

Review

Emmeline Besamusca & Jaap Verheul (eds):

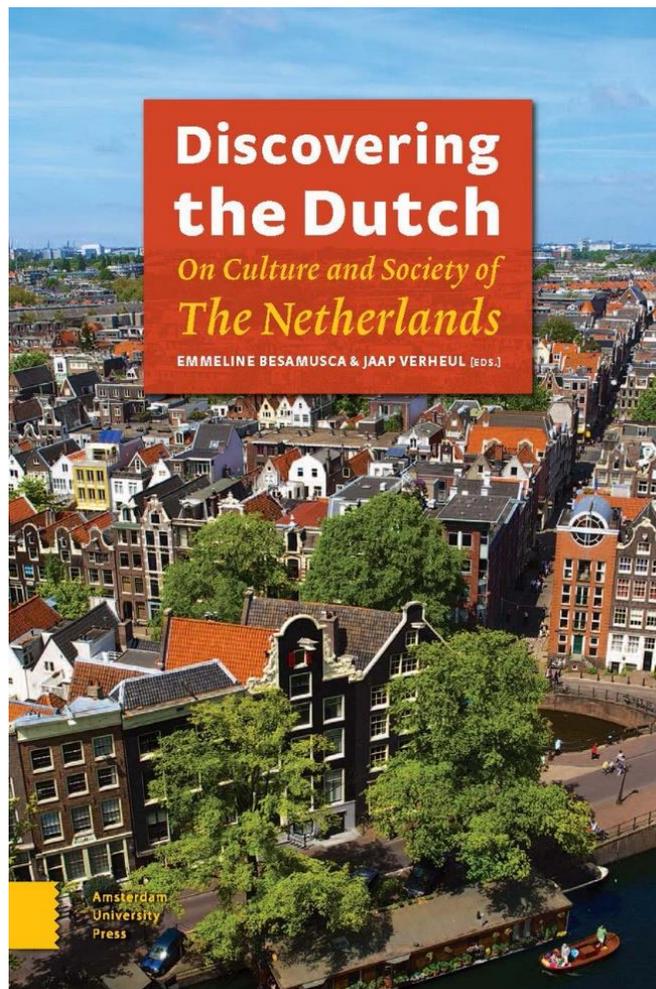
Discovering the Dutch:

On culture and society of the Netherlands

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014. 352p.

ISBN 9789089647924

Reviewed by Herman J. de Vries Jr.



The go-to introduction to Dutch society and culture, in the English language, used to be *The Netherlands in perspective* by W. Shetter – a classic which saw multiple editions between 1987 and 2002. With a structure reminiscent of Shetter’s book – twenty-some discrete chapters on various topics – *Discovering the Dutch*, first published in 2010, now assumes its place as chief guide to anyone interested in Dutch society today. Only four years after the initial publication, the editors have seen fit to release a “revised and enlarged” edition (2014), which is the volume under review here.

Despite its relatively small population and size, the Netherlands does attract, it seems, an outsized degree of international attention. Perhaps it’s due to the host of idiosyncrasies: a country half-below sea level and leading the world in water-management innovation. Maybe it’s the breathtaking cultural and technological achievements of the Dutch Golden Age? Possibly it’s that Dutch mix of social permissiveness coexisting with high-functioning social institutions. Is it the inspiring bicycle culture? Or maybe the romantic obsession with ice skating? Whatever the case, *Discovering the Dutch* addresses all the aforementioned traits of the Dutch and much more. It separates itself from popular favorites found in airport bookstores, such as *The UnDutchables*, which – as entertaining as they are – focus superficially on the “strangeness” of the Dutch. *Discovering the Dutch* is an academic collection of essays, each written by experts in the respective areas. The volume represents an impressive collaborative effort at the University of Utrecht, which is not only the home institution of the editors, but also – by my count – of all but one of the 30 contributors.

The investiture of the new monarch in 2013 was likely a chief catalyst for the speedy new edition. The opening chapter, “Citizens, coalitions, and the Crown”, accordingly, has updated the text as well as the photo of Queen Máxima (the absence of a photo of the king, Willem Alexander, remains curiously odd). But this chapter, authored by one of the volume’s editors, Emmeline Besamusca, features revisions reflecting shifting trends in the parliamentary political system itself. It is telling, in fact, that a new section heading in the chapter reads “From stability to volatility” (replacing the earlier “Changes and continuity”). Whereas radically declining allegiance to political parties was unmistakably evident at the writing of the 2010 edition, diminished party loyalty is now an accepted fact. Furthermore, the rise of personality politics in the Netherlands has reshaped election campaigns. And the torch of populist politics – ignited in the early 2000s by Pim Fortuyn – continues to be carried by Geert Wilders (People’s Freedom Party) who is fueling what seems to be a permanent discontent with the political establishment.

The general division of the book is virtually the same as in the first edition, with sections on Society, History, Arts & Culture, and Contemporary issues. There

has been some benign (but unexplained) shuffling of chapters between sections, the most curious of which is the movement of “Religious diversification or secularizations” from “Contemporary issues” to the section on “History”. More significantly, four new chapters expand this revised edition. Here’s a look.

A chapter on language has been added – addressing an unfortunate omission in the earlier edition. Marjo van Koppen gives a fine overview of the general and linguistic properties of Dutch, its geographical, standard and dialect variants, as well as its historical development. The chapter’s final section on the Global scale of Dutch is, however, puzzlingly short, and the chapter ends with strange abruptness: “Also, in a wider global context, the Dutch language seems to be of increasing importance in the cultural awareness of Dutch” (245). The reader wishes for an example or two to substantiate this intriguing claim.

In the first section, on “Society”, Paul Schnabel asks how distinctive the Netherlands is in the global field. His approach is a two-pronged inquiry: how unique is the Netherlands and are the Dutch becoming more unique or more like the rest of the world? Supplying international statistics, he shows the Netherlands in a comparative light. Sure, there is plenty of uniqueness, but the evidence shows, Schnabel argues, a Netherlands that is ultimately becoming less unique and more like the rest of us. Particularly, the type of social compartmentalization – commonly called *verzuiling* or its awkward English translation “pillarization” – is now significantly devolved. Shedding another common misconception (at least from a North American viewpoint) Schnabel asserts that the Netherlands is essentially becoming a more conservative country – driven in part by a Dutch fear of losing their prosperity.

Another new chapter – by Gert Oostindie, titled “From colonial past to postcolonial present” – reflects the current sense of historical identity in the Netherlands. Being Dutch increasingly involves recognition of the legacy of Dutch colonialism – a past that can no longer be conveniently ignored. A prime example is the legacy of Dutch involvement in slavery. Various recent anniversaries, new monuments, and head-of-state visits to former colonies have brought this to the fore. Oostindie treats the topic laudably, with analysis beyond the facts, noting for example the careful avoidance of “apology” in official expressions of remorse. Apologies, after all, tend to invite retroactive legal ramifications of reparation.

Oostindie’s account of the vastly different colonial experiences is also excellent. The nature of colonization in the east (Indonesia or the East Indies) was considerably different than in the west (the Antilles and Suriname), and the lasting impact has differed as well. “[...] on most accounts, culturally, the Dutch impact [on Indonesia] resembles a scratch on a rock” (136). Not so in the west. Oostindie’s discussion of decolonization helpfully describes just how complex (and undesired by the Antilles themselves) a break away from the Kingdom of the Netherlands

actually is. To this day, the primary option has been “autonomy within the kingdom”. The chapter’s final sections on postcolonial migrations and on the consequences of such migrations for Dutch society are essential reading towards an understanding of the formation of the present-day multicultural society in the Netherlands.

A new chapter on “The double bind of television” explains how TV is situated in and has emerged from the particular arrangements of Dutch culture (*verzuiling*, again). It also highlights the remarkable extent to which the Dutch have become gigantic exporters of and developers of television formats. The reality-concept Big Brother is a prime example.

While some chapters have been radically rewritten, such as the one on “Idealism and self-interest in the world,” most of the other chapters contain only minor revisions to their original versions. On the whole, the 24 chapters give excellent introductions to complex topics. Two topics come immediately to mind: Dutch tolerance and the Dutch welfare state. Wijnand Mijnhardt’s “Tradition of tolerance” makes a careful historical case for both the principled and pragmatic nature of famed Dutch tolerance – with the pragmatics playing a larger role than often touted. This contingent nature of tolerance makes for Mijnhardt’s somber realism about the present state of tolerance in the current, early decades of twenty-first-century Netherlands.

As for the welfare state: the topic has received significant international attention in recent years, due in large measure to the popular writing on the Netherlands by American journalist Russell Shorto. It’s not an exaggeration to say that Shorto’s writings on the Netherlands – and on Amsterdam in particular – have reached a larger readership (through publications such as the *New York Times*) than all of the book-length introductions to the Netherlands put together. Lex Heerma van Voss cleverly nods to this reality and deftly weaves Shorto’s observations into his explanation of the “Dilemmas of the Welfare State”.

All in all, the revised version of *Discovering the Dutch* is an improvement on the original. Not many of the dozens of colored photos have changed, but two improvements are worth noting. A diagram of the Dutch education system has now been added (p. 262), providing an essential visual aid for any outsider trying to comprehend the system. And the cover photo – an areal view of Amsterdam’s Bloemengracht and Prinsengracht – is improved. The shot is the same, but the current edition gives it day-lit during spring/summer, as opposed to the fall/winter nocturnal view on the original cover.

This edition is “enlarged”, but a book like this can only expand so much. The new material has added 50 pages, even while simultaneously shrinking the font type to the point of near discomfort for the reader. The volume is at once handsomely classy – with heavy glossy paper – and annoyingly heavy – a

paperback weighing .75 kilograms. As a reference work, that's fine, but the foreign traveler to the Netherlands will think twice before schlepping such a hefty tome in his or her luggage. Perhaps the publisher will consider a lighter, more travel-friendly edition in the future.

Regarding content, the revised *Discovering the Dutch* is, for its genre, so comprehensive and thorough that it hardly invites criticism. Given its assemblage of 24 separate chapters and different authors, the reader will not expect a central theme in the narrative. And yet, again and again in differing chapters, the thread that emerges is the changing nature of Dutch society and culture, as the social arrangements that so thoroughly marked the 20th century disappear. *Verzuiling* – with all its virtues of principled pluralism and its vices of tribal siloing – is still the rough social framework in place, even though it's simultaneously hollowed out. Which new social arrangements will continue to fill the vacuum is the pervasive question that makes for a Dutch society that feels caught in the sweep of a grand transition. This new edition of *Discovering the Dutch* helps us see that reality even more clearly.

About the reviewer

Herman De Vries is Professor of Germanic Languages at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he has been teaching since 1997. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Cincinnati, and his training has included study at the Universities of Hamburg and Utrecht. At Calvin College, De Vries holds the Frederik Meijer Chair in Dutch Language and Culture. He teaches Dutch language and culture courses at Calvin and also regularly leads students on study trips to the Netherlands and Belgium. Herman has been active in the American Association for Netherlandic Studies (AANS). Currently he is also the North-American representative to the board of the *Internationale Vereniging voor Neerlandici*. He serves as well as Vice President of the Association for the Advancement of Dutch-American Studies. His main research interest is in the discourse on language in the Low Countries – with particular attention to the tensions between English and Dutch as operative languages in Dutch higher education.

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