

Review

**Ton Broos, Annemarie Toebosch, and Karla Vandersypen:
*Dutch is beautiful: Fifty years of Dutch and Flemish studies
at the University of Michigan***

Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, 2019. 99 p.

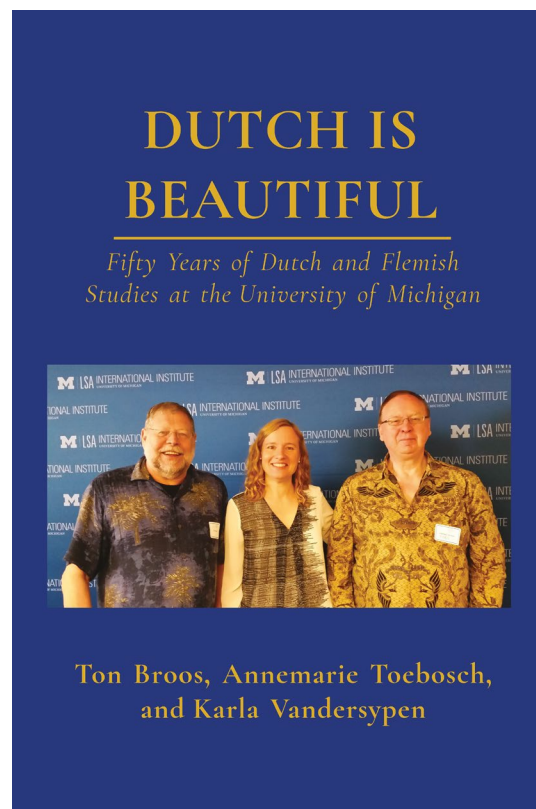
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Reviewed by Roel Vismans



As its subtitle suggests, this volume marks fifty years of teaching Dutch and Flemish studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (U-M). Its eleven chapters present a mixture of reflective writing and factual information about U-M's Dutch and Flemish programme, which together are intended to provide "a narrative that gives an account of our endeavors, an explanation of our past attempts to promote Dutch and Flemish culture and language." At the same time, however, *Dutch is beautiful* appears to have the ambition to present its current pedagogic philosophy, "a description of how the teaching of Dutch language, culture, and history can be a tool to look at a world of diverse identities." Both aims of the book are briefly touched upon in the introductory chapter. First, U-M's current director of Dutch and Flemish Studies, Annemarie Toebosch, explains how the teaching of Dutch and Flemish studies is rooted in U-M's policies on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Next, her predecessor, Ton Broos, introduces the rest of the volume after a short overview of some of the programme's highlights. The fact that *Dutch is beautiful* is written and edited by both the previous and current director of the Dutch and Flemish programme at times gives the volume the flavour of a handover document, of the baton passing from one runner to the next in an academic relay course marked by continuity and change.

Chapter 2, "Wringing beauty from an obscure language," is the integral text of a keynote lecture by Ton Broos at the 2016 Interdisciplinary Conference on Netherlandic Studies. Four years after his retirement, in what he admits is hardly "a concise and intelligent lecture with sound advice," he looks back at the ups and downs, and the things and people that inspired him over his 30 years as the face of Dutch studies at U-M. In a few places he also vents his frustration with the bureaucratic *rendementsdenkers* ('the for-profit bean counters without imagination') he has encountered over those years. Humorous as this chapter is, what it describes is the fate of most academics, especially in niche subjects like Dutch studies. We constantly must deal with sponsors' rejections as well as support from unexpected quarters. It is the creativity with which we balance those vicissitudes that marks us out, and by all accounts Broos has sometimes had to be very creative.

Chapters 3 to 8 contain factual information about U-M's Dutch and Flemish programme. Chapter 3 charts the history of Dutch teaching between 1968, when a Dutch course was first documented, and the academic year 2019-20, including the testimonies of seven alumni from the five past decades. However, from chapter 4, on the Netherlands Visiting Professorship, we learn that the relationship between U-M and the Netherlands was in fact established some 20 years earlier with the agreement in 1947 for the annual appointment of "a distinguished Dutch scholar." Impetus for this agreement, which was not enacted until 1950, was the 100th anniversary of the establishment of a Dutch colony in

Holland, Michigan. The professorship lapsed in 2010 when the Dutch funder, the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences, withdrew its support “for budgetary reasons” (reference Broos’ complaint about *rendementsdenken*). A similar fate befell the Dutch writer-in-residence programme, which is documented in chapter 5. It was inaugurated in 1981 with the author Bert Schierbeek and continued until 2005, after which it “lacked further commitment from the institution in the Netherlands.” The institution concerned was the then *Literair Productie Fonds* (“literary production fund”).

Authors for chapters 3 to 5 are not listed, unlike the following chapter, on U-M’s Dutch and Flemish library holdings, which is co-authored by Ton Broos and Karla Vandersypen. I found this chapter an eye opener for the library’s apparent enduring commitment to its Dutch-Flemish collection as well as the collection’s richness. Its foundation was laid over a century ago by what seems to have been a visionary librarian and the collection has been nurtured over the decades well beyond the more traditional Dutch studies areas, for example in music.

Chapter 7 lists events, lectures, and conferences, starting with a “rather grand convocation” which was held in 1947 to mark the centenary of Holland, Michigan. A special lecture series, the annual De Vries-Van der Kooy Memorial Lecture, is detailed in chapter 8. Inaugurated in 1996, the series with distinguished speakers continues to this date (at least 2019; presumably there was no lecture in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic).

There is one further chapter with factual information: chapter 10, with a list of selected publications, is rather oddly positioned between two more substantive pieces by Ton Broos and Annemarie Toebosch respectively. Chapter 9, “Reflections on Anne Frank in past and present,” is the text of another public lecture, this time delivered in 2015, when Indiana University, Bloomington, celebrated the 50th anniversary of its Dutch programme. In it, Broos discusses his most successful course at Ann Arbor, which boosted his student numbers whereby “to a certain extent Anne Frank did save Dutch Studies.” Chapter 11, “A race and ethnicity focus,” gives details of a handful of outreach events, but mainly consists of an updated reprint of an article Toebosch published in *The Conversation* in 2019. It concerns the exclusion of Indonesian victims of Dutch military action from the Netherlands’ annual Day of Remembrance. Although interesting and relevant, these two pieces disappoint in the context of this book. Broos writes more about Anne Frank herself and about the Dutch Holocaust experience than about the course he taught. Readers might like to know more about how it developed since its inception in 1993, how it has been kept fresh (and hence successful) over the years, and about the student experience. Likewise, Toebosch’ article does not give any insight into the pedagogy that “engages students in guided dialog of inquiry-based learning that allows them to examine their own cultures and histories

through the lens of what appears to many to be an accessible foreign culture,” as she writes in the book’s introduction. Nor does it demonstrate how a piece in *The Conversation* gives “marginalized Dutch communities a voice and a platform not directly available to them” (also in the introduction).

Despite these shortcomings, *Dutch is beautiful* is a worthy celebration. Dutch and Flemish Studies remains a niche subject which constantly must justify its existence. Often it thrives because of the enthusiasm and drive of one or two individuals, combined with a certain amount of (albeit often tacit) long-term institutional support. This book documents how this has worked successfully in one institution and shows that it can be done.

About the reviewer

Roel Vismans is professor emeritus of Dutch studies at the School of Languages and Cultures of The University of Sheffield in the U.K. Between 1979 and 2019 he also taught Dutch at the universities of Manchester and Hull, earning his Ph.D. from the Free University Amsterdam (Netherlands) in 1994. He is a linguist with an interest in pragmatics, particularly politeness. He has written about durative constructions, modal particles, constituent structure, forms of address, and the history of Dutch studies in the U.K. Professor Vismans was the founding president of the Association for Low Countries Studies in Great Britain and Ireland.