

CHAPTER 8

THE DUTCH REPUBLIC

8.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Netherlands (known today as Holland and Belgium) were governed by the Spanish Hapsburgs, but each of the seventeen provinces had its own special privileges and limited autonomy within the Spanish Empire.

During the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, large numbers of Dutch were converted to Calvinism ("Reformed" Churches), especially in the North. Catholicism remained stronger in the South (now Belgium).

When Philip II, king of Spain, began demonstrating his determination to use the Spanish Inquisition to enforce laws against "heresy," the Netherlands began to revolt against Spain which continued intermittently for eighty years (1568 – 1648).

In 1578, the Duke of Parma restored many of the old privileges of self-government to the ten southern provinces and large numbers of Calvinists moved north. In 1581 the seven northern Dutch provinces, under the leadership of William the

Silent, declared themselves independent of Spain. In 1588 the great Spanish Armada sent to defeat both the English and the Dutch was partially destroyed by a storm and then defeated by the English seadogs.

In 1648 the Peace of Westphalia recognized the independence of the Republic of the United Provinces. This had already been conceded by Spain in the Treaty of Munster, January 20, 1648.

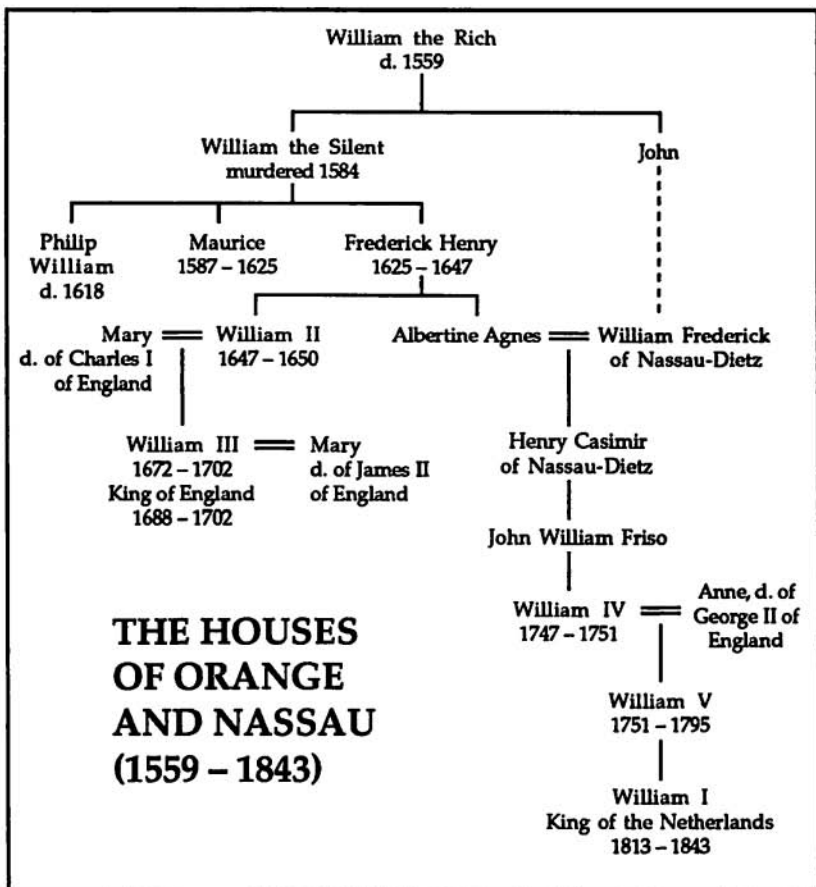
8.2 GOVERNMENT OF THE NETHERLANDS

The Dutch republic consisted of the seven northern provinces of Zeeland, Utrecht, Holland, Gelderland, Overijssel, Groningen, and Friesland. Holland was the wealthiest and most powerful. Each province and each city was autonomous.

National problems were governed by the States General which consisted of delegates from the provinces which could act only on the instructions of the provincial assemblies. Each province had a Stadholder, or governor, who was under the authority and instructions of the assembly. In times of crisis the provinces would sometimes choose the same Stadholder, and he thereby became the national leader.

8.3 DUTCH ECONOMY

The seventeenth century was the Golden Age of the Dutch. Not only was it the Age of Rembrandt and other great Dutch painters, but the Netherlands was the most prosperous part of Europe in the seventeenth century. It was also the freest. The Dutch did not have government controls and monopolies to impede their freedom of enterprise. As a result they became by



far the greatest mercantile nation in Europe with the largest merchant marine in the world.

Medium-sized cities and ports were characteristic of the Netherlands: Leyden, Haarlem, Gouda, Delft, and Utrecht, from 20,000 to 40,000. Amsterdam was the richest city in Europe with a population of 100,000. The quays and wharves of these Dutch cities were stocked with Baltic grain, English woollens, silks and spices from India, sugar from the Caribbean, salted herring, and coal.

The Dutch had almost no natural resources, but built their economy around the carrying trade, mercantile businesses, and other service occupations. They were skilled in finishing raw materials. Coarse linens from Germany were bleached and finished into fine textiles. Furniture making, fine woollen goods, sugar refining, tobacco cutting, brewing, pottery, glass, printing, paper making, armament manufacturing, and shipbuilding were all crafts in which the Dutch excelled.

The Dutch taught accounting methods, provided banks and rational legal methods for settling disputes. Their low interest rate was a key to economic growth: 3%, half of the normal rate in England. The Dutch were discussed and written about all over Europe as champions of free enterprise and individual rights – in contrast to state absolutism, economic nationalism, mercantilism, and protective tariffs.

The Dutch East India Company and the Dutch West India Company were organized as cooperative ventures of private enterprise and the state. The various provinces contributed part of the capital for these ventures and the Companies were subject to the authority of the States General.

8.4 DUTCH ART

The 17th century was the most significant in history for Dutch painting. Most of the Dutch painters came from the province of Holland. Rembrandt and Jan Steen were from Leyden; Cuyp came from Dordrecht; Van Goyen from the Hague; and Vermeer from Delft.

The artistic center of the Netherlands was Amsterdam where the Dutch school of painters was noted for their landscape and portrait painting, but especially for “genre painting” in which scenes of everyday life predominate. The Calvinist

influence in Holland is reflected in their celebration, but not idealization, of God's Creation. The realistic portrait paintings show mankind as great and noble, but flawed, or, as the Reformed Churches put it, "fallen creatures in a fallen world." Nevertheless, the flawed creation was still to be enjoyed and their pictures of Dutch life in the 17th century show it to be intensely joyful and satisfying in human relationships.

The Dutch painters were masters of light and shadow as were the later French Impressionists. They captured the subtlety and realism of an ordinary scene under the vast expanse of the sky; a storm at sea; or a rain shower "drifting across a distant landscape pursued by sunshine." It is an interesting comparison to contrast the equally-great Flemish contemporary school in the Spanish Netherlands strongly influenced by the counter-Reformation Baroque. Peter Paul Rubens from Antwerp is a good example.

8.5 DUTCH WARS AND FOREIGN POLICY

The Peace of Westphalia (1648) ended eighty years of war between Spain and the Netherlands and resulted in independence for the Dutch Republic and continued Hapsburg rule of the Spanish Netherlands. After being freed from Spanish domination the Dutch were faced with a series of wars against England over trading rights and colonial competition. Then, Louis XIV's efforts to move into the Low Countries brought the Dutch into a drawn-out war with France.

The accession of William and Mary to the throne of England in 1688 brought an end to the warfare between the Dutch and English. In the War of the Spanish Succession, 1701 – 13, England and Holland fought against France and Spain.