

**Crucibles Within  
and Without**

THE BIRTH OF  
**The Dutch Republic**

1575—1591



FORGOTTEN SEA

Excudebat Hugo Harlonii  
anno societatis LI



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## A NOTE ON SCOPE

¶ The birth of the Dutch Republic was an extremely complex historical event. Contests of military, political, and cultural power intertwined with one another over the course of eighty years before formal independence from Spain was recognized and the Low Countries were at peace.

¶ Within those eight decades, the roughly fifteen-year span between 1575 and 1591 would prove to be pivotal to the formation of a separate, independent republic and the development of a Dutch national identity.

¶ For the sake of the hour this lecture has been designed for, the following notes will focus primarily on the political developments that lead to the birth of the Dutch state with secondary considerations given to the ongoing military conflict and publishing of seminal pamphlets and socio-political print culture. A further, more in-depth study of these latter two topics and others would be interesting, but is outside the scope of today's introductory look at the topic.

## 1.

## 🌿 The Origins of the Conflict

(to 1575)

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE LOW COUNTRIES

🌿 **The Low Countries Today:** Corresponds to modern day Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and parts of northern France.

🌿 **The Low Countries in the 1500s:** Collection of different provinces forced together by the House of Habsburg since the end of the Burgundian era in 1477. Historically, the region was never a single polity, even though by the middle of the century, it was ultimately organized as such.

🌿 **"Low Countries" or "Seventeen Provinces":** The region as a whole.

🌿 **The "Dutch," "Dutch Republic," the "North," or the "United Provinces":** The independent-minded, Calvinist-influenced provinces that unite in the precursor to today's Netherlands.

🌿 **Holland Does Not Mean the Same Thing as the Netherlands:** Holland is a single province within the Netherlands (or Dutch Republic). Although this is a common colloquialism, it is similar to calling the United States "Texas."

🌿 **The "Spanish Netherlands," the "Southern Netherlands," or just the "South":** The predominantly Catholic provinces that favored reconciliation with

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the King. This region is the historic forerunner of what would become modern day Belgium and Luxembourg.

☛ **States General:** Name of the executive, legislative body of the Low Countries, comprised of delegates from each province.

☛ **Provincial Estates (e.g. Estates of Holland):** The legislative body of an individual province, represented by the various constituent “estates” of the province. Usually this corresponds to cities and the nobility, but the estates of the clergy and even estates of the rural farmers are seen in some provinces.



*Fig. 1: Map of the Seventeen Provinces c. 1548-1579*

## 1.2 THE ROAD TO OPEN REVOLT

¶ **The Overreach of Phillip II:** Charles V's efforts to centralize the administration of the Low Countries was grudgingly tolerated. Phillip II came to power in 1555. He was thoroughly Spanish, fervently Roman Catholic (to the point of introducing the Inquisition), and committed to administrative overhauls without the provinces' input. These last two issues were not acceptable to the self-governing and religiously tolerant Seventeen Provinces.

¶ **The First Sparks of Revolt, 1566-1570:** 1566 saw riots and the confederation of hundreds of lesser nobles against Phillip's policies. The Duke of Alba was

dispatched to crush the rebellion. His Council of Troubles (the “Council of Blood”) executed over a thousand people, including two of the three most prominent members of the high nobility: the Count of Egmont and the Count of Hoorn. The third grandee, William of Nassau, Prince of Orange, escaped only to return at the head of an army in 1568, which was defeated by Alba.

¶ **The Sea Beggars Reignite the Conflict, 1572 Onwards:** The rebellion had largely been suppressed by 1570. However, open revolt breaks out in the provinces of Holland and Zeeland in 1572 after Dutch privateers known as the Sea Beggars (*watergeuzen*) capture the port city of Brielle. William of Orange returns from exile in Germany and a war that would last eight decades would begin in earnest.

## 2.

# ✠ Last Hope for a United Seventeen Provinces (1575 - 1580)

### 2.1 THE SPANISH SACK OF ANTWERP AND THE RESULTING PACIFICATION OF GHENT

¶ **Unsustainable Nature of War:** War effort threatens to bankrupt Spain. At the same time, the rebellious Netherlanders are being hard pressed by Alba’s replacement, Luis de Requesens y Zúñiga.

Phillip II initiates peace talks in Breda in 1575 which flounder on the question of religion. Phillip II is forced to declare bankruptcy which results in widespread Spanish mutinies.

¶ **Provincial Short-Sightedness Unleashes a Spanish Fury:** The Spanish-installed Council of State refused to deal with the pillaging Spanish troops in any significant way. Requesens’ successor (as he had died) was to be Don John of Austria who is believed to be ordered to destroy the troops of the States General.



Fig. 2: Philip II of Spain

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This forces the provinces to act. On 4 September 1576, the Council of State is arrested, and the States General is convened which – in its haste - outlaws *all* Spanish troops, not just the mutineers. This unifies the Spanish troops, who converge on Antwerp, where the “Spanish Fury” kills over 8,000 people.

¶ **The Pacification of Ghent, the Perpetual Edit, and the Possibility of Peace:** The subsequent resolution - the “Pacification of Ghent” – unites the provinces behind the expulsion the foreign troops from the Low Countries.

However, Don John has actually been given authority by Phillip II to negotiate. A Perpetual Edit of peace is signed in February 1577 between Don Jon and the States General. Spanish troops leave Antwerp on 20 March 1577. In May, Don John is sworn in as governor-general (*landvoogd*). It appears that peace may be able to be made.



Fig. 3: William of Orange

## 2.2 THE UNITED FRONT QUICKLY DISSOLVES

¶ **Disagreements Over Religion and Spanish Trustworthiness:** Calvinist assertiveness alienated Catholics. On the other hand, Calvinists argue Catholic intransigence forced their hands. At the same time, some parties call for reconciliation with the king while others view Don John with distrust and don't expect him to hold to the agreement.

¶ **Don John's Betrayal:** A truce with the Ottomans and new gold from the New World allow Phillip II to focus on the Low Countries. Don John seizes territory in the southeast and open hostilities resume. In October 1578, Don John would die of disease, and Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma, takes command.

¶ **Dueling Catholic & Calvinist Politics:** In September 1577, William of Orange is invited back to the States General. The Catholic southern nobility counter by inviting Archduke Matthias of Austria to serve as the new governor-general. A Calvinist-backed Second Union of Brussels reconciles Holland and Zeeland with the States General. This is outrageous enough that several of the southern provinces – chiefly Hainaut and Artois - begin discussing a separate alliance to defend the Catholic faith. On 6 January 1579, some of the southern provinces agree to that alliance as a Union of Arras.

¶ **Meddling of Foreign Princes:** The Catholic Walloon nobility invite Francois, Duke of Anjou into the Low Countries in an attempt to check the growing Calvinist powers, while at the same time Elizabeth I – alarmed at French

involvement – finances German Protestant noble John Casimir to raise a force of his own and come to the relief of Calvinists in the south.

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### 2.3 BATTLE LINES ARE DRAWN: THE UNIONS OF UTRECHT AND ARRAS

¶ **Union of Utrecht:** Responding to the hardening southern faction, the northern provinces of Gelderland, Holland, Zeeland, Friesland, and the Ommenlanden form the Union of Utrecht. Overijssel continues to chart a middle course tries to remain aloof, but joins the Union a year later.

Realizing the potential danger of this move and still trying to represent a middle way of religious peace and independence, William of Orange doesn't sign the Union of Utrecht until four months later.

¶ **The Union and Treaty of Arras:** In response to the Union of Utrecht, the members of the Union of Arras begin peace talks with Parma (who is firmly in control of the County of Namur, the County of Luxembourg, and the Duchy of Limburg), which results in the *Treaty of Arras* later in 1579. The Dutch Revolt now takes on aspects of a civil war.

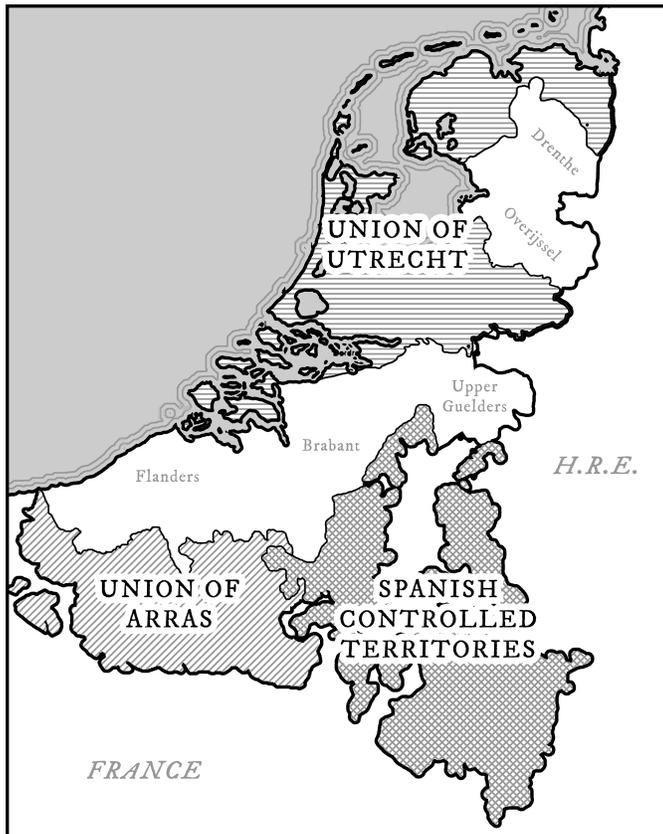


Fig. 4: Map of the Unions of 1579

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¶ **Fate of Flanders and Babant Uncertain:** These two were the Burgundian heartland and home of the historic great cities of the Low Countries: Antwerp, Brussels, and Ghent. They were divided and now not a party of either Union.

¶ **Cologne Peace Talks:** In May 1579, Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II called peace talks in Cologne which falter several months later. Phillip II takes the step of outlawing William of Orange and placing a bounty on his head in March 1580.

¶ **Important Dutch Political Documents:** Aggaeus van Albada writes the *Acts of the Peace Negotiations which Took Place in Cologne*. Secondly, *The Apology of William of Orange* drops the pretense of loyalty to the Spanish king and instead explicitly denounces his tyranny and the rights of the provinces to rebel.

## 3.

## Independence, Instability, and the Rise of Parma

(1580 - 1585)

### 3.1 ANJOU AS PRINCE AND THE ACT OF ABJURATION

¶ **If Not Phillip, Then Who?** Archduke Matthias wasn't deemed suitable (he would eventually resign in March 1581). Elizabeth I had already turned down the offer of sovereignty before. The only other option was Francois, Duke of Anjou.

¶ **The Joyous Entries of the Duke of Anjou:** A treaty with Anjou was signed 29 September 1580, and he was named "Prince and Lord of the Netherlands" in January 1581. He later arrives in the Low Countries in August, but quickly leaves for England in October.

¶ **The Act of Abjuration:** With Anjou installed, the States General issued a document deposing Phillip II as ruler of the United Provinces in late July 1581. However, the Act of Abjuration did very little to change the reality of the revolt or the relationship with Spain on the ground.

¶ **The Response of Phillip to Abjuration:** His policy was simple: ignore the Act of Abjuration altogether. He never mentions it in his letters or proclamations and issues orders to Parma to treat it similarly.

### 3.2 PARMA'S OVERWHELMING SUCCESS IN THE SOUTH

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¶ **Parma's Strategy:** Begin by putting pressure on the great cities of Brabant and Flanders (Ghent, Brussels, and Antwerp), then work through Gelderland and Overijssel to connect with the Spanish forces in the north. Once the south and west were secure, tighten the noose around the heartland of the rebellion: Holland, Zeeland, and Utrecht which were secure behind the natural defensive barriers of the Rhine, Maas, and Ijssel Rivers.

¶ **Political Savvy and Tolerance:** Parma's conquests were relatively bloodless (compared to the ruthlessness shown by Alba in the late 1560s), and his conditions for the surrender of cities were generous.

¶ **The States General Inability to Mount a Defense:** A number of factors contributed to this: inadequate finances, confusion about the ultimate authority in the northern provinces lead to a breakdown in leadership, and Holland's focus on its own defensive holdout. Lastly, the less experienced Dutch troops simply were rarely able to defeat the more experienced Spanish tercios in open battle.

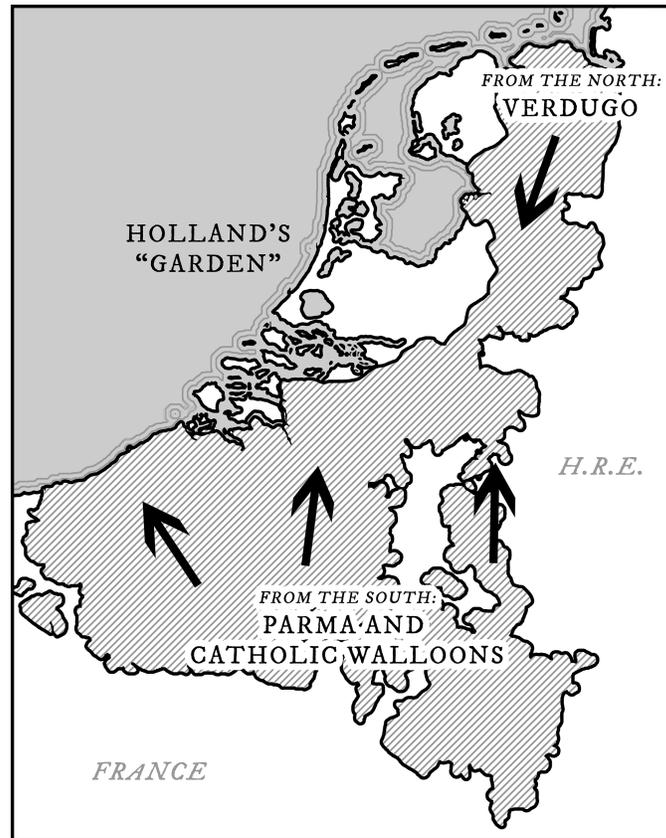


Fig. 5: Parma

### 3.3 RENNENBERG AND VERDUGO IN THE NORTH

¶ **The Defection of the Count of Rennenberg:** As a Catholic Walloon nobleman, George van Lalaing, the Count of Rennenberg was an anomaly as Stadhouder of four of the northern provinces. His concern with the growth of Calvinist political influence is behind his peace with Phillip II, and fears are the rest of the northeast may follow. Count William Louis of Nassau, the loyal stadhouder of Friesland opposes him.

¶ **The Different Nature of Warfare in the Northeast:** Rennenberg dies in 1581, and his lieutenant Francisco Verdugo takes control. Warfare in the inland northeast devolves into hit and run raids; the burning of villages, farmlands, and fortified places; and small-scale guerilla actions. There were still sieges from time-to-time, but just as often, town garrisons would switch sides out of secret allegiances or simply the promise of pay.

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*Fig. 6: Spanish Control of the Low Countries c. 1584*

### 3.4 ANJOU'S SHORT CAREER AS LORD OF THE NETHERLANDS

¶ **Francis, the Duke of Brabant, Count of Flanders, and Count of Holland:** After his return from England, the Duke of Anjou made three formal “Joyous Entries” into Brabant and Flanders in early 1582 where he is installed as Duke of Brabant, Count of Flanders, and Count of Holland.

¶ **The French Fury Discredits Anjou:** The relationship between Anjou and the States General quickly becomes dysfunctional. In an attempt to forcefully assert his authority, Anjou leads 10,000 French Catholic troops in attacks across Flanders in January 1583. While the two parties formally reconcile in March, Anjou leaves the Netherlands for good in June. He was effectively powerless, but retained his titles for the rest of his life. He died a year later of fever in June 1584.

### 3.5 THE ASSASSINATION OF WILLIAM OF ORANGE

¶ **The Villain, Balthasar Gérard:** Gérard was a French Catholic who impersonated a Huguenot in order to get close to William. On 10 July 1584, he shot the Prince

of Orange at point blank range in his home with a pair of pistols. Orange was given a lavish state funeral and quickly became seen as the “fatherland’s” beloved leader and founding father.

¶ **A New Low for the United Provinces:** Anjou had been run out of the United Provinces. William of Orange was dead. Parma and Verdugo had taken control of Brabant, Flanders, and large swathes of the eastern United Provinces. The rebellion was leaderless, and it looked like only a matter of time until Parma would reconquer what remained.

#### 4.

## ✠ The Era of Oldenbarnevelt, England, and the First Signs of Spanish Weakness

(1585 - 1591)

### 4.1 THE EARLY LEADERSHIP OF OLDENBARNEVELT

¶ **Johann van Oldenbarnevelt:** A political power vacuum is created with the death of William of Orange. As member of the Estates of Holland and proponent of the Union of Utrecht, Oldenbarnevelt quickly becomes a key politician and leader. He would remain the dominant force in Dutch politics and foreign affairs for the next thirty years.

¶ **Negotiations with France and Henri III:** The dominant political model still called for a sovereign prince; the Dutch were now without one at all, save Phillip II. Oldenbarnevelt quickly turns to Henri III, going so far as to send – and have accepted – Dutch agents to the French court in an offer of sovereignty. Henri III declines, not wanting to anger Spain.

¶ **Elizabeth I and the Anglo-Dutch Party:** Immediately after the death of William of Orange, Dutch statesman Janus Dousa departs for England; he returns at the head of the official delegation a year later. Elizabeth I declines the offer of sovereignty, but makes a counter offer to send a sizable army (for the relief of Antwerp which fell before the treaty could be completed) and money in exchange for a “governor general” of her choosing and temporary control over some port towns in Zeeland. This becomes the 1585 Treaty of Nonsuch which Oldenbarnevelt takes the lead in negotiating the details.

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#### 4.2 THE TREATY OF NONSUCH AND THE EARL OF LEICESTER

¶ **A Reinvigorated Dutch War Effort:** Leicester arrives before Christmas 1585, and his arrival – with more troops landing regularly – reinvigorates the Dutch, who enthusiastically vote him into the head of government and combined captain-general and admiral-general of the Dutch forces. Spanish “appeasers” were discredited and removed from town and provincial councils. The States General put together their largest field army in years.

¶ **Leicester’s Quarrels with the States General:** Much like with Anjou, Leicester came quickly into conflict with the States General over questions of promised financial support and the authority granted to his role but not specified in the terms of the treaty.

¶ **Elizabeth’s Ongoing Negotiations with Phillip II:** Even with the increased and public commitment to the Dutch, Elizabeth remained wary of intervening too greatly in the Low Countries – and the catastrophic risk with Spain such involvement could entail. Her chief goal was the political and military status quo: that the Dutch rebels would remain just threatening enough to continue to keep Spain’s attention away from England.

To that end, she successfully convened peace talks in the Flemish city of Bourbourg in the spring of 1588, but neither the Dutch nor the Spanish were ready to accept her proposals.

¶ **Leicester’s Departure & the Appointment of Maurice of Nassau:**

Leicester’s ongoing fights with the States General, his political pandering to the hardline Calvinist faction in Utrecht (including refugees from the south who didn’t care for Hollanders or Zeelanders), his long absence from November 1586 to July 1587, and his military failures lead to a crisis and loss of faith in his ability to lead. In October 1587, he departs for England and eventually resigns as governor-general in June 1588. Oldenbarnevelt consequently purges Leicester’s supporters from the Council of State and appoints the teenager Maurice of Nassau as commander-in-chief.



Fig. 7: Leicester

#### 4.3 GRUDGING ACCEPTANCE OF REPUBLICAN GOVERNANCE AND SOVEREIGNTY

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¶ **No More Searches for Kings or Princes:** The Duke of Anjou had been a failure and was dead, anyway. Had he a few more years, perhaps William, Prince of Orange and – briefly at the end – Count of Holland could have been positioned as prince over all the United Provinces. But he was dead. And now the experiment with Elizabeth’s man the Earl of Leicester had proven to be a mistake. Never again would the Dutch go looking for a foreign prince to rule them.

¶ **Developing the Theory of Republican Sovereignty:** At the height of the difficult Leicester years, one of the English-installed members of the Council of State, Sir Thomas Wilkes, argues in a tract that “in the absence of a legitimate prince,” sovereignty rests with the common people.

Holland’s Estate takes this challenge seriously and have one of their jurists, Francois Vranck, write a rebuttal. His *Deduction* becomes a key reference that establishes the Dutch view of sovereignty and republican government: that the institutions of the provincial Estates in the nobility and the towns represented the seat of sovereignty and authority. It rests not the people at large and not even with the individual members of the Estates.

¶ **The Republic is Born:** A 25 July 1590 pronouncement by the States General declared the assembly was the “sovereign institution of this country” which had “no overlord except the deputies of the Provincial Estates themselves.” With that, the United Provinces take hold of their sovereignty and transition into the “Republic of the Seven United Netherlands.”

#### 4.4 THE SPANISH JUGGERNAUT SHOWS WEAKNESS, THEN DEPARTS FOR FRANCE

¶ **The Invincible Armada:** Phillip II recognized that reconquering the entirety of the Low Countries would be impossible as long as England committed itself to their defense. Thus, Elizabeth’s backing of the Dutch provoked just the reaction from Spain that she looked to avoid. Phillip II’s goal was not invasion and conquest, but rather more modestly to sack London and force a treaty that would see English troops, mercenaries, and funds pulled out of the Low Countries.

¶ **Phillip II’s Orders to Parma:** Phillip II ordered Parma to prepare for the Armada through late 1587 and into 1588 by taking several Flemish ports in preparation for the crossing to England. Parma protested this redirection of funds and troops away from the real effort of subduing the Dutch, but dutifully obeyed. The towns were taken, but even had the Armada destroyed the English fleet, the barges carrying Parma’s army would have been hard pressed to press through the Sea Beggars’ fleet of shallow water ships and galleys who blockaded the ports.

¶ **Dutch Victories:** The failure of the Armada, new Spanish mutinies (the first in years), and the successful defense of Bergen-op-Zoom in late 1588 encouraged the

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Dutch politicians and troops that perhaps Spain was not invincible. Soon, the Dutch began to give as good as they got: the 1590 recapture of Breda inaugurated a long series of reconquests for Maurice's army.

¶ **Spanish Attention Drawn to France:** When Henri III was assassinated by a Catholic partisan in 1589, Phillip II saw an opportunity to support the Catholic League and gain a powerful ally in France in its wars in the Low Countries. He ordered Parma to move into France to support their co-religionists. When Parma returned in 1591, momentum had shifted decidedly in favor of the Dutch who were well underway in reconquering Gelderland and Overijssel. Phillip II, however, remained fixated on France, and this diversion allowed the Dutch enough time to reconnoiter and continue taking back the rest of the United Provinces.

¶ *The young republic had survived.*

5.

## ✠ The Republic Takes Root

*(1591 and Beyond)*

¶ **Prince Maurice's Victorious "Ten Years":** Maurice of Nassau, the second son of William of Orange and now commander of the Dutch Army, would take advantage of the weakened Spanish position over the next ten years to turn the tide of the war. Together with his cousin William Louis of Nassau in the north, he would retake the cities and land lost to Parma and Verdugo – and even carve out parts of the Spanish Netherlands for the United Provinces in the process.

¶ **The Twelve Years Truce, 1609-1621:** Dutch success, combined with Spanish financial pressures and the reconciliatory wishes of Philip III, brought about a truce with Spain in which the Dutch Republic was recognized de facto as an independent state. This was accomplished through Oldenbarnevelt's efforts (and opposed by Maurice of Nassau), and allowed for dramatic advances in the Republic's economy, culture, religious equilibrium, and overall sense of itself as a unified nation.

¶ **The Golden Age to Come:** Though the Dutch Republic wouldn't be formally recognized as independent until 1648, the seventeenth century came to be known in Dutch historiography as "the Golden Age." Lasting till the end of the century, the Dutch became one of the foremost merchant, economic, and maritime powers in the world and home to renowned scientists and artists.

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¶ For a broader and comprehensive selection of books and papers relating to the Dutch Revolt and early modern Low Countries, see my ever-expanding digital bibliography at: <http://hugovanharlo.com/netherlands/bibliography/>

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