

Memory Wars in the Low Countries, 1566–1700. Jasper van der Steen. Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 190. Leiden: Brill, 2015. xii + 358 pp. \$149.

The divide between modernists and premodernists within the field of nationalism is still in full swing, as many illuminating and thought-provoking publications in recent years have revealed. Van der Steen's book, developed within the wider project "Memory before Modernity" at Leiden University, adds welcome new ideas to this ongoing debate on the existence of feelings of national identity in the early modern period; but it also contributes importantly to the study of memory practices and of the awareness of a national past in early modern Europe. Focusing on the Revolt of the Netherlands, the author demonstrates that both interest in the national past and a rich and lively memory culture were omnipresent in the early modern Low Countries. In an original manner, Van der Steen reconstructs the existence of two diverging narratives about the revolt to be developed over time in the southern and the northern Netherlands and how they interacted and influenced one another's memory practices. In contrast to the southern territories of the Low Countries that were to remain under Habsburg rule, the future Dutch Republic would create its own tale of origin in a foundation narrative of resistance that implied a clear breach with a past linked to the legitimate Habsburg overlord. Which episodes in narratives about the revolt became popular and which did not? How was the past utilized by government authorities and interest groups to appeal to a "public memory" (19) within the public sphere?

The book is structured around seven chapters: the first deals with the rhetorical argumentation deployed by the rebels to justify their cause; the second with the principles of selection in the development of a national canonical version in the north and the south, where the same episodes could defend radically different political standpoints. Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on the appropriation of the past and the use of contested memories. The last three chapters analyze why political references to the Dutch Revolt remained so potent after the truce in 1621 and how public memories of the war evolved over time after 1648. For instance, eighteenth-century Dutch patriots and Belgian revolutionaries found in their sixteenth-century past an important source of inspiration. In order to tackle these questions, a wide array of sources are analyzed. As Van der Steen states, many neglected historical texts, such as political pamphlets, government propaganda, martyr tales, miracle books, or songs, strongly reveal popular engagement with the past. Although the scope of this book does not obviously comprise wider forms of literary expression, literature offers poignant examples of a memory culture that deserves further research, where

canonical episodes like the deeds of the Duke of Alba are reworked in compelling prose works or *novelles* for a wide audience.

There are many interesting aspects in this study on cultural remembrance and the role memories of the revolt played in northern and southern identity formation. One is the fact that canonical narratives about the revolt in both territories were first deployed to antagonize the enemy, but were then used to disarm domestic political opponents, as in the 1650s, when the dominant pro-Orange narrative was questioned in the Dutch Republic, specifically the role of William of Orange in the first phase of the revolt. Furthermore, not many historians have paid heed to southern memory practices. The *oubliance*, or certain silences, in the southern Low Countries say as much about memory practices of the past as the overt remembering practices found in the Dutch Republic. Also interesting is the contention that we can speak of interaction between religious and secular memory practices and that public memories were not top-down phenomena, as literature also reveals.

This book offers an intelligent comparative study of memory politics in the early modern Low Countries and shows how national feelings based on ideas of a communal past were distinctly present. It will interest a wide range of scholars, from historians to literary historians, engaged both in the early modern and the modern periods, and it contributes to the recent thrilling academic tradition that attempts to soften the dichotomy between the two.

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