

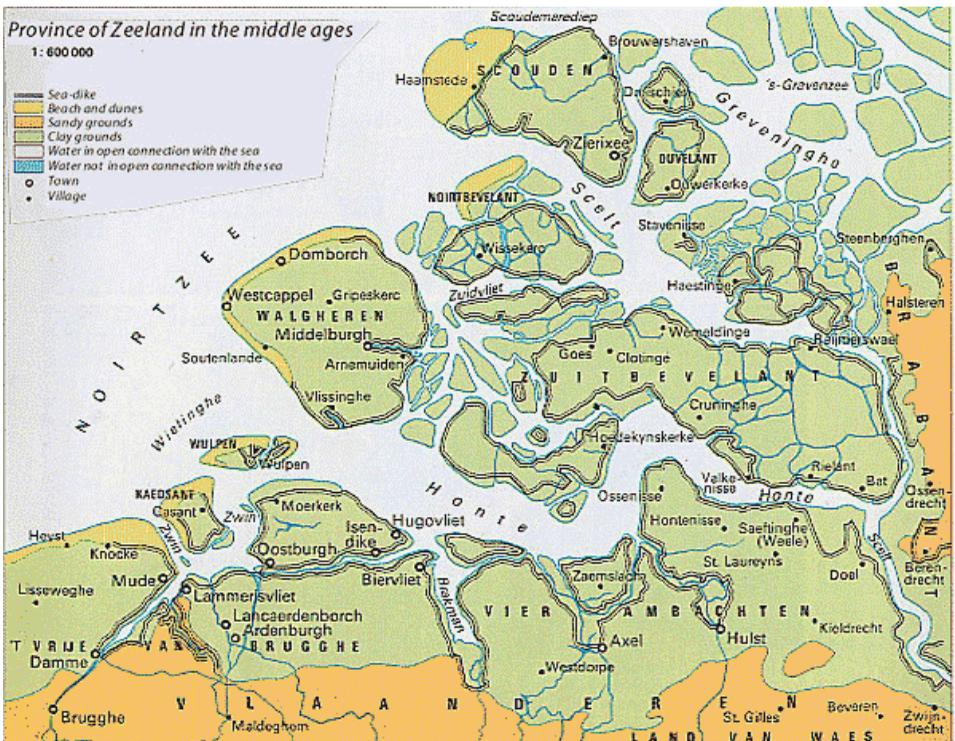
Oxford's Capture by Pirates, 10 April 1576

Jan Scheffer, from Holland, writes about his country's link with Oxford

Prelude

It was an American from Boston, John Lothrop Motley, who wrote the first treatise on *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* in 1856. The person who had stimulated him in this, Robert Fruin, is a well-know historian in Holland. Partly as a commentary on Motley he wrote “Prelude to the Eighty year War” in 1859, he found Motley too harsh in his verdict of Charles V and his son Philip II. About the Netherlands, Fruin states that in the period within which our war of liberation took place,

an antiquated mediæval feudal state developed into the present day state, in one country quicker than in the other and in a variety of shapes, according to the individual character of the different nations.



Fruin remarks:

In our country the dukes of Burgundy and Austria were responsible for the foundation of this new type of state, in the 17 provinces that comprised the Lowlands, the dukes saw to it that both territory and power increased and in order to secure the unity of the state, unification of justice was sought by establishing a High Court and a similar supervising body for the local taxation was created in the Court of Finances. To this end a body of civil servants was created who were 'tools' in the hand of government which attempted an ever increasing control over the Dutch nation, partly under development. Because of a number of unfortunate royal deaths, the crown of the Lowlands passed from Burgundy to the Austrian Monarchy. Soon afterwards, Spain and the Lowlands ended up with the same monarch. As a result of which two nations, situated a thousand miles apart, speaking totally different languages, with different culture, customs, contradictory interests were, you could say a mismatch 'accidentally' coupled.

Fruin asked himself the question: "How much blood would flow, how many tears cried, ere this unnatural union would be dissolved?"

The Netherlands under Spanish rule

In 1500, Emperor Charles V was born in Ghent, 'a Dutchman at heart'. In 1506, he became Duke of Burgundy through his paternal grand-mother. In 1516, he became King of Spain (and its American territories) through his maternal grandparents, Ferdinand and Isabella. After the death of his paternal grand-father in 1519, he became Holy Roman Emperor in 1519. He ruled this wide range of territories until the 1550s, when he abdicated. His brother Ferdinand became Holy Roman Emperor and his son Philip then became king of Spain and King of the Netherlands in 1556. Philip II still held the honorary title of King of England as Queen Mary's consort.

Philip II (1527-1598) chose Castile as the seat of his government. He had been brought up in Spain as a devout Catholic. When he attended his father's Court in Brussels, he felt himself ill at ease. However, before he departed for Spain, he appointed as governor to the Low Countries his half-sister Margarethe van Parma.

In 1559, Philip called an assembly of the 'Staten' of all seventeen provinces in Ghent to celebrate his departure. However, he was confronted with a demand for the removal of all Spanish troops and to have government entrusted to the local gentry. Philip suspected that Orange and Count Egmont were behind this demand and publicly confronted Orange, stating that no representative of the states would have dared speak to him like this: "Not the Staten, but you, you, you!" Philip waited a fortnight at Flushing for a favourable wind and departed, never to return to the Low Countries.



William of Orange, (1533-1584)
Prince of Orange-Nassau

Nicknamed ‘the Silent’, he is commonly referred to as Orange. He was the favourite nobleman of Charles V. He was murdered by a cleric at Delft in 1584.

Dutch Protestants or ‘geus’

Because of the oppression, persecution and execution of Protestants especially with the ‘bloodplackards’, in 1565, members of the lower gentry, representing the people, formed what was called a ‘Compromise’, a league, which grew rapidly and called for military action against the government. Orange was able to mitigate its intentions to offering a petition to the Governor, begging for leniency towards the Protestants and, in fact, asking for religious freedom. On 5 April 1565, a long procession of these lords through Brussels entered Margarethe’s palace where the marriage of her son Alexander was taking place. One of the noblemen, Henry van Brederode, offered her the petition. Not knowing who these people were, she asked Berlaymont, one of the members of the Council of State (comparable to the Privy Council). Berlatmont replied: “*N’ayez pas peur Madame, ce ne sont que des gueux*” - “there is nothing to fear, Madame, they are only beggars.” This remark was overheard and, no sooner was it mentioned on the 8th of April to the assembled lords, who were still awaiting an answer to their plea, than they adopted this name ‘geus’ as one of honor instead of insult: “*vivent les gueux*”! Later on the word ‘geuzennaam’ was adopted for a pejorative used as something honourable, in the sense that ‘Monstrous Adversary’ could be a geuzennaam (reappropriation or reclamation) for Oxford.

The Dutch Revolt, 1566

June 1566 saw the first Protestant open-air services; many now adopted the name 'geus' which thus also became synonymous with 'Protestant'. The uprising went further and in present Northern France, Steenvoorde, the first iconoclasm took place. Like a tidal wave it spread across Flanders and then to the provinces of Zealand and Holland, the most powerful ones of the Netherlands, next Utrecht and the other provinces.

Although Margarethe was still inclined to leniency, the orthodox Philip saw tolerance of heretics as a threat to the Catholic order and his authority, the revolt to be quenched at all cost. At first he procrastinated and gave the impression that he could be persuaded to tolerance but in 1567 he sent the Duke of Alva over as Captain General of the Netherlands, with an elite army force. The Spanish called the revolt 'Arson in the Netherlands'. Alva took over justice and had a special court installed colloquially called 'Bloedraad', the Council of Blood. He imposed heavy taxes, called 'tiende penning' or 'ten percent' both to which the States also protested vehemently – without effect. With her authority taken away from her, Margarethe let her brother know that she resigned from her function as governor. On a personal level, the Duke of Alva was at first friendly and inviting - which led to some of the nobility meeting with him in Brussels; Orange however was suspicious and thought that Alva was dissembling. He remained in his ancestral Castle Dillenburg in Germany. Alva then kidnapped Orange's oldest son Philip Willem and sent him as a hostage to Spain; father and son were never to meet again. With his arrest of counts Egmond and Hoorne and their subsequent beheading, Alva started a campaign of terror which cost many their lives and with his well trained army he conquered so many towns and territory that the situation for the revolt and its leader, Orange, became steadily worse.

The influence of the Watergeuzen

The situation on land deteriorated with no town able to resist Alva. Although Orange lacked the aid of the French Huguenots and the English Protestants, he found support from 'watergeuzen', sea-beggars, or corsairs, united in their hatred of the Spanish and all Papists. They consisted of hungry Hollanders and Zealanders, many Walloon laborers out of work and Protestants from Liege joined by Huguenots from la Rochelle. This force of Watergeuzen were *'exiles, insurgents, and suspects, mixed with thieves and adventurers'*. Commanding these ships were mostly gentry, from the southern Netherlands, Brabant, Liege, Limburg. In 1568, William of Orange contacted the watergeuzen.

There was no intention at this stage to declare independence: if the French came to the rescue, they would be offered the provinces of Flanders and Artois and if England came along, Holland and Zealand to Elizabeth. De Watergeuzen, who were as yet an unruly band, formed a big problem. The present admiral, de Lumbres was replaced by William II de la Marck, the Lord Lumey (1542 -1578), from Liege, who gained some authority over them. Nevertheless Louis wrote to Elizabeth saying he wished that she would punish the Watergeuzen who, up until then, had had a safe haven in English ports. There they could trade their spoils from Spanish ships and even traded Spanish prisoners as slaves which were bought by English coastal towns with the idea of a large ransom later on.



Flushing (Vlissingen) in the sixteenth century

English Aid

The town of Dover made the local prison available to this end! In February 1572 the English government ordered the Watergeuzen to leave English ports, at the same time Orange made his brother Louis the leader of the Watergeuzen in the hope that an end would be put to the indiscriminate ransacking of ships. Interestingly enough, this led almost immediately to turning their attention back to their homeland and on the first of April 1572, Lumey took the town of Briele (Brill) by surprise, the Spanish stadhouders, or lieutenant, Bossu failing to retake the town. Alva, sensing danger, wanted to fortify his garrison at Flushing with its strategic position at the Scheldt mouth, but when some civil servants appeared to prepare this, an uprising by fishermen drove the Spanish ships away.

Lumey, in spite of having been driven from the English ports wrote to Elizabeth asking for help against the Alva's central government, he received a reply - though not openly - "*the English government allowed considerable bands of volunteers to part for Flushing in aid of the uprising*". A couple of months later, town after town, beginning with Enkhuizen, had similar events taking place: while magistrates and the rich upper class generally opposed the Watergeuzen the ordinary civilians favoured them, took the town, had Catholics relinquish their churches to them and introduced Protestant services. Magistrates and many of the rich subsequently fled to Amsterdam, where Alva had his headquarters. At the end of 1573, realizing the adverse effect of his ruthless policy and having lost three naval battles against the Watergeuzen, he asked to be released of his function. He was replaced by a more moderate Requesens, duke of Milan.

However, Dutch hopes of assistance from the French Huguenots were dashed by the massacre in Paris on St Bartholomew's Day, 24 August 1572, in which their leader De Coligny was killed and Henri of Navarre only just escaped.

A person of great importance was Count Louis de Boisot, a nobleman from Liège, whose father had been a counsellor to Charles V. Boisot was condemned by the Council of Blood in 1570 and fled the country. He fled to flee to England in 1573 where he started operating as watergeuz, together with his brother, Charles. In August 1573, Boisot became lieutenant-admiral of Zeeland, took over the Watergeuzen at Lillo, near Antwerp. Under Boisot, the Watergeuzen beat the Spanish fleet in 1573 before Flushing and again in January 1574 at the Battle of Reimerswaal, where he lost an eye.



In March 1574 he also became admiral of Holland and West Friesland. He then relieved the town of Leyden, but drowned, probably from exhaustion while swimming from his ship which had stranded during attempts to break the Spanish siege of the town of Zierikzee on the 27th of May 1576. There are a number of letters of his written directly to Elizabeth, for instance about complaints from the Merchant Adventurers brought to his attention by Robert Beale.

Count Louis de Boisot

Much of what concerns these naval events has been recorded in H.J. Smit, '*Sources to the History of the Trade with England, Scotland and Ireland*' (1950) which contains a vast correspondence and comprises some eight volumes. In 1575 for instance the High Court of the Admiralty mentions several acts of piracy by Flushingers:

Mary Daniell, captain Thomas Estgate, with goods from Petrus de Morga and other Spanish merchants in the company of the ships the Prymrose and the Christ of London when they were sailing to Dunkirk, were attacked by six ships of Flushing, taken and lead to Zeeland.

Another ship was captured by Symon Vrege, Captain of the Beare of Flushing, in 1577. By order of the English Admiralty this pirate ship was arrested in Chatham Water.

It contains frequent reports by Daniel Rogers, (1538-1591) English envoy to Orange, about the problems of English ships, taken by the Dutch Watergeuzen, particularly "them of Flushing". The Merchant Adventurers had a trade monopoly with the Netherlands, initially largely in wool. Many of the problems referred to had to do with taxes in this trade with Holland, Zeeland, Brabant and Flanders. In March 1575 Boisot captured Merchant Adventurers ships on their way to Antwerp. In June 1575 Daniel Rogers, mentions to the Zeeland Admiralty, Louis Boisot, that the sale of goods of a certain merchants was in violation of their agreement with Orange that all ships of those merchants would have to enter Flushing harbour. The town of Flushing doubled its population, from approximately 4000 to 8000, between 1570 and 1582.

Capture of Oxford by the Watergeuzen

On the 10th of April 1576 Oxford returned home on a Merchant Adventurers ship. Mark Anderson in *Shakespeare by Another Name* on page 112 states: “the most expressive account is Shake-spear’s in Hamlet”:

Ere we were two days at sea, a pirate of very warlike appointment gave us chase. Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put up a compell’d valor, and in the grapple I boarded them on the instant they got clear of our ship, so I alone became their prisoner. They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy, but they knew what they did: I am to do a good turn for them.

The pirates of very warlike appointment boarded de Vere’s ship and stripped it bare. De Vere’s luggage was ransacked and the pirates even took the clothes from Oxford’s back, he was ‘left naked, stripped to his shirt, treated miserably, his life in danger had he not been recognized by a Scotsman’ according to a despatch by the French ambassador, Michel de Castelnau, Sieur de la Mauvissière on 21 April (quoted by Alan Nelson, in *Monstrous Adversary*, p. 137). Nelson understandably does not refer to *Hamlet*, but quotes Nathaniel Baxter who was part of De Vere’s entourage in Italy about the event in 1606 in *Sidneys Ourania*:

*Naked we landed out of Italie,
 Inthral’d by Pyrats men of noe regard,
 Horror and death assayl’d Nobilitie,
 If princes might with crueltie be scar’d
 Lo thus are excellent beginnings hard.*

Robert Beale 1541-1601, diplomat, administrator, clerk of the Privy Council was dispatched to Orange on the 17th April in order to try to recover Oxford’s goods.

The Privy Council notes:

The same day Mr Beale was dispayched towardes the Lowe COUNTRY upon occasion of a spoile committed upon thearle of Oxford at the seas in his passage, and for other injuries donne by them of Flussbinge against diverse of her Majesties subjects, according to instructions remaining in the hands of Mr. Secretary Walsingham.

A letter to thearle of Oxford signifieng what their Lordships had donne in respect of that injurie donne onto him, that Mr. Beale should come onto him to be informed of the manour of the outrage and the particulars of his losses, and either to deliver him prefect instructions or to send some servante of his with him that knowe his stuff and whereof be made moost accompt.

For his dispatche there were signed by his lordship sundry letters of credit for Mr. Beale, as to the Prince of Orange and the Admirall of Flusshinge and the Governor of Middelburghe.

Elizabeth also wrote to Orange about the matter as did Francis Walsingham and Leicester. The same day Burghley's letter included an emotional appeal:

if Mr Beale shall speak with the Prince, he may do well to think that such an outrage as this is, cannot take en without more offense to him and his than may be the hanging of five or six such thieves, as, if he were rid of a hundred of them, his cause would prosper better and his friendes would increase, which if he shall by subterfuge in answer delay, he will fele shall nether prosper.

Beale was also instructed to speak to Oxford himself about his losses; he met him at Rochester. Nelson states that the apparent date of Oxford's arrival at Dover was 20 April 1576. The French ambassador, Mauvissière, reported to his king, Henri III:

[the Queen] was marvellously angry that the Earl of Oxford...was left naked, stripped to his shirt, treated miserably, his life in danger if he had not been recognized by a Scotsman. The Queen dispatched Lord Howard to Dover to welcome and console him for it is said that he had brought with him a great collection of Italian garments, which were taken from him, over which his regret is infinite.

Daniel Rogers mentions the arrival of Robert Beale in Delft on the 5th of May. Orange had already left for Brill, Beale followed him and spoke to Orange and the Count of Culemborg on the 7th. Orange wrote four letters on the 31st of May, one to the Queen, to the Privy Council, Walsingham to Lord Burghley and to Oxford himself (at least, according to Robert Beale, see below), apologising:

that I was greatly displeased when I heard from Mr. Beale of the injuries which the Earl of Oxford had received by certain seacaptains who call themselves being from Flushing. I do not wish to tolerate these insolences some of them are already in prison.

Daniel Rogers in his May journal reports:

*the 10th, departed Mr. Herbert with Mr. Bodenham towards England and took with him **two pistolls** which were taken from the Count of Oxenforth. (The 29, I sent a couple of letters into England by Philipp [Roger's brother ?, JS], the one to sir Thomas Smithe, the other to Mr. Wilson.)*

Oxford's Escape

Robert Beale described Oxford's escape in a letter to Burghley, dated 5 June 1576:

besides the generall letter which I have written to all Ther Lordship of the doings with the Prince here, I knowe not what to advertise Your Lordship particularly of. In the matter of my Lord of Oxford, I have delt as earnestlie as I could, and the rather for that by a letter of your Lordshippes, which yt pleased Mr. Secretarie Walsingham to shewe onto me before my departure. I perceived the great care Your Lordship had thereof... indede the case deserved. And, yf so moche has not ben don therein, as erason were and as Your Lordship doth desire, I shall most humbly beseche Your Lordship to attribute the same rather to the unreasonableness of these persons with whom I have to do, than to that is my default (as God ys my witness).

For notwithstanding the Princes letters to both Your Lordships a ...his faire promises to me that justice shallbe.. and that the parties be in prison appears en ...ry, I cannot learne, but that only one hath been apprehended, whose name is Lambellon who ... is but kept in a townesman house in Flusshing, and has liberty to walke abroade. And appears that my Lord of Oxford wilbe appeased with a letter which I understand he sent unto his Lordship when I was in Holland. He trusteth to escape: and, when I regard the small consideration they have of her Majesty and your Lordship letters (more than in faire words)... partly believe yt. And therefore in my simple... bothe your lordships are to deale earnestly in your next letters for justice. For considering the carelessness and imparity of soche offenses in these places, all wilbe little enough.*

*And where they demand more particular information, I have declared unto them the manner of the outrage committed to his parson, as I understode yt from His Lordship at Rochester. And as for the particularity of the goodes, Althoughe I demaunded to have them restored, yet my chiefest desire was, seing jam constat de facto by the confession of the said Lambellon and the things taken here, to have justice don for the reparation of injurye and dishonor. As an appon my information they found **the daggers** which were sent by Mr. Herbert, so they might find more stuff yf they listed. But I heare sum of his **golden stuff** hath cam to sum of the cheef officers' hand, which now beare out the matter. I have ben fedd in this matter, as in the rest, with delayes, and , if her majesty send not a pleasing answer to the Prince's writing, they seem to be so desparate that I thinck no justice, nor ought els wilbe had of all my demands.*

Obviously, Orange was in difficulty over the whole matter: he desperately needed the Watergeuzen for his campaign and with the recent loss of both his undaunted admiral Boisot and his brother Charles, governor of Flushing, he could not afford to alienate them, yet at the same time he needed his English alliance all the more. The

capture of the Merchant Adventurers' ship with Oxford on board clearly was a mistake. Orange agreed to return the captured Merchants Adventurers' ships only if Elizabeth would return four ships from Flushing that had been detained in Falmouth. As to Orange, Daniel Rogers in his June 1576 journal complains that having 'offered' the provinces of Holland and Zealand to her Majesty if she would help him, "*he never had any answer.*" On the 6th of August the Privy Council gave instructions to William Holstock, controller of her Majesties ships, about:

them from Flushing have recently taken many English ships and they rob ships of any nationality, ...that you shall apprehend all shippes that you shall fynd at the seas within the coorse that you be appointed to keepe, which do belong to them of Flushing or to the portes thereabouts of Holland and Zeland and bring them to some port of the realme..

In November 1576, six months after Oxford's capture by the Dutch sea-beggars, Elizabeth agreed to help Orange finance the Revolt with £100,000 of which £20,000 was immediately dispensed.

Note

Van Grol in 'Het Zeeuwsche prijzenhof te Vlissingen' ('The Zealand Prize Court in Flushing'), *bijdragen en mededelingen van het historisch Genootschap*, XXXVI, p. 235) gives an overview of captured ships from 1575-1577. Lambrecht Lambillon is mentioned twice in November 1575 and twice in February 1576 as captain of a ship that took prizes. From the 15 of March till the 16 April 1576 however, no takings are mentioned.

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