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Dwight Elmendorf

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The History of Holland

ONE

The history of Holland is a record of the unexpected. One might think that this flat country would have a story as monotonous as the land on which it is built, that it would be the last part of the world to be the center of fierce battles and bloody wars. Yet there took place in this little country, formed principally of the mud deposited by three rivers, the Rhine, the Meuse, and the Schelde, some of the most important deeds in the history of the world.

The earliest inhabitants of this part of Europe are said to have been some of the barbarians that accompanied the Cimbri and Teutons in their expedition against Italy. The Romans, however, held sway over this district until near the end of the fourth century, when the Franks took possession and settled there. Later the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne extended his supremacy over the whole of the Netherlands, and under his successors a system of dividing the land among the vassal princes gradually developed. Thus the feudal system grew up.

The situation of the country on the ocean and the mouths of three great rivers invited the people to commerce. Then, also, the big cities grew up and surrounded themselves with strong forts.

In 1477 the Netherlands came into possession of the House of Hapsburg by the marriage of Mary of Burgundy, the daughter of Charles the Bold, with Maximilian, afterward emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Their son, Philip the Handsome, was the father of Charles V, who subsequently became King of Spain. Under his rule the Netherlands enjoyed a golden era of prosperity; but during the reign of his bigoted son, Philip II, there began that apparently hopeless struggle of the weak people of the north against the haughty Spaniards, which lasted for eighty years and which ended in the establishment of the powerful Dutch republic. The great founder of Dutch liberty was William of Nassau, the Silent. Today he is revered by the Dutch as a mighty hero and martyr.

It was in 1579 that the Union of Utrecht laid the foundation on which the republic of the United Netherlands was to be raised. By the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 the independence of the United Provinces was recognized.

The prosperity of Holland was great. Its navigators explored the most distant coasts in the world, and its trading posts in East India yielded a rich harvest. It had commerce with all nations, and at the same time its art reached its highest point of excellence.

For many years the fortunes of the Netherlands varied from good to bad. In 1795 the French Republicans took possession of the country and founded the Batavian republic. In 1806 Louis Bonaparte was created king of Holland by his brother Napoleon. Four years later Napoleon annexed Holland to France, giving as the reason his belief that it was formed of the alluvial deposit of French rivers. At last, in November, 1813, the French were expelled from Holland; and in 1815, by the Congress of Vienna, the southern or Belgian province of the Netherlands was united with the northern into a single kingdom, and the Prince of Orange was created king of the Netherlands under the title of William I. This union was severed by the Belgian revolution of 1830. Ten years later, William I abdicated in favor of his son William II, who was in turn succeeded by William III.

His daughter Wilhelmina is the present ruler of Holland. Her daughter, Princess Juliana, was born April 30, 1909.

William the Silent

TWO

William the Silent is to Holland what George Washington is to the United States. As the principal opponent of Philip II of Spain he was the very incarnation of the national spirit in the greatest period of Dutch history. He dared to stand forth as the fearless leader of a persecuted people in opposition to the mightiest monarch then on earth. William, Prince of Orange and Count of Nassau, was surnamed “The Silent” not because he was gloomy, but because he was able to hide his plans with wonderful discretion. He was born on April 16, 1533. He was a great favorite of Charles V of Spain, who appointed him, when he was only twenty-two years old, governor of the provinces of Holland, Zealand, and Utrecht. When the Low Countries came into possession of the Duke of Alva, the Spanish governor, William set out on a short but useless campaign to liberate the southern provinces. Four years later he was invited by Holland and Zealand to command their troops against the Spaniards. Shortly afterward he captured Middelburg and succeeded in raising the siege of Leyden. The Union of Utrecht, the famous defensive league of the North Netherlands, was formed in 1579. Soon afterward William was exiled by Philip II; but the States General defied his authority, and in 1581 formally threw off their allegiance to the Spanish crown.

However, so anxious was Philip to have William out of the way that he offered a reward of 25,000 crowns and a title of nobility to anyone who would assassinate him. Many were the cowardly attacks made against the brave Dutchman, eight attempts being made before the one that finally succeeded.

On July 10, 1584, William, in company with his beautiful young wife, was coming to dinner down the stairway of the Prinsenhof – his house in Delft. Suddenly from the corner of the corridor a man stepped forth holding a petition. The prince asked him to present it later when he was not busy. During the meal William was as usual very cheerful; but his wife seemed to have a premonition of danger. She spoke to him several times of the strange man they had met in the hall, remarking that she had never seen a more villainous face. This did not disturb William in the least, and at the close of the meal he led the way back along the corridor. As he approached the staircase, without a moment’s warning the assassin sprang forth and shot him in the breast. The prince reeled backward a few steps and fell into the arms of his wife. A few minutes later the founder of Dutch liberty had passed into history.

William the Silent was the foremost statesman of his time. He gave up great position, vast wealth, and at last his life, to rescue the Netherlands from the tyrannical power of Spain; and he had the satisfaction of knowing before he died that the cause for which he had suffered so much would succeed.

His murderer, Balthazar Gerard, was executed by having the flesh torn from his body with redhot pincers.

Amsterdam

THREE

Amsterdam has often been called “The Venice of the North.” Between the two cities there is a resemblance; but they also differ from each other essentially. Venice is golden; while Amsterdam is gray. Venice inspires romantic memories and poetical associations; Amsterdam, even with its many attractions, is distinctly practical and commercial.

Amsterdam is a seaport in the province of North Holland. It is one of the chief commercial cities in Europe and the largest city in the kingdom of Holland. It is one of the wealthiest cities in the world.

Amsterdam stands on flat, marshy ground into which piles fifty feet long are driven to form the foundations of brick houses, which are usually six or seven stories high. The form of the city is a crescent, and the arms of its canals project into the Y.

Amsterdam is really a city founded upon islands, ninety in all. It has miles of liquid streets, which are spanned by three hundred bridges. All through the city float heavy barges, many of which are the homes of citizens.

Among some classes of the Dutch it is customary, when a young man has saved or borrowed enough money, to buy a huge, broad-shouldered boat and install therein not only his entire family, but also his poultry, hogs, and even cows. From then on he is independent, and master of his own floating house, stable, farmyard, and express wagon. He transports loads of merchandise from town to town, and is in a small way even a farmer. When he moors his boat to take his wares from house to house he uses a cart, and to draw this cart he employs dogs. When the merchandise is sold the driver calmly seats himself in the cart and makes his patient animals pull him home. If he does not own a dog, he merely puts the yoke upon the shoulders of his wife, and she acts as a willing steed.

The little houses in the vicinity of Amsterdam are thoroughly characteristic of Holland. They have sharply pointed roofs of pretty red tiles, neatly painted walls and blinds, and a monstrous windmill on one side. Within they are scoured and polished so that they almost shine with cleanliness. Even among the wealthy citizens of Amsterdam there is not much display of luxury. The houses are quite plain, but always brightly clean.

To most people who are used to paved streets and plenty of dry land it would not be pleasant to dwell among the watery streets with their narrow sidewalks of Amsterdam; but to a Dutchman it is impossible to have too much water about his house. Even with a canal in front and another on each side he will add, if possible, an artificial pond in his small garden.

Rotterdam

FOUR

Rotterdam, the famous commercial center of Holland, lies fourteen miles from the North Sea at the union of two rivers, one of which is called the Rotte, and with the great dam erected on its banks gives to the town its name. To a visitor the most notable feature of this great Dutch city is its multitude of bridges, most of which are drawbridges, continually rising and falling like parts of a huge machine.

Rotterdam received its first municipal privileges in 1340. Its modern prosperity dates from the separation of Belgium from the kingdom of the Netherlands. The largest seagoing ships can now be admitted to the quays of the town. Great cargoes of oil, grain, coffee, tobacco, and coal pass through it, and its cattle market is the most important in Holland.

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