

*Sir William Temple, The Physical Environment and People of the Dutch Republic, 1673*

Introduction: Sir William Temple (1628-1699) served as the English Ambassador to the Dutch Republic from 1668 to 1672 and again from 1674 to 1679. He provided one of the most penetrating analysis and vivid descriptions of the Republic in his *Observations Upon he United Provinces of the Netherlands*, first published in 1672. The selections below are from chapter III and IV, "Of their Scituation" and "Of their People and Dispositions" in the 1673 edition, which was reprinted, with an interesting introduction, in Sir George Clark's edition (Oxford 1972). The idiosyncratic spelling of the original publication has been retained.

*Of their Scituation*

Holland, Zealand, Friezland, and Groninguen, are seated upon the Sea, and make the Strength and Greatness of this State: The other three, with the Conquered Towns in Brabant, Flanders, and Cleve, make only the Out-works or Frontiers, ( serving chiefly for safety and defence of these... Whatever it was, whether Nature or Accident, and upon what occasion soever it arrived, The Soil of the whole Province of Holland is generally flat like the Sea in a calm, and looks as if after a long contention between Land and Water, which It should belong to, It had at length been divided between them: For to consider the great Rivers, and the strange number of Canals that are found in this Province, and do not only lead to every great Town, but almost to every Village, and every Farm-House in the Countrey; And the infinity of Sails that are seen every where coursing up and down upon them; One would imagine the Water to have shar'd with the Land; and the people that live in Boats, to hold some proportion with those that live in Houses. And this is one great advantage towards Trade, which is natural to the Scituation, and not to be attained in any Countrey where there is not the same level and softness of Soil, which makes the cutting of Canals so easie work as to be attempted almost by every private man; And one Horse shall draw in a Boat more than fifty can do by Cart, whereas Carriage makes a great part of the price in all heavy Commodities: And by this easie way of travelling, an industrious man loses no time from his business, for he writes, or eats, or sleeps while he goes; whereas the Time of labouring or industrious men, is the gratest Native Commodity of any Countrey.

There is besides, one very great Lake of fresh water still remaining in the midst of this Province, by the name of Harlem Maer, which might as they say be easily drained, and would thereby make a mighty addition of Land to a Countrey, where nothing is more wanted; and receive a great quantity of people, in which they abound, and who make their Greatness and

Riches... There is in North-Holland a great Essay made at the possibility of draining these great Lakes, by one of about two Leagues broad having been made firm Land, within these forty years; This makes that part of the Countrey called the Bemster, being now the richest Soil of the Province, lying upon a dead flat, divided with Canals, and the ways through it distinguish'd with ranges of Trees, which make the pleasantest Summer-Lands chip of any Countrey I have seen of that sort,

Another advantage of their Scituation for Trade, is made by those two great Rivers of the Rhyne and Mose, reaching up, and Navigable so mighty a length into so rich and populous Countreys of the Higher and Lower Germany; which as it brings down all the Commodities from those parts to the Magazines in Holland, that vent them by their Shipping into all parts of the World where the Market calls for them; so with something more Labour and Time, it returns all the Merchandizes of other parts into those Countreys that are seated upon these streams. For their commodious seat as to the Trade of the Streights, or Baltique, or any parts of the Ocean, I see no advantage they have of most parts of England; and they must certainly yield to many we possess, if we had other equal circumstances to value them.

The lowness and flatness of their Lands, makes in a great measure the richness of their Soil, that is easily overflowed every Winter, so as the whole Countrey at that season seems to lye under water, which in Spring is driven out again by Mills. But that which mends the Earth, spoils the Air, which would be all Fog and Mist, if it were not clear'd by the sharpness of their Frosts, which never fail with every East-wind for about four Months of the year, and are much fiercer than in the same Latitude with us, because that Wind comes to them over a mighty length of dry Continent; but is moistned by the apours, or softned by the warmth of the Seas motion, before it reaches us...

The flatness of their Land exposes it to the danger of the Sea, and forces them to infinite charge in the continual fences and repairs of their Banks to oppose it; Which employ yearly more men than all the Corn of the Province of Holland could maintain (as one of their chief Ministers has told me). They have lately found the common Sea-weed to be the best Material for these Digues, which fastens with a thin mixture of Earth, yields a little to the force of the Sea, and returns when the Waves give back: Whether they are thereby the safer against Water, as they say

Houses that shake are against Wind; or whether, as pious Naturalists observe, all things carry about them that which serves for a Remedy against the Mischiefs they do in the world.

The extream moisture of the Air, I take to be the occasion of the great neatness in their Houses, and cleanliness in their Towns. For without the help of those Customs, their Countrey would not be habitable by such Crowds of people...The same moisture of Air makes all Metals apt to rust, and Wood to mould; which forces them by continual pains of rubbing and scouring, to seek a prevention or cure: This makes the brightness and cleanness that seems affected in their Houses, and is call'd natural to them, by people who think no further. So the deepness of their Soil, and wetness of Seasons, which would render it unpassable, forces them not only to exactness of paving in their Streets, but to the expence of so long Cawsies [causeways] between many of their Towns, and in their High-ways. As indeed most National Customs are the Effect of some unseen or unobserved natural Causes or Necessities...

#### *Of their People and Dispositions*

The People of Holland may be divided into these several Classes: The Clowns or Boors (as they call them), who cultivate the Land. The Mariners or Schippers, who supply their Ships and Inland-Boats, The Merchants or Traders, who fill their Towns. The Renteneers, or men that live in all their chief Cities upon the Rents or Interest of Estates forme fly acquiled in their Families : And the Gentlemen and Officers of their Armies.

The first are a Race of people diligent rather than laborious; dull and slow of understanding, and so not dealt with by hasty words, but managed easily by soft and fair; and yeelding to plain Reason, if you give them time to understand it. In the Countrey and Villages not too near the great Towns, they seem plain and honest, and content with their own... They know no other Good, but the supply of what Nature requires, and the common encrease of Wealth. They feed most upon Herbs, Roots, and Milks...

The Mariners are a plain, but much rougher people; whether from the Element they live in, or from their Food, which is generally Fish and Corn, and heartier than that of the Boors. They are surly and ill-manner'd, which is mistaken for Pride; but I believe is learnt, as all Manners are, by the conversation we use. Now theirs lying only among one another, or with

Winds and Waves, which are not mov' d 'or wrought upon by any language, or observance; or to be dealt with, but by Pains and by Patience; These are all the Qualities their Mariners have learnt; their Valour is passive rather than active; and their Language is little more than what is of necessary use to their Business.

The Merchants and Trades-men, both the greater and Mechanick, living in Towns that are of great resort, both by strangers and passengers of their own; Are more Mercurial (Wit being sharpened by commerce and conversation of Cities)...Of mighty Industry and constant application to the Ends they propose and pursue. They make use of their Skill and their Wit, to take advantage of other meri's ignorance and Folly they deal with: Are great Exacters where the Law is in their own hands. In other points, where they deal with men that understand like themselves, and are under the reach of Justice and Laws, they are the plainest and best dealers in the world; Which seems not to grow so much from a Principle of Conscience or Morality, as from a Custom or Habit introduced by the necessity of Trade among them, which depends as much upon Common-Honesty, as War does upon Discipline; and without which, all would break up, Merchants would turn Pedlars, and Soldiers Thieves.

Those Families which live upon their Patrimonial Estates in all the great Cities, are a people differently bred and manner'd from the Traders, though like them in the modesty of Garb and Habit, and the Parsimony of living. Their Youth are generally bred up at Schools, and at the Universities of Leyden or Utrecht, in the common studies of Human Learning, but chiefly of the Civil Law...

Where these Families are rich, their Youths, after the course of their studies at home, travel for some years, as the Sons of our Gentry use to do; but their journeys are chiefly into England and France, not much into Italy, seldomer into Spain, nor often into the more Northern Countreys, unless in company or train of their Publique Ministers. The chief End of their Breeding, is to make them fit for the service of their Countrey in the Magistracy of their Towns, their Provinces, and their State. And of these kind of men are the Civil Officers of this Government generally composed, being descended of Families who have many times been constantly in the magistracy of their Native Towns for many Years, and some for several Ages... Their Estates consisting in the Pensions of their Publique Charges, in the Rents of Lands, or

Interest of Money upon the Cantores, or in Actions of the East-Indy Company, or in Shares upon the Adventures of great Trading-Merchants.

The mighty growth and excess of Riches is seen among the Merchants and Traders, whose application lyes wholly that way, and who are the better content to have so little share in the Government, desiring only security in what they possess; Troubled with no cares but those of their Fortunes, and the management of their Trades, and turning the rest of their time and thought to the divertisement of their lives. Yet these, when they attain great wealth, chuse to breed up their Sons in the way, and marry their Daughters into the Families of those others most generally credited in their Towns, and versed in their Magistracies; And thereby introduce their Families into the way of Government and Honour, which consists not here in Titles, but in Publique Employments,

The next Rank among them, is that of their Gentlemen or Nobles, who' in the Province of Holland (to which I chiefly confine these Observations) are very few, most of the Families having been extinguished in the long Wars with Spain. But those that remain, are in a manner all employ'd in the Military or Civil Charges of the Province or States. These are in their Customs, and Manners, and way of living, a good deal different from the rest of the people; and having been bred much abroad, rather affect the Garb of their Neighbour-Courts, than the Popular Air of their own Countrey. They value themselves more upon their Nobility, than men do in other Countreys, where 'tis more common; and would think themselves utterly dishonoured 'by the marriage of one that were not of their Rank, though it wen; to make up the broken Fortune of a Noble Family, by the Wealth of a Plebean. They strive to imitate the French in their Meen, their Clothes, their way of Talk, of Eating, of Gallantry, or Debauchery; And are, in my mind, something worse than they would be, by affecting to be better than they need; making sometimes but ill Copies, whereas they might be good Originals, by refining or improving the Customs and Virtues proper to their own Countrey and Climate... The Officers of their Armies live after the Customs and Fashions of the Gentlemen; And so do many Sons of the rich Merchants, who returning from travel abroad, have more designs upon their own pleasure, and the vanity of appearing, than upon the Service of their Countrey...

There are some Customs or Dispositions that seem to run generally through all these

Degrees of men among them; As great Frugality, and order in their Expences. Their common Riches lye in every man's having more than he spends; or to say it more properly, In every man's spending less than' he has coming in... This enables every man to bear their extream Taxes, and makes them less sensible than they would be in other places...

This makes the beauty and strength of their Towns, the commodiousness of travelling in their Countrey by their Canals, Bridges, and Cawseys; the pleasantness of their Walks, and their Grafts in and near all their Cities; And in short, the Beauty, Convenience, and sometimes Magnificence of all Publique Works, to which every man pays as willingly, and takes as much pleasure and vanity in them, as those of other Countreys do in the same circumstances, among the Possessions of their Families, or private Inheritance. What they can spare, besides the necessary expence of their Domestique, the Publique Payments, and the common course of still increasing their Stock, Is laid out in the Fabrick, Adornment, or Furniture of their Houses: Things not so transitory, or so prejudicial to Health, and to Business, as the constant Excesses and Luxury of Tables; Nor perhaps altogether so vain as the extravagant Expences of Clothes and Attendance; At least these end wholly in a man's self, and the satisfaction of his personal Humour; whereas the other make not only the Riches of a Family, but contribute much towards the publique Beauty and Honour of a Countrey...

Charity seems to be very National among them, though it be regulated by Orders of the Countrey, and not usually moved by the common Objects of Compassion. But it is seen in the admirable Provisions that are made out of it for all sorts of persons that can want, or ought to be kept in a Government. Among the many and various Hospitals that are in every man's curiosity and talk that travels their Countrey, I was affected with none more than that of the aged Sea-men at Enchusyen, which is contrived, finished, and ordered, as if it were done with a kind intention of some well-natur'd man, That those who had past their whole lives in the Hardships and Incornmodities of the Sea, should find a Retreat stor'd with all the Eases and Conveniences that Old-age is capable of feeling and enjoying. And here I met with the only rich man that I ever saw in my life: For one of these old Sea-men entertaining me a good while with the plain Stories of his Fifty years Voyages and Adventures, while I was viewing their Hospital, and the Church adjoining; I gave him at parting a piece of their Coin about the value of a Crown; He took it

smiling, and offer'd it me again; but when I refused it, he askt me what he should do with Money? for all that ever they wanted, was provided for them at their House, I left him to overcome his Modesty as he could; but a Servant coming after me, saw him give it to a little Girl that open'd the Church-door, as she past by him; Which made me reflect upon the fantastick calculation of Riches and Poverty that is current in the world, by which a man that wants a Million, is a Prince; He that wants but a Groat is a Beggar; and this was a poor man that wanted nothing at all.

In general, All Appetites and Passions seem to run lower and cooler here, than in other Countreys where I have conversed. Avarice may be excepted. And yet that should not be so violent, where it feeds only upon Industry and Parsimony, as where it breaks out into Fraud, Rapine, and Oppression. But Quarrels are seldom seen among them, unless in their drink, Revenge rarely heard of, or Jealousie known. Their Tempers are not aiery enough for Joy, or any unusual strains of pleasant Humour; nor warm enough for Love... Qualities in their Air, may encline them to the Entertainments and Customs of Drinking, which are so much laid to their charge, and for ought I know may not only be necessary to their Health (as they generally believe it), but to the vigour and improvement of their Understandings, in the midst of a thick foggy Air, and so much coldness of Temper and Complexion. For though the use or excess of drinking, may destroy men's Abilities who live in better Climates, and are of warmer Constitutions; Wine to hot Brains, being like Oyl to Fire, and making the Spirits by too much lightness, evaporate into smoak, and perfect aiery imaginations; Or by too much heat, rage into Frenzy, or at least into Humours and Thoughts that have a great mixture of it; Yet on the other side, it may improve men's Parts and Abilities of cold Complexions, and in dull Air; and may be necessary to thaw and move the frozen or unactive Spirits of the Brain; To rowse sleepy Thought, and refine grosser Imaginations, and perhaps to animate the Spirits of the Heart, as well as enliven those of the Brain... Yet in Holland I have observed very few of their chief Officers or Ministers of State vicious in this kind; Or if they drunk much, 't was only at set-Feasts, and rather to acquit themselves, than of choice or inclination; And for the Merchants and Traders, with whom it is customary, They never do it in a morning, nor till they come from the Exchange, where the business of the day is commonly dispatcht; Nay, it hardly enters into their heads, that 'tis lawful

to drink at all before that time; but they will excuse it if you come to their House, and tell you how sorry they are you come in a morning when they cannot offer you to drink; as if at that time of day it were not only unlawful for them to drink themselves, but so much as a stranger to do it within their Walls...

I can say nothing of what is usually laid to their charge about their being Cruel, besides what we have so often heard, of their barbarous usage to some of our men in the East-Indies, and what we have so lately seen of their Savage Murther of their Pensioner De Wit; A Person that deserv'd another Fate, and a better return from his Countrey after Eighteen years spent in their Ministry, without any care of his Entertainments of Ease, and little of his Fortune. A man of unwearied Industry, inflexible Constance, sound, clear, and deep Understanding, and untainted Integrity; so that whenever he was blinded, it was by the passion he had for that which he esteemed the good and interest of his State. This testimony is justly due to him from all that practised him; and is the more willingly paid, since there can be as little interest to flatter, as honour to reproach the dead. But this Action of that people may be attributed to the misfortune of their Countrey; and is so unlike the appearance of their Customs and Dispositions, living as I saw them under the Orders and Laws of a quiet and settled State, that one must confess Mankind to be a very various Creature, and none to be known that has not been seen in his Rage, as well as his Drink...

To conclude this Chapter: Holland is a Countrey where the Earth is better than the Air, and Profit more in request than Honour; Where there is more Sense than Wit; More good Nature than good Humour; And more Wealth than Pleasure; Where a man would chuse rather to travel, than to live; Shall find more things to observe than desire, And more persons to esteem than to love. But the same Qualities and Dispositions do not value a private man and a State, nor make a Conversation agreeable, and a Government great: Nor is it unlikely that some very great King might make but a very ordinary private Gentleman, and some very extraordinary Gentleman might be capable of making but a very mean Prince.