

Agrarian History in The Netherlands in the Modern Period: a Review and Bibliography*

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THE agrarian history of The Netherlands has produced some household names in the discipline, like Jan de Vries at Berkeley, and B H Slicher van Bath, who laid the foundations of the Wageningen School when he was the Professor of Agrarian History at the Agricultural University of Wageningen. Dutch agriculture in the later Middle Ages and the early modern period is quite well known in the English-speaking world, for example through Jan de Vries' work on the Golden Age (114), and through studies on the neighbouring southern Low Countries, which now form Belgium (eg Van der Wee 116). Nevertheless, partly as a result of the perceived impenetrability of the Dutch language, the activities of Dutch historians of agriculture and rural life in the modern period after 1750 are not well publicized outside the Dutch-language area. This article therefore attempts to give an account of the more significant developments in the last twenty years, with reference to works which appeared prior to 1970 where they are still the accepted authorities on their subjects.

The account will of necessity be selective: for a small country, both in terms of population (less than 15 million) and in terms of agricultural area (34,000 km², half of which is presently used for agriculture) there is a very lively interest indeed in agrarian history, reflected in very substantial published output. I shall limit myself to the academic research, which means omitting the enormous production of an army of regional historical societies, which all produce periodicals filled with articles and source publications on the Dutch rural past. There are several reasonably comprehensive bibliographical tools available (Van Zon 132, Brouwer 23, *Repertorium* 82, Vervloet 110) to anyone who wishes to unlock this mine of information for a particular region or theme. It is true that the profession in the Netherlands does lack the equivalent of the *Agricultural History Review*: an academic journal exclusively for agrarian history;

nonetheless, there is an active Society for Agricultural History (*Vereniging voor Landbouwggeschiedenis*). Moreover, the irregular series produced by the Wageningen department, *A A G Bijdragen* (AAG 1), another issued by the Institute for Agricultural History in Groningen (40), and a journal of historical geography (41) partially fill the gap.

This substantial output is the subject of a lively theoretical and methodological debate, which is rigorous without being at the expense of the research itself. The Wageningen School still dominates the discussion by dint of its achievements in the last generation. The approach of its adherents is secular, serial, quantitative, and systematic. The research is problem-oriented, and the interest is in the structure of the agrarian society and economy, usually on a regional or provincial scale. Meanwhile, community studies thrive, and recently, in addition, a more economic-scientific approach has also been taken to the subject, attempting to locate the agricultural sector within the economy as a whole.

The standard work covering all aspects of Dutch agriculture in the modern period is still the multi-author work edited by Sneller, published in 1945 and covering the period 1795–1940 (97). It can be supplemented by earlier works, like Blink's study of farmers and their world (14) and the Agriculture Ministry's 1914 survey of the previous century (*Nederlandsche landbouw* 70). In Brugmans' 1969 standard work on the economic history of the Netherlands in the period 1795–1940 (24) there are substantial sections devoted to the agricultural sector, and in Slicher van Bath's survey of the agrarian history of western Europe from 500 to 1850 (94), the Netherlands features prominently. For the first half of the twentieth century there is a useful survey by Van Stuijvenberg (100). Many of these works are now very dated, albeit still useful, and what is really required is a single-author synthesis covering the period 1750–1950, embracing all aspects. This has been achieved in a masterly fashion for the economic aspects of agriculture in the period 1800–1914 by J L van Zanden's brilliant survey (128); the social, cultural, technological, and political aspects still await

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synthesis. Two multi-author works have appeared recently which are of assistance in this direction: one on the history of agriculture in the last two hundred years, edited by Jansma and Schroor (47), and another covering all the ground from prehistoric times up to today, edited by Noordegraaf (73). Both are richly illustrated and are clearly intended for a wide market. Also worthy of mention in the category of general works are the sections in books offering new views on Dutch history in general. In the fifteen-volume 'General History of The Netherlands', published between 1975 and 1983 (2), each period has a useful survey on agriculture written by the appropriate specialists, and for the early nineteenth century two historians, De Meere and Griffiths, have radically revised the accepted view that the Dutch economy was in malaise at that time, not least by their studies of the agricultural sector (66 and 38). For those who do not read Dutch, the best short introduction to the field is in Milward and Saul's study of the European economy from 1850 to 1914, which includes a ten-page section on Dutch agriculture (68, pp 184-94). Griffiths' study of the economy from 1830 to 1850 (38) is in English, and contains a short survey on agriculture, and there exists a large though unsystematic English-language study by Robertson Scott (83) of the period before the First World War. For more detail, the now dated works in German by Frost (35, 36) may still be consulted. In an unfamiliar research area it is also useful to have a guide to government statistics, and specialist dictionaries. The former are explained by Wijk (118), and there are two particularly useful Dutch-English agriculture dictionaries available (Huitenga 44 and Logie 63). It must be said that few of these works in this general category are entirely satisfactory: the only one which really stands out is van Zanden's dissertation on the economic aspects of agriculture (128), the translation of which into English would unlock many of the secrets of Dutch agriculture for historians outside The Netherlands.

It is in the major studies of regions, most usually provinces, that the Dutch have done their best work in agrarian history, and in this respect the situation is not dissimilar to that in France. There have been two impulses here: the Wageningen School, with its quest for systematic data in serial form covering a substantial area over an extended period of time; and the provincial governments which, since the war, in a country where nationalism is reticent, have often attempted to strengthen and enhance the provincial identity by commissioning major studies by distinguished academic historians on the history of the province. In the rural areas in the north, east, and south of the country, this has in effect meant *agrarian* history. These two agents of advance have brought about a present situation where most of the rural areas

of the country have had major studies committed to them, or where plans for such studies are well advanced and producing results. Slicher van Bath himself, the first Professor of Agrarian History at Wageningen, authored a pioneering study of rural life in the province of Overijssel (93; he also edited a more popular history of the province, 96), which was to define the 'Wageningen' genre: the sections concerned the demographic dynamics, the structure of the working population, social stratification patterns, wealth and poverty, the extent of farmland, land-ownership and tenancy, the farm economy, and the techniques of farming. Studies in similar vein followed for other areas of the country. Friesland was the subject of a Wageningen dissertation by Faber (31), and already had a more general social history by Spahr van der Hoek (98) and a detailed study of the agricultural crisis in the last quarter of the nineteenth century by Hille de Vries (111). The present incumbent of the Wageningen chair, Ad van der Woude, followed with a comprehensive study of the northern part of the province of Noord-Holland (124). The province of Drenthe is now extremely well covered, having a general provincial history (Heringa 39) of a high quality, in which the chapters on the agrarian history of the modern period were written by Jan Bieleman, who has since completed a dissertation on agriculture in Drenthe from 1600 to 1913 (9), and who has published some of his findings in this *Review* (8). The southern province of Limburg has a very active local historical association, and has been well catered for in agrarian history. The pioneer of local and regional history W Jappe Alberts has produced a two-volume history of Dutch and Belgian Limburg (48; vol. II covers the period from 1632 onwards), which has sections on agriculture in each chronological chapter; there is also a history of agriculture in Limburg by Claessens and others (27) which covers the period since 1750. Jansen has completed a more detailed and specialized study on the cyclical movements in southern Limburg agriculture from 1200 to 1800 (46), which is firmly in the tradition of long time-series and secular trend studies based on quantitative sources favoured by the *Annales* school in France. Noord-Brabant is also well served by its local historical association, and a number of very thorough studies have appeared, often in the series of 'Contributions to the History of the South of the Netherlands' (*Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis van het Zuiden van Nederland* 12). A recent issue in this series is a study by Crijns and Kriellaars (28) on the mixed farming of the Brabant sands from 1800 to 1885; again the approach is quantitative and systematic, dealing with population, land use, crops, cattle and other finite variables. Klep wrote his dissertation on the Belgian part of Brabant (54), taking a demographic approach to a mainly rural province in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries, and he has also contributed to the history of Brabant north of the Dutch-Belgian border, in his study of the area around Breda and the Kempen (Campine, 54). The Kempen is also the subject of a historical anthropological study by Meurkens (67), dealing with this heathland area's rural economy and society in the period 1840-1910, superseding the earlier classic by Barentsen (5). A useful study of the eastern part of the province of Noord-Brabant from 1700 to 1920 has recently appeared (Van den Brink 22), and Bieleman has provided a survey of agriculture in the Twente district of Overijssel in the early nineteenth century (10). The province of Gelderland does not have an agrarian history yet, but Roessingh's work on the Veluwe district (84) and Verstegen's recent dissertation on the same area (109) go some way to redressing the balance. Groningen, the northern sea-clay province, lacks a specifically agrarian history (although one by P Priester is in preparation), but a good general history of the province has recently been edited by Formsma and others (32), and many studies have appeared over the years on particular aspects of farming in the province, notably by the veteran historical (rural) sociologist, E W Hofstee (eg 42). Zeeland was fortunate in having two early but thorough histories of the province's agriculture, by Boerendonk (17), and an excellent work on the period from 1800 to 1945 by Bouman (20); this is now dated, and though Wintle's work on religion in this rural province in the nineteenth century (122) has advanced matters, more research is needed.

Not all eleven provinces (twelve, including the new polders in the IJsselmeer) are covered in the account given above: Zuid-Holland, Noord-Holland and Utrecht are too predominantly urban to have had agricultural histories devoted to them on a provincial scale. It would almost be like writing an agrarian history of London. In the urban core provinces there are of course many agricultural villages, and it is in studies of communities that this part of the country has its agrarian history recorded. Community studies, or 'village history', is thriving in the Netherlands, and has done so for some decades. Sociologists and anthropologists join historians here, and when the community is a rural or agricultural one, then the results contribute to agrarian history. In 1982 Jansen and Groot produced a useful guide to the methods and bibliography of these studies in the Netherlands since the 1930s (45), when the discipline was called 'sociography'. The central provinces are well represented here: Baars' Wageningen-inspired serial study of the Beijerland villages (3); Gadourek's sociological case-study of the small town Sassenheim (37) after the war; Noordam's economic-demographic examination of the village Maasland from 1700 to 1850 (71); Schutte's in-depth look at four hamlets

known as the Banne Graft from 1770 to 1810 (90); and Verrips' anthropological study of the village of Ottoland from 1850 to the 1970s (108). Similar studies, either directly or indirectly concerned with agrarian history, have been completed in all the provinces, for example Boer's study of a Drenthe village (16); the Keurs' examination of the isolated village of Anderen, also in the east of the country (52); and Hille de Vries' case-study of the Frisian village of Oostdongeradeel in his examination of the whole province (111).

Among those historians who take a thematically rather than geographically selective approach, the activity is equally wide-ranging. The physical environment is a fundamental starting point in such a mankind-influenced countryside as the Dutch; as well as very detailed works of historical geography, like Barends' study of the Achterhoek area in the east (4), which pays special attention to post-war land-reallocation issues, a more general introduction to Dutch landscape is provided by Bijhouwer (13). The history of climate in the Netherlands was written by Labrijn in 1945 (61): it is clearly due for an overhaul.

Studies which try to define the general character of Dutch rural community life in the past are not at present in fashion, but Van den Berg in 1949 (7) and Wichers in 1965 (117) made classic attempts, the latter being a sociological explanation of the variety in regional characteristics. More recently these attempts at rural *histoire de mentalité* tend to be undertaken on a less general scale, as in the community studies dealt with above, or on the basis of specific source materials such as probate inventories. Work at Wageningen on probates has produced a collection of papers (Van der Woude and Schuurman 127), and recently the dissertation by Schuurman (91, and also 92), which uses the source to define changes and regional variations in material culture in three rural areas in the nineteenth century. Included in these studies of the rural 'mentality' in the past are investigations of the rural family: Saal made a study of farming families (88), and Kooy's long series of works on the Dutch family began with a monograph on the Achterhoek area (57). A recent example of this subject is Vernooij's study of Catholic farming families from the 1930s to the 1980s (107). Wildenbeest investigated a handful of wealthy rural families in the extreme east of the country from their rise to power in the late Middle Ages to their eclipse in the mid-nineteenth century (119). The debate on the standard of life is discussed efficiently for the first half of the nineteenth century by De Meere (66), and as far as rural communities are affected the debate often centres on diet: Baudet and Van der Meulen have studied the period from 1850 to World War One (6), and Trienekens has written controversially on Dutch diet during the Nazi occupation in World War Two (103), concluding that

for most of the war the Dutch ate rather better than they did before it. Van Eekelen has studied infants' diet in the period 1840 to 1914 (30).

Turning to a more directly farming-related side of agrarian history, certain individual farms which have exceptionally well preserved records have been the subject of special studies, like the works on the model farm Wilhelminapolder, since its foundation at the start of the nineteenth century, by Van der Poel (77), Bouman (21) and Kuperus (59), and by Van Mol on a more ordinary farm in Zeeland in the middle years of the last century (69); however it is by no means clear how representative these studies are. Kuperus also contributed a study on pre-1900 farm book-keeping (60), and the recent publication by Botke of a late eighteenth-century farming diary (8) is used to investigate the socio-cultural world of the diarist as well as the economic side of the farm. Slicher van Bath's famous study of yield ratios (95), and his use of them as indicators of economic development in predominantly agricultural economies, relies heavily on data from the Netherlands from the ninth to the nineteenth century. Studies of particular crops include Roessingh's fascinating investigation of the cultivation of tobacco in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (85, 86), in which he shows the flexibility and adaptability of what we had thought were fundamentally conservative farmers. Several studies have appeared on the crop madder, which was important in the Netherlands (Van der Kloot Meyburg 56, Wiskerke 123, Van der Poel 78; see also Schot 89), and recently Buis has produced an exhaustive study of the history of forests and woodlands in the Netherlands up to 1850 (25). Technological developments in farming since 1850 have been dealt with by Van der Poel (80), and advances in the chemical side of agricultural technology have been investigated by Maltha (65). The introduction of steam power in agriculture is dealt with in an article by Lintsen (62), and Van Zon's dissertation (133), on non-industrial pollution from 1850 to 1920, is central to the whole question of land fertility and manuring: several of his chapters are directly on agriculture, and his case-studies focus on Groningen. Land ownership, absentee landlords and their effects on the agricultural economy have been explored by Klijnhout (who is the landlords' apologist, 55) and by Hille de Vries (112) and Wintle (121), who differ on the periodicity of shifts in the absentee landlord system; the swing of land use in Groningen from grass to arable in the late eighteenth century and subsequently is the subject of a recent monograph from Hofstee (42).

In a country which never experienced an industrial revolution, at least not before 1945, the agricultural sector has always been an important contributor to the economy. Pilat examines agricultural exports from the 1840s to the 1920s (75), and Bos' dissertation

on Anglo-Dutch trade from 1870 to 1914 (18) deals of necessity with the Dutch export of agricultural goods in some detail. Agricultural industry has been a dynamic sector in Dutch manufacturing, as Griffiths shows for the period 1830-1850 (38) and De Jonge for 1850-1914 (49); Schot (89) has reassessed Wiskerke's standard work on the madder-milling industry (123).

The manpower aspects of Dutch agriculture are intimately connected with the history of demographic behaviour, and as such are the subject of many studies and several controversies: an introduction in English, though not unpartisan, is provided by Hofstee (43), while Klep has taken a particularly demographic approach to the agrarian history of Brabant (53, 54). Migration of agricultural labour has been investigated by Swierenga (101, 102) and by Hille de Vries (113), who concentrate on the exodus to the United States at various stages since 1830 of large numbers of Dutch farmers and farm workers; Lucassen's work on seasonal migrant labour in Europe (64) concentrates on the coastal provinces of the Netherlands as a major destination for migrant labour in the nineteenth century. Frieswijk has made a special study of agricultural labourers and peat diggers in the northern provinces from 1850 to 1940 (33, 34). Regarding the quality of labour, literacy in the countryside has been the subject of a preliminary investigation by Van der Woude (126), while Van der Poel has compiled an account of agricultural education before 1918 (79), and Van der Burg has dealt with agricultural home economy education for girls since 1909 (26).

The organizational and governmental aspects of agrarian society have long been the subject of study because of the propensity of organizations, especially in the Netherlands (where many have a confessional affiliation), to sponsor commemorative publications about themselves. The general works already cited all deal with government intervention in agriculture, which in the Netherlands was almost non-existent until the First World War, and thereafter very *dirigiste*, especially in the 1930s. Vermeulen has made a special study of nineteenth-century agriculture policy (105). Van der Poel has examined the role of the Agricultural Commissions (76), which before 1851 were the government agencies in the provinces, Krips-Van der Laan has studied government policy on farming in the 1930s (58), and Piers wrote a commemorative study on The Netherlands Agriculture Committee (74) which ran agricultural politics in the years from 1934 to 1959. Vermeulen has written on the Dutchman Sicco Mansholt's contribution to early European agricultural policy after 1945 (106). Legal reform to the benefit of agriculture is dealt with by Demoed, whose work on the enclosure of the common lands (*marken*) in the east of the country (29) contends that the main reform of 1886 had in fact very little effect, and by Wintle, whose work on tithing reform (120)

suggests that legislation was ineffective until after 1900. Organizations of farmers themselves are also well served in the literature: De Ru's work on the movement called Agriculture and Society (*Landbouw en Maatschappij*, 87) investigates a farmers' pressure group in the 1930s, Van Stuijvenberg provides a survey of the early agricultural cooperative movement (99), and amongst the many works on local and ideologically affiliated cooperatives and other organizations, Jonker's studies of the Noord-Brabant Christian Farmers Union (50, 51) show how the organization was used at local level to reinforce the position of the local rural élite. Several of the major banks in the Netherlands have their origins in the agricultural cooperative movement, for example the now giant RABO-Bank; commemorative publications abound, the best of them by professional business historians like Johan de Vries, whose work on the Dutch agricultural cooperative banks in the quarter-century between 1948 and 1973 (115) is a useful update and inventory of most of the preceding publications in this genre.

In a less formal organizational sense, agrarian society in the Netherlands was an important part of the impetus to the formation of the confessional parties and 'pillars' in Dutch society, which (until the 1960s) was divided into Socialist, Protestant, Catholic and Liberal organizations protecting their members 'from the cradle to the grave'. This process, known as *verzuiling* or pillarization, is being studied at local level, and many of the studies concern rural communities in the period since 1850. They are too numerous to list, but a collection of local investigations edited by Blom (15) includes work on two villages in Holland, as well as an authoritative introduction on the theoretical and methodological issues involved. The work of the churches in shaping rural society has been explored by Roessingh for the Veluwe district at the beginning of the nineteenth century (84), by Verrips for a dairying village in Zuid-Holland from 1850 onwards (108), and for Zeeland in the last century by Wintle (122).

What is the sum of all this activity? The profession of agrarian history is very much alive in the Netherlands, and it appears to be in good condition. There is an influential running debate on theory and methods, which turns on two matters, the first of which is the perceived need to harness the army of amateur local and regional historians into a co-ordinated force which will be capable of yielding answers to important questions we wish to pose about the past, rather than simply piling up more and more unintegrated antiquarian information (see 'Regionale geschiedenis' 81, and Trienekens 104). The other is the question of the most productive methodology in making sense of the mass of quantitative and qualitative data now available for the various regions

over periods of a century and more. The approach to this scale of work is much influenced by the *Annales* historical school, reflected in some Dutch work on lengthy time-series of rents, tithes and other prices, like Van der Wee's collection on secular trends in land productivity (116), and Jansen's study of Limburg 1250-1800 (46). The influence of the Wageningen School is still very strong, with its emphasis on demographic data: its present chairman, Ad van der Woude, has provided an account of the Wageningen department in the last thirty years (125). The most exciting new development in recent years is the work of Jan Luiten van Zanden on the economic aspects of the agricultural economy (128): starting from a theoretical economic premise he has displayed the most extraordinary facility for channeling the mass of raw data and secondary studies on the agricultural economy into his quest for the dynamics of its development. The answers he has provided have formed the basis for new, improved estimates of the national income in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century (129), which is the subject of a major project at the Free University in Amsterdam under his general guidance.

But there is no feeling of complacency: there is a long way to go, and some areas, like the river-clay area of Gelderland, remain relatively untouched. The government agency for academic research in The Netherlands, the NWO (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek), is funding extensive research into agrarian society in the modern period in two important regions: the Meijerij area around the southern town of 's-Hertogenbosch' (Bois le Duc) in Noord-Brabant, and the rural province of Groningen in the north. These are long-term and comprehensive projects: we can expect major studies to be forthcoming in future years. The only principal agricultural region left uncovered is the province of Zeeland: the local historical society has launched a campaign to commission a properly funded and professionally organized programme of research into rural society since 1750, and the Department of Agrarian History at Wageningen has taken up the challenge: the project will last several years, and will provide the essential material and analyses for this predominantly arable province on the coastal clays. It is true that the Dutch do not argue much: there are few celebrated historical debates, and intra-professional criticism tends to be mild. But there are some major revisions going on in Dutch agrarian history: Jan de Vries' classic study of the Dutch rural economy in the early modern period (114), which puts forward specialization as the force behind a highly successful agricultural sector in the period 1500-1800, and links it with proletarianization, has been challenged by Noordegraaf (72), and by Van Zanden (131), who points more to the role of capital

and questions whether there ever was such a thing as a peasant economy in the western part of the Netherlands. Another debate which, if not raging, is ticking over in Dutch agrarian historical circles, arises from Bieleman's recent thesis on agriculture in Drenthe (9), in which he challenges Van Zanden's assertion (in 128) that Drenthe's agriculture experienced a marked rise in fortunes in the first half of the last century: Van Zanden has replied to the challenge (130), and Bieleman has fought back (11). It is in part a polite joust in print between scholars who are gentlemen, but the debate centres on the appropriate use of certain crucial quantitative sources, and the resulting interpretation of the dynamics of the eastern farming economy in the nineteenth century is fundamental to our whole view of recent Dutch history. It is in these discussions of the long-term dynamics and overall shape of agrarian society that the future lies: for a while it seemed that the enormous productivity of both professional and amateur historians would swamp us with an infinity of micro-data: the achievements of the Wageningen School, and of Van Zanden's economic analysis, have been to establish a broad framework into which the micro-research can be related and integrated.

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