

BOOK REVIEWS

DEURSEN, A.T. VAN. *Plain Lives in a Golden Age. Popular culture, religion and society in seventeenth-century Holland.* Transl. by Maarten Ultee. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 1991. ix, 408 pp. Ill. £50.00. (Paper: £15.95.)

Between 1978 and 1981 A.T. van Deursen published four small volumes on the daily lives of ordinary people in Holland during the Golden Age. Van Deursen, a professor of history at the Calvinist Free University of Amsterdam and an expert on the period, had set himself an ambitious goal: to explore, in the wake of the work of such notable scholars as E.P. Thompson, Kenneth M. Stampf and Eugene D. Genovese, the entirety of Holland's popular culture. That goal was, however, circumscribed from the very beginning. The text would limit itself to the province of Holland, no doubt the most important part of the Dutch Republic but not necessarily typical. Moreover, van Deursen does not go beyond the middle of the seventeenth century. And in the present English edition, which contains all four of the original volumes, he tempers our expectations still further by remarking that his aim was merely to describe "rather than . . . analysing or exploring in depth".

Although the four volumes were generally well received at the time of their publication, their reputation was much enhanced by the publication in 1987 of another book on the same subject: Simon Schama's amazing bestseller, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*. Schama's book, though very popular with the general public, received a less than enthusiastic reception from the Dutch scholarly community. Many Dutch historians, not least van Deursen, thought Schama had caricatured his subject. According to van Deursen, Schama's book revealed an essentially twentieth-century conception imposed upon seventeenth-century sources. Other Dutch critics, looking for examples of an alternative approach, and at the same time feeling obliged to explain to their readers how such an attractive topic had been annexed by a foreign author, all started to point to van Deursen's four volumes as a superior study of the same subject. So, by an ironical twist of fate, van Deursen's work got a new lease of life, and single-volume editions appeared both in Dutch and in English thanks to the success of its great competitor. Nevertheless, *Plain Lives in a Golden Age* merits our attention for its own sake, as a pioneering work on an important subject.

Van Deursen's book is pioneering because he was one of the first modern historians in the Netherlands working in this field. Like their colleagues in most other European countries, Dutch historians of the 1960s and '70s were either pursuing the traditional topics of political and economic history, or they were following the example of the *Annales* school, investigating long-term trends in population change and the availability of food. What was just then becoming known as the history of mentalities, or popular culture, was not yet fashionable. Thus, when van Deursen included these very terms, more or less in passing, in his Preface to the first volume (not, however reprinted in this English edition), he modestly reconnected Dutch historiography with the latest international trends.

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Van Deursen's work is also pioneering because, so far, little research had been done in this field, and as a result little material was available to him other than primary sources. Van Deursen therefore returned to the two types of sources he had already worked on extensively in his other research: the resolutions of the States of Holland, and the acts of the local councils of the Dutch Reformed (Calvinist) Church. These sources are available in serial form, but it was not the author's purpose to utilize that particular aspect. Instead, van Deursen looked for the telling anecdote that seemed to enlighten a specific situation or an aspect of his subject. To similar ends he also used some literary sources, such as the plays of the popular Bredero.

The rewards of this exploration of the sources, picking up seemingly odd, or unimportant details, were sifted into four distinct categories. Thus, the first part of his book deals with the material circumstances of ordinary people's lives. It discussed wages and poverty, immigrants and vagrancy, and social ambitions of painters. In van Deursen's opinion, the age was not necessarily "Golden" for the common man of Holland, but he was generally better off than his contemporaries in other European countries. Part two is entitled "Popular culture", and tells us about Holland's women and girls (they were considered very beautiful by foreigners), of prostitutes and bars (somewhat old-fashionedly presented as "natural life"), of education and of popular reading. Part three discussed the government, the taxation it imposed upon local communities, resistance against this taxation, and the ultimate purpose of this taxation, to finance the war with Spain. Holland's government emerges here as having been relatively honest, and the citizens had little to complain about. Part four is entirely devoted to religion: popular beliefs, and the Calvinist, Catholic and Mennonite churches. The churches are not primarily presented as institutions but as communities of believers; here van Deursen remains faithful to his subject.

Although van Deursen's book may at first glance look like a synthesis, it is better understood as an exploration. The author explicitly rejects the use of general schemes of interpretation, let alone theories, that may help to connect and explain the various expressions of popular culture he has observed. Thus, there is no comment on Muchembled's well-known ideas concerning elite versus popular culture, or on Peter Burke's thesis concerning the changes that affected European popular culture in the early modern period; both authors, who published their works in 1978, are in fact conspicuously absent from the bibliography.

The author's method of presenting small sketches that together create an image works best with non-material subjects. The chapters on drinking and gambling, on popular reading, and in particular the chapters on religion, are all marvellously evocative. Here the author obviously feels very much at home. Other chapters, however, are not always so compelling. The chapters on wages, on poverty, on social mobility and on taxation give the impression of arbitrariness: their contents seem to have been dictated by what was found in sources that are not always particularly helpful in illuminating these subjects.

There is another reservation I have about the book. It was published over a decade ago, and this English edition includes little of the literature published since then. Jan de Vries and Leo Noordegraaf's work on wages, Jan Lucassen's book on immigration, Marjolein 't Hart's work on taxation, and Rudolf Dekker's on popular protest and rebellion have given us a better picture of those subjects than one will find in this book. Most of these authors have also published in English,

but only Noordegraaf's work is referred to in the bibliography. The result is a work that in some aspects is already dated.

These asides should not, however, stop us from noting that this book meets the very high standards that Johan Huizinga set in 1941 with his *Dutch Civilisation in the 17th Century*. Whether one prefers the baroque intellectual and literary style of Schama or van Deursen's restrained tone is perhaps a matter of taste. Social historians may also deplore the somewhat superficial treatment of some of their favourite topics. But in those aspects that are central to van Deursen's study, i.e. the components of the mental world of the common man in seventeenth-century Holland, he is very much in command.

Maarten Prak

BOYDSTON, JEANNE. *Home and Work. Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*. Oxford University Press, New York [etc.] 1990. xx, 222 pp. £24.00.

This valuable study of the transformation of housework and gender roles in America, from colonial days to the 1850s, summarizes and elaborates much recent research in the social history of the period. It thus provides a useful vehicle for assessing how the field has evolved in the United States since the end of the 1960s.

Initially, social history merely aimed to add the history of common people to that of elites, leaving standard categories, periodizations, and interpretations pretty much alone. Only later did we find that as social history filled in the blanks of traditional accounts, some of the boxes already completed turned out to be incorrect, while others began to change their very shape, and even to bleed into each other. Eventually, of course, social historians abandoned the crossword puzzle approach to history, discarding the old compartments for economics, culture, politics, and even seemingly "natural" categories, such as masculinity, femininity, and the family. We had first sought answers to the questions posed in Bertolt Brecht's famous poem, "A Worker Looks at History". "Who Built the Seven Towers of Thebes? [. . .] Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone? In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished, where did the masons go?" Next we began asking how kings and stone masons, queens and prostitutes, shaped each others' lives and transformed the very conditions that gave rise to their original relationships.

The historiography of women in America exemplifies this transition. Early work by historians of women sought to fill in the gaps in traditional history, searching for the female counterparts to the male roles we already knew. Raised to believe that women had not worked outside the home before the 1960s, we were delighted to find that there were female blacksmiths, butchers, barbers, tavern owners, hunters, attorneys, physicians, undertakers, loggers, shipwrights, gunsmiths, jailers, and typesetters in colonial days. It was particularly intriguing to discover that the ideology of separate spheres, long assumed to be a natural outgrowth of "the" sexual division of labor, was actually a historically specific development that could be dated from the late eighteenth century. In that period, the duties and images of men and women began to be demarcated far more sharply than in colonial days,