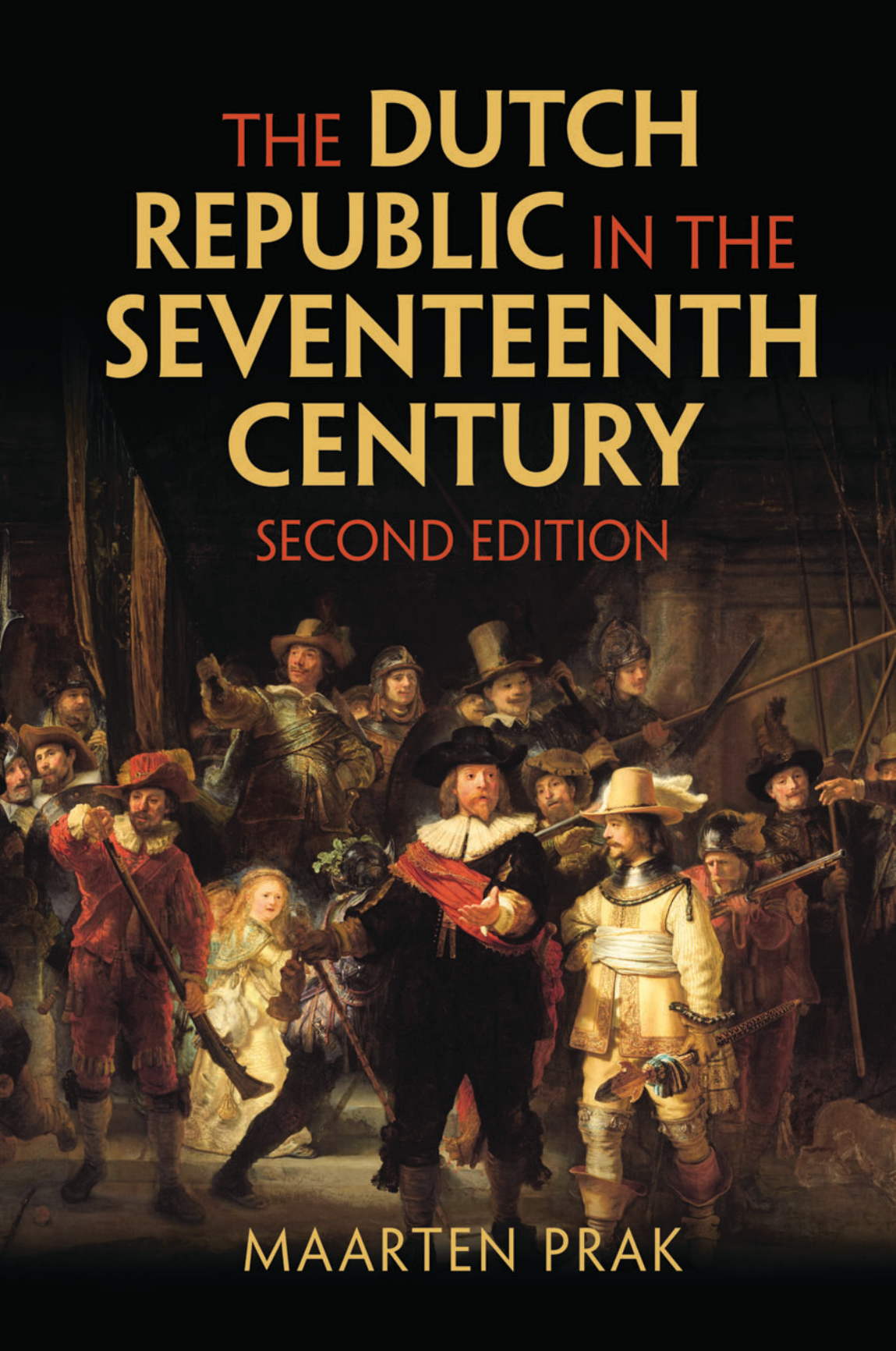
THE DUTCH REPUBLIC IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

SECOND EDITION



MAARTEN PRAK

The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century

Rembrandt, Hals and Vermeer are still household names, even though they died over three hundred years ago. In their lifetimes, they witnessed the extraordinary consolidation of the newly independent Dutch Republic and its emergence as one of the richest nations on earth. As one contemporary wrote in 1673: the Dutch were 'the envy of some, the fear of others, and the wonder of all their neighbours'. During the Dutch Golden Age, the arts blossomed and the country became a haven of religious tolerance. However, despite being self-proclaimed champions of freedom, the Dutch conquered communities in America, Africa and Asia and were heavily involved in both slavery and the slave trade on the three continents. This substantially revised second edition of the leading textbook on the Dutch Republic includes a new chapter exploring slavery and its legacy, as well as a new chapter on language and literature.

MAARTEN PRAK is Professor Emeritus of Social and Economic History at the Department of History and Art History, Utrecht University. He has published extensively on Dutch social and economic history and the Dutch Golden Age, and is also an expert on European craft history. His recent publications include *Citizens without Nations: Urban Citizenship in Europe and the World, c. 1000–1789* (Cambridge, 2018) and the co-edited volume *Apprenticeship in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2019).

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The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century

Second Edition

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Acknowledgements

The forerunner of this book on the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century first appeared in 2002 under the title *Gouden eeuw: Het raadsel van de Republiek* (Golden Age: The Enigma of the Republic) and was subsequently translated into Hungarian (2004), English (2005) and Chinese (2013). The English edition had an additional chapter on science and philosophy. That chapter and a chapter on literature were added to the new Dutch edition of 2012. In 2020, I prepared the third Dutch edition, expanding it with yet another chapter – on freedom and slavery – substantially rewriting the Introduction and completely overhauling the chapters on the Republic's worldwide trading network and the Dutch school of painting. The chapter on public finances has been shortened and incorporated into the chapter on the armed forces. In addition, I have made smaller changes throughout the book, in response to research carried out in the last twenty years. Not only have new publications enriched our knowledge, but they have also led to radically new interpretations of this fascinating period of world history, especially with regard to the role played by violence – between both states and individuals – in the genesis and shaping of the Dutch Golden Age. To compensate for all these additions, I made cuts in other places to keep the book to what I consider an appropriate length for a survey of this kind. In many ways, therefore, this second English edition is in fact a new book.

For the latest Dutch and English editions, which are now identical apart from the language, I have benefitted from the sage advice of my Dutch editor, Marieke van Oostrom, and from the helpful comments made by Karwan Fatah-Black, Maartje van Gelder, Michiel van Groesen, Judith Pollmann, Eric Jan Sluijter and Arthur Weststeijn. The earlier editions were improved with the help of Annelies Bannink, Klaas van Berkel, Frans Blom, Guido de Bruin, Oscar Gelderblom, Jur van Goor, Peter Hecht, Christine Kooi, Erika Kuijpers, Koen Ottenheym, Lodewijk Palm, Maarten van Rossem, Piet Steenbakkers, Els Stronks, Theo Verbeek, Hans Wansink, Diane Webb and Jan Luiten van Zanden. I am grateful to all of them, but the ultimate responsibility for what appears in print is mine alone.

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Chronology

Domestic Politics

1579	Union of Utrecht
1584	William of Orange murdered
1585–1625	Stadholdership of Prince Maurits
1619	Johan van Oldenbarnevelt executed
1625–47	Stadholdership of Frederik Hendrik
1647–50	Stadholdership of William II
1653–72	Johan de Witt serves as Grand Pensionary
1672–1702	Stadholdership of William III

International Relations

1609	Truce with Spain
1621	End of Twelve Years' Truce
1648	Peace of Münster
1652–4	First Anglo-Dutch War
1665–7	Second Anglo-Dutch War
1672	'Year of Disaster', Third Anglo-Dutch War
1678	Peace of Nijmegen
1688	Invasion of England (William and Mary, the Glorious Revolution)
1689–98	Nine Years War
1702–13	War of the Spanish Succession

Economy

1585	Antwerp falls to Spanish troops
1602	Establishment of the Dutch East India Company (VOC)
1611	Establishment of the Amsterdam exchange bank
1612–43	Polders drained in Noord-Holland
1621	Establishment of the Dutch West India Company (WIC)

1632–65	Construction of inter-urban network of tow-boat canals
1688	Zenith of East India Company shares

Outside Europe

1595–7	First Dutch trip to the East Indies
1614	New Netherland (later New York) established in North America
1618	Batavia becomes the VOC's Dutch headquarters in the East Indies
1628	Piet Hein captures the Spanish silver fleet
1630–54	Dutch colony in Brazil
1638	Elmina captured from the Portuguese; the Dutch become major slave traders
1639	The Dutch Republic becomes Japan's exclusive European trading partner
1652	Establishment of the Cape Colony in South Africa
1667	New Netherland becomes a British colony; the Dutch acquire Suriname

Religion

1579	Union of Utrecht establishes freedom of conscience
1612	First Jewish synagogue opens in Amsterdam
1618–19	Synod of Dordt splits Calvinist church

Science and Culture

1575	First Dutch university established at Leiden
1637	Descartes's *Essai de la Méthode*
1642	Rembrandt paints *The Night Watch*
1656	Christiaan Huygens builds the first pendulum clock
c. 1660	Vermeer paints his *View of Delft*
1670	Publication of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

Introduction
The Enigma of the Dutch Golden Age

In 1673 a book on the Dutch Republic was published in England. The author, Sir William Temple, was a former ambassador to The Hague and therefore an authority on the subject. Although the Dutch Republic and England were at war for the third time in twenty-five years, the tone of his book was never hostile; on the contrary, Temple was at pains to give his fellow countrymen an impartial description of their enemy, even to the point of expressing admiration for them. In the very first paragraph Temple stated that the Dutch were experiencing 'a prodigious growth in riches, beauty, extent of commerce, and number of inhabitants', which he attributed to 'the strength of their navies, their fortified towns and standing forces'[1] – an assessment that was probably based on their performance in the ongoing war. His book is full of interesting glimpses of Dutch society, such as the tax burden borne by the average citizen and the availability of excellent social services, which could be maintained because the Dutch gave so generously to good causes. Temple was obviously convinced that something unique was happening in the Dutch Republic, and he hit the nail on the head in the Introduction to his book when he described the Dutch as 'the envy of some, the fear of others, and the wonder of all their neighbours'.

William Temple was perhaps one of the first to express his astonishment at the Dutch, but he was certainly not the last. This feeling was shared by many people in the Republic itself – especially afterwards, when it was all past history. Such sentiments began to emerge in the eighteenth century, when numerous writers complained that the glory of the seventeenth century had been lost in their own time. For example, a short pamphlet written in 1748 criticised the elites for watching out for their own interests and attaching too much importance to sumptuous partying. Their seventeenth-century predecessors were definitely preferable, for in those days one 'took hold of the plough with one's own hands … everyone did his utmost for commerce and set to work himself to keep the factories running'.[2] Later that century, in 1785, governors were

[1] William Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands*, ed. by Sir George Clark (Oxford 1972), p. 1.

[2] *Waaragtig onderzoek wegens verzuim in het waarnemen der oude handvesten van Leiden* (etc.) [1748; Knuttel 18117], p. 6.

called on to work together on reforms whose goal was to make the Republic 'inwardly happy and outwardly formidable' – just as it had been in the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century, the era of nationalism, these voices grew louder. Rembrandt, who had been ignored for a century and a half because of his dark palette, was rediscovered and, in 1851, became the first Amsterdammer to be immortalised in a statue. In 1885 the Rijksmuseum opened its doors. A special Gallery of Honour on the first floor was devoted entirely to highlights of the Dutch school of painting. Rembrandt's *Night Watch* was – and still is, for that matter – the eye-catching centrepiece of this gallery, and thus became a national icon. 'Golden Age', a term used now and then in the seventeenth century, had become an established expression by the end of the nineteenth century.

A substantial and informative book that appeared in 1897 therefore bore the title *Onze Gouden Eeuw* (Our Golden Age). Its author, P. L. Muller, was not only the city archivist of Rotterdam but also *professor extraordinarius* at Leiden University. Muller's book was expressly written 'not for scholars', and this undoubtedly encouraged my own grandfather, Johan Prak, a general practitioner in Ter Apel, to buy, in 1908, a copy of the reprint: two hefty, gilt-edged volumes with copious illustrations in black-and-white and even some in colour.

Although Muller's style is too turgid for modern tastes, he wrote about issues that are still relevant today. He was amazed, for example, that a country so 'small in size and limited in population was capable of acquiring a measure of power equal to that of the large, traditionally established monarchies' and was equally surprised by the 'defectiveness of its national institutions' – a deficiency masked only by the quality of its governors.[3] A generation later, Johan Huizinga, the most famous historian the Netherlands has ever produced, asked himself the same question. He wondered how it was possible 'that so small and relatively remote a country as the young Republic should nevertheless have been so advanced politically, economically and culturally'.[4] Huizinga found the meteoric speed at which the Republic had shot into the lead extremely surprising, all the more so because it happened at a time when the Republic was actually out of step with other countries. 'Our astonishment would be somewhat tempered', continues Huizinga, 'were we to find that, in the seventeenth century, Dutch culture was merely the most perfect and clearest expression of European culture in general. But such was not the case.' The Netherlands, in his view, 'proved the exception and not the rule'.[5]

[3] P. L. Muller, *Onze Gouden Eeuw: de Republiek der Vereenigde Nederlanden in haar bloeitijd*, 2 vols. (Leiden 1908), vol. I, pp. 32 and 69.
[4] J. H. Huizinga, *Dutch Civilisation in the 17th Century and Other Essays* (London 1968), p. 10.
[5] Ibid., p. 11.

In fact, Muller and Huizinga were still preoccupied with the same question that had exercised Temple's mind in the seventeenth century. This question has continued to vex historians, who in recent years have put forward various thought-provoking answers. In their book on the economy of the Dutch Republic, *The First Modern Economy*,[6] the Dutch professor Ad van der Woude and his American colleague of Dutch descent, Jan de Vries, argue that the Netherlands already had a 'modern' economy a century and a half before the Industrial Revolution. This was apparent, in their opinion, from the presence in the Republic of a number of phenomena: well-developed markets for the three factors of production (land, labour and capital); high agricultural productivity, which not only enabled the development of a complicated social structure based on one's occupation but also facilitated social mobility; the authorities' respect for property rights and their attempts to promote prosperity; and the level of technological development and social organisation that – aided in part by market-oriented consumer behaviour – made economic growth possible. In other countries, such trends were either less marked or non-existent. This prompted the English historian J. L. Price to revive the old notion that the Dutch social structure must likewise have been modern. Instead of a society of orders, in which birth determined the individual's position, the Republic was a class society, in which economic factors were the main determinants. In Price's view, the Dutch Republic was a middle-class bourgeois society, because social life revolved around the cities and their urban elites, whereas in other countries it was the aristocracy who set the tone.

Culturally, too, the Republic is said to have been in the vanguard. Marijke Spies, an authority on Dutch literature, and the cultural historian Willem Frijhoff have conducted extensive research into the characteristics of seventeenth-century Dutch culture, labelling it 'a never-flagging discussion culture shared by all segments and groups of society'.[7] The Republic distinguished itself from other societies in its compulsive exchange of opinion and in its willingness, often seen as an obligation, to take note of the opinions of others. In this sense the Republic's culture could, in Spies and Frijhoff's view, be called 'modern'.[8] Jonathan Israel, the renowned English authority on Dutch history, demonstrated in an exhaustive study of the Enlightenment that its roots should be sought not in France or in England but in the Dutch debates of the seventeenth century.

Seventeenth-century Dutch politics is the only aspect that still refuses to fit into this pattern. Since the nineteenth century, the Republic's form of

[6] Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500–1815* (Cambridge 1997).
[7] Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies, *1650: Hard-Won Unity* (Assen 2004), p. 220.
[8] Ibid., p. 223.

government has been denounced in every possible way. Robert Fruin, the first to hold the chair in Dutch national history at Leiden University, considered the period of the Republic a waste of time from a political point of view. While other countries were improving their political structure by centralising government and systematising legislation, the Netherlands was lapsing into medieval chaos. The Revolt against Spain suspended all initiatives for improvement, and the thread was not picked up again until the Kingdom of the Netherlands was established in 1813. The period of the Republic, in Fruin's eyes, was nothing but a sorry spectacle of discord. As mentioned earlier, Muller called the government defective. And Huizinga, in 1941, spoke in no uncertain terms of 'a constitutional monstrosity'.[9] More recently, various historians have, however, pointed out that the apparently unstable structure of the Dutch state – with a weak political centre but strong local and provincial institutions – was in fact the Republic's strength, because it created a broad base for political decision-making. But no one has yet been willing to characterise the Republic as a forerunner of the modern – that is to say, democratic and bureaucratic – unified state.

This presents a serious obstacle to the notion that the Republic derived its uniqueness from its 'modernity'. It was political discord, after all, to which the Republic owed its culture of debate, its bourgeois social structure and perhaps even a part of its economic success. Overemphasising 'modernity' obscures the view of the medieval traditions that were often eagerly embraced by those living in the seventeenth century. Moreover, in the mid-nineteenth century, when it became fashionable to lambast the Republic's political institutions, the Netherlands was in many respects anything but a modern country. This book will therefore paint a different picture of the Dutch Republic, one in which the emphasis lies less on its relationship to the future (the Republic as precursor) and more on the position of the Republic in the seventeenth century itself.

Yet another debate has been sparked by this period in Dutch history. In September 2019 the Amsterdam Museum announced that it would no longer use the term 'Golden Age', which would henceforth be replaced by the neutral 'seventeenth century'. A long explanation followed, in which the museum argued that 'Golden Age' smacked too much of nationalistic self-glorification and ignored the dark sides of that period, particularly the Dutch involvement in the slavery then practised in Asia, Africa and the Americas, as well as the impoverished circumstances in which many Dutch people were living at that time. The latter is not such a convincing argument: as will be shown in Chapter 8, there is ample evidence that even the Dutch living in poverty enjoyed a higher standard of living than the inhabitants of neighbouring countries.

[9] J. H. Huizinga, *Verzamelde werken*, 9 vols. (Haarlem 1948–53), vol. II (1948), p. 432.

Slavery, however, is a very serious business, the more so because the descendants of the enslaved still suffer from that legacy today. In this expanded and updated edition, therefore, I have given much more space to colonial history and the crimes committed in that context.

However, even though I take the above-mentioned considerations seriously, I have decided to go on using the term 'Golden Age'. Historians use terms such as Renaissance, Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution and Golden Age to describe a particular characteristic of a period. Such designations are always an extreme simplification of reality. During the Renaissance, few looked back on antiquity, and humanists were a tiny minority. The ideas born in the Enlightenment were likewise carried forward by a small group of people. During the Industrial Revolution, most products were made in the traditional way, without steam engines or factories. And by no means did everyone enjoy prosperity and freedom during the Dutch Golden Age. Even so, something highly unusual happened: the Dutch Republic emerged as an independent country and instantly became a dominant player on the world stage. That was exceptional, and the term 'Golden Age' attempts to capture that exceptionality.

Many observers in the seventeenth century were aware that the developments they were witnessing in the Dutch Republic were unique. When William Lord Fitzwilliam visited Holland in the spring of 1663, he noted: 'Amsterdam is one of the most famous cities in the world … This is now the chief magazine of Europe, as Lisbon is of the Indies, but truly this town may claim this title as much as the other, for whatsoever the Old or New World produces may here be found.'[10] In 1621 the Frenchman Nicolas Bénard used the word 'miracle' to express his amazement at 'the endless number of shops filled with every conceivable kind of merchandise' to be found in Amsterdam.[11] In fact, the Dutch themselves were equally aware of the special nature of this juncture in time. Around 1644, when the famous poet Joost van den Vondel wished to sing the praises of the Beemster Polder, which is now on the UN's World Heritage List, he did so as follows:[12]

> Here the greyhound hunts wild game, the coach drives out for pleasure,
> One dances and one banquets in the merchant's wealthy quarter,
> Here the golden age doth laugh beneath a charming arbour.

[10] Quoted from *Touring the Low Countries: Accounts of British Travellers, 1660–1720*, ed. by Kees van Strien (Amsterdam 1998), p. 29.

[11] Quoted from Andreas Nijenhuis-Bescher, 'De "Hollandse reis" en de Franse visie der Verenigde Nederlanden in de eerste helft van de zeventiende eeuw', *Neerlandica Wratislaviensia* 28 (2018), p. 130.

[12] Quoted from Jan Blanc, 'Gouden Eeuw: The invention of the Dutch Golden Age during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in Jan Blanc (ed.), *Dutch Golden Age(s): The Shaping of a Cultural Community* (Turnhout 2020), p. 89.

In 1648 an anonymous book extolled the end of the Eighty Years War as a new beginning: 'The Netherlands is beginning, as in times of yore, to grow, to flourish, and the golden age is commencing in which our forefathers lived and for which we have long yearned.'[13]

That unique Golden Age came about, however, through means that we now find unacceptable (as indeed some people did then). Those means were an integral part of how the Dutch Republic operated in territories outside Europe. It would be going too far to assert that the Republic owed its prosperity entirely to slavery and other forms of exploitation that took place outside Europe. Yet these phenomena were important, both morally and materially, and are given ample attention because they constitute an inherent part of the story of that era.

It would have been very hard at the time to predict the success of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century. In the sixteenth century, before the emergence of the Republic as an independent state, the Northern Netherlands had been hopelessly divided. The Revolt against Spain gave birth to a new state that not only had to resolve the discord of the preceding period but was also forced to satisfy the need, by now generally felt, for cooperation. The desire to maintain local and regional 'freedoms' had been a major cause of the Revolt against Spanish authority, and the establishment of the Republic had been a triumph for this so-called particularism. The Republic was a league of cities and provinces, each of which derived its identity from its political independence, but the loosely united provinces had to hold their own against one of the most powerful rulers of the time, the king of Spain. Furthermore, the blossoming of its economy caused the young Republic's international interests to increase, making cooperation, especially military cooperation, an inevitable necessity. Throughout the seventeenth century, the Republic hovered between unity and discord in a never-ending struggle to maintain its balance.

The discord that frequently prevailed in the Republic was often seen as a shortcoming. Measured against the standards of the modern state, with its centralised decision-making and bureaucratic apparatus, the Republic was indeed a political oddity. In the seventeenth century, however, the modern state as such was forced to contend with huge problems in countries such as France and England. Governmental decisions were overturned in the provinces; the bureaucratic fabric was still very thin in places. The Republic, lacking both an adequate central government and a well-oiled bureaucracy, could, however, boast reasonably efficient local authorities, whose proximity to those they ruled meant that people usually had faith in the government, even if they had no right to elect its officials. Such faith was often lacking in other countries. By the

[13] Ibid., pp. 74–5.

same token, local authorities in the Republic lent a willing ear to the opinions of entrepreneurs and merchants, from whose milieu they often stemmed. Thus from the very beginning there was a healthy climate for investment, which in turn was conducive to expenditure and innovation. That balance led most of its inhabitants to perceive the Republic as a land of 'freedom'.

Although the Dutch deliberated constantly among themselves and somehow made room for migrants, religious differences and new art forms, their behaviour towards the outside world was resolute, even aggressive. Their assertiveness led time and again to violent confrontations. Within Europe, the Dutch spent nearly the entire seventeenth century embroiled in wars. Outside Europe, not only did they engage in the usual warfare, but Dutch merchants were also involved in human trafficking. Violence was not an incidental but a structural characteristic of the Golden Age.

By the mid-seventeenth century the Republic seemed to have found the formula for success, a formula that depended on the synergy between a worldwide economy, the foundations of which had been laid in the previous century, and the small scale of its institutions, whose roots went far back into the Middle Ages. The Republic had its ups and downs, of course, but for a long time its problems were pushed to the background by the revolutions and civil wars raging in other countries. Its small size created problems, the most worrisome being the sky-high cost of military defence, which was borne by relatively few people. Another recurrent problem was maintaining the political order of the Republic, because it depended on the willingness of the ruling elite to compromise, which they were not always prepared to do. Holland, where economic growth was largely concentrated, was called upon to solve many thorny issues, and this caused conflicts with the other provinces. Over the years the problems became more serious, if only because other countries began to put their own affairs in order, which enabled them to confront more successfully the alleged impertinence of the Dutch. Opposition from abroad, military threats and lack of cooperation at home – combined with a general decline in the European economy in the second half of the seventeenth century – led at first to increasing tension in the Republic and finally to stagnation and exhaustion. By 1715 there was no longer any doubt that the Golden Age had come to an end, yet it was also around this time that slavery began to flourish, especially on the plantations in Suriname.

In the eighteenth century the Dutch Republic became an 'ordinary' country. It would henceforth be extraordinary only by virtue of having such a glorious past. For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Dutch intellectuals continued to be obsessed with the Golden Age and the question of what should be done to revive it. That long period – in which self-glorification, owing to its undeniable successes, and self-loathing, because of its subsequent decline, fought to gain the upper hand – has certainly shown

that the Republic cannot be seen unreservedly as the pioneer of modernity. If that had been the case, the Netherlands would have experienced fewer problems between 1700 and 1900. In those two centuries the Netherlands had to rediscover modernity at least twice: around 1800 in politics, with the introduction of the unified state, and around 1900 in economic and social life, with the rise of industry and the industrial proletariat. In the seventeenth century the Republic had been a unique combination of old and new: even though similar combinations occurred elsewhere, it was the period of history in which this combination manifested itself in the Republic that made it unique. In the early modern period, between the Middle Ages and the era of industry and democracy, a voluntary alliance of urban societies was able to combine economic prosperity with diplomatic and military successes and cultural florescence. The formula that sparked this spectacular chemical reaction is the subject of this book.

To analyse this formula, we must explore seventeenth-century Dutch society from various angles. The following pages offer an examination of the economy, the vicissitudes of rich and poor, the organisation of neighbourhood life and the civic militias, and the workings of the political system. We investigate the relations between religious groups and assess the characteristics of the Dutch school of painting and its contribution to the fame of the Dutch Golden Age. We visit the cities, which made such an indelible mark on society, and try to gain an understanding of the intellectual and cultural innovations of this period. But it is also necessary to take a clear look at the dark side of the Dutch Republic: the violence that characterised its actions outside Europe, with slavery as the low point. And of course we must try to explain the demise of the Golden Age. These thematic chapters in the second, third and fourth parts of this book are preceded by a section on the great conflicts of the seventeenth century – conflicts that gave birth to the Republic and largely shaped the character of the Golden Age. This section provides a chronological overview of the most important events of that time and introduces the reader to such well-known personages as Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, Frederik Hendrik, Michiel de Ruyter and Johan de Witt. It is preceded by a sketch of the situation that existed in the Northern Netherlands in the sixteenth century, on the eve of the Golden Age.

This book encapsulates, for everyone interested in the history of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and the early modern period, the results of historical research carried out in recent years. It makes no attempt to be complete: that would be impossible in a book of some three hundred pages. The emphasis lies on the way society functioned, for in this respect, the Republic was unique. Despite a difficult beginning, filled with war and conflict, the Dutch succeeded in a very short time in establishing a society that functioned so well that many contemporaries considered it exemplary.

In revising this book, I have chosen to retain the term Golden Age, in the full knowledge that the seventeenth century was not a time of prosperity and happiness for everyone and that there were Dutchmen who behaved unforgivably in this period. Even so, the Republic compared favourably with many other seventeenth-century societies by virtue of its wealth – which trickled down to the poorest segments of society – the broad participation in governance, and its religious tolerance and cultural splendour. Altogether these factors made the Dutch Republic unique – a uniqueness that has become known as the Golden Age. This book elucidates the many interconnected factors that were at play and attempts to explain – without nationalistic bluster – how they combined to form the truly exceptional Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century.

Part I

War without End

1 Turbulent Beginnings

On Friday, 25 October 1555, at around three o'clock in the afternoon, an important gathering convened at Brussels. Representatives of the seventeen provinces of the Low Countries had been summoned to Coudenberg Palace to assemble in the great hall. Also present were the knights of the order of the Golden Fleece, the members of the three Councils of State of the Low Countries and various higher nobles. Benches had been made ready to seat them all. Interested members of the public were permitted to watch from behind a railing. When the guests of honour had taken their places, the door to the hall opened and Emperor Charles V hobbled in, leaning on the arm of William, the young prince of Orange. They were followed by Charles's son, Philip II, and the emperor's sister, Mary of Hungary, regent of the Low Countries. Though only fifty-five years old, Charles could barely walk without support. Born in Ghent in 1500, he had been forced at the age of fifteen to assume the reins of government, not only of the Low Countries but also of the Spanish and Austrian possessions of the House of Habsburg. As king of Spain since 1516 and Holy Roman Emperor since 1519, he had been compelled to criss-cross Europe dozens of times, waging war repeatedly at the head of his troops. Charles had not succeeded in suppressing the Reformation, which had broken out at the beginning of his reign. In September 1555 he had been forced to sign a peace treaty with the Protestant princes of the German empire. Finally, deeply disillusioned and plagued by gout and other ailments, he felt he could no longer rule, and resolved to abdicate in favour of his son Philip. This news was communicated by a councillor, who explained the emperor's decision to the assembled dignitaries. When the councillor had finished, Charles took the floor, clinging to the prince of Orange. He spoke of his love for his native country and the many sacrifices he had made during his forty-year reign. He asked his subjects to pardon his mistakes and entreated them to be as faithful to Philip as they had been to him. According to eyewitness reports, there was not a dry eye in the hall.

It was in fact a minor miracle that a meeting of this kind could take place at all. When Charles ascended the throne in 1516, political turmoil and instability, especially in the North, banished all thoughts of unity in the Low Countries.

Formal unification did not come about until 26 June 1548, when the Diet of the Holy Roman Empire, assembled in the German city of Augsburg, decided at the emperor's behest to bring together the patchwork of Netherlandish provinces under one separate *Kreits*, a self-governing entity of states within the empire. The formation of the Low Countries was confirmed the following year, when all seventeen provinces endorsed Charles V's Pragmatic Sanction, which stipulated that Charles's successors were to treat the Low Countries – now separate from both France and the Holy Roman Empire – as a single entity and not divide it up among a number of successors, thus guaranteeing the unity of the seventeen provinces of the Low Countries. When Charles abdicated, that union was just seven years old.

The resolutions of 1548 and 1549 and the transfer of sovereignty in 1555 represented the tail end of a process that had started more than a century and a half earlier, in 1384, when the county of Flanders fell into the hands of Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy. Philip's wife was the daughter of his recently deceased predecessor, the duke of Flanders. In 1396 Philip acquired the duchy of Limburg. In 1406 the House of Burgundy also gained possession of the duchy of Brabant upon the extinction of the ducal line. Over the course of the fifteenth century, various other territories in the South were acquired: Namur in 1429, Hainault in 1433, Picardy in 1435 and Luxemburg in 1441, to name only the most important. To the north of the Rivers Maas and Rhine, which cut the Low Countries in two, the Burgundians managed in 1433 to annex the rapidly rising province of Holland, thanks to the crisis of succession that ensued when Countess Jacoba of Bavaria died without a legal heir. Zeeland, closely allied to Holland since the thirteenth century, fell into their lap at the same time. Other territories in the North managed to elude the Burgundian grasp for the time being.

The Low Countries were a valuable asset. Since the twelfth century, Flanders and later Brabant had been developing into the most important commercial centres in north-west Europe. In Bruges, Italian merchants sold luxury goods such as spices and silk, which they acquired from their agents in the Middle East. At first, such trade was conducted overland, and merchants met at the annual fairs held in the Champagne region of France. From around 1300, however, there was also a direct maritime route between Bruges and the most important centres of trade in Italy: Venice and Genoa. These trade routes encouraged the emergence of industrial centres that developed spectacularly in such cities as Bruges and Ghent. In the Flemish countryside, spinning and weaving were engaged in with an eye to export. The Flemish textile centres also functioned as processing points for English cloth, which was imported as a semi-finished product to Flanders, where it was dressed and dyed and finally sold. It was this finishing stage in the manufacturing process that yielded the greatest profits.

The Burgundians were well aware of what the Low Countries had to offer. First and most importantly, the flourishing urban economies were a rich source of revenue. The money thus acquired enabled the Burgundian dukes to pursue their great ambition of ruling a territory stretching unbroken from Burgundy to the North Sea. However, the Low Countries would yield up their riches only if they were treated properly, and this required a great deal of tact. The Burgundians exercised provincial sovereignty; they held no claim whatever to the Low Countries as a whole. Since each province had its own political structure and traditions, the only thing binding them was the duke himself. Each time a new duke was sworn in – which took place in each province separately – he reconfirmed the 'privilege' whereby he granted each province certain rights and immunities. Moreover, these provincial governments were under a great deal of pressure from the prosperous cities, especially those in Flanders and Brabant, which had long been used to getting their way. Anyone hoping to govern the Low Countries successfully therefore had to win the confidence of the urban patriciate and persuade them to loosen their purse strings. But the duke's word was not enough to wheedle money out of the cities and provinces: he had to negotiate, and the great number of provinces made such negotiations tedious. This prompted Philip the Good to summon representatives from all the provinces under his rule to discuss common issues such as money. These assemblies evolved into the States General, which met on a fairly regular basis from 1464 onwards. Other government bodies started to take shape at the same time. Many provinces came to have governors, or stadholders, who exercised authority on behalf of the sovereign. The Burgundians underlined this institutional strengthening of their authority by engaging in a forceful, if symbolic, expansion of power. The magnificence of their court, with all the trappings of princely power, gave a strong boost to the arts in the Low Countries.

Not everyone appreciated the splendour of the Burgundian court and the inevitable political intrigues. The power of the opposition became painfully obvious when Charles the Bold died in 1477. The duke had been in the process of consolidating his conquest of Lorraine, which in 1473 had finally linked the House of Burgundy's hereditary lands to its possessions in the North. The people of Lorraine had risen in revolt, and during the siege of their capital city, Nancy, Charles was fatally wounded. His frozen body lay on the battlefield for a week, while the news spread like wildfire. Charles the Bold was survived only by an unmarried daughter, Mary of Burgundy. The French king, Louis XI, promptly sent troops to occupy Burgundy. At the same time, the weakened regime in the Low Countries was inundated with grievances, nearly all of which called for a halt to the policy of centralisation, urging instead the restoration of provincial and local privileges. Mary was forced to yield to many of these demands by signing the Great Privilege of 1477. In the same year, however, she married Maximilian of Austria, of the illustrious Habsburg dynasty.

Maximilian was determined to restore authority and, where possible, to extend it. He began to cast his eye upon the North.

Conquering the North, however, was easier said than done. Apart from Holland, the territories to the north of the great rivers had no experience of Burgundian rule. They could, moreover, boast a long history of independence. Friesland, never colonised in Roman times, had always been a law unto itself. A central authority had never established itself there, and feudalism was largely unknown. Friesland was in fact a collection of peasant republics. In small districts the law was laid down by *hoofdelingen* – untitled nobles who lived in fortified houses in the countryside. Frisian society was plagued by feuds between these noble families, bloody conflicts that often dragged on for years. In Friesland the cities were still of secondary importance at this time, certainly from a political perspective. Self-government had come to them late, in the second half of the fourteenth century, before which time these cities had simply been part of the rural district in which they were located. Even in the relatively large city of Leeuwarden (3,000 inhabitants in 1400), the *hoofdelingen* held sway. Economically speaking, Friesland was by no means backward. Indeed, it was densely populated by European standards, and its agriculture was highly developed. The Frisians carried on trade with Scandinavia, but the province was far removed from the most important centres of trade in the South.

Friesland had neither ruler nor provincial institutions. External threats could move the Frisian lords to cooperate with one another, but otherwise their energies were absorbed in dealing with the problems of their own factions. Indeed, it was this partisanship that was mainly responsible for the demise of the highly praised 'Frisian Freedom'. The Hollanders had long been casting a covetous eye at Friesland, but their conquests had been only temporarily successful. In 1498, however, one of the Frisian factions called in the help of the stadholder-general of the Low Countries, Albrecht of Saxony, who had gained a reputation as a formidable military commander. Albrecht conquered the whole of Friesland, and Maximilian of Habsburg appointed him *gubernator*. The first provincial institutions were created straightaway, naturally with a view to consolidating and safeguarding the newly acquired territory. Even though the *hoofdelingen* who had requested Albrecht's assistance had deliberately restricted his powers, the new situation was not agreeable to many Frisians, who hoped, with the support of the duke of Gelderland, to regain their old freedoms.

In addition to subjugating Friesland, Albrecht of Saxony had gained power in 1498 over Groningen to the east of Friesland, though at that time he was not able to settle down there. Like Friesland, Groningen was essentially a federation of small peasant republics. The Groningen countryside, like that of Friesland, was dominated by *hoofdelingen* who maintained their authority over a small area by employing groups of armed men. Feuds were not uncommon

in Groningen either, but it differed from Friesland in one important respect: by the time the *hoofdelingen* had firmly established themselves, the city of Groningen had become too large to control. The result was a great deal of friction between the city proper – which in 1400 had an estimated 5,000 inhabitants – and the rural districts. In 1506, in an attempt to ward off the Saxon threat, the city offered seigniorial rights to the count of East Friesland. In 1515, Karel van Gelre, duke of Gelderland, was sworn in as sovereign. This drew Groningen into the battle for a sphere of influence on the northern flank of the aggregation of Netherlandish states. In this battle of the giants, the duke of Gelderland was pitted against the House of Habsburg.

The contenders in this fight appeared to be mismatched, the Habsburgs being expected to win hands down. Gelderland was certainly not a promising contestant in a battle between great powers. The duke's territory consisted of four parts that had never been truly unified: the Nijmegen Quarter, the Veluwe (also known as the Arnhem Quarter), Upper Gelderland (the Roermond Quarter, which more or less coincides with present-day North Limburg) and finally the county of Zutphen, officially completely separate from the duchy of Gelderland. During the 1470s and again in the 1480s, Gelderland had been occupied by Burgundian-Habsburg troops. That encounter had not been a happy one, so it is hardly surprising that there was widespread approval, certainly in the beginning, of the duke's anti-Habsburg policies. Karel van Gelre, moreover, had powerful friends. He was supported by the French king, who viewed him, not without reason, as a thorn in the side of the Habsburgs, who were also his strongest opponents. The English, too, regularly offered support to Gelderland, and Karel also set about finding allies in the adjoining territories, in what is now Germany and in the Netherlands itself.

At first Karel van Gelre was on the defensive. By 1505 the Veluwe (with the exception of Wageningen) and most of the cities in the county of Zutphen had fallen into the hands of the Habsburgs, who also occupied Bommel and the Bommelerwaard, the area between the Rivers Maas and Waal. Later the tide turned, however. Between 1508 and 1513, Karel's troops frequently marauded and plundered the Oversticht (Overijssel), the part of the bishopric of Utrecht beyond the River IJssel. In 1513 he recaptured Arnhem and Stralen. A short time later his help was called upon by Groningen, where he was installed as the sovereign, giving him a firm hold on Overijssel as well. Until 1528, Overijssel was ruled by the Gelderlanders, who had established themselves in Friesland even before 1515. The Frisians, however, who had hoped that Gelderland would restore their independence and offer them protection with no strings attached, were in for a rude awakening. They had to put up with increased taxation, not to mention such inconveniences as the presence of foreign troops.

The Gelderlanders were also called upon to fight in the Nedersticht (the province of Utrecht), again owing to internal conflicts. Between 1481 and 1483

Utrecht had been torn by a civil war between the Hoeks and the Cabeljauws, rival factions of the leading noble and patrician families. In 1511 the city of Utrecht, at war with the lord of IJsselstein, appealed to the duke of Gelderland, Karel van Gelre, to come to its aid, just as it would do again in 1527 in its conflict with the prince-bishop, who exercised both ecclesiastical and secular authority in the provinces of Utrecht and Overijssel. The prince-bishop, forced by the Gelderlanders to pay a huge indemnity for their recognition of his authority in Overijssel, was in sore financial straits. He saw no alternative but to surrender his authority in both Utrecht and Overijssel to Charles V. In 1528 the emperor occupied the city of Utrecht and changed the constitution, ensuring that the guilds (which had dominated the town council since 1304) were completely excluded from politics. Charles V also had a large citadel built within the city walls, which he called – with a flair for public relations – the Vredenborch, or 'stronghold of peace'.

In Gelderland there was increasing criticism of the duke's escapades. In the cities, the patricians often complained of the excessive financial burden placed upon them and the damages they suffered from continued military action. By 1536 feelings were running so high that the duke was in danger of being deposed. Revolts broke out in Nijmegen and Zutphen. The *Landdag* – the provincial parliament with representatives from all parts of Gelderland – seriously considered the possibility of an alliance with the Lower Rhine mini-states of Cleves, Berg, Jülich, Mark and Ravensberg. When Karel van Gelre died in 1537, the Habsburgs immediately tried to placate the Gelderlanders, but the cities of Gelderland, remembering the fate of Utrecht, preferred to stand aloof. The duke of Cleves, proclaimed sovereign of Gelderland in 1539, was just as ambitious as his predecessor in the field of foreign policy. Joining forces with the king of France, he launched an attack on the Southern Netherlands. In the summer of 1542, Gelderland's famous military leader Maarten van Rossum marched in the direction of Antwerp, an action that proved exceedingly rash. The government in Brussels was alarmed at this threat to the most important trading centre in the Low Countries, and there were also fears that Protestantism, following in the Gelderlanders' wake, would gain a foothold in the Low Countries. Determined to prevent this, the emperor advanced with an army towards Gelderland in the summer of 1543. Jülich and Venlo fell almost immediately. In early September the duke of Cleves was forced to cede sovereignty over Gelderland to Charles V, whom the Gelderlanders themselves recognised a few days later as their ruler. The dream of an independent state on the northern edge of the Habsburg Empire had come to an end.

It is tempting to dismiss this history of feuds, skirmishes, small-scale wars and changing alliances as the death throes of what is sometimes called 'feudal anarchy' and to portray the Habsburg Empire instead as the prototype of the modern state, with its rule of law, uniform legal procedures and bureaucratic

efficiency. Charles V and his counsellors likely thought of themselves as modern statesmen and certainly did everything in their power to implement their agenda. In doing so, they undoubtedly had the support of many of Charles's subjects. An important step in this direction was the splitting up in 1531 of the Great Council, the most important government institution, into three separate Collateral Councils: a Council of State to handle political questions, a Secret Council to deal with legal matters and a Council of Finance. However, the façade of apparent order belied the political reality behind it, even in a province like Holland, which had long been integrated into the Burgundian-Habsburg state.

Holland was a late bloomer. In the fourteenth, and even as late as the fifteenth century, the economic heart of the Northern Netherlands was located more towards the east. In 1400 the cities of Utrecht and 's-Hertogenbosch, on the northern edge of the duchy of Brabant, were nearly twice as large as Dordrecht and Haarlem, at that time the largest cities in the province of Holland. The Northern Netherlandish cities allied with the Hanseatic League were not in Holland but in the east on the River IJssel. From the fourteenth century onwards, however, the cities of Holland were on the upsurge. Small towns, often having no more than several hundred inhabitants, developed rapidly, thanks to thriving agriculture in the surrounding rural districts and growing markets in the wealthy centres of Flanders and Brabant, where the numerous beer brewers of Gouda and Delft found most of their customers. Amsterdam's grain trade with the Baltic countries, initially arising from the impossibility of growing enough of this vital crop in the wet Dutch soil, also profited from the demand for grain in the South. Holland developed into a shipping power, and as early as the fifteenth century could boast one of the largest merchant fleets in Europe. The estimated carrying capacity of Holland's ships – 40,000–50,000 tonnes – meant that they could handle more cargo than either the Genoans or the Venetians. Holland, with Amsterdam at the forefront, became increasingly involved, also militarily, in the trading conflicts in the Baltic.

The cities played an important part in the provincial politics of Holland. In the fifteenth century the meetings of the provincial States were still rather informal, but even in those days the cities had most of the votes. Gradually a practice emerged by which the six large cities – Dordrecht, Haarlem, Delft, Gouda, Leiden and Amsterdam – had a permanent seat, next to the one vote held by the *ridderschap* (the nobility). The *ridderschap* consisted of nobles of Holland who represented not only themselves but the rural districts as well. The church had no representative in the States of Holland (as it did in the States of Utrecht). Like its neighbouring provinces, Holland was torn by the Hoek-and-Cabeljauw conflicts, which continued throughout the fifteenth century and led to various civil wars within Holland. It was not until the end of the century that the stadholder-general Albrecht of Saxony succeeded in bringing