

How noble was the Dutch nobility?

A family biographical and comparative view on an old noble family

Yme Kuiper (University of Groningen)

“Die Geschichte des Adels ist die Geschichte seiner immerwährenden Erfindung, der permanenten Konstruktion von Adeligkeit, der stets neuen Begründung von sozialer und kultureler Distanz. Aber es ist nicht nur der Adel selbst, der sich immer wider erfindet. Adel wäre nicht möglich ohne den Glauben an die Existenz von Adel in der ihn umgebenden Gesellschaft.”

(E. Conze, review of M. de Saint Martin, 2003)

In retrospective, modern Europe can be summarized as a set of de-nobled societies. After all mass movements and political dramas of the twentieth century, the question arises: *wo sind sie geblieben?* – all those princes, dukes, marquis, counts, barons, knights, esquires and *jonkheren*. Where are all these – titled or untitled – nobles of old? It is remarkable that the nobilities of such different states as Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden, have survived under the protective umbrellas of constitutional law, government registries and offices of heraldry (Wasson 2006: 203). Some of these monarchies still do nobilitate, some have ceased to. In the Netherlands, a new Nobility Act was adopted in 1994. Since that year, only members of the Royal House can be nobilitated. Most republics in Europe have ceased to recognize noble titles and achievements. In spite of all this, many noble families in those countries have congregated in exclusive knightly orders and noble associations.

Recent historical and sociological research shows that although the nobility has lost much of its corporate functions in European countries over the past decades, yet individual members of noble families have accommodated remarkably well to the new circumstances of the twentieth century. Empirical surveys by De Saint-Martin (1993), Dronkers (2003), and Dronkers and Schijf (2004), among others, show how persons of (high) nobility, deploying

different kinds of capital (social, cultural, and symbolic), have obtained elite positions in societies where meritocratic ethos was perceived as the dominant legitimization.

Construction of noble identity

Yet another trend manifest in these contemporary studies is the focus on experiences and perceptions among nobles of the major changes of our times, whether the societies in which they live have developed towards egalitarianism, totalitarianism, or democracy. Would they still present themselves in public as a noble collective or as a noble family, and to which degree? This question of the construction of a noble identity is central to De Saint Martin's ground-breaking study (1993: 23-24), and it is further elaborated in Conze's family biography of the German Counts of Bernstorff (Conze 2000). Conze, even more than De Saint Martin, offers an insider perspective through the eyes of the family, showing the different reactions of individuals in its several branches to such political watersheds as the end of the German monarchy, the rise and fall of the Hitler regime, and the division and subsequent reunification of the German Federal and 'Democratic' Republics. Both De Saint Martin and Conze show that in spite of the rather uniform mechanisms of noble identity formation, nobility as a group yet shows a remarkable degree of heterogeneity – a nuance often unnoticed by outsiders.

In my paper I will, like Conze, address the twentieth-century development of a single family: the Dutch Barons of Wassenaer. In De Saint Martin's footsteps, I will distinguish different fields in which twentieth-century nobles would show their aristocratic identities among themselves as well as to outsiders. De Saint Martin's study, as we all know, treats a ducal family where one member, the Duke of Brissac, married the wealthy daughter of an entrepreneur, as a paradigm for the entire French aristocracy, including both the rich and powerful part of the nobility. She contrasts this noble elite with the rather provincial, less wealthy landed gentry. To date, only the real *grands seigneurs* can still afford to live nobly and according to season, residing in Paris in winter and spending long summers on their ancestral estates in the countryside. Yet, the mental world and self-perception of the whole nobility still revolves around the memories and imaginations of a noble country life. To a significant degree, Conze's study also focuses on the psychological bond between the noble families and life on their country estates (or lasting images of its past).

Stratification

The first general research topic coming to the mind in this context is the stratification of the twentieth-century nobility itself. Wasson, for instance, shows in his recent comparative study of the richest, most prestigious and most powerful nobles, both titled and untitled, in several European countries, how this complex elite, or rather: complex elites, yet have certain traits in common. Although this aristocracy, as Wasson calls it, is not a single and uniform European elite, it appears distinct from the provincial gentry, which is the largest layer of the landed elites in Europe (Wasson: 12). Wasson on the other hand concedes that there has been too little scholarship on the latter, and that the distinction between them and the aristocracy may indeed be rather fluid.

Apparently, the question of stratification of the twentieth-century nobility in Europe can only be approached through a pilot survey in several countries, in which standards of empirical precision, periodization and contextualization must all be duly observed. In this respect, Wasson's construct of 'aristocracy' only has heuristic value. On the other hand, his vehement criticism of researchers who use the construct of an 'elite of notables' to characterize the process of integration between nobles and the *grande bourgeoisie* in the national administrative and political arena in a specific historical context, has somewhat surprised me (Wasson: 5). This very same criticism appears to backfire on Wasson's own construct of aristocracy.

Aristocracy

Before introducing my own research on the Barons of Wassenaer as a way to establish how noble the Dutch nobility actually was during the twentieth century, I shall summarize Wasson's vision of the Dutch aristocracy in a European perspective. The Dutch case indeed shows that aristocracy is not necessarily synonymous with old aristocracy. Most patents of Dutch nobles actually do not predate the early nineteenth century (Wasson: 105). I agree with Wasson that nobles and patricians have dominated the Dutch Foreign Service to the mid-twentieth century. Until 1919, this aristocratic presence was also strong in both Houses of Dutch Parliament. On the other hand, Wasson's assertions that the nineteenth-century Netherlands, like Denmark, Sweden, Central Italy, and Belgium, had between one hundred and two hundred aristocratic families (Wasson: 25) and that around 1900 these families controlled 15% to 33% of all land holdings, as they assumedly did in France, Belgium,

Denmark, Sweden, and Northern Italy (Wasson: 37), appear unfounded. I will, however, take up Wasson on two other points in his study: firstly his presumption that due to the social changes during the First World War, the Dutch aristocracy was in some 'semi-comatose state' between 1917 and 1945, and, secondly, his assertion that the landed elites tended to become marginalized and were only able to maintain some of their positions in such traditional fields as the military, in local communities, in the Foreign Service, and in the Royal Court, as well as on their own country estates (Wasson:164 and 174).

An old Dutch noble family

Now to the Barons of Wassenaer, one of the oldest noble families of the Netherlands. As early as 1200, their primogenitor Philippus de Wasnare was mentioned in a treaty between a Count of Holland and a Duke of Brabant. In 2000, the Van Wassenaer Family Foundation, established 1992, initiated a grand public manifestation to commemorate eight hundred years of family history. The two still flourishing branches (Wassenaer-Catwijck and Wassenaer-Nederhemert) are both represented on the board of this foundation. The manifestation included exhibitions in the Municipal Museum of History of The Hague as well as in the castles of Duivenvoorde and Twickel - owned by the family during the Medieval and the Early Modern period respectively - and a competition for classical musicians in the name of the eighteenth-century Dutch count Unico Wilhelm van Wassenaer; he (and not Giovanni Battista Pergolesi) was the composer of the famous *Concerti Armonici*. Last but not least, the Foundation sponsored two special publications: a comprehensive inventory of the family archives and a family history written by a team of professional historians and one anthropologist, titled: *Men of Position. Van Wassenaer 1200-2000: Eight Hundred Years of Noble History*. The aim of the latter book was to historically contextualize the family's noble status during four different periods, while highlighting the continuities and discontinuities of their self-perception.

Almost one century earlier, in 1903, a medievalist named Dr. Henri Obreen (indeed of Irish heritage, although his father was a notary public of Leiden), had published an extensive genealogy of the major and cadet branches of the Van Wassenaer family (Obreen 1903; Kuiken 2004). Apart from one branch of Counts of Wassenaer, run out in 1930, the Van Wassenaers, like many noble families of the Dutch *ancien régime*, have been recognized as barons since 1814. Princes, counts and knights are indeed relatively rare titles among the Dutch national peerage which was created in 1814 by King William I of the fledgling

Kingdom of the Netherlands. The subsequent wave of proclamations and incorporations of nobles compensated for the centuries-long moratorium in nobilitations under the Dutch Republic.

The Dutch nobility after 1814

Most of the new nobles were patricians whose families had dominated the local governments of the Republic's main cities. In addition, many cabinet ministers, senior officers and civil servants, colonial governors, and court dignitaries were also promoted to nobility. This royal policy thus added a noble image to a nation of notables. With few exceptions, the new nobles were not titled but instead given the predicate of *jonkheer*. The reign of Queen Wilhelmina (1898-1948) was typical of the twentieth century with its sharp decreasing numbers of nobilitations. The last Dutch nobilitation for personal merit was proclaimed in 1904, the last nobilitation for the historical merit of one's family in 1939. Around 1900, the titled members of the High Council of Nobility in the Netherlands, an official advisory body founded in 1814, also felt that only persons of merit from the nation's foremost and classiest families could and should be nobilitated, while 'burgesses' could and should not. At that time, the Dutch registry included 450 families; in 1939, some 7200 nobles from 400 families. Membership of the Dutch Society for Nobility, actually a charity for the support of impoverished noblewomen, grew from a mere 150 in 1900 to nearly 700 in 1930. After World War II, it took until 1990 for its membership to grow back to this level. In 2000 there were over 1000 members, including a separate society for the young (Ketelaar and Kuiper 2000). Of the nearly 600 families nobilitated from 1814, some 300 are still flourishing, with some 8000 persons who are residents of the Netherlands. Since 1903, one can look up their names in what is familiarly called the 'Little Red Book': the semi-official *Nederland's Adelsboek*, modeled after *Debrett's Peerage* and the *Almanach de Gotha*. A spin-off has been *Nederland's Patriciaat* which since 1910 has published the genealogies of Dutch patrician families, originally limited to those closely connected to officially registered nobles or to families who belonged to the town-governments in the Dutch Republic before 1795. This 'Blue Series' now also includes other families with a lasting prominence in government administration, scholarship, and commercial enterprise. Genealogies of some 1800 'patrician' families have been published so far: thrice as many as the number of registered noble families published in the 'Red Series' (Kuiper 1998: 193-195).

The Protestant dominance within the Dutch nobility is remarkable, but can partly be explained historically. As Catholics were excluded from public office during the Republic, those who qualified for nobilitation after 1814 were mostly Protestants. In 1925, only 22% of all Dutch registered noble families were Catholic (NAH 1925). In the twentieth century, membership of the Protestant Order of Saint John was four to five times the membership of its Catholic equivalent, the Order of Malta. Protestant dominance within the Dutch Society for Nobility has only slightly diminished over the years. The first and only Catholic President of the High Council of Nobility took office as late as 1936, after having served on it for 33 years (NA 2006-2007: 261). In 1918, the nation's first Catholic Prime Minister was a *jonkheer* (esquire) from an old and prominent family nobilitated in 1816. Until very recently, intermarriage between Protestant and Catholic nobles were extremely rare. To date, Catholic nobles still marry within the registered nobility more often than Protestants (Dronkers, Huistra and Kuiper 2006: 52).

Four generations

Around 1900, the Van Wassenaers were still a rather large family with several branches and big land holdings, including mansions and manors in the suburbs of The Hague and the more rural eastern provinces of the Netherlands. The male members of the family still cherished their old seigneurial titles. The *chef de famille*, the twentieth-generation Lord Wassenaer, and his spouse, a wealthy countess, had both died in 1892. Their three sons had all married nobles, and their eldest son became the new family chief. His two daughters also married nobles. Their husbands had read law together: one, a *jonkheer* Van Karnebeek, was to be mayor of The Hague, Foreign Minister, and Chairman of the General Assembly of the League of Nations; the other, a *jonkheer* De Jonge, would be Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies after serving as a cabinet minister and as managing director of a Dutch oil company. With their wealth, power and prestige, they certainly belonged to the top of the Dutch aristocracy (as defined by Wasson) during the 1920s and 1930s. 'Lord Rosande', the new *chef de famille*, served as a Navy officer, an MP and a gentleman in waiting to the royal court, all in line with the family tradition. The entire Van Wassenaer family was shocked when he committed suicide in the summer of 1914.

Lord Rosande's younger brother Baron Otto van Wassenaer (1856-1939) succeeded as *chef de famille*. He was a Navy officer, too. This was another family tradition: several Van Wassenaers had served the republic as admirals during its 'Golden Age'. Baron Otto had a

Ph.D. in Law from Leiden and was an MP for the Christian Historical Union, a Protestant party with a program of economic liberalism, social paternalism, and anti-catholicism. He was by far the wealthiest of the three brothers: he owned lots of houses, farms, and securities. He was also Landcommander of the most exclusively noble order in the Netherlands: the Teutonic Order at Utrecht. His titled spouse, Baroness Cornelia van Boetzelaer, was Queen Wilhelmina's *dame du palais*. Her diary reveals her ideas on 'being a noble'. The couple would often entertain an exclusive circle of relatives and friends in their town houses and country estates. Her diary radiates exclusivity, as in the following fragment, written in December, 1900: 'Having to serve at a grand ministerial dinner, that day I was enjoying my little job quite a bit. Not only the ministers, but also their dear better halves had been invited. It was curious to watch those tarted-up burgesses like Mrs. Lely, Mrs. Cort van der Linden, Mrs. Goeman Borgesius etcetera. Their going to table was so clumsy that two of these 'fat females' fell down side by side' (Kuiper 2001: 225). Incidentally, the third brother had acquired his title of 'Lord Nederhemert' through his wife.

In comparison to the preceding (21st) generation, the next (22nd) generation Wassenaer-Catwijk and Wassenaer-Nederhemert was less involved in the nation's aristocracy proper. Although Baron Frederik ('Frits') van Wassenaer van Catwijk (born 1894) owned large amounts of 'old money', his degree in Commercial Economics from Rotterdam was not really a ticket to a glowing entrepreneurial career. A brief stint with Sir Henry Deterding's Royal Dutch Shell in London turned into a disaster. In 1919 he had married Lady Sylvia van Lennep, from a family of recently nobilitated patricians from Amsterdam. Her diaries show a vivid interest in religious matters, but also a strong penchant for the country life in which villa and castle owners would indulge during the interbellum. This Dutch 'cult of the country house' also appears from the archives of other noble families. Newly purchased motor cars drove the owners between their country estates to play tennis or to hunt (just like in England; Mandler 2004: 47). Frits and Sylvia, who loved their estate in Gelderland as much as they enjoyed travelling abroad, were typical of this moneyed leisure class. Their eldest son would later depict this life of leisure in his father's biography. Being independently wealthy, Frits van Wassenaer could afford to participate as an unpaid volunteer in aircraft building experiments in England during the 1920s. In these years, six children were born: four daughters (of which one would marry a diplomat of noble family; the other would all marry independent professionals) and then two sons.

In 1928 Frits' cousin Baron Jacob van Wassenaer (born 1899), Lord Nederhemert's only son, married an Italian Ph.D. from Florence. In the late 1930s, when she was chairing the

local ‘Dante Alighieri’ chapter at The Hague, she would fall for Mussolini’s fascist cultural policy (Van Kessel 2003). Their castle at Nederhemert was transformed into a Museum of Art; the Wassenaer-Crocini couple were themselves living in a nearby country house (Van Wassenaer-Crocini 1993). Under the German occupation of the Netherlands, many guests were entertained at summer parties on the premises. In the winter of 1944-1945 the castle was almost completely destroyed during fights between German and Allied troops. A decade later, the Van Wassenaer family sold the ruins to the Dutch state (Bierens de Haan and Kramer 2005). It appears from the ‘Little Red Book’ that Baron Jacob never aspired to political or social office. By his marriage, the Wassenaer-Nederhemert branch converted to Catholicism. His sons (23rd generation) would flourish in the post-war business community. In 1960, the younger son married an Austrian-born *Prinzessin* – in Canada. The academic trainings of their sons, both Protestants, would result in careers in business and law respectively. In the 1980s, their daughters would prefer the Arts in their academic and professional lives. The other branch, especially Frits’ and Sylvia’s children, also opted for enterprise and the professions, based on solid academic training. The career of their oldest son, a lawyer, included appointments in business, at the bar and with the judiciary, to culminate in a full professorship in Private Law. In the early 1990s, he initiated both the Family Foundation as well as the Family Society. His father-in-law was a Dutch Supreme Court Judge; three of his four children (24th generation) also read law and had similar careers. The youngest son studied (agriculture) economics in the USA. Incidentally, none of them married a noble.

The Inter-War Years

Recent sociological research, based on the ‘Red Series’ from 1903, shows that the shift of professional fields as we observed it in both branches of this family is representative of the Dutch nobility in general, most notably in the second half of the twentieth century (cf. Dronkers and Schijf 2004). My preliminary analysis of 4000 biographies in a Dutch *Who’s who*, published in 1938 to celebrate Queen Wilhelmina’s four decades in office, indeed shows that although sons of recently nobilitated families had already found their ways into business and commerce around 1900, this was a less obvious career choice for the ‘old’ titled aristocracy, who were still more often active in government, the judiciary and the military (Van den Aardweg 1938).

Finally, we get back to Wasson’s propositions on the Dutch aristocracy in the 1920s and 1930s. If the 22nd Van Wassenaer generation is representative at all, the same subset of

the nobility that still qualified as a national power elite (the aristocracy) around 1900, was now in the defensive. As a consequence of the introduction of universal suffrage in 1919 and the increasing influence of political party boards, administrative and political top positions were increasingly shared with politicians of common upbringing. Until World War I, for instance, half of the 100 members of the Dutch House of Commons were aristocrats. In 1913 there were 16 nobles and 28 patricians, in 1937 only six nobles and six patricians (Van den Berg 1983: 48). In spite of this shift during the interbellum, however, the social status of aristocrats and nobles had not waned. Nobles were still overrepresented in the ranks of Governors-General in the East Indies, among provincial governors, and among mayors of the larger cities (De Graaff and Locher-Scholten 2007; Kuiper 2009). Especially those who had grown up in the traditionally leading classes would respond to feelings of insecurity, or the threat of a diminished social stature by re-investing in status. There is no better explanation of the gusto with which the wealthiest aristocrats cultivated their country houses. This also appears from the Van Wassenaer diaries and their personal memories of this period. This flourishing country house culture and the quest for spirituality shared by many nobles in the war and post-war era may together explain why the growth of the so-called Oxford Group, an elitarian conversion movement led by the American evangelist Frank Buchman, took root at a couple of noble country estates in the Netherlands. It all started with a house party on the Van Heeckeren van Kell-Bentinck estate at Rhederoord in Gelderland. Frits and Sylvia Wassenaer-Van Lennep were also touched by the Oxford virus. Being at the core of the movement between 1928 and 1939, they would be privy to all its internal storms. Once this religious movement had become more active in world politics under the slogan of Moral Re-Armament, however, the couple were more or less forced to leave it. Meanwhile, they had befriended several noble fellow-Oxfordians whose national socialist sympathies were becoming increasingly manifest and extreme (De Loor 1986). This is not to suggest that a major part of the Dutch nobility was then identifying with rightwing-authoritarian ideology and action – although research on this period is still regrettably scanty. In spite of two noble Dutch MPs who submitted portraits in national socialist party uniforms for the *Who's Who* of 1938, only a tiny fraction of the Dutch nobility were openly national socialist or fascist (De Valk 2007). Across the board, they were also much more active in the resistance than in collaboration with the German occupators. A main motive appear to have been loyalty to the Royal Family, but there were also vital networks of military officers. Wasson's assumption that the Dutch landed nobility had without much rancor accepted the political and social changes of the inter-war years (1919-1939) does not contradict this observation.

The cult of the country house

Johan Huizinga, a well-known Dutch historian, once wrote: ‘The unity of the Dutch people is entirely predicated on its bourgeois character. One way or another, we Dutch are all deeply bourgeois, from the lawyer to the poet, and from the baron down to the proletarian ’(Huizinga 1934). In this paper Huizinga’s a-historical cliché, that had a certain impact on Dutch historiography, has been somewhat qualified. In noble circles around 1900, ‘bourgeois’ apparently had a rather negative ring to it. Furthermore, the continuity of the construction of noble identities is predicated on their opposition with other social groups. This only adds to the challenge of studying these identifications with nobility and/or *bourgeoisie* (Kuiper 1998: 213-217). It is evident from De Saint Martin’s and Conze’s studies that this approach requires both qualitative and quantitative methods. In my paper I tried to integrate both methods and to experiment with comparative and family biographical information. They lead me to the following conclusion.

In the early nineteenth-century Netherlands, a national nobility was created as a large group of nobilitated families, most of them Protestant. In the course of that century, the wealthiest among them became the core of a national elite of notables. Well into the twentieth century, they remained highly visible in parliament and in senior government offices, and especially in the Foreign Service and at the royal court. During the interbellum, their noble lifestyle on country estates went through a kind of Indian Summer. Nine of the ten largest Dutch estates were owned by noble families around 1930. Yet this country house cult was no longer part of the political capital of these nobles: it was rather felt to compensate for their loss of political clout. To themselves, this cult represented tradition, dignity and social tranquillity. To the Dutch nobility, World War II rather than World War I was a breaking point. After 1945, the nobility disappeared as a *visible elite*: first from parliament, then from court, and eventually from public life in its entirety. Dutch nobility became a sort of secret society during the roaring political and cultural times of the 1960’s and 1970’s. From now on this nobility had to reinvent and revitalise noble identity completely on its own, as it did most successfully by creating family foundations and associations. Moreover, strategically deploying their cultural and symbolic capital, many *individual* Dutch nobles accommodated remarkably well to new social conditions, and found their way to the top – in different professional fields. As De Lampedusa in his great novel *Il Gattopardo* (1957) already prophesied: ‘The meaning of a noble family lies entirely in the tradition, that is to say in its

vital memories.’ Yet it is an open question how in the near future younger (Dutch) generations with a noble name will give substance to vital memories or identify themselves with their family ‘traditions’.

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