

The Renaissance of Dutch Nobility around 1900

Nikolaj Bijleveld / n.h.bijleveld@gmail.com

Next Saturday, June 20th, the Order of Saint-John in the Netherlands, will celebrate its knights' day. This annual day where the members of the order, the knights and ladies, all of noble descent, meet, draws every year much attention, not in the least because of the public manifestation of chivalry and the frequent presence of member(s) of the royal family. This year the day is extra special, since the order celebrates its centennial. The other main aristocratic charity order in the Netherlands, the catholic Order of Malta founded in 1911, differs primarily in 'the abundance of its ceremonies', to use the words of the protestant and sober coadjutor, jonkheer [*esquire*] J.P. de Savornin Lohman, of the Order of Saint John.¹ Both organisations are noble societies doing charity. These two orders have together about 750 members, making up almost 10 percent of the nobility in the Netherlands.² The Order of Saint John is almost five times as large as the Order of Malta.

The two organisations comprise together with the Dutch Nobility Association and the *Nederland's Adelsboek*, what has been called, the anchor points of noble identity in the Netherlands.³ These four organisations and institutions of nobility were all founded within a period of 12 years, between 1899 and 1911. I will argue that it is no coincident that this class engaged in self-organisation and self-mobilisation around 1900 when nobility in the Netherlands was under pressure.

Nobility under pressure

Traditionally many posts in national and regional government, posts which to a certain extent were hereditary, at least, they often remained within the same families for longer periods, were held by the nobility and the patriciate. Patriciate in the Dutch context must be understood as the non-noble families who for at least three generations belonged to the ruling class of the Republic before the Revolution of 1795. However, the privileged position of these elites changed in the course of the nineteenth century. Due to processes of democratisation and particularly the political reform in 1848 which abolished the representation of the estates, the political position and influence of these old elites became less obvious and subject to competition. The indication patriciate changed for instance, as the sociologist Kees Bruin made clear in an interesting article on the Amsterdam patriciate.⁴ In the course of the nineteenth century the term was no longer used solely to denote these old families but gradually also came to include the *homines novi* of this period. This resulted in a devaluation of the standing of the old families, who increasingly overcame their old resistance to noble titles and turned to the state to receive acknowledgment

¹ http://www.volkskrant.nl/archief_gratis/article1024936.ece/Riddertje_spelen [date checked: 07.06.2009].

² Ibidem; http://www.ad.nl/denhaag/3005259/Ridders_kruizen_en_goede_werken.html [date checked: 07.06.2009].

³ C. Gietman, 'Genealogie, waarheid en statusangst in de late negentiende eeuw. De Nederlandsche heraut (1880-1903), in: A. Gevers e.a., eds., *Mensen van adel. Beelden, manifestaties, representaties* (Hilversum 2007) 205.

⁴ K. Bruin, 'Kwestie van stand. Over de opname in de adelstand van Amsterdamse patriciërs in de 19de eeuw', *Sociologische Gids* 81/2 (XXVIII) 110-139.

for their historical important social positions. One may wonder why the patriciate especially from the second half of the century changed its attitude toward titles, since the prerogatives of the nobility were effected. Nobility in the Netherlands however, remained a group of respected and old families, a category to which the patriciate counted itself and increasingly wanted to be part of. The upper classes were clearly and subtly demarcated, or as the main character in the novel *The Books of Small Souls* by the naturalistic author Louis Couperus (1863-1923) from these years exclaims at a party at her sister's place:

people from their group, from other groups, with the nuances of birth, religion, position, fortune [...] 'decent' people [...] Fortune, which was in most cases distinguished not to have and subsequently to live, like they had it ... Position, which was what they aimed at [...] Religion, which was something other people had, the relatives, sometimes like a decency or a policy [...] Birth, birth ... which was everything [...] And above all, the soft smile of extenuating pity and contempt for everyone who thought different.⁵

Clearly, a title could function as a defence mechanism against social downward mobility in the changing society of this period.⁶ And, for that sake, contribute to social stability.

Some noblemen decided after the reforms no longer to run for parliament and concentrated on regional functions. But also in the countryside, the position of the nobility was effected.⁷ When the withdrawal to the countryside coincided with investments in landproperty and the estate, the economical position of the family would in the long run be effected. Not only became it more and more difficult to keep the family house – one of the most important aspects of the noble family's self image, as Anna-Maria Åström and Yme Kuiper stress in their contributions – undivided within the family. Developments within the agricultural sector resulted for some noblemen in financial problems in the beginning of the twentieth century too.⁸

Aristocrats no longer obviously occupied most social key functions. They were challenged by a new class of bourgeoisie, gaining political power, economic wealth and social standing. The nobility increasingly fragmented as it lost grip on many key functions in society. This effected in attempts to regroup⁹ and contributed to the remarkable renaissance of Dutch nobility around 1900, which I will demonstrate with the four cases mentioned earlier on.

⁵ L. Couperus, *De boeken der kleine zielen*, I-II (Amsterdam-Antwerpen 1991) 432-433. 'mensen van 'hun coterie', van andere coterieën, met de schakeeringen van geboorte, geloof, positie, fortuin ... 'fatsoenlijke' mensen [...] Fortuin, dat was bij hen allen bijna gedistingeerd het niet te hebben en dan te leven, of zij het hadden ... Positie, dat was waarnaar zij streefden [...] Geloof dat was bij de anderen, de kennissen, soms als een fatsoenlijkheid of een partij-belang [...] Geboorte, geboorte ... dat was alles [...] En over dat alles heen de zachte glimlach van vergoëlijkend medelijden en minachting voor wie anders dachten dan'.

⁶ Bruin, 'Kwestie van stand', 123; Y. Kuiper, 'Aristocraten contra burgers. Couperus' Boeken der kleine zielen en het beschavingsdefensief rond 1900', in: R. Aerts, H. te Velde, eds., *De stijl van de burger* (Kampen 1998) 186-217.

⁷ Cf. M. Prins, 'Rustoord van mijn blijdeste dagen, Eden van mijn tere jeugd. Constructie van een familie-identiteit: Nijenburg en de familie Van Foreest, 1742-1922), in: R. van der Laarse and Y. Kuiper, *Beelden van de Buitenplaats. Elitevorming en notabelencultuur in Nederland in de negentiende eeuw* (Hilversum 2005) 89-110; C. Schmidt, *Om de eer van de familie. Het geslacht Teding van Berkhout 1500-1950. Een sociologische benadering* (Amsterdam 1986) 180. K. Verrips-Roukens, *Over heren en boeren. Een Sallands landgoed, 1800-1977* ('s-Gravenhage 1982); Idem, 'Lokale elites en beschavingsoffensieven. Langbroek 1870-1920', *Sociologisch en Antropologisch Jaarboek* (1987) 165-181.

⁸ P.J. van Cruyningen, *Landgoederen en landschap in de Graafschap* (Utrecht 2005) 113.

⁹ Schmidt, *Om de eer van de familie*, 180.

Nederlandse Adelsvereniging / Dutch Nobility Association (1899)

The first case is the Dutch Nobility Association, founded in 1899. The founder of the Association, jhr. J. Hora Siccama, had in the 1890s originally opted for a national organisation of the nobility aiding all members of society. His attempts initially failed due to a dispute over the question who was to profit from the support: all, only the nobility, or only certain groups within nobility. Hora Siccama found however some 51 like-minded souls who supported his efforts and in 1899 the *Dutch Nobility Association* was founded.

All members of the Dutch nobility were welcome to join the association. One of the prominent benefactors of the association was the Queen who, just like the Queen-Mother, regularly donated money for the cause. Ties between the royal house and the association were strong. In 1903, the Queen became patroness of the association, from 1908 the association would advise the Queen in requests for support and, finally, in 1915 the private secretary of the Queen was made a member of the board.¹⁰

The association grew initially strong. One year after foundation, the board gladly welcomed the 159th member. This number had increased till 319 by 1906. In 2005 the association counted about 1.250 members, more than 15% of Dutch nobility.¹¹ Catholics have always been a minority within the Association, but their relative size has increased till about 30% in the last decade. In the early years, after 1906, the growth rate had however weakened, and in the following 14 years the number of members increased with only 90 till 409. This was a deception for Hora Siccama, who exclaimed in 1909 to be missing an *esprit de corps* among the Dutch nobility.¹² This stands in contrast to what a member of the association told me some years ago. He saw proof of successfully having passed on a sense of nobility to the next generation when his son joined the association. The main activity of the Association has been financially supporting members of the nobility. Already in the early years – like it still is today – the association also aimed at strengthening the collective power of the nobility.¹³ Hora Siccama stated in the opening meeting of 1899, that the unification of the nobility in the association should contribute to people realising that the noble class in society is not redundant and that a healthy democracy can not do without a healthy aristocracy.¹⁴ Here, the founding of the association is closely related to the political and social changes in society.¹⁵ In a period when the position of the nobility was at stake, the stakeholders sought like other social groups (women, Catholics, working class) by uniting to maintain or improve their own position.

¹⁰ E. Ketelaar-de Vries Reilingh, 'De geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Adelsvereniging', in: *Edel voor adel*, 13, 23-26.

¹¹ J. Dronkers, A. Huistra, Y. Kuiper, 'Hoe 'adellijk' is de adel in het huidige Nederland? Antropologische en sociologische kanttekeningen bij de in 2005 gehouden enquête onder de Nederlandse adel', *Virtus. jaarboek voor Adelsgeschiedenis XIII* (2006) 48.

¹² Ketelaar-de Vries Reilingh, 'De geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Adelsvereniging', 26-27.

¹³ <http://www.adelsvereniging.nl/us.htm> [date checked: 07.06.2009].

¹⁴ Ketelaar-de Vries Reilingh, 'De geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Adelsvereniging', 9.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

Chivalric orders

Besides the financial support for the needy that was issued by the Dutch Nobility Association, noble men and women had several other means of doing good. An international example is the Red Cross, whose Dutch department was founded in 1867 and actually offered the nobility ample opportunities for charity. Among the 18 members of the main committee (pres. 1917) we find six esquires and a prince, Prince Hendrik (1876-1934).¹⁶

Nowadays, the Netherlands counts three noble associations devoted to charity.¹⁷ I do not include the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, a recently founded organisation of some 30 non-nobles. Especially the top is working in real estate business, hence the term 'real estate knights'. They are accused of being false knights who use the symbols of the "real" chivalric orders. The oldest order is the Bailiwick of Utrecht of the Teutonic Order, a protestant chivalric order devoted to charity with roots going back to the crusades. There is no time to go into details. The order was put under the rule of king William I of the Netherlands in 1815. Admittance is very strict, as membership only can be acquired by nobility with four noble quarterings, a requirement which is hard to live up to for most noble families in the Netherlands.

Today, I will focus on the two orders mentioned in the introduction, namely the Order of Saint-John and the Order of Malta. Both orders trace their roots back to the crusades, but in the nineteenth century they only existed, if they did exist at all, marginally. In the case of the Order of Saint John, the husband of the Queen, Prince Hendrik played in the beginning of 1909 an important role as initiator and organiser of a national order. Only few months later, in October, the Prince received approval from the Brandenburger Bailiwick, the Dutch government and the articles were approved by the members. The official day of foundation is 30 April 1909, the birthday of Princess Juliana (1909-2004), who became Queen in 1948. The royal family has been closely involved in the Order ever since. For several decades, two princes subsequently acted as commendators.

Shortly after, part of the substantial catholic nobility in the Netherlands organised in a similar way. Probably inspired by the protestants' success, jhr. mr. E.B.F.F. Wittert van Hoogland attempted to establish a national association of the Order of Malta. In 1910 negotiations with the Grand Master of the Sovereign Order in Rome started. They were successful in 1911. Admittance to the Order of Malta was more strict than to the protestant Order, since members should belong to the nobility dating before the French Revolution. Nevertheless, rules were less strict than in other associations of the order, in order to ensure viability. For the Dutch case it is interesting to remark that, in contrast to the Dutch Nobility Association, not all members of the nobility could join the orders. Here, an internal division in the nobility itself becomes manifest.

Loyalty to the Dutch House of Orange is articulated in the case of the orders too. Despite being protestant, members of the royal house like Prince Hendrik, Queen Wilhelmina (1880-1962), Queen Juliana, Queen Beatrix (1938) and Crown-Prince Willem-Alexander (1967) are or

¹⁶ H.Ch.G.J. van der Mandere, *Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis (1867- 19 Juli - 1917)* (Amsterdam 1917).

¹⁷ http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/article365741.ece/Adellijke_ridders_vallen_valse_vastgoedriders_aan [date checked 07.06.2009].

have been admitted as (honorary) members, which was possible because of their descent from catholic noble families.

Surely, these close bonds were for the Dutch nobility a stimulus to join, but not the only. The history of these orders appealed to the romantic and historicising ideals we encounter in for instance architecture and literature in this period. The Middle Ages, knights and castles, all referring to nobility as an important class in society, were attractive ideals for many noblemen and –women. The Order of Malta for instance, celebrated its foundation in the city of Utrecht, where the Dutch Order had its roots. This symbolic location strengthened the idea of a revival of an existing Order. Just like in the case of the Order of Saint-John, historical continuity was stressed focusing on the crusades and chivalry. Chivalric symbols became part of the new Orders' traditions – all highly ritualized invented traditions. The focus on the specific noble dimension – the symbolic capital – of the nobility contributes to explaining the popularity of these orders. The growth for instance of the Order of Saint-John is strong. Between 1909 and 1911 membership almost tripled to 118. In 1918 the order counted 162 members.

Of course, the orders also provided the nobility with a means to realise the motto *noblesse oblige* in terms of charity. Hora Siccama had initially the same general charitable aim, which resulted in the foundation of an association for and of the Dutch nobility. But the Red Cross for instance offered that possibility too – we saw the number of noblemen involved. Among the boardmembers was Jhr. Mr. E.B.F.F. Wittert van Hoogland, who was quite active in noble circles. He actually partook in the board of the Red Cross as a representative of the Order of Malta. In this case, membership provided advantages in terms of ties and bonds with other groups and persons. The organisation and mobilisation was an investment in social capital too.

Genealogy

I come to the next case. Genealogy has always been used as a strategic instrument in social positioning, as the Dutch historian Willem Frijhoff stated.¹⁸ This was the case in the early modern period as well as in the modern period. Especially from the second half of the nineteenth century, genealogy as a discipline gained new élan.¹⁹ Darwinism drew attention to descent and heritage, which actually did contribute to critique on the nobility as a degenerated class. In *The books of Small Souls*, we find a young baron, educated as a medical doctor, who married a woman from the bourgeoisie, out of love, but also because of her strong physique and psyche, as a reaction to the physiological and mental weaknesses in his own family.²⁰ Besides evolutionism, new academic standards were introduced and genealogical interests intensified. These external factors contributed, though were not decisive for the increasing number of genealogical publications and societies. The case of *De Nederlandsche Heraut* illustrates how practicing genealogy was closely related to social changes. This society was dedicated to reveal abuses of genealogy for the sake of

¹⁸ W.Th.M. Frijhoff, 'De toekomst van het verleden. Genealogie als sociale wetenschap', *De Nederlandsche leeuw* C (1983) 541.

¹⁹ K. Bruin en K. Schmidt, "'Zur Genealogie der Genealogie". Over het boekstaven van "aanzienlijkheid" in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden', *Sociologische Gids* 80/4 (XXVII) xx-yy; A.G. van der Steur, 'De beoefening van de genealogie in Nederland sedert het midden van de negentiende eeuw', in: D.F. Goudriaan e.a., eds., *Gedenkboek 1948-1978 van de Afdeling Kennemerland van de Nederlandse Genealogische Vereniging* (z.pl. 1978) xx-yy.

²⁰ L. Couperus, *De boeken der kleine zielen*, III-IV (Amsterdam-Antwerpen 1991) 294-295, 395.

ones personal pedigree and aimed at restoring the noble class.²¹ Like the historian Conrad Gietman argued, in this case, genealogy served as an instrument for excluding competitors and defining the own group. This was off course seminal in a period when anxiety for the social standing of the nobility was acute.²²

The *Heraut* was closely related to other organisations of nobility. A comparison of the members of the genealogical group and for instance of the Dutch Nobility Association and the chivalric orders, reveal close ties. We have several noblemen who were member of at least two of these organisations. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the *Heraut* after its dissolution in 1903 donated its cash to the Dutch Nobility Association. The *Heraut* had no charitable ambitions but supported the Association's noble cause.

The connection between genealogy and noble identity is also strong in the *Nederland's Adelsboek*, published for the first time in 1903 and still appearing annually.²³ This spring, I interviewed Ursula den Tex (1933), former journalist and editor of a leftist weekly (*Vrij Nederland*) and author of two books about her noble family: the family Den Tex being ennobled in the nineteenth century and the old noble family Bentinck. She recalled a song from her youth in the 1940s: 'My mother is a countess, my father is mentioned in it'.²⁴ This 'it', is the *Nederland's Adelsboek* acting as an objective manifestation of nobility. Ursula den Tex remembers the long row of red volumes in the bookcase in her father's study and could as a small child not resist looking in it just to see her name among the other noble families.

The editors of *Nederland's Adelsboek* aimed at annually publishing the *état present* and descent in the male line of all families belonging to the Dutch nobility. According to the introduction of the first volume in 1903, the publication was an instant success. Even though one must hesitate to take these kind of statements for granted, in this case it appears to be correct. For in 1914 1.000 copies were published, in the following years even 1.200.²⁵ Only few years after, one of the dismissed members of the editorial board, D.G. van Epen, published what later became to be known as the blue booklet, *Nederland's Patriciaat* (only the colour is different while the rest is on purpose kept the same), a yearbook containing genealogical information about the Dutch patriciate.²⁶

The editor of *Nederland's Patriciaat* stated that he wanted to publish the genealogy of those family branches that had not been ennobled and of those respected families belonging to the ruling class. Now, the term patriciate did not imply that only the old elite would be included in the yearbook. The broad interpretation of the category patriciate opened up for new families to gain status. Furthermore, the editor stated that families did not have to pay for being mentioned, however, they were free to finance additional information or illustrations. Some years later, in 1920, the editor suggested that complete genealogies of families only would be published if the

²¹ Quoted in Gietman, 'Genealogie, waarheid en statusangst in de late negentiende eeuw', 184.

²² Ibidem, 180, 205.

²³ *Nederland's Adelsboek* ('s-Gravenhage 1903-).

²⁴ U. den Tex, *Anna baronesse Bentinck 1902-1989. Een vrouw van stand* (Amsterdam 2003) 128.

²⁵ C. Gietman, 'Heraut van de oude orde. Een genealogie van Nederland's Adelsboek (1903-1945), *Jaarboek van het CBG LIX* (2005) 183.

²⁶ *Nederland's patriciaat. Genealogieën van bekende geslachten* ('s-Gravenhage 1910-).

family paid the costs. This contributed to the suspicions that it was possible to buy respectability, even though a genealogical committee judges whether a family will be included or not.²⁷

Of course, this was exactly what the editors of *Nederland's Adelsboek* resisted. The specific aim of this so-called red booklet was to serve the interest of the nobility, unmask fraud and to document nobility. But the editors wanted also to use the booklet to illustrate the importance of the nobility for the country and as such, it is a clear reaction to the social changes in society.²⁸ The dedication to safeguarding the position of Dutch nobility was an important goal for the initiators and editors

Concluding remarks

Around 1900 Dutch society was changing and nobility was under pressure. In all studied cases, we see how the organisation and mobilisation of nobility is articulated as a reaction to the loss of political power and threatening decline of social status.

The organisations were closely interlinked, providing the members with the social capital to advance in society. This required however a unity which had never existed among the nobility – and still is lacking. Nevertheless, this period show attempts to mobilise larger parts of the elite and creating unity. We see how a historical discipline like genealogy contributes to defining and describing, as well as in discerning the nobility from other groups. The focus on families and pedigrees and on the new traditions of the chivalric orders advanced the nobility of the class. Specifically this investment in social and symbolical capital makes it possible to speak of the renaissance of Dutch nobility around 1900.

Despite the perception of loosing hold in Dutch society, the richest part of the nobility succeeded to a certain extent remaining on top. For instance, the number of MPs and ministers of noble descent was in this period (until 1919 when universal suffrage was introduced) still relatively high.²⁹ And, as Jaap Dronkers and Huibert Schijf have argued, persons with a noble title and name had even in the twentieth century have certain advantages.³⁰ Of course, this paper cannot corroborate their conclusions. But I think it can provide some insight into the process of revitalisation that the Dutch nobility passed through then. What happened around 1900 was a relatively new form of noble self-organisation. It is remarkable that this process of revitalisation was patronaged by the Dutch royal house. In a certain respect we can recognize in this synergy Montesquieu's famous dictum 'Point de monarchie, point de noblesse; point de noblesse, point de monarchie'.³¹

²⁷ K. Bruin en K. Schmidt, "'Zur Genealogie der Genealogie". Over het boekstaven van "aanzienlijkheid" in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden', *Sociologische Gids* 80/4 (XXVII).

²⁸ Gietman, 'Heraut van de oude orde'.

²⁹ Y. Kuiper, 'Adel, Nation und Staat in den Niederlanden im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert', in: M. van Driel, M. Pohl and B. Walter, eds., *Adel verbindet. Adel Adeligkeit in Nordwestdeutschland und den Niederlanden (1600-2000)* (Münster [2009]).

³⁰ J. Dronkers, H. Schijf, 'Van de publieke naar de culturele of de economische sector? Een vergelijking tussen de Nederlandse adel en het patriciaat in de twintigste eeuw', *Virtus. Jaarboek voor Adelsgeschiedenis* XI (2004) 104-117.

³¹ J. van Osta, *Het theater van de staat. Oranje, Windsor en de moderne monarchie* (Amsterdam 1998)