

Anthony Trollope in the Netherlands (1862)

More extensive version of the article by Albert van der Zeijden in *Ons Amsterdam* (June 2001) 184-187.

The famous English novelist Anthony Trollope spent a week in Holland in September 1862, visiting The Hague and Amsterdam, among other places. He came here to see the Dutch masters, but in passing he also visited the Amsterdam fair. He reported on it in the famous Cornhill Magazine. It is an entertaining piece, especially for the Dutch themselves. Trollope describes Amsterdam as very picturesque, but also as a city with a lot of noise and stench.

Lively

In England and America, the name of Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) is still a household word. This is evident from the fact that no fewer than four bulky biographies have been published about him in the last ten years. Trollope was a colourful figure. He spent almost his entire life working for the English postal service. It was to his great credit that he introduced the letter box, which meant you no longer had to go to the post office to post your letter. There are writers with a less legacy.

Trollope published 47 novels, many of them extremely voluminous. But he also wrote travelogues and biographies of Thackeray, Cicero and Palmerston. He achieved this high production by rising early each day and sitting down at his desk for several hours before breakfast. In his *Autobiography*, he writes that he put his watch on the table and set himself the task of writing at least 250 words every 15 minutes. Also, during his many train and boat trips, as a postal inspector he had to travel frequently, he was constantly writing. In a notorious statement, he called being a writer a craft that can be compared to that of a shoemaker, where it is about applying the stitching as carefully as possible. It did little to enhance his reputation among those with a more elevated view of authorship.

Trollope never worried about plot or intrigue. You should not read Trollope's books for the story, but for the character descriptions, which are always true to life. As a Dutch critic stated in 1870: "In a truly rare degree, Trollope has the gift of presenting his characters so vividly that we live and think and feel as if we were with them, happy when they are well, sad when they are suffering". The novels often take place in socially defined groups, such as his famous series about the fictitious English town of Barchester, with its cathedral modelled on the cathedrals of Salisbury and Winchester. He was not so much concerned with the spiritual life of his ecclesiastical characters as with the social busybody stuff and the bits and pieces that characterise every human life. In almost all of Trollope's novels, love plays a leading role. They are romantic stories in which the young heroine must overcome all sorts of social difficulties before she can marry the man of her dreams. No wonder Trollope was not always taken seriously by the intelligentsia. In *De Gids*, Trollope was once cornered as a writer "who fills heads and hearts with trifles", although the reviewer (Simon Gorter, father of the famous Dutch poet of the 1880s Herman Gorter) had to acknowledge that Trollope had a "lively style" and that his books were "pleasantly written".

This author with the fluent writing style visited Holland in 1862.

Humbug!

In the nineteenth century, the Netherlands was not an obvious destination for English travelers. The flat landscape was certainly not an attraction for them. And Holland was not so easy to reach for them either. Trollope tells us that he spent no less than eighteen hours travelling by steamboat from London to Rotterdam: it was "eighteen hours of steamboat misery". Fortunately, the interesting places were all close together. For him, these were Rotterdam, The Hague, Leiden, Haarlem and Amsterdam, the places he visited during his short trip through Holland between 13 and 23 September 1862. Trollope also visited Broek in Waterland, which apparently was already an unavoidable destination for every foreign tourist. He was very disappointed. He complains that you are constantly being dragged along by guides, whom he consistently refuses to pay. They must have been angry with him, he suspects. Conversely, Trollope was angry with Broek. The touristy character irritated him: it was all humbug!

Meanwhile, he wants to dispel some prejudices about the Dutch. That every Dutchman is a drunkard or a murderer (apparently, the Dutch had quite a reputation in England) turns out to be less true. And they are not all fat and plump either. According to Trollope, they look remarkably like the English, although they are on average a lot smaller and have the absurd habit of wearing French hats. Trollope: "Put on his head a hat made in England, and you will take him for an Englishman a little undersized".

Bathing in the North sea

He experiences how small the Dutch were when he wants to go for a swim in the sea near Scheveningen. He is impressed by the carriages that are used to bring bathers to the waterline unseen. They are much neater and better made than he is used to in England. But the bathing costume at hand turns out to be far too small, so Trollope decides to go swimming naked. He soon notices that everyone on the beach is in an uproar and he thinks this is because he has nothing on. The real reason is that the Dutch were worried about him going too deep. Trollope comments: 'Your Dutchman, who no longer drinks deep as the rolling Zuider Zee, does not bathe much deeper than he drinks.'

He experienced another strange habit when attending a service in the reformed church. The writer, who has become famous for his clerical novels, finds it remarkable that all the men in the church keep their hats on. And that the women are constantly chatting away to each other during the service. Trollope finds the Dutch very noisy in general, as he also experienced during his visit to the fair and the kermis. At the fair, the Dutch were noisy until late at night, without being drunk. Trollope states it emphatically. "Men and women with loud screams rushed hand in hand through the streets, catching excitement from each other, until they moved along with the fury of bacchanals. But yet there was no drunkenness; and as far as I could tell, no other evil was produced than nights made sleepless by noise and streets made impervious by crowds."

The Land of Rembrandt

Trollope's main goal, meanwhile, was the seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, which were already highly regarded abroad. Trollope visited the well-known highlights in The Hague and Amsterdam,

which are still highlights today: Paulus Potter's *The Bull*, Van der Helst's *Supper of the Archers*, and a series of paintings by Gerard Dow (= Gerrit Dou), of which a young girl reaching out of the window with a basket made the biggest impression on Trollope. The incorrigible flirt Trollope writes that this pretty girl alone makes a visit to Holland more than worthwhile. Of the most famous of all painters, Rembrandt, the personification of seventeenth-century realist Dutch painting, he mentions *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp* and, of course, *The Night Watch*. He added the comment that he thought the *Night Watch* was poorly lit and hung in an awkward position. At the time, the 'Rijksmuseum of Paintings' was still located in the *Trippenhuis*, which Victor de Stuers later characterised in his famous article 'Holland op zijn smalst' as a warehouse with objects that were 'stacked together in the most impractical way, no space, no light'. Trollope was also somewhat disappointed with the collection itself. Various English museums are said to contain more and better Dutch masters. He mentions, among others, Albert Cuyp's *View of Dordrecht*, in a private collection in London.

Seventeenth-century Dutch painting was famous for its homeliness, simplicity, honesty and bourgeois spirit. This would also have attracted Trollope, as he also preferred to portray scenes of everyday life in his books. But in a certain respect, the Dutch masters were not lifelike enough. He found the militia pieces by Van der Helst and Rembrandt, for instance, too messy and lacking in coherence. The archers were successful as portraits. But as a composition, it was too much of a huddled group. He had a similar criticism for Rembrandt's anatomy lesson.

In the merry-go-round

As mentioned, Trollope visited Amsterdam in the month of September. Seasoned fairgoers know that September was the month of the Amsterdam Fair.

In the nineteenth century, the fair looked very different from what we are used to now. There were no big mechanical rides, bumper cars or gambling tents. What did you have? Trollope mentions as the main attraction the ambulant theatres of all sizes in which actors showed their skills. He tried to attend one, but was unsuccessful because he and his friend, his postal colleague John Tilley, were recognised as foreigners. Trollope was strikingly tall with an enormous beard and was otherwise known as a noisy gentleman. In his travel journal, he wrote that he was constantly stared at and whispered about. The second great attraction of the fair, according to Trollope, were the merry-go-rounds, which, compared to what he was used to in England, were of enormous size. The wooden horses were arranged in groups of three, horses, lions and unicorns. Somewhat to his surprise, he noticed that it was not only children who took place on the merry-go-round. He saw several adult women of 25 having carefree fun. The older women supposedly accompanied the children, 'pretending to protect the children, but enjoying the motion with sober delight'. And Trollope would not be Trollope if he, in turn, did not want to join in with those young lovely women. He saw a 'demure Dutch lady' with whom he would have liked to mount one of the wooden griffins. But he lacked the courage to ask her.

About the visitors at the Amsterdam fair, Trollope says that he noticed that almost everyone was in traditional dress. "The whole city was full of people in strange rural costumes, - the women wearing huge awkward gold ornaments upon their head, broad pendants of gold hanging from machinery fixed carefully under their caps and round their heads, and bands of gold across their foreheads, - with high square-topped bonnets". They are the famous gold earrings, complemented with square-topped bonnets. He found it remarkable that Dutch women still wanted to dress in their grandmother's costumes. In England, regional costumes had long since died out, according to

Trollope. They may have been visitors from outside Amsterdam. It is known that the Amsterdam fair attracted visitors from all over the region - as far away as Haarlem and Utrecht.

Foul of smells

Trollope's report thus gives a nice picture of Amsterdam in 1862. He calls Amsterdam picturesque, but also a city with a lot of noise and stench, ``a city foul of smells''. We might wonder whether London was much less smelly at that time. We may also say that Trollope's account says as much about Amsterdam and its people as it does about Trollope himself. His view of the Dutch, whom he sees as little Englishmen with strange French hats, shows that he takes his own compatriots as a starting point in describing the strange Dutch neighbouring people. He also, for instance, has pronounced views on how people should behave in church: in his own Anglican church, they were a lot more civilised according to him. And always and forever there are the young women with whom Trollope is so eager to flirt. Actually, Trollope was quite happy in Holland. The Dutch themselves must have been surprised by this curious Englishman, who first dared to dive too deeply into the sea, completely naked, then antagonised the local guides in Broek and finally turned out to be a striking figure at the Amsterdam fair. Thanks to the report he had printed in *The Cornhill Magazine*, we know about it.

Meanwhile, hardly anyone in the Netherlands knows who Trollope is. Only famous Dutch novel writer Maarten 't Hart seems to have read his collected works, on which he reports in a catchy way in his essay collection *The Sum of Misunderstandings*. During his military service he had to travel twenty minutes a day between home and barracks. He calculated that he would spend three hundred days on the train and would have to fill a total of 12,000 minutes with reading. He looked for a writer who could fill this time and found Anthony Trollope. While reading Trollope, he regularly had tears rolling down his cheeks with laughter. Which publisher would like to take the trouble to translate some of his many books?

Literature

Anthony Trollope's 'My tour in Holland' was printed in *The Cornhill Magazine*, November 1862, pages 616-622. The trip is mentioned briefly in the biography by R.H. Super, *The chronicler of Bassetshire. A life of Anthony Trollope* (Ann Arbor 1988) 151-152 and N. John Hall, *Trollope. A biography* (Oxford/New York 1993) 245.

Recently, in 2017, 2019 and 2020, three of Anthony Trollope's best-known novels were published in translation: *Barchester Towers*, *The Way We Live Now* and *Orley Farm*. All three of them translated by Marijke Loots. These translations are an excellent stepping stone to getting to know Trollope. If you want to immerse yourself in nineteenth-century English country life, then *Barchester Towers* is ideal: humorous and wittily described, with amusing portraits of the sly chaplain Obadiah Slope and the weedy Bishop Proudie, who is completely under the thumb of his bossy wife, the unforgettable Mrs. Proudie. *The Way We Live Now*, a satirical description of unscrupulous bankers, is fascinating for drawing comparisons with our own world now. These translations were enthusiastically reviewed in *De Volkskrant* and the *NRC* respectively.