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# Oranierdenkmal, Aussichtsturm, Erinnerungsort

## Der Dillenburger Wilhelmsturm im Kontext nassauischer, deutscher und niederländischer Geschichte

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LOTTE JENSEN

# Icon of freedom, peace, and unity

## The reception of William of Orange in the Netherlands

William of Orange is, by far, the most well-known historical figure in the Netherlands. This can be attributed, in no small part, to the national anthem, which starts with his name and is sung at national commemorations, festivities, and sport events. Moreover, William of Orange is part of the "Canon of the Netherlands" (Fig. 1). This widely used educational material contains fifty "windows" with the most important events and persons of Dutch history, including William of Orange.[1] Every Dutch school child will, sooner or later, encounter his name.

William of Orange owes his status to the heroic role he played during the revolt against the Spanish. Moreover, his murder in 1584 added to his reputation by making him a martyr of the young Dutch republic, which was then seeking its own identity.[2] In songs, theatre plays, and poems, late sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries authors lauded his bravery, and freedom-seeking and sacrificial spirit. The well-known Protestant minister Jacobus Revius, for example, wrote an epitaph on William of Orange, stating that if anyone would ever surpass his fame, it would have to be somebody of the "same blood".[3] Such praise carries through to the present day and William of Orange is known as the "vader des vaderlands" ("father of the fatherland") and the founder of the new Dutch state, the "Republiek der Zeven Verenigde Nederlanden".

This chapter addresses the question of how this perception came about by looking at some pivotal moments: the "miraculous" year 1748, the Napoleonic era, and the heyday of nineteenth-century nationalism. It shows that the memory of William of Orange was appropriated to serve contemporary needs and purposes: pro-Orangist authors represented him as an icon of freedom, peace, and unity. Appropriation is, however, never neutral, but may be a politically charged and polemical act. This was often the case with William of Orange: in the process of canonisation and heroisation, other voices were consciously or unconsciously suppressed. Although this chapter pays less attention to those critical voices and anti-Orangist tendencies, it should be kept in mind that William

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[1] The Canon of the Netherlands was launched in 2006 and revised in 2020. See www.canonvannederland.nl (21.11.2024). I would like to thank Sophie Chapple from Bresser-Chapple for editing this contribution.

[2] Alastair Duke: The elusive Netherlands. The question of national identity in the Early Modern Low Countries on the eve of the Revolt, in: Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden 119, 2004, p. 10–38, at p. 37.

[3] Jacobus Revius: Op de begraefnis van Prins Willem van Orangien, in: id.: Over-Ysselsche sangen en dichten, ed. W. A. P. Smit, vol. 2, Amsterdam 1935, p. 34–35. For an anthology, see Anton van Duinkerken/P. J. G. Huincks: Dichters om Oranje. Oranjepoëzie van Willem de Zwijger tot heden, Baarn 1946.

of Orange and his successors have by no means been the object of adoration alone and that other representations of the nation's history have also emerged.


Fig. 1: The Canon of the Netherlands, revised edition of 2020, with William Orange on the frontispiece (photograph: Lotte Jensen).

## 1748: The year of miracles

Following the establishment of the Dutch Republic in 1581, political and religious struggles were constantly smouldering beneath the surface. Although there was a certain shared sense of identity, which was propelled upwards by the revolt against the Spanish, this so-called common Dutch identity was also permanently contested and under debate.[4] The political differences between the Orangists, who supported the stadtholder, and the anti-Orangists ("Staatsgezinden"), who opposed hereditary succession of the stadtholder and consequently sought to gain more democratic rights, were visible throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as were the tensions between different denominations. It led to fierce clashes and far-reaching upheavals, such as the beheading of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt in 1619 and the disastrous year of 1672, when the De Witt brothers were assassinated. In addition, the Republic faced two stadtholder-less periods, the first from 1650 to 1672 and the second from 1702 to 1747.

In both cases, the return of a stadtholder led to a flood of Orangist publications, which in turn revived the memory of William of Orange. The so-called "year of miracles", 1748, is a case in point. In that year the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (sometimes called the Peace of Aachen) was signed, ending the War of the Austrian Succession – a conflict that had swept across Europe for eight years. The war broke out in 1740 following the death of Charles VI, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. He appointed his daughter, Maria Theresa, to the Habsburg throne, but her position was challenged by, amongst others, Philip VI of Spain, Frederick II of Prussia, and Charles VII, the Prince-Elector of Bavaria. At first, the Republic adopted a neutral stance, however, there were also fierce advocates of

[4] For shared patriotic symbolism, see Marijke Meijer Drees: Patriottisme in de Nederlandse literatuur (ca. 1650–ca. 1750), in: De nieuwe taalgids 88, 1995, p. 247–260; ead.: 'Vechten voor het vaderland' in de literatuur, 1650–1750, in: Vaderland. Een geschiedenis vanaf de vijftiende eeuw tot 1940, ed. N. C. F. van Sas, Amsterdam 1999, p. 109–142.

military intervention, including Orangists who believed that such an intervention would improve the position of the Frisian stadholder.[5] Their number grew in 1744, when France invaded the Austrian Netherlands, and particularly in 1747, when the French besieged several cities in Zeelandic Flanders, including Hulst, Sas van Gent, Axel, and Bergen op Zoom.

Fig. 2: Stadtholder William IV, 1711–1751, by Jacques-André-Joseph Aved (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, https://id.rijksmuseum.nl/20026520, 20.1.2025).

In response to these developments, William IV was appointed by the States-General as the captain general and stadtholder of all districts in the Republic (Fig. 2). Heavy fighting ensued, with the French taking the city of Maastricht. In April 1748, the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle was finally signed. It was warmly welcomed by the Dutch, who had experienced severe losses. Orangists used this moment to lavish praise on the achievements of William IV. They also pointed at the fact that the Peace of Münster was established exactly one hundred years earlier, in 1648, which meant that the Dutch Republic was celebrating its first centenary as an independent state. And there was even more to celebrate: in March 1748 a new prince was born (the future Stadtholder William V). This made the position of the stadtholder, who now also had a male successor, stronger than ever. That all these developments occurred at the same time could hardly be a coincidence, the adherents of the stadtholder announced jubilantly. Forthwith, they called 1748 a "year of miracles".[6]

A large number of poems appeared in response to the events, including three large anthologies: "Olyf-krans der vrede" (1748, reprint of 1648, "Olive Wreath of Peace"), "Dichtkunstig gedenkteeken" (1748, "Poetical Memorial"), and "De tempel der vrede, geopend door de mogendheden van Europa" (1749, "The Temple of Peace, Opened by the Powers of Europe") (Fig. 3). The above writings were not only filled with praise for

[5] The following is based on Lotte Jensen: Pre-Modern Dutch identity and the peace celebrations of 1748, in: Discord and Consensus in the Low Countries, 1700–2000, ed. Jane Fenoulhet/Gerdi Quist/Ulrich Tiedau, London 2016, p. 6–19, 191–193; ead.: Celebrating Peace. The Emergence of Dutch Identity, 1648–1815, Nijmegen 2017, p. 127–143.

[6] Lotte Jensen: 'Toen 't volk als uit één' mond, lang leve Oranje! Riep'. Orangisme in het vredesjaar 1748, in: Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis 128, 2015, p. 1–22, at p. 2.

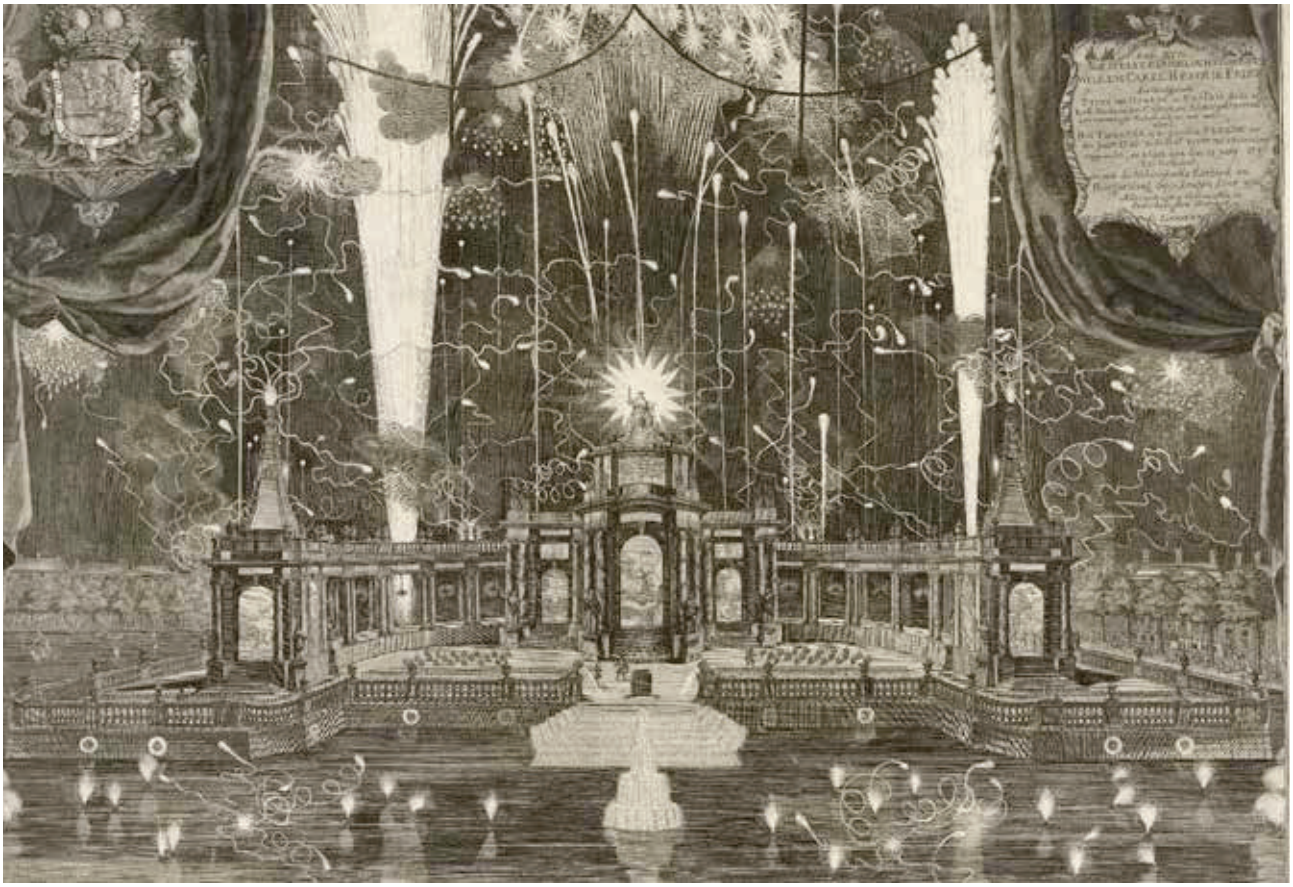

Fig. 3: Jan Caspar Philips, Fireworks in The Hague to celebrate the treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle on 14.6.1749 (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, https://id.rijksmuseum.nl/200517889, 20.1.2025).

the new stadholder, but also celebrated his predecessors, including William of Orange. Authors stressed that it was the people's wish ("vox populi") that William IV had been appointed to that position. William IV, in his turn, was said to be a true loving father of his people in line with the first stadtholder, Prince William of Orange.

The nation's history was one of the key themes during the celebrations, and it is here that we see a strong revival of the memory of William of Orange. The well-known poet Pieter Langendijk, for example, published a series of nine annual poems about the life of William of Orange, "Willem de Eerste, Prins van Oranje" (1747–1756). In the opening verses Langendijk stated that the prince had put liberty on a throne, and that he, as father of both the people and a small state, dared to challenge the Spanish King Philip II.

Many of the poems contain a historical outline of Dutch history with the aim of legitimising the position of the stadtholder. Three recurring motifs can be distinguished: (1) revolt and liberation from foreign oppressors; (2) the idea that the Dutch Republic, including its new stadtholder, was chosen by God or divine providence; and (3) the return of the Golden Age.

The memory of William of Orange especially played a role in the first two motives. Authors argued that the recent election of William IV was the logical outcome of nearly

two hundred years of struggle for freedom and liberty, which started with the revolt against the Spaniards and now ended with the defeat of the French. The Union of Utrecht of 1579 was considered a special landmark, because it brought together the seven northern provinces into one political union. Furthermore, the memory of the victories during the Eighty Years' War against the Spaniards were recalled, such as the triumphs in Den Briel (1572) and Leiden (1574). Special tribute was paid to William of Orange, who was said to be the unifying force in these developments: "What wonderful work he has done!", an anonymous poet wrote, "When he erected that pillar of honour / On which liberty rests, when Holland's associates / Bound their arrows tight with the bonds of Concord."[7]

Authors emphasised that it was the persistent efforts of William of Orange and his successors that eventually led to the Peace of Münster, which officially recognised the sovereignty of the Dutch Republic. The Utrecht-based author Sara Maria van Zon stated that the memory of William of Orange was alive and kicking again:

"WILLIAM of Nassau lives again, his name on all tongues.
Who is still unaware of MAURICE's courage in war,
And FREDERICK HENRY's fame, in times of good fortune and adversity?
No, heroes! No, everyone speaks of your brave deeds in war:
From your wreaths spring forth the leaves of oil-rich olives.
The second WILLIAM saw, at God's chosen hour,
The States declared free by Munster's Peace Treaty."[8]

The poetess emphasised that a direct line ran from William of Orange and his successors to William IV. This, combined with the idea that everything went according to a divine plan and that the Dutch were the chosen people, led to a narrative framework in which God, the fatherland, and Orangism ("God, vaderland en Oranje") were intrinsically linked. As the poet Jacobus Streng put it:

"As long as the Orange Tree is in the Netherlands,
Our Free Territory honours the God of its Fathers.
Then our State has nothing to fear,
Because no Tyrant will ever dominate God's estate."[9]

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[7] "Wat heerlyk werk heeft hy verricht! / Toen hy die eerzuil heeft gesticht, / Waaröp de Vryheid rust, toen Hollands bondgenooten, / Hunn' pylen hecht inéén door Eendragtsbanden slooten." The poet published his poem under the pseudonym Industria Dux Naturae in: Dichtkunstig gedenkteeken voor de Nederlandsche vryheid, Amsterdam 1748, p. 370–378, at p. 373.

[8] "WILHELMUS van Nassau herleeft op alle tongen. / Wie blyft 'er onbewust van MAURITS oorlogsmoed, / En FREDRIK HENDRIKS roem, in voor- en tegenspoed? / Neen, Helden! neen, elk meldt uw dappre krygsbedryven: / Uit uwe Lauren sproot het loof van vette Olyven. / De tweede WILHEM zag, op Gods bestemden stond, / De Staaten vry verklaard, by 't Munsters Vreverbond." Sara Maria van Zon: Gedachtenisviering der Nederlandsche Vrijheid: Op het eeuwgetyde van den Munsterschen Vrede […], Utrecht 1748, p. 8.

[9] "Zo lang de Oranje Stam in Neêrland blyft in weezen, / Ons Vry Gewest den God van zyne Vaadren eert, / Heeft ons Gemeenebest voor geen gevaar te vreezen, / Want geen Tieran heeft ooit Gods erfdeel overheert." Jacobus van der Streng: Op het eeuwgetyde, in: Dichtkunstig gedenkteeken voor de vryheid, Amsterdam 1748, p. 168–178, at p. 178.

Almost every highlight in the country's history was, the poets wrote, linked to the powerful actions of a stadholder and provided by God's will. This "triple alliance" between God, the House of Orange-Nassau, and the Dutch Republic, which had overcome so many threats in the past and would be able to resist any crisis in the future, would remain one of the most powerful poetical symbols of Dutch identity throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

## William of Orange as a symbol of resistance during the Napoleonic Wars

Following the death of William IV in 1751, the hostility between Orangists and the Staatsgezinden (from then on, also referred to as "Patriots") continued. The conflicts reached a peak during the Patriotic Revolution (1780–1787). During these years and the following period of the Batavian Republic (1795–1806), any reference to William of Orange or his successors could be interpreted as a political statement. The poet Joannes Nomsz, for example, dedicated the epic "Willem de Eerste, of de grondlegging der Nederlandsche vryheid" ("William the First or the Foundation of Dutch Freedom", 1779) to the contemporary Stadtholder William V, implying that true freedom was only guaranteed when a stadholder was in power. The playwright Willem Haverkorn, in contrast, was critical in his representation of William of Orange in "De overwinning van Willem den Eersten, Prins van Oranje, of de aanslag op Antwerpen" (1779). The work was banned twice: first in 1780, because of his criticism of William of Orange and the inflammatory passages that could pit Protestants against Catholics; and again in 1795, because of the anti-French sentiments it could provoke, aptly demonstrating how politically charged it was considered to choose William of Orange as a subject for any poetical work.[10]

His name was to remain just as politically charged in the subsequent two decades, however, unlike the prior period, referring to William of Orange or his successors would unite rather than divide Dutch society. Between 1806 and 1813, the Dutch were officially ruled by the French: first the country was led by King Louis Napoleon, one of Napoleon's brothers (1806–1810), while later it was annexed by the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte (1810–1813). During these years, the resistance against the French regime gradually increased: people protested against particular measures, such as orphans being sent to serve in the French Army and censorship. The colour orange in general, and William of Orange in particular, became a symbol of the struggle for freedom and liberty.[11]

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[10] Klaartje Groot: Willem Haverkorn en de Amsterdamse Schouwburg, Amsterdam 2017, p. 68–71, 110–111.
[11] On Dutch resistance against Napoleon, see: Johan Joor: De Adelaar en het Lam. Onrust, opruiing en onwilligheid in Neerland ten tijde van het Koninkrijk Holland en de Inlijving bij het Franse Keizerrijk (1808–1813),

Former Patriots even celebrated the Nassau family, albeit hesitantly at first. A telling example is the poem "Willem de eerste" ("William the first") by Hendrik Tollens. This paint merchant from Rotterdam became one of the most popular Dutch poets of the nineteenth century. His breakthrough came when he started writing poems about heroic figures and events from the national past, such as Jan van Schaffelaar, Kenau Hasselaar, and the princes William and Maurice of Orange. These poems could be read as a critique against the French regime and established Tollens as a resistance poet.

Fig. 4: Reinier Vinkeles, William of Orange shot by Balthasar Gerards in 1584, ca. 1810–1812, illustration used in J. F. Helmers, De Hollandsche natie, as note 14 (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, https://id.rijksmuseum.nl/200486339, 20.1.2025).

Initially, Tollens supported the Patriots, but during the Napoleonic Wars he embraced the Orangist past of the country. He recited his poem about William of Orange in 1808 at a society in Rotterdam. This must have taken at least half an hour, as the poem consists of sixty-two stanzas.[12] It also appeared in print the same year, and contributed to his reputation as a national poet. The poem is filled with exclamations, hyperbolic comparisons, and bombastic superlatives. He celebrated the many miraculous deeds of this unprecedented hero, who surpassed any Greek or Roman military leader of the past. He contrasted William of Orange's noble character with that of the Duke of Alba, who was represented as the devil himself. Tollens elaborated on the horrific battle scene, where evil was fought by the stadtholder, echoing the verses of the seventeenth-century playwright Joost van de Vondel, who wrote a play about "Lucifer" in 1654. For the contemporary reader it was easy to draw a parallel between Alba and Napoleon Bonaparte, who violated Dutch sovereignty as well. The closing line of the poem could be interpreted as a call for action

Amsterdam 2000; Lotte Jensen: The Dutch against Napoleon. Resistance Literature and National Identity, 1806–1813, in: Journal of Dutch Literature 2, 2011, p. 5–26, https://www.journalofdutchliterature.org/index.php/jdl/article/view/19 (26.3.2025); ead.: Verzet tegen Napoleon, Nijmegen 2013; Bart Verheijen: Nederland onder Napoleon. Partijstrijd, identiteit en natievorming 1801–1813, Nijmegen 2016.

[12] G. W. Huygens: Hendrik Tollens. De dichter van de burgerij. Een biografie en een tijdsbeeld, Rotterdam 1972, p. 117.

in the present time: "Oh Fatherland, trampled with feet! What sacrifice dost thou make Nassau's spirit?"[13]

William of Orange was also represented as a role model during the French occupation by the Amsterdam-based poet Jan Frederik Helmers. In his epic "De Hollandsche natie" (1812), Helmers offers a survey of Dutch national history, paying specific attention to William of Orange, the sea heroes of the seventeenth century, the colonial empire, and national poets and painters. Many passages can be read as anti-French statements, such as the descriptions of the Eighty Years' War against Spain or those of the French King Louis XIV, who in 1672 invaded the Dutch Republic.[14]

William of Orange plays a key role in the second part of the poem, in which he is singled out as one of the Dutch "heroes on the land". Helmers imagined himself sitting next to the grave of William of Orange in Delft, overwhelmed by emotions:

"Yes, first William! Yes, I want, sitting at your grave,
To share everything my heart is feeling with my contemporary!
The tear which I dedicate to your memory
Is the sacrifice which you demand, and is worthy of you.
Sublime struggle for freedom! This country as sworn-in
Throughout the centuries your voice did spread!"[15]

In later editions – the poem was reprinted many times and became a classic in Dutch literature – illustrations of heroic scenes were included. One of them showed the assassination of William of Orange by Balthasar Gerards in 1584 (Fig. 4).

Interestingly, Helmers also celebrated the former enemies of William of Orange's successor, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt and the brothers Johan and Cornelis de Witt. This can be explained by the context of the Napoleonic Wars. Helmers supported reconciliation during a time when the continuation of the existence of the Dutch nation was severely threatened: in their struggle against the French, the Dutch had to unite forces and forget about former internal political conflicts, Helmers thought.

In 1813 the French were defeated, and Prince William Frederick, the son of the late Stadtholder William V (who died in exile in 1806), proclaimed himself "Sovereign Prince of the Netherlands". In 1815 he officially became king of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. This transformed the Netherlands into a monarchy, which it remains to this day. Liberation from the French and the instalment of King William I led to an unprecedented wave of Orangist sentiment.[16] In their celebrations of the

[13] "ô Vaderland, vertrapt met voeten ! Wat offers brengt gij Nassaus geest?" H. Tollens Cz.: Gedichten, Den Haag 1808, p. 129.
[14] In 2009, a new edition with an introduction and explanatory footnotes was published. J. F. Helmers: De Hollandsche natie, ed. Lotte Jensen, Nijmegen 2009.
[15] "Ja, eerste Willem! ja! 'k wil, bij uw graf gezeten, / Al 't geen mijn hart gevoelt mijn' tijdgenoot doen weten! / De traan, die ik hier wij' aan uw gedachtenis, / Is 't offer dat gij eischt, en uwer waardig is. / Verheven Vrijheidszucht! dit land als ingezworen, / Die door alle eeuwen heen alhier uw stem deedt hooren!" Ibid., p. 139.
[16] This Orangism, especially in the turbulent years spanning 1813 to 1815, took many different forms. Republican voices could also be heard, although they were in the minority. See: Wilfried UItterhoeve: Haagse bluf. De kor-

new king, authors frequently referred to the first "father of the fatherland", William of Orange. The poet Marten Westerman wrote in his hymn on the king that every breastfeeding mother had to sing her favourite song "Wilhelmus van Nassauwen".[17] Playwright Hendrik Kraijestein celebrated the glorious victory of William of Orange over the Spanish in 1576 in the historical play "De watergeuzen of het beleg en ontzet der stad Middelburg" (1815, "The Sea Beggars or the Siege and Relief of the City of Middelburg"). The piece ends with a prediction that the Netherlands will flourish and receive legitimate government.[18]

## The heyday of nationalism and the celebration of William of Orange

As in other countries, nationalism peaked in the Netherlands during the nineteenth century. This went hand in hand with a celebration of the national past. In the field of literature, this can be witnessed in the blossoming of genres such as historical theatre, the historical novel, and narrative poetry about the illustrious past. Besides literature, such artistic expressions as painting, sculpture, and historiographical writings were also used as instruments in nation building.[19] They provided the readers and listeners with a sense of belonging to a shared community. Through these media the readers were instilled with patriotic feelings, which included the celebration of King William I and his predecessors. This also required people to behave like virtuous Christians and show compassion to fellow countrymen in times of crisis. As mentioned earlier, Dutch nationhood could be summed up in a core motto: God, fatherland, and Orange.[20]

The celebration of William of Orange was reflected, amongst other things, in the erection of two statues in The Hague. The first shows the prince on horseback (Fig. 5) and was unveiled on 17 November 1845 in the presence of the royal family and numerous dignitaries. The date chosen was symbolic, as on 17 November 1813 a proclamation was spread that announced the defeat of the French and the return of the Nassau family to Dutch soil. On this occasion, Professor Abraham des Amorie van der Hoeven held a speech in which he commemorated the deeds of William of Orange. The second statue (Fig. 6) was also unveiled on a symbolic date: 5 June 1848, exactly two hundred years af-

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te chaos van de vrijwording, Nijmegen 2013; and Lotte Jensen: Napoleon's Hundred Days and the Shaping of a Dutch Identity, in: Napoleon's Hundred Days and the Politics of Legitimacy, ed. Kate Astbury/Mark Philp, Basingstoke 2018, p. 125–142.

[17] Marten Westerman: De verheffing van Willem den Eersten, prins van Oranje-Nassau, tot koning der Nederlanden, Amsterdam 2005, p. 7.

[18] Hendrik Kraijestein: De watergeuzen of het beleg en ontzet der stad Middelburg, Middelburg 1815, p. 80.

[19] On this celebration of the national past, see: Marita Mathijsen: Historiezucht. De obsessie met het verleden in de negentiende eeuw, Nijmegen 2013.

[20] On popular Orangism, see: Oranje onder. Populair orangisme van Willem van Oranje tot nu, ed. H. te Velde/D. Haks, Amsterdam 2014.


Fig. 5: Émile de Nieuwerkerke, statue of William of Orange, Noordeinde Den Haag, 1845 (Wikimedia Commons, Eveleens).


Fig. 6: Louis Royer, statue of William of Orange in Den Haag, 1848 (Wikimedia Commons, Donar Reiskoffer).

Fig. 7: Anonymous print of Prince Maurice at the dead body of Prince William of Orange, 1584, after the design of Jan Adam Kruseman (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, https://id.rijksmuseum.nl/200449533, 20.1.2025).

ter the establishment of the Peace of Münster. The ceremony was accompanied by music and speeches about the historical significance of William of Orange.

Painters such as Matthijs van Bree, Reinier Craeyvanger, Jan Adam Kruseman, and Woutherus Mol also added to the fame of William of Orange with their large historical canvasses. Especially the attempt on his life and his deathbed were favourite subjects. In 1846 Kruseman painted him full-length, just after the attack by Balthasar Gerards, at the moment he uttered his last famous words: "My God! My God! Have mercy on me and on your poor people" (Fig. 7).[21] The murder and death scenes were also disseminated via prints and illustrations, adding further to their iconic status.

The celebration of William of Orange reached a peak in the mid-nineteenth century, when he became a symbol of national unity and resilience.[22] His fame also grew thanks to a new genre entering the market: historical children's books. Amongst the authors of such works were many schoolteachers, who saw this as an ideal way to increase knowledge of the past. However, their representation was far from neutral, and instead

[21] "Mijn God! Mijn God! Erbarm U over mij en over Uw arm volk". The historical paintings are described in the catalogue Het Vaderlandsch Gevoel. Vergeten negentiende-eeuwse schilderijen over onze Geschiedenis, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Amsterdam 1978, p. 108–126, at p. 121.

[22] Henk Slechte: Niederlande. "Durch eigene holländische Kunst angeregt, fühle ich, daß ich Holländer bin", in: Mythen der Nationen. Ein europäisches Panorama, ed. Monika Flacke, München/Berlin 1998, p. 223–247, at p. 235–238.

aimed to propagate patriotism and Orangism. One of their favourite topics, for example, was the siege and relief of Leiden (1573–1574). Both the Prince William of Orange and Mayor of Leiden Pieter van der Werff played heroic roles. The first is portrayed as the mastermind behind the uprising, the latter offers his arm to eat to the starving people of Leiden. There is also a little orphan boy named Cornelis Joppenszoon, who finds a cooking pot full with "hutspot" (potatoes with carrots and onions), left behind by the Spaniards who have to escape from the city. The food is warmly welcomed by the hungry citizens of Leiden. The story is told in many different ways, but the heroic role of Prince William of Orange is one of the recurrent motifs.[23]

Fig. 8: The nation's gift to King William III for his efforts during the flood of 1861: an Authorised Dutch Bible (photograph: Marianne Eekhout).

Many more examples of the glorification of William of Orange could be added, but we restrict ourselves to one final and lesser-known example. The name of the prince also resonated during the flood of 1861. This hit the so-called "Land of Maas en Waal" (a region in the province of Gelderland located between the rivers Meuse and Waal). On 5 January of that year a dike in the Bommelerwaard gave way to the pressure of the increased water, and swept twenty-three houses away. At the end of January, floating ice caused other dikes to break as well. The small village of Leeuwen was particularly affected and all of its thirty-seven inhabitants drowned. The national impact and press coverage were enormous: every Dutch newspaper wrote about the tragedy and people went to great lengths to collect money and goods for the survivors. [24]

Although the king was known for his intimidating and sometimes even violent behaviour and lacked popularity amongst the Dutch people, during the floods of 1861 he rose to the occasion.[25] Together with his brother, Prince Hendrik, he visited the stricken area, donated large sums of money, and sent goods to the victims. Poets lauded his

[23] Lotte Jensen: De les van leeuwtje. Kinderboeken over het beleg en ontzet van Leiden, Leiden 2013.
[24] On nineteenth-century Dutch disasters and nation building, see: Fons Meijer: Verbonden door rampspoed. Rampen en natievorming in negentiende-eeuws Nederland, Hilversum 2021.
[25] See the biography by Dik van der Meulen: Koning Willem III, 1817–1890, Amsterdam 2013.

actions and the Dutch people thanked him by offering him an Authorised Dutch Bible with lectern (Fig. 8). This expensive bible was designed on behalf of 55,000 donors and presented to the king on 22 March 1862. Before that, is was put on public display in a number of large cities, such as Utrecht, Rotterdam, Leiden, and Amsterdam. Thousands of visitors came to admire the silver cover on which memorable moments in the nation's history were depicted, such as the murder of William of Orange in 1584. The bible's design made clear that King William III operated strictly within the tradition of his ancestors, who showed courage in times of crisis as well.[26]


Fig. 9: "Flood Disaster Wilhelmus" (Watersnood-Wilhelmus) with a portrait of King William III (Leiden University Library, https://catalogue.leidenuniv.nl/permalink/31UKB_LEU/18s393l/alma9939398455602711, 20.1.2025).

Another, rather amazing token of gratitude was the large Flood Festival, held on 18 February 1881. A committee of Amsterdam well-to-do citizens wanted to raise money for the victims of the flood that occurred on 31 December 1880 in Nieuwkuijk in Brabant. They planned an impressive festival with food, drinks, and entertainment in the Palace of Industry. At midnight they celebrated the birthday of the king with a performance of a very special version of the national anthem, the "Flood Disaster Wilhelmus" (Fig. 9), in which William III, the "Flood King", was eulogised:

> "Wilhelmus of Nassau, scion
> Of Dutch descent and line,
> I pledge my faith undying
> To this Waterland of mine.
> A prince with full devotion
> Of Orange here I stand,
> For pools as big as oceans
> I've annexed to my land. [...]

[26] For more details, see: Lotte Jensen: Water: A Dutch Cultural History, Nijmegen 2024, p. 116–121.

Wilhelmus is emerging
As prince of land and sea,
Where Triton once was surging
He claims his mastery;
His people proudly leading,
Fears neither storm nor wave,
The floods their power ceding
To the water lion brave."[27]

In this "Flood Disaster Wilhelmus", the memory of William of Orange also resonates. By replacing his name with that of William III, it was suggested that he was just as much a founder of the fatherland, as was his sixteenth-century forefather.

## A unifying symbol: Present-day appropriation

In the twentieth and now the twenty-first century, William of Orange remains a symbol of unity in the Netherlands. Even if historians question the dominant Orangist representation of the nation's history and plead for more attention for the States Party, the Patriot era, and the first constitution of 1798,[28] it remains clear that the story of the birth of the Netherlands cannot be told without referring to the role of the first stadtholder.

However, the glorification of William of Orange is always subject to appropriation, especially in the public domain. Those looking for facts should read the well-balanced biography published in 2022 by René van Stipriaan.[29] It is, however, more likely that the broader audience will remember the way in which William of Orange was portrayed in one of the popular television series about the nation's history broadcast in recent years. He will also be the subject of a great musical theatre spectacle that is planned for the Autumn of 2025. The show will accommodate an audience of 1,250 people at a time, seven days a week, and is meant, according to investor Arthur Oudshoorn, "to make people aware of our Dutch background and why we are the Dutch people we now are. We can

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[27] "Wilhelmus van Nassauwe / Ben ick van Dietschen bloet, / Den Waterlant ghetrouwe / Blijf ick tot in den doedt. / Oranjevorst met eere / Ben ick vrij onverveert, / Want plassen groot als meiren / Heb ik geannexeert. […] Wilhelmus sal verschijnen, / Als lant- en watervorst, / En swemt aen 't hoofd der sijnen, / Waer Triton komen dorst; / Den waterleeuwe-heere, / Gheen storm of vloet geneert, / Daer golven obedieeren / Aen 't quispelen van sijn steert." With thanks to Francien van den Heuvel for bringing this song to my attention. The text can be found in the Catholic Documentation Centre in Nijmegen (Archives of the Alberdingk Thijm family, no. 4727) and was also printed in the Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche Courant, 24.2.1881. The author is unknown. The English translation is by Nancy Forest-Flier.

[28] See for instance the many works by Joost Rosendaal and his edition of Staatsregeling voor het Bataafsche Volk 1798. De eerste grondwet van Nederland, Nijmegen 2005.

[29] René van Stipriaan: Willem de Zwijger. Het leven van Willem van Oranje, Amsterdam/Antwerpen 2022.

witness much polarisation nowadays, and I see this musical as a unifying force for many people."[30] One of the initiators of the show, Jurjen van der Honing, adds that William of Orange brought the Dutch people tolerance, freedom of speech, and respect for each other's culture. "These are the core values which William of Orange held in high esteem and which we are still known for – it is part of our DNA."[31] This quote clearly illustrates how firmly rooted this image of William of Orange still is, as if completely detached from any political reality.

[30] "Ik vind het belangrijk dat mensen bewust gemaakt worden van onze Nederlandse achtergrond en waarom we de Nederlanders zijn die we nu zijn. We zien tegenwoordig veel polarisatie en ik zie deze musical als een mooie verbindende factor voor veel mensen." Leonie Kapiteyn: Rijke ondernemer redt Musical Willem van Oranje, in: Algemeen Dagblad, 28.6.2024, https://www.ad.nl/delft/rijke-ondernemer-redt-musical-willem-van-oranje-zijn-verhaal-is-belangrijk-in-tijden-van-polarisatie (29.8.2024).

[31] "Tolerantie, vrijheid van meningsuiting, respect voor elkaars cultuur, dat waren kernwaarden die Willem van Oranje hoog in het vaandel had. Dat zijn nog steeds de kernwaarden waar wij als Nederlanders veelal om bekendstaan. Het zit in ons dna." Ibid.