

*Erasmus on the Dutch, ca. 1500*

Introduction: Desiderus Erasmus (1469-1536) remains the most famous Dutch writer and the outstanding Northern Humanist. He was born and Educated in Holland but he lived most of his life abroad. He remained a Dutchmen at heart, as the passage from his *Adages*, first published in Paris in 1500, suggests. The excerpt below is from Margaret Mann Ohillips, *The "Agaes" of Erasmus: A Study with Translations* (Cambridge, 1964), in Herbert T. Rowen, ed., *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 2-3..

The Batavi were a German tribe, part of the Catti, who migrated owing to internal dissensions and occupied the extreme tip of the coast of Gaul, then unoccupied, and also at the same time an island situated between two stretches of water, washed by the ocean in front and by the river Rhine at the back and sides. As a people they were strong fighters, with much experience in the Germanic wars, but also powerful through their wealth, so that the Roman military power could not be exhausted while these people were allies of the Empire and contributed to it both arms and men; how generously, Cornelius Tacitus tells us in his book xx. Most scholars agree, and the guess seems uncontradicted, that this island mentioned by Tacitus is what we now call Holland, a country I must always praise and venerate, since to her I owe my life's beginning. And I would that I could bring as much honor to her, as I have little regret in being her son! For as to that accusation of boorishness which Martial levels against her, and Lucan's charge of savagery, I think that either they have nothing to do with us at all, or both can be turned into praise. For which people has not been uncultured at one time? And when was the Roman people more praiseworthy than when they knew no arts except farming and fighting? If anyone argues that the criticisms levelled at the Batavi long ago still hold good today, what better tribute could be paid to my dear Holland, than to have it said that she recoils from Martial's pleasantries, which he himself calls vile? If only all Christians had "Dutch ears", so that they would not take in the pestilential jests of that poet, or at least not be infected by them, if understood. If you call that rusticity, we freely admit the impeachment, in company with the virtuous Spartans, the primitive Sabines, the noble Catos. But Lucan, I imagine, calls the Batavi "savage" much as Virgil calls the Romans "sharp" (acer) .

If you look at the manners of everyday life, there is no race more open to humanity and

kindness, or less given to wildness or ferocious behavior. It is a straightforward nature, without treachery or deceit, and not prone to any serious vices, except that it is a little given to pleasure, especially of feasting. The reason for this is, I think, the wonderful supply of everything which can tempt one to enjoyment; due partly to the ease of importing goods (since the country stands at the mouth of two noble rivers, the Rhine and the Meuse, and is washed on one side by the sea), and partly to the native fertility of the region, intersected as it is by navigable rivers full of fish, and abounding in rich pastures. And there is a plentiful supply of birds from the marshes and heaths. They say that there is no country which holds so many towns in a small space, not large towns it is true, but incredibly civilized. As for domestic furniture, Holland is unsurpassed in neatness and elegance-or so say those merchants who travel over most of the globe. In no country are there more people who have a tincture of learning than in Holland. If there are few deeply learned scholars, especially in the classics, this may be due to the luxury of life there, or it may be that they think more of moral excellence than of excellence in scholarship. For it is certain, and many things go to prove it, that they are not wanting in intellectual power, though I myself have it only in a modest degree, not to say scanty-like the rest of my endowments.