

*Prince William II's attempted coup d'état in Holland as seen by an English spy, 1650*

Introduction: After the Peace of Münster in 1648, Prince William II of Orange secretly attempted to continue the war with Spain with the help of France and to initiate a war with Cromwell's England, which had just executed his father-in-law, Charles I. Meanwhile the province of Holland sought to reduce naval tensions with England over trade and fishing disputes by an offer to reduce the size of the Republic's army. In the spring of 1650, Prince William II convinced the States General to send him with a delegation to the cities of Holland to try to convince them to change their vote for peace in Holland's provincial assembly. This maneuver was roundly denounced by Holland as an unprecedented attack on the constitution and on the sovereignty of Holland. William's effort was not welcomed by Holland's cities. On June 30, William arrested the representatives of Holland's cities, which had rejected his overtures, at the government buildings in The Hague. At the same time, he dispatched a military force to Amsterdam. When his attack plans failed, William compromised. He released the representatives he had taken prisoner and Amsterdam agreed to replace some of the magistrates who had opposed him. William's death of smallpox in November of 1650 removed the immediate threat of a fundamental alteration of the Republic's constitution and convinced the Republican faction to attempt to permanently exclude the Princes of Orange from the office of stadholder.

The documents below are a letters describing the events of 1650 by an English spy in the entourage of the exiled Stuart king, Charles II, to the government in England. England feared that William II would attempt to restore the Stuart monarchy in England. The documents also demonstrate the growing tensions about trade and fishing between revolutionary England and the Dutch Republic. The following text (the erratic spelling in the original has not been changed) is from P. Geyl, 'Een Engelsch Republikein over Willem II's Staatgreep in 1650,' *Bijdragen en Medeellngen van het Historisch Genootschap*, XLV (1924): 78-87.

Leyden, 4 August. 1650. Stilo novo.

Sir,

This week hath happened in these parts a very strange attempt of the Prince of Orange, which in all probability will produce a very great revolution and catastrophe of affairs in these countreys; if the Provinces be not blinded, but that they take the advantages that God hath hereby put into their hands, for the recovery of their true Liberty, of which for a long time they have enjoyed onely a shadow, and have pleased themselves with an empty name, which they may now make real, if they please, and cast off the yoke of their servant. He hath handsomly trodden in his Father in Law's steps, and it is not hard to see his end is beginning. I will onely give you what has passed here at the Hague, and for that at Amsterdam, leave you to the Relations that I doubt not you will have thence from many hands.

Here the business passed in this manner: Upon Saturday the 30 of July, new stile, at six of the clock, in the morning, the company of the Guard of the Prince of Orange were commanded by beat of drum to take Arms and march into the fields about Schevening, where three Butts were set up, as if they should there shoot for a wager: This only served to put off suspicion. About nine of the clock six Lords and Members of the States of Holland, were severally sent for by Messengers, to come to the court to speak with the Prince, not one of them knowing of the other; being come, they were arrested by the Lieutenant of his Guards, and conducted each to a several chamber; all which was done very privately, and was so kept till eleven of the clock. When the Guard came back -- having not been in exercise -- and was placed in the yard of the court, they disbanded not as is usual at other times, but remained in three Squadrons at the three Gates: About twelve of the clock came two other companies from Delph {Delft}, two from Rotterdam, and one from Schiedam. The other States of Holland being in the mean time assembled, expecting each one of his colleague(!), and thought they had been with the Prince onely about some business as they had been informed. By this time the fact was discovered, and a very great concourse of people in the streets and all places about the court. But by reason of those five companies placed round about, that none could stir, though there was much murmuring and discontent appeared. The night following a Troop of 100 Horse came into the Park here at the Hague, by whom, and by fifty Muskettiers of the Guard, those six seized Members were convoyed, being carried in two coaches of the Prince of Orange, to the castle of Lovenstein, which stands at the confluence of the Maes and the Wahl near to Gorcum. This being done, the Prince certified the States General of it, who did nothing thereupon, but the Courts of Justice were otherwise affected with it: It is said they went to the Prince, and remonstrated the foulness and danger of the fact, and commanding their release, as I was told by some that knowit1).

But that afternoon the Prince went towards Amsterdam with a great train of Courtiers, whither he had before sent Grave William of Nassaw, Governor of Friezland with eight or nine thousand Horse and Foot, and all was done with such speed and secrecy, that he had without question surprized the Town, had not the Providence of God, by sending a great Rain and Darkness, so retarded the Soldier's march, that they could not get thither so soon as they had

appointed, which was to have been just at the opening of the Gates; which if they had done, that rich Town had been spoiled, and an infinite Treasure had come into his hands; whereby he would have repaired his own sinking state, settled his Tyranny over these people, and made them to bear that yoke which they have so tamely received from the hands of his Father and himself, although his Uncle laid the foundation of it in the blood of Barnevelt, that faithful Advocate of Holland, who out of his great wisdom, foresaw to what the Orange Tree would grow, and endeavored then to apply that Remedy which they were glad at last to use, though he was not able to bring it about, but must die as a Traytor, and the mercenary Priests proclaim him for an Heretique; his worst opinion being, that these people ought still to be free, and his worst action was, that he endeavored it: Besides, our Nation may see how the Providence of God hath watched over us in this disappointment of him, who is a most inveterate and irreconcilable enemy of our Nation; for had he obtained the money of the Bank at Amsterdam, he would have given great supplies to the King of Scotland [Charles II] against us.

But I hope these people will see how neer they were to the brink of danger, and put him into an incapacity of doing the like again: And indeed I perceive there is a general discontent amongst them, and it will never be made up again. He will now either make an absolute conquest of them, or they must otherwise dispose of him: The thing is yet but new, I cannot give more particulars about it; what was done at Amsterdam, you will hear thence; this is that I could learn at the Hague, whether several of us went for curiosity sake, to learn what we could of so strange an attempt. By my next you shall have more, it is Post time, and I cannot enlarge.

Leiden, Septem. 9. 1650. Stylo novo.

I have not latelie put you to the trouble of my Letters, there beeing not much worth your knowing, since the miserable base business of Amsterdam, whereby hath been discovered the baseness of some Provinces, and the weakness of other, and by both their ripeness for slaverie, and readiness to succumb. Certainly that gallant spirit which possest those people when they bravely -- to their hitherto lasting honor --vindicated that libertie from the oppressions of the most potent Prince of Europe, which they have now tamely given up into the hands of their own servants, hath made a transmigration into our Nation. I could wish their industrious genius would transmigrate, also, purified in the passage from its mixture of *fas et ne fas*; I would then believe

that by the gallantrie and industrie of our people improving the fertilitie, and situation of England and Ireland, this Republique, which begins already to give some apprehensions abroad, would speedilie become very considerable. Onely at present, they at the Hague, where I was three dayes since, comming thither from Rotterdam, bear up themselves that your Armie in Scotland [Cromwell's forces] will bee beaten to peeces -- of which I have no great apprehension -- and Macdonnel, the Scots' Ambassador, gives it out, that they are already beaten; but onely their own partie believ's it, the rest judge a Scottish storie, they are known to lose nothing they can get by boasting and lying. But if God shall send you good success there, you wil see these people less active against you, than now they seem ready to bee. This you may assure your selvs, the States General, beeing all at the Prince of Orange his devotion, are perfectly your Enemies upon that account against the clear interest of the United Provinces in respect of Trade, and Zealand more bitter than anie; but you need not care for their enmitie, you have an easie way to bring them to reason, they can no more live without you, than without the air, and that some of the wisest of them have acknowledged to mee.

And certainly you ought not longer to suffer them to walk in the clouds, but to declare what they act. Forbidding them your Ports one year would ruine their Trades, forbidding their fishing upon your Coast, or putting them to fight for what they take would root up their trade by the foundation. Certainly they are your real Enemies, you ought not to let them injoie the privilege of friends so much to your own detriment, while they not onely employ your favors to the ruine of your Trade, but acknowledge your Enemie by receiving this Macdonnel [the Scottish ambassador to the Republic], a fellow quite out of sorts, and wanting the furniture of Thistleflowers, as the Ambassador of a King of Great Britain, while they refused to receive your publick Minister sent from the Commonwealth [revolutionary England].

There are very manie of the Province of Holland that mislike these things, and fear you wil, when you see it proper for you to remember them to their disadvantag but cannot help it. The Articles of union of Utrecht tie's up Holland from treating, and they see that the Armie which they pay, and all their Garrisons are at the dispose of their saucie servant [William II] who went over Rubicon at Amsterdam, and seized their nominal libertie into his own hands, and hath an Armie to keep himself Master at their Charge. And indeed they seem beyond hope of recoverie

by anie strength of their own, onely there seems to bee a Providence moving to the extirpation of Tyrannie, under the power of which hee is likelie to fall in due time; but for present hee is complimented by the other Provinces for taking this pains of making them slaves. 'T was don by extraordinarie Deputies from his Creatures of Zeland. They of Gheldre [Gelderland] did it in a bodie at Dieren, they of Freisland by a letter, which was taken for a slight; and they say there were manie in that Province who were whollie against giving him anie thanks; but in the mean time, hee hath them fast. They that see through things, and know that the Prince of Orange had higher speculations than those hee yet practised, and think they will break out in time, they wish verie well to your affairs in Scotland, for if they should bee adverse, hee would bee able to procure the States General to declare a War; the burthen and loss whereof would fall more upon others, than themselves. The Ministers are also much more your enemies here, as well as there, and flatter the Prince of Orange in all this. And hee, knowing how profitable it is for him to have an Orator in everie Church to lead the people by the ears, to serve him in his interest, he gratifies them upon al occasions with what is in his power, either by donation or intercession, knowing well that in that waie of Tyrannie hee intends to go they cann prejudice him, but hee can take them off by an Act of power whensoever hee pleas, though they were as manie as the Citie of Amsterdam. Meantime notwithstanding his personal debaucheries, they crie him up the best Prince for Religion that ever they had; and for their Religion, which is near a kin in practice to that of Scotland, hee must soon bee so, it beeing nothing else but a meer outside formalitie. The States General have resolved to offer their mediation for peace between France and Spain. I hear they will send a denunciation to Spain that they cannot endure to see France fall in pieces, but that is not so near yet. But 'tis like enough Orange has some design against Spain, beeing troubled that Spain hath not yet satisfied him according the agreement at Munster, and tis like hee will do anie thing that maie distaste the States of Holland, who were so much for that peace.

Leiden, Octob. Styl. vet. (1650).

I write not everie week becaus everie week affords not matter worth the trouble, besides the knowledge of affairs is best had at the Hague, whether I can not go everie week for it. That which I have now to tell you, is that MacDowel the King of Scotland Resident is, and hath been

a good while, with the Duke of Oldenburgh, a Lutheran Prince. Hee live's near Wesel and is esteemed verie rich. His errand thither is to borrow ten thousand pounds for the Scottish King, but there is no great likli hood of obteining it. Your successes in Scotland hath spoil'd the credit. Hee hath not got his Estate by lending to Princes, nor for it; tis like hee will do by his monie, as hee did last year by Ships when desired by Montross: hee excused it upon the report of the great fleet you last year set out. When he hath don with Oldenburgh, hee is to go to Hamburg; Where perhaps hee may get something, for they are perfectly your enemies, notwithstanding the advantage they have by your trade. Bee not deceived by their profession of Neutralitie, for they are your enemies and that you will findewhenver they have an opportunitie. But the remedie is easie when ever you will, for they are most inconsiderable. If you do but etc.

Thence is hee to go for Denmark. There, as everie where, dispositions to do you mischief, but means are not everie where readie. For even Denmark fails of hisaccount, his treatie with the Hollanders about the Customs of the Sounds meets with so manie obstructions, as tis thought it will com to nothing, and thereby he remain unfurnished of those great summes, which should have been paid him by these Countries. And indeed tis certain that monie is wanting here, and that it is so far off that the Scots King should bee hence suppli'd, that they meet with verie great difficulties to furnish their own occasions: Take this instance: The Council of State --at the Hague -- lately autorized their Receiver to borrow 200.000 Livers to carrie out the business of Brazil. They seeking a revenue out of which to paie the Interest, do finde som difficultie about it, and are unwilling to finde anie for their own most pressing occasions. I was certainly informed -- being at the Hague -- that the Council of State there sitting about the affairs of Brazil, some officers and souldiers imploied in the West Indies did in a verie high and mutinous manner press the said Council, so as they were much troubled and went away at a back door.

Indeed things look here with a very strange face, all men in sollicitude of events; the late extravagant actions of Orange have made men see their danger. But they do not so easily see a defence against his Tyrannie. By what he hath don, they see what thee can do when hee pleas, and they have no ground to be secure upon the hopes of his good Nature. And I see no great reason from experience, why they should think their own courages a sufficient fortification. They of Amsterdam see their Error, but are like enough to commit the like, though they are in

preparation to give better entertainment to those guests, if they should com again on the sudden uninvited. Certainly things avery ill here, very superficially slubbered up, and will doubtless break out again; But the advantage will fall on that partie that shall best time their affairs. I have sent you herewith four Pamphlets in Dutch, being Dialogues under the Names of some of the several Provinces; by them you wil see what spirit is stirring here; But in the meantime monies are drawn awaie from hence, the Banks begin to sink, a clear evidence time monies are drawn awaie from hence, the Banks begin to sink, a clear evidence their own general opinion of their insecuritie. And som that pretend to bee skilful inspeculations not vulgar, do threaten these Countries with som ill events impending. I forbear what follows.

But to return to the Books I spake of: The matter of them is the high Actings of Orange and the danger of them; And to assert the supreme power of each Province remain in the Province, and not in the States General by the union of Utrecht. And that therefore neither the States General nor Orange can justifie the late force against Amsterdam, for that hee cannot justifie the going into the field against an Enemie, but by the consent of the particular Provinces; All that I can hear anie of his saie in defence, is that if anie Province will not paie their quota the rest may compel them, and perhaps hee think's to justifie himself upon this account. Hee is now gon into Zutphin a Town in Gelderland to get those his proceedings justified.

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