

*The Low Countries as seen by an Italian in 1567*

Introduction: Lodovico Guicciardini (1521-1589) was an Italian from Florence who resided in Antwerp. The excerpt below is from his *Description of All the Low Countries*, first published in 1567. The translation below by Donald Weinstein is from the 1581 edition and selected by Herbert T. Rowen, ed., *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York, 1972), pp. 2-11.

By our estimate the Low Countries altogether have a circumference a little more than a fifth as long as Italy's, that is, about a thousand Italian miles or 340 Flemish leagues. . . . This country is composed of seventeen provinces . . . in which there are 208 walled places. About 150 of these are places whose favorable circumstances have gained for them the quality of walled or privileged towns, as they are called; and there are more than 6,300 villages with belfries. There are not many other lesser villages but innumerable manors where the administration of civil and criminal justice is held by a prince, lord, or gentleman. In all, there are 60 fortresses or strongholds in the country under royal governors, with garrisons varying in strength according to their situation and circumstances. Although the air of the country is humid and heavy, it is nonetheless salubrious and good for the digestion, and above all generative (as Caesar declares more than once). But it is generally believed that the air has become more healthful and moderate during the past 25 or 30 years, either because there are more homes and inhabitants who purge it in various ways (as is done at Venice), or for some other, more significant reason. In fact, if the people of the country did not eat carelessly and neglect themselves when sick, they would ordinarily live to an old age and few would die young. This may be seen in the plain of Kempen in Brabant, where the country is naturally infertile and still the people live to a very old age thanks to abstemiousness and hard work. Summer is beautiful and delightful because the heat is usually not too severe and flies and gnats do not get in the nose very much, except in Zeeland, where there are far too many. There are few thunderstorms, and earthquakes are very rare because the humid climate and low ground are not conducive to them.

Winter is usually long and stormy. The weather is very cold and harsh when the North,

Greek, Levantine, and Sirocco winds are blowing, but when the four opposite winds blow, which is usually more than three quarters of the time (as Caesar also noted), the cold turns into rain.

The terrain is almost wholly flat. There are few hills and even fewer mountains, except in Luxemburg and Namur and some parts of Hainaut, which are quite hilly, as is the region of Liege. In many places the ground is very sandy, as in much of Flemish Flanders and in part of Brabant. Nonetheless the land is good and fertile everywhere, although better in some regions than others, and in many places it is very fertile, especially for cereals and grains, as in French Flanders, Artois, Hainaut, Liege and Gelderland, where they are produced in abundance. Many kinds of fruit are grown, especially pears, apples, plums, cherries, which are mentioned and praised as early as Pliny, purple grapes, peaches, apricots, walnuts, hazelnuts, medlars and, in some places, chestnuts. Except for many varieties of pears and apples which are excellent and are raised throughout the year, the fruits lack the fragrance and flavor that they possess in Italy, as there is not enough warm weather. It is very difficult to grow figs, almonds, and similar fruits because there is not enough hot weather, and olives, oranges, lemons, pomegranates, and other noble fruit of that kind are even harder to grow; but they are supplied in great abundance from Spain and Portugal by sea in every season. Many grapes of all varieties are to be found in the towns and villages, but very few in the countryside because the climate does not seem to be suitable for them either; however, modest amounts are grown around Louvain, Namur and Luxemburg, and wine is made from them, but in small quantities, and it is rather tart because the grapes do not ripen fully. However, now that the people devote themselves to agriculture more than before and are not so sparing of expense, it may be expected that many other places will produce wine. It has been tried several times with modest success at Brussels, Diest, and nearby Antwerp, and in several places in Germany, even at Cologne which has as much cold weather as most of this country. There are trees of all kinds and of good size and quality both for lumber and for fuel. There are not many bays, cypresses, pines, or fir; on the other hand there are great numbers of a tree they call the linden, the *Tiliae* of the Latins, which are similar in shape and foliage to the elm, but taller and of more rapid growth . . .

There is beautiful scenery in most of the countryside thanks to the frequency and regularity of the trees and plants which are seen virtually everywhere, as well as the many fine

meadows which are to be seen everywhere, full of every kind of cattle. Everyone agrees that their meadows are greener and more picturesque than ours; unless I am mistaken, this is due to the wetness of the low ground, which causes their pastures to give excellent fodder almost all year.

The country has domestic livestock in very great abundance for meat of every kind except buffalo. In Friesland and Holland the cattle are especially large, often indeed of extraordinary size; frequently they weigh more than 1,600 pounds local weight (that is, 16 ounces per pound, which makes more than 2,000 pounds in our weight). Indeed, one animal from Friesland which was presented as a gift at Malines to the' Count of Hoogstraeten was so large and fat that it weighed 2,528 pounds local weight. This was considered so remarkable that a life-size portrait of it was placed inside the gate of the count's palace, with the day and year of the presentation, and it can still be seen there today....

The country, especially Holland, Friesland, Gelderland, and Flanders, produces a great number of big horses, proud, handsome beasts excellent for every use, and especially good for warfare, so that in a battle of lances they have no equal in strength. However, except for most of the Flemish horses, they are a bit too heavy, especially in the head, and rather hard to manage.

The woolens of the country are somewhat coarse, inferior inequality to those of Spain and even more to those of England. One reason for this besides the climate is that the pastures here are so wet and nourishing that the animals grow coats which are too thick, long, and rough.

The country produces no salt, alum, or sulfur, except in the region of Liege; nor does it have any important minerals, so that it produces no metals of any kind except iron, some lead and a bit of copper. Nevertheless, what the country lacks in nature it makes up in the abilities of its people. . On every side, they see to it by their industry and diligence that they suffer no lack of anything; on the contrary, there is such an abundance of these materials as well as of everything else (as will be seen in the description of Antwerp) that the daily needs of various foreign countries are taken care of by this region.

The country produces such large quantities of madder, which here is called *garance*; that not only do they supply their own country but a large part of Europe as well. They also produce excellent woad, although in small amounts, and flax and hemp in great abundance.

## Description of Holland

Holland is a small country but full of great and memorable things. It has many fine towns and lovely villages, great men and women, excellent cattle, immense riches and power-but we shall describe it in detail. Holland lies in the island which in ancient times was called Batavia, from Bato, the son of the king of the Catti, a people who came from Germany, according to Cornelius Tacitus . . . Opinions vary as to how Holland got its modern name. Among those whose opinions are most widely accepted, some say that it was first called Houtland, which means "lumber country," since, according to them, the country was heavily wooded and was afterward called Holland, which sounded better. Others maintain (and I agree with them) that it is a name compounded of the two Teutonic words "hoI" and "lant," which really means "concave" or "hollow country," because in many places a traveler by cart or horseback can clearly see the ground shake like something bobbing on the water. An extraordinary occurrence which took place two years ago near Haarlem shows this very clearly. A cow grazing in a field more than half a league in length fell into a hole and was found dead three days later in the gulf which is nearby to the east. This means that the cow, having passed down through the earth into water, was carried by the water into the gulf, where it re-emerged. Although it seems strange and almost impossible that a country of such size rests on water, nevertheless it is very obvious that a part, if not all, has no other foundation but water (perhaps because the country is adjacent to water) and is supported by it. This is true of the whole region known as Waterland, that is, country of water, where the town of Monnikendam is located, and some other villages near Amsterdam. In Artois, near St. Omer, there is a very large lake (which I shall talk about in due course) in which there are various rather big bits of land which look like meadows and rise above the water, and on which cattle graze; and yet the lake has neither the size nor the volume of flow to sustain such a mass, as does the ocean. But these things are not at all contrary to nature, although they may seem so; every day, when wells and ditches are dug, it is seen that the earth rests on water and, what is more, that by the grace of God the water and earth rest on air. But let us see what Pliny writes in agreement with our opinion on this question of lands and islands with great forests perched and bobbing on top of water....

To the north and west of Holland is the sea; to the south are the Maas and Brabant; to the east lies in part the bay of the Zuider Zee and in part the province of Gelderland, so that it is truly the Batavian Peninsula and not an island, as many call it and believe it to be. It has the huge rivers Rhine and Maas which, in many branches and tributaries that bear other names, wash it in many places. Nevertheless, not content with these waterways, the inhabitants have supplemented nature with very great skill and labor; they have made so many canals and great ditches everywhere that one can travel by water as conveniently as by land between all the towns and almost all the important villages. It is a marshy country; it has many ponds and is full of ocean bays, while the ocean together with the branches of the Rhine forms many small islands, each with its own name but together called by one name, Holland, as was said above. The air, notwithstanding so much water and humidity, is healthy and pleasant by reason of the good breezes, the saltiness of the sea, and the great number of dwellings and inhabitants who purge it, as at Venice. The land is so low that almost all the rivers and major canals where the tide enters and carries materials with it are diked so as not to overflow the land. For this reason it is a wonderful thing to see the water so much higher than the ground in many places. And this country is so watery that generally one sees few trees and fewer fruit trees in the countryside. Nevertheless we read that in ancient times the country was full of woods and forests, as in the time of the emperors Diocletian and Maximianus; moreover, even now in those surrounding lands which have been recovered from or abandoned by the sea, great quantities of huge ancient trees are constantly being found everywhere beneath the ground. These are thought to have been torn up by storms when the ocean covered this country long after the time of Julius Caesar. I think that this happened in the terrible and gigantic storms and winds that occurred in the year 860, three years before Charles the Bald elevated this state to the level of a county (as will be recounted). The result, as it seems, was that the ground, remaining so low and covered by water most of the time, changed a great deal. Because of its low and damp ground, this country produces very little wheat or rye. Nevertheless it has such a great abundance of them that it supplies other provinces, for these grains are shipped here from many regions, especially from Denmark and the Baltic. The country does not produce wine and yet there is plenty of it, and more is drunk here in proportion to the number of people than in any region where wine is

produced. It is brought here from many places, especially from the Rhineland. Flax does not grow in this country and yet it produces more fine linen than any other region in the world, since it obtains flax from Flanders and a certain quantity from Liege and the Baltic, although this flax is not as fine. Holland does not produce wool and yet an enormous amount of woollen cloth, especially for ornamental purposes, is woven here from wool which it gets from England, Scotland, Spain, and a little from Brabant. It does not grow lumber and yet it builds more ships and dikes and other things made of wood than perhaps all the rest of Europe, importing it from the Baltic and elsewhere. The foundation of the country's fruitfulness lies in the pastureland for grazing and feeding cattle and the districts where herds are raised; there is livestock in abundance, especially horses, oxen, and cows. The horses are large and husky; while they are a bit heavy of head, they are still handsome and of good quality, especially for warfare. They get better all the time too, because efforts have been made for some time to improve the breed with Spanish cavalry horses and other light horses which are purchased for this purpose . . .

The oxen are handsome and huge, as are the cows, whose milk is made into so much cheese and butter that anyone who has not been here and seen it himself would never believe it. In truth the value of the cheese and butter production of Holland is correctly and accurately compared to the value of the spices that come into this country from Portugal, which, as already related in the description of Antwerp, amounts to more than a million in gold per year. Nor will this seem amazing to anyone who considers the following example. A single village of Holland called Assendelft, about a league from Beverwijk and two leagues from Haarlem, has four thousand cows which each year, taking winter and summer together, produce at least eight thousand "measures" of milk. The quantity of milk reportedly produced by four other villages, Oostzaan, Westzaan, Krommenie, and Krommeniedijk, not far from Assendelft, is so great that I dare not describe it. Indeed, a survey was made not long ago by some important people, among them Jan Benninck, a member of the Council of Holland, and it was found that the quantity of milk produced each year by these five villages, including Assendelft, was greater than the quantity of Rhine wine shipped to Dordrecht, the staple for the entire country, so that this is a marvelously huge amount. A great deal of butter and cheese is distributed, first to the adjacent regions which consume an extraordinary amount, and also to Germany, England, and Spain.

Similarly, the huge number of herds which are exported bring a great deal of money into the region. It is easy to calculate it from the export duty which is paid at Gouda, which amounts to more than three thousand ducats a year: Also, a tax of considerable size is paid which brings in more than a million, not counting what is collected on exports from other places as well as the vast quantity which is consumed within the land of Holland itself. The country exists principally upon its fishing and shipping, which are unceasing and extensive. These are the native arts of the Hollanders. Holland alone uses in fishing and shipping more than 800 good large sailing ships with from one to four or five sails, most with three, and from 200 to 700 tons burden. It has more than 600 other ships and boats which they call fishing busses, from 100 to 200 tons and over.

The circumference of the region of Holland proper is about 60 leagues. It is not so large that if a man were set down in any part of it, he could not reach the borders in six hours. Nevertheless it has 29 walled towns. These are Dordrecht, Haarlem, Delft, Leiden, Gouda, and Amsterdam, which are the six principal towns; then Enkhuizen, Hoorn, Alkmaar, Purmerend, Edam, Monnikendam, Weesp, Naarden, Woerden, Oudewater, Schoonhoven, Ijsselstein, Vianen, Leerdam, Asperen, Heuckelum, Gorinchem, Woudrichem, Heusden, Rotterdam, Schiedam and, the smallest, Geertruidenberg and Zevenbergen. In addition to these walled towns, it has various other smaller towns, as Medemblik, Beverwijk, Muiden, Nieuwpoort, Vlaardingen, and 's-Gravezande, which in former times were all walled but because of discord and civil dissensions or for other reasons have had their walls in great part or entirely dismantled. Nevertheless they retain their privileges and status, just as when they were walled. The country also has more than 400 villages, many of which, although not surrounded by walls, have exactly the same characteristics and privileges as the towns; this is particularly true of The Hague . . .

Outside this territory Holland has under its dominion various nearby islands, the most notable of which, beginning from the north, are Vlieland, Texel and Wieringen, the last being given this name from the plant called "wier" [seaweed], the plentiful supply of which is used to build and maintain many dikes. Toward the east, in the gulf of the Zuider Zee, it has Urk and Ens together with some villages. In the south, from the Merwede to the mouth of the Maas, it has the islands called Voorne, Goeree, and Sommelsdijk, which is also called Voorn, and Corendijk with Piershil.