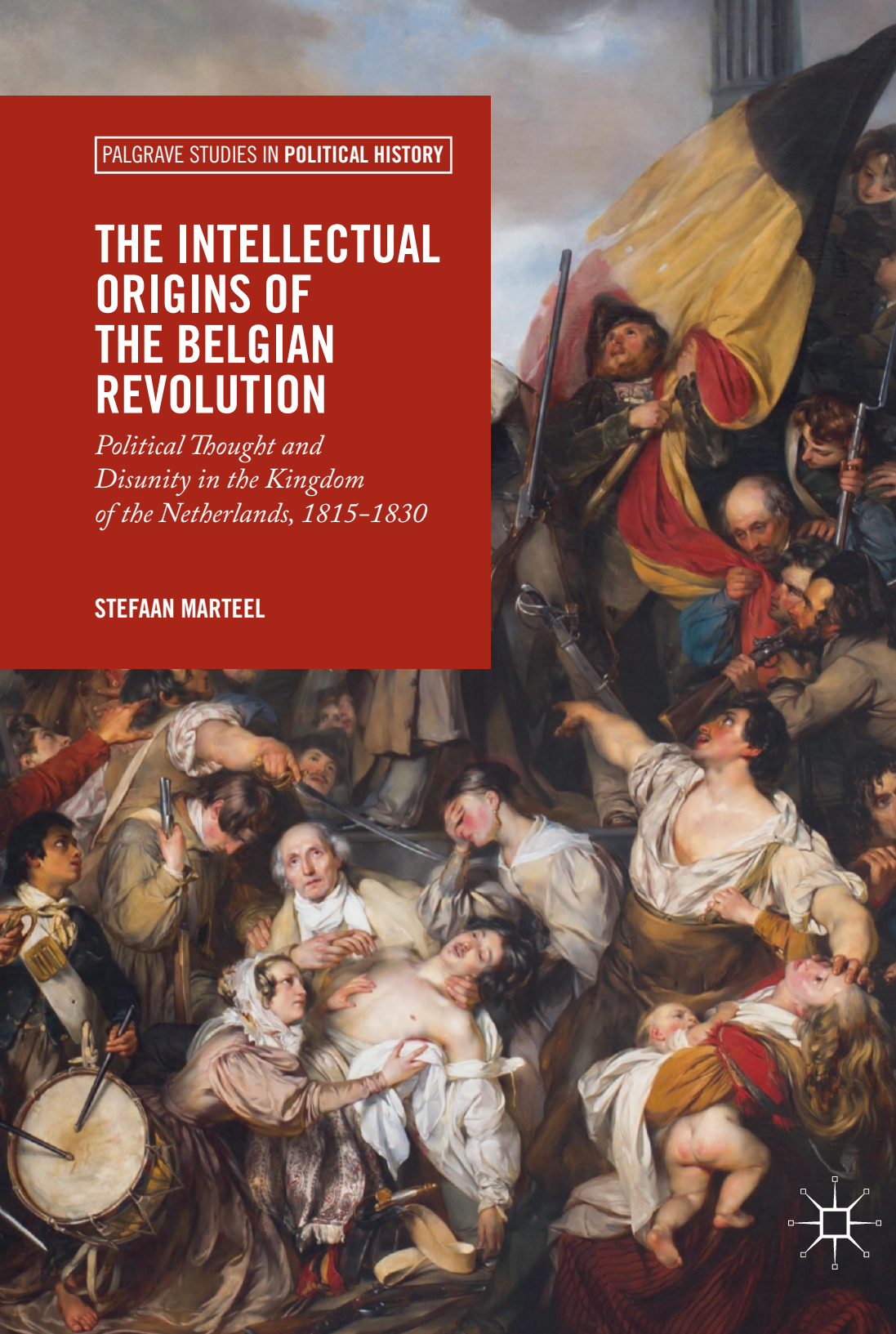


PALGRAVE STUDIES IN POLITICAL HISTORY

# THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF THE BELGIAN REVOLUTION

*Political Thought and  
Disunity in the Kingdom  
of the Netherlands, 1815-1830*

STEEFAAN MARTEEL



# Palgrave Studies in Political History

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# The Intellectual Origins of the Belgian Revolution

Political Thought and Disunity in the Kingdom  
of the Netherlands, 1815–1830

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In dedication to the memory of my father, Bernard Marteel (1939–2011).

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# Introduction

## 1.1 1830 IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

In recent years, the ‘United Kingdom’ of the Netherlands has attracted new interest in the context of the 200-year commemoration of the foundation of the state in 1815.<sup>1,2</sup> In 2015, two worthwhile volumes were published, with contributions by a considerable number of Belgian and Dutch historians with specialisations in different fields. In the first volume, titled *Belg en Bataaf*, the editors confront the ‘one-dimensional’ perspective that still prevails in the historical narrative about the establishment of the state that united what today are Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. According to this narrative, ‘the construction of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands came after the Congress of Vienna, which followed ... the Battle of Waterloo’ (Judo and van de Perre 2015, 8). Rather than understanding the origin of the kingdom as the result of abrupt changes, provoked by great leaders and great battles, the authors believed that it makes more sense to look at its

<sup>1</sup>For an overview of the different commemorative events that took place, both in Belgium and the Netherlands, and how they fitted into the contemporary political context, and of recent developments in the historiography of the period, see Witte (2016).

<sup>2</sup>The name ‘united kingdom’ (often capitalised, as in the present text) is commonly used for the Kingdom of the Netherlands as it existed between 1815 and 1830, uniting what are today Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. It was, however, never the official name of the state, nor was it used at the time of its existence.

birth from the perspective of gradual change and ‘synthesis’. It is the aim of the contributions to the collection therefore, to focus on how the old and new came together in this period of transition: how old structures were adapted to a new context, how differences between North and South were looked upon (Judo and van de Perre 2015, 8). In another volume published in the same year (*On*)*verenigd Koninkrijk*, the editors pointed out that in previous decades, regrettably, the overwhelming majority of studies on the period took either the Northern or Southern part of the kingdom as their object of study (Aerts and Deneckere 2015, 14–15).<sup>3</sup> This national orientation in political and social history constituted a departure from major integrative and comparative histories of the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s. This return to national history, Aerts and Deneckere pointed out, is at odds with current international trends in historical scholarship towards transnational approaches. Moreover, the United Kingdom, because of its multifaceted character, seems perfectly suited to studying how ideas, modes and patterns were transferred from one society to another.<sup>4</sup>

If historians of late wish to look at the Restoration kingdom of the Netherlands as more than the sum of two entities, this is closely related to the viewpoint that the eventual failure of the state was attributable to contingent factors, and was in no sense ‘inevitable’. The value of the contributions to the volumes is, in the words of the editors of one of them, that they focus on ‘the beginning of the experiment’ without ‘the final failure necessarily determining the plot’ (Aerts and Deneckere 2015, 18). For some time already, historians have moved away from a narrow nationalistic historiography that viewed the United Kingdom as an unnatural union of two clearly distinct peoples/nations. However, the respective (original) inspirations for this evolution have been very different in the Netherlands and Belgium.

<sup>3</sup>An exception has been the increasing number of studies among students of Dutch culture and literature on the impact of the cultural and language policy of the government of William I, primarily in the South. Important publications in that regard are Janssens and Steyaert (2007), Vosters and Weijermars (2011), Weijermars (2012).

<sup>4</sup>Apart from these two volumes, another volume has been published on the constitution of 1815 and its legacy (Alen et al. 2016) and in November 2016 a symposium and exposition were held by the *Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten* on ‘the world of scientists’ in the period of the United Kingdom.

Of primary importance in the Netherlands has been the influence of the so-called constructivist and modernist theories regarding nationalism, and more specifically the studies by Ernest Gellner and Reinhart Koselleck (Van Ginderachter 2009, 527). Dutch historians have argued that a broad Dutch national awareness developed in interaction with the revolutionary events at the end of the eighteenth century. After the transformation of the Netherlands into a centralised state during the Batavian Revolution (1795–1798), a process of normalisation and consolidation followed that is often described as the ‘nationalisation of the revolution’. In that context, from 1800 onwards, politically inspired patriotism was gradually replaced with a national sentiment that was, above all, ‘culturally’ defined and ‘carried by a new sense of (national) history’ (van Sas 2004, 86–87). From a similar perspective of seeing the advent of nationalism primarily in relation to a sequence of political events (revolution and reaction), Dutch historians generally do not attribute the failure of the nation-state project of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands to a pre-existing division in nationality, but look for contingent, political causes. A strong, mutually exclusive, Dutch and Belgian national awareness was therefore, in their eyes, more likely the result of the break-up into two states rather than at its origin (te Velde 1991; Aerts 2006; van Sas 2006). In Belgium, on the other hand, the revision of the predominant nationalist narrative of 1830 has primarily been the work of historians who take a social-historical approach rooted in academic Marxism. They have looked at the politics of the period 1815–1848 primarily from the perspective of social-economic transition, the destruction and the dismantling of the clerical and feudal structures of ‘the old regime’ and the construction of a liberal bourgeois state (Dhondt 1953, 1963; Witte 1973, 2006a, 2014). The Belgian Revolution of 1830 emerges here as the work of disgruntled middle classes that took to liberal ideas, and eventually revolutionary action, in their wish to see the state reformed in a way that would give them more political leverage.

In spite of the different historiographical contexts and theoretical influences, these Dutch and Belgian historians share a common interpretation of the events of 1830. An important recent textbook on the history of the Netherlands sums up the political crisis in the United Kingdom accordingly. It was ‘in origin a liberal crisis, aimed at the modernisation of the political system and potentially anticipating the liberal state’ (Roegiers and van Sas 1993, 254); a state, as historian Remieg Aerts paraphrased,

which ‘as a result of coincidental circumstances, between 1830 and 1839, was first established in independent Belgium, then in the Netherlands’ (Aerts and Deneckere 2015, 16). Moreover, historians have in recent years emphasised that in many fields there were tendencies towards convergence of the North and the South that have been disregarded. In the fields of culture and literature, initiatives were taken that effectively brought the North and the (Flemish) South closer to each other, even when they also sometimes had an alienating effect (Weijermars 2012). Els Witte supported in her recent book the thesis that large parts of the Southern elite, in all social areas, were before the revolution overall loyal to the government, and, above all, to the king (Witte 2014), even when they continued to distinguish themselves from the Northern elites.

However, the constructivist paradigm that has prevailed in recent decades has not remained uncontested. Especially in Belgium, a number of historians emphasise the importance of Belgian national sentiments in the political opposition in the South and insist the Belgian Revolution was a national revolution born out of feelings of injustice and discrimination by a Dutch-dominated government towards the Belgian provinces and the Belgian people. Based on the nationalism theory of Anthony D. Smith,<sup>5</sup> they argue that, in early modern times, the Southern, Habsburg-ruled Netherlands, on the one hand, and the Dutch Republic of the United Provinces, on the other, had developed into ‘proto-nations’, which were dominated respectively by a contra-reformatory, Catholic culture and a Germanic, Protestant one. Subsequently, the cultural, proto-national differences acquired a new dimension from the complete integration of the Southern Netherlands in the French Republic and later Empire from 1796 onwards, resulting in a more profound endorsement in political culture of the revolutionary concepts of popular sovereignty and individual liberties. Moreover, these historians recognise a continuity between the Brabant Revolution of 1789, in which Habsburg rule over the Southern Netherlands was overthrown and a short-lived confederal republic was established, and the Belgian Revolution of 1830. As the transformation of the Belgian proto-nation of the old regime into the

<sup>5</sup>Smith’s theories found a more popular reception in Belgium than those of Gellner and Koselleck. Maarten Van Ginderachter attributed the minor influence of Gellner in Belgium, compared to the Netherlands, to the fact that in Belgium research on nationalism developed primarily within the historiography of the Flemish Movement, inevitably focusing less on the state as primary actor (Van Ginderachter 2009, 527, 529).

modern nation-state is seen as the result of these two revolutions, 1830 and the failure of the United Kingdom established in 1815 emerge as much less ‘accidental’, that is, more ‘predictable’, than thought by other historians (Wils 1997, 1999; Stengers 2000; Dubois 2005).<sup>6</sup>

Cultural historians, on the other hand, have focused on the emergence of a national historical narrative in the second half of the eighteenth century, highlighting the common traits of the different regions and provinces rather than their differences (Verschaffel 1998, 89–98; Deseure 2014, 62–63). This new historical narrative also gave legitimacy to constitutional political views that were mobilised in opposition to the Austrian government (see later). Furthermore, historians who focus on the promotion of a Belgian national identity after the Belgian Revolution, through the creation of national art and monuments, folklore, national histories and so on, question the evaluation of Belgian patriotism during and after 1830 as a *creatio ex nihilo* (Verschaffel 1987; Tollebeek 1998). The emphasis on the authentic national character of 1830 was probably to some extent inspired by aversion towards an assertive Flemish-nationalist historiography that, predictably, insists on the ‘artificial’ character of the Belgian nation-state, created by francophone Belgians with the support of France and against the wish of the Flemish population (Van Ginderachter 2009, 529; Witte 2001, 184–187).<sup>7</sup> The search for the longer-term origins of the Belgian nation has often been criticized by (primarily Dutch) historians of the constructivist school as ‘crypto-nationalistic’ and in continuity with old school Belgian-patriotic historiography (Kossmann 1994, 63; van Sas 2006, 71–73; Van Ginderachter 2009, 528).

<sup>6</sup>Jean Stengers’ book was a re-elaboration of a fifty-year-old doctoral thesis, which was praised by its critics for its valuable semantic analysis of concepts such as Flemish, Belgian, Walloon, Dutch etc. (van Sas 2006, 72; Witte 2001). A recent doctoral study by American historian Jane Judge at the University of Edinburgh supports the view that the Brabant Revolution needs to be considered as a first manifestation of Belgian national consciousness: Judge (2016).

<sup>7</sup>This applies primarily to Flemish historian Lode Wils and francophone historian Jean Stengers. Lode Wils was in previous decades the major authority on the Flemish Movement and Flemish nationalism. His view that Belgian independence found support in a widespread Belgian national sentiment is a corollary of his thesis that the Flemish Movement in the nineteenth century remained until after the First World War loyal to Belgium, and that Flemish and Belgian national feelings were until then not in conflict with each other. This thesis has recently come under criticism from a younger generation of historians of nationalism (Van Ginderachter 2005, 2009, 529).

In spite of these rather intense historiographical debates, it is remarkable that no recent studies have been conducted into the ideology of the opposition movements in the Southern Netherlands, and the revolutionary movement that emerged from them. In the Netherlands, a number of new, innovative studies on the politics of the period have been published in recent years, but their focus has been almost exclusively on the Northern Netherlands (van Zanten 2004; Lok 2009). In Belgium, only a few preliminary, exploratory articles have been written on the language and politics of the opposition and revolution (Witte 2006b; Beyen 2015). Marnix Beyen has, on the basis of an analysis of the parliamentary discourse, pointed at the failure of the political class to express the positive convergences between North and South discursively (Beyen 2015, 149). But this still leaves the question of how a discourse expressing the wish of the ‘Belgian people’ to be independent and justifying this independence emerged from the political debates and arguments that preceded the revolution. Moreover, the evidence that in the North there was also an increasing political presence of liberal and constitutional ideas and opposition groups (van Sas 2004; van Zanten 2004), begs the question why the first real crisis of the kingdom developed in a Belgian-national revolution, and not in a reform of the political system along broadly shared liberal and constitutional principles. Now that we possess thorough studies on political discourse in the Northern Netherlands, we can make a comparative study between liberals and their ideas in the North and the South: what kind of liberalism and political Catholicism are we talking about? What were their intellectual sources? How did liberals in the North and the South look differently at the legitimacy of the new kingdom, on the constitutional model adopted in 1815, and on the role of the political opposition? What, finally, were the dynamics behind the radicalisation of the liberals and Catholics in the South into a (national-) revolutionary direction, and what held back the Northern liberals?

## 1.2 LIBERALISM AND CATHOLICISM: A TURN TO ‘TRANSFERS’ AND COMPARISON

In the last thirty years no thorough research has been conducted taking liberal political thought in the first half of the nineteenth century as its primary subject.<sup>8</sup> The classical thesis that has long survived is one of a

<sup>8</sup>Among the few publications that take as their subject the beginnings of liberalism in Belgium are Van Kalken (1926), Harsin (1930), Bartier (1975), Demoulin (1989).

dichotomy between the regime-abiding liberals of the early years of the Restoration and the liberals who towards the late 1820s formed a union with Catholics that would result in the national-revolutionary movement of 1830. In the early years of the kingdom, the liberals, although they adhered to French Jacobin-style republicanism, overall supported the government of William I, in spite of its authoritarian tendencies, because of its modernising policies, often taking aim at the social power of the Church, and out of a lingering fear of reactionary political forces. In later years, liberals belonging to a younger generation that did not have memories of the Ancien Régime were less willing to accept an authoritarian style of politics. They furthermore endorsed a kind of neoliberalism that sprang from Romantic, organic, less rationalistic conceptions of society, making them less averse to Catholicism and more prone to cultural nationalism (Dhondt 1976; Kossmann 1978; Witte 2016). Some studies have undermined this classical thesis, for example an exhaustive Dutch doctoral study on the subject of ministerial responsibility which thoroughly covered the debates in both the Southern and the Northern Netherlands (van Velzen 2005). The work gives a clear indication to what extent views on this particular issue differed in the North and the South from the very start. It also shows how mistrust and misunderstanding between political actors, the Dutch opinion press and the liberal press in the South created a dynamic that led, on the one hand, to radicalisation in the South and, on the other, a rallying around the government in the North. However, as the work remains focused on the long-term developments of the Northern Netherlands (beyond the separation of 1830), and takes a legal-historical approach, it does not explore how the different views related to broader differences in political culture and intellectual contexts.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to the question of intellectual transfers and the influence of foreign political thinkers on early liberal developments in the Southern Netherlands, a number of studies (van Velzen 2005; Lemmens 2011; Marteel 2007, 2011) have pointed to the crucial importance of French liberal thought, and especially of the works of the Swiss-French

<sup>9</sup>Another doctoral research project currently being conducted by Wim Lemmens of the Free University of Brussels on ‘journalistic networks, the spreading of liberal political theories and the construction of a liberal opinion in Belgium’ from 1815 to 1860, will go a long way to fill the lacuna with regard to early liberalism in Belgium. Preliminary publications are: Lemmens (2011, 2013).

author and politician Benjamin Constant. Simultaneously, in recent years an increasing number of studies have pointed to the continued influence of French liberalism on the constitutional debates following Belgian independence, as well as the later developments in liberal thought (de Dijn 2002; Smaele 2005; Delbecke 2012; Geenens and Sottiaux 2015; Deseure 2016). For these new developments in the understanding of the intellectual origins of Belgian liberalism, Belgian scholars are indebted to a proliferation in recent decades of intellectual-historical studies on French liberalism. In its early phase, French post-revolutionary liberalism is now understood in terms of the challenge it presented both to the French absolutist tradition and to revolutionary *légicentrisme*. In the latter, the state was generally regarded as the institutor of the society, and the individual (as well as his rights) as subordinate to the law. Stéphane Rials wrote in this regard of the ‘legicentric changeover [*basculement légicentriste*]’ of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 (Rials 1988, 352). French political debate moved on after the French Revolution, and rather than being concerned with ensuring that the people’s will could genuinely express itself, post-revolutionary theorists, as Marcel Gauchet pointed out (Gauchet 1995, 42–51), generally distrusted sovereignty and were primarily concerned with limiting the expression of the ‘will’. As Lucien Jaume pointed out, among the earliest liberals there was an aspiration ‘to reconcile sovereignty with liberty, authority with responsibility’, even when, generally speaking, the French political mind of the nineteenth century remained convinced that ‘every question concerning the general interest obligated an invocation of the State’ (Jaume 1997, 173, 185).<sup>10</sup>

Apart from the influence of contemporary (mainly) French political thinkers, journalists and pamphleteers in the Southern Netherlands also wrote within the context of a domestic political culture that was shaped by the political events of previous decades. On this point, the legacy of the so-called Brabant Revolution of 1789 against the Austrian-Habsburg Emperor Joseph II, which led to the establishment of a short-lived

<sup>10</sup>These French early liberals need to be distinguished from the slightly later, more conservative, movement of the French *Doctrinaires*, revolving around François Guizot and Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard. Renewed interest in them was sparked by Pierre Rosanvallon’s *Le moment Guizot* (1985) and they have also attracted a lot of attention from Anglo-American scholars (Siedentop 2012; Craiutu 2003a, b).

Belgian, confederal republic, needs to be addressed.<sup>11</sup> In older Belgian historiography, the Brabant Revolution has generally received a negative evaluation. The revolution originated out of a reaction against the enlightened reform agenda of Emperor Joseph II, and the resulting confederal republic, founded on old constitutions and medieval charters, lacked any democratic inspiration. In comparison with the American, Dutch and French revolutions, the Brabant Revolution was therefore considered as a ‘reactionary’ moment in the history of the nation, ‘a step back in time’ without much lasting historical importance. New intellectual-historical research on the origins of the eighteenth-century revolutions, however, has made clear to what extent the language of ancient constitutionalism structured political debates in most countries where revolutions occurred.<sup>12</sup> Since then, historians have revisited the Brabant Revolution as a moment of political innovation that is more comparable with the revolutionary events in other countries than initially thought. Johannes Koll has distinguished four types of patriotism in the Southern Netherlands of the late eighteenth century (dynastic-state patriotism, statist-corporatist patriotism, reform-patriotism and liberal-constitutional patriotism), which all had strong links with similar patriotic movements in other European countries (Koll 2003).

In a study of the political thought of the Brabant Revolution, Geert Van den Bossche demonstrated how the triumphant conservative or Statist party introduced a conception of the ‘*Rechtsstaat*’ in the political discourse. They ‘cancelled’ the authority of the ruling monarch and reduced his status to that of a private person, and invested supreme authority in the institution of a Constitutional Court (Van den Bossche 2001). Similar to the Orangists in the Dutch Republic around the same time, the Belgian Statists supported the notion of the nation as the sum of privileged and corporate groups. But the absence of a royalist narrative on the national past allowed the Statists to combine this understanding of the nation with the concept of popular sovereignty that was at the

<sup>11</sup>The new republic, heavily undermined by political instability and lacking international recognition, was abolished in the following year in the wake of a returned Austrian army and restoration of the Habsburg government. It was to become a historical point of reference for nineteenth-century Belgian nationalism (especially from 1830 onwards).

<sup>12</sup>This field of research was opened up by John Pocock’s *The Ancient Law and the Feudal Law* (1971). See for France: Baker (1990), and for the Netherlands: Klein (1995) and Velema (2007).

time driving political debates in revolutionary France. It remains to be explored how political discourse after 1815 related to this legacy. What, in other words, was the longer-term effect of the political language of the most important political event in the recent history of the Southern Netherlands?

With regard to this question, it is particularly (but not exclusively) to the Catholic and clerical journalists and polemicists that we have to turn. Many historians have explored the question of why Catholics between 1814 and 1830 moved towards embracing individual rights, including freedom of religion, and changed their attitude towards the liberal opposition, which resulted ultimately in a ‘union of oppositions’ (Haag 1950; Jürgensen 1963; Simon 1963; Lamberts 1972; de Valk 1998). Depending on which clerical and Catholic circles one takes into account, it has either been answered in terms of a genuine intellectual development inspired by the French liberal-Catholic thinker Félicité de Lamennais, or in terms of strategical choices. In the latter view, Catholics came to ‘understand’ how liberal principles, and a liberal understanding of the constitution, could be made useful to secure and advance the social power of the Church. Although both explanations undoubtedly apply to specific groups within the Catholic world (respectively to circles of Catholic nobility and to the higher clerical establishment), the presumption generally seems to be that Catholics entered politics for the first time under the Restoration monarchy. In this view, their intellectual point of departure did not go beyond the ultramontane religiopolitical doctrine that in the eighteenth century had prevailed against more regalist views on the relation between the Church and the State (see Chapter 5). What is generally being ignored is the extent to which clerics had contributed to the political events of the Brabant Revolution and to the intellectual justification of the revolution, and by doing so endorsed certain principles that distinguished them, for example in comparison with the outspoken monarchist and counter-revolutionary clergy in France.<sup>13</sup> The question, in other words,

<sup>13</sup>In a recent study on religion and politics in nineteenth-century Belgium, Henk de Smaele has argued that the Catholic proliferation that took place at the end of the nineteenth century was no indication of the predominance of the ‘conservative or reactionary character’ of the Flemish-rural territories where it took place. De Smaele even implies a causal relation between the ‘ruralisation’ of the clergy at the end of the eighteenth century and the ‘republican’ convictions which a part of the Flemish clergy endorsed at the time of the Belgian Revolution (de Smaele 2009, 184–186).

is whether or not, and to what extent, the discourse of the Brabant Revolution created a ‘path dependency’ when it came to the later intellectual history of political Catholicism.

### 1.3 INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AND THE AGE OF REVOLUTION

The major inspiration for the research project leading to this book was provided by the way in which the ‘linguistic turn’ or ‘new cultural history’ has since the 1970s influenced historical research of the French Revolution. Essential to this conceptual turn, so it is commonly acknowledged, was the work undertaken by François Furet, primarily his 1978 publication *Penser la Révolution française* (Furet 1978). Before Furet, a number of revisionist Anglo-American historians had already undermined the dominant analysis of the French Revolution in terms of class conflict and socioeconomic change.<sup>14</sup> Endorsing the rejection of an understanding of the Revolution in Marxist and structuralist terms, Furet argued eloquently, starting in the early 1970s (Furet 1971), for an understanding of the French Revolution in political and cultural terms. Crucial to that argument was bringing the Terror back to the centre of the analysis. Furet strongly rejected the view in which the Terror was dismissed as an unfortunate aberration of the Revolution that was primarily attributable to the circumstances of war and internal revolt that the revolutionary leaders were confronted with. He set out to explain how revolutionary politics, from the very beginning, was in the grip of a ‘democratic imaginary’ which insisted on a perfect transparency between government and the ‘will of the people’, and in which every obstacle or resistance to the revolutionary process towards a perfect democracy was explained in terms of ‘conspiracy’. The Revolution, according to Furet, was trapped from the start in a ‘semiotic circuit’ that led straight to the Terror (Furet 1978, 71–79).

From a critical point of view, by over-determining the course of the Revolution in terms of political language, Furet replicated in his historical analysis what he considered to have been the crucial element of revolutionary discourse, an ‘overinvestment in the political’. In doing so, as Steven Laurence Kaplan has argued, he substituted a purely abstract, philosophical approach to history for objective historical analysis.

<sup>14</sup>The so-called Wiles Lectures by Alfred Cobban are considered to have provided a first step in that direction: Cobban (1964).

Historical reality is entirely reduced to its representation within a certain political discourse (Kaplan 1995, 80–98). Lynn Hunt has also pointed out that ‘in the absence of some linkage between the social and the semiological, or even an analysis of how the semiological determines the social, there are no causal explanations’ (Hunt 1981, 320). It appears as if, in Furet’s analysis, ‘the Revolution spontaneously causes itself’ (Mah 2000, 175). However, most criticisms of Furet were appreciative, and fully supported a shift towards politics and culture in revolutionary studies. Crucial in this sense was Lynn Hunt’s argument that, in spite of Furet’s outspoken ambition ‘to rediscover the analysis of the political as such’, he to some extent boycotted his own agenda: ‘Furet is so keen to demonstrate the power of discourse that he passes right by the discourse of power ... so dazzled by the theoretical imaginary of the democratic consensus that he overlooks the new practices of representation which were being developed ...’. The fundamental error that Furet made, in Hunt’s view, was to describe ‘the linguisticity of the Revolution as its special, temporary condition (in fact, as its motor), rather than as a status it shares with any and all events’ (Hunt 1981, 320).

Hunt herself became the inspirer of a whole new field of cultural studies on the French Revolution. Others, however, such as Keith Michael Baker, took their cue from Furet (and Hunt) to refocus on the origins of the revolutionary discourse in the political culture of the Ancien Régime. Baker argued, in clear resonance with Hunt’s argument for the linguistic status of all events, that once we start looking at political culture, we can no longer accept that the Revolution simply erupted from behind the scenes of the Ancien Régime (Baker 1990, 4). His central thesis therefore is that ‘the conceptual space in which the French Revolution was invented ... was the creation of the Old Regime’ (Baker 1990, 4). Baker warns, however, about the traps which historians of ideas so often fell into in the past. One is to write a linear history of doctrines, with an emphasis on a particular thinker, often called the ‘C’est la faute à Rousseau’ style of interpretation.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, he distinguishes between treating ideas as if they were causal, individual agents of motivation and determination, a view that inevitably results in an exclusive focus on their circulation, and understanding the meaning of ideas to social actors: ‘Texts, if read, are understood, and hence reinterpreted, by

<sup>15</sup>This type of interpretation is often attributed to Talmon (1952).

their readers in contexts that may transform their significance; ideas, if received, take on meaning only in relation to others in the set of ideas into which they are incorporated' (Baker 1990, 18–20). In his conception of what a study of the 'ideological origins' of the French Revolution should be about, Baker was clearly inspired by the Anglo-Saxon school of intellectual history (or 'Cambridge School'), and primarily by Quentin Skinner.<sup>16</sup> He defends in that regard a 'linguistic approach to political culture' against the accusation that it denies the relevance of social interests as well as the possibility of human agency (Baker 1990, 4–7).<sup>17</sup> Concretely, Baker set out to uncover how the revolutionary discourse emerged from a political culture defined by three distinctive discourses revolving around the concepts of 'justice', 'reason' and 'will', and from the way elements from each of these discourses were re-elaborated and re-combined in the context of the political crisis of 1789.

If we want to apply a similar linguistic approach to the question of the origins of the Belgian Revolution, we need first to take stock of how political culture changed as a result of the French Revolution, which, as a 'pan-European phenomenon', had a lasting effect. We have already indicated the centrality in pre-revolutionary political culture of the language of ancient constitutionalism. As Brecht Deseure has pointed out, the three discourses that Keith Baker uncovered, corresponding respectively to a parliamentary-constitutionalist, a royalist and a democratic-reformist political affiliation, were not typical of the French context, but reoccurred in the neighbouring countries in similar political discussions. Moreover, what all these pre-revolutionary discourses shared was that they originated in taking a certain position towards the question of the ancient constitution. This happened, more often than not, in combination with the adoption of certain new political ideas or concepts, such as the one of the social contract. More radical political scenarios became

<sup>16</sup>Baker wrote in that regard of a 'new creative synergy' that has opened up between the French historiography of the Revolution and the English-language history of politics and ideas (Baker 1990, 3). He refers to the publication of the multivolume series *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* (4 vols., Oxford: Pergamon, 1987–1994), a collection of papers from a series of symposia commemorating the Bicentenary of the French Revolution which address the central dimensions of the Revolution as a political event, and of which Baker was co-editor.

<sup>17</sup>On both these points there are distinct differences of approach between the Cambridge School and the German School of Conceptual History. See for this: Bödeker (1998), van Gelderen (1998), and Bevir (2000).

imaginable when the tension between different idioms reached breaking point and the historical arguments were sacrificed. One of the essential effects of the dynamic of the French Revolution was, in the words of Deseure, a ‘total undermining of the historical models’ (Deseure 2014, 68–69, 73). In effect, political debate after the French Revolution was clearly no longer structured by the language of ancient constitutionalism.

As Markus Prutsch has pointed out, the French and American, as well as the Batavian, upheavals can be classed as ‘constitutional revolutions’, in which the ideas and benchmarks of ‘constitution’ were fundamentally changed. In spite of the rhetoric of restoration, political culture after the period of the French Empire revolved around the notion that a constitution, in the form of a written document, was the foundation of the political system and above all of normal legislation. Both the state powers and the rights of the citizens were to be systematically and uniformly established in this document. Prutsch points to two more ways in which the new understanding of the constitution could be traced back to the political thought of the French Revolution: it was a ‘secularised creed’ to which everyone could refer, and it recognised, to a greater or lesser degree, ‘the will of the people’ or ‘the nation’ as the source of political power (Prutsch 2013, 1–2; Aerts 2009, 589–590). At the same time, the constitutions that became adopted in 1814–1815 also differed in important ways from the revolutionary constitutional model of the revolutionary times. First of all, societies’ expectations of maintaining a constitutional state, as well as the political innovations generated by the Revolution and Napoleonic imperial rule, had to be reconciled with the monarch’s claim to preserve their sovereignty (Prutsch 2013, 3). Secondly, after 1814, great importance was attached to investing the new constitutions with a national character, even when they were all variations on a number of general principles of politics and rights, and all more or less referred to the same constitutional models. Constitutions, after 1814, became in fact monuments of ‘invented tradition’, in which the new political forms and institutions were presented as a return to old ‘national’ forms and traditions (Aerts 2009, 589–591).

As a result of trying to reconcile such different aspirations and inspirations, the constitutions that were adopted in 1814–1815 often excelled in ambiguities and paradoxes. Conflicting interpretations of what the constitutions were meant to say, as well as on the fundamental question as to where the original constituting power was to be situated, is what drove, to a large extent, the political battles of the Restoration.

We will discuss the constitution of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the next chapter in more detail, but here its specific problems in this regard can briefly be highlighted through a comparison with the French *Charte constitutionnelle* of 1814. With regard to its form, there could be no doubt that the *Charte* was a *constitution octroyée*, rooted in monarchical sovereignty. A long preamble was aimed at forging links between post-revolutionary France and the legitimate ruler ‘Louis, by the grace of God, King of France and Navarre’. Nevertheless, while suggesting a return to monarchical sovereignty in the style of the Ancien Régime, the actual text of the constitution clearly corresponded with a modern understanding of constitution. This was most obvious from the provision concerning the responsibility of the ministers, including a procedure for a parliamentary initiative to indict ministers, as well as from the provision that any bill passed required the approval of both parliamentary chambers. In comparison, the constitution that became adopted in 1814–1815 in the Netherlands was generally understood at the time as a ‘contract’. However, also in view of the novel nature of the new monarchy, the text of the constitution left much more room for speculation regarding the question to what extent the legislative and judicial institutions were being given the powers to keep the king’s government in check. These ambiguities opened the door for mutually exclusive interpretations of the constitution to enter political debate, leading to an escalation of political tensions.

Another preliminary point can be made with regard to the constitution of the Netherlands, when it comes to its qualities as a harbinger of a revived national tradition. Whilst the new constitution was indeed a monument of invented tradition in the Dutch context, where the national past was successfully invoked to legitimise the new constitutional monarchy and political system (Aerts 2009, 590–591), this was clearly not the case with regard to the Southern Netherlands, where the constitution, after unification, became introduced with only moderate adjustments. In general, the government, in its attempts at legitimising the new state on a historical basis, offered few points of reference to the annexed South (Leerssen 2013, 338). This would lead to profound differences in the way the constitution was invoked in the North as compared to the South.

Aside from the differences in political culture, we are also looking at the origins of a very different kind of revolutionary event in comparison with the upheavals of the preceding century. The French Revolution

was marked by the idea of recreating society and by constantly placing itself in opposition to what came before, the vilified Ancien Régime. The Belgian Revolution in one sense transformed the political system in the Southern Netherlands, and did so on the basis of principles that the French Revolution had stood for. On the other hand, the revolution was not conceived ('thought') in terms of a radical rupture with an ancient regime originating in the dark ages. If anything, it originated from an opposition against radical reform policies in the fields of public education, language, legal tradition etc., and the eventual establishment of a Belgian state secured an increased level of continuity with the past in many of these areas. Still, the Belgian Revolution was a *national* revolution, in the sense that it declared a certain ('imagined') people or nation, with its corresponding national territory, to be henceforth sovereign over its own destiny. The challenge, therefore, is to understand how the turn to Belgian nationalism emerged from different political movements that, until very late in the day, made no point of questioning the constitutional order itself. Trying to make sense of the turn to nationalism, in particular circumstances, can be compared to the way intellectual historians of the revolutions of the late eighteenth century tried to understand how history became abandoned as the foundation for making claims to legitimacy, which eventually made it possible to make a clean break with the existing order.

#### 1.4 POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE LOW COUNTRIES AND EUROPE LEADING TO THE CREATION OF A UNITED KINGDOM OF THE NETHERLANDS

In 1810, the former Dutch Republic, which in 1806 had under pressure from Napoleon been turned into a monarchy with the emperor's brother Louis-Napoleon as king, was fully integrated in the French nation and lost all semblance of independence. Only two years later however, after the disastrous retreat of *la Grande Armée* from Russia, the Empire was fighting for its survival and facing popular riots in annexed and controlled territories in Italy, Germany, Spain, and also in the Dutch cities. After Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Leipzig in October 1813, the authority of the imperial administration in the Netherlands crumbled and French administrators as well as troops started to evacuate. In the power vacuum that emerged, an old representative of the Dutch regency

class, Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp, took matters in hand, a coming into action that was preceded by years of silent reflection and preparation in the belief that this moment would eventually present itself. After a failed attempt to convoke the pre-revolutionary States General in the form they existed until 1794, and with the same (surviving) members, Van Hogendorp in November formed in the city of The Hague a provisional general government, together with Frans Adam van der Duyn van Maasdam and (count) Van Limburg Stirum, with the intention of clearing the path for a return of William Frederick (Willem Frederik), the Prince of Orange. Two delegates were sent to the prince, residing in London, with an invitation to cross the Channel and be proclaimed ‘Sovereign’ of the Netherlands and head of the provisional government, in advance of the adoption of a new constitution. The message sounded: ‘La nation s’est levée, elle porte vos couleurs et proclame votre nom’ (de Haan 2013, 16).

William Frederick was the son of the last stadtholder of the Republic of the United Provinces (the title of the head of government, which since 1747 had become hereditary) who had ruled until 1795.<sup>18</sup> In that year the French revolutionary army, after having re-occupied the Habsburg Netherlands in the summer of 1794, crossed the frozen ‘Great Rivers’ in the winter of 1794–1795, marched into the Northern Netherlands and overthrew the stadtholderate regime (which after the execution of Louis XVI had joined the first coalition in the war against France). Whilst the former stadtholder settled down to a comfortable life as an exile in England, Prince William Frederick turned to Napoleon in search of employment. The French First Consul made him prince of the German Principality of Fulda, where he only remained, however, until the dismantling of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. Afterwards, William retired to the family estates in Posen and Silesia, but in 1813 moved to England to plead with the English, in collaboration with other Dutch *émigrés*, for the restoration of the House of Orange in the Netherlands in the event of the collapse of the French Empire. William was given assurance by the British foreign minister Lord Castlereagh that the ‘liberation’ of the Netherlands and the ‘restoration’ of the House of Orange were of primary importance for Great Britain. Upon receiving the invitation by Van Hogendorp, William Frederick embarked on his

<sup>18</sup>William Frederick, or King William I, has recently become the subject of a new academic biography: Koch (2013).

journey, in a fleet financed by the British government and accompanied by the British delegate Lord Clancarty (who would remain British ambassador until 1824). He famously landed on 2 December on the coast of Scheveningen and moved from there to The Hague. In the coming months, a Constitutional Commission, whose members were appointed by the prince himself, drafted a new constitution, which was adopted by an Assembly of Notables, equally selected by William Frederick and his advisors, on 29 March 1814. Whilst the European powers were still consumed by the war effort to bring Napoleon to his knees, and negotiations over the future European order had still to make a start, the Netherlands had remarkably smoothly been transformed into a constitutional monarchy.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, in spite of the rhetoric of restoration and the use of vocabulary that evoked the political order of the old republic, the new state was not a restoration. Some of the most fundamental changes since the Batavian Revolution (1795–1798/1801), such as the unitary state, a written constitution, a ‘national’ representative assembly and a uniform legal system, were maintained or consolidated, in a similar way as would be the case under the Restoration monarchy in France. Ironically, the monarchical form of government, even when superficially a ‘restoration’ of the House of Orange, was in the Netherlands undeniably a novelty for which the Dutch had as their only historical reference the ‘imported’ monarchy under Louis-Napoleon that existed from 1806 until 1810. Although the short history of this kingdom became, for obvious reasons, not part of the reference framework after 1814—it was generally ignored and Louis-Napoleon became something of a ‘shadow king’—Napoleon’s brother had succeeded in familiarising the Dutch to some extent with the idea of a monarchy (van der Burg 2010, 238). In contrast to an older historiography that has presented the period 1806–1810 as a moment of rupture in Dutch history, a time, in the words of Jonathan Israel, when ‘practically every typical feature of the old republic was finally erased, and consciously so’, Martijn van der Burg has recently analysed the period as a time of transition, in which the principles of hereditary rule and constitutional monarchy ‘were gradually—but not without

<sup>19</sup>For a more in-depth description of the events leading to the establishment of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1814 see the following recent publications: de Haan (2013), Lok (2009, 43–71) (in comparison to the French Restoration); Deneckere (2015) (in a European context); Koch (2013, 215–283).

resistance—introduced’ (van der Burg 2010, 73–74). Louis-Napoleon managed to do so, by referring actively to the republican past of the United Provinces, as well as to Batavian precedents, whilst at the same time radically breaking with tradition in other regards. The duplicity was in fact very comparable, Van der Burg points out, with the way Napoleon accomplished the transition from republic to empire in France, referring to different historical eras in the history of France (including the revolutionary one) whilst also introducing radical changes.

Overall, political developments in the Netherlands since 1795 had been very much attuned to how regimes succeeded one another in post-revolutionary France. The Batavian Revolution has in recent years been subject of revived interest among Dutch scholars, and has been increasingly seen as the central political event in the development of the Netherlands into a modern nation-state.<sup>20</sup> The most important innovations introduced by the Batavian revolutionaries were the unitary state and representative democracy, the work of a National Assembly established in 1795, which, after three years of intensive debate, in 1798 adopted the first written constitution (*Staatsregeling voor het Bataafsche Volk*) in the history of the country. These innovations were, however, not underpinned by contemporary liberal-democratic political ideas, but were rooted in convictions resulting from a (classic-)republican vocabulary, adapted to novel Enlightenment principles such as equality and popular sovereignty (Rutjes 2012, 219; Velema 2013, 29), and had been prepared by a reform movement to rejuvenate the republic in the 1780s (the so-called Patriot Revolt, or *Patriottentijd*, that was eventually crushed by the stadtholder, with Prussian military support).<sup>21</sup> If a unitary state had in the early-modern republican tradition been conceived as in opposition to a free citizenry, the Batavians believed it was essential to promote the national unity and ‘love of country’ that were essential to the republican form of government. Furthermore, it was also justified on the basis that a fragmented republic had in the past created

<sup>20</sup>The most important example of this revival was the NWO-research project at the University of Amsterdam ‘The First Dutch Democracy: The Political World of the Batavian Republic, 1795–1801’ under supervision by N.C.F. van Sas and Wyger Velema (2007–2012). It resulted in a number of innovative publications, including monographs (Oddens 2012; Rutjes 2012; Grijzenhout et al. 2013).

<sup>21</sup>On the political thought of the Patriot Revolt: Klein (1995), van Sas (2004, 173–274), Velema (2007, 115–177).

the desire for a strong stadtholder and now also in the new American republic necessitated a strong president (Rutjes 2012, 209–211; Velema 2013, 35–45). Excluding an Athens-like participatory democracy, representative government was considered an inevitable choice in view of the endorsement of popular sovereignty and equality, but the republican understanding of politics was still given its due through the institution of popular assemblies (*grondvergaderingen*), the adoption of clear procedures for constitutional revision, and ensuring public knowledge of political decision-making (Rutjes 2012, 211–214; Velema 2013, 45–51). But if 1798 was the ‘pinnacle’ of the republican history of the Netherlands, it was also the year in which political culture irrevocably turned away from republican concepts and ideals towards a more contemporary, ‘liberal’ understanding of politics.

After the new constitution was adopted (23 April 1798), which even included ideas about how the state should guarantee the welfare of its citizens, the Assembly was confronted with the immense challenge of implementing the new order in a country where the old-republican forms and habits persisted. After the hectic political battles that accompanied the constitution-making, including a Jacobin-style ‘purification’ of the Assembly of its moderate and federalist factions (which initiated the phase of the so-called ‘Batavian Terror’,<sup>22</sup> from January to June 1798, a period marked by political repression at all levels of government, but without guillotines), the political mood changed radically from the summer of 1798 onwards. Emphasis shifted, on the one hand, from valuing politics and political conflict for its own sake to a desire for reconciliation and political calm, and, on the other hand, from giving expression to the will of the people to effectively implement the Batavian blueprints (van Sas 2013, 79–89; Rutjes 2012, 217). This ‘*moment thermidorien*’ of the Batavian Revolution crystallised in the new constitutional regime of 1801, with a shift of power to the executive branch of government (the College of Twelve), the restriction of the suffrage, the abolition of the different possibilities for citizens to participate in and contest political decision-making and the reintroduction of old-republican political vocabulary (the republic was re-baptised as the ‘Batavian Commonwealth’). Another change that took place was that the French, after having chased out the unpopular stadtholderate

<sup>22</sup>For a short overview of the events of the so-called Batavian Terror: van Sas (2011).

regime, had left the Dutch until then relatively free to work out their own political business, but with the coming to power of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799 this radically changed. In 1805, under pressure of the emperor, the Batavian constitution was changed again, now to establish a single-headed government, with moderate republican ('Batavian') and former ambassador Rutger-Jan Schimmelpenninck at its head (with the old-republican title of grand pensionary or *raadspensionaris*). Napoleon's nomination of his brother as King of Holland, one year later, can be interpreted as the logical next step in a development towards a unitary state with a strong central government. Furthermore, it presented to many Batavian rulers and administrators the best guarantee to maintain the revolutionary legacy and avoid a restoration of the old order. By that time, in view of the recent military successes of Napoleon and the expansion of the *Grande Nation*, the Dutch considered themselves lucky that the emperor was still willing to grant the former republic at least nominal independence (Lok 2009, 40).<sup>23</sup>

The advent of a Dutch kingdom under the House of Orange completed what Niek van Sas has called the 'nationalisation' of the Batavian Revolution (van Sas 2013, 95–100). The divisions that had accompanied the transition from old to new in the last years of the previous century had since then been transcended by the construction of a historical narrative about the nation, that smoothed over contemporary conflicts and radical ruptures. Van Hogendorp excelled in applying a historicist approach to the constitutional consolidation of the recent major developments in Dutch politics and government, even evoking the times of the Habsburg Netherlands under Charles V, before the Dutch Revolt took place at the end of the sixteenth century. This turn to national history also fitted a conscious politics of 'prescriptive forgetting', as Matthijs Lok has argued (Lok 2011, 68–72). It became an implicit political practice not to evoke the recent past, so as not to endanger the new order that was still considered very fragile. It meant that, at all levels of government, people could take up positions, or be confirmed in them, without having to answer for past political alliances or 'collaboration' with past regimes. Even when Dutch historians have in recent years strongly refuted Huizinga's image of a Dutch nation that, in 1814–1815, went to sleep under the 'Orange tree', the crucial importance attached to the

<sup>23</sup>For detailed discussion on the political debates surrounding the abolition of the republic, see Velema (2006) and van der Burg (2010).

‘history of the fatherland’, as a consolidating and unifying factor in politics, would, in years to come, have the effect of limiting the scope of politics to the framework of the imagined national tradition (van Zanten 2004, 40–45).

Although it is clear that the nature of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1814 needs to be primarily understood in the context of Dutch history, the ‘founding fathers’ of the new kingdom, including Prince William Frederick, had from the beginning in mind to expand the kingdom to include the former Habsburg Netherlands.<sup>24</sup> In historical terms, they imagined this to be a return of the political unity of Netherlands that in the fifteenth century had been the result of the dynastic politics of the House of Burgundy. The idea of a ‘reunion’ of the ‘two Netherlands’ was not entirely new in 1814 either. At the time of the Brabant Revolution, the Belgian leaders had considered choosing the brother of William Frederick, second son of the Dutch stadtholder William V, to become stadtholder over the Southern Netherlands. In 1805 British prime minister William Pitt the Younger presented a memorandum to the Russian tsar for a post-Napoleonic European order, in which he suggested that a Dutch state restored to independence should be expanded to include the region Antwerp–Maastricht. The rest of the Southern Netherlands would best be transferred to Prussia, whilst Austria would be compensated in Italy. In 1812, after news reached the European capitals of Napoleon’s Russian disaster, the new British secretary of state for foreign affairs, Lord Castlereagh, adopted Pitt’s blueprint from 1805 and turned it into a political programme. After the Dutch exploited the power vacuum left by the French retreat to create their own state, the new Dutch government unfolded an active diplomacy for an expansion of the new state with the Southern Netherlands. William Frederick even hoped that not only the Southern Netherlands, including the former Prince-Bishopric of Liège and Luxembourg, would become part of the united Netherlands, but also the territory between the rivers Meuse, Moselle and Rhine, containing German cities like Aachen, Cologne and Düsseldorf. As a German prince, he dreamed of a ‘third Germany’ next to Austria and Prussia, which could possibly even have outshone the latter (ruled by his nephew Friedrich Wilhelm III).

<sup>24</sup>The following description of the events that led to the creation of the United Kingdom is based on: Judo and van de Perre (2015), Lamberts (2013), Deneckere (2015), Koch (2013, 259–283), Lok (2009, 60–62).