

Preface

I am anxious to make it clear to readers of the book now offered to the public that its purpose is not to re-tell the story of the revolt of the Netherlands against Spain, but – on the basis of that story – to discuss whether, and if at all, how far, and in what ways it is open to us or obligatory upon us, to form and express moral judgments of approval or disapproval regarding the leading parties in this great historical episode. That most people who take any interest in history at all are, in point of fact, prone to pass moral judgments of this kind on historical characters generally is, I think, a matter of common knowledge: that their right to do so is a much-discussed question is less widely known, as will, I think, be clear from the evidence adduced in my first chapter.

Needless to say, if we are to assess rightly the moral quality of any particular character or movement in history, at least an adequate knowledge of the relevant facts is indispensable. It might occur to some to suggest that no one should attempt an assessment of this kind unless he has studied the bulk of the sources in their original languages. While fully realizing, however, the vital importance of factual accuracy, I cannot but think that to confine all discussion of historical episodes to those who can claim to have fully examined the sources for themselves would be to impose a needlessly severe restriction on debate. How gravely it would narrow the field of disputants, at least in regard to what we call *modern* history, is revealed by the opinion recently expressed to me by a learned scholar, to the effect that the available sources of information concerning any period of history subsequent to A.D. 1500 are so abundant that it is virtually beyond the power of any one investigator really to master them for a longer period of history than twenty years. But, apart from that, we can surely feel that, short of so exhaustive a knowledge, one can derive from the works of modern scholars, representing as they do differing and independent points of view, yet each of them conversant in large measure with

the contemporary documents, at least sufficient knowledge of a period to permit of a tentative estimate of certain aspects of it.¹

I can make no claim myself to have delved into the abundant source-literature, in Spanish, Dutch, French, and other languages, dealing with the revolt of the Netherlands: still less can I produce fresh light from documentary sources hitherto unpublished. But I am confident that enough of the facts for my immediate purpose is available in the works of the numerous modern historians accessible to me: and while a thorough investigation of the original sources might necessitate a minute modification here and there, and might therefore be a really necessary propaedeutic, were one proposing to recount the story in detail afresh, it is hardly a *sine qua non* for a discussion of the kind I am here proposing.

I have not therefore attempted to quote authorities for every factual statement uttered or presupposed in the ensuing pages. Here and there, for some special reason, I have stated the authority I am depending on for some statement of fact. But for the most part, the documentation is intended to subserve the interests of the controversial evaluation of the facts.

For the sake of any who may be interested to consult the authorities I have quoted, I may say that – for reasons of brevity – I have confined such bibliographical particulars of the works concerned as it seemed needful to give, to the *first* occasion on which each is quoted. Thereafter, abbreviated titles only are quoted. The index will give the page on which the first reference to each work occurs.

Once or twice, as I have been writing, it has occurred to me that the reading of the book might be in places difficult and confusing to one without a sufficient previous knowledge of the story. For the assistance of such persons, I have appended a chronological summary of the main relevant events which occurred during the lifetime of Philip II. Some readers may prefer to peruse that summary before they go further than the end of Chapter II. In any case, I hope that, with the assistance of that appendix, and in the light of the explanations offered in this Preface, the line taken in the main discussion will at least be

1. Cf. H. Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, vol. iii (ed. 1912), p. VIII: “Je ne crois pas que l'historien doive attendre avant de prendre la plume que tous les détails de son sujet aient été élucidés.”

clear to the reader, even if (contrary to my hopes) it fails to win his complete concurrence.

The manuscript of this book was complete before I could get access to Dr. G.J. Renier's recent work, *The Dutch Nation: an historical study* (Netherlands Government Information Bureau, London, 1944). As the composition of a Dutch scholar with a first-hand knowledge of the authorities, it has a value of its own; and I read it eagerly as a check upon what I had myself ventured to write. The point on which I feel it is most valuable as a corrective is its stress on the non-democratic character of the native government in the Low Countries during the sixteenth and following centuries. Accepting this as in substance true, we may yet note that the oligarchical administration was at least more in line with the popular will than was the rule of Spain, that democratic forces were increasingly at work throughout, and that the popular voice, though debarred from framing official decisions, did make itself heard in the national affairs.

On the particular issue with which my own book deals, Dr. Renier's work is somewhat less helpful. He disallows all concern with Philip's moral character. "To the historian", he says, "it matters little what Philip was: he must know what Philip did or tried to do". He bestows praise on his policy in the Netherlands, because he wanted to substitute an efficient centralized monarchy for the ramshackle disorderliness of the normal institutions of the States. The quality which he emphasizes as good in Philip's rule is, somewhat strangely, the fact that it was "modern". I cannot agree that the ruler's personal character, especially when it affects his governmental measures so closely as it did in Philip's case, is a matter of indifference to the historian. And while I can see the general truth of the statement that centralization is more efficient and possibly more "modern" than unsystematic devolution, I hold that the ethical character of the centralizing monarchy in question must needs affect our judgment in a particular case.

Furthermore, Dr. Renier's book is marked, like that of his friend, Dr. Pieter Geyl, by a tendency to belittle the importance of the religious factor in the great struggle between Spain and the Netherlands. As I have touched on this tendency at the close

of my first chapter, and have discussed the particular issue elsewhere in the book, I do not need to deal with it further here. The only comment I wish to make is that, in adducing the Netherlanders' tolerance and dislike of persecution and torture as a ground of their opposition to Spain, Dr. Renier seems *to me* to be a little inconsistent with himself; for their dislike of torture and persecution was itself a religious conviction, and not by any means due to indifference or to their taking religion "as a matter of course". Finally, I am disposed to think that his statement that the Calvinists were as intolerant as the Spanish inquisitors is an exaggeration: but that, too, is a matter which will have to be considered at length in the course of our study.

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Oxford
April 1944