Matthias Meirlaen, ***Revoluties in de klas. Secundair geschiedenisonderwijs in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, 1750-1850*** (Dissertation University of Leuven 2011; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014, 416 pp., ISBN 978 90 5867 964 2).

The historiographical sub-discipline 'history of education' is alive and kicking in Belgium. Whereas Dutch educational historians – and philosophers alike – are busy complaining about empiricism in educational research dislodging the institutional embedding of the history and philosophy of education, Belgian researchers continue to produce valuable research concerning educational history. Meirlaen's *Revoluties in de klas*, published in 2014, is an example of this. It contributes to the underdeveloped field of chronicling history education in the Low Countries (332). In particular, Meirlaen deals with the question of how social-political revolutions influenced the teaching of history in secondary education. The volume under review is a revised version of Meirlaen's doctoral thesis, which he defended in 2011.

The revolutions Meirlaen's book title refers to are the major social and political changes that took place in Western Europe around 1800. The Southern Netherlands – present-day Belgium – experienced several regime changes in this period (from Austrian to French to Dutch rule, and after 1830, independence). The effects of these regime changes on history education are discussed in three parts: the first deals with the Austrian period, focusing on the 1777 Theresian reform, the second with the French revolutionary rule during the 1790s and the third with the Napoleonic and Dutch era. Each part contains three levels of analysis: government policy, history methods and classroom practices.

While the title speaks of 'revolutions in the classroom', it is somewhat misleading. One of the major conclusions of Meirlaen's study is that history education remained fairly stable, despite the turbulent times. Throughout the whole period, history occupied a relatively unimportant place in the secondary school curriculum, which revolved around the classical languages. History lessons were intended to add some background information to the texts that were being studied, but were also included for the sake of having some variation to the language lessons. Another characteristic of history education for the whole period was moral instruction. Didactically, teachers were used to dictating their lessons. In the course of the years, modern history increased in importance in addition to classical history, but this did not significantly alter the status or function of history teaching. Only after 1830 did history education significantly change, as becomes clear in the book's epilogue. History education was professionalized through the introduction

Published by Royal Netherlands Historical Society | KNHG

DOI: 10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10356 | www.bmgn-lchr.nl | e-ISSN 2211-2898 | print ISSN 0165-0505

of teachers specialized in history and a growing number of history books. Meirlaen stresses the importance of the period from 1750 to 1830 for understanding this transformation.

An exception to the continuous character of history education during the Theresian, French, and Dutch period was provided by the French revolutionary rule. History was no longer a minor aspect of the classical languages, but became the second most important subject in the curriculum. Instead of a religiously interpreted course of history – for which Meirlaen shows a personal dislike, rather inappropriately calling history writer Loriquet's religious interpretation of the French Revolution 'repulsive' (274) – a philosophical history or history of civilization was prescribed. History lessons were to show how, through human effort, society had become increasingly technologically and culturally civilized. However, although the changes were significant, only relatively few pupils (some 187) from the nine secondary schools chose the now optional school subject.

On page 333, Meirlaen speaks of 'small revolutions in the classrooms', referring to 'some' history teachers who 'more or less' complied when new regime leaders asked for changes. This nuanced statement does more justice to Meirlaen's findings than is implied by the title of the book.

Revoluties in de klas is in most respects undoubtedly a solid and valuable contribution to the history of education. However, a few minor critical comments are justified. One concerns the superfluous nature of the introductory section that deals with the intersections of the history of education and of historiography. Here, Meirlaen describes several approaches that have characterized both historical sub-disciplines. He explains that for his own study he did not choose any approach in particular, but combined several. Two of them are the 'intellectual' (*ideeënhistorische*) and the 'narrative' approach for his first two levels of analysis. However, what this all adds up to is nothing out of the ordinary. What he calls the 'narrative approach' or 'narrative analysis' is simply analysing the events and facts described in history books as well as their plots. This is common, traditional historical practice, which could have been introduced as such, without the theoretical fuss.

Meirlaen frequently challenges the interpretations of other historians of education. However, at least in one case he is attacking a straw man. He states that the Dutch historian Reinsma wrongly concluded that history education under the Dutch King William I was part of the government's policy to unify the southern and northern Netherlands (in an article printed in 1967 in *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis*, and not 1969 according to Meirlaen). In reality, Meirlaen argues, William I's government was relatively indifferent to history education. Yet Reinsma actually concluded no such thing. His research question clearly reads *whether*, and if so, *how* history (and geography) education was used in William I's policy of unification. Reinsma concluded that the government *could have* used history for unification, but *did not* do so;

not that the government had tried to do this and failed. When Meirlaen writes that Reinsma 'a priori' believed that William I's government had included history education in its unification policy, this is unsubstantiated and unfair (296, 305).

Undoubtedly a strong point of Meirlaen's study is the attention he pays to educational practice. It is far from usual for historians of education to go beyond educational policies, ideas and materials (23). At the same time, Meirlaen's study demonstrates the difficulty of researching educational practice. Even though he undertook a demanding quest for archival sources in three countries, he nevertheless has to acknowledge the scarcity of such material (32-33). What he learns from inspection reports and programmes for examinations, his main sources for investigating teaching practices, remains sketchy. Information on what exactly was being taught, for how many hours a week and what pupils gained from this teaching is often absent, untrustworthy or uncertain (for example 94, 190, 247). Furthermore, Meirlaen sometimes leaves a claim unsubstantiated. For instance, when he notes that in the Dutch epoch pupils not only had to learn moral lessons from history, but also had to apply these by writing essays, he only provides one illustration (311). A single example is insufficient to prove something to be a common practice. Such under-determination, however, is perhaps unavoidable in writing history with such a scarcity of primary data. We should therefore salute Meirlaen for bringing together a substantial amount of data on history education, providing us with a predominantly convincing account of the nature of history teaching in Belgian secondary schools around 1800.

Vincent Stolk, University of Humanistic Studies