



# The Low Countries in Broader Perspective

MARTHA HOWELL

This article argues that the *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* would have an even greater impact on scholarship both about the Low Countries and Europe more generally if the editors were to include articles written in French, thus capturing the history and culture of the entire Low Countries, past and present, not just its Dutch-speaking regions. It also suggests that the editors might well expand the range of the published articles to more fully reflect new directions in historical scholarship. In particular, articles intersecting with scholarship on art history, linguistic and literary theory, or anthropological/archeological work on material culture might be encouraged.

In dit artikel wordt gesteld dat *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* een veel grotere invloed zou hebben op de geschiedschrijving van Nederland en van Europa in het algemeen als er ook artikelen in het Frans zouden worden opgenomen. Op die manier zou de aandacht niet slechts uitgaan naar het gedeelte waar Nederlands wordt gesproken, maar naar de geschiedenis en cultuur van de gehele Lage Landen, vroeger en nu. In dit artikel wordt eveneens gesteld dat de redactie van *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* er goed aan zou doen ook stukken op te nemen waarin meer aandacht wordt besteed aan nieuwe richtingen binnen de geschiedschrijving, en vooral ook artikelen waarin wordt verwezen naar kunsthistorisch onderzoek, theoretische studies op het gebied van linguïstiek en literatuurwetenschap, of naar antropologisch/archeologisch werk over materiële cultuur.

The *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* (hereafter *BMGN*) has been very useful to me, and to my students, but not so much for the articles it publishes, although they are generally of high quality. Rather, I have used it most frequently to find out about new books on subjects that interest me, especially, as Schmidt points out, those written by scholars from the Low Countries. It seems to me that more of the books reviewed are authored by Dutch nationals than Belgians, perhaps especially since many Belgians who work on the southern Low Countries publish in French and the journal does not feature this work. That being said, the journal's coverage of new books is encyclopedic, allowing people like me who are only in the Low Countries once a year or so and sometimes for short periods, to get up to date on what new work is being done and to find references to studies that are often not reviewed in the journals published in Anglophone or other non-Dutch journals. Indeed, flipping through back issues to help me prepare this essay, I found several books I need to read or at least get my hands on, and I am keeping my university library busy either ordering the books for our collection or obtaining them through Interlibrary loan.

That a scholar like me finds the book reviews the most useful section of the journal raises, however, some questions, which intersect with those Schmidt raised about a certain parochialism. Let me start simply with content and numbers. Most of the articles published (perhaps not the book reviews, but the articles) take the region defined by the modern Dutch state as their subject – even when the article focuses on the later Middle Ages when there was no Dutch state. This pattern, which I admit is not unique to this journal, is regrettable and is surely a measure of how today's national boundaries have become, unjustifiably, historiographical boundaries. Let me provide a few numbers in support of this observation. I did a quick and rough count of the articles published from 2014 through the second volume of the 2017 series. In these issues, 54 articles treated what is now the region defined by the Dutch state, 7 treated locations in what is now the Belgian state. None treated the sections of today's French *Nord* that in my period were indisputably part of the Low Countries. None treated the small German-speaking region of present-day Belgium. There were a few others that included both The Dutch and Belgian state or were so general that they could not be so labeled, but there were very few of such articles indeed. My impression is that this is a long-standing pattern, and it probably explains why the journal is not my 'go-to' source for my own work even though, let me emphasize, even in this survey I found several articles that will be of use to me. And it is certainly true that in the past I have been led to articles published in the journal via a colleague's recommendation, footnotes, or other references. And have been glad to be there. But I think it is fair to say that the journal is very 'Dutch'.

Schmidt developed this point not so much by emphasizing the subject matter of the articles as the editors' apparent preference for Dutch (or maybe Belgian) authors and a general sense that the journal is in the business

of documenting and explaining the distinctiveness of Dutch society and culture. As he reminds us, in a way there is nothing wrong with that. This is supposed to be, after all, a journal focused on the Low Countries and even if that turns out to be disproportionately dedicated to the history of the region set by the geographical boundaries of the modern-day Netherlands state, it is perfectly acceptable to have a journal that seeks to uncover and document a national history. After all, what else does the *Journal of American History* do? The problem is, as he suggests, that ‘Dutchness’ is carefully curated by the bulk of the journal’s articles. Even when the articles or the entire issue is self-consciously comparative, the ‘Dutch’ case is not deconstructed or imbedded in the larger story being told, but held out as a special case of the whole, in which the ways that the Dutch case differed or was similar are emphasized. For a scholar like me, even if I concentrated on the geographic region that is now The Netherlands (in which I have, after all, worked), that focus would be a problem. I am not, in fact, principally interested in the distinctive features of Dutch society (or Belgian for that matter), then or now, unless they illuminate the larger question that brought me to the region. More importantly perhaps, I am not qualified to mine the soul of the Dutch (or the Belgians) even though, as an outsider, I might be able to observe things that insiders could not see. But that is not my scholarly project. I work in this region because of its place in the history of the western market economy. Period.

Let me acknowledge, however, that the apparent parochialism of the journal comes with a profound strength: the articles it publishes display a sure control of sources that outsiders can rarely match. We are seldom in residence for more than a year here, a year there, a few months here, then a few months there. To be sure, those of us who concentrate on one city, one court, one kind of source can, over time, match the expertise of scholars who often live next door to their material, but most of us have to work more strategically, beginning with a question and settling down where we can best answer that question. In contrast, many of the books and articles that have traditionally come from Low Countries’ scholars began with the sources at their disposal, a pattern particularly common among young scholars. Although the best of them are conversant with the literature covering other parts of Europe or the world on whatever subject is being investigated, the starting point for many of the studies is not the question so much as the body of material. This is not a criticism; it is an observation, but these qualities may help explain what Schmidt described as a little insularity – and the tension between cosmopolitanism and parochialism. If the starting point of a piece of scholarship is the archive and not the question, the archive, and the scholar’s control of the archive, will acquire pride of place. This often means that while the historiographical and sometimes theoretical issues raised by the material are discussed, they often seem to serve to position the empirical study rather than to drive it. The result is some fine studies that provide raw material for other scholars but do not change the discourse.

In short, if I were asked by a new graduate student thinking of working with me to recommend a list of journals useful for future research, I would certainly put this one on my list but I would not describe it as a journal focusing on the history of the greater Low Countries. Rather, I would say it publishes work on the Dutch-speaking Low Countries, preeminently what is now The Netherlands. I would also warn that it slants ‘modern’, even though of course it accepts articles that treat the pre-1500 period. I would thus caution the student to read selectively and critically, searching among the articles for those that spoke most directly to her or his research interests but not allowing them to define his or her research interests or methodological strategies. And I would urge using the book reviews to survey the field as a whole.

If I were to recommend how to strengthen the journal, I would want to both broaden its reach and more clearly restrict its boundaries. I would begin by either abandoning the claim that the journal treats the history of the greater Low Countries or I would seek to actually become such a journal. As a start, I would take the region as a whole. To be sure, the present-day Low Countries do not constitute a coherent nation state and, as both the Dutch and Belgians I know would be the first to tell you, they do not share a coherent culture. Although the majority of the Belgian population shares a language with people in the Netherlands, the Belgian Dutch-speakers I know arguably share more in the way of lifestyle with their French-speaking co-nationals. But they also differ in profound ways from precisely those co-nationals. So if the journal is to be dedicated to the history of the historical and present-day Low Countries, it is going to have to take those differences and similarities into account and in any case become less ‘Dutch’. That means not only soliciting and accepting more articles that treat the south but, in my view, also soliciting and accepting articles in French. That may limit international readership a bit, certainly among Anglophone readers (but they certainly read French more easily than they read Dutch), but it should expand Francophone readership and it would, in my view, at least be faithful to the title of the journal: *The Low Countries Historical Review*.

I would also change several other things. I would decide whether the journal could manage to conceive of the region as a whole during its long and complicated medieval, early modern, and modern history. This would require not only recognizing but also taking as a scholarly project how much the region has changed, politically and culturally, over this long period, how the lines that now divide the north from the south were differently drawn in different periods, and how internally what are now its two nation-states are divided, north from south and east from west. In short, the journal would simultaneously take the region as the complex whole it is and implicitly recognize that it is not a whole and never has been. I would even try to image a few special issues that explored the connections, divergences, interchanges, and tensions across and within the entire region and throughout time.

But I would also ask whether the medieval period of this region is sufficiently covered by other journals (I think, for example, of the new

*Medieval Low Countries* from Brepols). I suspect it is, and in that case I would make the chronological boundary clear to readers and contributors. But I would not recommend entirely abandoning the pre-1500 period. Rather, I think the *BMGN* could profitably consider some special issues that took the complex period from approximately 1400 to 1650 as its frame, featuring articles not just on the Reformation but also on economic, political, and social upheavals that redefined both south and north. Such a project would nicely follow from the suggestion advanced in the previous paragraph: that *BMGN* might well confine itself to soliciting and publishing articles that focus on the post-1500 period even if, as I propose here, the editors could nevertheless consciously cross from the late Middle Ages into the early modern period on the understanding that this period redefined the entire region.

Finally, and now returning to a point Schmidt made, I would urge that the editors broaden the methodological scope of the journal's articles. Historians today are considerably more interdisciplinary than they once were, and new sub-disciplines emerging in part out of the so-called 'cultural turn' are measurably enriching the entire field. The journal does not, by and large, reflect the excitement generated by studies that move, for example, between the visual arts and politics (writ with a capital or small 'p'), those that combine theory about the meaning of objects with empirical studies of collecting, or those that historicize the structures of gender hierarchy via linguistic theory. Why not? Have the editors made a conscious choice to privilege social, economic, political and institutional history of a more traditional sort? Or, more likely, are those not the kinds of articles that are submitted to the journal?

I realize that my suggestions would not all be easy to accommodate even if the editors made a decision to do so. But I hope it would be useful to have discussions along these lines and see what comes out of it. The journal is excellent as it stands but could, I think, become more influential as a shaper of the field of Low Countries historical studies rather than a reflection of a part of the field.

**Martha Howell** is Miriam Champion Professor of History at Columbia University in New York. Her publications include *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* (Cambridge 2010); *From Reliable Sources*, with Walter Prevenier (Cornell, 2001; German ed., Vienna 2004); *Uit goede bron*, with Marc Boone and Walter Prevenier (Antwerp 2000); *The Marriage Exchange: Property, Social Place and Gender in Cities of the Low Countries, 1300-1550* (Chicago 1998); and *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (Chicago 1986). She is presently working on the culture of credit in northern Europe during the late medieval and early modern centuries. She was awarded a doctorate of humane letters, *honoris causa*, from the University of Ghent, Belgium in 2007 and in 2015 was elected a foreign member of the Royal Flemish Society of Belgium Academy of Arts and Sciences. Email: mch4@columbia.edu.