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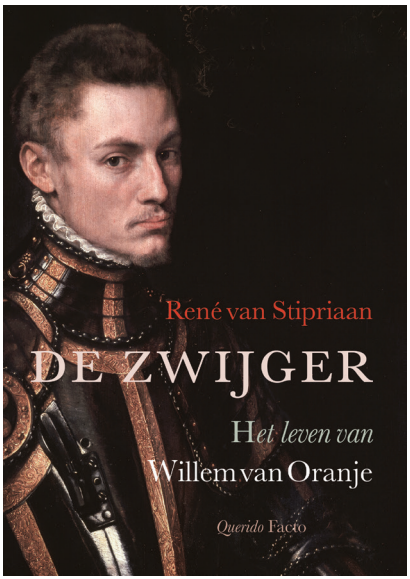
Review

René van Stipriaan, *De Zwijger. Het Leven van Willem van Oranje*, Amsterdam, Querido Facto, 2021, 944 pp. ISBN 9789021402758.



William of Orange's epithet 'the Silent' seems ill-chosen considering the seemingly endless conversations, deliberations, and correspondence that occupied him daily. It was through words, rather than through decisive military action, that the prince achieved his most impressive feats. Nevertheless, the title of van Stipriaan's monumental new biography is apt. Orange operated in a cultural context in which the art of dissimulation had become an accepted and necessary part of the political toolkit. Few mastered it as well as the Prince of Orange. His many utterances are therefore notoriously difficult to interpret.

Because of the resulting ambiguity, Orange can be anything to anybody. Champion of religious tolerance or stalwart defender of Protestantism, national figurehead or member of a transnational noble cast, idealist or opportunist, hero or villain – all these interpretations have over the years been put forward in the many biographies of William of Orange. Selective reading of his extensive output of letters and the panoply of conflicting characterisations by contemporaries makes it possible to support any of these positions. The challenge for van Stipriaan was how to truly take the measure of a man with such a talent for spin.

Van Stipriaan tackles this problem simply and effectively by being extraordinarily thorough. Step by step, he retraces the words and actions of the Prince of Orange, a venture in which few details are deemed unimportant. To achieve this, he builds on years of careful research, the close reading of a large body of sources – both the words of Orange himself and those of his contemporaries – and the latest developments in the historiography of the Dutch Revolt. The result is a remarkably rich and nuanced encounter, not only with the Prince of Orange himself, but also with the turbulent times in which he lived.

The structure of the book is resolutely chronological. It starts at the very beginning of Orange's life in the 1530s and devotes an unusual amount of attention to his upbringing as well as the cultural environment of the Habsburg court from which he launched his

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promising career. From there, we can follow the gradual unfolding of the political crisis that would inadvertently morph into the Dutch Revolt. This meticulous step-by-step account of the life of the prince is a potent antidote to sweeping generalisations. The reader can witness the doubts and struggles of an ambitious aristocrat faced with a quickly shifting and unpredictable political landscape, in which he was only one of many influential players.

Regularly, van Stipriaan takes a little side-step to introduce the reader to an important dimension of the cultural and religious world of the sixteenth-century Netherlands. We learn, for instance, about the many different religious ideas and movements that sprung up, the changing educational practices of the nobility, and the fascinating intellectual and social circles of sixteenth-century printers. All these digressions allow the reader to form a clear impression of the underlying cultural, religious, and intellectual assumptions that shaped Orange's decisions.

Despite its length, wealth of details, and many nuances, the book is highly readable. At times, it has the quality of a novel, in which a complex and flawed central character seems to triumph, before seeing his achievements disintegrate. The number of obstacles encountered by Orange is particularly striking. Not only did he face competent adversaries, such as the capable Alexander Farnese, but he simultaneously struggled with the incessant intransigence of radical Protestants, the parsimony and stubbornness of local magistrates, and the unpredictability of his noble peers. The constancy displayed by Orange throughout these persistent challenges seems at times almost superhuman. Yet, in the estimation of van Stipriaan, Orange also regularly miscalculated, or stubbornly persisted in following a path that was clearly leading nowhere. His insistence on a policy of religious peace (*religievrede*), a concept that has won him many plaudits in later ages, is a surprising example of such a miscalculation.

Nor does the prince come across as a one-dimensionally heroic figure. His concern for the well-being of the population of the Netherlands seems to have followed his more instinctive apprehensions about the loss of his own status. Also, his insistence on religious concord jarred with his unwillingness or inability to control militant Calvinists, who left a trail of destruction throughout the Low Countries. Moreover, his more admirable qualities, such as patience and optimism, are counterbalanced by moments of aggression, pride, and ambition.

Even after almost a thousand pages of carefully-researched biographical detail, William the Silent remains a somewhat elusive figure. Van Stipriaan is at times surprisingly cautious when weighing his actions and intentions, presenting possible interpretations rather than firm arguments. Presented with so much context, readers are to some extent free to form their own interpretations. Nevertheless, some broader themes colour van Stipriaan's reading of the Prince of Orange. Convincing, for instance, is the argument that Orange was first and foremost the scion of a great noble house, whose instincts were to work towards the betterment of his illustrious family. His self-consciousness as the steward of a house in the ascendancy shaped his political actions. Throughout the book van Stipriaan also devotes plenty of attention to the contentious question of Orange's religious convictions. Whereas many have accused him of religious opportunism and hypocrisy (even his own mother suspected atheist tendencies), van Stipriaan discerns a genuine commitment

to a basic form of freedom of conscience. These were instincts that guided Orange's decision-making, but also contributed to his eventual decline.

De Zwijger merits the positive response it has received. It provides academic historians with an authoritative, thorough, and insightful study of *the* key player in the history of the Dutch Revolt. For non-academic audiences, it is a wonderfully-readable and gripping account of the life and times of one of the most fascinating characters of sixteenth-century Europe.

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