

# Henri Pirenne

## Historian and Man of the World

SARAH KEYMEULEN

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Henri Pirenne (1862-1935) is generally recognised as one of the most influential European historians of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century. The combination of his scholarly activity with the social mission that he set himself earned him an extraordinarily successful career and a double reputation: at least in Belgium, he was regarded not only as a 'father of history', but also as great citizen. Although his influence was unmistakably large, there is no consensus about the existence or the nature of a 'Pirenian persona'. He combined the ideal collection of skills, values and standards required of historians with very specific personal characteristics. At the same time he was inextricably linked to a certain era and a certain Belgium that died with him. Pirenne therefore, did not so much represent a new type of scientific persona as the prestige of an idealised, long-vanished Belgium and its corresponding academic culture.

*Henri Pirenne. Historicus en man van de wereld*

Henri Pirenne (1862-1935) wordt beschouwd als één van de meest invloedrijke Europese geschiedschrijvers van de laatnegentiende en vroegtwintigste eeuw. Het verband tussen zijn wetenschappelijke activiteit en de maatschappelijke taak die hij voor zichzelf zag weggelegd, leverde hem een uitzonderlijk succesvolle carrière en een dubbele reputatie op. Pirenne staat, althans in België, immers niet alleen geboekstaafd als een 'vader van de geschiedenis', maar ook als een groot staatsburger. Hoewel de invloed van Pirenne onmiskenbaar groot is geweest, is er geen consensus over het bestaan of de aard van een 'Pirennaanse persona'. Hij combineerde het ideaalpakket van vaardigheden, normen en waarden die historici werden geacht te bezitten met zeer specifieke karaktereigenschappen. Tegelijk was hij onlosmakelijk verknoopt met een zeker tijdsgewricht en een zeker België, dat samen met hem ter ziele ging. Pirenne stond dan ook niet zozeer model voor een nieuw type wetenschappelijke persona als voor het prestige van een geïdealiseerd, verdwenen België en een vervlogen academische cultuur.

## Introduction

‘What I ultimately want’, mused Henri Pirenne, then a fresh young university student, in a diary entry of 1882, ‘is not to waste my life in pure erudition like a university professor, but by means of the study of the past to obtain facts, arguments and new insights that I can apply to the study of the present’.<sup>1</sup>

At first sight this statement is hardly surprising: many students of history begin their study because they want to understand the present by knowing about the past. Nevertheless, in Pirenne’s case it is significant because it gives an early intimation of the sort of scholar Pirenne wanted to be and in the end was, with great success. Pirenne had no ambition to dwell in an academic ivory tower and be satisfied with what, after the First World War, he would call – with a sneer at the German historians – ‘mere specialism’.<sup>2</sup> His professional motivations, as well as epistemic, were explicitly social and ideological, or as Bunna Ebels-Hoving put it: ‘it never occurred to him to see the historian as anything but socially complicit’.<sup>3</sup> That link between Pirenne’s scholarly activity and the social task, not to say mission, that he set himself earned him an extraordinarily successful career and a double reputation. Pirenne, at least in Belgium, is regarded not only as a ‘father of history’<sup>4</sup>, but also as great citizen.

Certainly in the aftermath of the First World War, Pirenne has spoken very openly about the moral responsibility of scholars and historians in particular.<sup>5</sup> That is not surprising: for Pirenne and many of his contemporaries, moral superiority was a *conditio sine qua non* for scholarly virtue and in no way in contradiction to the positivist primacy of objective fact-based historical scholarship, which was the dominant idea of the time. History education was focussed just as much on producing good citizens as good scholars, and historians were even assessed posthumously on their moral legacy – in this connection necrologies are very illustrative.<sup>6</sup>

1 Free University of Brussels (further: FUB), University Archives (further: UA), 026PP/01/04/003, Notes de cours 1879-1885, 2. Notes prises en 1882 et années suivantes, 23 Novembre [1882]. All original (French or Dutch) quotations in text and footnotes have been translated into English by Dr. Jill Bradley and the author.

2 Henri Pirenne, ‘De l’influence allemande sur le mouvement historique contemporain’, *Scientia* (1923) 176.

3 Bunna Ebels-Hoving, ‘Henri Pirenne (1862-1935)’, in: A.H. Huussen, E.H. Kossman and H. Renner (eds.), *Historici van de twintigste eeuw* (Utrecht, Antwerp 1981) 33.

4 For the term ‘father of history’, see Herman Paul, ‘Fathers of History: Genealogies of the Historical Discipline’, *Storia della Storiografia* 59-60 (2011) 224-230.

5 See for example his famous and influential address on comparative history as the answer to the dangers of narrow nationalist historiography, Henri Pirenne, ‘De la méthode comparative en histoire’, in: *Ve Congrès international des sciences historiques* (Brussels 1923) 19-23.

6 On the genre of the necrology, see for example Jean-Claude Bonnet, ‘Les morts illustres: Oraison funèbre, éloge académique, nécrologie’, in: Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris 1986) 217-241.

Far more implicit for Pirenne and his colleagues was (self) reflection on the motives behind the choice of research themes, the interpretation of facts and the practice and performance of historians. Nevertheless, it is just such underlying, often culturally determined and unconscious inspiration, motivation and aims that form the scholarly persona of the historian.<sup>7</sup> That was the case too with Pirenne. As a prominent member of the French-speaking liberal bourgeoisie, a fiery patriot, an outraged victim of war – in short as a child of his times and social class – these aspects of his character were forcefully present in his ideas, research themes and practices as an historian.<sup>8</sup> In the first part of his career, roughly between 1885 (the year of his first university post) and 1914 (the start of the First World War), Pirenne's ideological, political and moral motivation and aims were anything but a hindrance to his scholarly fame. Quite the opposite – they boosted his rapidly rising reputation as a scholarly and social authority. In the second, post-war, phase of his career, along with the social upheaval, a growing tension arose between his epistemic aims and his political and social goals.

In what follows it will be demonstrated how the sort of scholar that Pirenne had long represented with self-evident conviction and with great academic and social recognition came under increasing pressure, how, not without difficulty, it bent with the wind of the changing times and in the end could not avoid some painful cracks.

### The liberal humanist

Thanks to an unprecedented wave of industrialisation, by the late nineteenth century the new Belgian nation had reached the position of the fifth most important economic power in the world, the fourth biggest trading nation and, at least for the wealthier classes, the most prosperous country in the

7 Lorraine Daston and H. Otto Sibum, 'Introduction: Scientific Personae and their Histories', *Science in Context* 16:1-2 (2003) 1-8 DOI 10.1017/S026988970300067X, in particular her remark that 'specific cultural contexts are central in defining the content of the scientific persona.' On the concept of the 'scientific persona', see also the current joint research project by Stockholm University, KU Leuven and the University of Groningen, *Scientific Personae in Cultural Encounters in Twentieth Century Europe* (SPICE). A terminological alternative is Herman Paul's concept of the scholarly persona: Herman

Paul, 'What is a Scholarly Persona?: Ten Theses on Virtues, Skills, and Desires', *History and Theory* 53 (2014) 348-371 DOI 10.1111/hith.10717.

8 See, also the demystification of the 'Pirenne phenomenon' by Jan Dhondt (1966) and, almost fifty years later, by Walter Prevenier (2011): Jan Dhondt, 'Henri Pirenne: Historien des institutions urbaines', *Annali della Fondazione Italiana per la Storia Administrativa* III (1966) 81-129; Walter Prevenier, "'Ceci n'est pas un historien": Construction and Deconstruction of Henri Pirenne', *Revue belge d'Histoire contemporaine* 3-4 (2011) 553-573.

world.<sup>9</sup> All over Europe national pride was in its heyday at this time and this was certainly the case in Belgium. The *belle époque* was a period of unbridled capitalist expansion for the country, with the acquisition of the Congo in 1908 as the crowning achievement.<sup>10</sup> With the most liberal constitution and an international cultural appeal, Belgium was the cosmopolitan Mecca of modernity. The liberal industrial bourgeoisie was the leading class in the country. Among the prominent members of this political, economic and cultural elite was a family of textile entrepreneurs from the Walloon industrial city of Verviers and it was into this family that Pirenne was born in 1862.<sup>11</sup> Although he had been intended to follow a career as engineer or barrister, once at university the young Pirenne quickly became fascinated by history. At the same time, as he confided in his diary, he wanted emphatically to combine his scholarly activities with the ‘practical, active life’.<sup>12</sup> The calling to be a socially involved historian did not come out of the blue: it was a result of the increasing status of scholarly activity on the one hand, and of his upbringing on the other.

In the modern, rapidly industrialising society, science was regarded as the driving force of progress. With increasing support from the state, academic institutions and courses began to make themselves more professional ‘intellectual industries’.<sup>13</sup> In this process, science grew into an explicitly civil

9 Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *De groote oorlog. Het koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Amsterdam 1997) 11.

10 See Gita Deneckere, *Les turbulences de la Belle Époque* (Brussels 2010) and idem, *1900: Op het breukvlak van twee eeuwen* (Tielt 2006). Although the colonisation of the Congo was the subject of heated debates, especially among the liberal bourgeoisie, Pirenne at several occasions defended his country’s colonial policy. At a faculty meeting in May 1910, he suggested – in his familiar entrepreneurial spirit – that ‘with the colonisation of the Congo, an important domain opened itself to new scientific research – research that could very well be conducted in Ghent.’ See Ghent University Archives, Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres. Procès-Verbaux des séances, 6A1\_003: Séances 1895-1913. During the First World War, he ranted against the German questioning of the legitimacy of Belgium’s possession of the Congo: Cernex, France, Personal Archives of Yves Pirenne, *Journal de Guerre* 1, Captivité. 1 août 1914-17 mars 1916, 18 mai 1915. And in December 1920, in the presence of King Albert, Pirenne was

a keynote speaker at the first Colonial Conference in Brussels with a lecture on ‘the formation of a colonial mentality in Belgium’: FUB, UA, ULB 026PP/01/06/003, Conférences III, 1913-1920, ‘La formation d’une mentalité coloniale en Belgique’.

11 More information on the Pirenne family and their textile imperium in Bryce Lyon, *Henri Pirenne: A Biographical and Intellectual Study* (Ghent 1974).

12 FUB, UA, 026PP/01/04/003: ‘Je caresse toujours l’idée de mêler la science à la vie pratique, active’.

13 Term from Thorsten Nybom, ‘A Rule-governed Community of Scholars: The Humboldt Vision in the History of the European University’, in: Peter Maassen and Johan P. Olsen (eds.), *University Dynamics and European Integration* (Dordrecht 2007) 69. On the professionalization of the historical sciences in Belgium see, amongst others, Jo Tollebeek, *Fredericq & Zonen. Een antropologie van de moderne geschiedwetenschap* (Amsterdam 2008); Jo Tollebeek, Tom Verschaffel and Leonard H.M. Wessels (eds.), *De palimpsest. Geschiedschrijving in de Nederlanden, 1500-2000* (Hilversum 2002).

culture, which offered scholars interesting possibilities with regard to both career and status.<sup>14</sup> This applied not only to the branches of science that held out possibilities for technical use, but just as much to historians whose view of the past and future of their country's history was of great importance for the nation. Both historians and statesmen were imbued with the idea that the point of writing and teaching history was to simultaneously stimulate knowledge, morality and a sense of civil virtues.<sup>15</sup> For the French historian Gabriël Monod (1844-1912), one of Pirenne's teachers during his studies in Paris, the symbiosis of scientific, moral and patriotic aims was 'the true essence and contribution of history: the development of humanity and civilisation'.<sup>16</sup> The American historian Carl Becker (1873-1945) even went so far as to say that 'the value of history is not scientific but moral'.<sup>17</sup> Whoever served science also served civilisation – and not infrequently the primary focus was on one's own nation. With all this display of service to society and to the state, it was somewhat paradoxical that the virtue of objectivity was regarded as the supreme moral guide for the historian.<sup>18</sup> The objective scientific method, so it was believed, led to a superior form of truth. Only by means of 'objective research', that is to say free from an explicit personal standpoint or judgement, the historian-as-impartial-judge received legitimation on both the epistemological and the social level.<sup>19</sup> In this way scientific knowledge served as a basis for socio-political action, in the first place for those in authority and policy makers who took advantage of this knowledge, and in some cases also for historians themselves.<sup>20</sup>

14 Carol E. Harrison, *The Bourgeois Citizen in Nineteenth-Century France: Gender, Sociability, and the Uses of Emulation* (Oxford 1999) 64-65.

15 See Olivier Dumoulin, *Le rôle social de l'historien* (Paris 2003) 176-187. It is no coincidence that necrologies of Pirenne almost unanimously refer to these three functions (scientific, moral, civic) of the historian. Quite literally even in the case of the newspaper article by Charles d'Ydewalle after Pirenne's death in December 1935: '(Pirenne, S.K.) gently past away in his beautiful home in Uccle, surrounded by his books and his grandchildren, leaving to the historians of tomorrow the task of recounting his grand life as a savant, an honest man and a citizen'. Archives of the Royal Academy, Classe des Lettres et Sciences politiques, Dossiers personnels, membres et correspondants décédés, Pirenne Henri, 11605.

16 Cited in André Burguière, *L'École des Annales: Une histoire intellectuelle* (Paris 2006) 86.

17 Cited in Michael Kammen, 'Personal Identity and the Historian's Vocation', in: idem, *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture* (New York 1997) 8.

18 On the notion of objectivity, see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York 2007). On the role of scientific virtues in general, see Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation* (Chicago 2008).

19 See Cathryn Carson, 'Objectivity and the Scientist: Heisenberg rethinks', *Science in Context* 16:1-2 (2003) 243-269.

20 Probably the most well-known example of modern, professional historians using the authority of objective, critical scientific method to actively participate in political debate was the Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906). See, in this respect, Vincent Duclert, 'L'Engagement scientifique et intellectuel démocratique: Le sens de l'affaire Dreyfus', *Politix* 48 (1999) 71-94.

The growing social status of an academic career was not the only factor in Pirenne's calling as a committed historian: the circle in which he grew up provided an ideal and fertile ground. His father Lucien-Henri, a major manufacturer in the textile industry, after office hours was active in the progressive-liberal party as councillor for public works and member of a freemason's lodge. Pirenne was raised with liberal-humanistic values and convictions (the importance of reason, *Bildung*, tolerance, a critical mind, freedom of opinion and service to the general good, to name but a few), by a devout Catholic mother, which only underlines the importance of tolerance and freedom in the family.<sup>21</sup> At the University of Liège where Pirenne began his higher education in 1879, the modernisation of history education had been started recently by his instructors Godefroid Kurth (1847-1916) and Paul Fredericq (1850-1920). Both had studied in Germany, the leading light in the scientific approach, and they had introduced the seminary system (known as the *cours pratiques*) in their own country.<sup>22</sup> Together with the German scientific model the corresponding scientific *persona*, based on classic liberal principles, appeared in Belgium as well. The modern 'man of science' was teacher, civil servant, researcher, *Bildungsbürger* and *pater familias* all at the same time. Pirenne was immediately attracted to this emergent academic culture. There was so much new ground to be broken, so many truths to discover, so much social progress to be made – these appealed to both Pirenne's intellectual appetite and to his liberal entrepreneurial spirit.<sup>23</sup> Moreover he became inspired by the enticing, deeply engaged project of modern history as it was so passionately taught by Kurth, his mentor in Liège. In this connection, on the occasion of Pirenne's appointment to the University of Ghent in 1886, Kurth gave him – this time as a colleague – a last unmistakable message:

Please do not forget when you come to hold the chair in history that you will be not only a representative of science and that you will not just impart scholarly ideas to young people: whether you want to or not, you will find yourself to be

21 On the peaceful co-existence of progressive-liberal and devout Catholic thought in Pirenne's parental home, see the aforementioned biography on Pirenne by Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, chapter I.

22 Respectively in Liège in 1874 and in Ghent in 1883 (further advanced by Pirenne himself in 1886). In Brussels, the seminar system was introduced by Leon Vanderkindere in 1877. See Paul Fredericq, 'L'origine et les développements des cours pratiques d'histoire dans l'enseignement supérieur en Belgique', in: *A Godefroid Kurth, professeur à l'Université de Liège, à l'occasion*

*du xxve anniversaire de la fondation de son cours pratique d'histoire* (Liège 1898) 3-149.

23 See also François-Olivier Touati, 'Notes Pirenniennes', *Revue Historique* 666 (2013) 404: 'The size of the paternal factory, the affluence of his family, the consideration of the masters he frequented, from the start here was a "baron" armed to apprehend life without inhibition, socially at least, and one could almost say entrepreneurial, sensible to the economy, both to the activity of workers and to profit, able to cultivate networks, to frequenting the "great" and to exercise authority'.

the bearer of a social mission, and from the realms of the past, your words shall reach across to echo in the present, where they will form the seeds of life and death. For it is both the honour and the danger of the historical sciences never to be able to stand unconsciously in the field of pure intelligence and to be constantly involved with life and to react to it.<sup>24</sup>

Kurth's influence on the formation of Pirenne's scientific persona, at least in the sense of the social mission of the profession of historian, must not be underestimated. Nevertheless Pirenne differed from his former teacher in one essential point: to him the motor of history was not a Divine Creator, but a creative mankind, who with never-ending diligence works on the furtherance of the economy, the intellect and the cultural patrimony. This pluralistic, humanistic vision was an impetus to his career.

### The bridge builder, 'man of the world' and academic entrepreneur

While Kurth and Fredericq had been there at the birth of modern Belgian history, it was Pirenne who surpassed them and became the 'father' of the discipline.<sup>25</sup> That was the result not only of his productivity, the quality of his work and his great sociability; it also had an ideological reason.<sup>26</sup> Far more than the Catholic apologist Kurth or the Protestant, pro-Flemish liberal Fredericq, Pirenne represented the neutral scientific persona that was part of the modern academic culture (and that in Belgium moreover, fused seamlessly with a divided political landscape that longed for unity). Naturally, just like his teachers, Pirenne represented his own political, ideological and gender class – that of the *white male liberal bourgeoisie* that had made reasonableness, impartiality and moral superiority its professional

24 FUB, UA, 026PP/01/01/005, 16 September 1886, Kurth to Pirenne.

25 See, in this respect, Jo Tollebeek, 'Pirenne and Fredericq: Historiographical Ambitions around 1900', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 3-4 (2011) 383-409; Herman Paul, 'Voorbeeld en voorganger. Robert Fruin en Godefroid Kurth als vaders van de Geschiedwetenschap', *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review* 126 (2011) 30-53.

26 See Paul, 'Voorbeeld en voorganger', 30-53: 'Unlike Fruin, Kurth was not honoured as an example to follow, but as a predecessor. [...] While Fruin was praised for his scientific persona,

Kurth was honoured for the scientific praxis he had initiated in Belgium. Because of his persona Fruin was considered an example, while Kurth was only a predecessor of the praxis. [...] Why was it that Kurth was not lauded as an example, but simply as a predecessor? Religion and ideology played a crucial part. After all, Kurth was a distinctly catholic intellectual. Not only did he mainly attract catholic students, he was also taunted by his liberal colleagues for his explicit apologetic writings and his commitment to the emerging Christian workers' movement in Belgium'.

ethos, and modern science its intellectual playing-field. ‘With the pathos of reasonable men who were above the interests and class, (they, S.K.) saw themselves as impartial spokesmen of the general interest’, was the way in which Cathryn Carson described the persona of the late nineteenth-century (German) scholars. Pirenne too, belonged to these ‘public-minded, reasonable men, standing above interests and classes’.<sup>27</sup> Of all the virtues with which Pirenne was associated both during his lifetime and posthumously, his talents for reasonableness, impartiality, tolerance and consensus are by far the most famous.<sup>28</sup> In the biography Francois-Louis Ganshof (1895-1980), one of Pirenne’s most renowned pupils, these also form a central point:

The great sense of justice that Pirenne showed in the exercise of his functions and his judgements should be fully emphasised here. [...] The concern for being honest in life is yet another facet of the virtue that impelled him to such rigorous objectivity in his academic work. During his opening speech at the 5th International Conference of Historical Scholarship, he told the historian who was bound by objectivity ‘to suppress and transcend his most precious prejudices, his most stubborn convictions and his most natural and respectable

27 Carson, ‘Objectivity and the Scientist’, 245.

28 Pirenne’s remarkable talent for ‘fine diplomacy’ however, was also criticised at times. In his diary on several occasions fellow-historian Paul Fredericq explicitly condemned Pirenne’s art of compromising. In February 1914 he lamented: ‘Oh that turning and avoiding! [...] (Pirenne’s wife, S.K.) is from Ghent, she’s straightforward, much more than Pirenne, who at all times wants to safeguard his influence and his popularity, sometimes even by cutting capers’. In January 1916, while in exile together in the city of Jena, Fredericq criticised Pirenne for being too amicable with German officers while reproaching them behind their back: ‘He always tries to please everyone’. That Pirenne was allowed to exchange letters with colleagues while his correspondence was strictly limited to his close family, made Fredericq wonder ‘how the sacred Pirenne had maneuvered to be able to write to (Eugène, S.K.) Hubert? He’s an intriguer and an *arriviste*.’ University Archives Ghent, respectively Hs 3704, *Journal de Paul Fredericq, Cahier 45*, f. 139-141; *Ibid.*, *Cahier 73*, f. 83 and Hs 3708,

*Journal de Guerre de Paul Fredericq, Cahier 26*, f. 212. If Fredericq – at the same time one of the key supporters of Pirenne’s professional career – politely confided his criticism of Pirenne’s personality to his diary, other fellow-academics were less tactful. Such was the case with his old study friend from Liège, Maurice Wilmotte, an influential professor of Roman Philology and a militant Walloon. ‘(M. Pirenne, S.K.)’, he subtly remarked on the occasion of the Pirenne manifestation in 1912, ‘has deployed an intelligent and unperturbed coquetry to avoid all compromise and fundamental commitment which, in a country where the political combat is hand-to-hand, could alienate him from sympathies he thought he might be needing.’ *Manifestation en l’honneur de M. le professeur Henri Pirenne. Bruxelles, 12 mai 1912 (Mons 1912)* 172. Although these observations, at least partially, resulted from personal frustration and professional envy, it is a fact that in a country as ideologically polarised as Belgium Pirenne’s striking social abilities and talent for compromise were crucial for his career and reputation.



feelings.’ By speaking these words Pirenne formulated a rule not only for intellectual work, but also a true rule for life, a moral prescription.<sup>29</sup>

Modern historical scholarship demanded a neutral impartial standpoint of every historian, but in the hornets’ nest of the various conflicting communities and ideologies that was Belgium it was absolutely essential. Partisanship divided, but objective scientific debate – free of prejudice or ideological interests – had the capacity to unite. In other words, the practice of scholarship revolved not only on its own rightness, but also on public interest – that of scholarship, society and the nation.

Thus the ideal historian was a builder of bridges, just as Pirenne was – someone who linked people and opinions, who could bring about consensus and mutual understanding, who increased insight and at all times guarded the greater public interest. For Pirenne, in order to fulfil this significant task, historians were supposed to possess the right qualities:

Source criticism is not the whole story. [...] The historical construction, or if you wish, the historical synthesis demands qualities that are not the concern of this activity – clarity of mind, the capacity to distinguish between the essential and the incidental, the skill to understand the links between phenomena, the aptitude to distance one’s self from the present in order to interpret the past and, yet, also a knowledge of the political and social life that one can only acquire by a certain familiarity with present day life, through imagination, the absence of prejudices and finally a psychological discretion that springs from a nuanced culture that is characteristic of what I, in the best and broadest sense of the word, would call the man of the world.<sup>30</sup>

A good historian then, also had to be a ‘man of the world’, a man with cosmopolitan flair and enlightened values, a man who was as sensible of contemporary politics and the social system as of the niceties of the past, a man who dared to combine professional knowledge with imagination, a man who loved the full life – in short, the type of man who, when in a strange city, would rather go and see the brand new town hall than yet another cathedral.<sup>31</sup>

29 François-Louis Ganshof, ‘Pirenne (Henri)’, in: *Biographie nationale de Belgique* xxx (1959) col. 671-723. For an in-depth analysis of Ganshof’s motivations for writing this article, see Henning Trüper, *Topography of a Method: François Louis Ganshof and the Writing of History* (Florence 2008) 90 ff.

30 Henri Pirenne, ‘De l’influence allemande sur le mouvement historique contemporain’, *Scientia* 34 (1923) 174.

31 See the famous anecdote recounted by Marc Bloch of his trip with Pirenne to Stockholm in 1928. When Bloch asked Pirenne what he would like to visit first, Pirenne replied that he wanted to start with the newly built town hall. Noticing Bloch’s surprise, he explained that he was a historian, not an archaeologist, and therefore he loved life. Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l’histoire ou métier d’historien* (Paris 1959) 13, also cited in Prevenier, ‘Ceci n’est pas un historien’, 555.

As proof of Pirenne's great passion for the 'practical, active life' – and in addition to his impressive oeuvre – an equally impressive list could be made of initiatives and memberships that can be called 'academic entrepreneurship' because they had the aim of developing the scholarly industry in the broadest sense of the word. Pirenne played a leading role in the founding and expansion of countless associations, institutions, councils and societies. He set up national and international cooperative relations, was at the root of great educational reforms and supported the interests of libraries and archives. As a gifted speaker at public lectures, as an authoritative voice in public debate and as guardian of the historic patrimony of his city he was also active in popularising scholarship – because that too, was scholarship in the service of the public interest.<sup>32</sup>

### The national historian

However, the professional project with the greatest social impact and the reason for the unprecedented rise in his career, of course, was Pirenne's role as the national historian of Belgium. When he began his career as a young medievalist in 1885, the nation was still largely legitimated in the historical field by romantic tales. Thus Pirenne did not hesitate when, about the turn of the century, Karl Lamprecht (1856-1915) offered him the chance to write a new history of Belgium for his series *Geschichte der Europäischen Staaten*.<sup>33</sup> It had long been a cherished plan of Pirenne to examine the origins of what was later to become Belgium, as can be seen from an entry in his diary from 1888: 'I must make note here of my project to write a history of the Low Countries. What will come of that? Perhaps it will be forgotten before I read these lines again'.<sup>34</sup> The plan was not forgotten, even though it would be more than ten more years before the *Histoire de Belgique* was first published. Pirenne's magnum opus would eventually appear in seven volumes spread over a period of thirty-three years (1899-1932). During that process a remarkable symbiosis emerged between the ambitious Pirenne and the young nation of Belgium, and the initial scholarly project was complemented with an emphatic social and political component.

The growing tension on various grounds – ideological (Catholics versus Liberals), socio-economic (socialists versus conservative economic powers) and between communities (Flemish versus Walloon) – demanded

32 See, with respect to the popularisation of science, also the zeal of Pirenne's colleague in Ghent Paul Fredericq: Tollebeek, *Fredericq & Zonen*.

33 In fact Lamprecht asked Fredericq first, who passed the assignment to Pirenne because 'he

was much better suited for the job'. See the postcard of Fredericq to Pirenne at FUB, UA, 026PP/01/03/036, Correspondance relative aux TI-II de *Histoire de Belgique*.

34 FUB, UA, 026PP/01/04/003.

a stronger defence of the national narrative. Pirenne's *Histoire de Belgique* provided that: it gave the country a new common past and thereby also a new identity. The work immediately brought Pirenne national renown and gave him a role as one of the first public intellectuals of Belgium. His lectures became crowded events, his readers spread far beyond the boundaries of the academic community – witness the fact that his influential article 'Les périodes de l'histoire sociale du capitalisme' was reprinted by the socialist Librairie du Peuple.<sup>35</sup>

The *Histoire de Belgique* was also the reason for an important personal rapprochement between Pirenne and King Albert I, who as head of state had the final say in the state university. Around the turn of the century the connection between the monarchy and the state university was still close. The approbation of the king was seen as the highest form of scholarly prestige. The strong focus of the academic culture on the nation and the monarchy, according to Henning Trüper, played an important role in the establishment of the professorial persona in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup> In Pirenne's case however, the relation with the king went further than a simple exchange of telegrams on the occasion of important life events or professional achievements. King Albert invited Pirenne to informal walks by the sea or intimate dinners at the palace. With a mixture of pride and amazement Pirenne wrote to his mother in 1919 about one of these meetings: 'It was an extremely intimate dinner, there was no-one else'.<sup>37</sup> For his youngest son Robert, the event illustrated that 'there is no honour that has not been bestowed on him'.<sup>38</sup> Pirenne was invited to join the elite group Cercle des xv, where sensitive matters of state were discussed to the accompaniment of a glass of good Burgundy.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, in 1920 his son Jacques was appointed history tutor to the young Prince Leopold.<sup>40</sup> The Pirennes became the purveyors to the royal household of scientific knowledge that helped to support national unity and the monarchy. On two

35 Henri Pirenne, *Les périodes de l'histoire sociale du capitalisme* (Brussels 1922).

36 Trüper, *Topography of a Method*, 231.

37 Waterloo, Belgium. Personal Archives of Françoise Lemmers-Pirenne, Henri Pirenne. Lettres de famille 1908-1929, 30 December 1919.

38 *Ibid.*, Lettres de famille 1908-1929, 31 December 1919.

39 See Jacques Pirenne, 'Henri Pirenne. Conférence faite à Bruxelles le 24 novembre 1936', *Le Flambeau* (1936): 'Speaking freely, with fantasy, uncontrolled, was for him one of the greatest pleasures. He found a comfort in it, a joy that he needed and

that made him an indefatigable dinner guest, especially at the Cercle des xv, where he found brilliant partners in a Paul Hymans and a Maurice Duvivier. [...] And when the xv got tired and returned back home, he moved on to Taverne de Waterloo, with Leon Cornil and Max Léo Gérard (the secretary of the king, S.K.), and spent a part of the night talking [...]'.  
40 From 1945 onwards, as the secretary of Leopold III, Jacques Pirenne took up a very combative attitude while defending the king during the royal question. As a reward for his loyalty, he later received an hereditary noble title.



Pirenne in his student uniform in Leipzig, 1885.  
Université libre de Bruxelles, 026PP/01/04/003,  
Notes de cours, 1879-1885.

occasions Pirenne considered an even more active (or more visible) political role. If the elections of 1912 had not resulted in a defeat for the Liberals, he would have withdrawn from the professorship in order to become a minister in a party of national unity.<sup>41</sup> In 1920 too, he came close to a governmental post: he was asked to agree to have his name on the list of the Parti de Renaissance National, but his function as rector prohibited him taking up a political mandate.<sup>42</sup>

The high degree of social recognition that came to Pirenne as national historian has contributed greatly to his somewhat mythical reputation.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, it also lay at the root of the first conflict between his scientific aims and his political and social motivation. After all, not everyone was convinced that Pirenne's vision of his country's history served the public weal. Even before the First World War and to Pirenne's annoyance, incidental criticisms of the *Histoire de Belgique* arose from both the Flemish and Walloon sides.<sup>44</sup> In an attempt to preserve his moral integrity, Pirenne emphasised ever more strongly the impartiality with which he studied and reported the history of Belgium.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, he did not yet consider re-evaluating his role as national historian on the grounds of this limited dissent – for this the impact of a world war was needed.

### The victim of war

The First World War brought unprecedented challenges to historians. On the eve of the outbreak, Pirenne, as many Europeans, was scarcely aware of the threat of conflict. The brutal declaration of war came as a shock, certainly when it appeared that renowned German historians also seemed to defend the war. Karl Lamprecht, Fritz Arnhem (1866-1922) and many others, who

41 Waterloo, Belgium, Personal Archives of Françoise Lemmers-Pirenne, Journal of Pierre Pirenne, 3 June 1912.

42 Cernex, France, Personal Archives of Yves Pirenne, Mme Henri Pirenne. Lettres à son fils Jacques Pirenne 1908-1938, 1921.

43 See above, note 8.

44 See the argument between Pirenne and the French historian Frantz Funck Brentano (a Chartist, specialised in the Ancien Régime and the history of 1302). On 13 March 1899, Pirenne wrote in a fury: 'You tell me that I lack impartiality! The Flamings in their turn reproach me to have Francophone sympathies.

Some think I'm anticlerical, others think I'm too favourable for the Church. Now that's enough!' Brussels, National Archives, 'Manuscrits Divers', Henri Pirenne, BR/6 (4596), 1892-1899 [old inventory]. The letter marked the end of their correspondence.

45 In a preparatory note to the introduction to the fourth volume of *Histoire de Belgique* (1911), Pirenne quite explicitly remarked: 'If there is one motive for me to rejoice in having undertaken this history, it is the general assessment of my impartiality'. Archives Générales du Royaume, Manuscrits Divers, Papiers Henri Pirenne, 4457.

until shortly before had been friends and even scientific examples, were suddenly dangerous pan-Germans with imperial ambitions on Belgium. Under occupation, academic life came to an abrupt halt. The universities remained closed, teaching and meetings could only take place clandestinely. Due to his opposition to the reopening in Flemish of the German occupied university, in 1916 Pirenne, along with Fredericq, was deported to Germany where he spent two and a half years in exile. In a war diary and in separate 'Reflexions d'un solitaire' he testified to the radical ideological transformation he underwent.<sup>46</sup>

On his return to Belgium Pirenne was hailed as the symbol of intellectual and moral resistance to the German aggressor. To an even greater extent than before the war, he took on the role of public intellectual and used that position to challenge the causes of the war and the aberrations of the German scholars. Asking himself if European historians had not failed just as much as political leaders and if they could not have done more to avert the First World War, he decided: 'I have come to believe that we must change our historical methods a great deal. In my opinion, they seem to be too mechanical, too far removed from their real subject – life.'<sup>47</sup> Pirenne's war experiences, and more specifically his outrage at the German scholars' support of the war, had not led him to abandon his pre-1914 view that social involvement was an essential part of historical scholarship, but in fact had even strengthened it. More than ever scholarship had to be in service of the 'public interest', even if this was now more emphatically defined as

46 For more information on Pirenne's resistance and captivity, see Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, 197-276. For Pirenne's personal reflections on his war time experience, see Bryce and Mary Lyon (eds.), *The Journal de Guerre of Henri Pirenne* (Amsterdam 1976); Bryce and Mary Lyon (eds.), 'Réflexions d'un solitaire' by Henri Pirenne (Brussels 1995); Sarah Keymeulen and Jo Tollebeek, *Henri Pirenne, Historian: A Life in Pictures* (Leuven 2011) 43-56. On Pirenne's post-war methodological revision, see Cinzio Violante, *La fina della 'grande Illusion': Uno storico europeo tra guerra e dopoguerra*, *Henri Pirenne (1914-1923): Per una rilettura della Histoire de l'Europe* (Bologna 1997); Peter Schöttler, 'After the Deluge: The Impact of the Two World Wars on the Historical Work of Henri Pirenne and Marc Bloch', in: Stefan Berger and Carl Lorenz (eds.), *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe* (Basingstoke

2010) 404-425; Raoul Van Caenegem et al., *Herdenkingsplechtigheid Henri Pirenne. Bij de 100e verjaardag van zijn geboorte* (Ghent 1963); Sophie De Schaepprijver, "'That Theory of Races': Henri Pirenne on the Unfinished Business of the Great War", *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 3-4 (2011) 473-506; Geneviève Warland, 'L'Histoire de l'Europe d'Henri Pirenne: Genèse de l'oeuvre et représentation en miroir de l'Allemagne et de la Belgique', *Textyles: Une Europe en miniature?* 24 (2004) 38-51; Bryce Lyon, 'The War of 1914 and Henri Pirenne's Revision of his Methodology', in: Jo Tollebeek, Georgi Verbeeck and Tom Verschaffel (eds.), *De lectruur van het verleden. Opstellen over de geschiedenis van de geschiedschrijving aangeboden aan Reginald De Schryver* (Leuven 1998) 507-516.

47 Pirenne in *Reflexions d'un solitaire*, quoted in Ebels-Hoving, 'Henri Pirenne', 33.

the progress of the whole of humanity and not only the concern of narrow national interests. Pirenne's plea for comparative history and his efforts to bring about international academic collaboration after the war accorded with this striving for 'a history (that would be, S.K.) increasingly scientific, increasingly impartial and increasingly more humane'.<sup>48</sup> With a great deal of censure he contrasted this to the immorality of the German historians: '(The German historians, S.K.) without realising it, have become simple specialists, devoted only to problems related to knowledge or polemics. These historians have voluntarily placed themselves outside history.'<sup>49</sup>

Much ink has been spilled on Pirenne's treatment of Germany. In fact Pirenne did not so much reject the German historical method as the blameworthy direction that German historians had taken recently – that of an abhorrent narrow nationalistic and essentialist vision of history.<sup>50</sup> Together with a moral judgement and a logistical boycott (the exclusion of German historians from history conferences), Pirenne embarked on a scientific revision of some of his own pre-war works. Before 1914 he had consistently presented Belgium as the junction of German and Roman influences – this was the central idea on which his *Histoire de Belgique* was based. Now he argued that from time immemorial Belgium was more attracted to the superior Western (French) culture than the Eastern (German) culture.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, Pirenne's resolute rejection of all that hinted at nationalism and racial theories caused

48 Henri Pirenne, 'De la méthode comparative en histoire, discours d'ouverture du cinquième Congrès international des Sciences historiques', in: Guillaume Des Marez and François-Louis Ganshof (eds.), *Compte-rendu du cinquième Congrès international des Sciences historiques* (Brussels 1923) 13.

49 Henri Pirenne, 'De l'influence allemande', 176 (see also note 2). See also Geneviève Warland, 'Avatars de la "métahistoire" nationale et mise en récit de la Grande Guerre: Point de mire sur Henri Pirenne (1862-1935) et Ernest Lavisse (1842-1922)', in: Annamaria Laserra, Nicole Leclercq and Marc Quaghebeur (eds.), *Mémoires et antimémoires littéraires au xx<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Brussels 2008) 27-63: 'The victory of the Allies against a nationalist Germany in which the idea of race and national genius tried to replace the idea of humanity, represented for Pirenne much more than a military victory. It incarnated the victory of scientific truth and

moral truth: the 'triumph of the idea of humanity over the idea of race'.

50 See De Schaepdrijver, 'That Theory of Races', 537; Lyon, 'The War of 1914', 511; Peter Schöttler, 'Henri Pirenne face à l'Allemagne de l'après-guerre ou la (re)naissance du comparatisme en histoire', in: Serge Jaumain et al. (eds.), *Une guerre totale: La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale* (Brussels 2005) 507-517; Violante, *La fina della 'grande illusione'*.

51 See also Trüper, *Topography of a Method*, 293: 'Since the late 19th century, Belgian scholarship had assigned to itself a mediating role. [...] Belgian historians were obliged to, and Belgian history was marked by, the pursuit of a Franco-German syncretism, in Pirenne's words. Pirenne's bitter farewell to this notion – his conclusion that one was obliged to "unlearn from Germany" – was relinquished after only a few years' (under pressure from the American Historical Association, amongst others, S.K.).

him to set about a semantic revision of the pre-war volumes of the *Histoire de Belgique*. Comparative research with the editions published after 1918 showed that he systematically rewrote every passage in which the idea of ‘race’ appeared.<sup>52</sup>

With his plea for comparativism and his engagement with international cooperation, Pirenne chose a radical European project.<sup>53</sup> In his post-war work (in particular his influential *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, published posthumously in 1937 but in preparation since 1922) he also increasingly looked beyond the frontiers of his own country, to eastern Europe and the Mediterranean areas. Nevertheless, more than other European historians he remained bound to his role of national historian. Between 1914 and the completion of his magnum opus in 1932 another three volumes of the *Histoire de Belgique* appeared. In the atmosphere of exalted patriotism after the war, Pirenne more than ever was regarded as a national icon. In 1921 he was honoured by King Albert and the *Ligue Nationale du Souvenir* as ‘one of the few people who truly personifies the national ideal’. He was sent abroad to speak about the origins and importance of the nation state now internationally known as ‘poor little Belgium’, and in countless national and international lectures he refuted the claims of the German and ‘Greater Netherlands’ historians that Belgium was an ‘artificial nation’.<sup>54</sup> Pirenne’s treatment of the narrow nationalistic German historiography was in no way a hindrance to his continual (and even exalted) engagement as national historian after the war. Was not Belgium the prototype of the cosmopolitan, tolerant, freedom-loving and peace-loving Europe of the future?

### The last Belgian

Pirenne’s ambiguous attitude after the First World War – hesitating between scholarly revenge and the worthy pursuit of objectivism, between growing internationalism and continuing patriotic pride – displayed the same mental desperation felt by so many intellectuals. Up to the First World War it was rare that the compatibility of professional and patriotic engagement was questioned in the community of scholars of history. The experiences of the War had mercilessly exposed the contradictions of academic research in the service of the nation.<sup>55</sup> In the wake of this evolution criticism arose – from

52 Schöttler, ‘Henri Pirenne face à l’Allemagne de l’après-guerre’, 514-515.

53 Marc Boone and Sarah Keymeulen, “‘Personne ne songe à l’Europe, sauf quelques utopistes sans voix et sans force’: Henri Pirenne (1864-1935) et l’histoire de l’Europe”, *Actes du Colloque*

‘*Historiens d’Europe, historiens de l’Europe*’ (forthcoming).

54 Tollebeek and Keymeulen, *Henri Pirenne, Historian*, 64.

55 See also Christophe Prochasson and Anne Rasmussen, *Au nom de la patrie: Les intellectuels et la première guerre mondiale (1910-1919)* (Paris 1996).



academic circles and beyond – of the role Pirenne had built for himself as ‘national historian in the service of public interest’.

The Belgian project to which Pirenne, as the principal representative (and in a certain sense even as the initiator), had bound his identity – Belgium as a cosmopolitan cultural mix and as a training ground for a peaceful, progressive and eminent civilisation – was increasingly undermined. At the international level the United States rapidly gained ground in both politics and scholarship after 1918.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, in the post-war readjustments of the international playing fields of power the over-ambitious Belgium was quickly put in its place. Within its own borders the increased striving for autonomy of the Flemish and Walloons movements attacked the roots of Pirenne’s idea of a historic joint ‘Belgian civilisation’.<sup>57</sup> Pirenne was blamed for nationalistic finalism: it was a recurring criticism that he presented Belgian history as a process in which the independence of 1830 must be regarded as the ultimate achievement.

Pirenne’s defence of his view of Belgian history automatically implied opposition to the ‘Dutchifying’ of Ghent University and a plea for national (and linguistic) unity.<sup>58</sup> As rector of the university between 1919 and 1921 Pirenne managed, not without difficulty, to hold the tendencies in check. In the early 1920s the demands for the (partial) ‘Flemish-isation’ became ever more vociferous. Pirenne reacted strongly: the loss of French as the principal working language would lead to great cultural impoverishment, destroy the leading role of the university and greatly reduce the number of students. Above all, to Pirenne the demand for making Ghent University Flemish was the symbol of a radical and short-sighted Flemish nationalism that would mean the beginning of the end of the united Belgium that he had documented in his *Histoire de Belgique*. To Pirenne, the Belgian nationalism of which he was accused was the very antithesis of the abhorred narrow nationalism that had manifested itself in Germany and of which Flemish nationalism, partly due to the association with activism in the First World War, could be regarded as an off-shoot.<sup>59</sup>

56 It was, not unsymbolically, also under pressure from the United States that historians of the ‘central powers’, from 1926 onwards (and after years of exclusion under Pirenne’s lead) were allowed to participate again in historical congresses and organisations for international scientific cooperation. On Pirenne’s role in isolating the German historians from the international scientific community, see amongst others Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, 293-296.

57 See Marnix Beyen, *Oorlog en verleden. Nationale geschiedenis in België en Nederland, 1938-1947* (Amsterdam 2002) 396.

58 On this subject, and more specifically on the efforts of the French-speaking populations in Flanders to maintain a place for French in the Flemish public realm, see David J. Hensley, *Fighting for French in Flanders: The Promotion and Defence of French Language Rights in Flanders, 1880-1975* (Unpublished dissertation Penn State University 2013).

59 Nevertheless, the most important advocate for and also the first chancellor of the Ghent University made Flemish, August Vermeylen, was a convinced internationalist, as his famous slogan ‘We want to be Flemings to become Europeans’

In Pirenne's fight to maintain Belgian unity, professional, political and strongly personal motives and aims became increasingly intertwined – particularly after his son Jacques Pirenne became the leading figure in the anti-Flemish opposition movement in the interbellum period. As a reaction to the proposal made by Minister Nolf in 1923 for a dual language system at the university, he set up the *Ligue Nationale pour la défense de l'Université de Gand et la liberté des langues*.<sup>60</sup> In demonstrations, pamphlets and a formal appeal to the king that Henri Pirenne handed to the monarch personally, the organisation pointed out the importance of Ghent University for building the Belgian nation. After all, had not the historical research carried out at that university contributed considerably to the awareness of national unity among the people?<sup>61</sup> It was a bitter pill for Pirenne that even the reference to his own scholarly prestige and to his dedication to the nation could not change the minds of the politicians.<sup>62</sup>

With the publication of a series of preparatory studies for his influential *Mahomet et Charlemagne* during the 1920s Pirenne continued to confirm his international scholarly reputation.<sup>63</sup> In his own country however,

illustrates. Ironically, the quote was modelled directly after Pirenne's cosmopolitan vision of Belgium. See Daniel Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880-1930: Peace, Progress and Prestige* (Manchester, New York 2013) 197.

60 On the struggle for making Ghent University Flemish, see, among other Maria De Waele, 'De strijd om de citadel. Frankrijk en de vernederlandsing van de Gentse universiteit, 1918-1930', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 32:1-2 (2002) 153-193; Anne-Marie Simon-Vandermeersch and Elienne Langendries, 'De vernederlandsing van de Gentse universiteit', in: Guy Leemans et al. (eds.), *Vlamingen komt in massa. De Vlaamse beweging als massabeweging* (Gent 1999) 121-146.

61 Archives of the Royal Palace, Cabinet of King Albert, 110, Dossier 953, 23 January 1923: 'The French-speaking University of Ghent has more than ever become the living symbol of national unity.'

62 That the obvious engagement of the Pirenne family against making the university Flemish hindered their relationship with the Court is also illustrated by a report from Max Leo Gérard to

the king on 10 July 1923: 'M. Henri Pirenne has said to me that he was called to the Palace by M. the Count d'Arshot who told him that M. Nolf had complained about M. Jacques Pirenne's activity as secretary of the National League for the Defence of Ghent University, of which the politics are opposed to those of the Government in this matter. He asked me, in a personal capacity, for my advice. I excused myself, given the fact that I naturally don't know the exact scope of the intervention, nor by the Government, nor by the Chief of the Royal Cabinet. I did say however, that it was perhaps regrettable that M. Jacques Pirenne had not assured himself, before occupying himself so actively in the League, if there was no incompatibility with his functions as Professor of Prince Leopold'. Archives of the Royal Palace, Archives of Max Leo Gerard, 35/2/A (009-010).

63 *Mahomet et Charlemagne* would eventually be published posthumously (Brussels 1937), and is considered up to the present as one of the most influential works on the influence of Islam on (Western) European history. On the genesis and experiences of the Pirenne thesis, an exhibition was organised in 2009 by Ghent University in

the growing contestation of his role as national historian gnawed away at his authority. Thus the *incontournable* leader and guide of Belgian historiography at the end of his career became somewhat of a superseded icon of a Belgium that no longer existed. An extremely symbolic illustration of this loss of authority can be found in the report of the Faculty Committee of 22 October 1929, when a new dean was to be chosen – the Flemish-isation of Ghent University, by that time, had already become politically unavoidable. Up to that moment Pirenne, the eternal advocate of compromise, had always carried the greatest weight and always had the final word. Now political reality caught up with him and the new head of the university, August Vermeulen (1872-1945), simply set him aside.<sup>64</sup>

To put it briefly, the conflict concerned the political agenda of the vote whereby a French-speaking candidate from the Pirenne group stood against a Flemish candidate from the Vermeulen camp. Referring to the old university tradition of open debate and the importance of unanimity – especially on the eve of the celebration of Belgium's centenary – Pirenne opposed a secret ballot. He hoped that in an open vote his authority would be sufficient to suppress the dissidents. However, only some of those present applauded after his speech – an unprecedented humiliation for Pirenne and 'his great defeat in the faculty', according to Trüper.<sup>65</sup> The secret ballot was taken and resulted in the selection of the Flemish candidate. Shortly after, the 'Dutchifying' was a fact. Pirenne requested retirement as emeritus and moved to Ukkel, never to return to Ghent. When Pirenne died in 1935, in consideration of the political sensitiveness, the government decided not to organise a state funeral. It was a final symbolic rejection of Pirenne's engagement as national historian. In that sense the old idea of 'Belgium' died with him.

## Conclusion

What can we learn from this biographical sketch with respect to the scholarly persona of Pirenne? Was his success due to the fact that, more than his contemporaries, he personified the ideal-typical scientist? Was he the model for a new type of scholarly persona? Or is the persona concept not really useful for an icon such as Pirenne who was both admired and opposed?

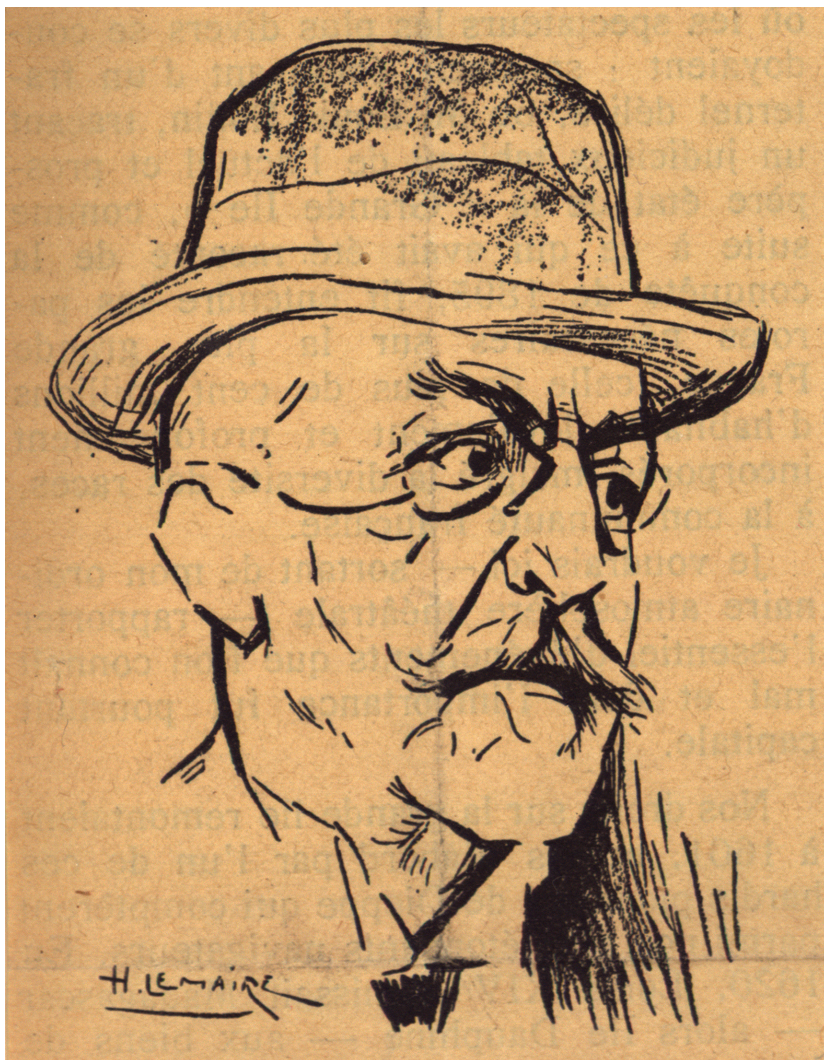
collaboration with the Free University of Brussels. See also the corresponding website [www.henripirenne.be](http://www.henripirenne.be).

Even before the First World War Pirenne enjoyed a high international reputation, mainly because of his synthesis on *Les anciennes démocraties des Pays-Bas* (Paris 1910), a work of wide influence in the field of urban history, and with the equally

influential *Les périodes de l'histoire sociale du capitalisme* which was published simultaneously in English and in French in 1914.

64 For a detailed analysis of these faculty minutes and the loss of authority of Pirenne and some of his French speaking colleagues, see Trüper, *Topography of a Method*, 234 ff.

65 *Ibid.*, 234.



▲  
Caricature created by Henri Lemaire, published  
in *L'Horizon Bruxelles* on 2 November 1935 in  
response to Pirenne's death.  
Université libre de Bruxelles, 026PP/01/07/006,  
*Hommages à Henri Pirenne*, Tome II, Presse.

An interesting debate in this regard is the question whether or not Pirenne founded a school. Pirenne is known as the ‘father of the Ghent school of history’, but according to Walter Prevenier such a school has never existed.<sup>66</sup> Pirenne’s students went in all directions, geographically, methodologically and thematically, so we cannot speak of an overarching structure or paradigm. Therefore Prevenier speaks of a ‘legacy’ to give a name to the continuity of the link with Pirenne rather than calling him the ‘father of a school’. The strength of this legacy was expressed, for instance at the International Historical Conference in Rome in 1955, when it appeared to be alive and well twenty years after his death.<sup>67</sup>

According to Marnix Beyen, on the contrary the Belgian historians could just as well present themselves as a ‘school’ because ‘they all saw themselves more or less as the children of Henri Pirenne’.<sup>68</sup> Beyen even perceived something of a ‘Pirennian paradigm’ that seems to perfectly combine the influences of Pirenne’s own scholarly predecessors. The Pirenne school historian, according to Beyen, is a medievalist ‘with a strong methodological basis’ (cf. Ranke), ‘convinced of the influence of economic factors on history’ (cf. Lamprecht) and ‘concerned with both the German and French historical world’ (cf. the syncretism of Kurth).<sup>69</sup>

Bryce Lyon, author of Pirenne’s biography published in 1974, brought forward yet another Pirenne model. In his in memoriam for Fernand Vercauteren (1903-1979), another of Pirenne’s alumni, he referred explicitly to Pirenne’s ‘Bourgundian man of the world’ and to a certain ‘Belgianness’ that went with it: ‘The Belgian tradition, most honored by Henri Pirenne and his school, has promoted a combination of intensive scholarship with *joie de vivre*. (The Pirennian historian, S.K.) was a thoroughly convivial person, never tired of travelling, meeting people, and telling stories about tables laden with food and drink’.<sup>70</sup>

Does all this mean that Pirenne presented a new sort of scholarly persona that was emulated even posthumously? Although the influence of Pirenne, particularly on contemporaries and immediate students of the master, was unmistakably great, there is no consensus on the existence or

66 Prevenier, ‘Ceci n’est pas un historien’, 558.

67 Jo Tollebeek, ‘Rome in 1955. Een momentopname van de Belgische en Nederlandse geschiedschrijving’, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 85:2 (2007) 368-369.

68 Beyen, *Oorlog en verleden*, 387.

69 *Ibid.* Anton Froeyman gives a different set of characteristics of the historian of the Ghent school: he practices urban history, is socially committed and of liberal and Flemish-minded

opinion (the latter of which is not the case for Pirenne), and often makes use of auxiliary sciences such as diplomatics and paleography. Anton Froeyman, *Clio en de Menswetenschappen. Max Weber’s “die Stadt” en de Gentse Historische School* (Ghent 2004), published on [http://www.ethesis.net/clio/clio\\_inhoud.htm](http://www.ethesis.net/clio/clio_inhoud.htm).

70 Bryce Lyon, Paul Meyvaert and Robert Lopez, ‘Memoires of Fernand Vercauteren’, *Speculum* 55:3 (1980) 645-650.

the nature of a Pirenne school, let alone of a 'Pirennian persona'. Pirenne combined the ideal collection of skills, values and standards that were required of historians in his time with very specific personal characteristics, such as notable emotional intelligence, a talent for daring syntheses and one-liners, an exuberant social life and a great social openness and tolerance. At the same time he was inextricably linked to a certain era and a certain Belgium, which has died with him. Therefore the nostalgic idealisation of Pirenne by his students must also be interpreted as a longing for a long-vanished 'Pirennian' Belgium and its corresponding academic culture, just as Jan Dhondt's criticism of Pirenne was also an unmistakable attack on these old structures (and their principal representative, François Ganshof).<sup>71</sup> Apart from being an influential scholar, Pirenne can better be regarded as a mythologised personality than scientific persona: the fact that he is often described in such terms as 'icon' or 'phenomenon' underlines this conclusion.

**Sarah Keymeulen** is a researcher at Ghent University. Together with Jo Tollebeek, she is the author of *Henri Pirenne: A Life in Pictures* (Leuven 2011). She is currently finishing her PhD on Henri Pirenne. Email: sarah.keymeulen@ugent.be.