

Cruz, Laura, Frijhoff, Willem (eds.), *Myth in History, History in Myth* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 182; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009, viii + 263 pp., ISBN 978 90 04 17834 2).

*Myth in History, History in Myth* sets out the proceedings of the Third International Conference of the Society for Netherlandic Studies, which was held in New York in 2006. Laura Cruz and Willem Frijhoff (respectively Associate Professor of History at Western Carolina University and Emeritus Professor of Early Modern History at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), who edited the selection, refer in their introduction to the Fifth Anglo-Dutch Historical Conference, which was held in Southampton in 1973 on the subject of political mythology and whose proceedings were published by John S. Bromley and Ernst H. Kossmann under the title *Some Political Mythologies* (1975). On that occasion, they write, the speakers were mostly concerned about the removal of masks: myths were seen at the time essentially as distortions of the truth. In New York, however, the organisers were seeking to understand myths as narrative complexes built around issues that were seen as essential to society; they were viewed no longer as obstacles but as real objects of study. The participants in this conference focused especially on the production and circulation of historical myths in the traditions of the Low Countries from the Middle Ages to the present day. More than their predecessors in the 1970s, they also sought to keep in mind the dynamics of myths, their historicity, their multiple meanings and their emotional power.

The resulting selection is not tightly structured. Even after reading the ten contributions it is not clear how they were arranged; no line is clearly detectable in either chronological or thematic terms. This is evident even in the introduction. The editors of this book have not managed to get the theme under control. Is this surprising? How can research into myths follow a clear direction when the theoretical

foundations set out in the notes include just about everyone and everything: the Annales school, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, writers on nationalism such as Benedict Anderson, classics of anthropology such as Bronislaw Malinowski, cultural historians like Roger Chartier and Robert Darnton, Claude Lévi-Strauss, the Dutch scholar of Germanic linguistics and Germanic mythology Jan de Vries, Nietzsche, Cassirer and Henri Bergson, Hayden White, Jung, the Marxist thinker Georges Sorel, Michel de Certeau and – of course – Pierre Bourdieu? Is it surprising that contributors such as Kimberlee Cloutier-Blizzard, Hubert P. van Tuyl and Willem Frijhoff would each define the 'myth' in a different way and always on the very first page of their contribution, as if they were discharging an unpleasant duty that was best finished as quickly as possible?

Nonetheless, *Myth in History, History in Myth* still has a certain unity. This arises from the function attributed to myths by most of the contributions: it shapes identity at the collective level. This can take place at the proto-national level, as Donald J. Harreld shows in his analysis of narratives by seventeenth-century Dutch mariners like Olivier van Noort and Joris van Spilbergen. These are 'useful myths', in which values considered to be unique are attributed to the writer's own community. The same process can also occur in a smaller group, as is evident from Frijhoff's article focusing on the contribution of myths to the identity formation among the colonists in New Netherland. Each of these cases involves a form of community building or a similar process: creating a familiar environment at a time when the old world has disappeared from view, coping with forces considered to be hostile to the group, or social criticism calling for a harmony that is perceived as having been lost (as in the paintings of *Satyr and Peasant* by artists considered as diverse as Jacob Jordaens and Jan Steen, the theme of the contribution by Cloutier-Blizzard).

This function emerges most clearly in political myths, as a number of articles in this selection

demonstrate – indeed these would not have been out of place in *Some Political Mythologies*. These contributions focus on the festivities on the occasion of the Joyous Entry into the Netherlands of Crown Prince Philip II in 1549 and the local differences that arose at the time (Jac Geurts), the epic ‘larger-than-life’ narrative of the Resistance against Spain (Cruz), the development of a strong Orangeist mythology in the decades after 1650, precisely at a time when there was no stadholder (Jill Stern) and the complex emergence of the idea of *Neerlands Israel* as a political utopia in the seventeenth-century Republic (Theodore Dunkelgrün). In each case these analyses maintain a sharp eye for telling details: the different types of giants in Antwerp and Maastricht in 1549 (Geurts); the fact that almost fifty paintings of the grave of William I were made between 1650 and 1671 (Stern), etc. This collection also devotes some attention to the role of historians in the formation of political myths: Johan Joor shows how a historian like Herman Th. Colenbrander, writing in the first quarter of the twentieth century, created an image of the Netherlands that had lapsed into lethargy under Napoleonic rule. This allowed him to date the beginning of the modern Netherlands from 1813, when a member of the Oranje family, together with the liberal bourgeoisie, once again governed the country.

Such (political) myths had unmistakable power in defining the organisation of both state and society. In his contribution, however, Frijhoff also points out the importance of ‘smaller, less ambitious’ myths, almost incidences of mystification, such as the creation by the American colonists of genealogical links with the European nobility. He calls these ‘emblematic myths’: they served as emblems of group identity. This is an interesting nuance, which has been carefully applied to the wider *tableau* of the mythical Netherlands. This painstaking approach is characteristic of the whole collection. Almost all the contributions in *Myth in History, History in Myth* show evidence of cautious probing and

searching, considerable erudition and impressive scholarship. The way in which Jan Blanc explains the controversy surrounding Rembrandt’s *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* (around 1661), may serve as an example of this. This is a collection whose editors found it difficult to define their research programme precisely but in which the old theme is once again clearly mapped out through a series of erudite contributions. It will act as a stimulant in the future: towards a less eclectic form of reflection and towards new contributions which, the reader hopes, will be as expert and enthusiastic as those found in this book.

JO TOLLEBEEK, K.U.LEUVEN

Frijhoff, Willem, *De mist van de geschiedenis. Over herinneren, vergeten en het historisch geheugen van de samenleving* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2011, 96 blz., ISBN 978 94 6004 072 6).

De grenzen tussen historische wetenschap en historische cultuur zijn diffuus geworden. Sinds de jaren tachtig van de vorige eeuw zijn er voortdurend grensoverschrijdende contacten tussen de geschiedenis als wetenschap en al wat met het historisch geheugen of de herinnering van een samenleving te maken heeft. Het grote voordeel van die grensoverschrijdende contacten is dat we beter zicht hebben gekregen op de mogelijkheden en beperkingen van de geschiedwetenschap zelf. Die wetenschap is door haar academische karakter soms ver afgedwaald van haar maatschappelijke functie. Dat is een van de belangrijke punten die Willem Frijhoff in *De mist van de geschiedenis* voor het voetlicht haalt. Naast waarheden over het verleden aan de hand van feiten en argumenten dient de geschiedwetenschap ook beelden van het verleden te geven waarmee huidige generaties op adequate wijze zicht krijgen op heden en toekomst. Ik kan me helemaal scharen achter Frijhoff als hij stelt: