

Colin White & Laurie Boucke

THE UNDUTCHABLES

*An observation of the Netherlands:
its culture and its inhabitants*

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PREFACE



This is the ninth edition and 34th year in publication of *The UnDutchables: an observation of the Netherlands, its culture and its inhabitants*. When first published in 1989, we declared the book to be an impressionistic view of a certain side of the Dutch as it is often perceived by visitors to Holland. In the ensuing years it has brought much laughter to its readers and enabled many to vent their frustrations through joking. Along the three-decade-plus path, we have chosen to retire some earlier topics and points of focus as they disappear from view in contemporary Holland—good examples being the gorgeous guilder as a currency, the strip ticket as a travel toy, the night shop as a life-support system and most recently a spoof retelling of the *Dutch-boy-with-his-finger-in-the-dijk* tale, titled “Another Brick In The Waal.” This book is not a dry, scholarly offering. Rather, it is offered as a pro-Dutch, fun yet irreverent exposé. Thanks to their spirit of openness, the humour has resonated well with most Netherlanders.

It is not possible to cover every province, town, custom and aspect of life in a short work—such information is available elsewhere. We have avoided such an approach as it would have stifled the character of this book. Some readers may resent what they perceive to be stereotypic images, but all people form such images

(to some extent) when they travel or reside abroad. Fortunately, most readers have been able to appreciate the humour without feeling offended.

Although much of the book clearly concerns contemporary Dutch life, certain national traits have been around for centuries. These have been commented upon in works dating back to the 1600s. We believe the Dutch will still be renowned for certain classic characteristics for many generations to come.

Similarly, the book is biased towards the urban environment, especially Amsterdam. However, in travelling through the countryside, one finds many of the same things, perhaps in a more peaceful setting and at a slower pace, but fundamentally the same traits: commercial cunning; cosy homes; coffee rituals; money worshipping; moralizing; criticizing; obsession with weather; humanitarianism; compromise and consensus; straightforwardness; and so forth.

Many readers view this book as a psychological survival kit for expats—the lowdown on the Lowlands, so to speak. This being the case, we feel that our efforts have been more than worthwhile.

Colin White & Laurie Boucke
California USA, June 2023



1

INTRO

(THE WAY THE TEXTBOOKS SELL IT)

THERE

The Netherlands: A country (often called Holland) in Western Europe bordering on the North Sea, with Belgium on its southern frontier and Germany on its eastern flank; total area 41,543 km² (16,040 sq miles) approximately, of which 18 percent is water; divided into 12 provinces—plus three Caribbean islands—which in turn are divided into municipalities; official language, Dutch; capital, Amsterdam; seat of government, The Hague; population 18 million and counting (2023).

“Holland” is an informal, cosy name for the country, but officially it defines the dominant provinces of North Holland and South Holland. Originally heavily forested, these provinces were referred to as “Holt Land” (lit. wood land), from which the word “Holland” derives. It was not until 1st January, 2020, that the country formally became “the Netherlands.”

THEM

The area was occupied by Celts and Frisians who came under Roman rule from the 1st century BCE until the 4th century AD and

was then overrun by German tribes, with the Franks establishing an ascendancy during the 5th–8th centuries. During the Middle Ages, it was divided between numerous principalities. The northern (Dutch) swamp (part of the Habsburg Empire) revolted in the 16th century against Spanish attempts to crush the Protestant faith and won independence in a series of wars lasting into the 17th century, becoming a Protestant republic. The southern part was absorbed into the Spanish Habsburgs and then in 1713 into the Austrian Habsburgs. Prior to wars with England and France, the country enjoyed great prosperity and became a centre of art and scholarship as well as a leading maritime power, building up a vast commercial empire in the East Indies, South Africa and Brazil. In the 18th century, it sharply declined as a European power. In 1814, north and south were united, but by 1840 the southern and eastern extremities of the Netherlands had become the independent nations of Belgium and Luxembourg. The Dutch managed to maintain their neutrality in World War I, but were occupied by Germany in World War II.

The post-war period has seen the country turn away from its traditional dependence on agriculture, although farming is still an important part of the economy. In 1960, large quantities of natural gas were discovered in the north; the ensuing wealth helped the Dutch mould their country into a “super” welfare state and emerge as a key figure (while struggling to maintain its individuality) in the increasingly oppressive European Union (EU).



2

GETTING ACQUAINTED

THERE

Do not be surprised if one of your first impressions is of being in doll-house country. Everything is small, crowded and cramped: houses, streets, shops, supermarkets, parks, woods, cars—horizontally, vertically, diagonally, upside-down and inside-out. Holland is by far the most densely populated country in the territory known as the Schengen Zone. With an average of 522 people per square kilometre of soggy land, its inhabitants have mastered the art of using the centimetre to the fullest.

This ability and talent has arisen, of course, from the fact that around 55-60 percent of the country consists of land reclaimed from the sea (depending on when it last rained). And the reclaiming and raining continue today.

On an international flight, when the pilot announces that you are flying over Holland, don't blink! You'll miss it—it's that small. You can, in fact, cross the whole nation by car in three hours.

For those of you arriving by plane from distant lands, a word of advice. Having entered the country and adjusted to the barometric pressure prevalent below sea level (jet lag withstanding), you'll

undoubtedly rush to view the windmills, tulips, cheese markets and canals. Water and horizontal hills abound. So do coffee shops. And, yes, you'll see your share of wooden shoes and Frisian cows. Tourist attractions can be exhausted within a few days, so ration yourself carefully.

If you expect to find delicious national food or the exotic, forget it. If you like wide, open spaces or a little solitude in nature, this is not the country for you. There are no large forests or wide expanses of land. When walking in the woods, dunes or on the beach, you have the feeling that millions have trod wherever you place your feet. They have. Can this be the stuff that inspired Rembrandt and Van Gogh?

THEM

The inhabitants of this small chunk of ex-seabed are not lacking in self-esteem, as reflected in literary titles such as *And the Dutch Created the Netherlands* and a KLM advertising poster that claimed: “*Most people only get to visit great works of art—the Dutch get to live in one.*”

They are bursting with dikes, liberalism, independence, equality and global beliefs. Some Dutchmen even go so far as to seriously believe that they should have the right to vote in US presidential elections. Why? “*Considering the amount of business that Holland does with America, it's just not democratic that we can't vote there.*” They brag about their freedom yet are caught in a self-imposed web of restrictions in the form of ever-increasing regulations and laws.

The Dutch appear a friendly lot: kind, polite and helpful to tourists. They love to talk about their country and to provide any directions or information you may require. Their fascination with things foreign—products, attitudes, ideas, customs, languages, etc.—is impressive and flattering. The Dutch reputation for tolerance is all too apparent to the overseas visitor. You get a strong message that: “*You can do whatever you want . . . as long as it doesn't interfere with me.*” But do not let this image fool you—it changes drastically if you stay long enough to be regarded as “part of the scene.”

The longer you stay, the deeper you sink into it. The dark cloud of disapproval descends as your Dutch comrades constantly criticize what they consider to be unfavourable situations beyond their borders. There is no relief from this moralizing, despite the fact that similar or even worse situations often exist within their own kingdom. Do not take the onslaught personally. You will soon discover that the Dutch reprimand is not reserved for foreigners alone. The natives thrive on shaking their fingers at and scolding each other. Every 5–10 households actually relocate to get away from the dancing digits of neighbours.

They also seem to be caught up in a cycle of endless envy. They cannot free themselves from feelings such as, “*If you are sitting, then I should be sitting too!*” They are extremely jealous of each other’s possessions and keep a constantly updated mental inventory of what their neighbours, relatives and colleagues have and have not. But they are also a very giving people when it comes to charities and crises. They are world famous for their universal humanitarianism, and exercising this particular type of generosity gives them much satisfaction. The key to getting cash from cloggies is that they must feel that they WANT to give and not that they HAVE to give.

They always speak their mind and ask what most foreigners consider to be probing questions about one’s personal life. Their directness gives many the impression that they are rude and crude—attributes they prefer to call “openness.” You can put it to the test by discussing intimate and shocking topics with them that you would never dare speak about with persons of any other nationality. What may strike you as being blatantly blunt topics and comments are no more embarrassing or unusual to the Dutch than discussing the weather.

This frankness is linked to their reputation for being opinionated and obstinate. When they believe in something, they will stubbornly adhere to their principles through thick and thin, unless and until they are ready to change their mind of their own accord. It is easy for newcomers to view the Netherlands as a country full of pontificating alpha-cloggies battling for leadership of the herd.