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Book Review

Theo Hermans (ed): *The Flemish Movement: A Documentary History 1780-1990.* London & Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: The Athlone Press, 1992.

According to the Preface, the main aim of this book is "to present, for the first time, a broad historical picture of the Flemish Movement on the basis of original documents in English translation." Two skills have been combined, therefore, in this highly informative and quite readable anthology of texts: that of editing, that of translating. For the overall editing of the text Theo Hermans (no stranger to readers of *Dutch Crossing)* is responsible. The original selection of historical documents was made primarily by Lode Wils (Leuven), the author also of the Introduction; for the translation of the latter, Jane Fenoulhet and Theo Hermans jointly signed, while the introductory notes and annotations accompanying the documents, provided by Louis Vos (also of Leuven), were initially translated by Lesley Gilbert. A combined effort, therefore, from the extremely busy members of the Dutch Department of University College London and the University of Leuven.

There are sixty-nine documents collected here, presented in chronological sequence, varying in length, and showing a wide range of forms, from official to clandestine, and from speeches and open letters all the way to proclamations by the Belgian bishops, by the Council of Flanders, and King Baudoin I himself - all intended to throw light on the "nature and growth of the language conflict" in Belgium from 1786 to the present. In addition, this collection also sets out to provide the background to the "current transformation of the once unitary Belgian state into a fully fledged federal state."

Both in the struggle for equality of the Flemish language and in the development of the Belgian nation from a unitary to a federal state, the so-called "Flemish Movement" played a crucial, indeed the *dominant* role. The term "Flemish Movement" (*Vlaamse Beweging*) is a vague and all-encompassing one - a term, however, which the editors of the present text are reluctant to replace by a more precise definition, for, as the documents collected here clearly show, it is a "complex and changing... phenomenon," concerned, to be sure, with the linguistic rights of the Flemish people, but also heavily involved in the struggle for their well-being in a social, political and cultural sense.

Fascinating though the texts in the main body of this volume are (and there are some gems here, especially from the earlier periods), they gain immeasurably in value through the extremely enlightening Introduction to the collection by Lode Wils. It is thanks to Wils' brief historical overview that the documents acquire the necessary framework; in some cases it is only after reading the Introduction that the document can be properly interpreted.

Introduction and texts provide a vivid picture of the tangled web not only of conflicting claims and demands, but also of conflicting loyalties, shifting allegiances and changing attitudes. Patriotism, religion, socialism enter into combinations which often a few decades later are completely reversed. Nor are the terms of reference of the debate in any sense stable throughout the history of the Movement, and of Belgium in general. Patriotism at one time may mean having to decide between adherence to the nation state or to one's "homeland" (as in the period of King William I), at another time it may mean the exclusive clinging to the region, or to one's native religion. Enlightenment, liberalism, democracy, all imported from France and condemned by the Catholic church in one period, at another time surface as forms of patriotism in the face of German domination (1914-18, 1939-45).

Particularly the concept and nature of language itself are subjected to a seemingly endless series of transformations and metamorphoses. Language can be seen in the light of the triad of socio-cultural and political determinants conveniently titled "people, monarchy and religion" but all through the 19th century and into the 20th, it is also often interpreted as an instrument of oppression, wielded to the detriment of the Flemish by the predominantly French-speaking bureaucracy, the court, the upper bourgeoisie. The love of one's language may express itself in a tenacious clinging to a local dialect rather than the adoption of a standardized Dutch (Gezelle), whereas a more uniform language may be seen as providing access to wider culture (Julius McLeod). Language provides an "existential" ground, but it is also a social tool, promoting or preventing the material advancement of society and

individuals alike. It is an instrument for the recovery of past glory and greatness through literature, but it also manifests itself as a line of demarcation drawn across the map of Belgium, separating not only linguistic but also social, economic and cultural spheres of influence.

From the tenuous beginnings of the Movement, building on the miraculous survival of Flemish in an overwhelming French environment, to its present dominance in the "most federalized country in the world, after Canada" (p.38), Introduction and documents succeed admirably in conveying the multidimensional nature of the Movement, while at the same time showing its essential unity of thought and ambition. The extremely well chosen texts reinforce and broaden the themes introduced by Wils, and spur the reader on to go beyond the mere "facts," and to confront the emotions, aspirations and dreams also, to which these texts bear witness.

The Flemish Movement is a "must read" not only for those it addresses in the first place, namely people living in the English-speaking world, but also for many a Netherlander, for whom most of this information is probably new, or has in any case seldom been presented in such a lucid, well-organized fashion. For Canadians the texts and their context have of course a special meaning. As Hermans points out in his Preface, the history of the Movement not only "demonstrates the sociopolitical potential of language in multilingual societies" but above all "provides an object lesson in the containment of ethnic conflict by democratic means," a lesson sorely needed at this critical juncture in Canadian history. But could the lesson not be said to be valid for most societies, especially those of the industrialized world? Are there not lessons here for Britain, Germany, France, the Eastern European countries, and even the United States?

Highly recommended reading therefore not only for all those interested in the Low Countries, but for all students of nationalism, ethnicity, language, culture and government.