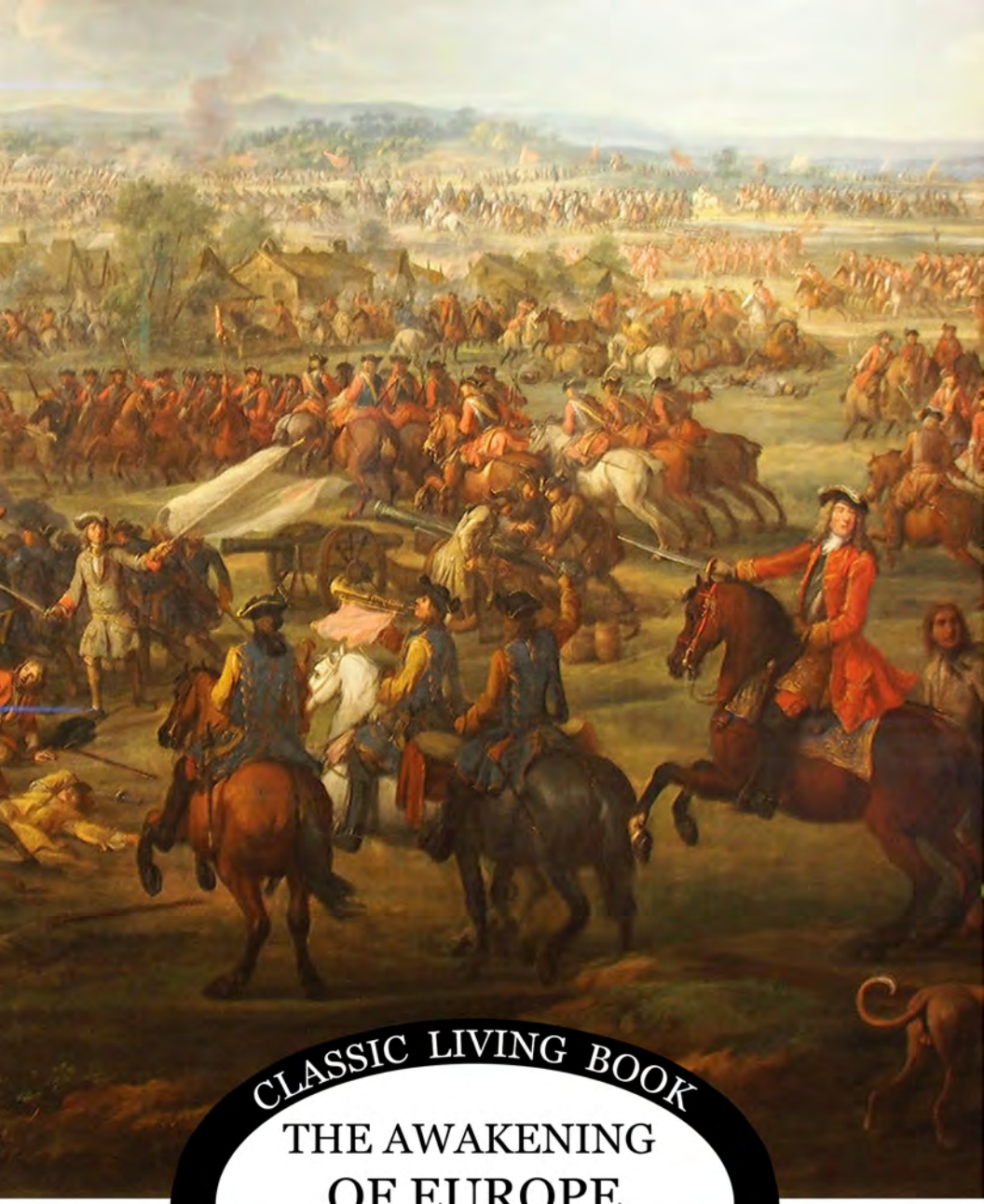

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

THE AWAKENING OF EUROPE

M. B. Synge

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

This edition published 2023
by Living Book Press

ISBN: 978-1-76153-002-9 (hardcover)
978-1-76153-004-3 (softcover)

First published in 1903.

A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

The Awakening of Europe

FROM THE REFORMATION TO THE SEVEN YEARS WAR (1520-1745)

by

M. B. Synge

Contents

1. STORY OF THE NETHERLANDS

"God made the sea, but the Hollander made the land."

—OLD DUTCH PROVERB.

Far away, in the north-west corner of Europe, lie the Netherlands, the lands which are now to play a large part in the world's history. The Low Countries they were called by the men of old time; and with good reason too, for many parts were actually below the level of the sea. Spongy and marshy, bleak and cold, was this corner of the European continent in the olden days.

Winds and waves had wrought sad havoc with the coast. The rough North Sea was ever encroaching on the low-lying land, breaking over the shores with its never-ceasing roar and tumble, and flooding the country below its level whenever the wild west wind blew it home. Not only had the people of this country to contend with wind and wave, but from the other side many great rivers rolled through the land, to empty their waters into the North Sea, overflowing their low banks and flooding the surrounding neighbourhood.

The largest of these was the Rhine. Rising amid the snowy Alps, leaping joyously over the famous falls of Schaffhausen, flowing in majesty right through Germany, the Rhine at last reached the Netherlands. The mouth of this famous river gave some trouble to the Hollanders. They made colossal pumps and locks, by which they lifted the water and lowered it into the sea. There was no rest for a lazy river in these parts. The stream must be kept moving, it must do its share of work in the country.

"As long as grass grows and water runs." This was their idea of For ever.

"I struggle but I emerge."

This was the motto of Zeeland, with the crest of a lion riding out of the waves, and it sums up the story of the people of the Netherlands. For hundreds of years they fought the angry waters with a stubborn determination, a patient energy, a dauntless genius,—an example to other countries.

They erected great mounds or dykes to keep out the North Sea; they dug canals to direct course of their sluggish rivers and to keep them within bounds. And when the ocean tides were high or the winds blew long from the west; when the heavy snows from the mountains melted, or the rainfall was unusually great, so that the dykes were broken down and the waters rushed in boundless masses over their land, yet the Hollander would not give up. With dogged perseverance he began again, so that to-day such an inundation is impossible.

"God made the sea, but we made the land," they can say to-day with pride. But even to-day these great dykes which keep out the sea have to be watched. Every little hole has to be carefully stopped up or the sea would rush in and devour the land once more. Every man, woman, and child in the country knows the importance of this.

A little Dutch boy was returning from school in the late afternoon, with his bag of books hanging over his shoulder, when he thought he heard the sound of running water. He stood still and listened. Like all other little boys in the Netherlands, he knew that the least crack in a dyke would soon let in the water, that it would cover the land and bring ruin to the people. He ran to the mound and looked about. There he saw a small hole, through which the water had already begun to trickle. He was

THE LITTLE DUTCH BOY AND THE DYKE.

some way from his home yet. Suppose he were to run on fast and tell some one to come. It might already be too late—the water might even then be rushing over the land. He stooped down on the cold damp ground and put his fat little hand into the hole where the water was running out. It was just big enough to stop up the hole and prevent the water from escaping any more.

His mind was made up; he must stop there till some one came to relieve him. He grew cold and hungry, but no one passed that lonely way. The sun set, the night grew dark, and the cold winds began to blow. Still the little boy kept his hand in the hole. Hour after hour passed away, and he grew more and more cold and frightened as the night advanced. At last he saw little streaks of light across the sky; the dawn was coming. By-and-by the sun rose, and the boy knew his long lonely watch must soon be over. He was right. Some workmen going early

to work found him crouched on the ground with his little cold hand still thrust into the hole. But the large tears were on his cheeks, and his piteous cries showed how hard he had found it to keep faithful all through the long dark night. The boy was at once set free and the hole was mended. And so it depends on each man to watch the dykes, though there are now bands of watchers appointed by the State for this purpose.

So these people have, as the poet says, "scooped out an empire" for themselves, and kept it by their never-ceasing vigilance and industry.

2. BRAVE LITTLE HOLLAND

"Brave men are brave from the very first."

—CORNEILLE.

It will be interesting to trace the history of these resolute people, who reclaimed their land from the angry North Sea and built busy cities which should play a large part in the history of the world.

The earliest chapter in the history of the Netherlands was written by their conqueror, Julius Cæsar. Why he cast covetous eyes towards these swampy lowlands is hard to see, but he must needs conquer them, and he thought he should have an easy task. At least one tribe wrung from him admiration by its rare courage. When others were begging for mercy, these people swore to die rather than to surrender. At the head of ten Roman legions Cæsar advanced to the banks of one of the many rivers of this low country. But hardly had the Roman horsemen crossed the stream, when down rushed a party of Netherlanders from the summit of a wooded hill and overthrew horses and riders in the stream. For a moment it seemed as if this wild lowland tribe was going to conquer the disciplined forces of Rome. Snatching a shield, the world's conqueror plunged into the hottest of the fight and soon turned the tide. The battle was lost, but, true to their vow, the wild Netherlanders refused to surrender. They fought on till the ground was heaped with their dead—fought till they had perished almost to a man. Cæsar could respect such courage, and when he left the country, to be governed by

Romans, he took back soldiers from the Netherlanders to form his imperial guard in Rome.

When in the fifth century the Romans sailed away from the shores of Britain to defend their own land, they turned their backs on the Netherlands.

Then came the "Wandering of the Nations," when barbarians from the north and west tramped over the country. This was followed by the dark ages, when the Netherlands with the rest of Europe was plunged in sleep.

Charlemagne next arose and added the Netherlands to his great kingdom of the Franks. "Karel de Groote," as he was called, was very fond of this new part of his great possessions. He built himself a beautiful palace at Nimwegen, high up on a table-land raised above the surrounding country. For beauty of scenery he could hardly have chosen a more lovely spot. Below lay some of the many rivers, making their way slowly through the low country to the sea, while the rich meadows and fields beyond were the scenes of legend and poetry of a later age. At Nimwegen to-day the curfew rings at 8.30 every evening. It is often called Keizer Karel's Klok. In the city museum the dead world seems to live again in the relics of the past.

With the death of Karel de Groote came the Norsemen. Up the many creeks and into the rivers of the Netherlands these fierce Vikings pushed their single-masted galleys. For three centuries they were a terror to every sea-coast country.

"From the fury of the Northmen, good Lord, deliver us," sobbed the men of the Netherlands with the rest of Europe.

For further protection the Netherlands were divided up into provinces, each put under a count or lord. Among others was one, Count Dirk, who was set over the little province of Holland. It was a small piece of country along the sea-coast, but it

was destined to be the cradle of an empire. And this is the first mention of Holland in history—the low land, the hollow land as it was called. The Count of Holland lived at Haarlem till he built himself a castle to the south, standing some three miles from the sea. To make it safe it was surrounded by a hedge, known as the Count's Hedge—Graven Hage—now The Hague, the Capital of the Netherlands. Then the Counts of Holland also built the new town of Dordrecht. "Every ship that comes up the river shall pay a toll for the new town," said Dirk. But this made the men of other provinces very angry, and the men of Friesland fought over it.

But a time was at hand when they should find something better to fight over than the toll of Dordrecht. The new teaching under the name of Christianity was making its way to the Netherlands, and the Counts of Holland were not slow to join the rest of Europe in their rush to the Holy Land, to free the Holy Sepulchre from the hands of the Mohammedans.

One day the men from Holland sailed down the river Maas in twelve ships, gay with banners and streamers, and out into the North Sea, on their way to the Holy Land. They would have to sail down the English Channel, between the coasts of England and France, through the Bay of Biscay and the Straits of Gibraltar, to the eastern ports of the blue Mediterranean, before ever they could reach their destination. But it is probable that the Crusades did more for Holland than Holland did for the Crusades, for by her contact with the East she learnt that of which she had not even dreamt before.

3. A WEALTH OF HERRINGS

"Commerce changes the fate and genius of nations."

—T. GRAY.

It has been said that the Crusades did more for the Netherlands than perhaps the Netherlands did for the Crusades. Thousands of ignorant, half-civilised Hollanders left their cold wet homes in the north to feast their eyes on the sunny land of Syria.

From their huts and rude lives they came into contact with great cities, such as Constantinople and Alexandria. They saw houses of marble and Greek statues; they met men of learning and scholars of Greece and Rome. For the first time they saw the use of linen sheets, carpets, soap, and spices. All the refinement and luxury of the East, the golden sunshine, the brilliant dresses, came before the Hollanders and dazzled them—after their dull lives and overcast climate.

They returned home full of new wants. They, too, must have linen sheets and pillow-cases; they too, must make their food pleasant with the spices of the East. They must build more ships to send round to Venice; they must trade by the overland route to the Queen of the Adriatic, and establish closer relations with the East.

Changes, too, passed over the landscape of Holland. The idea of the windmill was brought back from the East. To make their rough winds work, as they blew over the flat land, commended itself to the Hollanders, and very soon hundreds of windmills were working all over the country. To-day they stand in thou-

sands, like sentinels keeping guard over the land. Not only do they pump water, but they saw wood, grind grain, help to load and unload the boats and hoist burdens. Just as the lazy rivers were made to work, so the wind has been made to do its share too. And these mills played a very large part in the commerce that at this time arose in the Netherlands.

It was natural that a people living in constant conflict with the sea should seek their livelihood in fishing and spend much of their time on the water. From the earliest times they were a sea-faring people. "Holland is an island," wrote an old historian, "inhabited by a brave and warlike people, who have never been conquered by their neighbours and who prosecute their commerce on every sea."

So the Hollanders built their ships, and fished their creeks and inlets, and did a thriving trade in herrings.

Early in the fourteenth century there lived a man called Beukels. He was unknown and poor, but he made a great discovery, which did much to enrich his country. He found out how to keep herrings by curing them, so that they could be packed in barrels and exported. Herrings were a very valuable food in those days, when the Church demanded much fasting for her members. For a long time the Hollanders kept the herring-fishing to themselves. They sailed across to the British coasts opposite and fished in the bays and inlets of Scotland, and they became rich.

"The foundations of Amsterdam are laid on herring-bones," they used to say of one of their most wealthy towns. So herring-fishery helped to lay the foundation of the wealth of the Netherlands.

But there were soon other sources of wealth. Flax was brought back from Egypt and grown in Holland, until Dutch flax became famous all over Europe. Linen-factories sprang up. Tablecloths,

shirts, handkerchiefs, were manufactured. For a long time linen sheets, pillow-cases, and shirts were used only by kings and nobles. They were rough and dark-coloured; but the Dutch studied the art of bleaching, till all over Europe the "finest linen, white as snow," was known as holland. The ground around Haarlem was used largely for this process of bleaching or spreading out the sheets of linen in the sun, till the country looked as if a snowstorm had whitened the earth.

The wool trade, carried on chiefly in the south of the Netherlands, was a source of power, and the Flemish weavers were famous throughout Europe. The towns of Ghent and Bruges had long been centres of importance; they were among the richest towns in Europe. From foreign lands came raw material to be made up here. Every year the famous "Northern Squadron" from Venice visited the neighbourhood; it was the great market-place of English wool, and thrived until that day when Vasco da Gama found the route to India by the Cape of Good Hope. Then, with Venice, the famous cities of Ghent and Bruges fell.

"Grass grew in the fair and pleasant streets of Bruges, and seaweed clustered about the marble halls of Venice."

The next city to rise to great importance was Antwerp, which soon became the commercial capital not only of the Netherlands, but of the whole world. This was under Charles V., one of the greatest figures in the early part of the sixteenth century, whom it will be interesting now to know.

4. A DUTCH REFORMER

"Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched it."

—OLD MONKS OF THE REFORMATION.

The Netherlands now became absorbed in the greater kingdom of Charles V., who ruled over the largest empire since the days of Charlemagne. He was the grandson of that Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain who had driven the Moors from Granada and sent Columbus on his great voyage to the New World. From his father he inherited the Netherlands, and in the year 1519 he was elected Emperor over the heads of the Kings of France and England, both claimants for the high position. His reign was full of importance, not only for the Netherlands, but for the whole world; for a wonderful change was passing over Europe—that great Renaissance, at which we have already glanced for a moment. The new learning was spreading rapidly now, and the great empire of this Charles V. was not behind-hand to adopt it. Indeed Holland was to produce one of the greatest scholars of the age in Erasmus, the forerunner of Martin Luther, the famous German Reformer.

"I have given up my whole soul to Greek learning," said this man in the early days of his enthusiasm, "and as soon as I get any money I shall buy Greek books, and then I shall buy some clothes."

Erasmus was born at Rotterdam, one of the famous towns of the Netherlands at this time, in the year 1467, seven years after the death of the sailor Prince of Portugal. He was a bright

little boy with flaxen hair, grey-blue eyes, and with the voice of an angel.

"This little fellow will come to something by-and-by," said a famous scholar, patting the boy's flaxen head; for he had been struck with the ability of Erasmus as he inspected the school where he was learning. The boy had a passion for study. He devoured any book he could get hold of. He was always at work, writing poetry or essays; always thinking and pondering, though full of life and brightness. But monastery life was distasteful to him, and at the age of twenty he was glad to escape to Paris, still wearing his monk's dress, to continue his studies. He yearned to go to Italy, the centre of the new learning; to mix with the great Greek scholars; to breathe in the new life, which had not as yet taken root in his own country. But money was not forthcoming for this, and he made his way to England, where the new learning had been well received.

"I have found in Oxford," he soon wrote, "so much polish and learning that now I hardly care about going to Italy at all. When I listen to my friend Colet, it seems like listening to Plato himself."

Amid a little group of English scholars Erasmus found the sympathy he needed. Still he worked on at Greek translations, and wrote a new grammar-book for the little scholars under the new learning. Moreover, he gained some repute by writing a song of triumph over the old world of darkness and ignorance, which was to vanish away before the light and knowledge of the new era.

But more than this. He had studied his Bible very deeply and carefully, specially the New Testament and the writings of the early Fathers. He was greatly struck with the difference between the teaching of Christ by His disciples in the old days

of long ago, and the distorted version of Christianity now taught by the priests, monks, and clergy of Europe. The people knew only what they were taught by the priests. Copies of the Bible were rare, shut up in convent libraries, and read only by the few. Erasmus saw that before any reform could take place the Bible must be in the hands of all, rich and poor alike.

"I wish that even the weakest woman might read the Gospels and the Epistles of St Paul," he says as he works during the long hours at his translation and notes. "I long for the day when the husbandman shall sing portions of them to himself as he follows the plough, when the weaver shall hum them to the tune of his shuttle, when the travellers shall while away with their stories the weariness of the journey."

Since his boyhood printing-presses had been established everywhere. At last his work was finished, text and translation printed, and the wonderful story of Christ, His disciples and His teaching, was revealed to an astonished world in all its beautiful simplicity.

"A single candle shone far in the universal darkness."

The New Testament of Erasmus became the topic of the day; every household eagerly purchased a copy; it was read and discussed with alternate fear and joy. A new era was dawning. Erasmus had sown the seeds of that more far-reaching movement which Martin Luther was to finish. He had prepared the way; but a greater than he was needed to stand up boldly, with the eyes of Europe on him, to denounce the abuses that had crept into the Christian teaching, and to show mankind the Christ of the New Testament.