“Europe can never be lost as long as there are men like you” – Huizinga and Europe

ANTON VAN DER LEM

For historians from the Netherlands it is always a great pleasure, wherever we go in the world, to encounter people reading and admiring Huizinga. We are forever finding historians and other scholars who are fascinated by his works, organizing conferences or workshops, and creating new translations (preferably from Dutch!). The people of the Netherlands and their counterparts in the Slovak Republic have something important in common. We both have our own language, which is a precious thing. Huizinga was well aware of the importance of having this independent treasure in the case of his own country. He appreciated the special position of the Netherlands when compared with that of Belgium or Switzerland, where the nation as such has no language of its own. He even believed that because of the peculiarities of the Dutch language and its pronunciation, no other people in Europe was quite so suited to speaking English as well as they were to speaking German or French. He even asked why it was that native speakers of any of the so-called “great languages” could not master, for the sake of argument, four or five other languages as well (Huizinga 1948–1953, VII, 257). We also know to our cost that speaking a “minor” language can be a great impediment to the process of translation. Huizinga’s works have been translated into more than 25 languages, but in many instances the translations are based on English, German or French editions, rather than directly on the Dutch original.

On 10 November 2016 a workshop was organized in New York by Professor Peter Arnade (University of Hawaii and Columbia University) on the subject of Huizinga’s The Waning of the Middle Ages. Participants from Belgium, Israel, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States of America discussed many different aspects of Huizinga’s first major book, in preparation for the celebration of its first centennial in 2019. The fame of this work may even be surpassed by that of another great book he later produced, Homo Ludens. Here, Huizinga defended the bold thesis that no matter what field of human activity one might care to mention, culture the world over assumes the form of play. This point reminds us that Europe, our theme, is only one part – albeit an important one – of Huizinga’s interest in the history of the wider world. Even as a young student in comparative linguistics, his interests were wide and ambitious. When, after his MA in Dutch literature at Groningen, he went to study in Leipzig to broaden his understanding of the
field of comparative linguistics under the leading figures of the day, his Groningen professor thought it appropriate to warn his German colleague that Huizinga did not need to be encouraged, but to be kept in his place. His wings needed to be clipped, to make a disciplined philologist of him. Now there is nothing wrong, we might say, with mere philologists – Huizinga himself remained an outstanding philologist right through to the end of his life. But he wanted to study languages, so to speak, as a means to solving a bigger problem, namely the mystery of life itself. And the same could be said of his studies of comparative religion, or of history. In this context the following manuscript remark is revealing: “I am too deeply in history. It is not a study to me, it is life itself” (Van der Lem 1997, 113). To define the place of Europe in Huizinga’s life and work, we must pay attention to his travels throughout Europe and even to the United States. More importantly, we must pay close attention to his lectures and publications on European history.

Diplomatic passport, given to Huizinga as a member of the International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation. Issued in 1941 during the Nazi-occupation, Huizinga would not have used this passport anymore. Leiden, Leiden University Libraries, Huizinga-Archives.

**TRAVELS IN HIS YOUTH AND DURING HIS MARRIAGE**

Johan Huizinga was born on 7 December 1872 in the most northern university town of the Netherlands, Groningen. Here his father Dirk Huizinga (1840–1905) was a university professor in physiology. Though Dirk Huizinga had a regular income, the family was not rich. Johan’s parents spent their vacations on the German islands of the North Sea, or in the Black Forest: holidays in England, France or Switzerland were beyond their means. They also paid visits to Amsterdam, or the Dutch North
Sea coast. Johan regularly said himself that he preferred to stay at home, though of course he spent some of his holidays with uncles and aunts in other parts of the country. As a student he travelled several times with his elder brother Jacob (1870–1948) within Belgium and Luxemburg. The first time he was really away from home on his own for a prolonged period was the trip he made to Leipzig after his MA, during the four months from November 1895 to the following March (Van der Lem 1993, 47). Whilst working as a teacher of history at a secondary school in Haarlem (1897–1905), Huizinga continued in his own spare time to study Sanskrit literature, and it was for that reason that he attended the Conference of Orientalists in Rome with some friends in 1899.

When Huizinga married Mary Vincentia Schorer (1874–1914) in 1901, their honeymoon took them via Germany and Switzerland to Florence. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a recently married couple, they both appreciated the same pictures they saw in the museums they visited. It was with Mary once again that Huizinga would later visit the exhibitions of the Flemish Primitives in Bruges, and go on a cultural tour to London. We may presume that the author of The Waning of the Middle Ages also visited France, at least Paris, but there is no explicit evidence of such a visit. When Huizinga writes about the seven chimneys in the kitchen of the ducal palace in Dijon, or the Château de Coucy in northern France, it is not unreasonable to assume he does so as someone who has seen these features with his own eyes. And yet it remains the case that there are no recorded visits to France before World War I. The couple’s visit to Wiesbaden with their two eldest children, Elisabeth and Dirk, had a sadder motive: Mary was then suffering from deteriorating health, and I presume the health-giving properties of the spa town were the reason for the journey.

The year 1914 was a real annus horribilis for Huizinga. After months of sadness and sorrow, his wife died on 21 July, leaving him with his five children. For more than 20 years he would remain a widower, remarrying only in 1938. He mourned this great personal loss more than he lamented the major public event of 1914, the outbreak of the First World War. In his private correspondence he only addressed the events of the war with reluctance. He hoped the war “would be brief, that Holland would be spared, that the west would prevail over the east, that is to say, the French and English over the Germans, and the Germans over the Russians.” After the death of his wife he always spent his vacations with one or more of the children, but never on his own.

LECTURES AS A PROFESSOR

When Huizinga accepted the chair of history at Groningen University in 1905, he was obliged to lecture on both Dutch and general history. When he moved to Leiden University in 1915, he only had to teach general history. Upon accepting his post in Groningen he wrote to one of his friends that he wanted to lecture on a variety of themes, although he thought he would be expected to offer a general survey of both Dutch and general history in due course (Huizinga 1989, 81; 2016, 69). By the time he arrived in Leiden he had given up entirely on the idea of surveys, stating that “I don’t want to lock myself up in one period or theme.” Europe was the principal focus of the lectures which he embarked upon in Groningen and continued in Leiden, enti-
tiled De Grondslagen van Europa (The Foundations of Europe). Present-day students of “European studies” who might expect from such a title to learn about the contemporary history of Europe in their own times would probably be very disappointed by the content of these lectures. Huizinga kept his notes in 40 envelopes under captions such as: Rome in decay, Early Christianity, Arabic countries, Anthropology, Races, Ethnology-sociology, Germanic peoples, Rise of papal authority, Charlemagne. What he meant by the “foundations of Europe” was the earliest beginnings, the watershed between Europe’s ancient and medieval history, when indeed there was almost no idea of “Europe” as such. We will return to this theme at the end of this article.

Other subjects from general history which Huizinga dealt with in greater or lesser detail were: Islam, the history of the United States, Burgundian culture, the Middle Ages, and the Florentine renaissance. One of his students in Leiden in 1917 was so fascinated by his lectures on Florence that he wrote a letter to Huizinga to express his gratitude and admiration. He even went so far as to say: “Europe can never be lost as long as there are men like you.” That is quite a statement, and it is all the more remarkable when we recall that Huizinga had not yet published a single one of the major works he was then writing – that is to say, his book on America and his book on the closing of the Middle Ages. The student in question was Jan Romein (1893–1962), who became professor of Dutch history at the University of Amsterdam in 1939. It is easy to imagine Jan Romein and many others falling under the spell of Huizinga’s teaching and work, but it is not quite so easy to describe why Huizinga was, and remains, so fascinating or compelling. There are many definable characteristics we could mention: his pluralistic, interdisciplinary approach combining texts and images, drawing on history, linguistics, religion, sociology and anthropology, all of which contribute to the rich panoramas he is able to present, over and over again. He demonstrates an unmistakable interest in his subject and a will to understand. He does not want to explain, and particularly not to offer explanations based on political, social or ideological theories. Everything is said or written in his unparalleled personal style: with his inimitable ability to define complicated things in just a few sentences, his remarkable vocabulary (with invented words!), his surprising metaphors, and his concision.

When Huizinga lectured during the First World War on the history of the United States, he showed himself to possess a sharp eye for contemporary and economic history, and demonstrated his awareness of the influence which the USA would soon exert on European history. When he published his ideas in his Mensch en menigte in Amerika, the reaction was generally positive (Huizinga 1918; 1972; 2011). One of the members of the American legation in The Hague wrote to him: “How do you know America so well?” In his own review of the book, Jan Romein suggested that Huizinga may have had some sympathy with the Marxist interpretation of history. Huizinga rejected the notion, and preferred the “American solution” to its Russian equivalent at a time when many European intellectuals thought it appropriate to despise American civilization (Huizinga 1989, 244). He was, above all, a Dutch historian, keenly aware of the international situation both inside and outside Europe, with a great knowledge of European history spread over time and space.
AMBASSADOR OF HIS COUNTRY

In 1924, when Huizinga was 51 years old, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* was published in full in German, and in an abridged edition in English. The same year his biography of Erasmus appeared in both English and Dutch, and was recognized as “a European book on a truly European theme.” Both books were translated into many other languages. As a result, Huizinga became the most eminent historian of his country. When a representative of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation in New York wished to add a Dutch representative to its board, he approached – in a most American way – the president of the National Bank of the Netherlands, who in turn recommended Huizinga. In response to the invitation, Huizinga and several other European professors, made a tour of US universities and other centres of learning. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Huizinga was regularly invited to lecture in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and France. He became a kind of cultural ambassador of his country. In this capacity it was his inclination, first of all, to try to interest his foreign audience in the influence which their own country had had on the emergence of Dutch culture, especially the influence of Germany. Only then would he try to present the history of his country in its own right. He did not want to put his audience off by opening with a discussion of the economic and cultural achievements of Holland, the rich merchant Republic of the Golden Age and its famous painters. Instead, he emphasized the social and ethical values of the country of Erasmus and Grotius. He did so for the first time at the Sorbonne in 1930, and adapted the lectures he gave there for a German audience in Cologne in 1932. By 1933, his point of view was even bolder: he suggested that Holland could function as an intermediary between central

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Announcement in French for the lectures given by Huizinga at the Sorbonne in Paris, spring 1930. The Hague, Literature Museum, collection Huizinga.

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and western Europe, that is to say, between Germany on the one hand, and France and England on the other (Huizinga 1933; 1948–1953, II, 284–303).

The successes of fascism in Italy and of national socialism in Germany made Huizinga all too aware of the dangers that were now at hand. In April 1933 he personally had to deal for the first time with the anti-Semitism of the Nazis at the International Student Conference in Leiden. The leader of the German delegation was a member of the Nazi party who had anonymously published an anti-Semitic tract, in which he warned Christian mothers against the ritual murder of their children by Jews. As rector of the University of Leiden, Huizinga summoned the man in question for interview. When the German affirmed his authorship of the tract, Huizinga expressed Leiden University’s deep disgust of such opinions. He forbade the German representative any further use of the University’s hospitality and refused to shake hands with him. Of course, the German delegation then left the conference (Otterspeer 1984; 1997; Van der Lem 1993, 228–230).

Huizinga became keenly aware that not only was civilization itself under threat, the very right of “small” nations to exist was in question. For the first time he expressed his indignation on the subject in Nederland’s geestesmerk (The spirit of the Netherlands), an essay about the national characteristics of his country and its place in the world (Huizinga 1935a, 1948–1953, VII, 279–312, 299; 1968). In his In de schaduwen van morgen (In the Shadow of Tomorrow) he attacked once again the policy of totalitarian nations that were prepared to wage war simply because they had the power and means to do so. He aimed particular criticism at the ideas of the German historians Gerhard Ritter and Karl Mannheim, who had minimized or even denied the relevance of Christian morals in the field of international relations. In Huizinga’s private correspondence with Ritter, he defended the right of existence of the smaller states in this world in even stronger words: “Every nation is immediate to God.” No wonder translations of Huizinga’s work have been published in so many languages, especially in nations threatened as regards their very existence by totalitarian or imperialist regimes. And who would dare to affirm that in the world of today, that danger has passed? Huizinga remembered having seen election posters in Rome, in the spring of 1934, bearing the slogan: “The principle of Fascism is heroism, that of bourgeoisie, egoism.”

At the same time, however, Huizinga refused to take part in committees established to organize public protest and action. By nature and vocation, he was not the type to take to the street. He refused to become a member (let alone chairman) of the
Dutch Committee of Vigilance of anti-national-socialist intellectuals. As it happens, Huizinga was already the Dutch representative on the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation which advised the League of Nations, comparable with the present-day UNESCO. He took part in its international conferences held in Paris, Geneva, Budapest and Belgrade (De Voogd 2013). One of his first publications in this capacity was his *Lettre à M. Julien Benda*, finished in December 1933. He shared with Benda a concern for the future of Europe, but he emphasized the fact that every state was justified in having a sentiment of national identity. Europe and the whole world were threatened by those totalitarian states which thought themselves above the law in their national and international relations. He referred to the wise adage of St. Augustine: “Without justice, what are nations but great bands of robbers?” This ethical imperative is always central to Huizinga’s judgment on matters of state and culture.

In 1931, Theo J. G. Locher (1900–1970), one of Huizinga’s students, had defended a thesis on national differences and integration between Slovaks and Czechs from
1848 (Locher 1931; 1938). When on 5 October 1938, following the Munich Agreement, the president of the Czechoslovak Republic from 1935, Edvard Beneš (1884–1948), was forced to resign from office and go into exile, Huizinga wrote to Locher: “You will have felt the fate of Masaryk’s state more deeply than most of us. We live in worrying times” (Huizinga 1991, 263). In November 1938, around 8,000 Dutchmen were signatories to a declaration of sympathy for Edvard Beneš which was organized by the Dutch Committee of Vigilance. Huizinga was among them.  

In February 1940 Huizinga gave three lectures in Leiden to a general audience about patriotism and nationalism in European history up to the end of the 19th century. In contrast to German historians who had often lamented the “Kleinstaaterei” of their country in the 18th century, Huizinga thought that this political form was far preferable to the “Großstaaterei” of the 20th century. By “patriotism” he meant the justifiable sentiment anyone might feel for his native soil, be it Heimat in the strict sense, or the nation in its wider setting. But this natural adherence to nation left room for appreciating the history, language and culture of other countries as well (Huizinga 1935a). The curse of this world was the hyper-nationalism of totalitarian countries, devoid as they were of respect for the existence of other countries, or for the individual consciences of their own citizens. One of the copies of this little book was dedicated by Huizinga to his second wife, Auguste Huizinga-Schölvinck (1909–1979),
whom he had married on 4 October 1938: “Thought through together and written in the peace of being together, during a time without peace, 7 April 1940.” On 10 May 1940, Nazi Germany invaded France and the Benelux countries. It must have been a serious blow to Huizinga. While the advent of the First World War had been accompanied by the mourning of his first wife, the period of the Nazi occupation of Holland was certainly made easier for him by his second wife, especially when on 4 November 1941 their daughter Laura Maria was born. In many letters Laura Maria’s presence was praised as their daily comfort.

From July till October 1942 Huizinga was kept hostage with hundreds of other Dutchmen – intellectuals, captains of industry etc. – in the former Roman Catholic seminary in St. Michielsgestel in the province of Brabant, north of Eindhoven. Released on account of his bad health, and probably also thanks to foreign intervention, Huizinga was not allowed to go back to Leiden. He took refuge in the east of the country, in the village of De Steeg, east of Arnhem. Here, in the harsh autumn of his own life, Huizinga wrote his Geschonden wereld, which was finished on 28 September 1943 and would eventually be published in 1945, after the liberation.

broad strokes this book presents essentially the same content which can be discerned in a two-page printing proof entitled *Een gezicht op Europa* (A view on Europe), which under other circumstances would normally have been published in 1941. Two manuscripts written in Leiden in 1941 deal with the earliest history of Europe, in the form of the Roman Empire. The first is titled: *Een gezicht op het Westen* (A view on the West), by which Huizinga meant Europe and America. The second is titled: *Een gezicht op Europa* (A view on Europe). The opening sentence of this manuscript is literally the same as the printed page in the illustration. These manuscripts were inaccessible to Huizinga during his exile in De Steeg. But his *Geschonden wereld* deals with the foundations of Europe, just as he did in his lectures in Groningen and Leiden at the very beginning of his career. We can easily imagine how the post-war generation, looking ahead and ready to rebuild society, might have preferred to overlook Huizinga’s analysis of past and present. Though he did not live to see the liberation of his country, he knew that liberation was coming and hoped that freedom and democracy would be restored. He was worried that any reestablishment of the pre-war *status quo* would leave many evil ideas and opinions lurking in the minds of both the governors and the governed. And perhaps he was right.

What Huizinga could not foresee or predict was the tremendous success of Europe as we have experienced it in the last sixty years. With all its faults the European Union is, when viewed in the long term, a tremendous miracle. For the first time shared values of democracy, freedom of religion, freedom of the press and expression are considered to be European values. That does not mean there is no discrimination; on the contrary, discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, sex, nationality and sexual identity are of course still with us. Two days before this lecture was delivered in Bratislava, H. M. King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands paid an official visit to COC, the Dutch organization for gay, lesbian and transgender people. I wish the heads of state in all countries all over the world would follow his example. But it will take a long time before the values of Western Europe will be shared all over the continent.

**NOTES**

2. First survey of the translations in the bibliography in Huizinga 1948–1953, IX 1-45; second one in Van der Lem 1998. The next survey will be published on the Huizinga-website (in preparation; see in this volume).
3. The contributions will be published by Amsterdam University Press in 2017.
4. Huizinga, 1938; 1948–1953, V, 26–246. The English translation was written after the German one! (Huizinga, 1949).
5. Letter of Barend Sijmons (Groningen, 3 October 1895) to Eduard Sievers (Leipzig, Universitätsarchiv).
In the course of recreating Huizinga's library, Leiden, University Library has recently received a copy of George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman: a comedy and a philosophy* (Shaw, 1911) which was given by Huizinga to his wife, and which includes the following dedication: "As a memento of our lovely days in London, and the performance of October 18, 1911, Criterion Theatre" (Ter herinnering aan onze heerlijke dagen in Londen en aan de opvoering van 18 October 1911, Criterion Theatre) (Leiden, UL, HUIZIN 2072).

"Meine einzige Hoffnung ist, dass er kurz dauert, dass unser Land verschont bleibt und dass der Westen den Osten besiegt, also die Franzosen und Engländer die Deutschen und diese die Russen" (Huizinga 1989, 165).

"Ich schließe mich nicht in einem Zeitabschnitt oder einem Thema ein" (Huizinga 1989, 222; 2016, 69).

He dealt with the subject in Groningen 1908/9, 1912/13; in Leiden 1916/17, 1922/23, 1931/32, 1939/40.

Van der Lem 1998, 28, 138, 199–200 (nr. 6, nr. 65 II and nr. 117 II).

Van der Lem, 1998, 6–8: survey of all his lectures.

"[…] zo iets van dat Europa – het was in 1917 of '18 – niet verloren kon gaan, zolang er nog mensen leefden zoals hij" (Romein 1971, 272).

A superb analysis can be found in Otterspeer 2010, though one has to be familiar with Huizinga's works to appreciate the scope of the work.

Legation of the US of America (The Hague), to J. Huizinga (Leiden), 16 August 1918 (Huizinga 1989, 228).

Köster 1947, 32, quoting Werner Jaeger from his review in the *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 51 (1930) 912.


Huizinga 1935b; 1948—1953, VII, 313–428, chapter XIV.

"Ebenso wie Ranke's jede Epoche ist auch jede Nation unmittelbar zu Gott" (Huizinga 1991, 119-121).

Translations in chronological order: Switzerland (German) (1935), Spain (1935), England (1936), Sweden (1936), Italy (1937), Norway (1937), Hungary (1938), Czechoslovakia (Czech) (1938), France (1938), Croatia (1944), Japan (1971), Russia (1992) and probably even more?

Quoted from the English translation, by his son Jacob Herman Huizinga, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (Huizinga 1936, 159). It is a quote from Mussolini: "Il credo del fascista è l'eroismo, quello del borghese è l'egoismo." The quote was left out in the Italian translation of the book.

Het Comité van Waakzaamheid van anti-nationaal-socialistische intellectueelen (1936–1940); Huizinga’s refusal was a great disappointment to his cousin Menno ter Braak (1902–1940), one of the leading Dutch critics and one of the instigators of the organization, together with a.o. Jan Romein.

Lettre à M. Julien Benda: "la légitimité d’un sentiment de nationalité distincte" (Huizinga 1948–1953, VII, 269).

"Quid sunt regna sine justitia nisi magna latrocinia" (Huizinga 1948–1953, VII, 270).


Huizinga 1940, followed by a second edition in 1941; see also Huizinga 1948–1953, IVs, 497–554; 1942; 1959.

"Samen bedacht en in de rust van samen zijn in onrustigen tijd geschreven 7 April 1940", Leiden, University Library, shelf number HUIZIN 308 ned 1 (1).

Huizinga 1945; 1948–1953 VII, 477–606. It was never translated into English, but three times into German, most recently by Annette Wunschel under the daring title “Verratene Welt” (Huizinga 2014, 137–270).

**LITERATURE**


*Bulletin Comité van Waakzaamheid*. 1938. 7 October, 8 November, 9 December. Amsterdam, University Library, Collection H. J. Pos, inv. nr. 11.


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“Europe can never be lost as long as there are men like you” – Huizinga and Europe


As a professor in Groningen (1908/09, 1912/13) and Leiden (1916/17, 1922/23, 1931/32, 1939/40) Huizinga chose to lecture on the “Grondslagen van Europa” (the Foundations of Europe). In these lectures he focused on the ancient and early medieval history of Europe. In 1941 he considered writing a book entitled Een gezicht op Europa (A view on Europe), of which the title page and the first page were printed. This book was supposed to start with the Roman Empire. But after 1933, with the rise of the totalitarian systems of communism and fascism, Huizinga became worried about the future of our civilization in general. He dealt most explicitly with the history of Europe in his Patriotisme en nationalisme in de Europeesche geschiedenis tot het einde der 19de eeuw (Haarlem, 1940; translated a. o. into English and German). In 1943 he preferred to write a short survey about the possibilities of a recovery of our civilization: Geschonden wereld (Haarlem, 1946; translated into German three times, 1945: Wenn die Waffen schweigen; 1948: Geschändete Welt; 2014: Verratene Welt). The article combines an analysis of Huizinga’s published works concerning Europe with unpublished sources from his archives.

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Dr. Anton van der Lem
University Library
University of Leiden
Witte Singel 26-27
2311 BG Leiden
Netherland
g.a.c.van.der.lem@library.leidenuniv.nl