

The Netherlanders

With a name like mine, I like to think that I am uniquely qualified and *un*qualified to write about the people of Holland. Hence I can be mildly extreme and judgemental; I can toss off a half-loony rant and none need take me too seriously.

I was born there, had a reasonably happy childhood under Netherlandish parenting, then moved away at eight. Now, having lived mostly in an English-speaking culture, I am a bit of both and neither fully the other, which is fine and makes me prone to all kinds of outsider/observational fancy. But also strangely *dual* in a way – a ‘native’ foreigner in Holland and not-quite Australian-seeming citizen over here. It also means my writing about Netherlanders isn’t the outside-in, fish-out-of-water stuff, but nonetheless conscious of the peculiar germs in the soul of its people, that makes them so incorrigibly Netherlandish.

The problem with not being a bona fide, fully moulded Netherlander (which isn’t a bad thing) is that I’m relying on many of my parents’ prejudices, bollocks and habits in fleshing out my observations. The parental thing obviously having continued way into our migration to Australia¹. And which some pessimists would say you never quite unyoke from.

And of course I may be wildly off the general social mark, especially regarding the Netherlands after the early 80s, or even the NL of today.

So then, this is a particularly biased accounting. Partly due to parenting, my foreignness when back in the Netherlands, and also my never fully re-connecting with my generation there – only with the olds, and particularly the olds of my home town. The Netherlanders of my generation that I did get to know and value recently were largely exceptions to the rule, or Belgian. But if you want me to clarify certain superficial national quirks, like the carpets on tables of old’s homes, I can be logically and historically accurate². Let’s go point-form.

Tolerance.

The fabled Tolerance. Complete hokum. A self-pleasing reflection of the real extent of religiosity in Holland. In my home town for instance (population 17,000), there are *over* 30 active church groups and religious communities. Take away the Catholic³, Jewish and non-Christian faiths, that still leaves an awful lot of Protestant sects and sub-denominations. Calvinists, funny pastoral variants, baptists and reformed-this or Lutheran-that. Spiritualists? Evangelists? Either way, a lot of these sects take their tithe/contribution by *direct debit* from believer’s wages. A fixed percentage every year (like all good bureaucratic institutions, with which Holland is rife). With so much church in the air, even people not overtly practicing or identifying with any religion may inherit, receive and enact such tenets unconsciously (in moral tightness, parading of virtues, hypocrisy etc). Which then becomes a matter of pride: look how many religions we tolerate in Holland.

Tightness.

I’m not sure if this has something to do with the war generation (think: struggle for food), or the general poverty of Holland in the early 20th Century, or the post-war generation that enjoyed the late economic boom from gas reserves in the North Sea, but many Netherlanders are obsessed with getting a bargain. Or, the fear of potentially not getting a bargain. They love Aldi and Lidl as though God Himself had decreed the savings. Not that you can bargain with them at the markets: even the markets are fixed price now. And why the bogrolls have to be of the cheapest, roughest kind.

Pretension.

What I learned from my parents was a distrust of showy wealth, ostentation or any kind of status-derived pretension. Which is odd because Netherlanders can be utterly competitive on the status stakes. See *Superiority* below. One parental anecdote: many boats had a radar-reflector at the top of their masts. Made out of metal, an odd folded cube shape. We had a boat, but not a reflector, I think. Now, some other family couldn’t afford one for their boat, but still wanted to compete in the radar-stakes, so they made one out of a silvery plastic wine-cask bladder and hoisted it up (and unlikely to have worked effectively as a reflector). This act being *deplorable* in my parents’ eyes⁴.

¹ And which event has placed a kind of clear wedge in my memory, before and after; so that the before-period is very solidly cast – I can remember the streets, orientation, smells (hand-ground coffee, fishing nets hung to dry, smoking houses and cold winter streets), games, schoolboy stuff, fears, excitements (basically all the rabble and noise of childhood), even childish states of mind (especially when revisiting my hometown).

² It has to do with the historical damp of NL homes.

³ We had Catholic neighbours on the block. Religion and religious difference were never explained to me, nor the fact that ‘Jesus Christ’ (or *Jezus Christus* if you want the full flavour) was not just a swear. But interrupting the Catholics during their prayers at table was something odd then, odd about *them*. That is, religion went quite a way to describe or contextualise the person, is the knowledge implied.

⁴ It may also be completely untrue, but a gossipy self-advancement of some sort nonetheless. Or, it may have been a sarcastic act to begin with.

Pragmatism.

The Netherlanders are peacocks of savvy – trying to be as *with it* as anyone (especially in the practical sense), and out-savvying the next guy about everything. All the while pretending to working class honesty, and yet living and espousing middle class comfort⁵. Look at our Dijks they say, the land reclamation and the control of rivers and natural forces. Look at all that engineering savvy. We are a pragmatic people. The pride that extends from this savvy also makes connections with wealth. Success in the Netherlands means not only the usual status and signs of prosperity (new car every year, holiday houses and golf memberships, upwardly mobile or connected friends) but in having achieved it through *savvy*, and hence to have the legitimate bragging rights of savvy. Commercial savvy especially is the brass ring of Netherlands life and morals. That's the reason why Protestantism took so well in Holland; it was mutually compatible with the merchant class.

Really, 'working class' and 'middle class' aren't legitimate or well-defined boundaries any more; there's only the 'wealthy' savs and the 'getting wealthy (but really just working towards it)' savs, and they are the ones who make a bigger show of it; which is the ostentation thing again.

And naturally there's the thousand shades of lifestyle snobbery in between: those with a year-long subscription to the tanning salon, those with kids in Montessori or parents in *extra* showy retirement housing, those with boats, those with bigger boats, those whose boats can cruise oceans etc etc.

Superiority Complex.

This I can blame my folks for: the perpetual grandstanding of Netherlandish this-and-that. That because Netherlanders learn three languages at school, and because of their vastly superior educational system⁶, and because they export cheese, beer and flowers to the world that this somehow makes them smarter and savvier than non-Netherlanders. From a people who conversationally anticipate everything that's possible as something they've already done or know about or are fully informed on. Sounds like arrogance, no?

This arrogance is really just misplaced (but very vocal) pride. Pride in the Netherlands, its tolerance and engineering savvy, history, cheese etc. For instance, my father and his cronies are of the convinced belief that Netherlandish is a *world language*. And no, they're not joking when saying this; they're harking back to a distant but glorious past when Holland was a significant player on the world scene. Should you happen to bump into an old colonial in Indonesia today, or need to order extra cheese in Surinam, or if you want to have a drunken conversation with an Afrikaner (at *any* time), then your Netherlandish might garner a laugh. Even though pretty much everyone speaks crisp English, they'll often simply choose not to. And if you've made the colossal mental expenditure to learn the language and practiced its subtle vowels and expectorants, and your ability is close to 95% perfect, they'll still condescend to your 5% imperfection by switching to English.

It's worth mentioning that even though they can be fatuously sarcastic, the Netherlanders strangely lack a clear sense of irony⁷. Might have something to do with an archaic prohibition on laughter, many churches ago; but may also be coded in the language and the literal directness of its people.

Many Netherlanders can wax lyrical about the beauty and virtues of any liveable place in the world (especially Spain), but they'll always remain adamant: Holland is the only (because best) place to live. That which requires the least adjustment of lifestyle, perhaps. My twisted take on this: the best Hollander is one who can move away from it, and also the one who can return, comfortably, for a spell; one who doesn't *need* it.

Culture.

Talk about insularity: the Netherlands music scene is closed-in, parochially derivative and largely immune to foreign trend. It's a language thing no doubt – there is something queasy about hearing a song sung in Netherlandish – but also normal for any country that has a unique language culture. Golden Earring were an exception maybe, but there were no English-singing Abbas⁸ crossing over in to the West, thank god. Their cultural sense of music is small, hence easily filled by small-world entertainers, or *cabaret*-artists as they're called. Their musical frame of reference doesn't have the same connectivity and historicity as other countries. No significant genres have come out of Holland.

⁵ I remember a photo of a man working at some kind of nuclear-plant interface, all modern machinery and indicators etc, being disparaged for wearing what appeared to be his 'Sunday best'.

⁶ I once consulted a 'pedagogue' (in every sense of the term) who laughed at my High School certificate, saying the English I had learnt and done well at wasn't at the NL standard of English education.

⁷ Another language problem is this: you cannot insult a Netherlander for being a Netherlander in his native language. No other nation uses the language, the way an Algerian can a Frenchman, a Canadian a Yankee etc. It'd be insulting yourself. This is diminutively ironic for me because Netherlandish is so rich in insults, disparagements and obscenities.

⁸ Or rather, none worth mentioning. Pussycat anyone?

If you want pride, then talk about the Golden Age of 17th Century Holland. The age of Vermeer, Rembrandt et al. The wealth of the commercial nation-state. Awesome buildings, the invention of modern investment and corporations, strong trade control, and riches to spend on art. That art saw the flowering awareness of NL domestic cleanliness, overt pride in their interior spaces and portraiture, the subtle reverence of private pragmatism and discreet wealth.

Rembrandt and Van Gogh are objects of great pride if little understanding. “Art” is something that happened in the deep past, way back then. Modern art is incomprehensible (and possibly a con, pragmatically purposeless) and therefore meaningless. Modern music even more so. The unquestioned greatness of Rembrandt’s reputation is a way of containing the artist and Art, to say there’s no legitimate money or status in art as a way of life, to be suspicious of its depths. The Netherlanders don’t really understand or make room for artists, but do revere and respect even the most general of *artisans* – that’s a trade you see. Especially if they make commercial empires. The reason for all this, and this is the most critical comment I can make about Netherlanders – is they lack art in their souls. It could be the damp absence of legitimate sunshine⁹, or secret working class angst or a churchy conservatism at heart, but that essential gene for living poetically is missing or inactive.

Personal Space.

Maybe it’s the overcrowding, the living room windows and neighbourly nosiness, but Netherlanders can be socially invasive and extremely indelicate. In the sense of asking a really private or penetratingly direct question right to your face, even at a first meeting, about whatever seems unusual – which, if you’re not Netherlandish, is everything. A certain relative of mine still has such a habit, but only physically: when seeking to make a direct or emphatic point, she’ll stick her face in your face-space. It’s like the old decorum of conversation and etiquette was never there, historically. That subjective respect for the boundaries of identity¹⁰. Clam up, plead your privacy or defer the question and you’re in for a rant about their being up-front and honestly direct with everyone. Which is of course bogus, and part of the pretentiousness of being a Netherlander – which also means actually being quite private and closed. It makes one hungry for quaint English reserve and manners.

For some people these may seem like meaningless quirks, but if you’ve grown up with a healthy sense of Australian space, it can be disconcerting. As with the habit of strong eye contact.

It could also be a big window thing: when I walk by your house (a Netherlander thinks), I expect to see into your personal living space. And expect it to be in order: with new furniture, big TV, everything warm and snug and a spirits trolley nearby. You may even wave to me. Overt closure and privacy is somehow (but ironically) suspicious. Which leads into –

Emotional Burial.

It has *got* to be a churchy leftover, to explain why many Netherlanders bury or constrain their emotions. There’s something patently unhealthy about this – even though, on first impression, they seem to wear them on their sleeves. From personal experience in growing up (emotions being perceived as somewhat embarrassing) to seeing a mature age man completely fall apart and break down over a slight from his pseudo-girlfriend (a man admittedly a bit bipolar), to the bottle-up habits of others – it’s baffling. They’re otherwise completely gregarious.

It might be part of this Netherlandish logic: if you’re emotional and thinking about yourself, then you’re not *working* and hence doing the one honest thing that’ll set you free. Very churchy.

OR it could be that anything or anyone dramatic is leaning to pretension, that other NL sin.

OR it could be that the lack of art in the soul has diverted the Netherlanders from a human understanding of joy and the balance of other emotions, that essential roundedness.

I don’t know.

The problem is that I don’t know enough non-familial Netherlanders to gauge the collective inner barometer. And I can’t draw much from NL culture besides the superficial beacons of Netherlandishness.

But anyway. This ramble is also a response to something a friend said about my (humorously) being more Netherlandish than I was aware of – me being maybe the first of a handful of NLs he’s probably ever met. Now – to me that was mildly insulting (identifying more with the English-speaking world now, ho ho), but also richly indicative of him *not* knowing how annoying, in-your-face, arrogant and downright baffling the NLs can be. Especially to live with. Sure they’re a nation of desperate extroverts on the one hand and champion pragmatists on the other (again, this is an

⁹ And/or a touch of the Mediterranean spirit.

¹⁰ I know, this is starting to sound prudish, as though bemoaning the absence of Gentlemen from society.

exaggeration for my benefit), but he doesn't fully know how Netherlandish they can get. To do this requires getting drunk with them, eating their food (quite another story¹¹), going out and being seen in your going-out-to-be-seen clothes, getting more drunk and singing along to sickly oompah music, getting ferociously stoned and watching inane game shows and obsessing about better weather. It means learning their obscure, guttural and yet richly allusive, slang-folksy language and dialects, it means consoling them in a crying jag and getting sick of their pomposity the next day; it means being just short of a mildly drunk hooligan most times and an absolute OTT hooligan while on holidays – the Netherlanders are on par if not worse than the Brits overseas. You have to go on holidays with them – best snapshot ever.

Like I said, this is mostly inspired by family. The flipside is that Holland, despite flatness, is achingly pretty in the summer, especially if you can cruise its waterways. Its historical buildings are very immediate and lived in, they're palpably part of history despite being snobbishly taken for granted¹². And though Amsterdam is the representative bomb in terms of wow-factor (and the *most* cosmopolitan¹³), its provincial towns and centres also have definitive charm. Most of its people are lovely. And even a general study of Rembrandt will enrich any person with an awareness of art's wonder.

It's just not a country I can live in for any significant time before it starts infuriating me.

My final swipe is this: any nation without a sense of irony¹⁴ or the absurd or the greater cultural world out there¹⁵ is slightly suspect...

It may also explain why I love Belgium and the Belgians more – qua temperament, *variety* and their sense of being both *of* and *between* two worlds – of being wisely dual: that seems far more harmonious somehow. And humorous.

¹¹ There is ultimately no holistically-defined Netherlands cuisine, only specific quirks like croquettes, salty liquorice, patatje met/patatje oorlog (that is, mayonnaise on everything, and/or mayonnaise *and* saté sauce on everything. The Febo is as close to an NL food institution as you can get). Also bear in mind that beer is served in smaller-than-expected glasses, and is usually poured with half to a third head; so getting drunk requires speed sculling.

¹² You'd think living in a building dating back to the 17th Century would be pretty spesh, but for Netherlanders this is just another point of assumed pride.

¹³ That is, it's truly a world city, through which all the world's cultures pass.

¹⁴ This, perhaps, something in common with the Germans. Excuse me while I run for the hills after saying that.

¹⁵ And yes I mean the English-speaking world of culture. But also everything else.