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## A cat with nine lives

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# A Cat with Nine Lives

*Rural History in the Netherlands after 1900*

Piet van Cruyningen

## Abstract

Initially, Dutch rural history was mostly practised by non-historians, including geographers, agronomists and sociologists. This changed after the Second World War, when B.H. Slicher van Bath founded a research group at Wageningen University. Because this group was the first in the Netherlands to apply the ideas of W. Abel and the French Annales School, it became prominent in the 1970s and 1980s. It specialised in long-term regional studies with the emphasis on economic and demographic development in the Early Modern Period.

From 1990, the field was widened to include the Medieval and Modern Periods and with new themes such as political and water management history. During the last decade, rural history has become more comparative thanks to new international networks and the European Rural History Organisation (EURHO).

**Keywords:** rural history, agriculture, water management, environmental history

## Introduction

Rural history is more a field of research than a discipline. The 'systematic study of human behaviour over time in the rural environment' as American rural historian R. Swierenga defines it,<sup>1</sup> has been contributed to by researchers from many disciplines. In addition to historians, these include sociologists, economists, archaeologists, soil scientists, geographers, biologists and agronomists. The vast majority of these researchers do not even consider themselves rural historians. They simply add a historical perspective to the work in their own discipline. One drawback of this situation is that rural history suffers somewhat from a lack of identity and visibility. Researchers have very different approaches and often are not aware of those of others.

<sup>1</sup> R. Swierenga, 'The new rural history: defining the parameters', *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (1981) 212.

The number of researchers presenting themselves as rural historians is small and there are few relevant research institutes or departments of rural history.<sup>2</sup> This situation also has benefits. Because rural history is influenced by so many disciplines, it is flexible and can adapt easily to paradigmatic changes. Both in the Netherlands and elsewhere, rural history was able to reinvent itself several times in the course of the twentieth century, which is why L. Van Molle and E. Thoen compared it to a cat with nine lives.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter concentrates on the work of historians. Of all the scholars engaged in rural history, historians are the ones who can be most expected to integrate the results of research from all disciplines into a 'systematic study of human behaviour over time'. Of course, important work by non-historians will also be discussed and it should be kept in mind that some of the finest rural historians of the twentieth century were not historians by training, for example W. Abel (an economist), H.K. Roessingh (an agronomist) and J. Bieleman (a landscape architect). This overview is divided into three periods that are separated from each other by institutional and paradigmatic changes, although the chronology is not strict. Related publications are sometimes discussed together, even when they are from different periods.

## Rural history by non-historians, c. 1900-1950

Before the mid-twentieth century, interest in rural history among professional Dutch historians was negligible. In this regard, the Netherlands did not differ from many other European or North-American countries. Although the Agricultural History Society had already been founded in 1919 in the United States, its membership was mostly recruited from economists, geographers, agronomists, sociologists, etc.<sup>4</sup> The famous Annales School historian M. Bloch, who had already researched French rural history in the 1920s, was one of the few exceptions. In the Netherlands, rural history was also written by non-historians.

2 Swierenga 'New rural history', 220; L. Van Molle and E. Thoen, 'Comparative rural history in the spotlight: past experiences and recent developments' in: E. Thoen and L. Van Molle, (eds.), *Rural history in the North Sea area. An overview of recent research (Middle Ages – twentieth century)*, CORN Publication Series 1 (Turnhout 2006) 21.

3 Van Molle and Thoen, 'Comparative rural history', 22.

4 R.D. Hurt, 'Reflections on American agricultural history', *Agricultural History Review* 52 (2004) 1-4, A.M. van der Woude, 'The *AAG Bijdragen* and the study of Dutch rural history', *Journal of European Economic History* 4 (1975) 220-221.

At the beginning of the century, the geographer H. Blink (1852-1931) published his two-volume overview of the history of the Dutch farming class and agriculture.<sup>5</sup> The work of this prolific and able author is still eminently readable. Instead of most nineteenth-century publications, with their legal-historical approach, Blink's book was clearly written from a geographical perspective. The chapters on land reclamation and water management still contain valuable insights and data. He also paid attention to horticulture and forestry, subjects that were almost completely ignored by later rural historians. In 1913, to celebrate the centenary of the renewed Dutch independence, the *Directie van den Landbouw* (Department of Agriculture) published an overview of one hundred years of Dutch agriculture, written by seventeen authors, many of them staff members of the department.<sup>6</sup> Their approach was partly legal-historical and partly agronomic.

In the interwar period, an important contribution to the study of Dutch rural history was made by researchers termed as sociographers. Sociography is a mix of sociology and human geography, and was invented on the eve of the First World War by the Amsterdam professor S.R. Steinmetz (1862-1940), the founder of sociology in the Netherlands. He distrusted speculative generalisations based on very little data and instead promoted the systematic collection of data about economy, culture, geography, social relations and the demography of regions over time. Accordingly, sociography clearly had a historical perspective. Its weakness was that it had no adequate theory and sometimes comprised little more than data collection. However, the more accomplished sociographers produced some interesting work on rural areas. One of the best sociographers was E.W. Hofstee (1909-1987), whose 1937 dissertation on the Oldambt region in Groningen can really be considered as rural history in the above-mentioned sense. It is a geographical, social, economic, cultural, religious and political history of a rural area from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, Hofstee paid so much attention to the historical 'formative forces' that he did not accomplish his original goal, an analysis of the twentieth-century conditions of the region.

Although the contributions of these non-historians to our knowledge of Dutch rural history should not be underestimated, their work had one important drawback. Most of these authors were in some way involved in the programme of the Dutch government to modernise agriculture and all of

5 H. Blink, *Geschiedenis van den boerenstand en den landbouw in Nederland. Een studie van de ontwikkeling der economische, maatschappelijke en agrarische toestanden, voornamelijk ten plattelande* (2 Vols., Groningen 1902-1904).

6 *De Nederlandsche landbouw in het tijdperk 1813-1913* ('s-Gravenhage 1913).

7 E.W. Hofstee, *Het Oldambt. Deel I. Vormende krachten* (Groningen and Batavia 1937).

them shared the view that Dutch agriculture had only started to modernise during the agricultural depression from 1878 to 1895. This shock had awoken a backward, traditional farming sector from its centuries-long sleep. From then on, farmers modernised quickly, led by benevolent experts from the Department of Agriculture and its agencies. This view also prevailed in the first overview of the history of Dutch agriculture in the period from 1795 to 1940.<sup>8</sup> The editor Z.W. Sneller (1882-1950), the only historian in the team of authors, concluded that hardly any change had occurred in Dutch agriculture before 1880, apart from the activities of some landlords who had improved agriculture on their estates.

There were some scholars who did not share this static view of pre-industrial agriculture. O. Postma (1868-1963), a high school teacher in Groningen who had studied mathematics and physics at the University of Amsterdam, examined land use and farm construction in his native province of Friesland in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. He discovered several changes that had occurred in early modern Frisian agriculture, such as the introduction of the churning mill around 1660 and at the same time a transformation from small subsistence to large-scale commercial farming in parts of the province. Methodologically he was also ahead of his time, because in the 1930s he was already using probate inventories as a source. Although some of his results were published in a 1952 history of Frisian agriculture, much of the work of this talented scholar remained unknown because most of it was published in relatively obscure journals and a lot of it was in Frisian. In 2010, his collected articles were published in a 500-page volume in Dutch.<sup>9</sup>

Postma's work was valued by a few later scholars such as B.H. Slicher van Bath, but another Frisian researcher received even less recognition. K. Uilkema (1873-1944), a primary school teacher and autodidact, studied developments in the construction of farm buildings in the Netherlands. Similar to Postma, he had a dynamic view. The variety of farm types in the Netherlands was not introduced by the tribes who settled in the country in the early Middle Ages as was assumed by other scholars, but instead farm buildings changed as farming adapted to changing circumstances.

8 Z.W. Sneller, (ed.), *Geschiedenis van den Nederlandschen landbouw 1795-1940* (Groningen and Batavia 1943).

9 J.J. Spahr van der Hoek and O. Postma, *Geschiedenis van de Friese landbouw* (2 Vols., Leeuwarden 1952); O. Postma, *Veld, huis en bedrijf. Landbouwhistorische opstellen*, edited by Ph. Breuker (Hilversum 2010).

Uilkema's ideas were not widely accepted during his lifetime and most of his work was only published posthumously.<sup>10</sup>

In this period, rural history was studied in an unsystematic, haphazard way, mostly as a hobby of non-historians. It was also more the study of the history of agriculture than rural history in a broader sense. Researchers did not co-operate and were often unaware of the work of others. Illustrative of this is the fact that truly innovative ideas such as those of Postma and Uilkema were not appreciated, if only because most scholars did not even know about them.

## Rural history becomes mainstream history, c. 1950-1990

The predominance of non-historians in the field of rural history continued well into the 1950s. This is illustrated by the fact that the Dutch Agricultural History Society (*Vereniging voor Landbouwgesehiedenis*) was founded in 1939 by a soil scientist from Wageningen and a gentleman farmer from Groningen. However, change was in the air. In 1950, the *Nederlands-Agronomisch Historisch Instituut* (NAHI, Dutch Agronomic Historical Institute) was founded. This institute, linked to the University of Groningen, collected sources and created a documentation system. Up to 1975, it maintained an international bibliography. NAHI also started its own publication series, *Historia Agriculturae*, in 1953.<sup>11</sup> The earlier volumes contained mostly bibliographies and publications of sources. Later, dissertations and monographs were also included. To date, 45 volumes have been published. The Agricultural History Society also had a publication series, *Agronomisch-Historische Bijdragen*. Sixteen volumes appeared between 1948 and 1999.

A real watershed in the writing of Dutch rural history came in the years of 1956 and 1957. In the first year, B.H. Slicher van Bath (1910-2004) was appointed as full Professor of Rural History at Wageningen University. Slicher van Bath was a medievalist and archivist who had written a dissertation on rural settlement in the eastern provinces of the Netherlands during the early Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup> He was offered the unique opportunity to set up a group of five researchers. In addition, an agricultural museum was to be founded in

10 E.L. van Olst, *Uilkema, een historisch boerderij-onderzoek. Boerderij-onderzoek in Nederland 1914-1934* (Arnhem 1991).

11 J. Bieleman, 'Dutch agricultural history c. 1500-1950: a state of research' in: Thoen and Van Molle, *Rural history*, 283-284.

12 B.H. Slicher van Bath, *Mensch en land in de Middeleeuwen. Bijdrage tot een geschiedenis der nederzettingen in oostelijk Nederland* (2 Vols., Assen 1944).

Wageningen, the director of which was to be Slicher's colleague J.M.G. van der Poel. Van der Poel specialised in the history of agricultural technology and published an important volume on the history of mechanisation of Dutch agriculture.<sup>13</sup>

A year after his appointment in Wageningen, Slicher van Bath published a monograph that became a turning point in the writing of Dutch rural history.<sup>14</sup> *Een samenleving onder spanning* (A society under tension) is a history of the countryside of the Overijssel province from around 1600 to 1930. For this long period, Slicher collected data on population, occupational structure, distribution of landownership, farm sizes, prices, wages, etc. This regional approach and the collection of data on demographic and economic themes is clearly reminiscent of the work of the French Annales School, which was beginning to become influential at that time. However, Slicher was not influenced by them, but more by the Dutch sociographers and by the German Abel.<sup>15</sup> Similar to Abel, Slicher placed the tension between population and the means of subsistence at the centre of his analysis.<sup>16</sup> Abel and Slicher van Bath shared the Malthusian view that in the long term, agricultural production will not be able to keep up with population growth, which will result in increasing food prices and eventually a subsistence crisis. Slicher's way of writing rural history was completely new within the Dutch context, but in one respect he remained within the pre-war tradition: he considered agriculture before the nineteenth century as unchanging. Later research has shown that he was too pessimistic and that agricultural production increased much more than he had supposed.<sup>17</sup>

Slicher van Bath's views fitted perfectly with those of the Annales School and other social and economic historians, who were changing history into a social science with an emphasis on quantification. When with some delay these ideas also reached the rest of the historical profession in the Netherlands, the Wageningen group found itself suddenly in the vanguard of Dutch economic and social history. They had been doing for years what other historians had just recently discovered and accordingly in the 1970s and 1980s, they became very influential. Economic historians elsewhere in the Netherlands adopted the Wageningen research questions

13 J.M.G. van der Poel, *Honderd jaar landbouwmecanisatie* (Wageningen 1967).

14 B.H. Slicher van Bath, *Een samenleving onder spanning. Geschiedenis van het platteland in Overijssel* (Assen 1957).

15 Van der Woude, 'The AAG Bijdragen', 222.

16 W. Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur. Eine Geschichte der Land- und Ernährungs-wirtschaft Mitteleuropas seit dem hohen Mittelalter* (Hamburg and Berlin 1966, first edition 1935).

17 C. Trompeter and J.L. van Zanden, *Over de geschiedenis van het platteland in Overijssel (1500-1815). Elf studies* (Zwolle 2001).

and methods. Their influence was also the result of the fact that they had had their own publication series since 1962, the *AAG Bijdragen*, of which 42 volumes appeared until 2003. In this series, researchers from Wageningen and elsewhere could publish articles, dissertations and monographs on rural history. Slicher van Bath himself became an international authority after the publication of his 1960 book on the agrarian history of Western Europe between 500 and 1850, which was translated into English, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Japanese. Although A.M. van der Woude, who succeeded Slicher van Bath in 1975, described rural history as ‘the total social and economic history of the countryside’, he readily admitted that the research of the Wageningen group on rural social history had remained limited.<sup>18</sup> Their best work was on economic history and historical demography. Van der Woude himself and J.A. Faber wrote voluminous theses on the northern part of the province of Holland and on Friesland respectively, both covering the period from around 1500 to 1800.<sup>19</sup> Both are broad regional studies in the vein of *Een samenleving onder spanning*, although less concerned with the tension between population size and agricultural production. In these prosperous coastal areas, tension barely existed. There is much less attention for agriculture in these two studies than in that of Slicher van Bath. In fact, they are economic historical and historical demographic studies of more or less rural areas – the northern part of Holland included the heavily industrialised Zaanstreek.

One of the criticisms aimed at the Wageningen group was that they concentrated on structures and price cycles so strongly that they lost sight of people. To some critics, it appeared that in the Wageningen view people were mere victims of geographical and economic circumstances who did not have the will or the capacity to change their fate.<sup>20</sup> It has to be acknowledged that for Slicher van Bath’s book on Overijssel at least, this criticism seems to be apt. In his view, the rural population had no choice but to submit to the vicious circle of population growth and insufficient increase in agricultural production. For the work of the ‘Wageningers’ from 1976 onwards, however, this criticism no longer holds true. In that year

18 Van der Woude, ‘The *AAG Bijdragen*’, 221.

19 A.M. van der Woude, *Het Noorderkwartier. Een regionaal historisch onderzoek in de demografische en economische geschiedenis van westelijk Nederland van de late middeleeuwen tot het begin van de negentiende eeuw*, 3 Vols., *AAG Bijdragen* 16 (Wageningen 1972); J.A. Faber, *Drie eeuwen Friesland. Economische en sociale ontwikkelingen van 1500 tot 1800*, 2 Vols., *AAG Bijdragen* 17 (Wageningen 1972).

20 L. Noordegraaf, ‘Overmoed uit onbehagen. Positivisme en hermeneutiek in de economische en sociale geschiedenis’ in: L. Noordegraaf, (ed.), *Ideeën en ideologieën. Studies over economische en sociale geschiedenis in Nederland 1894-1991* (Amsterdam 1991) 673.



H.K. Roessingh, one of Slicher van Bath's colleagues, published his brilliant thesis on the cultivation of tobacco in the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>21</sup> In this book, he demonstrated how peasants in the sandy Veluwe region switched to tobacco cultivation when grain prices fell in the seventeenth century. They not only adopted this new crop but also adapted the cultivation techniques to the Dutch climate, which is not congenial to tobacco growing. The people who did this were not the major commercial farmers of the coastal region, but small peasants from an area with a very conservative reputation. Roessingh made abundantly clear that early modern agriculture was not static and that the farming population was able and willing to adopt innovation.

Roessingh's work influenced all the regional studies that were to appear in the *AAG Bijdragen*. The first of these was Bieleman's study on Drenthe in the period from 1600 to 1910.<sup>22</sup> Although he paid attention to subjects such as demographic change and social stratification, Bieleman's work is in the first place a history of the agricultural sector. Similar to Roessingh, he showed that farmers were not averse to innovation and had managed to raise the yield of rye considerably during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He also demonstrated that in the seventeenth century, the farming sector of this relatively isolated sandy province was already engaged in production for the urban markets in the west of the country. Later regional studies followed in the same vein: they concentrated on the agricultural sector and destroyed the myth of conservative, traditional agriculture in the Early Modern Period. These were the books by Priester on Groningen (1800-1910) and Zeeland (1600-1910),<sup>23</sup> by Brusse on Over-Betuwe in the Gelderland river area (1650-1850)<sup>24</sup>, by Van Cruyningen on Western Zeeland Flanders (1650-1850)<sup>25</sup> and by Knibbe on the Frisian clay area (1505-1830).<sup>26</sup> The 1973

21 H.K. Roessingh, *Inlandse tabak. Expansie en contractie van een handelsgewas in de 17<sup>e</sup> en 18<sup>e</sup> eeuw in Nederland*, *AAG Bijdragen* 20 (Wageningen 1976); an abridged version in English in 'Tobacco growing in the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: a case study of the innovation spirit of Dutch peasants', *Acta Historica Neerlandicae* 11 (1978) 18-54.

22 J. Bieleman, *Boeren op het Drentse zand 1600-1910. Een nieuwe visie op de oude landbouw*, *AAG Bijdragen* (Wageningen 1987).

23 P. Priester, *De economische ontwikkeling van de landbouw in Groningen 1800-1910. Een kwalitatieve en kwantitatieve analyse*, *AAG Bijdragen* 31 (Wageningen 1991); idem, *Geschiedenis van de Zeeuwse landbouw circa 1600-1910*, *AAG Bijdragen* 37 (Wageningen 1998).

24 P. Brusse, *Overleven door ondernemen. De agrarische geschiedenis van de Over-Betuwe 1650-1850*, *AAG Bijdragen* 38 (Wageningen 1999).

25 P. van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam. Boeren in West-Zeeuws-Vlaanderen 1650-1850*, *AAG Bijdragen* 40 (Wageningen 2000).

26 M. Knibbe, *Lokkich Fryslân. Landpacht, arbeidsloon en landbouwproductiviteit in het Friese kleigebied, 1505-1830*, *Historia Agriculturae* 38 (Groningen and Wageningen 2006).

dissertation of C. Baars was a regional study with an even stronger accent on agriculture. Baars was an agronomist and carried out meticulous research covering the period from around 1600 to 1900 on the Beijerlanden, a small area of polders in South Holland. What was innovative was that Baars used the account books of farms to analyse profitability.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1980s, the Rural History Group in Wageningen started a new research theme: material culture. Probate inventories were used as a source for this research. The first result was A.J. Schuurman's thesis on the development of material culture in the Dutch countryside in the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Schuurman compared three regions, differing in wealth, religion and relationships with urban culture. One important result of this study is that it demonstrated that innovation does not just spread from urban centres to the countryside, but that rural societies have their own dynamics. Kamermans wrote a thesis on the material culture of the Krimpenerwaard region in Southern Holland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>29</sup> His research demonstrated that the standard of living in Krimpenerwaard in this period was considerably higher than in England. Material culture was also studied at the ethnological department of the Meertens Instituut in Amsterdam. Their work resulted in several important publications on the material culture of villages and small towns.<sup>30</sup> Material culture in the form of farmhouses had already been studied by the *Stichting Historisch Boerderij-Onderzoek* (Foundation for Historic Farm Building Research) after 1960. This foundation published the previously mentioned work of Uilkema, in addition to monographs on the rise of brick as a building material and on the development of farm construction in Zeeland from the high Middle Ages until the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup>

From the 1970s, rural history became quite popular. In Leiden, D.J. Noordam published a superb thesis on the historical demography of the village of

27 C. Baars, *De geschiedenis van de landbouw in de Beijerlanden* (Wageningen 1973).

28 A.J. Schuurman, *Materiële cultuur en levensstijl. Een onderzoek naar de taal der dingen op het Nederlandse platteland in de 19<sup>e</sup> eeuw: de Zaanstreek, Oost-Groningen, Oost-Brabant*, AAG Bijdragen 30 (Wageningen 1989).

29 J.A. Kamermans, *Materiële cultuur in de Krimpenerwaard in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw. Ontwikkeling en diversiteit*, AAG Bijdragen 39 (Wageningen 1999).

30 H. van Koolbergen, 'De materiële cultuur van Weesp en Weesperkarspel in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw', *Volkkundig Bulletin* 9 (1983) 3-52; J.J. Voskuil, 'De weg naar luilekkerland', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 98 (1986) 460-482; H.C. Dibbits, *Vertrouwd bezit. Materiële cultuur in Doesburg en Maassluis 1650-1800* (s.l. 1998).

31 Van Olst, Uilkema; J.J. Voskuil, *Van vlechtwerk tot baksteen. Geschiedenis van de wanden van het boerenhuis in Nederland* (Arnhem and Zutphen 1979); P.J. van Cruyningen, *Schone welbetimmerde hofsteden. Boerderijbouw in Zeeland van de tiende tot de twintigste eeuw* (Utrecht 2002).

Maasland in South Holland in the eighteenth century, based on the method of family reconstitution.<sup>32</sup> The Maastricht historian Jansen wrote a regional study on South Limburg agriculture over the very long term, from 1250 to 1800.<sup>33</sup> A very important contribution was the Dutch-American historian J. de Vries' study on the Dutch rural economy in the period from 1500 to 1750.<sup>34</sup> De Vries explained the development of farming in the coastal provinces by his 'specialisation model'. Peasants who previously had multiple sources of income abandoned non-agricultural activities and became commercial farmers. In this way, they contributed to the transformation of the Dutch economy. Another American historian, M.P. Gutmann, published a study on the influence of warfare on the countryside of the lower Meuse valley in the Early Modern Period.<sup>35</sup> A major contribution was J.L. van Zanden's thesis on the economic development of Dutch agriculture in the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> This book has a macroeconomic approach but also focuses on the regional diversity of agriculture. It shows agriculture was already dynamic long before the 1880s. Most dynamics were to be found in the sandy inland provinces. Agriculture in the coastal provinces seems to have reached a productivity ceiling around 1800, which was difficult to break through. Van Zanden's view was not uncontested. Jan Bieleman claimed productivity growth in the Eastern Netherlands did not begin around 1810, but some fifty years later.<sup>37</sup>

In the 1980s, the 'integral history project' was launched. 'Integral history' was a concept of the historian J. Romein, who thought that every aspect (economic, social, political, religious, etc.) of history should be studied and in particular the connections and interactions between the aspects. All of this should then result in one consistent integral history. Two predominantly rural areas were selected to be studied in this way for the period from 1770 to 1914: Eastern Brabant (by historians from Utrecht University) and Northern

32 D.J. Noordam, *Leven in Maasland. Een hoogontwikkelde plattelandssamenleving in de achttiende en het begin van de negentiende eeuw* (Hilversum 1986).

33 J.C.G.M. Jansen, *Landbouw en economische golfbeweging in Zuid-Limburg 1250-1800* (Assen 1979).

34 J. de Vries, *The Dutch rural economy in the Golden Age* (New Haven and London 1974).

35 M.P. Gutmann, *War and rural life in the early modern Low Countries* (Assen 1980).

36 J.L. van Zanden, *De economische ontwikkeling van de Nederlandse landbouw in de negentiende eeuw (1800-1914)*, AAG Bijdragen 25 (Wageningen 1985).

37 J.L. van Zanden, 'De landbouw op de zandgronden van Oost-Nederland', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 101 (1988) 190-205; J. Bieleman, 'Boeren en rekenmeesters – een repliek', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 101 (1988) 206-221; J. Bieleman and H.K. Roessingh, 'Wie zaait zal oogsten? De ontwikkeling van het roggebeschoot op de noordelijke zandgronden op de lange termijn' in: H. Diederiks et al. (eds.), *Het platteland in een veranderende wereld. Boeren en het proces van modernisering* (Hilversum 1994) 167-197.

Groningen (by Groningen historians). This resulted in some interesting books and articles. R.F.J. Paping, for example, wrote a dissertation on the economy of the Groningen clay area between 1770 and 1860, and V. Sleebe one on social control in the same region.<sup>38</sup> In each research area, the project concluded with a collection of articles that demonstrated the outcomes in the various fields of research. The Groningen collection, edited by P. Kooij, focuses on the village of Hoogkerk and shows how developments in the economic, demographic, political and social fields transformed village society and economy.<sup>39</sup>

### Rural history in transformation, c. 1990-2013

Under the influence of the 'linguistic turn', Annales-inspired economic and social history lost its leading position after the 1980s. This also meant that rural history lost its prominent position within the Dutch historical profession. Rural history became less visible again, but on the other hand it also reinvented itself. New themes were explored, new periods studied (the Middle Ages and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and comparative history became more and more important. As a result, rural history has become more difficult to define. For the period 1960 to 1990, it can be defined as the study of agriculture, rural economy and demography in the Netherlands in the Early Modern Period (1500-1800). From 1990 onwards, it includes the period from around 500 AD to the present day and encompasses many more themes. The field of research has become wide and diffuse. On the one hand, this makes rural history less visible, because it is practiced at many universities and institutes and seldom explicitly as rural history. On the other hand, if we look at all that has been accomplished following the early 1990s, the only conclusion can be that rural history is blossoming more than ever before. Because of the wealth of publications, not everything can be dealt with here. I will therefore concentrate on four themes: the work of the Wageningen group and their change of attention toward the nineteenth and twentieth century, the rise of medieval rural history, the confluence

<sup>38</sup> R.F.J. Paping, *Voor een handvol stuivers. Werken, verdienen en besteden: de levensstandaard van boeren, arbeiders en middenstanders op de Groninger klei, 1770-1860*, *Historia Agriculturae* 27 (Groningen 1995); V.C. Sleebe, *In termen van fatsoen. Sociale controle in het Groningse kleigebied, 1770-1914* (Amsterdam 1994).

<sup>39</sup> J. van Oudheusden and G. Trienekens, *Een pront wijf, een mager paard en een zoon op het seminarie. Aanzetten tot een integrale geschiedenis van oostelijk Noord-Brabant, 1770-1914* ('s-Hertogenbosch 1993); P. Kooij, ed., *Dorp naast een stad. Hoogkerk 1770-1914* (Assen 1993).

of rural, ecological and water management history, and the increasing importance of comparative rural history and international co-operation.

In the early 1990s, the time seemed to have come to write a synthesis of the work that had been done in the previous decades. Accordingly, in 1992 Bieleman's first history of Dutch agriculture between 1500 and 1950 was published.<sup>40</sup> This was not a synthesis of all the work from Wageningen. It was a history of the agricultural sector, so research on historical demography and non-agricultural sectors in the countryside was not included. Bieleman based the composition of his overview on the secular trend – the long-term cycle of expansion and contraction of the pre-industrial economy – and the geographic model of J.H. von Thünen. According to this model, the type of agriculture in a region is primarily determined by the transport costs to the central urban market. By using this model, Bieleman was able to explain most of the striking regional variation in the types of agriculture within a small country. Isolated Drenthe, for example, could be included in the market economy of Holland by selling live cattle. The animals could be herded to the urban markets, so transport costs were low. In 2008, a revised edition was published, to which a chapter on the period from 1950 to 2000 had been added. The conceptual basis remained the same.<sup>41</sup> This was followed shortly afterwards by an abridged English translation.<sup>42</sup>

For a long time, the Wageningen research group had concentrated on research of the Early Modern Period. There were good reasons for this: rural history of the period had been little studied previously and there were good archival sources. There had been some research on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Schuurman's work on material culture and M. van der Burg's dissertation on the education of rural women,<sup>43</sup> but the Early Modern Period was predominant in Wageningen research. This changed in 1998, when P. Kooij succeeded A.M. van der Woude as professor. He decided to concentrate research on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Kooij also initiated a biographical tradition. In particular, several biographies

40 J. Bieleman, *Geschiedenis van de landbouw in Nederland 1500-1950. Veranderingen en verscheidenheid* (Meppel and Amsterdam 1992).

41 J. Bieleman, *Boeren in Nederland. Geschiedenis van de landbouw 1500-2000* (Amsterdam 2008).

42 J. Bieleman, *Five centuries of farming. A short history of Dutch agriculture 1500-2000* (Wageningen 2010).

43 M. van der Burg, 'Geen tweede boer'. *Gender, landbouwmodernisering en onderwijs aan plattelandsvrouwen in Nederland, 1863-1968, AAG Bijdragen* 41 (Wageningen 2002).

of prominent people from the agricultural sector were published in the *Historia Agriculturae* series.<sup>44</sup>

Bieleman and P. Priester participated in a major research project on technology in the Netherlands in the twentieth century, for which they wrote the important chapters on the development of agricultural technology.<sup>45</sup> Attention was also paid to the history of agricultural policy. This subject had not received much prior attention. Some of the few exceptions were the dissertation by the Utrecht historian Trienekens on food provisioning for the Dutch population during the Second World War and the comparative study on agricultural policy in the Netherlands, Britain, Germany and the US by Wageningen sociologist Koning.<sup>46</sup> Wageningen research mostly concentrated on the first three decades after the Second World War, when government strongly intervened in agriculture and a strong belief existed in the possibility of planning economy and society. This resulted in dissertations about land consolidation and *streekverbetering* (rural area development).<sup>47</sup> Rural area development was a programme aimed at modernising not just agriculture, but also the men and women farmers of 'backward' rural areas. The way of thinking of these 'conservative' people had to be adapted to the modern dynamic way of living. The results were ambiguous. Farming in these areas was indeed modernised, but not always in the way scientists had anticipated. In this regard, the work of Wageningen sociologist J.D. van der Ploeg about the 'expert system' of the Department of Agriculture is also of interest. He shows how policymakers developed a kind of tunnel vision, because they perceived the modernisation project they initiated as the only way in which Dutch agriculture could develop further.<sup>48</sup>

For a long time, Wageningen researchers acted in the manner of G.M. Trevelyan: they left out the politics. In historiography, the Dutch countryside

44 For example H. Krips-van der Laan, *Woord en daad. De zoektocht van Derk Roelfs Mansholt naar een betere samenleving* (Groningen 1999); H.M.L. Geurts, *Herman Derk Louwes (1893-1960). Burgemeester van de Nederlandse landbouw*, *Historia Agriculturae* 32 (Groningen and Wageningen 2002); W. Coster, *Baron op klompen. Mr. B.W.A.E. Sloet tot Oldhuis (1807-1884): aan de hefboom tot welvaart*, *Historia Agriculturae* 40 (Wageningen and Groningen 2008).

45 J. Bieleman and P. Priester, 'Landbouw', in: J. Schot et al. (eds.), *Techniek in Nederland in de twintigste eeuw. III Landbouw Voeding* (Zutphen 2000) 13-233.

46 G.M.T. Trienekens, *Tussen ons volk en de honger. De voedselvoorziening, 1940-1945* (Utrecht 1985); N. Koning, *The failure of agrarian capitalism. Agrarian politics in the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States, 1846-1919* (London 1994).

47 S. van den Bergh, *Verdeeld land. De geschiedenis van de ruilverkaveling in Nederland vanuit een lokaal perspectief, 1890-1985*, *Historia Agriculturae* 35 (Wageningen en Groningen 2004); E.H. Karel, *De maakbare boer. Streekverbetering als instrument van het Nederlandse landbouwbeleid 1953-1970*, *Historia Agriculturae* 37 (Wageningen and Groningen 2005).

48 J.D. van der Ploeg, *De virtuele boer* (Assen 1999).

looked like an area without politics. The only rural historians who paid any attention to politics were those who were commissioned by farmers' unions to write their history. Several of these organisations had been founded around 1900, when the electoral franchise had been broadened considerably. The catholic and protestant parties tried successfully to tie the farmers to their parties by founding farmers' unions, thereby weakening the existing liberal associations.<sup>49</sup> A change came about in 2005, when the research program 'Modernization and democratization of the countryside', initiated by Schuurman, started. This project aimed at studying the changes in power relations in the countryside that had been caused by the broadening of the electorate and the rise of the farmers' unions. To date, this has resulted in monographs on the rise of the co-operative movement from the middle of the nineteenth century to 1940<sup>50</sup> and on the changes in the distribution of political power in the Gelderland countryside between 1880 and 1930.<sup>51</sup>

In 2000, A.M. van der Woude considered the lack of a good overview of medieval rural history as one of the most important lacunae in Dutch rural historiography.<sup>52</sup> Because – unlike England or Belgium – the Netherlands is not a country with many written sources concerning the Middle Ages, the history of this period has been left to archaeologists and historical geographers.<sup>53</sup> Two of the important historical geographical studies were those by Renes on the Maas and Peel area in Northern Limburg and by Elerie on the Reest valley in Southern Drenthe.<sup>54</sup> The 1,100-page dissertation of Spek on the landscape of the open field area of Drenthe is also very impressive.<sup>55</sup>

49 T. Duffhues, *Voor een betere toekomst. Het werk van de Noordbrabantse Christelijke Boerenbond voor gezin en bedrijf, 1896-1996* (Nijmegen 1996); M. Smits, *Boeren met beleid. Honderdjaar Katholieke Nederlandse Boeren- en Tuindersbond, 1896-1996*; R. van der Woude, *Op goede gronden. Geschiedenis van de Christelijke Boeren- en Tuindersbond 1918-1995* (Hilversum 2001).

50 R. Rommes, *Voor en door boeren? De opkomst van het coöperatiewezen in de Nederlandse landbouw voor de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Hilversum 2014).

51 P. van Cruyningen, *Boeren aan de macht? Boerenemancipatie en machtsverhoudingen op het Gelderse platteland, 1880-1930* (Hilversum 2010).

52 A. van der Woude, 'Vijftig jaar agrarische geschiedschrijving in Nederland (1950-2000). Een historiografie in verminkte sonatevorm' in: idem, *Leven met geschiedenis. Theorie, praktijk en toepassing van historische kennis* (Amsterdam 2000) 116.

53 For a comprehensive overview of their work see P. Hoppenbrouwers, 'Dutch rural economy and society in the later medieval period (c. 1000-1500): an historiographical survey' in: Thoen and Van Molle, *Rural history*, 249-282.

54 J. Renes, *Landschappen van Maas en Peel: een toegepast historisch-geografisch onderzoek in het streekplangebied Noord- en Midden-Limburg* (2 Vols., Leeuwarden and Maastricht 1999); J.N.H. Elerie, *Weerbarstig land. Een historisch-ecologische landschapsstudie van Koekange en de Reest* (Groningen 1998).

55 Th. Spek, *Het Drentse esdorpenlandschap. Een historisch-geografische studie* (3 Vols., Utrecht 2004).

Apart from a history of the landscape, this book also provides a history of agriculture from prehistory to the sixteenth century. His conclusion concerning the introduction of *plaggen* manure – manure composed from cattle and sheep dung mixed with sods cut from heath moors – in Drenthe agriculture is very important. This did not happen in the tenth century, as had been assumed, but from the fifteenth century.

From the early 1990s onwards, the later Middle Ages also started to receive attention from historians. In 1992, P. Hoppenbrouwers published his thesis on the Land van Heusden (in the present day part of North Brabant, then part of Holland) between around 1360 and 1515.<sup>56</sup> This dissertation clearly differs from earlier Wageningen studies, not only because Hoppenbrouwers researched the Middle Ages, but also because of his theoretical basis. Hoppenbrouwers was less inspired by the Annales School than by the neo-Marxist historian R. Brenner, who explained divergent paths of European countries in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, by differences in social property relations.<sup>57</sup> Brenner's ideas were far from generally accepted and led to the famous Brenner debate. The Low Countries did not feature in this debate, because although Brenner claimed to write about pre-industrial Europe, he and his opponents in fact limited themselves to a comparison of England and France (in which France equalled 'the continent'). In 1994, however, Hoppenbrouwers and J.L. van Zanden organised a conference on the Brenner debate in which the Low Countries were put at the centre stage, the proceedings of which were published some years later.<sup>58</sup> This volume shows that Brenner still had followers and opponents, and they would probably never agree.

It cannot be denied, however, that in the 1990s a paradigm shift occurred in rural history, and not only in the Netherlands. The old neo-Malthusian paradigm of Slicher van Bath, Abel, M.M. Postan and others – which was based on the tension between population growth and food production – was replaced by another one, in which property relations took centre stage. Most rural historians of the medieval and Early Modern Period adhere to this new paradigm. Some are mostly inspired by Brenner's neo-Marxist ideas, others by the New Institutional Economics, especially the work of D.C.

56 P.C.M. Hoppenbrouwers, *Een middeleeuwse samenleving. Het Land van Heusden, ca. 1360 – ca. 1515*, *Historia Agriculturae* 25 (Groningen 1992).

57 R. Brenner, 'Agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe' in: T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, *The Brenner debate. Agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe* (Cambridge 1985) 10–63.

58 P. Hoppenbrouwers and J.L. van Zanden, *Peasants into farmers? The transformation of rural economy and society in the Low Countries (Middle Ages – 19<sup>th</sup> century) in light of the Brenner debate*, CORN Publication series 4 (Turnhout 2001).



North. In North's view, institutions – the rules of the game – are decisive for the economic performance of countries. Secure property rights and well-functioning markets are indicators of good economic performance.<sup>59</sup> Both Brenner and New Institutional Economics inspired rural historians to focus on property rights, so the difference between the two is not that great.

The paragon of the new paradigm is Utrecht historian B.J.P. van Bavel. He started his career with research on the Guelders river area using a Brenner-inspired approach, explaining economic development from the change or lack of change in social property relations.<sup>60</sup> Gradually he expanded his research to Holland and eventually all of the Low Countries. Attention was paid not only to property relations, but also to the rise of efficient markets. Two of his PhD students wrote important theses on capital markets and commodity markets in late medieval Holland.<sup>61</sup> In 2010 Van Bavel finally published his *magnum opus*, the synthesis Van der Woude had wished for ten years earlier. It is an overview of the economic and social history of the Low Countries from 500 to 1600.<sup>62</sup> The main theory is that regions that performed well over a long period were those with favourable economic institutions, characterised by a 'social balance' in which no social group could manipulate the institutions to its own benefit. I will not discuss the contents here further, because they have already been discussed extensively in *TSEG*.<sup>63</sup> In the current context, the theoretical background of the book is more interesting. On the one hand Van Bavel's approach was new, inspired by Brenner and the New Institutional Economics. On the other hand, he followed the Dutch tradition by studying regions. These regions, however, were not studied in isolation, but comparatively. He also paid attention to the interaction between regions. In addition, the concept 'region' has changed. It is no longer defined as a natural or administrative region, but as a 'social agrosystem': a farming system characterised by natural, economic

59 D.C. North, *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance* (Cambridge 1990).

60 B.J.P. van Bavel, *Goederenverwerving en goederenbeheer van de abdij Mariënweerd (1129-1592)* (Hilversum 1993); idem, *Transitie en continuïteit. De bezitsverhoudingen en de plattelandseconomie in het westelijke gedeelte van het Gelderse rivierengebied, ca. 1300 - ca. 1570* (Hilversum 1999); idem, 'Land, lease and agriculture: the transition of the rural economy in the Dutch river area from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century', *Past & Present* 172 (2001) 3-43.

61 C.J. Zuijderduijn, *Medieval capital markets. Markets for rents, state formation and private investment in Holland (1300-1550)* (Leiden and Boston 2009); J. Dijkman, *Shaping medieval markets in Holland. The organization of commodity markets in Holland, c. 1200-c. 1450* (Leiden and Boston 2011).

62 B. van Bavel, *Manors and markets. Economy and society in the Low Countries, 500-1600* (Cambridge 2010).

63 'Debate: Manors and markets: economy and society in the Low Countries', *TSEG* 8 (2011) 61-138.

and social factors, but primarily by certain patterns of landownership and holding size. This concept was developed by Ghent historian Thoen.<sup>64</sup> It is highly probable that Van Bavel's book will be as epoch-making as Slicher van Bath's work was around 1960.

In a country such as the Netherlands, more than half of which is situated below sea level, a strong connection exists between agriculture and water management. In spite of this, for a very long time rural history and the history of water management were separate fields that developed independently. Historians of water management took a legal-historical and technical approach and paid little attention to agriculture. Nevertheless, some of their research did have important outcomes for rural history, such as the 1956 dissertation of the legal historian Van der Linden on the reclamation of the peat areas of central Holland and Utrecht during the high Middle Ages.<sup>65</sup> According to Van der Linden, the way in which these reclamations were organised resulted in a relatively free peasantry and an egalitarian society. This was to have profound influence on historiography.

From the middle of the 1990s 'new water management history' arose, in which 'old' water management history, environmental history and rural history were combined. The pioneers of this new history were the historian P.J.E.M. van Dam and the historical geographer A.M.J. de Kraker. Van Dam graduated in 1998 with a thesis on the conflicts over eel fishing in locks in Holland in the late Middle Ages.<sup>66</sup> The explanation for these conflicts was the ecological transformation of the area. The interests of farmers who wanted to improve the discharge of excess water because of soil subsidence were difficult to reconcile with those of the eel fishers. De Kraker's 1997 thesis on landscape change and water management in East Zeeland Flanders between the late fifteenth and early seventeenth century combines a geographic approach with an inquiry into the rural economy in the area.<sup>67</sup> He demonstrated that the profitability of land in coastal polders influenced decisions on investment in sea defences and thus on landscape change.

64 E. Thoen, 'Social agrosystems as an economic concept to explain regional differences. An essay taking the former county of Flanders as an example (Middle Ages - 19<sup>th</sup> century)' in: B.J.P. van Bavel and P. Hoppenbrouwers, (eds.), *Land holding and land transfer in the North Sea area. (late Middle Ages - 20th century)*, CORN Publication Series 5 (Turnhout, 2004) 47-66.

65 H. van der Linden, *De cope. Bijdrage tot de rechtsgeschiedenis van de openlegging van de Hollands-Utrechtse laagvlakte* (Assen 1956).

66 P.J.E.M. van Dam, *Vissen in veenmeren. De sluisvisserij op aal tussen Haarlem en Amsterdam en de ecologische transformatie in Rijnland 1440-1530* (Hilversum 1998).

67 A.M.J. de Kraker, *Landschap uit balans. De invloed van de natuur, de economie en de politiek op de ontwikkeling van het landschap in de Vier Ambachten en het Land van Saeftinghe tussen 1488 en 1609* (Utrecht 1997).

This is also a theme of the Belgian historian Soens' monograph on water management in the Flemish coastal plain (in present-day Belgium and the Netherlands) in the late Middle Ages.<sup>68</sup> He argued that major landowners abandoned their possessions in fragile coastal areas when the costs of maintaining sea walls became too high, leaving small local owners, often peasants, to bear the financial burden. In many cases, the land eventually became flooded. Disasters such as floods are now perceived not only as purely natural disasters, but also largely as the consequences of human agency. Human agency also had grave consequences in the peat area of Holland. There, peat extraction caused the creation of lakes within an already subsiding area, which might have caused the flooding of the central part of Holland. This is one of the main themes of a book on the history of the regional water board of Rijnland.<sup>69</sup> The authors showed that from the seventeenth century the water board managed to get a grip on peat extraction and prevent the land from further erosion. One of the best examples of the new water management history is Van Zwet's careful analysis of the costs of lake drainage in Northern Holland in the seventeenth century.<sup>70</sup>

Peat digging is a rural activity that has received a great deal of attention, not only because of its environmental risks, but also because of its importance for the economy. J.W. de Zeeuw demonstrated in 1978 that the economic expansion of the Dutch Republic could be explained partly by the accessibility of large amounts of cheap energy in the form of peat.<sup>71</sup> Since then, several monographs have appeared on peat extraction, transport and trade in several areas: by Leenders on Western Brabant, by Stol on Veenendaal, by Gerding on the four northern provinces and by Van 't Riet

68 T. Soens, *De spade in de dijk? Waterbeheer en rurale samenleving in de Vlaamse kustvlakte (1280-1580)* (Gent 2009).

69 M. van Tielhof and P.J.E.M. van Dam, *Waterstaat in stedenland. Het hoogheemraadschap van Rijnland voor 1857* (Utrecht 2006).

70 H. van Zwet, *Lofwaardighe dijckagies en miserabele polders. Een financiële analyse van landaanwinningsprojecten in Hollands Noorderkwartier, 1597-1643* (Hilversum 2009).

71 J.W. de Zeeuw, 'Peat and the Dutch Golden Age. The historical meaning of energy-attainability', *AAG Bijdragen* 21 (1978) 3-31.

on Rijnland.<sup>72</sup> The thesis of C. Cornelisse focused on energy markets and trade in Holland.<sup>73</sup>

I have left the probably most important change in Dutch rural historiography for last: the rise of comparative history. As has been remarked quite recently, for a long time rural history was characterised by insularity.<sup>74</sup> Rural historians studied the history of their own country according to a national research agenda and in their own language. This was not just the case in the Netherlands, but everywhere in Europe. Change occurred in 1995, when the Ghent professor E. Thoen founded the CORN network (Comparative Rural History of the North Sea area). CORN organised conferences in which historians from Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Britain participated at first, and later also those from Germany, Denmark and Sweden. The proceedings of these conferences were published in the *CORN Publication Series*, of which fourteen volumes appeared between 1999 and 2013. They include contributions by Dutch historians including Van Bavel, Bieleman, Van Cruyningen, Van Dam, Hoppenbrouwers, Kooij, Paping, Priester and Van Tielhof. Two volumes were primarily dedicated to the Low Countries: the previously-mentioned volume on the Brenner debate and a volume on the history of the coastal environment.<sup>75</sup>

As of now, Dutch rural historians have widened their perspective to include most of Europe. The old national research agendas are still often obstacles to real comparative history. This became clear when the CORN network launched its second project: a four volume rural history of the North Sea area. It turned out that authors from some countries frequently could not answer some of the questions the editors had asked them to address, because no relevant research had ever been carried out. For example, in the Netherlands, research on agricultural policy has been haphazard at best. In spite of these problems, to date three of the four volumes have appeared:

72 K.A.H.W. Leenders, *Verdwenen venen. En onderzoek naar de ligging en exploitatie van thans verdwenen venen in het gebied tussen Antwerpen, Turnhout, Geertruidenberg en Willemstad* (Wageningen 1989); T. Stol, *De veenkolonie Veenendaal. Turfwinning en waterstaat in het zuiden van de Gelderse vallei 1546-1653* (Zutphen 1992); M.A.W. Gerding, *Vier eeuwen turfwinning. De vervingen in Groningen, Friesland, Drenthe en Overijssel tussen 1550 en 1950*, AAG Bijdragen 35 (Wageningen 1995); A. van 't Riet, *'Meeten, boren en besien'. Turfwinning in de buitenrijnse ambachten van het hoogheemraadschap Rijnland 1680-1800* (Hilversum 2005).

73 C. Cornelisse, *Energiemarkten en energiehandel in Holland in de late Middeleeuwen* (Hilversum 2008).

74 D.R. Curtis, 'Trends in rural social and economic history of the pre-industrial Low Countries. Recent themes and ideas in journals and books of the past five years', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 128 (2013) 61.

75 E. Thoen et al., (eds.), *Landscapes or seascapes? The history of the coastal environment in the North Sea area reconsidered*, CORN Publication Series 13 (Turnhout 2013).

on social relations, property and power; on production, distribution and consumption of agricultural products; and on family, income and labour.<sup>76</sup> For the first time since Slicher van Bath's *Agrarian history* in 1960, Dutch rural history has been written from a comparative perspective.

Dutch historians have also participated in the comparative 'Rural history in Europe' project, initiated by the French historian Béaur, which at present has resulted in nine volumes on for example property rights, productivity, the role of the state, agrosystems and labour relations and the economy of ecologically fragile areas.<sup>77</sup> The tenth volume, on material culture, is due to be published in 2014. Furthermore, historians are participating in the rural network of the European Social Science History Conference and in the European Rural History Organization (EURHO), founded in 2010. This organisation held its second conference in Bern in 2013. Rural history is now being organised across Europe, but it will probably take a long time before all of Europe takes part. The list of participants in the Bern conference gives a clear indication of the degree to which rural historians are now taking part in international activities. Northern, Western and Central Europe and the Iberian Peninsula were well represented, but Eastern and South East Europe were almost completely absent and Italy was underrepresented. Belgium was very well represented, but almost exclusively by historians from Flanders.<sup>78</sup>

Scholars from outside the area of 'classical' rural and agrarian history have continued to contribute to the field. The political historian Van Merriënboer wrote a biography of one of the key figures in twentieth-century Dutch agriculture: Minister and European Commissioner S.L. Mansholt.<sup>79</sup> The biologist and historian Theunissen published a monograph on cattle breeding in the twentieth century and the agronomist Maat, one on the development of agricultural science in the Netherlands and its colonies after 1863.<sup>80</sup>

76 B. van Bavel and R.W. Hoyle, (eds.), *Rural economy and society in North-Western Europe, 500-2000. Social relations, property and power* (Turnhout 2010); L. van Molle and Y. Segers, (eds.), *Rural economy and society in North-Western Europe, 500-2000. The agro-food market: production, distribution and consumption* (Turnhout 2011); E. Vanhaute, I. Devos and T. Lambrecht, eds., *Rural economy and society in North-Western Europe, 500-2000. Making a living: family, income and labour* (Turnhout 2011).

77 *Rural history in Europe*, 9 Vols. (Turnhout 2009-2013).

78 *Rural history 2013. International conference of the European Rural History Organisation* (Bern 2013) 209.

79 J. van Merriënboer, *Mansholt. Een biografie* (Amsterdam 2006).

80 B. Theunissen, *De koe. Het verhaal van het Nederlandse melkvee, 1900-2000* (Amsterdam 2010); H. Maat, *Science cultivating practice. A history of agricultural science in the Netherlands and its colonies, 1863-1986* (Dordrecht and Boston 2001).

## The future of rural history

Rural history has come a long way since Blink. In the last twenty years in particular it has considerably changed. Change is still continuing. In 2012, E.H.P. Frankema was appointed as the new professor of rural and environmental history at Wageningen University, which implies a shift in the research programme from Europe to Africa and Asia. Therefore, the global turn has also reached rural history.<sup>81</sup> In addition, the comparative historical approach will be strengthened and the link between rural and environmental history will be more accentuated.

However much has been achieved, there still are important lacunae. We still know surprisingly little about the twentieth century. There is no synthesis of the history of the Department of Agriculture and agricultural policy, although we know this became very important after the 1930s. More importantly, an enormous change occurred in the countryside during the twentieth century. Complete social groups, such as farm labourers, disappeared, while the number of farmers dwindled. They were replaced by non-agrarians. The countryside changed from a production to a consumption area. Rural historians have not even started to study this change to a 'post-productivist' countryside. Again, the Netherlands is not unique in this – in England the situation is the same.<sup>82</sup> However, that should not prevent us from doing something about it. What is also lacking is a history of horticulture. During the twentieth century, horticulture became of the most important export sectors of the Dutch economy, but its history has barely been studied.

Furthermore, rural history is still predominantly economic history. Although Van der Woude admitted in 1975 that rural social history was lagging behind, the situation has not changed much. Bits and pieces have been published, such as Botke's book about the Groningen gentlemen farmers,<sup>83</sup> but much of the social history of the countryside still remains *terra incognita*. Unlike surrounding countries, we have no history of the role of landed elites or of the rural poor. This can also fit in with a response to Brusse and Mijnhardt's recent challenge. They proposed a new template for Dutch history, in which the period from 1750 to 1850 features as an 'agrarian

81 E.H.P. Frankema, *Africa and the Green Revolution: a global historical perspective* (Wageningen 2013).

82 J. Burchardt, 'Agricultural history, rural history or countryside history?' *The Historical Journal* 50 (2007) 465-481.

83 I.J. Botke, *Boer en heer. 'De Groninger boer' 1760-1960* (Assen 2002).

age'.<sup>84</sup> Rural historians should be able to prove whether there really was a shift in power and wealth from city to countryside in this period. When we include these new themes and periods and approach them from a comparative and transnational perspective, rural history can enjoy its next life.

## About the author

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