

Performing national identities in everyday life: Popular motivations and national indifference in 19th-century Amsterdam

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how and when the nation—whether in the shape of concrete national symbols or as an abstract frame of reference—became relevant to ordinary people. It focuses on the experiences and activities of Amsterdam citizens in the second half of the 19th century. Central to the analysis is the apparent contradiction between ‘banal’ or ‘everyday nationalism’, in which nationalist symbols and rhetoric appeared to successfully reach their audience because of their omnipresence in daily life, and ‘national indifference’, as referring to the absence of national identification among the masses. It argues that in order to overcome the dichotomies between elites and masses and national and non-national performances, we should focus on the popular incentives for national identification, rather than on the ideological content and the (physical or symbolic) borders of the national community.

KEYWORDS

everyday nationalism, national identity, popular nationalism, The Netherlands, urban landscape

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1 | INTRODUCTION

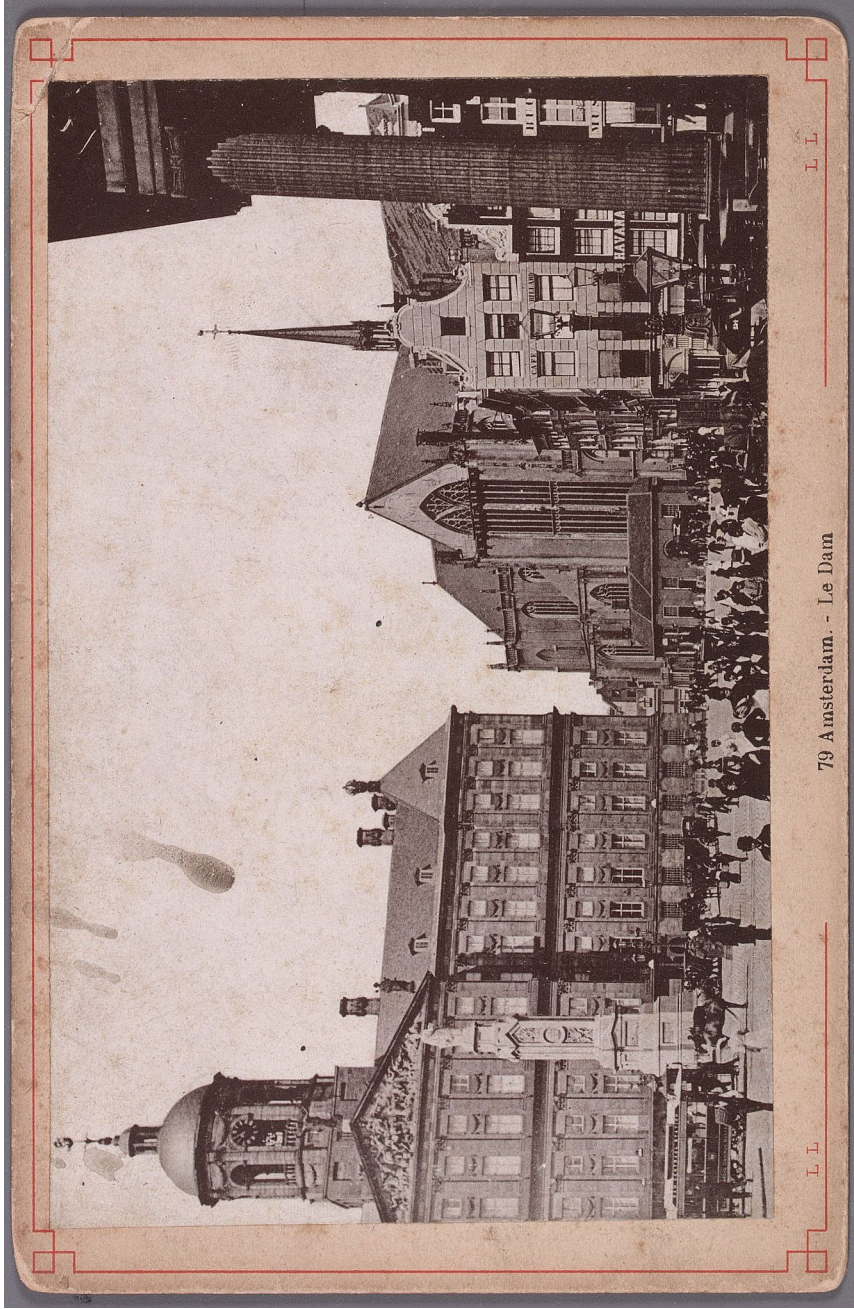
At first glance, the photo appears to be a snapshot. The postcard in Figure 1 shows the bustling city centre of 19th-century Amsterdam.¹ We see drivers waiting for their customers, maids doing their daily shopping, gentlemen in high hats rushing to get the omnibus and a number of passers-by throwing curious glances at the photographer. However, the image on the picture postcard represents more than an average square on a Monday afternoon. Like today's tourist postcards, it stimulated the 19th-century spectator to look at the city in a particular way. Dam Square hosted important institutions of the Kingdom of the Netherlands: The Royal Palace, the New Church (in which the monarch was inaugurated), the National Monument commemorating the separation with Belgium in 1830–1831, and on the right-hand side, we can get a glimpse of a pillar of the Stock Exchange. The central square of Amsterdam was thus deliberately marketed as a national location. But did the city dwellers themselves experience it as a 'national' place?

This article examines how and when the nation—whether in the shape of concrete national symbols or as an abstract frame of reference—became relevant to ordinary people. It focuses on the national experiences and activities of ordinary Amsterdam citizens in the second half of the 19th century, the period in which the Netherlands developed into a modern nation-state. For decades, historians assumed that the present-day nation-state was the result of an inevitable process of modernisation, directed and controlled 'from above' by authorities and social elites (e.g. Baycroft & Hewitson, 2006; Weber, 1976). This teleological slant has been challenged only recently. First of all, more attention is being paid to the question of *what* the nation meant to *whom*. On a geographical level, historians have emphasised the continued importance of local and regional identifications in shaping an overarching national identity (Applegate, 1990; Brophy, 2007; Confino, 1997; Whyte & Zimmer, 2011; Zimmer, 2013). On a social level, the focus on elite projects has been broadened up by a perspective 'from below' and the agency of a multitude of actors—both elites and subalterns—in the national project (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Van Ginderachter & Beyen, 2012; Whitmeyer, 2002).

Whether the great mass of ordinary people, by which I mean citizens without formal political or institutional power, subscribed to elitist nation-building agendas is open to question. In her influential article 'Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis' (2010) Tara Zahra even questioned whether the nation played a role at all in the lives of many people: 'What if our subjects seem to shrug their shoulders at the questions that interest us?' (p. 93) The introduction of the concept of 'national indifference' (Zahra 2008 & 2010) has made both historians and researchers of contemporary nationalism aware of the possibility that despite the fact that in the 19th and 20th centuries, more and more citizens became residents of a nation-state, this did not automatically imply that the nation was a relevant category for identity formation. In studies on nation-building in Central and Eastern Europe, the concept has already proven its added value (Bjork, 2008; Judson, 2006); in research on modern nation-building in Western Europe, however, the presence of 'national indifference' has been less explored (Van Ginderachter & Fox, 2019).

Besides the question of *what* the nation means for *whom*, the concept of 'national indifference' draws our attention to a third factor, namely under *what conditions* does nationalism acquire its meaning? Zahra states that 'making [national] indifference visible enables historians to better understand the limits of nationalization' (2010, p. 94). The demarcation line between national and non-national identification has proven to be ambiguous and ambivalent. This is especially addressed in historical studies on border regions, like Pieter Judson's study on 'language frontiers' in imperial Austria (2006) which explores the 'flexible' (and indifferent) response of inhabitants of linguistically mixed regions to the work of nationalist activists (see also Cole, 2007; King, 2005). How do we decide whether certain ideas or performances are perceived as 'national'? And can *non-nationalist* motives still result in national practices and identifications? When we concentrate on the activities of individuals—like the ordinary citizens of 19th-century Amsterdam in this article—we will see that the limits of national identification in the daily practices of nation-building are fluid and situational.

It has already been noted on various occasions that the existence of 'national indifference' is difficult to investigate: How do you prove the absence of something? For historians, this may apply even more so because, unlike



79 Amsterdam. - Le Dam

FIGURE 1 A commercial picture postcard published in the 1890s of Dam Square in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. SGA, Collectie kabinetfoto's, 10005/1124, 'De Dam met het Koninklijk Paleis en de Nieuwe Kerk', Gebr. Douwes, ca.1890. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jama.12961)]

sociologists or anthropologists, they cannot create new sources (e.g. social surveys) and are dependent on the traces that are preserved in the archives. Moreover, the concept of 'national indifference' can be interpreted literally as an *unresponsiveness* to nation-building agendas, but it can also apply to the *lack of nationalisation* or national awareness among certain groups in society. Determining the knock-on effect or 'successes' of nation-building initiatives, in the form of the emergence of a national consciousness, is hardly measurable. Instead, the historian should try to understand how and why (historical) actors made the national framework relevant in their daily lives—and when this explicitly did *not* happen.

I therefore argue that we should focus more on the reasons of identification with the nation, rather than on the ideological content and the (physical or symbolic) borders of the national community. Moreover, attention to the motives of individual citizens provides a better understanding of how ordinary people connect their own lives to larger abstract identities such as the nation. As the example of the picture postcard at the beginning of this article shows, 19th-century Amsterdam citizens were confronted with representations of the nation on a daily basis. But which of the traders on their way to the Stock Exchange was aware of the historical significance of the national monument he was passing? The meaning that one contemporary attached to the monuments and buildings depicted—or to the postcard as an object in itself—did not necessarily resonate in the minds of his fellow citizens. The urban environment brought the people of Amsterdam into contact with numerous well-known national stories and images. But above all, the city offered them a platform to express their commitment to the nation in their own ways (Bickford-Smith, 2012).

Jonathan Hearn's concept of 'embedded nationalism' offers a useful starting point exploring individual citizens' motives for national identification. Building on the work of sociologist Derek Layder, Hearn demonstrates how the interaction with social and everyday environments (or 'embedding') is essential in understanding how people integrate a broad and abstract category such as 'the nation' into their individual and personal identity (Hearn, 2007). Moreover, Hearn argues how widely used concepts such as 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1996) and 'personal nationalism' (Cohen, 2000, 1996) fall short in truly recognising this process of identity formation. The concept of 'banal nationalism', introduced in the mid-1990s by social scientist Michael Billig, opened researchers' eyes to the omnipresence of the nation in everyday life. Almost unnoticeably, Billig argues, national symbols and agendas sneak into people's daily lives—as a counterpoint to moments of 'hot nationalism' when national display comes to the fore (Billig, 1996; Edensor, 2002; Hutchinson, 2006; Nieguth, 2020). Billig's main concern was, however, according to Hearn 'the implicit and naturalised social reproduction of social categories more than with *how we invest ourselves in them*' (Hearn, 2007, p. 659—emphasis added).

In order to better understand how and when people invested themselves in 'the nation', this article focuses on national identity as a category of practice and explores people's *motivations* for interacting with more abstract symbolizations of the nation. John Breuilly's distinction between 'structural' and 'motivational nationalism' is particularly helpful here (Breuilly, 2012). Structural nationalism, according to Breuilly, refers to the existing national narrative, a cognitive framework to which citizens consciously or unconsciously relate. Motivational nationalism involves people's motives for engaging in nationalistic expressions, such as participating in a national celebration or flying the flag. Breuilly emphasises here how precisely non-nationalistic motives, such as political or religious preferences, financial and material considerations or the desire for social change, could instigate nationalistic actions. Popular nationalism was driven by many familiar nationalist themes. Yet people's motivations to express or recognise a national identity only partly revolved around the nation-state, as will be demonstrated below.

The search for the link between individual beliefs and identities on the one hand and abstract social categories such as the nation on the other offers (the beginning of) a solution to the problematic binary of national identification versus national indifference. Zahra is right to say that we must be careful not to immediately fill the lack of national identification with other seemingly more convincing sources of individual identity building—such as local or regional affiliations, religious beliefs or political views (Zahra, 2010, p. 111). At the same time, people cherish different identities, which do not all have to be dominant at the same time (see, for example, the field of intersectionality studies). The simple observation or acknowledgement of 'national indifference' is therefore not enough; what is

going on when individuals do *not* relate to the nation remains unclear. Using a micro-historical approach, in this article, I aim to get closer to exactly these experiences and activities of ordinary citizens (Hearn & Antonsich, 2018).

Maarten Van Genderachter and Jon Fox (2019, p. 1) argue that one of the most important benefits of the concept of 'national indifference' is that it invites a 'much needed' empirical and social embedding of (constructivist) nationalism research. Especially in an urban context, ordinary people were confronted again and again with nationalist agendas and 'invented traditions' of an intellectual elite. Instead of taking a trickling-down effect of these nationalist initiatives for granted, this article asks how, when and why citizens produced alternative interpretations and nationalist expressions. I do not aim to accentuate the contrast between 'top down' and 'bottom up' or between 'elites' and 'commoners'; some of the examples will show that differences between the various social strata turn out to be less significant than expected. Rather, I am looking for manifestations of popular nationalism, thus linking up with recent studies on the position of the subaltern in the process of modern nation-building (Pettersson, 2017; Van Genderachter & Beyen, 2012).

As a capital city, 19th-century Amsterdam played an exceptional part in the process of Dutch nation-building; this will be explained in more detail in the next section. In three case studies, I focus on a different manifestation of nationalism in the urban environment.² The first case study concerns the creation of national statues and monuments in public spaces. The portrayal of patriotic heroes in stone or bronze was one of the most eye-catching vehicles for building a national pantheon. Time and again, these were initiatives from the social upper echelons; the reaction of the wider public, everyday passers-by, to the statues has so far hardly been problematized. This section examines how Amsterdam citizens dealt with these monuments as a resource of national feeling, showing that the national message did not or only partly get through and that, in everyday practice, 19th-century city dwellers used the monumental landscape for all sorts of non-national purposes. In the second part, attention shifts to the social settings in which national symbols would be employed. The singing of the national anthem serves as an example: In what contexts did ordinary people perform the anthem, and above all, why? This section reveals a tension between popular and 'official' nationalism and shows how spontaneous performances of the national anthem on seemingly all kinds of non-national occasions nevertheless contributed to shaping a national feeling. The third and final part addresses the enthusiasm of 19th-century Amsterdam citizens for the monarchy. Here, it becomes clear how nationalist agency was grounded in a variety of non-nationalist motivations and citizens' highly personal agendas. In particular, the specific social setting of the neighbourhood proved an important point of departure for participation in national festivities.

All case studies deal with familiar themes in nationalism research. This raises the question whether we should not look for national identification in other places if we want to get a better understanding of popular nationalism. In a recent study, Maarten Van Genderachter (2019), for example, used 'propaganda pence' advertisements (similar to contemporary tweets) in Belgian socialist newspapers to gain insight into proletarian consciousness and national identification. This article, however, aims to show that even the obvious symbols of the nation did not automatically evoke national feelings or could be used by ordinary citizens for all sorts of non-national reasons. The national discourse that spread as a consequence did not exclude the existence of both everyday nationalism and national indifference. However, the motives of citizens to relate to the national discourse are less black and white than these concepts from nationalism literature suggest and imply that both forms actually existed side by side in (historical) reality.

2 | TRACKING NATIONAL INDIFFERENCE: STATUES AND MONUMENTS

For many 19th-century citizens, the abstract community of the nation only became recognisable in their everyday surroundings. When it comes to national unification, it seems obvious that local identifications are gradually disappearing from sight and become replaced by a national identity. After having been a Republic of relatively independent regions (*gewesten*) for centuries, the foundations for a new Kingdom of the Netherlands were laid around 1800

(de Haan et al., 2013). During the early modern Republic, the city and locality were the most important source of civic identification (Prak 2018 & 2019). However, recent research shows that even after the formation of the Kingdom, local identities and traditions continued to play an important role in the life of the 19th-century Dutchman (Arijs, 2017; Leerssen, 2015; Peverelli, 2019). Local pride was strongly developed and proved to be an important source for the national narrative in the 19th century.

Studies have shown that, in historical practice, local and national identities were extensions of each other (Augusteijn & Storm, 2012; Bickford-Smith, 2012; Confino & Skaria, 2002; Green, 2011; Whyte & Zimmer, 2011). Also, the representation of the city as a whole could be used as a metaphor for the nation (te Velde, 2011; Wagenaar, 2001). The special status of Amsterdam as the capital of the newly founded Kingdom in 1813–1815 needed little confirmation (Aerts & De Rooy, 2006). Although the city lagged somewhat behind other European capitals in terms of metropolitan prestige in the first half of the 19th century, it caught up quickly from the 1850s onwards. During this period, the number of inhabitants doubled: By the end of the century, the city had almost 511,000 registered residents.³ While The Hague traditionally symbolised the centre of government and Rotterdam developed into an international port city and economic power, Amsterdam presented itself as the focal point of metropolitan culture and social politics.

The distinct environment of the city provided city dwellers with a space in which they could express their own imaginations of the nation: a notion prominent in landscape studies and research on urban architecture (Cosgrove, 2008; Daniels, 1993; Driver, 1995; Driver & Gilbert, 1999; Leith, 1991). In the case of 19th-century Amsterdam, this involved major projects, such as the construction of the Rijksmuseum (1885) or Central Station (1889). But this article also shows more small-scale and spontaneous initiatives, such as festive parades through the city centre or nationalistic decorations in local neighbourhoods. Without this local embedding, 'the Netherlands' remained an abstraction. The streets and buildings provided both resources and (social) settings, which could limit the city dwellers in their actions but much more often enabled them to show their attachment to the nation. The urban environment therefore offers precisely the link that we can use to understand how individuals did—or did not—pursue national practices and in the process adopted a national identity.

One of the most urban expressions of the nation in the 19th century were statues and monuments. The monumental landscape is considered as an important resource for national identification (Agulhon, 1978; Jourdan, 1993; Mosse, 1975; Rausch, 2006, 2009). While a true *statuomanie* or *Denkmalswut* dominated big nation-states like France and Germany, the monumental landscape of the 19th-century Netherlands was relatively modest. In 1852, Amsterdam welcomed its first statue, of the 17th-century painter Rembrandt, followed by five other public monuments in the second half of the century. Scholars have generally studied the monumental landscape through an ideological lens: what was the central idea behind these initiatives and how was this expressed in the sculpture itself. Whereas the initiators often had a clear national agenda in mind, the inhabitants of 19th-century Amsterdam seemed to have little interest in the newly erected statues and monuments. Why did the national message behind the monumental landscape fail to catch on?

The transmission of the ideas and ideology behind the statues and monuments was not self-evident, first of all, because the initiators took little trouble to get the city dwellers involved. The unveiling ceremony of the statue of Rembrandt in 1852 was explicitly staged as a nationalist performance. Internationally, the 17th-century painter was already recognised as a symbol of the Dutch 'Golden Age'. In the Netherlands, Rembrandt had not yet reached such a status, although this only encouraged the initiators of the statue to emphasise the national character of the painter and especially the *public* importance of the statue in their speeches and publications. The inhabitants of Amsterdam expressed a strong curiosity for the festivities in honour of the first statue in their city. House owners advertised rooms with a view for weeks in advance in the local newspapers and pictures show how during the ceremony people climbed the roofs of the houses that surrounded the venue to gain a better view.⁴

Newspapers afterwards wrote how the unveiling had been a true 'patriotic celebration'.⁵ The organisation of the ceremony, however, mirrored the 19th-century obsession with social demarcation. The festivities were accessible upon payment of an entrance fee; only dignitaries and invited guests were allowed to enter the grounds in order

to stand near the statue during the unveiling.⁶ Afterwards, people complained that they had not heard or seen anything during the entire ceremony. 'Because of all the shouting and cheering the crowd could not hear a syllable of what had been said,' concluded Joris Praatvaar ('George Babblers'), the fictional protagonist of a popular brochure on the Rembrandt festivities.⁷ The attraction of the ceremony was therefore more in the entertainment on offer than in the nationalist message. The streets were decorated, there would be music and, with a bit of luck, it would be possible to catch a glimpse of the king who was invited to join the festivities.

Afterwards, the initiators took little effort to explain the monument to the city dwellers. Various publications regarding the Rembrandt statue were published by other parties. In most cases, however, these were more expensive brochures and commemorative albums, which in all likelihood did not reach the general public.⁸ Most illustrations of the Rembrandt statue that were published as a souvenir of the ceremony presented an ideal world: In a few cases, they show only the statue itself; in most cases, they also contain passers-by gazing at the monument. Unfortunately, we know little about the manufacturing process. The drawings, engravings and lithographs were commercial products and available in a wide price range. They repeatedly depicted well-dressed passers-by looking at the monument, supposedly contemplating the higher (national) meaning of the 17th-century painter.⁹ The statue was thus presented as an object that commanded respect and attention. This ideal type, however, would not be achieved in reality.

In everyday life, the Rembrandt statue hardly seemed to evoke national (or local) sympathies. Some popular writings published shortly after the ceremony help us to deduce some first perceptions of the statue. What becomes clear is that the average citizen had little to no clue about the background of the statue. As an example here consider a brochure by popular writer and school master Jan Schenkman (1806–1863) in which various fictional 'popular types' expressed their opinion about the recently unveiled monument. Two working-class women, called 'Mie' and 'Lijs', were apparently unimpressed by Rembrandt's artistic merits: 'Say, Lijs, do you know this strange fellow?/For sure, Mie! He was a painter! /A painter? Are you kidding me?'¹⁰ Others thought the money could have been better spent or characterised the initiative as idolatry. Although Schenkman's poetry gave a voice to fictional city dwellers, it is quite conceivable that these feelings reflected actual opinions—in reviews of his work, Schenkman was praised for his ability to convey the popular mindset.¹¹

While sources on the popular experience of the Rembrandt statue are limited—or voiced by writers like Schenkman—photographs throw a more direct light on how city dwellers used the monumental landscape in their daily life (Pettersson, 2019; van Veen, 2016). Some passers-by deliberately had their picture taken with the 17th-century painter, confirming (or copying?) the image that was also shown in the commercial illustrations.¹² From the fact these photos exist, we can conclude that these people at least thought the statue was worth noticing. In some cases, the passers-by might have identified themselves with the ideas of the founding committees. It is also possible that they were tourists and that the picture was taken as a souvenir. Most of the city dwellers that appeared in the photographs, however, did not pose intentionally. At Rembrandt's pedestal, we meet, for example, a craftsman (perhaps a scissors grinder) doing his work under the watchful eye of his clients, or a man crossing the square with a handcart.¹³

These street snaps stand in clear contrast to the more official drawings, engravings and lithographs of the statue. From photographs of the Rembrandt statue and other monuments in 19th-century Amsterdam, we can discern several non-nationalist usages: Some proved to be a magnet for commercial activities, in part because of their central location, and others served as hangout or meeting point. An advertisement published in a local newspaper in 1895 states, for example, how an anonymous gentleman missed his appointment with a 'Miss. M.B.....Ma' at seven o'clock at the foot of the statue of the 19th-century statesman Thorbecke (unveiled in 1876).¹⁴ Simultaneously with the appearance of the first statue in Amsterdam, the urban environment began to change radically in other ways as well. The statues and monuments faced competition from all kinds of other objects in the streetscape: gas lamps, benches, clocks, billboards and newspaper kiosks with the latest news spread rapidly across the public space. The initial meaning of the monumental landscape faded over time and became replaced by other associations. The national monument on Dam Square, featured prominently on the picture postcard at the beginning of this article, was by far the

most visible to both inhabitants and visitors of the city. Yet at the turn of the century, bustling city life was taking up all of the attention as was remarked by a newspaper reporter in 1896:

The city dweller passes the monument, as he passes so many other things that appear common to him; and the stranger, he has other things on his mind. He has to see the Palace and the Nieuwe Kerk [New Church] and the Exchange and at the same time try to avoid a confrontation with other pedestrians and all the carts, carriages and trams.¹⁵

Another picture postcard of Dam Square dating from the turn of the century confirms this observation and shows how the monument commemorating the Ten Day's Campaign against the secessionist Southern Netherlands (since then: present-day Belgium) in 1830–1831 seems to have turned into a tram stop with six or more trams waiting for their passengers.¹⁶

The statues and monuments were certainly erected with nationalistic intentions, and as such are presented by contemporaries and historians as important markers in modern nation-building, yet this nationalist agenda does seem to play only a limited role in everyday perception. Popular responses suggest how the nationalist message was (most of the time) not at the core of ordinary people's experiences. For many city dwellers, the monuments functioned as useful beacons in a modernising and constantly changing urban landscape instead. As a consequence, it would prove difficult to keep the original meaning and ambition of the initiators present in the minds of the passers-by. This goes against Billig's idea of banal nationalism, whereby national backgrounds subconsciously instil nationalism in ordinary people. Although, as noted in the introduction to this article, determining the true impact of a national discourse remains problematic, the available historical sources in this case rather point to the absence or waning of national identification. The underlying problem with the monumental landscape is that it offers few openings for symbolic interaction: The Rembrandt statue was part of people's daily urban environment, but active involvement was limited and the intended message remained unclear to many city dwellers. If a national symbol is to have broad support and be successful, it must provide citizens the opportunity to connect with the wider community and create emotional involvement.

3 | EVERYDAY CONTEXTS: THE NATIONAL ANTHEM

In this section, I will therefore focus on the example of the national anthem, a national symbol that needed to be actively performed and could be claimed by various social groups in different contexts. Where the monumental landscape provided a tangible reference to the nation, the city offered different social settings in which the national anthem could be sung. These settings helped to shape the meaning attached to the music (DeNora, 2000; Revill, 2000; Whiteley et al., 2004). Moreover, the practice of singing together created a sense of belonging, as is shown in studies on the social function of music (Cerulo, 1995; Hoegaerts, 2014). In the case of the national anthem, that meant that the expression and construction of a national symbol coincided. An inventory of the urban contexts in which the national anthem sounded exposes the impact of this national song repertoire and demonstrates at what moments the 19th-century city dwellers appealed to this symbol.

Most of the time, the encounter took place through *listening*, such as the performance of the national anthem during official and orchestrated national ceremonies where the musical repertoire had already been determined in advance. These included, for example, the unveiling of the statues and monuments we encountered in the previous section, festive commemorations of historical events or large-scale musical tributes (so-called *aubades*) to the Royal House on the central Dam Square. On these occasions, listening and—in some instances—singing the anthem provided city dwellers with a means of defining themselves as part of a larger group. While the national texts were often lost in the open air, the same could not be said for the melodies. These moments were ideally suited to confirm the

solemnity of the anthem and to establish the association of this symbol with national themes and events (Hoegaerts, 2014, p. 121).

However, the emotional character could only come about through powerful direction. During the unveiling of the monument on Dam Square in 1856, at the conductor's signal, some 400 children all entered simultaneously from complete silence into the first words of the *Wien Neêrlands bloed*. When they reached the second strophe, the orchestra also began to play, but at the same time—and this was unexpected—a large number of male voices, scattered across the square, joined in. According to a reporter, this caused 'some confusion', as they were more concerned 'with making their powerful voices heard than with keeping the beat'.¹⁷ Such a spontaneous effort may have been prompted by patriotism, but at the same time, it clearly broke the magic of the moment. From the organisers' point of view, such uncontrolled expressions of emotion showed a lack of control which they would rather not see.¹⁸

Since 1817, the solemn *Wien Neêrlands bloed* served as the official anthem of the Kingdom. The song was composed on commission and faced competition from the popular *Wilhelmus*, a traditional 17th-century Beggar's song which was not to become the official anthem until 1932 (Grijp, 1998). Contemporaries, however, observed that most Dutch people knew very little about the contents and lyrics of both songs. According to headmaster H.H. Hartman, the lyrics of the stately *Wien Neêrlands bloed* were 'echoed with hoarse shouting', and the popular interpretation of the lyrics of the *Wilhelmus* was no better.¹⁹ This criticism reveals the tension between popular and official nationalism. It is precisely teachers like Hartman who made an effort to improve popular singing practices and increase national awareness (Pasler, 2009). The popular expressions were dismissed by educators and authorities as non-national and non-civilised (*onburgerlijk*).

The recurring use of the anthem at official national events encouraged the association of certain people or topics with the song. As a result, the anthem also sounded on more spontaneous, non-official occasions. During the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the reign of King William III (r.1849–1890) in 1889, a gentleman, Mr Wilking, entertained the youngest inhabitants of a lower-class Amsterdam neighbourhood with a spectacle of 'mist images' (*nevelbeelden*). When the light artist conjured up the portraits of the King and Queen, the group—that was joined by more and more curious street dwellers—spontaneously started to sing the *Wilhelmus*.²⁰ We can see the exact similar response during cinema screenings towards the end of the century. 'The applause reaches a climax when the Queens [Wilhelmina and Emma] and Prince Hendrik appear on the screen,' a journalist wrote about a visit to a cinema in the Amstelstraat around 1900. 'At that point the audience gets up and sings along with the *Wilhelmus*.'²¹

More surprisingly, it turns out that the inhabitants of Amsterdam frequently used the nationalist repertoire in numerous non-national contexts as well (see also Cerulo, 1995, pp. 135–137). This indicates on the one hand that the solemn and unique national character of the national anthem the elites wished for was far from self-evident. On the other hand, the wide-ranging usage of the *Wien Neêrlands bloed* and *Wilhelmus* demonstrates that the songs were known by large parts of the population.

A sample taken from the newspapers shows that the anthems, for example, were used by a whole range of associations to conclude their meetings. Accordingly, the report of the annual conference of the Roman Catholic People's Union (*Volksbond*) ended with the remark that: 'After a few more announcements had been made, the conference was concluded with the singing of the *Wien Neêrlands bloed*.'²² The *Wien Neêrlands bloed* and *Wilhelmus* also sounded during award ceremonies, ranging from an international bakery competition to an art needlework exhibition.²³ Celebrities that visited the city, like the Viennese soprano Pauline Lucca or the travelling 'Miracle Doctor' Sequah, were serenaded with the national anthems in the streets of Amsterdam.²⁴ And by far the majority of the alternative lyrics that appeared to the melody of the *Wien Neêrlands bloed* (so-called contrafacts) were intended as wedding songs, bringing the national anthem into very private settings.²⁵ Significant is the presence of the national anthem in the many theatres and other centres of entertainment in the city. Earlier, we saw the example of cinema screenings where, as soon as the royal family came into the picture, the audience sang the *Wien Neêrlands bloed* or *Wilhelmus*. During theatre performances with a nationalistic character (e.g. historical plays), the anthems were performed as well. But the *Wien Neêrlands bloed* and *Wilhelmus* also sounded when national references were missing.

For example, in 1892, the national anthem was included in a festive programme celebrating the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus.²⁶ Four years later, in April 1896, the visitors of the well-known Park Theatre (*Parktheater*) were completely captivated by a performance of the *Wien Neêrlands bloed* by a company of French singers. According to a reporter, the audience became 'elated' and 'so warm in their applause' that 'the artists had to repeat the singing of the national anthem four times'.²⁷

That the use of the anthems in theatres was a fairly established custom and helped to create a sense of belonging is further proven by an incident from 1898. When on a Tuesday evening in 1898 in Circus Arena just after a cinema screening, the film projector toppled over and a big fire broke out on the stage, the audience only calmed down after the orchestra started to perform the *Wien Neêrlands bloed*. 'The cinema-goers, now reassured, began to sing along and the panic slowly began to subside,' a reporter noted.²⁸ Unlike popular or religious song repertoires, the anthems offered a text and melody that could transcend parties, social ranks and generations. In response to the threat of fire and chaos, the *Wien Neêrlands bloed* emerged as a familiar and comforting tune. The singing contributed to the feeling of security and at the same time served as a demonstration of gratitude for the heroic theatre manager who single-handedly had put out the fire.

The social settings in which the national anthems sounded were of great importance for the significance that was attached to the music. However, the at first sight somewhat unusual moments when the *Wien Neêrlands bloed* and *Wilhelmus* were performed should not be understood separately from the more obvious and formal national occasions. In most of these cases, the national repertoire served to mark a mutual bond. The songs were also often intended as a special token of homage, and there was no distinction here between King William III and the quack doctor Sequah: The *Wien Neêrlands bloed* was considered to be suitable for both. Contrary to the everyday experience of the statues and monuments, the singing of the anthems offered the opportunity for active involvement and appropriation by ordinary citizens. The fact that the idiosyncratic performances of the *Wien Neêrlands bloed* and *Wilhelmus* upset contemporaries like headmaster Hartman does little to detract from the outcomes. Although performing the national anthem did not always involve an intentional nationalism these expressions did result in the spreading of the *Wien Neêrlands bloed* and *Wilhelmus* as collective symbols. It was precisely this non-nationalist usage of the national anthems that provided them with a truly unifying potential. Whether this can subsequently be interpreted as 'banal' or 'everyday' nationalism is open to question: The intentions of ordinary city dwellers to use the national anthems were not always nationalistic, and a link between the songs and national symbolism or themes was not required either. Rather, the performances of the 19th-century Amsterdam citizens demonstrate a sense of mutual recognition and broader community building through these songs—a performance that could turn nationalistic when the circumstances called for it.

4 | PERSONAL, LOCAL AND COMMERCIAL AGENDAS: THE MONARCHY

John Breuilly raised the question of what it actually means to say that nationalism is 'popular' (Breuilly, 2012). The term often refers to the involvement of lower social classes in the shaping of nationalism and the general appeal of different national themes and symbols (Smith, 2008). In his response, Breuilly does not focus so much on the distinction between elites and lower classes but rather tries to provide a framework within which popular nationalism can be examined. Breuilly's dichotomy between 'structural' and 'motivational' nationalism allows us to focus on popular expressions in which national identifications were perhaps not so much the stake of the action, but rather the result—as was addressed in the previous section. The alternative contexts in which symbols like the national anthem are performed raise questions about citizens' personal agendas to use nationalist expressions. In this section, I will further explore Breuilly's 'motivational nationalism' by focusing on the most prevalent theme in Dutch 19th-century national identity: the affection for the monarchy. Popular 'Orangism' was based on a mythical connection between the Netherlands and the House of Orange; a historical bond that dated back to the founding father William of Orange (1533–1584) that could be addressed time and again (Huijsen, 2012; te Velde, 2006). In the context of

Amsterdam, citizens displayed a huge local autonomy in expressing their love for the royal family (de Wildt, 2008). As an example here serves the Willemsstraat, a street based in a largely working-class area and named after King William I (r.1815–1840) in 1857 at the request of its residents.²⁹ Although many 19th-century citizens probably did feel a genuine commitment to the monarchy, I will show how individual interests, local community building and commercial considerations played a crucial role in addressing this aspect of national identity.

For a long time, the Willemstraat had been an isolated island in the city: Its residents belonged to the lower end of the labour market, lived in poor conditions and had a bad reputation among their fellow citizens. As a result of municipal government intervention and the introduction of social housing, living conditions improved from the mid-19th century onwards (van der Woud, 2010). By requesting the street's name to be changed, the residents testified to their adherence to the royal family. Naming streets or buildings after monarchs or other persons or events was not yet common in the Netherlands during this period. The residents' request to the city council was therefore more original than it seems at first. In their letter, they mentioned 'the loving government of the House of Orange' and the official inauguration of the street took place on August 24, the birthday of King William I who had passed away in 1843.

During national celebrations, the streets of Amsterdam were decorated with national and Orangist symbols. In addition to the official decorations by the city government, residents of streets and neighbourhoods united in local decoration committees. On photographs of the Willemsstraat during these festivities, the gates of honour stood out in particular. These were metres-high structures, usually made of wood, decorated with foliage and all kinds of inscriptions and paintings. The symbolism used shows that a nationalist (or Orangist) idea was present in the minds of the initiators. For example, at the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Kingdom in 1863, we see the use of the national and orange flag, the coats of arms of Amsterdam and the Netherlands and slogans such as 'The Netherlands and Orange' or 'Homage to William I, William II and William III'.³⁰ References to the royal family itself were also visible in the use of portraits, busts and royal initials.

The lavish decorations during national celebrations helped the Willemstraat residents to improve the image of their neighbourhood—and themselves. In 1874, the *Amsterdamsche Courant* advised the people of Amsterdam who were visiting the city for the 25th anniversary of William III to pay the Willemstraat—'that almost forgotten corner of our great city'—a visit. 'Amsterdammers know how well they are always received there and how readily the Willemsstraat receives visits from that large section of the population which they would otherwise never see in their midst'.³¹ Enhancing the public image of one's street or neighbourhood was especially relevant to the poorer neighbourhoods. To finance the decorations, Willemstraat residents went door-to-door collecting, a custom somewhat derogatorily referred to as 'begging' by some of the city's more affluent residents.³² The ultimate goal was to be able to realise the decorations without outside (financial) assistance.³³

From the elites' point of view, the popular involvement with the street decorations was a blessing: After all, in a society dominated by class distinctions, it was quite a challenge to give concrete substance to 'national togetherness'. They recognised how the membership of a festive committee also brought personal status. Being chairman of a committee was an honourable task and strengthened the social position within one's street or neighbourhood. In 1887, in the run-up to the King's 70th birthday celebrations, a well-to-do city dweller told his domestic caretaker how he had been appointed as a member of a festive committee. The servant trumped him by proudly announcing that he had been elected as the *chairman* in his street. 'There was a clear indication in his words that for the first few weeks he wished to be treated on the footing of the most favoured colleague,' his boss commented, 'and I took the hint of the caretaker-chairman to heart and offered him an extra fine cigar'.³⁴

From the 1870s onwards, the local authorities realised there could be advantages in tapping into popular national feelings and activities. At the same time, their efforts were aimed at channelling national emotions and disciplining the increasingly visible masses on the streets. In 1872, the newly founded *Vereniging tot Veredeling van het Volksvermaak* (Association for the Advancement of Popular Entertainment) organised a city-wide competition to award prizes to the most beautiful neighbourhood decorations. The Willemsstraat residents were awarded the first prize, comprising a certificate and 50 guilders (approx. 500 euros in current days value).³⁵ Honour was important

here, but for the residents of the working-class neighbourhoods, the considerable material reward must also have played a role. Similar contests took place at subsequent celebrations, resulting in the diffusion of national and Orange symbolism across the city.

On a motivational level, the organisation of the decorating contests led to increasing competition between the different neighbourhoods in the city. Support for the House of Orange was linked to decent citizenship: The street with the most beautiful decorations could therefore count on appreciation from the local authorities. This appealed to the neighbourhoods' sense of honour. Pride in one's own street was consequently as important a reason for decorating your house as were Orangist or national feelings, as was showing from the explicit disappointment at not receiving a prize.³⁶ This dynamic was not just top-down but also propagated by the local committees themselves. Examples of this are the increasing number of requests to the monarch to visit certain streets during national festivities.³⁷ The impression that some streets were favoured by the authorities over others led to local jealousies. 'The discontent is strong,' a teacher on the Wittenburg island in the north-east of the city reported to the mayor in 1887. 'I heard: are we Wittenburgers less than the inhabitants of the Jordaan or the Jewish neighbourhoods?'³⁸

Around the middle of the 19th century, local identification dominated Amsterdam's working-class neighbourhoods. This was due to the social background of the residents and their interdependence, but also to spatial boundaries (Garrioch & Peel, 2006). Many of the working-class neighbourhoods were cut off from the rest of the city by streets or canals. While street decorations were mostly local projects, where curious city dwellers had to visit neighbourhoods that might be unfamiliar to them in order to witness the decorations, Orange supporters made a much greater claim on urban space with spontaneous parades. The Willemstraat residents visited other Orangist neighbourhoods carrying national and orange flags and singing the national anthem. At the same time, they wore sashes with the name of their street thus marking their local ties (e.g. Meijer, 1931, p. 270). These parades were part of an urban tradition and once again demonstrated the importance of local pride and competition between neighbourhoods in arranging nationalist initiatives.

The routes of the parades were extensive and crossed the whole city. By doing so, the Willemstraat residents showed themselves and their enthusiasm for the royal family to the other residents of Amsterdam as well. Despite the noisy and colourful presence of the procession, this did not lead to any—public—complaints from the local elites. In fact, as long as there was no direct contact (in contrast to the door-to-door begging for the street decorations), the different classes got along remarkably well. During the procession through one of the city's more affluent neighbourhoods, Willemstraat residents were not lacking in sympathy: 'In front of many a window, one could see the residents waving their cloths and hats, or wearing Orange sashes, as a sign that, even if they were divided, the House of Orange was the centre that united them all.'³⁹ Although these descriptions might be more optimistic of inter-class sympathies than reality, they emphasise the broader social and urban significance of the parades.

Nationalist agency was thus grounded in a variety of non-nationalist motivations. This tendency was by no means restricted to the lower social classes but involved the middle classes and urban elites as well: Each social group used the national framework to further its personal interests and improve its position in society. Local entrepreneurs, for example, competed for the commercial profits that came from holding large-scale popular games (*volks spelen*) during national festivities. When the city council discussed the best locations, various local inn keepers—who 'are weighed down by the heaviest and most oppressive burdens'—wondered if they might not also 'share a little in the benefits'.⁴⁰ Elsewhere in the city, shop owners lured customers to their stores during festivities by filling their shop with nationalist decorations, royal busts and lifelike photographic portraits of King William III and Queen Wilhelmine (r.1898–1848)—next to selling an ever-expanding supply of nationalist and Orangist merchandising; a practice Richards (1990) and Plunkett (2003) also described for Victorian Britain. Precisely, these more banal motives—individual pride, neighbourhood competition, or material and commercial considerations—were the driving forces behind many of the nationalist activities developed by the inhabitants of 19th-century Amsterdam. Nationalism in these cases functioned as a means rather than an end in itself. On the one hand, the idea of the Netherlands and the House of Orange provided a common vocabulary: When it came to nation-building agendas, in everyday practice, the different social groups often appeared to be much closer to each other than had been thought. On the

other hand, certain views and forms of expression could also lead to moments of conflict or competition: between different social strata, but certainly also within one's own social class.

5 | CONCLUSION

In his much-acclaimed enquiry into the subject of modern (European) nationalism, Eric Hobsbawm defined the nation-state as a dual phenomenon, 'constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist' (Hobsbawm, 1993, p. 10). It is precisely this dualism that recent research on the subject has taken as its core. Nationalism is no longer perceived as a privilege of the elites but just as well identified as a project embraced by people from the lower and middle social classes. This contribution investigated in what ways and to what extent the inhabitants of 19th-century Amsterdam constructed their national identity through their urban surroundings.

Central to the analysis is the apparent contradiction between 'banal' or 'everyday nationalism', in which nationalist symbols and rhetoric appeared to successfully reach their audience because of their omnipresence in daily life, and 'national indifference', as referring to the absence of national identification among the masses. By looking at the everyday practices and performances of nation-building, it becomes apparent that for the 19th-century Amsterdam citizens, identification with the nation depended on several factors. First of all, successful repertoires were based on social interaction: One did experience the nation preferably together with others in a public space. The examples have demonstrated the importance of a diversity of social settings: It was not—or not exclusively—the official ceremonies such as the unveiling of the Rembrandt statue where a national discourse was acquired but the surroundings of one's own street or neighbourhood, a club meeting or during a visit to the cinema. According to Hearn's concept of 'embedded nationalism', even instances of a more 'personal' national experience (Cohen, 2000, 1996) relied on this social context. Although this article did not explore the private realm, the behaviour of the inhabitants of the Willemstraat showed how public national discourses and personal and local motives were strongly intertwined. Secondly, the relevance of 'the Netherlands' as an abstract category was dependent on the possibilities of appropriating national resources. While the monumental landscape of 19th-century Amsterdam carried a clear national message, city dwellers did not automatically recognise this discourse in their daily urban experiences. Instead, they used the statues and monuments as street furniture, locations to run one's business from, romantic meeting points or a tramway stop. Although the lack of internalisation cannot be proven, the sources rather point to the absence or waning of national identifications. This was due to insufficient communication of the national intention behind the monuments but also to limited opportunities for ordinary city dwellers to actively appropriate the national narratives. This was different in the case of the national anthem and the Orangist symbolism: These resources were mobilised during official nationalist events but could also be easily integrated into individual, local or commercial performances of nationalism. Successful appropriation was closely related to, as third and final factor, the non-nationalist incentives of city dwellers to participate in nationalist events or employ a nationalist discourse. This draws our attention to the grey zone between national identification (whether in the form of 'hot' or 'banal' nationalism) and non-identification with (or even resistance to) a national discourse. Non-nationalist motives do not automatically imply indifference: They only suggest a relation to the national discourse different from straightforward identification or internalisation. The 19th-century Amsterdam citizens showed how the nationalist (and elitist) agenda might not be their first priority, yet their actions did increase the visibility and spread of national symbolism. These underlying motives and social dynamics come to light only in research on the micro level. National identification is never an on/off switch, but boundaries are more fluid: National indifference and national identification might coexist.

Nation-building as a 19th-century civilising strategy is tightly interwoven with the socio-political emancipation of the lower classes. The latter constantly adapted, influenced or contested elitist initiatives. Although these popular forms of expression were commented on by school masters, well-to-do city dwellers and authorities, this article also

demonstrated how the upper social classes also learned from the common people. In the case of the elaborate local street decorations during nationalist and Orangist festivities, the authorities and official festive committees tapped into its success by adapting and transferring these neighbourhood-based initiatives to the city level. It was the elites who followed popular practices here, not the other way around. It is through these social dynamics that national expressions and national imagination acquired their practical application: National symbolism was not so much an artificial framework superimposed on local and everyday life 'from above' but served as a means of shaping mutual social relations.

By paying attention to this everyday social reality within which national identities took shape, the apparent contradiction between identification versus indifference is broken down and replaced with a more layered interpretation of nationalist and non-nationalist behaviour.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Stadsarchief Gemeente Amsterdam (SGA), Collectie kabinetfoto's (CK), 10005/1124, 'De Dam met het Koninklijk Paleis en de Nieuwe Kerk', Gebr. Douwes, ca.1890.
- ² This article is based on the research for my PhD thesis 'Eigenwijs vaderland. Populair nationalisme in negentiende-eeuw Amsterdam', Leiden University, 2017.
- ³ <http://www.volkstellingen.nl> (February 2021).
- ⁴ SGA, Collectie tekeningen en prenten (CTP), 10097/010097007715, 'Onthulling van het standbeeld van Rembrandt', 1852. Example advertisements: *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 11 and 18 May 1852.
- ⁵ *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 28 May 1852.
- ⁶ Ibidem. Anon., *Programma van het Rembrandts-feest* (Amsterdam 1852) 6. Arti & Amicitia Archives, Brieven commissie Rembrandt (Letter M.G. Tetar van Elven, 16 May 1852).
- ⁷ Anon., *Het feest van Rembrandt van Rijn, verhaald door Joris Praatvaar* (Amsterdam 1852) 3.
- ⁸ W.N. Peijpers, *Levensschets van Rembrandt* (Amsterdam 1852).
- ⁹ E.g. SGA, CTP, 10097/010097003675, 'Amsterdam. Standbeeld van Rembrandt', G. Heizinger/G.B. van Goor, c.1885.
- ¹⁰ Jan Schenkman, *Jeremiade van Rembrandt van Rhijn* (Amsterdam 1852) 17. Similar opinions are expressed in, for example, Jan Schenkman, *Wat een eenvoudig burger dacht bij de onthulling van het standbeeld van Rembrandt van Rhijn* (Amsterdam 1852) or F.W. Vislaake, *Een woord van Rembrandt na zijne onthulling* (Amsterdam 1852).
- ¹¹ SGA, Collectie topografie, inv.nr. 483, Stukken betreffende het Rembrandtmonument, indic. 419 (review 1852).
- ¹² SGA, Collectie foto-afdrukken, 10,003/OSIM00001004537, 'Rembrandtplein 12-2', Pieter Oosterhuis.
- ¹³ SGA, CK, 10005/010005000433, 'De westzijde van het Rembrandtplein', A. Jager, 1867–72 (craftsman); SGA, Collectie stereofoto's 10007/010007000383, 'Amsterdam. Statue de Rembrandt sur la place du marche au beurre (Botermarkt)', 1864 (handcart).
- ¹⁴ *Het Nieuws van den Dag*, 29 April 1985.
- ¹⁵ *Het Nieuws van den Dag*, 28 August 1896. The next paragraphs of the newspaper article reflect, however, on the (historical) meaning of the monument.
- ¹⁶ SGA, CK, 10005/010005000036, 'De Dam gezien naar de ingang van het Damrak', Gebr. Van Rijkom, c. 1886–89.
- ¹⁷ *De Noord-Brabander*, 30 August 1856.
- ¹⁸ According to the official commemorative book, the spontaneous singing enhanced the 'sacred moment', but this report was only published two years after the unveiling. S.J. van den Bergh and W.J. Hofdijk, *Gedenboek der oprichting van het monument ter herinnering aan den volksgeest van 1830 & 1831* (Dordrecht 1858) 103.
- ¹⁹ H.H. Hartman, 'Het volksgezang', *De Wekker*, 28 September 1872. These practices still existed at the end of the 19th century: C.Th. van Deventer, *Het 'Wilhelmus' als Nederlandsch volkslied* (Amsterdam 1898).
- ²⁰ *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 15 mei 1889.
- ²¹ Adam Belder [pseud. J.H. Altona], *Op de vlakte* (Amsterdam 1901) 63.

- ²² *Het Nieuws van den Dag*, 16 September 1895.
- ²³ *Het Nieuws van den Dag*, 5 January 1887 (needlework); 11 December 1894 (bakery).
- ²⁴ *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 4 March 1875 (Lucca); 25 October 1891 (Sequah).
- ²⁵ This statement is based on an analysis of 129 songs (93 unique) from the period 1850–1900 with the standard melody ‘Wie Nederlands bloed’ in the Dutch Song Database of the Meertens Institute, of which 34 unique songs were wedding songs. (Search: June 2016).
- ²⁶ *Het Nieuws van den Dag*, 14 October 1892.
- ²⁷ *Het Nieuws van den Dag*, 23 April 1896.
- ²⁸ *Het Nieuws van den Dag*, 12 October 1898.
- ²⁹ SGA, Algemene Zaken (AZ), 1,685, Ingekomen en minuten van uitgaande stukken 1857, 12584 (Letter J. Mens et al to B&W, 14 August 1857).
- ³⁰ SGA, Commissie volksvermaken 1863, 37 (*Buitengewone Amsterdamsche Courant*).
- ³¹ *Amsterdamsche Courant*, 12 May 1874.
- ³² Example: *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 30 August 1858. Cf. Meijer, 1931, p. 261.
- ³³ During festivities in 1872, for example, the inscription ‘Brought together by our own efforts and not by begging’ was displayed on a gate in the Willemsstraat (Meijer, 1931, p. 271).
- ³⁴ *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 3 April 1887.
- ³⁵ SGA, Pamflettencollectie 1872 (‘Rapport der Jury’).
- ³⁶ Disappointment, for example, is evident in the letter from one Reijngat to the committee: SGA, Uitvoerend Comité Aprilfeesten, 12, Stukken betreffende de jury, scanno. 22 and 23 (Letter M. Reijngat to J. Gosschalk, 16 April 1887).
- ³⁷ SGA, AZ, 7082, Stukken betreffende voorbereidingen van bezoeken van koning Willem III (various letters).
- ³⁸ *Ibidem* (Letter F.G. Mellink Pz., 16 April 1887).
- ³⁹ Anon., *Oranje-vonken. Verzameling van opschriften in rijm en onrijm* (Rotterdam 1864) 7.
- ⁴⁰ SGA, AZ, 1756, Ingekomen en minuten van uitgaande stukken 1858, 15518 (Letter inhabitants Botermarkt to Mayor, undated).

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