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William of Orange

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1533 - 1584

William of Orange

From rebel nobleman to “father of the country”

William of Orange was an ambitious nobleman who grew into a rebel leader and was later honoured as the “father of the country”, as the founder of a new Dutch state. He himself had never envisaged the emergence of an independent state.

William was born in 1533 at Dillenburg Castle (in Germany). His parents were Lutheran, but when he inherited the principality of Orange (in France) in 1544 and could call himself “Prince”, emperor Charles V insisted that the young prince be raised a Catholic. For this reason, from age twelve, William grew up at the royal court in Brussels. He was raised in the French language in his new surroundings in a manner that befitted his new standing.

From 1555 onwards, William of Orange acquired high positions. As a military commander, member of the Council of State, Knight of the Order of the Golden Fleece and Stadholder (governor) of Holland, Zeeland and Utrecht he was

one of the most powerful noblemen in the Low Countries. However, his relationship with Philip II, Charles V’s successor, quickly deteriorated. William became the major spokesman of the noble opposition party. They were arguing for the persecution of heretics to be scaled down and they resisted the rise of professional civil servants in the administration of the country. The rise of the new civil servants meant that the nobility were losing their traditional positions.

After the debacle of the iconoclastic outbreak, William fled to Dillenburg. From here, from 1568 onwards, he undertook several military assaults on the Low Countries to bring to an end the rule of Duke of Alva. He also used propaganda (pamphlets, battle songs and cartoons) in this battle. One of the products of this period is the Dutch national anthem, the *Wilhelmus*. William had little initial success. Only when the Sea Beggars took Den Briel by accident on 1 April 1572 did

the Rebellion begin to receive widespread support.

Against all expectations, the rebels in Holland and Zeeland continued to hold fast, due in part to the perseverance of William of Orange. With the Pacification of Ghent in 1576 the rebels even managed to make peace with the various provinces. The ideals of William of Orange seemed within reach: the restoration of the seventeen Burgundian Low Countries under the administration of the nobles, and the resolution of the prevailing religious differences, based on tolerance. However, the new unity did not last.

In 1580, Philip II placed a bounty on the head of William of Orange. William's

response was to write an *Apologie* (defence) and the States General of the rebelling provinces responded with a *Plakkaat van verlatingshe* (Oath of Abjuration). Both these documents had the same message: resistance was justified because the king was acting like a tyrant. On 10 July 1584 a Catholic, Balthasar Gerards, shot William of Orange and brought an end to his life. William appeared to have achieved nothing, but less than twenty-five years later the rebellious provinces had developed into a self-confident Republic and William of Orange was regarded as the founding father of the new state.

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Sub-topics

Primary education sector

The assassination of William of Orange
William of Orange and the Beggars
The House of Orange and its symbols,
including the Wilhelmus

Secondary education sector

The Dutch Rebellion
Beggars' songs: from flyers to Valerius
Religious wars
The rebellion from the Spanish perspective
The wives of William of Orange

Past and Present

The purpose of the Wilhelmus, then and now
The bond between the House of Orange and the people

In the Treasure Chest

Beggars' Songbook

References

Places to Go

Delft: Museum Het Prinsenhof and the memorial
monument at the tomb in the Nieuwe Kerk
Alkmaar: Stedelijk Museum (siege)
Leiden: Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal (siege)
Breda: Royal Military Academy (court of the Nassau
family in Breda)
Den Briel: city walk (1572)

Books for young people

Arend van Dam, *Onder vuur*
Joyce Pool, *Vals beschuldigd* (12+)
Willem Wilmink (ed.), *Het Wilhelmus* (10+)

Background literature

K.W. Swart, *Willem van Oranje en de Nederlandse
Opstand 1572-1584*, The Hague 1994.

Websites

dutchrevolt.leidenuniv.nl
www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/WVO
(letters of the House of Orange)
www.wilhelmus.nl/biografiewillem.html
www.gozcit.nl/epubgmdz/uploads///print/wvo-
speurtocht.PDF
(a hunt through Delft for children around the
theme of William of Orange)