

For the historic gardens and parks of the Netherlands, the danger-
signal is alight

Part I

It was with some hesitation that I accepted your Chairman's invitation to tell you about the dangers which threaten the historic parks and the remains of historic gardens in the Netherlands. There were two reasons for this. In the first place, I am neither a landscape-nor a garden-architect but a lawyer; I live in a castle and do my best, as secretary-general of the Castellum Nostrum Foundation - of which I shall be speaking later - to look after the interests of the private owners of historic estates in dealings with the authorities. Secondly, there was the realization that I would be addressing a group of important experts from countries abroad where historic gardens are held in esteem and have had an important part to play, whereas in this country they have unfortunately been relatively little appreciated and have assumed lesser importance.

I have been contemplating the problem of what I should actually talk to you about, and have decided that it will be best for me to tell you of the political and social background against which you must view our castles, historic gardens and parks. Unfortunately, as far as the gardens are concerned, you will perhaps see little, and here I must ask you to have recourse to your imagination.

I assume you know little or nothing of the history of this small country and that you are unacquainted with the exceptional contribution it made to the development of Western political democracy.

You must imagine this country in the late Middle Ages as an agglomeration of earldoms, dukedoms, and so on, whose links with the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire were little more than symbolic. In these earldoms and dukedoms cities sprang up which maintained special relations with the local sovereign power; and here we can trace the origins of modern democratic legislation. Gradually a structure arose in which power came to rest with two large groups, the democratic corporations in the cities and the feudal lords on the land, both of them linked to the sovereign power.

Gradually the sovereign authority ceased to be shared out among so many and became centralized in the hands of the Dukes of Burgundy, who had established themselves in Brussels. The greatest - and also the

last - of the great Burgundy princes, was Charles V, ruler of the seventeen provinces of the United Netherlands, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain. He left the Netherlands to his son, Philip II, and his abdication heralded the coming of a major revolution.

What, exactly, was at stake? To this very day historians have remained divided on the question of whether the motives prompting the revolution were primary religious or political. It is not for me to pass judgment and fortunately this is not, in fact, necessary, since everyone agrees that both factors were influential. However important or otherwise the religious factors may have been, you all certainly know that the Burgundians and the Hapsburgs who succeeded them in the Netherlands chose the side of Roman Catholicism in the face of rising Protestantism; I shall therefore confine myself to an explanation of the political motives, since these are directly instrumental to a proper understanding of what you will be seeing on your excursions in this country.

I mentioned in passing that already in the Middle Ages the feudal lords had been up against the important concentrations of power represented by the towns. These towns did not derive their importance in the first place from the number of their inhabitants, but from the trade and industry which blossomed in them and the consequent very considerable dependence of the princes on the townspeople as a source of taxable activity. By the end of the Middle Ages a situation had thus arisen in which the power of the towns was so great that they could, practically speaking, extort written constitutions from the Dukes of Burgundy through their representatives on the States of the provinces, since they were represented on these side by side with the nobility which - together with the clergy - was to continue to rule the country until the Reformation.

Each new overlord, when he acceded to his title, was obliged solemnly to accept such constitutions and to pledge himself to observe them. I may mention, as an illustration, the "Great Privilege" granted by Mary, Duchess of Burgundy, on 14th March, 1476, to Holland, Zeeland and Friesland, which to a large extent resembled the charters granted, for example, to Brabant and Flanders, the following provisions being common to all of them:

1. To avoid undesirable dynastic complications, the overlord may not contract a marriage without the consent of the State.
2. Only local inhabitants may enter the public service (a very important provision at a time when the Hapsburgs were frequently calling on foreigners to hold high office.
3. The State may assemble as often as, and where, it pleases (hence without the consent of the overlord).

4. The overlord may not levy customs dues without the consent of the State.
5. The overlord may not wage war without the consent of the State.
6. No Dutchman may be forced to enter military service beyond the country's frontiers.
7. The overlord may make no decision contrary to the special privileges of the towns.
8. The overlord may mint no coinage without the consent of the State.
9. The overlord is not entitled to intervene in the town's finances or to inspect them.
10. Taxes may be raised only with the consent of the State.
11. No man may be declared to be expropriated except following a legal decision of justice, the right to judge such cases being entrusted to an independent lawyer.

The Great Privilege of Maria of Burgundy is, I would repeat, mentioned here merely in that it illustrates an important phase in the process which led to a manner of democratic legal order manifestly countering any form of absolute power on the part of the nobility.

It was precisely with this state of things that the Hapsburgs - and particularly Philip II - came into collision. The tragic element in the story lies in the fact that the Hapsburgs, in their political thinking, were in several respects in advance of their time. The Hapsburg rulers had neither time nor inclination to wait until the multiplicity of towns and of estates could develop into democratic units to be subsequently merged into a unified state. They were intent - and in this they were prompted by their legal advisers - on forcing the transition to a unified state and no longer depending on the approval of the citizens.

They started by infringing on the constitutions and so came up against the old privileges - both those of the towns and those of the greater and lesser nobility which ruled the land. There thus arose the heroic and famous conflict which nominally lasted eighty years - from 1568 to 1648 - before being finally brought to an end by the Treaty of Munster. At this juncture the northern provinces, which approximately comprised the territory of the present Kingdom of the Netherlands, became, once and for all, a sovereign republic. The reason - and this is a factor important to remember during your visits - was our ancestors' deep-rooted dislike of the nobility and its sway, which led them to decide, after much hesitation, not to invest sovereignty in the House of Orange (which so honourably and effectively led the revolution against the House of Hapsburg), but to let it rest with the States. The members of the

House of Orange thus became the most important Civil Servants - the stadtholders. Sovereignty, in the Republic of the United Netherlands, remained vested in the towns, and the latter therefore exerted the dominant role, so that there never developed an aristocracy around a powerful and great ruler.

It was the civic leaders of the towns, and not the nobility, who set the tone and owned the money. The old republic of the United Netherlands was a republic of wealthy burghers, with a few aristocratic and monarchical elements. Naturally, the stadtholders tried again and again to strengthen the monarchical element, but they did not succeed in doing so.

When William III, the greatest of the Orange leaders, made it his life's purpose to put an end once and for all to Bourbon absolutism - and especially to that of Louis XIV - he found that, in order finally to defeat his opponent, he would need to unite the weak and loosely-knit power of the Republic with the far greater and more highly centralized power of the Kingdom of England. The incidental fact that he was half Stuart and married to a pretender to the English throne enabled him to occupy that throne together with his wife and so to unite England and the Netherlands for the gigantic struggle against the Bourbons.

And what do we now find happening in Holland? The King-Stadtholder William III, who has now raised himself far above the rank of a mere servant of the States, assumes a monarchical attitude in his own country as well. He surrounds himself with members of the old nobility of Gelderland, on which he showers favours in a typically monarchical fashion - partly at the expense of the British Treasury

It is to these circumstances that we owe the emergence of a number of great historic houses, which in the normal republican society of the Netherlands would never have come into existence; moreover, William had a royal residence built for himself, the purpose of which was to serve as a home worthy of the leading opponent of Louis XIV.

When You see the Het Loo Palace you must bear this in mind, and you must also remember that the palace on the dam in Amsterdam - probably the most important historic building in Holland - was built not as a palace but as a town hall for what was then the most important city in Europe, and that it was turned into a palace only when one of Napoleon's brothers was puppet king of the Netherlands.

I may conclude this "bird's eye view" of Dutch history, by adding that, on the death of the Stadtholder-King, the country's career as a world power came to an end, partly as a result of the total exhaustion engendered by the struggle against Louis XIV, but also as a consequence of international political developments in general.

The eighteenth century, though it brought this country a great many cultural achievements, was not of interest from a political point of view. The later stadtholders were insignificant figures, and during the French Revolution the Republic broke up somewhat ingloriously, mainly, it may be said, owing to its inability to modernize its now antiquated public institutions.

The Kingdom of the Netherlands was, as You know, founded after the Napoleonic Wars, when the sovereignty was vested in William I, the son of the last stadtholder. Yet it has remained in a sense a democratic republic with a king, and the Dutch are still, fundamentally, disinclined to support a monarchical system, though they are anxious for the Head of the State to be a member of the House of Orange.

I believe, ladies and gentlemen, that this piece of history will have provided a sufficient basis for an answer to the question why we may look in vain in this country for great palaces, parks or gardens of royal standing; they have, indeed, never existed.

However there were, and still are, a considerable number of relatively plain fortified dwellings - castles, if you prefer - which belonged to the nobility and date from the Middle Ages; most of these were altered in the 17th and 18th centuries to suit the requirements of the time, and provided with grounds and sometimes a modest geometric garden. There also exist late 17th- and 18th-century houses built as country residences by the wealthy townspeople and merchants, and frequently these had fairly big formal gardens; most of these latter have unfortunately disappeared, though they have sometimes been replaced by interesting and important informal landscape gardens. I hope you will see examples of these in the course of your stay in this country.

There is one aspect I still wish to dwell on, and that is an aspect of the Dutch country estate which in my opinion is probably unique. Here I am thinking more of the country seats of the nobility than of those of the wealthy townsmen. What I would call your attention to is the simple and yet often interesting way in which a geometric pattern has been given to the agricultural land around the castle by means of ingenious divisions and by the planting of trees all along the lanes cutting through the estate. Such patterns, though of a rustic simplicity, confer on these "country places" a certain architectural beauty and dignity of landscape. Dutch architects have also succeeded in using water - whose role in this country is so important - in a simple but ingenious fashion to suit both agricultural and architectural requirements.

The typical formal garden is not a special feature of this country. It can be found on a grander scale and better designed on your country estates; but what are most typical of this country are what we call by the untranslatable

Dutch name of "buitenplaats", or, literally, "country places".

Part II

The social and economic background of the historic estates of the Netherlands

In the first part of my talk I showed how the "country places" in the Netherlands fell, roughly speaking, into two groups, i.e.

- a) Those originally surrounding a medieval castle and forming part of an estate (since castles almost always stood on lands of some good size.
- b) Those which were designed to surround a 17th- or 18th-century country house, built for pleasure, sometimes on the foundations of a castle destroyed or laid waste, and often forming no part of what we would call an "estate". Here we have the country residence and nothing more - though sometimes a farm was purchased in addition.

This latter type is more often to be found in the western part of the country, whereas the first-mentioned type is found rather in the east and south. There are no clear dividing-lines, though certain trends are understandable in the light of history. Thus, in the west the towns with their corporations had a prominent role in the days of the Republic, whereas in the eastern and southern provinces the country nobility continued for a long time to exert an influence.

It will be clear that the economy of the mere country residence will differ totally from that of an estate. The former may be viewed to a great extent as a large villa, whose high cost of upkeep supposes an owner drawing income from other sources. The residence which is part and parcel of an estate should, on the contrary, be financed out of the income from the estate, since the latter should be treated as an agricultural enterprise and the château with its garden should house the administration including the home of the owner and his family.

Even if we do not go at too great length into the financial question it will be essential for a thorough understanding of the matter to know that, while until the agricultural crisis of the last quarter of the 19th century such agricultural concerns were reasonably prosperous, there was subsequently a gradual decline. The result was that more and more frequently farms were handed over by their original owner to a tenant-farmer, to enable the owner to concern himself rather with forestry.

At the outset the situation was economically acceptable because rents were at a level which enabled a reasonable profit to be made, while wood prices were high enough to make forestry a worthwhile business. But after the Second World War rents became regulated by law and the government could enforce low rents, while at the same time the tenants' children became automatically entitled to succeed them. A situation thus emerged in which income from the

leasing of agricultural land had fallen to less than 1% of the capital invested, while timber prices had dwindled to an unacceptably low level. Naturally these two factors have made the running of an ancient estate an uneconomic undertaking, obliging the owner to bear the annual deficit on upkeep.

The fiscal advantages enjoyed by estate-owners under the Nature Protection Act of 1928 are not nearly sufficient to counterbalance these drawbacks. Here it may be of some interest to you to know what this Nature Protection Law of 1928 contains; it offers two fiscal advantages to estate-owners who have - by an act of free choice - decided to subject their estates to the conditions involved. For purposes of the property tax the estate is assumed to be a quarter of its size, while the value of that quarter is assessed at roughly 80% of its market value. The same applies to death duties.

As I have just said, these fiscal aids, however appreciable - and I felt that the basic nature of the law would be of interest to our English and other West-European friends - are totally insufficient to ensure a reasonable yield from the capital invested in such an estate.

It will further be clear that such insufficient yield figures will have a most unfavourable effects on the maintenance of country residences, formal gardens, parks, castles and other historic mansions. Landlords do not generally have nearly enough private income at their disposal to cover such maintenance costs, and even if it were possible to increase the yield of such estates this would in any case take a long time. It is true an improvement in output could be effected if the estate-owner returned to his ancestors' way of life and once again farmed his estate personally. This might prove a solution in a few cases; but here we are up against the difficulties mentioned above in connection with the rental problem. It is all very well to entertain a desire; one must also be in a position to fulfil it. And if agricultural land cannot be freed of its tenants one can scarcely set to work on it oneself.

Part III

Castellum Nostrum

I have given you an outline of the precarious position of our historic estates. The same applies to the others as well - by which I mean those estates without a historic house or castle.

To make clear to you the importance of all this in a country which is the most densely-populated in the world and in which open spaces are so scarce that

every square metre must be defended, I will now quote some figures. In the Netherlands there are still approximately two hundred and fifty thousand hectares (about 620,000 acres) of nature - and in "nature" I include actual unbuilt-on land, dunes, forests and estates, in addition to grounds which are the property either of the State or of private institutions for protection of nature. Of this total area roughly 80,000 hectares are covered by estates, from which it will be seen that Dutch estates occupy an enormous amount of space compared with that occupied by open country. Hence deterioration of our estates means very considerable damage to our natural scenery.

These developments have seriously perturbed the owners of the historic estates (those containing a castle or a historical house), and they have set up a foundation for the improvement of their upkeep. Their principal aim is to consolidate their interests and to act unitedly in their dealings with the authorities. The name of this institution is "Castellum Nostrum", and almost all the owners of historic estates have joined it. Its Council has drawn up a programme of action which covers the most important problems facing its members. A part of this has been implemented, and I am going to give you a few of the points on which action has been taken.

1. Whereas for the average landowner-resident the cost of maintenance may not be deducted from income-tax, owners of historic houses are now entitled to a rebate in the amount concerned, and this covers the maintenance of the outbuildings, canals, ponds, bridges, formal gardens and adjoining parks. This provision is contained in a separate article of the Income Tax Act, and the Council of Castellum Nostrum congratulates itself on having been able to reach agreement on this point with the Minister of Finance.

This initial success, as you will well understand, encouraged the Council of Castellum Nostrum to pursue its efforts.

2. The difficult problem of the insurance of historic buildings is being duly examined and will also shortly be settled.

3. The problem of regular inspection of historical monuments by the State to prevent their deterioration has likewise now been settled in principle. In the five provinces where an Inspectorate of Monuments now exists, subsidized by the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, private castle-owners will be able to use the services of this institution in return for a small payment. The buildings in question will be inspected twice a year, and a report submitted both to the owner and to the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, while small repairs will be dealt with on the spot.

4. Likewise as a result of insistence on the part of Castellum Nostrum, the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work is now, together with the

Government Forestry Administration, to draw up a list of existing formal gardens and informal landscape parks, a majority of which are the property of members of Castellum Nostrum, and register them for addition - should they duly qualify - to the castles and historic mansions already on the list of protected monuments. Unfortunately it has taken a long time in the Netherlands - too long in some cases - to reach the conclusion that if a garden and grounds cannot be divorced from the castle or historic mansion they belong to, neither can the castle or mansion itself be divorced from its garden and grounds. I must confess - and I assume this will be a matter of concern for you - that in this field the Netherlands lag a long way behind and are falling further and further out of step every day, and that the Dutch authorities, who usually display a certain amount of energy in the protection of culture and nature, have failed to respond adequately on this delicate point. I hope there will shortly be an improvement and that the inventorying of formal gardens and parks may be concluded in 1976.

5. As you may know, with regard to subsidies for restoration work the Dutch authorities have adopted a reasonably liberal attitude. As a general rule the owner of a historic monument receives an amount equal to approximately 70% of those costs which are eligible to be covered by subsidies. But once the restoration work has been completed the authorities withdraw, and the owner must manage all by himself. In the case of ordinary residences and farms this manner of dealing with things on the part of the authorities is understandable and often defensible; but for the great historic mansions and castles such a way of proceeding is not only unreasonable from the owners' point of view owing to the enormous rise in maintenance costs, it is also - more important still - unintelligible as a policy from the point of view of the community. When the restoration contractor withdraws his men, decay invariably sets in; and there arises the paradoxical situation in which the aid available for restoration is wanting when it comes to annual upkeep, which is beyond the owner's own means. Decay will set in more rapidly than before, involving fresh restoration work, when in 60 to 70% of the cases good annual maintenance would have been enough to prevent it. It is for this reason that my institution has approached the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, with which it is now negotiating.

6. I now come to the sixth point and the one most important for the future as far as the activities of Castellum Nostrum are concerned. This connected with the general maintenance of the estates, including the castles, the historic houses, the formal gardens, the parks, etc. I told you earlier on in my lecture that the origin of the difficulties lay in the inadequacy of the yield from the estates, and pointed out that with a different form of set-up it would be

possible, very gradually, to achieve better results. The Council of Castellum Nostrum is of the opinion that we shall have to find a simple solution ourselves. Under present sociological and economic conditions, historic estates can scarcely be remunerative to run; but to admit this is to pronounce a death sentence on a very important part of the country's cultural and natural property - and this loss the country simply cannot afford. This is, indeed, the way the estate-owners see it, and fortunately the Netherlands government holds the same opinion.

Now there are two possible solutions: either the authorities take over the estates, or else a system of financial and fiscal measures is instituted which enables them to be maintained as private property. The authorities have expressly made it clear that they would prefer for financial reasons, to have the estates all remain private property, since management by themselves would work out more expensive than management by a private owner. Moreover, the authorities would not have the means of coping with the historic houses and their contents. They would find themselves with no less than a hundred museums requiring a hundred curators, a hundred foresters, etc. A live home housing a family and children is more attractive than an inanimate museum.

One difficulty in the Netherlands is that our houses are too small for the English system of throwing open one part only to be feasible. The norm in England is 10,000 visitors per year, which is not possible in the Netherlands. It is possible to throw open a house there on a given day, but only to ten, twenty or thirty people, not thousands. It should be mentioned, further, that 99.9% of the estates themselves, if we omit the houses, are already open to the public.

When the authorities declared, via the Secretary of State for Culture, Recreation and Social Work that, for the reasons I have just explained, it was preferred to have estates and castles retain their private status, it was of course to be understood that the authorities and private owners must join forces and together seek for a solution. Indeed I consider it as most important and historically relevant for the future of such estates and for all they have to offer our country in the sphere of culture and of natural beauty that the Secretary of State for Culture, Recreation and Social Work, Mr. Meyer, should have set up a Committee to this end composed of representatives of the private estate-owners, of his own Department, and of the State Forestry Service. The task of this Committee will be to investigate the problems confronting the estates - historic buildings, gardens and parks included - with a view to the drafting of recommendations regarding their maintenance. These recommendations will no doubt deal with the fiscal aspects of the problem. The property tax on estates open to the public will need to be reduced to zero and a subsidy for the upkeep

of the castles, gardens and parks will need to be provided. Probably, too, management agreements will have to be made, on the basis of which subsidies for the management and upkeep of the estates will be provided.

I do not wish to go any further into this matter here, since the Committee's activities are scarcely yet in their opening stage, and I hope to be having my own contribution to make to them. But I do wish to say, Mr. Chairman, that for the first time for years we can see a future dawning for the estates of the Netherlands and thus also for those Dutch formal parks and gardens which are of such great concern to

Lastly, Mr. Chairman, and in conclusion, I would like, as the Honorary Secretary of the Castellum Nostrum Foundation, to extend my warmest welcome to you and to all those taking part in this symposium on our country mansions, for - with the exception of those belonging to the State - all those you will be visiting or have already visited are the property of members of the Foundation. We have endeavoured, with the assistance of the representative of ICOMOS Netherlands, Baron van Asbeck, to show you average specimens of our country residences, large and small, well-kept or neglected. I trust, Mr. Chairman, you will have encountered the same devoted attachment to their estates on the part of all those owners who have received you - an attachment, Mr. Chairman, which is the guarantee that they will take proper steps to preserve their centuries-old cultural heritage.

Thank you.

Mr. Kamerlingh-Onnes
the Netherlands