

9 Rinderpest in Dutch Regional Fiction

Community, Precariousness, and Blame

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Abstract

This article investigates the portrayal of the social and cultural consequences of disaster in Dutch rural literature during the long nineteenth century, primarily its final decades, in which fiction often emphasised the precariousness of rural existence. Following a discussion of how several regional texts represent both the emotional and economic impact of failed harvests and loss of livestock, the analysis focuses on the representation of an outbreak of rinderpest in Josef Cohen's *Ver van de mensen* (1910), set in rural Overijssel. The events in the novel have a historical referent: they are based on the 1865 outbreak of rinderpest across the Netherlands. This article thus contributes to a better understanding of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary imagination of rural vulnerability and calamity, which, in turn, provides insights into dynamics of social relations in the face of disaster and into how (past) natural disasters are made meaningful (in the present).

Keywords

cattle plague – regional fiction – nineteenth century – literature – rural economy – community

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, farmers in the Netherlands were plagued by outbreaks of rinderpest. Unlike some other national disasters, such as several nineteenth-century cholera epidemics that often originated in urban centres, rinderpest disproportionately affected the countryside. The 1865 rinderpest outbreak resulted in the loss of about half of the livestock in some areas. Imported from England, the cattle plague quickly



Figure 9.1 *God's Punishing Hands in the Netherlands by the Cattle Plague*, copy after a print by Jan Smit, 1745. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RP-P-1920-2588

spread from Schiedam across the rest of the country. Nationwide, almost 157,000 animals were infected.¹ Although particularly disastrous for many livestock farmers, the economic consequences of rinderpest outbreaks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were felt throughout the country.²

In general, rural economies were vulnerable to natural disasters: even smaller adverse events, such as hailstorms or periods of drought, could wreak havoc on crops and impact financial stability. Many nineteenth-century works of regional literature, often set in small villages in the countryside, explore this vulnerability of rural communities and economies. Loss of livestock, disease, fires, and storms are commonplace in the genre, which often explores the effects of such events on individuals as well as communities: it attends, in other words, to ramifications beyond the economic. This makes regional fiction a valuable resource for the study of agricultural disasters, as literature functions partly as a way of theorising, and imaginatively

1 Ronald Rommes, “Geen vrolijk geloei der melkzwaare koeijen”. Runderpest in Utrecht in de achttiende eeuw’, *Jaarboek Oud-Utrecht* (2001), 87–136, at 120.

2 Landowners suffered as tenant farmers became unable to pay rent. Cattle plagues also resulted in a scarcity of dairy products, with price increases affecting consumers, and the loss of income for farmers even affected tax revenues so that the consequences were felt throughout society. See Rommes, ‘Runderpest in Utrecht’; Adam D. Sundberg, ‘Floods, Worms, and Cattle Plague. Nature-Induced Disaster at the Closing of the Dutch Golden Age, 1672–1764’, PhD dissertation, University of Kansas, 2015.

experimenting with, social experiences, processes, and responses that result from disaster.³

This article investigates the portrayal of the social and cultural consequences of disaster in Dutch rural literature during the long nineteenth century, with a focus on its final decades, in which fiction often emphasises the precariousness of rural existence. Following a discussion of the way several regional texts represent both the emotional and economic impact of failed harvests and loss of livestock, this article zooms in on the representation of an outbreak of rinderpest in Josef Cohen's *Ver van de mensen* ('Far from the People', 1910), a novel set in rural Overijssel.⁴ While many regional novels consider the impact of adversity, Cohen's representation of rinderpest has a clear historical referent: although this is not mentioned explicitly, the details surrounding the cause and spread of the outbreak in the novel match up with the 1865 rinderpest that was brought over from England and, from there, spread across the rest of the Netherlands.⁵ Reviewers of the book refer to it as a regional or 'peasant novel' (*boerenroman*), perhaps because the historical setting of its events is not made explicit, but it can also be read as historical fiction.⁶ At a safe remove from the events they describe, historical novels experiment with the meaning of the past in the present and explore the lessons to be drawn from past events. Novels set in the past are necessarily also a reflection on the present moment: literary historian Marita Mathijssen calls this 'double-timeliness' ('dubbeltijdigheid'), referring to the interplay of past and present in historical novels.⁷ She also notes the

3 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 82. Latour argues that literary fiction is an important resource for understanding social reality. Building on this, David Alworth advocates for literature as a resource for thinking through the 'complexity of collective life', in *Site Reading. Fiction, Art, Social Form* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 24.

4 All novel title translations from Dutch are mine, except for *The Flaxfield* (translated in 1988), *Pretty Marie* (translated, without its subtitle, in 1919), and *The Manse of Mastland* (translated in 1860).

5 Other outbreaks were primarily caused by infected cattle imported from Denmark and Northern Germany, as most beef cattle was imported from these countries. See also Peter A. Koolmees, 'Epizootic Diseases in the Netherlands, 1713–2002. Veterinary Science, Agricultural Policy, and Public Response', in Karen Brown and Daniel Gilfoyle (eds), *Healing the Herds. Disease, Livestock Economies and the Globalization of Veterinary Medici* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 23.

6 See 'Literaire kroniek', *Bredasche courant* (29 April 1911); 'Het boek van de week', *Leeuwarder courant* (29 May 1911); 'Letteren', *Het vaderland* (2 September 1911); 'Een uitstekende roman', *Gracieuse. Magazijn voor Neerland's vrouwen* 49 (1911), 16. *Ver van de mensen* is described as a novel of farm life or the Overijssel heath, with no reference to historical dimensions.

7 Marita Mathijssen, *Historiezucht. De obsessie met het verleden in de negentiende eeuw* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2013), 288.

value of (historical) fiction for understanding history beyond mere facts, as literature reveals patterns and mindsets.⁸

In *Ver van de mensen*, Cohen explores how a mass outbreak of rinderpest affects the social stability of a rural community and how this relates to notions of identity and belonging. By considering Cohen's novel alongside other contemporary narratives of rural life, this article contributes to a better understanding of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary imagination of agricultural disaster and rural vulnerability. This, in turn, provides insights into dynamics of social relations in the face of disaster, as well as into how (past) natural disasters are made meaningful (in the present).

Regional Literature and the Precariousness of Rural Life

Regional literature, often in the form of village tales, emerged throughout Europe in the nineteenth century. Its popularity is attributed by some scholars to the rise of nationalism as well as industrialisation and urbanisation, processes which increased cultural interest in the countryside as a repository for the nation's traditions.⁹ In the Netherlands Cornelis van Koetsveld, who wrote *Schetsen uit de pastorij te Mastland* ('Sketches from the Manse of Mastland', 1843), is identified by some literary historians as the first author of contemporary village life.¹⁰ From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, many other village tales cropped up, describing regions all over the country.¹¹ Many early authors in this genre were village pastors or school teachers: they moved to the countryside from the city and wrote short stories about their experiences with the rural population, which idealised rural life.¹² As pastors or teachers, these authors were seen as cultural mediators, conveying the essence of rural life to urban readers and transforming the rural population from 'strangers' into 'fellow citizens'.¹³

8 Mathijsen, *Historiezucht*, 289–90.

9 See e.g. Josephine Donovan, *European Local-Color Literature. National Tales, Dorfgeschichten, Romans Champêtres* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

10 This is initially suggested by Jan ten Brink in *Geschiedenis der Noord-Nederlandse letteren in de XIXe eeuw. Eerste deel* (Amsterdam: Tj. van Holkema, 1888), 258–59, and several later literary histories follow this view.

11 See Jan te Winkel, *De ontwikkelingsgang der Nederlandsche letterkunde. Deel 7* (Haarlem: Erven F. Bohn, 1927), 501–6 for an overview of works per region.

12 Examples include Cornelis van Koetsveld, Cornelis van Schaick, and Pieter Heering.

13 'Van vreemdeling wordt hij dan medeburger'. 'Maclaren-van Koetsveld', *Rotterdamsch nieuwsblad* (18 November 1897). See also Oscar Westers, 'Welsprekende burgers. Rederijkers in

Their role in producing national awareness was thus seen as significant. However, although regional literature was very popular in the mid-to-late nineteenth century – van Koetsveld's *Schetsen uit de pastorij* was reprinted twelve times by 1899, and reviewers repeatedly identify village tales or rural novels as contemporary fashion trends – there is a paucity of scholarship on many of these texts.¹⁴ Most of their authors have been all but forgotten, when their work in fact offers fascinating insights into contemporary perspectives on community and identity, and the way these are impacted by disasters.¹⁵

The economic vulnerability of rural regional communities becomes more pronounced in regional literature of the later nineteenth century. However, despite their reputation for superficiality and sentimentalism,¹⁶ several early village tales already comment on the risk exposure that rural existence entails. For instance, in the short story 'De oude Wessels en zijn gezin' ('The Old Wessels and His Family'), published in *Betuwsche novellen* ('Stories of the Betuwe', 1854), J.J. Cremer describes how a hailstorm ruins Wessels's tobacco harvest: 'it had been the hail, dreaded so by the tobacco planter' that completely destroyed his plants. '[T]he plants, so lush just moments before, were on the ground in tatters and rags'.¹⁷ The sight is heartbreaking to the farmer: 'There lies the product of so many drops of sweat, and so much care, destroyed in mere moments! There lies this whole year's livelihood, ruined!'¹⁸ A single ill-fated hailstorm affects the family's yearly income, illustrating

de negentiende eeuw', PhD dissertation, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2003, 275.

14 For regionalism as a fashion, see e.g. J.H.C. Heijse, 't Fingertje naast den duum en Neeltjes Nôl, Texelsche vertellingen door D. Dekker. Enkhuizen, J. Groot. 1871', review in *De gids* 36 (1872), 366; H. van Loon, 'Het vervloekte geslacht, door Josef Cohen ...', review in *Den gulden winckel* 13 (1914), 122.

15 While some regional authors, including van Koetsveld and J.J. Cremer, are comparatively well known, others – such as Cohen and Idsardi – are extremely marginal figures and rarely feature in scholarship.

16 See, for instance, G.P.M. Knuvelde, *Handboek tot de geschiedenis der Nederlandse letterkunde*, 4 vols ('s-Hertogenbosch: Malmberg, 1976), vol. 4, 431; 'dorpsroman', in *Algemeen letterkundig lexicon* (2012–), via DBNL, digitale bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse letteren, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/dela012alge01_01/dela012alge01_01_00782.php (accessed 3 April 2023). Village tales (or so-called local-colour fiction more broadly) have a similar reputation abroad; see M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (9th ed., Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2005); Donald Dike, 'Notes on Local Color and Its Relation to Realism', *College English* 14: 2 (1952), 81.

17 '[H]et was de, voor den tabaksplanter, zo gevreesde hagel geweest'; 'aan flarden en lompen lagen de straks nog zoo welige planten ter aarde'. J.J. Cremer, *Betuwsche novellen* (Haarlem: Erven Loosjes, 1860), 61. Translation from Dutch is mine.

18 'Daar ligt dan in weinige oogenblikken vernietigd wat zoovele droppelen zweets gekost, zoovele zorgen vereischt heeft! Daar ligt dan het bestaan van den ganschen jaarkring verdorven!' Cremer, *Betuwsche novellen*, 62.

the dependence of the rural community on natural circumstances beyond their control. In Cornelis van Schaick's *Tafereelen uit het Drentsch dorpsleven* ('Scenes of Village Life in Drente', 1848), the village's vulnerability to natural disaster is similarly illustrated: 'In the previous night, when everything lay quiet, lightning had struck the mill, and in less than an hour everything had fallen prey to the flames ... Even the cattle and the wheat had burned. Therefore the unfortunate souls were dirt poor, and had nothing, not even to provide for their own and their children's most urgent needs'.¹⁹ As in Cremer's story, one unfortunate natural incident forces a community into poverty and leaves them unable to care for their children. Even these early Dutch village tales show an awareness of the rural community's exposure to risk: due to the dependence on – sometimes fragile – crops, a single storm can have lasting consequences on a farm's (financial) wellbeing.

In the nineteenth century, the rural region is commonly associated with tradition, a 'rootedness' in the past, and a resistance to change and industrialisation. For instance, Joep Leerssen explains that national identity is shaped by ideals of progress and modernity as well as by continuity and tradition, and that the latter ideal is largely dependent on the region, which is often imagined as rooted in a premodern past.²⁰ One reviewer of van Schaick's *Geert* (1847) writes that the rural man has 'preserved' '[t]he peculiarity and separateness' of the rural region 'against all improvement and corruption'.²¹ In the popular imagination, the countryside is often connected to simplicity and stability and contrasted with the rapidly changing environments of urban spaces.²² However, even in early regional stories by authors who generally uphold this distinction, rural life is also portrayed as precarious. Inhabitants of rural communities are vulnerable to natural

19 'In den vorigen nacht, terwijl alles in diepe rust lag, was de bliksem in den molen geslagen, en in minder dan een uur was alles een prooi der vlammen geworden... Zelfs 't vee en koren was verbrand. Zoodoende waren de ongelukkige zielen doodarm, en hadden zelfs niets om in de eerste en dringendste behoeften des levens voor zich zelve en hunne kinderen te voorzien'. Cornelis van Schaick, *Tafereelen uit het Drentsch dorpsleven* (1848; 2nd ed., Meppel: H. ten Brink, 1858), 64.

20 Joep Leerssen, 'De canonisering van het typische. Tradities, culturen en de cultivering van tradities', in Carlo van der Borgt, Amanda Hermans, and Hugo Jacobs (eds), *Constructie van het eigene. Culturele vormen van regionale identiteit in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Meertens-Instituut, 1996), 45–57.

21 'Het eigenaardige, het afgescheidene, dat [de landman] tegen alle verbetering en verbastering tevens bewaard heeft'. 'Geert. Een verhaal voor het volk, vooral ten platten lande. 't Hoogduitsch gevolgd door C. van Schaick', review in *De gids* 11 (1847), 795.

22 See e.g. Henk Nijkeuter, *Geschiedenis van de Drentsche literatuur, 1816–1956* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003), 82.

events ranging from bad weather to pests affecting crops and livestock, and as both Cremer and van Schaick illustrate, one storm or lightning strike can effectively destroy the financial stability of a family or community. Rural existence is, therefore, characterised by exposure to risk.

As the century progresses, Dutch regional literature becomes increasingly attentive to this vulnerability of the countryside: many later novels in the genre are socially engaged, and explicitly critical of power dynamics and poverty.²³ The precariousness of rural existence becomes increasingly central to literary representations. This might be partly because its authors are increasingly local and thus more aware of social issues in the countryside than outsiders who idealise rural life. For instance, W. van Palmar's *De golden kette* ('The Golden Chain', 1875) narrates a wealthy farmer's exploitation of a growing working class in Oldambt and shows the precarious situation of underpaid field labourers. In the early twentieth century, H.H.J. Maas's early works – including *Verstooteling* ('Outcast', 1907), *Het Goud van de Peel* ('The Treasure of De Peel', 1909), and *Landelijke Eenvoud* ('Rural Simplicity', 1910) – show rural families affected by poverty and failed harvests and comment on how heavy labour is rewarded with very little pay, leaving farmworkers financially vulnerable. His works are particularly critical of mismanagement and power abuse by local authorities, and they were heavily criticised as a result.²⁴ However, some reviewers praise him for his honesty about corruption in the countryside, and one reviewer commends him for 'having the courage to blow away the pseudo-poetic haze with which earlier writers shrouded Limburg's rural life'; the reviewer explicitly notes that earlier writers idealised the countryside, while Maas focuses on its harsher reality.²⁵ Both Maas and van Palmar (presumed to be a pseudonym for Wiepke Heikes Bouman-Geertsema) were from the area about which they wrote, and Maas's later work is especially critical of literary works that idealise rural life.²⁶

23 This shift is also described by Johanna Maria van Buuren, 'De taal van het hart. Retorica en receptie van de hedendaagse streekroman', PhD dissertation, Universiteit van Groningen, 2005.

24 See, for instance, a scathing piece in the *Limburger koerier* which chastises Maas for his negative portrayal of Limburg (5 May 1915).

25 '[D]ie den moed gehad heeft, het pseudo-dichterlijke waas, door vroegere schrijvers gelegd om het Limburgsche landleven, weg te blazen'. Review of Maas's *Landelijke eenvoud* in *De telegraaf* (13 June 1911).

26 In his later novel *Het goud van de Peel* (Laren: Schoonderbeek, 1944), Maas criticises authors and readers who idealise rural life and 'admire Conscience's descriptions of loam huts which breathed bliss-and-happiness' ('men bewonderde hoog de geluk-en-tevredenheid-ademende leemen-hut-beschrijvingen van Conscience'), 95.

Besides increasing attention to poverty and misconduct of those in power, exposure to natural events and disasters continues to feature in regional fiction throughout the long nineteenth century. In later works, the impact of these disasters on social relations becomes more important. In Stijn Streuvels's *De vlaschaard* ('The Flaxfield', 1907), published in Amsterdam and widely read in the Netherlands, the destruction of the flax fields after a devastating storm escalates a conflict between father and son. Streuvels was a Flemish author who lived in and wrote about West Flanders, and *De vlaschaard* is one of his most famous works. Streuvels's work is described as exceeding boundaries of regionalism, precisely because the social and generational struggles in his novels are seen as more universal.²⁷ However, the conflict in *De vlaschaard* is clearly informed by agricultural practices. Early in the novel, the farmer's inability to control the circumstances that determine the health of his crop becomes clear: the elder Vermeulen waits impatiently for summer weather, powerless to change climate conditions.²⁸ Meanwhile, he struggles to manage his son and to remain in control of his farm. After several disagreements between father and son about when to sow and reap the crops, a storm suddenly hits before the harvest:

now the raging turmoil came so unexpectedly that people looked on it, dazed and bewildered. The flax, which had grown and matured for so long in the peaceful caressing breeze without disturbance, was seized on this final day, beaten and swayed, rendered defenceless in the power of that same wind that suddenly appeared mad and bad-tempered and wanted to destroy it all.²⁹

Angered by his powerlessness against nature, and wounded in his pride, Vermeulen eventually strikes down his son for defying his wishes in an attempt to regain control.³⁰ An act of nature and its accompanying loss

27 See Jacqueline Bel, *Bloed en rozen. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1900–1945* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2018), 107. Bel writes that *De vlaschaard* 'avoided the accusation of being regional fiction' ('onttrok zich aan het verwijt streekliteratuur te zijn').

28 Stijn Streuvels, *De vlaschaard* (Amsterdam: L.J. Veen, 1907), 5.

29 [N]u kwam zoo onverwacht die razende woeling dat de menschen er verpaft en radeloos stonden op te kijken. Het vlas dat zoo langen tijd in de vreedzaam aaiende lucht, zonder kroom of stoornis was opgegroeid en gerijpt, werd nu dien uitersten dag, gepakt, vermooscht, geslagen en geslingerd en weerloos stond het in de macht van dien zelfden wind die ineens zot en baloorde scheen en 't al vernoozelen wilde'. Streuvels, *De vlaschaard*, 251.

30 Streuvels, *De vlaschaard*, 259, 288–90.

thus intensifies existing conflicts and potentially results in the death of the farmer's son: the violence of man and nature mirror each other.³¹

In Maas's *Landelijke eenvoud*, a storm likewise leads to strife. For years, a small village has been spared any disastrous weather events. Farmers are offered insurance against hailstorms but most refuse, except one: Jorissen, a farmer who has embraced modern techniques and machinery on his farm despite his community's contempt for new technologies.³² When heavy thunder and hail destroy most of the village's fields, his neighbours turn against him: 'it *had* been strange, that hailstorm ... It must have been a punishment. The "striking hand" had touched so many places in the village these past years. Disease had affected animals here, people there ... If *one* family had brought all these misfortunes to the village!'³³ In the absence of belief in science or technology, and lacking insurance to compensate their losses, the community turns to superstition and blame to explain the destruction of their crops. The 'striking hand of God' is a common explanation for disaster,³⁴ but in this case, the rural community in Maas's novel attributes this wrath to the actions of one family. Adversity due to natural disasters thus challenges community relationships and social cohesion as people resort to blame.

Amidst the multiple losses and disasters that feature in regional texts, loss of livestock is portrayed by several authors as especially devastating, and several rural narratives emphasise the strong emotional connections between farmers and cattle. After a farmer has to kill his horse due to an injury in van Schaick's *Tafereelen uit het Drentsch dorpsleven*, the pastor immediately comes for a visit because he knows 'what the loss of a horse means to a farmer'; there is an unspoken understanding in the community about the intensity of such a loss.³⁵ In Pieter Heering's *Overijsselsche vertellingen* ('Tales of Overijssel', 1883) a community also bands together over a farmer's loss. When one farmer's cow refuses to eat, he is concerned, because 'these days, one frequently heard of similar symptoms amongst cattle, and many animals had already succumbed'.³⁶ As the cow's symptoms worsen, members

31 The novel ends with the son in a comatose state but leaves ambiguous whether he will die.

32 Maas, *Landelijke eenvoud*, in *Peel omnibus* (De Bilt: De Fontein, 1969), 192.

33 "t wás vreemd geweest met die hagelslag ... Dat zou wel een straf zijn. De 'kwade hand' was in de laatste jaren op zóveel plaatsen in het dorp geweest. Hier waren het ziekten onder het vee en daar onder de mensen ... Als één zo'n familie dan toch al die ongelukken over het dorp bracht!" Maas, *Landelijke eenvoud*, 190.

34 See Sundberg, 'Floods, Worms, and Cattle Plague', 206.

35 '[D]e Dominé ... wist wat het verlies van een paar voor een boer in heeft'. Van Schaick, *Tafereelen uit het Drentsch dorpsleven*, 69.

36 Pieter Heering, *Overijsselsche vertellingen* (3rd ed., Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1893), 149.

of the community – previously despised by the farmer – help him care for her, but despite their efforts, the cow dies in the night. The farmer wants to deliver the news to the neighbours, but words fail him: instead, '[t]he old man wept, wiping away his tears with his sleeves'.³⁷ More than worry about his financial dependence on the cow, he grieves the loss of an animal that he had for eight years and that was beloved by the whole family.³⁸

Idsardi's *Mooie Marie: Een verhaal uit het Friese volksleven* ('Pretty Marie. A Tale from Frisian Rural Life', 1916) considers the impact of governmental policy on rural communities in the face of agricultural disaster. Idsardi was a pseudonym for G.I. van der Ploeg, a teacher of religion in Friesland who wrote several popular moralistic novels set in the Frisian countryside. In *Mooie Marie*, farmers argue about the requirement to kill any cattle that have been in contact with a cow infected with foot-and-mouth disease. Farmer Steenma, whose cow might be affected, disagrees vehemently with this policy and claims that 'when you mess with the lives of his cattle, you mess with the farmer himself'.³⁹ He is unwilling to be persuaded by scientific arguments presented by fellow farmers and people in the community and cannot accept the loss of his healthy cows. Not only does he describe the care for his cattle as his life's work, but he compares them to ill children in an attempt to convince others of the injustice of 'murdering them in cold blood' for contracting a disease.⁴⁰ To Steensma, his cattle represent his livelihood, but his repeated comparisons of the cows to humans also suggest a deep attachment and a desire to protect them. All three stories share a focus on the importance of animals to rural inhabitants, and the death of livestock is accompanied by grief that exceeds concern about loss of profit, a grief that is instead based on a genuine attachment of farmers to their animals.

The following section will therefore focus on a literary representation of the 1865 rinderpest, a disaster that was both economically and emotionally devastating to rural communities, in Cohen's *Ver van de mensen*. This novel is particularly interesting because, unlike the examples above, it describes the aftermath of a historic national disaster in the rural community (rather than commonly recurring local disasters such as storms and failed harvests) and therefore invites its readers to engage with the connection between nation and region as well as past and present. It also explicitly engages

37 'De oude man schreide en veegde met zijne mouw de tranen af'. Heering, *Overijsselsche vertellingen*, 151.

38 Heering, *Overijsselsche vertellingen*, 151–52.

39 '[W]anneer je aan het leven van zijn vee komt, [kom je] aan het leven van den boer zélf'. Idsardi, *Mooie Marie* (Kampen: J.H. Kok), 158.

40 '[K]oelbloedig te vermoorden', Idsardi, *Mooie Marie*, 159, 162.

with the relationship between the regional, national, and transnational in its representation of this disaster and its aftermath. Literary scholar and genre studies expert June Howard writes that in regional fiction, 'the local and the global are by no means distant ends of a continuum': global events consistently influence regional communities, and so-called 'global culture' cannot annihilate difference.⁴¹ Regional fiction is therefore always relational and engages with places elsewhere. Not only did regional stories themselves travel across borders – many works were translated – but the genre also functions as a way of thinking through the ways national and global actors and events impact the local. (Natural) disasters are powerful examples of this dynamic: agricultural disasters can have a nationwide impact (consider, for instance, the failed potato harvest and famine in the 1840s in the Netherlands and Flanders), while national or transnational events can have deeply felt repercussions in local communities (outbreaks of rinderpest usually came to the Netherlands from abroad). More than the literary examples explored above, Cohen's novel acknowledges these interrelations between the region and the 'outside' in its representation of the ways disaster impacts the community.

Community, Loss, and Blame in *Ver van de mensen* (1910)

Although the rural community in Cohen's *Ver van de mensen* is plagued with multiple disastrous events throughout the novel, the rinderpest outbreak is depicted as particularly traumatic, both socially and economically. The plot of the novel revolves around the life and history of the Strie family. The Strie name holds power in the rural community: 'The narrow Strie farm was known in all of Salland; the name inspired awe in the richest farmers. Ancient myths resounded in the name; for hundreds of years the Stries had been dreamers and thinkers who had not associated with the others in the village. And this had increased their magical influence'.⁴² The family are marked as outsiders to the community: the Stries are respected, but not well integrated in their village. Moreover, the family is haunted by

41 June Howard, *The Centre of the World. Regional Writing and the Puzzles of Place-Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 42.

42 '[I]n geheel Salland was de smalle Strie-boerderij bekend; het ontzag voor den naam was in den rijksten boer. Oude mythen klonken in den naam; want door honderden jaren waren de Strie's droomende denkers geweest, die niet omgegaan waren met de anderen in het dorp. En dat had hun magischen invloed vermeerderd'. Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 166, published in parts in *Onze eeuw*, 10 (1910).

legend: 'there was a legend that the Stries would perish if they took part in village life too much; they were to avoid the inns, and wild company, and the game of cards. When a Strie sought after lower desires, our dear Lord burned his book of life in the high heavens, and wrote him off from the list of the privileged'.⁴³

Ver van de mensen traces this family's downfall and survival, focusing primarily on Hannes Strie and his son, Peter, over the course of several decades. Throughout the novel, several disasters threaten the rural community. Cohen seems to be particularly interested in the rhetoric of blame that surrounds disaster in the rural community and in its effects on the dynamics between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. The community is described as somewhat impenetrable: 'You had to have lived in Merloo from childhood to understand this quiet world far from the people'.⁴⁴ The region is thus described as isolated from the rest of society and difficult to understand for an outsider. The relationship between individual and community, and between local and foreign, is very important in this context. Tradition and legend – two important pillars of local identity – shape the way disasters are framed and interpreted by members of the local community.

Throughout the novel, legend and superstition are used to explain as well as predict disastrous events. For instance, the community is convinced that if the castle of the local baron catches fire, the whole town and even the entire province will burn.⁴⁵ The Strie legend in particular is seen as the cause of disaster. The family is often blamed when misfortune comes to the family or the community, even if it is explicitly caused by others. For instance, when Peter's sister Gerardien develops a relationship with a local nobleman, she is murdered by a jealous local youth. Gerardien is blamed for arson after the young man burns down the castle and even receives blame for her own death; the narrator claims that 'no human on earth but the legend had killed her' and that her murder is therefore 'no case for an earthly judge'. Meanwhile, the townspeople protect her murderer from

43 '[E]r was een legende, dat de Strie's te gronde zouden gaan, wanneer ze te veel deel zouden nemen aan het dorpsleven; ze moesten de herbergen mijden, en woeste gezelschappen, en het kaartspel. Als een Strie lagere lusten zocht, verbrandde in den hoogen hemel onze lieve Heer zijn levensboek, en schreef hem af van de lijst der bevoorrechten'. Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 167.

44 'Je moet van kind-af in Merloo hebben gewoond, om deze stille wereld ver van de mensen te kunnen kennen'. Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 169.

45 'Denk ie dan neët an de legende? As het kasteel in brand vlug, geët 't heele darp mee. Bedenk dat toch. Heel Overiesel verbrandt'. Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 177.

persecution.⁴⁶ When the family farm is burnt down by the jealous husband of Peter's childhood friend, the Strie family is, once again, blamed: 'who dared accuse Piet Nievelt, when it was so clearly a punishment for the misdemeanour, by which a Strie played with his family name?'⁴⁷ Both events are explicitly the consequence of crimes committed by others.

However, blaming the Strie family for disaster has a clear social function. The Stries are essentially outsiders to the community, though at times respected and at times despised. Other members of the community escape culpability by blaming the Stries. It also makes disaster *explicable*. The narrator notes that 'the farmers found comfort in the idea that misfortune had not come to their lands for no reason. It was because Peter Strie and Hilde Wolters had desired each other, and this has caused the catastrophe'.⁴⁸ By blaming individual actions and desires for disaster, the wider community can avoid investigating their own accountability. This thus serves as a coping mechanism for dealing with disasters.

Throughout the novel, Cohen draws parallels between the Strie family and other persecuted outsiders, particularly the Jewish population in the area.⁴⁹ As a boy, Peter Strie befriends a young Jewish man – an unnamed character consistently called 'the Jew' – who remains his loyal friend and ally throughout the story. The two support each other throughout, against the prejudice of others in town. Both are treated as 'foreign', and their existence is identified as a threat. Early in the novel the narrator explains that a Jew and his family had moved to the region in the fourteenth century. Twenty years later, when crusading armies returned from Jerusalem and spread leprosy in the community, the Jew was accused of poisoning the wells and causing the illness, after which he was brutally murdered by a local knight.⁵⁰ This illustrates, early on, the role of prejudice in explaining disease and disaster: communities irrationally place blame on an individual, with horrific consequences.

46 'Dat was geen zaak voor den aardschen rechter ... de legende [had haar] vermoord, geen mensch ter wereld'. Cohen, *Ver van de menschen*, 183.

47 'Wie durfde Piet Nievelt beschuldigen, nu het zoo klaarblijkelijk een straf was voor de euveldaad, waarin een Strie met zijn naam gespeeld had?' Cohen, *Ver van de menschen*, 340.

48 '[D]e boeren vonden troost in de gedachte dat het ongeluk niet zonder reden over de landen was gekomen. Het was, omdat Peter Strie en Hilde Wolters naar elkander hadden verlangd, en dat had het onheil gelokt'. Cohen, *Ver van de menschen*, 213.

49 Cohen was himself Jewish, potentially motivating his interest in superstition, prejudice, and the dynamics of 'othering' in the novel.

50 Cohen, *Ver van de menschen*, 4.



Figure 9.2 *The Cattle Plague: Another One of the Blessings of War*, cartoon in *De courant* (23 August 1920), 5. KB – National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague. Source: Delpher (accessed 21 April 2022)

The actual cause of this fourteenth-century outbreak of leprosy is identified by the narrator to be the return of the Crusaders; war is the real root cause of disaster. This applies to rinderpest as well: in the description of the outbreak, the narrator explains the causes to the reader and notes that 'as it has been since the Migration Period: where war has burnt not only men were killed due to battle, but cattle too'.⁵¹ The narrator states that the cattle plague initially raged due to the war, and after a ship from one of the countries at war transported infected cows to England, thousands of English cows died. A diseased cow was then exported to Holland, bringing rinderpest to Dutch farms. While countries at war had made peace, England and Holland both continue to grieve for their lost cattle.⁵² Cohen describes the consequences of war as far reaching, affecting more than the countries involved in battles, with ramifications that last beyond the timeframe of the war itself. Notably, the countries at war remain nameless in the novel, perhaps suggesting that Cohen himself has no interest in placing blame. War and conflict in general, rather than a *specific* war or nation, are the cause of this agricultural disaster.

Due to the magnitude of the losses, the rinderpest and loss of cattle are described as a collective regional trauma. The narrator mentions that an earlier rinderpest a hundred years prior had also robbed the farmers of their cattle and that the people in West Holland had forgotten, but that 'in the East, on the heathland, rinderpest was a repeat of a drama just experienced'.⁵³ Although the tragedy itself is national, and the 1865 rinderpest disproportionately affects Holland and Utrecht, Cohen suggests that the cultural memory and response vary between regions. This is in line with the previously mentioned notion that peripheral rural regions are more 'rooted' in tradition and the past: in the province of Overijssel, the tragedy feels more recent, suggesting a different relationship to time in West Holland compared to the eastern provinces. Likewise, it suggests that the east has a different relationship to memory. Pierre Nora has argued that industrial growth caused a 'fundamental collapse of memory', identifying 'peasant

51 'En zooals het al sinds de volksverhuizing is geweest: waar de oorlog brandde, werden niet alleen menschen gedood onmiddellijk door den strijd, maar middellijk de runderstapel'. Cohen, *Ver van de menschen*, 354.

52 'De veepest woedde in de stallen; een schip met besmette koeien uit een land, waarvan men op de heide nog nimmer gehoord had, bracht zijn gevaarlijke lading in Engeland, en bij duizenden stierven daar de koeien. En weer werd een ziek rund, temidden van gezonde, geëxporteerd naar Holland. En door de lucht woei dichtonzienbaar de smetstof, van stal tot stal. De vrede tusschen de twee mogendheden, die niets met Holland en Engeland gemeen hadden, werd gesloten. Wat deed het er toe, wie won en wie verloor? In Holland en Engeland was rouw op de akkers!' Ibid.

53 'in West-Holland, waar het groote leven heerscht, vergeet men ras zulke dingen. In het Oosten, op de heide, werd de veepest als de herhaling van een zoo juist-beleefd drama'. Ibid.

culture' as a 'quintessential repository of collective memory' due to the transmission and conservation of values and habits across generations.⁵⁴ *Ver van de mensen* similarly suggests that the rural east has a privileged relationship to memory, one that binds its inhabitants together. The novel thus establishes a relationship between the region and its outside and explicitly reflects on the importance of the past in the present.

After a brief historical introduction to rinderpest's history and causes, the novel details the effect of the most recent outbreak on the local community in this town in Overijssel:

When the water began to run from the eyes of one of Isfordink's cows... and in the blink of an eye the breathing of the cattle accelerated feverishly, when the eyes were swollen and red and the animals were coughing, even the stupidest servant knew that the cattle plague had broken out. But because the marks of illness did not reveal themselves for about five days, everyone understood that the whole region must be contaminated with the pest. The cows also coughed in Piet Nievelt's stable, and the animals moaned in wild terror for lack of breath.⁵⁵

The descriptions are graphic at times, illustrating the devastating effects of the illness on the cows. Although this passage suggests that people have some level of understanding of the progression of the disease – 'everyone understood' that the whole region must be contaminated, since it takes days for symptoms to reveal themselves – superstitions about the cause of the outbreak soon begin to shape the community's response. For instance, the local farmer Tubertink 'did not believe in contamination' and was convinced that the disease only affected 'unclean stables'.⁵⁶ For a while, his cows remain unaffected. The farmer is so sure of himself that he suggests that other farmers bring their diseased cows to stay amongst his own and that the animals will heal, after which an infected animal is taken to his stables.

54 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History. Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations* 26 (1989), 7–24, at 7.

55 'Toen het water uit de ooggen van een van Isfordink's koeien ging lopen ... en in een oogwenk de adem van alle runderen koortsig zich versnelde, de ooggen roodgezwollen zagen en de dieren hoestten, wist de domste knecht, dat de veepest was uitgebroken. Daar echter de kenteekenen zich eerst na een dag of vijf vertoonen, begreep ieder, dat de geheele streek met den besmetting bevekt moest zijn. Ook in Piet Nievelt's stal hoestten de koeien, en de beesten kreunden in wilden angst om gebrek aan adem'. Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 354–55.

56 'Jan Tubertink ... geloofde niet aan besmetting. Hij zei, dat de ziekte alleen maar kwam in onzindelijke stallen'. Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 25.

Unsurprisingly, the animal does not get better.⁵⁷ Then, 'a few days later Peter Strie passed his farm. And the next day Jan Tubertink noticed that his livestock was also affected by the disease. Now people on the heath understood: Peter Strie was bewitching the cattle. How could the ringing of the bells help to prevent evil when one of the curse-worthy Stries remained on the land?'⁵⁸ The only action people undertake to prevent the disaster is ringing the church bells, a traditional method for warding off disaster since at least the Middle Ages. This indicates, once more, the community's rootedness in tradition and the past, as well as, perhaps, their conviction that the rinderpest outbreak was an act of God. As in Maas's *Landelijke eenvoud*, the community places blame on an individual for causing misfortune and invoking God's wrath.

However, Cohen has noted previously that people are aware that symptoms take a while to appear. An infected cow was brought into the stables, other cows were likewise infected, and Peter Strie is still blamed for merely walking past. There is at least the suggestion that this is deliberate scapegoating by people who have enough information and resources to know better. In fact, by 1865, information about the disease, its causes and prevention, was widely accessible. Newspapers and periodicals across the country reported on the cattle plague, and many included detailed information about the best preventative measures, such as quarantining diseased cattle and prohibiting sales of meat or hides from affected animals.⁵⁹ The need to isolate infected cattle was already well understood in the eighteenth century.⁶⁰ Regional authorities likewise called upon farmers to isolate diseased cattle, and one local newspaper from Middelburg warned farmers in the region not only to avoid any contact with livestock from Holland but also to steer clear of any cattle dealers that had visited Holland and even any other labourer who had worked in the area, to ensure that the province of Zeeland would remain unaffected.⁶¹ In spite of the widespread availability of information to the contrary that was widely accepted and put into practice by nineteenth-century

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ 'Enkele dagen kwam Peter Strie zijn boerderij voorbij. En den volgenden dag bemerkte Jan Tubertink, dat zijn vee ook door de ziekte was aangetast. Nu begreep het de heide: Peter Strie behekste de runderen. Wat hielp het luidden van klokken, die men luidde, allerwege, om het onheil te bezweren, wanneer een der vloekwaardige Strie's op het land bleef?' Cohen, *Ver van de menschen*, 26.

⁵⁹ See e.g. *Landbouw-courant* (7 September 1865). Similar claims are repeated in numerous local and regional papers.

⁶⁰ Rommes, 'De runderpest in Utrecht'.

⁶¹ 'De veepest!', *Middelburgsche courant* (29 August 1865).

farmers, the town nevertheless becomes entirely convinced that ‘everything was Peter Strie’s fault. He had infected the stable and sown disaster wherever he went. And he had forced many farmers to sell their farms and travel far from their homeland, to strange countries’.⁶² Blaming Peter Strie is, perhaps, more comfortable than accepting that the farmers have no control over the disease once it starts to spread or acknowledging that Tubertink himself might be to blame for allowing a diseased cow to be brought amongst his healthy cattle. Cohen implicitly invites readers to critically consider the motivations for blaming others.

Peter tries to reason with people, asking them how they know that he brought the cattle plague to the area and pointing out that ‘[t]he plague is all over the country and in England – have I brought all that here, and there as well? I haven’t done anything’.⁶³ Peter emphasises the scope of the disaster, noting that the spread of the disease is not limited to his region, but to no avail: he is forced to leave the area to escape the hatred of his community. After he is banished, disasters continue to strike. Farms burn down due to lightning, and after a few years, the region is affected by another outbreak of rinderpest. Like several other regional novelists, Cohen emphasises the precariousness of rural existence and its vulnerability to threats and natural events. The novel suggests that it is the community’s inability to accept this precariousness that causes further problems. As Judith Butler suggests in *Precarious Life*: ‘though for some, mourning can only be resolved through violence, it seems clear that violence only brings on more loss, and the failure to heed the claim of precious life only leads, again and again, to the dry grief of an endless political rage’.⁶⁴ It is precisely this cyclicity of violence that Cohen illustrates in his novel, relying on a narrative frame of recurrence: throughout the story, grief, loss, and jealousy bring about acts of violence, resulting in more loss.

However, it is not just this cycle of blame and violence that undermines the cohesion of the rural community. After the rinderpest outbreak, and accompanying losses of income, many locals are forced to move abroad or to the cities, while urban speculators buy up the farms for little money.

62 ‘Alles was de schuld van Peter Strie. Hij had de stallen gesmet, en, waar zijn voet ging, onheil gezaaid. En hij had vele boeren gedwongen, om hun hoeven te verkoopen en ver van hun vaderland te trekken, in vreemde landen’. Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 27.

63 “[H]oa weët-ie, dat ik de veepest ebracht heb. In ’t heele land is de veepest – en in Engeland is de veepest – heb ik dat dan allemoale hier en gunder ebracht? Ik heb niks edoan.” Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 30.

64 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), xix. Although Butler focuses on the aftermath of 9/11, their writing about vulnerability is relevant here.

When farmers are forced to sell, their servants lose their employment: 'this meant worry about daily bread, and misery for many'.⁶⁵ Cohen emphasises this domino effect, showing how rinderpest undermines community bonds, leaves farmers unable to support each other, and forces people out of employment and homes. Social stability is undermined by disaster even before people turn to prejudice and blame. The people who populate Cohen's novel are described as rooted to the heath, and the land will always have 'terrifying attraction of mystery for those who are born there'. When rinderpest forces them to move to the cities, they 'remain always homesick for nature ... they could not speak except when you talked to them of the land that they had left'.⁶⁶ Peter Strie describes the 'societal imbalance' caused by these migrations from the country to the city, separating people from the land and communities to which they are so strongly connected.⁶⁷ In the city the people from rural Salland become outsiders themselves. *Ver van de mensen* therefore illustrates that rural precariousness is not merely economic; the vulnerability of the countryside might also threaten its very identity, dispersing those people who share the connection to the land and the collective memory of the region. Identity, history, and tradition, elements so important to communities in regional literature, are thus always at risk – perhaps this also adds import to their preservation or memorialisation in fiction.

However, while identity and community sometimes devolve into xenophobic suspicion of outsiders, Cohen's novel consistently portrays the inadequacy of 'us versus them' thinking. By portraying the migration of people in the rural community to the city, Cohen also shows that anyone can become an outsider. Ultimately, it becomes clear that banishing Peter – the suspected cause of the community's misfortune – does not solve anything. The vulnerability of the countryside is partly innate to rural existence. Failure to accept the fact that misfortune does, in fact, strike the land 'for no reason' results in the community's attempts to blame individuals, mostly outsiders whose acceptance by the community is always already at risk.⁶⁸ Cohen suggests that misfortune cannot be avoided and that, in many cases, no one can be blamed. In fact, solidarity and community are suggested as partial solutions

65 'Dat betekende zorg om brood, en ellende voor velen'. Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 28.

66 'De heide heeft op hen, die er geboren zijn, de angstwekkende aantrekkingskracht van mystiek en mysterie'. Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 37. '[I]n hen bleef altijd het heimwee naar de natuur... Ze konden niet praten behalve als je ze van het land sprak, dat ze verlaten hadden'. Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 51.

67 '[M]aatschappelijke evenwichtsverstoring'. Ibid.

68 Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 213.

to the precariousness of rural life: during Peter's banishment, sharing his longing for home with someone from the same region eases his suffering, and the Jew helps him buy back his farm from investors.⁶⁹ Solidarity is thus a more effective coping mechanism than blame, improving instead of undermining a community's resilience in times of crisis. Throughout the novel, bonds in the local community help people find jobs or escape financial ruin through loans. This does not prevent disasters from striking: after Peter Strie restores his family name, and relationships are repaired, the farmers continue to 'fight a heavy battle with the land', and failed harvests and diseased livestock continue to threaten their livelihood.⁷⁰ However, the focus is on cooperation and rebuilding as a community. The novel is persistent in its focus on the social and emotional impact of economic loss and on solidarity and nonviolence as ways of coping with it.

Conclusion

Like many regional novels, *Ver van de mensen* emphasises social relationships in a small rural community. This community is initially described as isolated and far removed from society, but Cohen persistently illustrates how it is shaped relationally, impacted by events both at home and abroad. Rural inhabitants move to the cities or abroad; urban speculators buy local farms; outsiders live and work in the local village. The rinderpest that plagues the community happens on a much larger scale and is caused by a foreign war. Grief over the lost cattle is shared between England and the Netherlands and extends beyond the end of the war. In Overijssel grief also spans across generations as memories of previous rinderpest outbreaks linger. Far from isolated, the small rural community is in fact deeply embedded in transnational and transgenerational processes. This interdependence is emphasised by the rinderpest, which has a clear historical referent: the 1865–67 rinderpest outbreak in the Netherlands. The novel thereby invites readers to imagine their connection to others, both past and present.

Besides being economically devastating, rinderpest undermines social stability, both because poverty and bankruptcy force people out of the region

69 e.g. Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 57, 61, 337.

70 'Het is een zware strijd, dien hij met den grond te voeren heeft. En het is niet waar, dat de boeren minder te werken hebben, nu er weer een Strie op de heide woont: kwade zomers, die den oogst op het land vernielden, zijn niet uitgebleven, noch ziekten onder het vee, noch ziekten in het gewas'. Cohen, *Ver van de mensen*, 355.

and because people resort to superstition and blame in explaining their misfortune. While the novel emphasises the importance of tradition and community, it negates the validity of thinking in terms of 'self' versus 'other' and implicitly criticises strategies of blame in the face of disaster. Cohen engages this past disaster to convey moral lessons to present-day readers.

Moreover, he challenges existing dynamics of exclusion and notions of belonging, within a genre that was deeply concerned with constructing the identities of rural regional communities in relation to the nation and beyond. The novel encourages audiences to imagine grief as shared across nations and generations, offering an expanded sense of a social collective. This ability to rethink social relationships and collective life in the aftermath of a (trans)national catastrophe makes literary fiction a useful resource for understanding the cultural impact of disaster and for memorialising events and communities that – as the novel repeatedly emphasises – are at risk of disappearing and being forgotten.

About the Author

Anneloek Scholten is a PhD candidate at Radboud University, where she is working on a dissertation on Dutch nineteenth-century regional literature. In particular, her research engages with the relationship between the local, national, and transnational in rural fiction and the genre's circulation across borders. This PhD project is part of the NWO-funded Vici project *Redefining the Region. The Transnational Dimensions of Local Colour*.

