

13 Breaking the Cycles of Catastrophe

Disaster, Time, and Nation in Dutch Flood Commemoration Books, 1757–1800

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Abstract

Historians argue that the eighteenth-century Dutch interpreted disasters in an overarching decline narrative. As such, catastrophes were understood as signs of an escalating political, economic, and moral crisis. However, this declensionist narrative was not the only interpretative framework that people could employ for dreadful events. This article traces the temporalities in four contemporary commemoration books on major Dutch flood disasters in 1757, 1775, and 1799. Their authors located recent inundations in time by comparing them to past catastrophes and imagining a future in which floods may or may not recur. The writers of two commemoration books recognised regular cycles of catastrophe, while the authors of the other two titles discerned an increase in the number of and the damage caused by inundations. Nonetheless, most authors provided their readers hope. Through either morality or technology, the writers asserted, people could prevent future catastrophes.

Keywords

floods – temporality – time – decline – memory – commemoration books

On the night of 14–15 November 1775, disaster came with the northwest wind. The combination of storm and spring tide led to a large-scale flood disaster around the Dutch South Sea (*Zuiderzee*). Houses, cattle, and people were taken by the water; many lives were lost. In the following year, two extensive commemoration books were published to memorialise the catastrophe. The *Historisch verhaal der overstromingen in de Nederlanden* ('Historical

Story of the Floods in the Netherlands') by anonymous authors and Johan Hendrik Hering's two-volume *Bespiegeling op Neêrlandsch Watersnood* ('Reflection on the Dutch Flood') collected stories from newspaper reports and private letters on the flood of 1775. On the basis of these documents, the authors reported in great detail on the recent events in the many places that had been struck. Nonetheless, the authors did not write about 1775 flood exclusively. Both commemoration books started with a long enumeration of flood disasters that had preceded the latest storm surge. Although the 1775 flood was exceptionally catastrophic, these books located the event in a long history that characterised the Dutch nation.

In this article I analyse four commemoration books from the second half of the eighteenth century, including the two I just mentioned. The two other commemoration books, dedicated to floods in 1757 and 1799, took a very different approach. The authors also referred to the history of floods, but they did not emphasise the stable recurrence of inundations. Instead, they argued that people could learn from disasters and that humans had the agency to prevent new catastrophes by employing technological measures. In the various commemoration books, I argue, one can find different temporalities. In addition, these sources provided an alternative to the decline narrative that was prominent in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic.

Historians Petra van Dam and Harm Pieters provide valuable insights into the ways eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commemoration books contributed to the cultural memory of flood disasters. They show that the genre emerged in the eighteenth century, when authors compiled extensive books on a recent disaster to memorialise these events.¹ Nonetheless, van Dam and Pieters pass over fact that these books also referred to earlier inundations, thus locating the latest events in a longer history of calamities and risk. The history of temporalities, I contend, provides helpful analytical tools for understanding the remembrance of flood disasters in commemoration books.

Thus far, the historiography on early modern experiences of time has predominantly dealt with political discourses and actions.² Early modern environmental events have not yet been investigated in the context of

1 Petra J.E.M. van Dam and Harm Pieters, 'Enlightened Ideas in Commemoration Books of the 1825 Zuiderzee Flood in the Netherlands', in Pepijn Brandon, Sabine Go, and Wybren Verstegen (eds), *Navigating History. Economy, Society, Knowledge, and Nature* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 275–97, at 275–76.

2 e.g. Tony Claydon, *The Revolution in Time. Chronology, Modernity, and 1688–1689 in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present. Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); J.G.A. Pocock,

temporalities. Phenomena associated with the seasons, like snow and the harvest, fit a cyclical time frame.³ However, in cultural landscapes like those in the Dutch Delta, the environment was partly made by its human dwellers. As we will see, some authors of commemoration books also recognised this fact. Furthermore, the majority of early modern Europeans interpreted nature-induced disasters as divine punishments, caused by the sins of people.⁴ Seasonal high water was expected as part of the annual cycle – especially in the river areas. However, many eighteenth-century commentators explained exceptionally severe inundations as events that were caused by moral failings. Whether via technology or via religion, early modern Dutch authors recognised the environment as a ‘space for human action’.⁵

During the eighteenth-century, Dutch moralists argued that their country experienced general decline.⁶ Economic malaise, political unrest, and divinely ordered punishments were seen as its symptoms, but at its core, eighteenth-century Dutch moralists argued, lay a deep moral crisis.⁷ Historian Adam Sundberg and literary scholar Lotte Jensen find this decline narrative in texts on disasters in the eighteenth century.⁸ With regard to

The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

3 For the perceived ‘timelessness’ of nature, see Sabine Hofmeister, ‘Nature’s Temporalities. Consequences for Environmental Politics’, *Time & Society* 6: 2–3 (1997), 309–21, at 312.

4 Adam D. Sundberg, ‘Claiming the Past. History, Memory, and Innovation Following the Christmas Flood of 1717’, *Environmental History* 20: 2 (2015), 238–61, at 242–45; Jan Willem Buisman, *Tussen vroomheid en verlichting. Een cultuurhistorisch en -sociologisch onderzoek naar enkele aspecten van de Verlichting in Nederland (1755–1810)*, vol. 1 of 2 vols (Zwolle: Waanders, 1992), 225–65.

5 Sara Miglietti and John Morgan, ‘Introduction. Ruling “Climates” in the Early Modern World’, in Miglietti and Morgan (eds), *Governing the Environment in the Early Modern World. Theory and Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 1–21, at 4.

6 This decline narrative does not fit solely into one of the two temporalities, linear or cyclical. The rise and fall of states was regarded by some authors as an inevitable cycle, albeit on a different time scale than the changing of seasons. However, a contrasting optimism about the ability of humans to break the cycle revealed a linear experience of time. See Jan Rotmans, ‘Circles of Desire and the Corruption of Virtue. The Historical Thought of Cornelis Zillesen (1736–1828)’, *De achttiende eeuw* 46: 2 (2014), 79–105.

7 Ernst H. Kossman, ‘The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century’, in Margaret C. Jacob and Wijnand W. Mijnhardt (eds), *The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century. Decline, Enlightenment, and Revolution* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 19–31.

8 Adam D. Sundberg, *Natural Disaster at the Closing of the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 196–97, 203, 242; Lotte Jensen, ‘“Disaster upon Disaster Inflicted on the Dutch”. Singing about Disasters in the Netherlands, 1600–1900’, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 134: 2 (2019), 45–70, at 65–66.

Hering's commemoration book, Pieters argues that the author interpreted the recent disaster as a symptom of this imagined deterioration of the Republic.⁹ Although this was a popular analysis at the time, I am convinced that the decline was neither the leading story arc of Hering's book nor that of the other authors. When they mentioned general decline of the Dutch nation, they did so only in passing.¹⁰ Despite the lack of a decline narrative, some authors did imagine a Dutch nation with a history and a future. The 'fatherland', as they called it, existed in time.

My argument unfolds in five sections. In the first, I dwell briefly on the two strands of literature I engage with: history of temporalities and, in relation to that, the study of national identities. In the next, I analyse the two commemoration books written by so-called civil scientists. As I will show, these books operated in a linear temporality. The third and fourth sections investigate the two commemoration books on the 1775 flood. They provided readers with a cyclical history of flood disasters, presenting severe inundations as events that repeated every century. In the final section, I will analyse how the various commemoration books dealt with the concept of nationhood. Commemoration books connected the suffering of ancestors, contemporaries, and posterity.

Time, Nation, and Continuity

The flood commemoration books engaged with contemporary notions of time and nation in various, even contradictory, ways. In order to grasp this dynamic, we have to take a closer look at two strands of theory: the work on temporalities – i.e. experiences of time – and the research on nations as imagined communities.

Scholars have argued that the European experiences of time shifted during the eighteenth century.¹¹ Before then, Europeans regarded history

9 Harm Pieters, 'Herinneringscultuur van overstromingsrampen. Gedenkboeken van de overstromingen van 1775, 1776 en 1825 in het Zuiderzeegebied', *Tijdschrift voor waterstaatsgeschiedenis* 21: 1–2 (2012), 48–57.

10 Cornelis Zillesen, *Beschryving van den Watersnood van 't jaar MDCCXCIX., in verscheidene gedeelten van ons Vaderland door ysverstoppingen veroorzaakt, met Kunst-plaaten* (Amsterdam: Johannes Allart, 1800), vii–viii; Johan Hendrik Hering, *Bespiegeling over Neêrlandsch watersnood, tusschen den 14den en 15den Nov. MDCCLXXV*, vol. 1 of 2 vols (Amsterdam: Wed. Loveringh en Allart, 1776), 66; Lidia van der Souw-ten Hoven, 'Beschouwing over den zwaaren storm en hoogen watervloed', in Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 33–38, at 33.

11 e.g. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 266–69; Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York: The

predominantly as cyclical. Just like the natural passing of seasons, what happened in human societies in the past would just happen again. Changes occurred, of course, but they were never deemed radical or unprecedented. Because of that, people could project the past onto the future. In the eighteenth century, this sense of time moved to the background. Confronted with fundamental ruptures in all aspects of society – science, religion, politics – Europeans adopted an understanding of history as a linear timeline on which radical change was possible.¹² French authors of ‘philosophical histories’ – a typical Enlightenment genre – therefore constructed linear timelines on which civilisations and nations experienced periods of decline yet predominantly progress.¹³ Writers claimed that, since people’s future was open, humans could choose what it held.

Despite the radical ruptures that caused it, the shift of conceptions of time was a subtle one. Historian Judith Pollmann convincingly argues that even before the eighteenth century, Europeans were well aware of historical breaking points.¹⁴ In the sixteenth century, she shows, people also perceived and discussed discontinuities. Likewise, a stable, cyclical understanding of time did not disappear in the eighteenth century.¹⁵ Cyclical and linear notions of time coexisted, sometimes even in a single text or image.¹⁶

Furthermore, the distinction between the two temporalities is not always clear-cut. The general decline narrative that entertained the enlightened minds of the Dutch Republic, for instance, combined elements of both understandings of time.¹⁷ While the downturn was viewed as a cyclical

New Press, 1998), 25; Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012), ch. 2: ‘Modernity and History’, 47–91, at 51–53, <http://books.openedition.org/ceup/820>. Historian Peter Burke locates the change in the seventeenth century. See his *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London: Arnold, 1969), 149–50.

¹² Burke, *The Renaissance Sense*. Such a linear understanding of time was also present in Judeo-Christian texts, stretching history from the Fall to the unavoidable Apocalypse. Nonetheless, Renaissance authors and thinkers emphasised cyclical understandings of time. See the same, 87–89.

¹³ Siep Stuurman, ‘Tijd en ruimte in de verlichting. De uitvinding van de filosofische geschiedenis’, in Maria Grever and Harry Jansen (eds), *De ongrijpbare tijd. Temporaliteit en de constructie van het verleden* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2001), 79–96.

¹⁴ Judith Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 51–72.

¹⁵ Claydon, *The Revolution in Time*, 14.

¹⁶ Brecht Deseure and Judith Pollmann, ‘The Experience of Rupture and the History of Memory’, in Erika Kuijpers, Judith Pollmann, Johannes Müller, and Jasper van der Steen (eds), *Memory before Modernity. Practices of Memory in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 315–29, at 318; Helge Jordheim, ‘Against Periodization. Koselleck’s Theory of Multiple Temporalities’, *History and Theory* 51: 2 (2012), 151–71.

¹⁷ Rotmans, ‘Circles of Desire’, 79.

return to the period before the seventeenth-century Golden Age, authors also argued that the future was open for progress.¹⁸ In other words: the cycle was not inevitable. These nuances show that the two temporalities are ideal types. They are scholarly constructs that help us to grasp an observable shift in the ways eighteenth-century people understood time. Yet the muddled thinking of contemporary writers seldom operated in one temporality only.

Interestingly, the notion of co-existing temporalities has also been picked up by academics with another specific research topic: national identities. Several scholars assert that the concept of a nation exists by the grace of a linear temporality.¹⁹ National myths refer to a lost golden age or a glorious future. Geographer Nuala Johnson, however, argues that nations, as imagined communities, can build on both 'linear and recurrent time formulations'.²⁰ What matters to the members of nations is a sense of continuity: the idea that a community moves as one entity through time.²¹ This continuity can be found in a transformation narrative but also in the stability of tradition. Recent studies by social psychologists confirm Johnson's claim. They establish that there are two ways that members of groups envision their collective continuity: cyclical and permanent, on the one hand, and linear and transforming, on the other.²² These two temporal perspectives on the Dutch nation can also be traced in some of the commemoration books.

Learning from Past Disasters: Pierlinck and Zillesen

Jacob Pierlinck was a captain-lieutenant and engineer. When a flood hit in 1757, Pierlinck lived in 's-Hertogenbosch, a city in the south of the Dutch Republic. In the days that followed, victims from the surrounding areas

18 Eleá de la Porte, 'Polite Batavians. The Uses of the Past in Late-Eighteenth-Century Dutch Spectators', in *Discourses of Decline. Essays on Republicanism in Honor of Wyger R.E. Velema*, ed. Joris Oddens, Mart Rutjes, and Arthur Weststeijn (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 87–88, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004470651>.

19 Hakkı Taş, 'The Chronopolitics of National Populism', *Identities* 29: 2 (2020), 127–45, at 127–35; Carsten Humlebæk, 'National Identities. Temporality and Narration', *Genealogy* 2: 4 (2018), 36–53, at 40–41.

20 Nuala C. Johnson, 'From Time Immemorial. Narratives of Nationhood and the Making of National Space', in John May and Nigel Thrift (eds), *TimeSpace. Geographies of Temporality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 89–105, at 92.

21 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 11–12.

22 Fabio Sani et al., 'Perceived Collective Continuity. Seeing Groups as Entities That Move through Time', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 37: 6 (2007), 1118–34, at 1119–20.

sought refuge in the town. Pierlinck felt sympathy for the wretches. The presence of all this suffering in his city and its surroundings led Pierlinck to produce the commemoration book, he claimed. The events had 'evoked in me the zeal – which I am indebted to this number of unfortunate people amidst I live – to investigate all these disasters in their origins'.²³ For Pierlinck, by knowing these 'origins' – the causes – people could act to prevent such events from happening again.

Tax officer, inventor, and hydrologist Cornelis Zillesen made similar claims in his commemoration book on the inundations of 1799. '[T]here is no effect without cause', he wrote, 'so the investigator of nature should, as much as possible, trace how causes and effects relate. ... A superficial historical narrative is of no use in this regard, but a story that benefits the experts of nature would be [helpful]'.²⁴ Zillesen's and Pierlinck's aim – tracing the natural circumstances that created river floods – manifests in the information they provided. Both writers tried to figure out, for instance, where water swelled in rivers. For this reason, both commemoration books discussed at length the water levels at various places along the rivers at various moments leading up to dyke breaches.

Pierlinck and Zillesen fit the category of eighteenth-century 'civil scientists': amateur scholars who wanted to serve society by studying practical topics and producing useful inventions.²⁵ Their publications, accordingly, engaged with a technocratic dialogue on floods.²⁶ Yet the books of both authors were not just dry enumerations of data. They also tapped into the genre conventions of commemoration books and appealed to the audience that wanted vivid descriptions of destruction. To illustrate the disastrousness of the recent events, Pierlinck and Zillesen told the personal stories of survivors. Anecdotes appeared often in early modern literary descriptions of floods and representations of disasters from that period in general. Literary

23 'hebben my, uit een yver, welken ik meen, aan zulken getal van ongelukkige Menschen, in welker midden ik woone, verschuldigd te zyn, opgewekt, om alle die Rampen in hunnen oirsprong na te vorschen ...' Jacob Pierlinck, *De verschrikkelyke watersnood, langs de Rivieren de Waal en de Maas, voorgevallen in de Maand February des Jaars 1757* (Amsterdam: Isaak Tirion, 1757), 2.

24 Free translation from the original: 'want is er geen uitwerkzel zonder oorzaak, zo diend de natuuronderzoeker, zo veel mogelijk op te speuren, hoe oorzaaken en uitwerkzelen in hun verband werken ... Een oppervlakkig Geschiedverhaal kan ons daarom in dezen van geen nut zyn, maar wel een zodaanig verhaal, waar uit Natuurkenners nut trekken kunnen'. Zillesen, *Beschryving*, 43.

25 Ad Maas, 'Civil Scientists. Dutch Scientists between 1750 and 1875', *History of Science* 48:1 (2010), 75–103, at 75–76; Rotmans, 'Circles of Desire', 84.

26 Sundberg, 'Claiming the Past', 241, 249–50.

scholar Françoise Lavocat argues that these mini-narratives functioned as *pars pro toto*: they captured a large, destructive event in the specific experiences of one individual or a couple of people.²⁷ At the same time, these stories evoked pity in the readers. Zillesen introduced the dramatic story of a father who lost a child in the waves as a 'heart-rending case'.²⁸ Evoking emotion was a conscious goal.

The emotionally charged anecdotes contrasted stylistically with the scientific disquisitions on water levels.²⁹ However, in the two commemoration books, the touching stories strengthened the technological argument. Pierlinck argued that he chronicled all the misery to show to 'all our compatriots in which dreadful situation their fellow brethren' were brought by the floods.³⁰ Subsequently, he stated that he also wanted to tell how these calamities could be prevented. Emotional anecdotes evoked thus a sense of urgency for Pierlinck's technological plans. Zillesen does not make this connection so explicitly, but his moving stories would have had a similar legitimising effect.

Another way that Pierlinck proved the urgency of technological interventions was by referring to the past. He included a list with major floods in the river area since 1653. The inundation of 1757 was the twelfth time that such an event had occurred, Pierlinck claimed. 'Who does not fear for more severe consequences', the author asked rhetorically, 'after paying only little attention to this short register in which one sees in at once that – especially since the year 1740 – this corrupting malady increases?'³¹ Here Pierlinck drew a rising line of disastrousness.³²

Zillesen also referred to previous disasters. Like Pierlinck, he included a short list with historical floods along the major Dutch rivers, although he went further back in time. The first flood in his list was one in 1573.³³ And like Pierlinck, he saw a worrying rise in the number of disasters. 'It is highly remarkable', he concluded, 'that the [number of] ice congestions and

27 Françoise Lavocat, 'Narratives of Catastrophe in the Early Modern Period. Awareness of Historicity and Emergence of Interpretative Viewpoints', *Poetics Today* 33: 3–4 (2012), 254–99, at 265.

28 Zillesen, *Beschryving*, 69.

29 For Zillesen's use of literary techniques, see Lotte Jensen, 'De schoonheid van een ramp. De culturele verbeelding van de watersnood van 1799', *Vooys* 39: 1 (2021), 6–17, at 9–10.

30 Pierlinck, *De verschrikkelyke watersnood*, 33.

31 'Wie vreest niet voor droeviger gevolgen, die zynen aandacht, maar eenigzins, op dit klein Register vestigt; waar uit men met een opslag ziet, dat deze zoo bederflyke kwaal, hoe langer hoe meer, toeneemt, byzonderlyk zedert den Jaare 1740'. Pierlinck, *De verschrikkelyke watersnood*, 34.

32 See also Pierlinck, *De verschrikkelyke watersnood*, 39.

33 Zillesen, *Beschryving*, 38–41.

inundations that were caused by them, has increased in this century'.³⁴ The increase was the result of obstacles in the river, Zillesen speculated. One of the barriers he listed were groynes (*kribben*), man-made structures that prevented rivers from eroding their banks.³⁵

Zillesen and Pierlinck dealt with time in a similar way. Although Zillesen went further back in time than Pierlinck, the long history of floods receives little attention in either commemoration book. When Zillesen compared the latest disastrous water levels to those of previous floods, he referred most often to recent inundations: 1784 and 1795.³⁶ Similarly, Pierlinck consistently compared the disaster of 1757 to a flood in 1740. The timespan in which the latest disaster fell was, in both commemoration books, relatively short.

Regarding the future, both authors attributed agency to humans. They showed that disasters were preventable and that the future was therefore malleable. As has been mentioned before, both commemoration books are relatively secular. Zillesen denied even explicitly that floods were the result of divine intervention. According to the engineer, river floods were 'not originally the judgements of God'.³⁷ Furthermore, if people would allow rivers to inundate their lands every winter, the fields would actually become more fertile.³⁸ By keeping the water out at all costs by building dykes and constraining the space of the river, Zillesen argued, people were actually creating the danger of floods.³⁹ In a sense, the engineer already envisioned ways of dealing with high water that are now applied in the Dutch water management project *Space for the River* (*Ruimte voor de rivier*).⁴⁰ In Zillesen's view, it was human agency that created catastrophe, and it was human agency that could solve the problem.⁴¹

Like Zillesen, Pierlinck was also sceptical about the preventive qualities of dykes.⁴² People should always be on guard for floods, he wrote, and

34 Zillesen, *Beschryving*, 41.

35 On this groynes problem, see Toon Bosch, *Om de macht over het water. De nationale waterstaatsdienst tussen staat en samenleving, 1798–1849* (Zaltbommel: Europese Bibliotheek, 2000), 22; Alex van Heezik, *Strijd om de rivieren. 200 jaar rivierenbeleid in Nederland of de opkomst en ondergang van het streven naar de normale rivier* (Haarlem and The Hague: Van Heezik Beleidsresearch, 2008), 46–47.

36 Zillesen, *Beschryving*, 78–79, 98, 148, 160, 167–68, and 271.

37 Zillesen, *Beschryving*, xiii.

38 A similar argument can be found in Pierlinck, *De verschrikkelijke watersnood*, 47.

39 Interestingly, Hering also acknowledged these man-made risks for floods but did not elaborate on them. See his *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 43.

40 These proposals contrast with the projects to 'tame the rivers' in Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. See David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature. Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), chs 1 and 2.

41 Cf. Heezik, *Strijd*, 48–50.

42 Pierlinck, *De verschrikkelijke watersnood*, 8–9.

they should repair and maintain dykes and dams. However, the recent disaster showed that these measures were not enough. With regard to the area around 's-Hertogenbosch, he argued for the creation of an emergency spillway (*overlaat*) that would reduce high water levels.⁴³ The spillway would redirect excess water to the Biesbosch, a large wetland in the southwest of the Netherlands. In spite of his scepticism towards dykes and dams, the author did provide a technological solution that could prevent misery in the future.

The commemoration books of Zillesen and Pierlinck operated in a linear temporality. Their past was a time of change, and their future was open and malleable. The emphasis on scientific investigation and the technological prevention of disasters was not unique to the Enlightenment, as some scholars have shown.⁴⁴ Furthermore, a secular understanding of floods which emphasised natural causes also existed before the eighteenth century.⁴⁵ Yet, I think it is undeniable that Zillesen and Pierlinck manifested a mindset that historians associate with the era: rational, curious, and forward thinking. However, between the publication dates of these two commemoration books, two other commemoration books were written which took a completely different approach. Instead of forward, they looked backward in time.

Catastrophic Cycles in the *Historisch verhaal*

The *Historisch verhaal der overstromingen in de Nederlanden* (hereafter *Historisch verhaal*) was sold in two volumes. While the publisher distributed the first, the anonymous authors – they referred to themselves as ‘we’ – were writing the second.⁴⁶ In the preface the authors thanked the people who had already sent them ‘various neat and extensive messages from many places’.⁴⁷

43 Pierlinck, *De verschrikkelijke watersnood*, 40.

44 Adriaan M.J. de Kraker, ‘Two Floods Compared. Perception of and Response to the 1682 and 1715 Flooding Disasters in the Low Countries’, in Katrin Pfeifer and Niki Pfeifer (eds), *Forces of Nature and Cultural Responses* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013), 185–202, at 199–200; Marie Luisa Allemeyer, *‘Kein Land ohne Deich ...!’ Lebenswelten einer Küstengesellschaft in der frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 371–83.

45 Raingard Esser, ‘“Ofte gheen water op en hadde gheweest”. Narratives of Resilience on the Dutch Coast in the Seventeenth Century’, *Dutch Crossing* 40: 2 (2016), 97–107, at 99.

46 Pieters argues that the second volume was never published. See Pieters, ‘Herinneringscultuur’, 49. Nonetheless, I found a book in the KB – National Library of the Netherlands in The Hague (KW 656 M 57) that includes both volumes.

47 ‘verscheidene nette en uitvoerige berigten uit vele plaatsen ontvangen’, in *Historisch Verhaal der overstromingen in de Nederlanden, byzonder op den 14 en 15 van Slagtmaand des Jaars 1775 voorgevallen* (Amsterdam: G. Warnars and P. den Hengst, 1776), ch. ‘Voorberigt’.

The writers asked other readers to send in reports on the inundations at their locations, so they could write an even more extensive second volume.⁴⁸ By collecting the events of the night of 14–15 November 1775 in one book, the authors emphasised the geographical scale of the disaster. The dyke breaches, the drowning cattle, the stories of families that sought refuge on their roofs – these events happened at various places but all at the same time. The storm surge did not hit the whole Dutch Republic. Because of their geographical location, provinces like Groningen were spared.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the authors of the *Historisch verhaal* claimed that the disaster hit ‘the fatherland’. The specific stories of families on roofs and other anecdotes that took place simultaneously functioned as *pars pro toto* of the storm surge that hit the whole nation.

Besides the geographical scale, the authors of the *Historisch verhaal* also stretched the disaster’s temporal scope. The book did more than just recapitulate recent news. The full title translates to ‘Historical Story of the Floods in the Netherlands, in Particular [the One] on the Fourteenth and Fifteenth of the Slaughter Month of the Year 1775’. The words ‘in particular’ were telling. Although the authors dedicated most space to the recent storm surge, they also extensively discussed earlier flood disasters. The first section (*afdeeling*) of the *Historisch Verhaal* was an enumeration of flood disasters in the Dutch delta since 806, when sea water flooded the fields of Frisia on St Thomas Day.⁵⁰ Unlike Pierlinck and Zillesen, who mainly mentioned recent disasters, the anonymous authors covered no fewer than nine centuries of inundations. The overview of historical floods ended in the year 1747 – 28 pages later – with a storm that ‘gave birth to very large calamities in our fatherland’.⁵¹ In between, the authors provided their readers with a canon of major flood disasters.

A canon implies selection.⁵² The authors wrote that they had to pick events, since they could not include all these catastrophes. For instance, when discussing the thirteenth century, the authors asserted:

Although our space does not make it possible to remember [*op te halen*] all the exceptional drawbacks which we experienced because of the water

48 Ibid.

49 *Historisch Verhaal*, 230–31.

50 *Historisch Verhaal*, 4.

51 *Historisch Verhaal*, 30–31. After the enumeration, the author closes the section with a couple of pages with geographical information.

52 On flood disaster canons, see also John Emrys Morgan, ‘Understanding Flooding in Early Modern England’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 50 (2015), 37–50, at 46; Pieters, ‘Herinnering-sculptuur’, 49.

in one or the other part of our fatherland, we cannot silently pass over the Marcellus Flood that particularly hit Frisia.⁵³

The St Marcellus Flood was considered to be the most severe flood disaster of the century. However, the authors did not have objective measures for severity, especially not when they described disasters from centuries ago. They had to rely on collective memory, such as earlier disaster canons. It is therefore no surprise that the authors included the St Elisabeth Flood of 1421. Modern-day research shows that the flood was not the sudden, catastrophic event as it was remembered in later centuries.⁵⁴ The authors of the *Historisch verhaal* nonetheless claimed that it had 'surpassed most other severe floods'.⁵⁵

The last quote shows that disaster canons enabled comparisons between floods.⁵⁶ For instance, in their description of a storm surge in March 1625, the authors of the *Historisch verhaal* argued that the water in Amsterdam rose one *duim* – a old measure of length which compares to an inch – above the level of the All Saints Flood of 1570.⁵⁷ This is one of many comparisons to earlier inundations that were made. In their introduction the authors argued that weighing severity was the main reason to include a historical overview. The information on previous flood disasters enabled their readers to 'compare this [recent] flood disaster with those of other epochs'.⁵⁸

The authors deemed the catastrophe of 1775 exceptionally severe. Nonetheless, the recent catastrophe was embedded in the past. As noted before, a twenty-eight-page list with historical inundations preceded the reports on the storm surge. After that, the authors also referred to a village or town's experiences with previous flood disasters when describing recent events. For instance, when discussing the impact of the storm surge in Scheveningen, a coastal village near The Hague, the authors started with a description of a plaque in the local church that commemorated the 1570 All Saints Flood.⁵⁹ Hereby, they showed that it was not the first time that Scheveningen was hit by a storm surge.

53 'Schoon ons bestek het niet mogelyk maakt alle byzondere nadeelen, welke wy door de wateren, nu in het eene dan in het andere gedeelte van ons Vaderland, veroorzaakt vinden, op te halen, kunnen wy egter den Marcellus Vloed, door welken Friesland in het byzonder is getroffen geworden, niet met stilzwygen voorbygaan', in *Historisch verhaal*, 9.

54 Gerrit Jan Schiereck and Paul Visser, 'De Sint-Elisabethsvloed. Feiten en fictie', in Hanneke van Asperen, Marianne Eekhout, and Lotte Jensen (eds), *De grote en vreeselike vloed. De Sint-Elisabethsvloed 1421–2021* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2021), 139–54.

55 *Historisch verhaal*, 12.

56 de Kraker, 'Two Floods Compared', 198.

57 *Historisch verhaal*, 19.

58 'dezen Waternood met dien van andere tyden te vergelyken'. *Historisch Verhaal*, 3.

59 *Historisch Verhaal*, 43–44.

In the *Historisch verhaal*, flood disasters are recurring events, with major inundations happening several times in a century. Because of that, the danger of the water is a stable threat in the lives of the Dutch. The authors did not present a story arc in the historical overview nor in the reports that followed it. Floods differed in severity, but the authors did not draw rising or declining lines. In other words: the authors did not claim that floods were becoming less or more catastrophic over time. The anonymous authors presented disasters thus as cyclical events. When discussing the dyke breaches in the polder of Dussen, they noted that here ‘one was afraid that the despair of the year 1421 – when everything was inundated – would be reborn’.⁶⁰ According to the authors, the inhabitants of the polder feared for a flood disaster because of a similar catastrophe over three centuries ago. They feared repetition.

The authors wrote about the distant past and the recent events, but they said little about the future. Nonetheless, in the postscript they do envision the time to come. Just like the past, this future was strikingly cyclical. The authors closed the book with ‘the whole-hearted wish that these provinces [*Gewesten*], by the protection of Divine Providence, may be protected against these disasters for long’.⁶¹ The words ‘for long’ imply that the authors did not think that the inhabitants of the Dutch Republic would ever be safe from flood disasters. Even though God could postpone catastrophes, it was only a matter of time before the next inundation arrived.

Hering’s Monument for Posterity

In many ways, the *Historisch verhaal* and Hering’s *Bespiegeling* are similar. Just like the anonymous authors, he preceded the recent events with an extensive historical overview, and he also links the stories from various places to their local histories. And like the anonymous authors, he portrayed the disaster as an event that hit the whole ‘fatherland’. However, Hering’s commemoration book diverged in two key ways from the *Historisch verhaal*: it put the disasters in a far more explicitly religious frame, and it adopted a more literary style. Hering regarded his book as a literary work of art.

60 ‘Men was bedugt dat hier de ellenden van het Jaar 1421, toen ’er alles onder liep, zouden herboren worden’. *Historisch Verhaal*, 166.

61 ‘met den hartelyken wensch dat deze Gewesten, door de bescherming der Goddelyke Voorzienigheid, tegen dergelyke en andere onheilen lang mogen beveiligd blyven’. *Historisch Verhaal*, 231.

Johan Hendrik Hering was the editor of the newspaper *Amsterdamsche courant*.⁶² In addition, he wrote books on topics like harsh winters and the island of Curaçao. The first volume of his *Bespiegeling*, counting almost 300 pages, described the storm surge and past floods. The second volume was an extensive appendix with sources that Hering used. Among them were letters from people in the affected areas. Although these reports were often rather plain and factual, the author presented the stories they conveyed in a vivid, even dramatic manner. Hering complained that his 'primary objects of contemplation are air and water' and that these led to similar stories from the various places.⁶³ Because of that, the author feared that he could not distinguish the various events sharply enough.⁶⁴ In order to solve this problem, he employed 'visual descriptions and jewels of art'.⁶⁵ With the latter, Hering meant literary devices. Flowery prose dominated the book, an aspect that was criticised by contemporaries.⁶⁶

In his descriptions of the unfortunate night of the storm surge, Hering aimed at portraying events as vividly as possible. Like the other commemoration books, he told the personal stories of survivors and appealed to the emotions of his readers. Another way in which he made the descriptions lifelike was by situating himself, as an all-seeing narrator, reporting in the present tense.⁶⁷ This narrator travelled from disaster area to disaster area. He heard the wailing of the victims, felt the dykes crumble, and even saw a ship smashing on a dyke.⁶⁸

Hering wanted to introduce a similar vividness to the historical overview with which he starts his book. Grandchildren listen to the life stories of their 'grey grandfather' with much dedication, the author wrote.⁶⁹ Plain history writing could not evoke this level of engagement, Hering argued. Because of that, the author introduced his readers to a personification of history: 'Dutch Antiquities' ('Neêrlandsch Oudheidkunde'). This female figure spoke directly to the audience and told it how she accompanied the first

62 Eco O.G. Haitsma Mulier, G.A. van der Lem, and P. Knevel, *Repertorium van Geschiedschrijvers in Nederland, 1500–1800* (The Hague: Nederlands Historisch Genootschap, 1990), 180–81.

63 Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, vii.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Pieters, 'Herinneringscultuur', 52.

67 For a similar narrator in eighteenth-century disaster literature, see Peter Altena, "'Menschlievendheid schikt hulp van boven". Evert Schonck, Lambert Stoppendaal en de Nijmeegse watersnood van 1784 en 1799', in Rick Honings, Lotte Jensen, and Gert-Jan Johannes (eds), *Jaarboek Bilderdijk 2021. Rampen in de tijd van Bilderdijk* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2021), 31–50, at 42.

68 Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 192, 117.

69 Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 19.

inhabitants of the Netherlands. Dutch Antiquities regarded these previous inhabitants as her 'old friends'. During her narration, she even shed tears for their losses during flood disasters.

Hering's use of personification sets his historical overview apart from the one in the *Historisch verhaal* and other contemporary publications on floods. Nonetheless, the function of this literary device was not unique. Page after page, Dutch Antiquities listed chronologically the most severe flood disasters in the history of the Dutch delta. Hering's Dutch Antiquities noted that 'my old friends endured many severe floods, which have – from time to time – increased in weight, and I will touch upon the most severe ones'.⁷⁰ The description of these historic events did not follow a rising line of increased impact, and neither do the disasters decline in impact. Instead, major floods recurred 'from time to time'. This illustrates that Hering, like the authors of the *Historisch verhaal*, adopted a cyclical view of flood disaster history.

A major difference between the two books is the way they dealt with the future. Hering was far more interested in the times to come than the anonymous authors. In various parts of the books, he referred to posterity and how it would reflect on the 1775 flood disaster. One of the regions that endured the most damage was the province of Overijssel. Hering: '[M]any dungeons of bitterness open here in front of us, [those] which will let the heart[s] of the progeny shiver from fear'.⁷¹ A couple of pages later, the author praised the generosity and hospitality of the citizens of the town of Zwolle, a city in Overijssel. They gave refuge to flood victims. The author wished that the citizens would receive a 'hereditary blessing over your lineages'.⁷² Remarks like these show that Hering had the future generations of Dutch people in mind while writing his book. Furthermore, he imagined his book to be part of that future. Because of his publication, Hering wrote, the 1775 storm surge would become part of the collective memory of coming generations.

In one dramatic fragment, the author made his future-focused goals most explicit. In the middle of the first volume, Hering confessed to his readers that he could not bear to write more about all these sad events.⁷³ Then he addressed himself:

70 'Menige zwaare watervloeden hebben myne oude vrienden moeten doorstaan, die van tyd tot tyd in gewicht zyn toegenomen, en waarvan ik u de voornaamsten zal aanstippen', in Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 41.

71 'veele kerkers van bitterheden worden hier voor het gezicht geopend, welke het hart der nakomelingschap nog van angst zullen doen beven'. Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 240.

72 Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 241–42.

73 For a similar case, see Altena, 'Menschlievendheid', 40–41.

Maybe you [Hering] will, at one moment, impress the insensitive hearts of their progeny. It would be unfair to let the generation that still have to be born be ignorant of this that happened these days.⁷⁴

According to Hering, he had a responsibility not only to his readers but also to their children. The Dutch people of the future should know about the night of 14–15 November 1775.

Hering's ambition to educate the next generations is also reflected in the analogies he used to describe his *Bespiegeling*. He wrote that his two volumes were intended to be a 'building of letters' and a 'memorial column'.⁷⁵ One time, he used another word. '[I] would like to do complete justice to the historical [events], and, at the same time, by my labour erect an EBEN-EZER, to honour Him, who punishes and blesses'.⁷⁶ The term 'Eben-Ezer' refers to the biblical monument from 1 Samuel (4:1, 5:1, 7:12) built to thank God for a military victory. The fact that Hering compared his books to this mythical memorial column highlights two things. Firstly, it illustrates his fear for the forgetfulness of future generations. Secondly, it shows that he deemed remembering to be a divine mission.

Hering perceived collective amnesia as a constant threat for the Dutch. With regard to the eleventh century, his Dutch Antiquities told the readers that

[s]ince then, for around half a century, the wind and the sea, tired from the previous havocs, hid in their holes, or they at least did not do noticeable damage. The previous fatalities were almost forgotten ... Some of your countrymen probably imagined that they, by taking careful measures, did not have anything to fear.⁷⁷

74 'Misschien zult gy te eeniger tyd, op de ongevoelige harten van hun nakroost, indruk maken; 't zou derhalven onbillyk zyn, de Geslachten, die nog staan gebooren te worden, onkundig te laten van het geen, deezer dagen, gebeurd is!' Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 98.

75 Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, vi, 13, 245. See also Michael Kempe, "Mind the Next Flood!" Memories of Natural Disasters in Northern Germany from the Sixteenth Century to the Present', *The Medieval History Journal* 10: 1–2 (2007), 327–54, at 350.

76 'ik wilde gaarne aan het Historische alle mogelyke volledigheid geven, en te gelyk door mynen arbeid een EBENHÆZER oprichten, tot eer van HEM, die straft en zegent'. Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, vi.

77 'Zedert verliep omtrent eene halve Eeuw, dat wind en baren, vermoeid door de vorige verwoestingen, zig in hunne hooien schuil hielden, of ten minsten geene merklyke schaden aanbragten. De vorige noodlottigheden waren meest vergeeten ... Mogelyk verbeeldden zig zommige uwer landsgenoten, dat men, door voorzichtig genomen maatregels, diergelyke gevaren niet meer te duchten had ...' Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 46–47.

After a period with less severe floods, Dutch Antiquities asserted, people forgot about the threat of the water and God's divine punishment. Then the St Marcellus Flood (1219) hit the Netherlands. The personification of history showed that it was naïve to think that the nation was ever safe from the destruction of the waters.

Not only the water proved to be a constant threat, Hering and the personification implied. Forgetting the threat was a danger in itself. To understand the author's fear for forgetfulness, it is essential to look at the causes Hering sought for the disasters. As is already implied in the quote, the author considered 'careful measures' insufficient to counter future disasters. Dykes and other types of envirotech alone would not help the Dutch. Hering wrote:

[I]t seems to be a general shortcoming in human nature, to lack esteem for the endured disasters, and always push away the fear for the future [catastrophes], especially when one starts to regard them as the natural [gewoone] effects of this or that cause, to which one can protect oneself.⁷⁸

Blind trust in hydrological interventions rested on the assumption that floods were only a natural phenomenon. Here, Hering claimed, people made a costly mistake. Sins were the real cause of floods, and only conversion could prevent disasters.

In general, early modern Europeans followed the logic of the 'economy of sin': because of the sins of individuals – input – God punished communities with disasters – the output.⁷⁹ Even though Hering never pointed to specific sins or sinners, he also applied the economy of sin as an explanation of the 1775 storm surge.⁸⁰ His account therefore fits the wider, eighteenth-century understanding of disasters. Although there were secular understandings, like the ones discussed in this article, the punishment-for-sin interpretation remained dominant.⁸¹

78 'het schynt een algemeen gebrek in de menschelyke natuur, de doorgestaane rampen niet te achten, en de vrees voor de toekomstende, altoos verre te stellen, voornamentlyk, wanneer men die begint te beschouwen als gewoone gevolgen van deeze of geene oorzaak, waar tegen men zig op de beste wyze zoekt te beveiligen, en 'er verder niet aan denkt, dan wanneer het gevaar vergroot'. Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 40–41.

79 Wolfgang Behringer, *A Cultural History of Climate*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 133; Adriaan Duiveman, 'Praying for (the) Community. Disasters, Ritual and Solidarity in the Eighteenth-Century Dutch Republic', *Cultural and Social History* 16: 5 (2019), 543–60, at 545–46.

80 Also noted in Pieters, 'Herinneringscultuur', 51.

81 Buisman, *Tussen vroomheid en verlichting*, vol. 1, 143, 217.

Sundberg has convincingly shown that remembrance was an important goal of eighteenth-century poets and preachers in their representations of flood disasters.⁸² For these authors, keeping alive the memories of past disasters was a religious obligation. Since disasters were regarded as part of a divine plan, authors asserted that recent and past catastrophes taught their victims and others moral lessons. Forgetting disasters, and thus forgetting divine punishments that were disasters, was a sin in itself.⁸³ Hering also believed that amnesia would invoke God's wrath again.

Just as with the *Historisch verhaal*, Hering closed his book by envisioning the future. Hering, however, was more optimistic. He concluded:

Now, nothing is in the way from ... wishing you, beloved compatriots for who this memorial column has been raised, that our behaviour will not invoke any more revenge from heavens [*Hemelwraak*]!⁸⁴

In the case of the *Historisch verhaal*, the authors deemed it inevitable that a next flood would occur. They believed a merciful God would postpone the next flood but not stop inundations altogether. Hering, to the contrary, thought that people could learn from disasters, repent, and hence prevent new floods from happening. For Hering, the agency of people was not technological or environmental, as Pierlinck and Zillesen argued, but religious and moral.

Whose Past, Whose Future?

As argued earlier, national identities presuppose collective continuity. One of the two ways to establish such a sense of communal persistence involves the idea that the imagined community has a stable essence. Groups can search for this essence in traditions and mentalities. The other way to construct collective continuity is by stressing the phases of change that a group went through. This process makes the group. In Zillesen's and Pierlinck's commemoration books, the past is a time of transformation. This change is one for the worse, since they both see a rise in disastrousness.

82 Sundberg, 'Claiming the Past', 243.

83 Ibid.

84 'Thans blyft my niets overig, dan ... u, BEMINDE LANDSGENOOTEN, voor welken deeze GEDENKZUIL gestigt is, toe te wenschen, dat onze gedragingen, geen Hemelwraak meer wekken!' Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 245.

Nonetheless, if people would learn from this past, the authors explicitly and implicitly claimed, their future was malleable. But whose past and whose future was this?

Pierlinck appeals to the idea of the 'fatherland' (*Vaderland*) – i.e. *patria* – a couple of times. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, authors did not use the word 'fatherland' exclusively for the whole Dutch Republic.⁸⁵ Some authors employed it to point only to their own province, like Holland or Guelders, or it even referred only their own city. Later on, the notion of the fatherland 'nationalised', as did the disasters that hit it.⁸⁶ Pierlinck also employed the term in its national sense. He asserted that other people with ideas on how to prevent river floods should share this knowledge with the whole nation, since this would benefit the whole of the Netherlands.⁸⁷ Yet the Dutch nation does not seem to be the entity that owns the past and the future of the river area. There is not a clearly defined 'we' in Pierlinck's commemoration book.

Zillesen's book also lacks a clear collective protagonist. This is striking, since a declining Dutch nation is central in other works he produced.⁸⁸ Zillesen's flood commemoration book was published five years after the Batavian Republic replaced the Dutch Republic. Whereas political power was held by many local authorities in the latter, the new government centralised the state. Part of this programme was the introduction of a new, central agency for water management.⁸⁹ Zillesen expected that the new agency could prevent river floods and the nation-*state* would be the actor of his imagined future.⁹⁰ When it comes to the past, however, Zillesen did not perceive the Dutch nation as a single character that struggled through centuries of floods.

The commemoration book of the anonymous authors addressed, as its title claimed, floods in the whole of the Netherlands. The historical disasters listed in the beginning took place in both coastal and riparian regions of the Republic. The authors also referred to the fatherland as the place where

85 Eco O.G. Haitsma Mulier, 'Het begrip "vaderland" in de Nederlandse geschiedschrijving van de late zestiende eeuw tot de eerste helft van de achttiende', in Niek van Sas (ed.), *Vaderland. Een geschiedenis van de vijftiende eeuw tot 1940* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 163–79, at 169–71.

86 Jensen, 'Disaster upon Disaster', 65–66.

87 Pierlinck, *De verschrikkelijke watersnood*, 43.

88 Rotmans, 'Circles of Desire'.

89 Bosch, *Om de macht over het water*, 44–52; Bert Toussaint, 'Eerbiedwaardig of uit de tijd? De positie van de waterschappen tussen 1795 en 1870', *Tijdschrift voor Waterstaatsgeschiedenis* 18: 2 (2009), 40–50.

90 Zillesen, *Beschryving*, xv–xvi.

recent disasters took place. Readers could read the commemoration book as an account of the flood and storm disasters that hit the whole Dutch nation. The repetition of suffering connected contemporaries with the previous generations.⁹¹

More than the authors of the *Historisch verhaal*, Hering explicitly framed the Dutch nation as his protagonist. Thanking God for His mercy, the author claimed that 'the Netherlands was preserved this time; the Netherlands has been spared again!'⁹² The nation that the author imagined was based on the cyclical recurrence of flood disasters. The author sought, I argue, the essence of the Dutch in the stability of experiences. This is illustrated by the fact that Hering's Dutch Antiquities did not distinguish between contemporary readers and their imagined forebears. She spoke about the readers' 'ancestors' and 'your fathers', but when discussing the impact of a flood in the ninth century, she remembered the following:

when sea and Rhyne again, with equal drift, attacked your possessions ... salt and sweet water united to [cause] your deterioration, played a most dreaded role over the surfaces of your formidable lands, and caused a great maceration of the [number of] inhabitants and cattle.⁹³

Here Dutch Antiquities addressed the readers in 1776. Yet, while she talked about a flood from eight centuries ago, she mentioned 'your possessions', 'your deterioration', and 'your formidable lands'. In Hering's envisioning of the past, there was no difference between the people who inhabited the Dutch delta then and those who lived there during the 1775 storm surge. The experience of flood was the same, and those who experienced it were the same.

In Hering's book, posterity was just as much part of the Dutch nation as the ancestors. However, while the connection with the past was the repetition of disasters, the future of the Dutch nation was open for Hering. He regarded the Dutch as a single moral community that could change its

91 This contrasts with the proud remembrance of water management successes described in Lotte Jensen, 'Floods as Shapers of Dutch Cultural Identity. Media, Theories and Practices', *Water History* 13: 2 (2021), 217–33, at 228–30.

92 'NEËRLAND werd ditmaal nog behouden; NEËRLAND is ditmaal wederom gespaard!' Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 14.

93 'wanneer de zee en rhyne andermaal, met gelyke drift, op uwe bezittingen aanvielen ... ; zout en zoet water thans tot uw bederf vereenigt, speelden eene allergeeduchtste rol over de oppervlakte uwer heerlyke landsdouwen, en maakten eene groote vermagering aan inwooners en vee'. Hering, *Bespiegeling*, vol. 1, 43.

future for the better.⁹⁴ To put this in terms of temporalities: while the past had been cyclical, the future was linear. According to Hering, the Dutch could break the cycles of catastrophe.

Conclusion

In this article I compared four flood commemoration books. The two books written by Pierlinck and Zillesen operated in a linear temporality. They looked at recent floods, counted frequency, and looked at water levels to conclude that the disastrousness of floods rose with time. Furthermore, they argued that one could learn from the past. By learning from history, people were able to prevent potential floods. Pierlinck pleaded for an emergency spillway, Zillesen argued that people should give rivers more space and that they should benefit from inundations instead of creating disasters. This illustrates that both authors attributed agency to humans. People could do something about the floods and their future was malleable.

Pierlinck's and Zillesen's books provide a stark contrast to the two other commemoration books that are central in this article: the *Historisch verhaal* by anonymous authors and Hering's *Bespiegeling*. These two commemoration books paid far more attention to past disasters than Pierlinck and Zillesen did. In addition, they went back further in time, also discussing medieval floods. The lists with flood disasters stressed that the latest catastrophe was severe but still far from unique. Instead, the recent events were included in a pattern that stretched across centuries. Finally, the anonymous authors and Hering show more interest in the idea of the Dutch nation and its experiences through time, whereas Pierlinck and Zillesen do not introduce such a clear collective protagonist.

Nonetheless, the *Historisch verhaal* differs from Hering's *Bespiegeling* in the ways the anonymous writers described the future. The *Historisch verhaal* paid little attention to the time to come. When the authors reflected on it, they projected the past onto the future. In the logic of the cyclical temporality, they assumed that a subsequent, severe canon flood was simply inevitable. Hering, to the contrary, was far more interested in the future. He even regarded his own book as part of it. Claiming that he produced a 'memorial column', he wanted to educate the coming generations so that they could learn from the dreadful experiences of the victims of the 1775

94 Peter van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes. Over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland, 1570–1990* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1996), 89–95.

storm surge. If the readers would repent, they could prevent the repetition of the *Hemelwraak* – revenge from heavens.

Historians have shown that the decline narrative was a prominent national story in the eighteenth-century Netherlands. Scholars have convincingly argued that disasters, as divine punishments, were interpreted as symptoms of the general decline. Nonetheless, the commemoration books in this article add nuances to this generalisation. The publications operated in different temporalities, yet not one emphasised the decline narrative. On the one hand, the books that emphasised a cyclical recurrence of disasters showed that several severe floods hit the Netherlands every century. There was not a sudden rise of disastrousness caused by a moral collapse but a strict repetition of a historical pattern. On the other hand, the books that found that the number and severity of floods had increased over time did not explain this development by referring to the decline narrative. Instead, Zillesen and Pierlinck pointed to humans' mismanagement of their environment.

In the commemoration books, the tragedies of flood disasters connected readers with past generations. With exception of the *Historisch verhaal*, the commemoration books nonetheless provided readers with hope. Pierlinck, Zillesen, and Hering attributed agency to humans. Through technology or religion, the inhabitants of the Netherlands could prevent future disasters.

About the Author

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