Ik ontdekte Nederland vijf en twintig jaar geleden. Maar terwijl ik een grote eerbied en genegenheid tot het land van jullie heb, heb ik alleen een klein beetje kennis van jullie geschiedenis. Dus ben ik verrukt en vereerd om voor deze conferentie uitgenodigd te zijn en zal ik bescheiden moeten zijn in mijn conclusies. Gelijktijdig, als jullie me kennen, weten jullie dat ik vastberaden ben om een eerlijke aantekening te geven - ik hoop de prijs is niet jullie vriendschap, of mijn reputatie.

The central aim of this symposium is to interpret *Four Centuries of Dutch-American Relations*, for me in particular its survey of the long nineteenth century, from about 1780 to 1914. Some human interactions surely occur in this extended time period. There were diplomatic relations of a limited sort; some American writers wrote about the affairs of the Low Countries, and had books reviewed there, and vice versa; trade took place between merchants on either side of the Atlantic; and so on. Yet I believe that the goal of the book is to catch a bigger sort of fish, something of more significance. People in Holland, it is claimed, had collective beliefs about the United States, and the Americans had their own communal views of the Dutch. I want to focus on the latter, and following Annette Stott I will call it the “image of Dutchness” in America. One of the bigger fish we want to reel in is how Americans thought in respect to the Dutch.

Consequently, we want to figure out what it was to which American communal views were directed, what the supposed beliefs of Americans were about. Listen to my former colleagues, Krabbendam, van Minnen, and Scott-Smith. Their book, they say, has used “a clear understanding of the Dutch

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1 In writing this comment I have been indebted to F.L. van Holthoon’s essay, “The Dutch and American Enlightenment” (June 2008).

nation” and depends on “accepting the problem of defining ‘Dutchness’ and what it entails.” The problem is that no one defines what a Dutch identity might look like. There are three parts to this problem.

First, we have a difficulty in locating a political entity that we can safely call the Netherlands. This you all know far better than I do. The so-called Dutch Republic loosely assembled provinces and towns that unsuccessfully struggled to form a central government. Toward the end of the 18th century the Low Countries themselves warred between monarchical and republican factions, and in furtherance of their political goals the natives relied on the English, the Germans, and the French to forward incipient ideas about nationhood and about the ethnic distinctiveness of a Dutch nation. Then, French armies conquered these Lowland peoples in 1795, and in 1806 Napoleon restyled the Netherlands (along with a small part of what is now Germany) into the Kingdom of Holland. But he soon gave up the idea of such a separate kingdom and incorporated the Netherlands into the French empire. As Napoleon was being defeated, in 1813, William VI of Orange was proclaimed the Sovereign Prince of the United Netherlands. This state was superseded by the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815, unifying the northern Netherlands with what were called the Austrian Netherlands – more or less present-day Belgium. From 1815 to 1830, the Low Countries were politically united, and at least King William determined to retain Flanders, and more, as part of his greater Netherlands until 1839.

So first of all, we have issues in locating a Dutch polity that Americans could have had in mind when they were generating a collective belief in the first-half of our long 19th century. The Dutch Republic was hardly a state; it was succeeded by a French colony; and then by an entity that included Flanders and then by one that did not include Flanders.

The editors of *Four Centuries of Dutch-American Relations* particularly state that they don’t want Flanders in their story of the Dutch, and I find the elimination of the Flemish especially troubling. This is a second part of the problem. Here certainly the editors are at odds with at least some of the Americans of the long-nineteenth century who appear in the volume and who did think Dutch=Flemish. The wealthy nineteenth-century art collectors in the United States who acquired Low Country paintings of the Golden Age did not make the distinction between Flanders and the rest. According to Nancy Minty, connoisseurs in the United States had approximately equal numbers of Rembrandts and Vermeers in comparison to paintings of Van Dyck; Rubens, who lived in Antwerp;

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3 Hans Krabbendam, Cornelius A. van Minnen, and Giles Scott-Smith, “General Introduction,” in *Four Centuries of Dutch-American Relations*.
and Hals, who was born there. While the Roosevelt Study Center scholars correctly point out the discontinuities that separate the Flemish, they pass over the continuities that do make the Flemish Dutch.

The discontinuities that might make us suspicious of the claims to Dutchness of other Lowlanders are also passed over. If we construct our Dutchness by ousting Flanders, then we must also leave the far north out of consideration. Folks out in Friesland- and Groningen-way have as little a claim to Dutchness as the Flemish in the south; the Frisians have a separate language, and the Groningers are closer to the Platt Deutsch, to north German culture, than to the Dutch in the west. We can embrace both south and north in an understanding of what is Dutch, or exclude both; but I don’t see the grounds for excising the south and embracing the north.

If politics and geography don’t give us a clear idea of Dutchness that Americans might want to connect to, it is also possible to look at language as a mark of a unified culture. Where might Americans think that real Dutch was spoken? Here, unfortunately, there is a third part of the problem in the history of language, of an Algemeen Nederlands. As you again will all know better than I, the movement for standard Dutch had its early start in Antwerp but then moved to the provinces of Holland with the Statenvertaling. But the movement has long since again gone south and accepted aspects of Flemish in what gets defined as a common language. Indeed, in the 1830s the just-installed Belgian monarchy reintroduced French as the official language in that new nation, and a repressive regime was implemented with regard to the language spoken in Flanders. In Flemish intellectual circles opposition arose to this reintroduction of French and the repression of the native speech of Flanders. The Flemish sought contact with the northern Netherlands for moral support in their struggle. From these initiatives arose the Nederlandsche Taal- en Letterkundig Congressen, the first of which took place in 1849. Literary figures and scholars from both parts of the language area could meet each other.

Thus, from the middle of our long-19th century onwards, when the Netherlands arguably comes into a unified political existence, the least Dutch parts of the Lowlands, the north and east and the south, collaborated in the movement for a standard tongue that led to Algemeen Nederlands and the De Nederlandse Taalunie.

With all respect, I believe that looking for Dutchness is a bit like trying to define Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands, and I want to propose a different way of grasping the problem of determining supposed American views of the Dutch.

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The issues of this conference do not presuppose a definition of Dutchness or precision about a 19th century Dutch nation. Rather, a definition of Dutchness is to some extent a hoped for result of the scholarship in this volume. Delving into the connection of the United States to the Low Countries in the 19th century is as much a strategy to define what is Dutch as it is an attempt to find out what the Dutch did, or what was thought about them, in the United States. Dutchness is not given; it is created in the response others have to you. What Americans thought was Dutch helped to make what was Dutch. Today, we are exploring your own national identity through an examination of how Americans constituted Lowlanders. A national public personality can only materialize by taking into account how you are perceived by others, how in this special case Americans perceived the Low Countries.

Trying to establish common beliefs Americans held about you is a way of deciphering who you are, for who you are cannot be assumed, and was far from transparent in the 19th century. You are looking for yourselves and hope to find a trace in that great big mirror that we call the USA. I really don’t know if the image accurately represents how some Americans thought about the Dutch 150 years ago, but I am sure that the image is more alive in the minds of some Netherlanders today than it was in the minds of Americans in the past.

I would also argue that the image of Dutchness has only become significant after World War Two, a catastrophic geo-political experience for your country. The exploration of this image is a function of Dutch nationalism after the war. Culturally speaking, the Netherlands looked for another way to characterize itself outside of continental Europe and especially outside the heavy impact of Germany. The United States lay easily to hand as an entity through which Dutch ethnicity could be investigated. Contrast the experience of the Netherlands to that of Flanders and Belgium, both of which, as you know, have a complicated sense of their identities. Belgium and Flanders, coming out of World War Two, have a more problematic and ambiguous connection to Germany than the Netherlands; and a more positive connection to France. After the war, the Belgians looked far more to the continent than to the United States in classifying themselves. You can easily see the results in the comparative lack of interest of the Belgians and the Flemish in things American; even in Flanders you will find few people concerned with the image of Flanders in America. I would argue that denying Dutchness to Flanders has as much to do with the events after World War Two as with the period 1785 to 1840.

I have often felt that the post-modern deconstruction of traditional scholarship is the last refuge of the scoundrel, and I have made my comments with some trepidation. But I do want to press you to see that this work tells us as much about the interest of the educated Dutch in the contemporary United States, as it does with past Americans awareness of the Netherlands. But I don’t want to throw the baby out with bathwater. I am not that big a scoundrel. There are in the 19th century fruitful links worthy of
being studied for their own importance at the time. These links, I believe, center around Reformed Protestantism.

Hans Krabbendam knows more about some of these links than anyone – the continuing immigration from the Netherlands of traditional Protestants to Dutch communities in the United States that have retained many of their connections to Holland. These ties endured because the Dutch in the first place believed that their traditions would prosper in the United States, where no one would force them to relinquish their faith. While I believe these bonds are real and worth studying, they are different from national bonds, and in some ways antithetical to a project in which we are looking for a Dutchness joined to statehood. Evangelical Protestants in the United States were determined not to be contaminated by currents of thought not their own, and they succeeded in many ways. Such Protestants who emigrated from the Low Countries hardly represent what is American, and their connection to their homeland is not primarily national but religious. This Dutch-American association shows that primary ties need not be about the state but may rather embrace identities that are not political.

Another link is Protestant in a wider sense. Ponder what I shall call “actual Dutchness” in the English language. We have Dutch uncles and Dutch treats, and one can get in Dutch, or have a Dutchy look, or get one’s Dutch up. And one can think to oneself “I’m a Dutchman,” or worse (no matter where I come from) I may be called a dumb Dutchman. Not one of these phrases has a positive connotation, and the best that can be said of them is that they evoke some degree of seriousness or sobriety that I associate with Protestantism. One way of understanding the American image of Dutchness is to look at these, and other migrant expressions to American English.

According to my Oxford English Dictionary, they all entered the English language, many in our long nineteenth century, via the English of England and not of the United States. That is why I call the phrases migrants to America. England’s view of Dutchness mediates the American image of the Lowlands. There are even more negative phrases that, so far as I can tell, never made it from English English to American English: a Dutch bargain is a gyp; a Dutchman names a wedge of wood driven into a gap to hide the fault of a badly made joint; a Dutch pump is used in a punishment whereby you die if you don’t pump hard enough; and a Dutch concert is one in which several tunes are played together in a cacophony. Whereas in American English something may be “Greek to me” if I don’t understand it, in the King’s English “It’s Dutch to me” is the paradigm of gibberish, and in England “double Dutch” is worse than gibberish. Overall the OED tells us that Dutch-words in (England’s) English have an opprobrious or derisive application, largely due to the enmity and rivalry between Holland and England when the words were introduced. For the English, anything both bad and foreign was Dutch. There is an Euro-phobic English slur on the French from the post-World War Two period:
WOGS begin at Calais. It is clear that much earlier they began at Amsterdam. The United States seems to have linguistically absorbed the more dour Dutch-isms that I see as Protestant, but not accepted those that were downright hostile.

Now let me conclude by suggesting how these assorted attacks on a clear-cut Dutch culture can forward a more traditional scholarly agenda in respect to our long 19th century. Many of the professors engaged in the enterprise of this conference have spoken about trans-Atlantic history. The Dutch-American connection is viewed as a key chapter in transnational “Atlantic history.” I think this is the wrong way to comprehend Atlantic History, and I am sorry that Bernard Bailyn is not here today to discuss these issues. Atlantic History *downplays* the bilateral connections between individual nation states; variables that transcend national boundaries are significant. National boundaries are not artificial but perhaps superficial if we want to understand how change took place. Atlanticists instruct us to look to trade relations, religion, and aspects of culture that an emphasis on the nation-state may not reveal. Since I am such a fan of politics and nationalism, I am suspicious of Atlantic History. But look at what I have dabbled in in surveying what could be Dutch. The United States, England, Belgium, Germany, and France have a role. The search for a Dutch ethnicity may not be chimerical. The search, however, is not one that can be limited to America, or to attempts at defining Netherlands nation-hood. You might be able to catch the big fish of the Dutch in a Protestant Atlantic world, but you may also need to throw the little fish of Dutch-American relations back into the water.