

# THE SCHELDT QUESTION

to 1839

by

S. T. BINDOFF

With a Foreword by

Professor G. J. RENIER



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To  
PIETER GEYL



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THE SCHELDT  
QUESTION

## FOREWORD

As adviser of the Dutch Government in London on literary publications I drew the attention of my Minister, Mr. E. N. van Kleffens, to Mr. S. T. Bindoff's work on the river Scheldt. After a careful reading of the typescript Mr. van Kleffens pronounced in favour of its publication at the expense of the Dutch Government. In taking his decision he disregarded the fact that Mr. Bindoff advances several theses that are not consonant with the official view taken by the Dutch when the Scheldt question was a live issue. The Minister was animated solely by the desire to secure the publication of a scholarly and objective study of Netherlands history by a British expert.

As the appointed teacher of Dutch History in the University of London I welcome the appearance of a first-rate work on the subject in which I specialise, written by a former student of my friend and predecessor, Professor Pieter Geyl.

G. J. RENIER.

## PREFACE

It was once said that the Irish Question would never be settled until the English had learned some history and the Irish had forgotten some. In much the same way, the "Scheldt question" is likely to remain a live issue until both the Dutch and the Belgians have forgotten a good deal of its history. For the "Scheldt question" is one of those international controversies of which the current difficulties are continually aggravated by the rankling memories of the past. That being so, it may be argued that to write a book which rakes over the old embers is to render a disservice both to the present and to the future, and that the only proper treatment for these "old, unhappy, far-off things" is decent burial. This argument might have carried some weight a generation ago, when, as part of the aftermath of the First World War, feeling on the subject ran very high in Holland and Belgium. But to-day, in the more sympathetic atmosphere engendered by their common ordeal, Dutchmen and Belgians are little disposed to squander energy upon an issue which, however large it may once have loomed, now appears insignificant beside the problems which they have to face and solve in common. If neither country has forgotten, or is likely to forget, the "Scheldt question", each sees it in a new perspective which robs it of much of its ugliness; and a sober chronicle of its earlier phases, seen through the eyes of a neutral observer, is unlikely to upset this new objectivity.

Even if it were otherwise, the historian would not let himself be dissuaded from striving to satisfy the curiosity about the past which is his *primum mobile*. Of this curiosity, this urge to know, the present book may fairly claim to be a direct product. It originated in the study of British policy in the "Scheldt question" between 1814 and 1839, which I submitted for the Master's Degree of the University of London in 1934.<sup>1</sup> That study included a long introduction on the earlier history of the "question", based upon the existing literature; and it was my dissatisfaction with the conventional picture thus derived which afterwards led me to push my own inquiry further and further back, until it reached the point at which this book begins. My search was of necessity limited, owing to other claims upon my time and interest, almost exclusively to the field of printed material,<sup>2</sup> of which, however, thanks to generations of painstaking editorial labour, there proved to be an immense bulk, much of it evidently ignored by earlier students of the subject. I am only too conscious, however, of the gaps in my list of sources, as well as of the many points upon which further work needs to be done. The different parts of the book are therefore of very

<sup>1</sup> "Great Britain and the Scheldt, 1814-1839". See below, p. 156 *n* 1.

<sup>2</sup> The occasional use of MS. sources will be found noted among the references.

unequal standard in respect of the amount and character of the research involved, although not, I hope, in respect of the handling of the material itself. While Part Three is based almost entirely upon unpublished, and largely unused, archive-material, and Part One upon a fairly exhaustive study of the medieval documents in print, Part Two (the detailed work for which had mostly to be done in war-conditions) rests far more upon secondary sources and, I doubt not, is correspondingly weaker. But I trust that, taken as a whole, the book will be adjudged to have justified itself as an attempt to trace the subject over a long period.

Its appearance, in these difficult times, is due chiefly to the generosity of the Dutch Government. In particular, I wish to express my gratitude to His Excellency Dr. E. N. van Kleffens, Netherlands Foreign Minister, who did me the honour of reading the book in typescript.

My debt to my old master, who introduced me to the study of Netherlands history and who taught me most of what I know about it, I have tried to express by dedicating this book to him. While writing it, I feared that the dedication might prove to be to his memory, but happily he has been spared the fate of so many of his brother-intellectuals. May this token of admiration and affection from an earlier pupil mingle with those of many new generations of his students. To his successor in the Chair of Dutch History in London, my colleague and friend, G. J. Renier, I owe much, not merely in the production of this book, but over the whole range of our common work and interests, and I wish to express my gratitude to him in this place. I must also thank the officials of the many archives and libraries in which I collected material, and especially of those in Holland and Belgium, where, as a young and unknown student, I was received with so much courtesy and given so much help. (To the Belgian archivist who warned me not to do as many men had done and "drown myself in the Scheldt", I express the hope that I have sufficiently heeded his injunction.) Part Three of this book owes much to my utilisation of the Palmerston Papers; the late Lord Mount-Temple kindly granted me access to these and took a personal interest in my discoveries among them.

Many friends have contributed, in many and various ways, to the making of this book, and I thank them all. I will name only the two ladies, Mrs. Marion Plant and Miss J. D. I. Tyson, who laboured with such care to produce the maps, and Miss Pauline Strange, who collaborated with them. The person to whom this book owes most of all has expressed a wish not to be mentioned in this preface; I respect her wish. And finally, I think it fitting to associate this volume with the kindly folk among whom it was written during my war-time sojourn in their Principality, and I therefore date this preface from

Bethesda,

Caernarvonshire.

S. T. B.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The River Scheldt and the "Scheldt Question"*

THE river Scheldt<sup>1</sup> rises in France, in the department of the Aisne, between Le Catelet and Belcour, and the first sixty miles of its course lie in French territory. Becoming navigable at Cambrai, where it is linked with the Somme and Oise by the St. Quentin canal, the river flows north-east through Bouchain and Valenciennes and is joined by the Scarpe at Mortagne shortly before crossing the Belgian frontier. In Belgium the Scheldt first follows a northerly course by way of Tournai and Oudenaarde to Ghent, where it receives its most important tributary, the Leie (Lys), and thence turns sharply to the east to pass through Dendermonde to Antwerp. Dendermonde and Rupelmonde, as their names imply, mark the junctions with the Scheldt of the Dender, which comes from the south through Aalst, and of the Rupel, a river which, deriving from the Senne, Dijle, Demer, and the two Nethes, links the Scheldt with a network of waterways radiating across Brabant into Hainaut, Namur, Liège and Limburg. At Antwerp the Scheldt swings back to its northerly course and some twelve miles below the city it crosses the Dutch frontier. Two miles beyond the frontier, opposite Santvliet, the river turns sharply to the west and broadens into a wide estuary, bounded on the north by the Zeeland islands of Zuid-Beveland and Walcheren and on the south by the coast of Zeeland-Flanders. Beyond Flushing, the southernmost point of Walcheren, this estuary widens out into the North Sea. The mouth of the Scheldt consists of alternating banks and channels; the most important channel, the Wielingen, hugs the Belgian coast as far as Zeebrugge before losing its identity in the sea.

It is a far cry from the infant Scheldt at Cambrai to the noble river at Antwerp, still more to the majestic expanse of water between Santvliet and Flushing. The transformation of the river only begins below Ghent and is due almost entirely to the remarkable influence of the tides, which reach as high as the Flemish capital. In its hundred-mile course from Cambrai to Ghent the Scheldt increases but little in size, and the navigable waterway is limited by the many locks. But below Ghent, and still more below Dendermonde, where the last bridge crosses the river, it gains rapidly in volume. At Mariakerke, just below Dendermonde, the incoming tide, bringing more than 100

<sup>1</sup> French: *Escaut*; Dutch: *Schelde*.

times as much water as the river itself, swells its width from 200 to 275 yards, and at Hemiksem, near Antwerp, from 360 to over 600 yards, while between Santvliet and the sea the estuary stretches more than three miles across at high water. The accompanying increase in depth is such as to give a minimum of 23 and a maximum of 33 feet of water at the quays of Antwerp and as much as 100 feet in parts of the fairway below Santvliet.

The marked difference in the size of the Scheldt above and below Ghent means that, in respect of its navigation, the Scheldt is not one river but two. This is reflected in a change of name, the navigable waterway from Cambrai to Ghent being officially styled the Upper Scheldt (*Haut-Escaut, Boven-Schelde*) and the river from Ghent to the sea the Lower Scheldt (*Bas-Escaut, Beneden-Schelde*) or Maritime Scheldt (*Escaut-Maritime, Zee-Schelde*).<sup>1</sup> The commercial navigation of the Upper Scheldt is performed by ships limited in size by the locks to a maximum of 450 tons; it is thus essentially an interior navigation. By contrast, the navigation of the Lower Scheldt is pre-eminently maritime, for the river bears comfortably all but the largest ocean-going ships up to Antwerp. The port of Ghent no longer depends for its maritime navigation on the Scheldt by way of Antwerp, but on the canal joining it with the Scheldt estuary at Terneuzen; since this canal was deepened in 1900-11 to nearly 30 feet it has made Ghent accessible to ships of 10,000 tons. Thus above Antwerp the largest ships normally using the river are those of up to 1350 tons which pass along it and the Rupel between Antwerp and Brussels.

The navigability of the Upper Scheldt is largely the result of human effort. As early as the fifteenth century improvements were made to the river between Ghent and Tournai,<sup>2</sup> but before the construction of the locks at Tournai in 1670 boats could hardly pass above that point. The canalization of the river between Valenciennes and Cambrai, projected in the seventeenth century, was hindered by the recurrent wars and was only completed in 1782. The last great improvement, the linking of the Scheldt with the Somme and Oise by the St. Quentin canal, had also been planned as early as 1614, but was not begun until the middle of the eighteenth century and would not have been finished in 1809 but for the vigour imparted to the work by Napoleon. The eighteenth century saw great progress made on

<sup>1</sup> This division is as old as the mid-seventeenth century. On the map in Sanderus's *Flandria Illustrata* (Cologne, 2 vols., 1641-4) the river above Ghent is called "Schelde" and below Ghent "neer Schelde".

<sup>2</sup> Pinchart, A., *Inventaire des Archives des Chambres des Comptes*, IV (Brussels, 1865), 349.

the Belgian part of the Upper Scheldt in straightening the waterway and in building barrages and locks; these works, and the industrial development which accompanied them, gave a great stimulus to the navigation of the Upper Scheldt across the Franco-Belgian frontier.

On the Lower Scheldt Nature herself has been the great improver. We have seen that the river below Ghent owes its size, not to any great increase in the volume of water coming down, but to the tides which thrust themselves up to that point. This phenomenon is largely the outcome of the changes which took place in the estuary below Santvliet towards the close of the Middle Ages. Before that time the Scheldt was protected from heavy tidal action by the configuration of the delta through which the river found its way to the sea; it was natural forces which transformed this delta and thus created the Lower Scheldt as a highway of maritime navigation. Moreover, this highway has improved, rather than deteriorated, with the passage of time, and only recently has the growing size of the ships seeking to use it called for the use of artificial means to supplement the natural clearing action of the tides.<sup>1</sup>

Why has the navigation of this river given rise to an international "question" which has persisted through more than three centuries down to our own day?

Reduced to its simplest terms, the "Scheldt question" is the product of three facts of history. The first is that since the end of the fifteenth century Antwerp has been, potentially if not actually, one of Europe's greatest seaports; the second, that since the year 1585 (with one short interval) a political frontier has separated Antwerp from the mouth of the Scheldt, which is its gateway to the sea; and the third, that the state whose territory is thus interposed between Antwerp and the sea was long dominated by economic interests in greater or less degree hostile to those of Antwerp.

Many factors, geographical, political, and economic, contributed to the rise of Antwerp to commercial pre-eminence in the sixteenth century. The town already enjoyed exceptional advantages of location before the transformation of the Lower Scheldt gave it direct communication with the sea. Placed at the lowest point on the river secure from serious flooding—an inestimable advantage during the two centuries of great inundations from 1377 to 1570—Antwerp possessed in the rivers radiating south and east from the Scheldt excellent lines

<sup>1</sup> A useful symposium, historical, hydrographical and economic, on Antwerp and the Scheldt will be found in the *Bulletin de la Société Royale de Géographie d'Anvers*, LVII (1937), 105ff.

of communication with the immediate hinterland of Brabant, Hainaut and Liège, and beyond them with the plain of Northern France and the valleys of the Maas and Rhine. Between these broad lands and the great delta of Scheldt-Maas-Rhine, the meeting-place of medieval Europe's principal trade-routes, Antwerp was one of the natural links. What the Scheldt, that is, the new maritime waterway created in the fifteenth century, enabled Antwerp to do was to add to its role of an inland port that of a seaport, and this at a time when the volume of overseas trade to be handled was rapidly increasing. It was the combination of the two roles, and the addition of a third, that of a money-market, which developed out of them, that gave Antwerp its unique position in sixteenth-century Europe.

Antwerp did not long enjoy the benefit of uninterrupted communication with the sea. The present-day map of the Scheldt shows the river traversed at two points by state-boundaries, the Franco-Belgian frontier which crosses it just below Mortagne, 63 miles from its source, and the Belgo-Dutch frontier at Santvliet, 43 miles from its mouth. This political trisection of the river has persisted throughout the greater part of the modern period. From the end of the sixteenth century, when the separation of the Northern and Southern Netherlands became an accomplished fact, until the year 1794, the three riparians of the Scheldt were France, the Southern Netherlands (first Spanish, then Austrian), and the Dutch Republic. The French conquest of the Southern Netherlands inaugurated a period of sixteen years (1794-1810) during which there were two riparians, France and the Batavian Republic (afterwards the Kingdom of Holland), and this was in turn followed by the brief and unique interlude when Napoleonic France, having annexed the Kingdom of Holland, possessed the river in its entirety. The return to the triple division was also accomplished in two stages; from 1814 to 1830 France, confined to her old limits, shared possession with the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and the advent of an independent Belgium in 1830-31 added a third riparian and established the present situation.

If we compare these political divisions with the natural division of the river at Ghent we shall see that neither the Upper nor the Lower Scheldt lies within the territory of a single state. Of the first, 40 miles belong to France and 58 to Belgium; of the second, 69 are Belgian and 43 Dutch. (Belgium and Holland also share the Ghent-Terneuzen canal, of which 11 miles lie in Belgian and  $8\frac{1}{2}$  in Dutch territory.) Thus the international navigation of the Scheldt is to-day, as it has been for more than two centuries, of two distinct kinds, the interior

navigation across the Franco-Belgian frontier and the maritime navigation across the Belgo-Dutch. Of the first of these we shall have little to say, since it has never given rise to any major dispute between the countries concerned, much less to an international question; its chief interest lies in the fact that at one decisive moment in Scheldt history its regulation was confused with that of the Lower Scheldt, with far-reaching consequences. It is the international navigation of the Lower Scheldt, and especially of the waterway between Antwerp and the sea, which has occasioned so much trouble. The political frontier which divides this part of the river dates from the separation of the Northern and Southern Netherlands towards the close of the sixteenth century; it was after Parma's reconquest of Antwerp in August 1585 that the military frontier between the warring provinces came to traverse the Scheldt by a line which, with but slight modification, marks the present Belgo-Dutch frontier. The circumstances in which this frontier originated were also largely responsible for the hostility, born of economic jealousy, which led the United Provinces to keep the Scheldt "closed" that is, to prohibit maritime navigation on the river, so long as they retained their control of it. Out of the situation thus created there developed the "Scheldt question".

It might therefore appear that we need go no further back than the second half of the sixteenth century to trace the origins of that question. This has, indeed, been the usual starting-point for its study, and since it was only then that the three factors which go to make up the question came fully into play the modern "Scheldt question" may be said to date from that period. But this does not mean that there was no "Scheldt question" before that time. On the contrary, most of the elements in the situation after the outbreak of the Revolt were already present, although in a somewhat different and more rudimentary form, during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and the result was an anticipation of the "question" which is both of interest in itself and of importance as a background to the later history. This earlier "question" is the subject of Part One of this book, which covers the period between the thirteenth century and the outbreak of the Revolt. Parts Two and Three deal with the "Scheldt question" proper, from the fall of Antwerp in 1585 to the establishment of the existing regime on the river by the treaties of 1839.

## PART ONE

### ORIGINS, 1200—1572

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#### CHAPTER ONE

#### *To the Close of the Fourteenth Century*

IF we wish to find an earlier starting-point than the conventional year 1572 from which to begin our inquiry into the history of the "Scheldt question" we shall have little or no hesitation in choosing the closing years of the fourteenth or the opening years of the fifteenth century. For it was then that the waterway which has since provoked so much controversy first came into existence, and manifestly there could be no "Scheldt question" before there was a "Scheldt". The present chapter, which covers the two centuries preceding this epochal change, is therefore to be regarded in the light of an introduction, designed to furnish a background to the two chapters which follow, just as they in turn form a background to the remainder of the book. One of the chief fascinations of history is its continuity, and there are some features of even the contemporary "Scheldt question" which are not to be wholly understood without a knowledge of events which took place in the thirteenth century.

#### (i) *The Scheldt-Honte Delta.*

The complex network of waterways which in the Middle Ages surrounded the islands of the Scheldt-Honte delta (and which, although much reduced in extent and simplified in pattern by centuries of reclamation, still does so) is of comparatively recent origin. At the opening of the Christian era the whole of this delta region was dry land, intersected only by minor channels. Bounded on the north by the broad estuary of the Rhine-Maas (*Ostium Helinium*) and on the west by the North Sea, this region was not separated by a waterway of any size from the Flemish plain to the south, of which indeed it formed the northernmost angle, but it was divided from the land to the east, the later Toxandria and modern North Brabant, by a considerable river. This river was the Scheldt, which, if Cæsar's evidence is to be relied upon, then held a northerly course down to its junction with the Maas at the head of that river's wide estuary.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Bellum Gallicum*, VI, 33. See Hettema, H. Jr., *De Nederlandsche wateren en plaatsen in den Romeinschen tijd* (The Hague, 1938), 82-3. Whether or not Cæsar was right, it is clear that the Scheldt in the past conformed to the general rule by which all Netherland rivers have tended to shift their principal outlet from north to south, and that therefore the theory once put forward (and surprisingly adopted by Prims, *Geschiedenis van Antwerpen* (Antwerp, 1927-), I, pp. 3ff, and plate 4) of a former outlet of the Scheldt north of Ghent in the neighbourhood of the present Braakman is quite untenable.

It was in the third or fourth century A.D. that there took place the great invasion of the Netherlands coast by the sea which wrought widespread and lasting changes along almost its whole length. Nowhere save in the region of the Zuider Zee were its effects so marked as in the lands bordering the Lower Scheldt. Here the incoming sea engulfed wide tracts of land and converted what remained into a mosaic of islands set in a waste of waters. To the south the inundation penetrated into Flanders far beyond the line of the present Scheldt estuary, but on the east the Scheldt, that is, the original river running north into the Maas, marked the limit of its progress. The sea did not, it is true, keep all that it had taken, for the inundation was followed by a fairly rapid drying out of considerable stretches of shallow water. But some hundreds of years passed before the inhabitants of the delta, whose ancestors had fled before the oncoming waters to their *terpen*, or mound-refuges, first ensured the safety of the existing islands by ringing them about with dykes, and then, turning from defence to attack, began to recover ever-growing areas. These operations, begun on a small scale in the eighth and ninth centuries, culminated in the great outburst of activity in the twelfth and thirteenth, when very large areas were reclaimed.

Since it is at this point that the documented history of the Scheldt begins, we may pause to review briefly the state of the delta at that time.<sup>1</sup> Of the waterways composing the delta, the one which has undergone the least change in the last seven hundred years is the Scheldt between Antwerp and its junction with the Honte at Hontemuide. In the thirteenth century, however, the Scheldt between these limits must have been a considerably smaller river than it is to-day, since the penetration of the tides from its estuary was far less powerful and sustained than the thrust of the present tides through the Honte.<sup>2</sup> It was, moreover, a less "disciplined" river. Of the numerous streams which in earlier centuries had joined it on

<sup>1</sup> I wish to acknowledge my great indebtedness to the work of Dr. A. A. Beekman in the *Geschiedkundige Atlas van Nederland*, especially in the map of Zeeland in 1300 and the accompanying text (*Holland, Zeeland en Westfriesland in 1300. Blad VI, and text III. Zeeland*, The Hague, 1921), although, as will be seen, I find myself compelled to differ from Dr. Beekman on some points. The most useful study of the historical geography of the Scheldt-Honte is E. Cambier, "Etudes sur les transformations de l'Escaut et de ses affluents au nord de Gand pendant la période historique", in *Bulletin de la Société Royale Belge de Géographie*, 31<sup>me</sup> année (1907), 40-91, 126-70, 252-88, 349-83.

<sup>2</sup> Prims has suggested that before the transformation of the Honte at the end of the fourteenth century high water at Antwerp was about one metre lower than it normally is at the present time. "De grondgeschiedenis van het oude Antwerpsche gebied sinds de bewoning", in *Bulletin de la Société Belge d'Etudes Géographiques*, III (1933), 33.





both banks<sup>1</sup> some remained to absorb their share of each incoming tide; the dykes, too, stood for the most part further back, leaving a wider foreshore to be covered at high water. Thus dissipated, the tides coming up the Scheldt could scarcely have carved out and kept clear a channel as deep and broad as the present one below Antwerp. At the lower end of this stretch of the Scheldt lay the junction of the river with the Honte. It is possible that at an earlier period there had been no such junction.<sup>2</sup> But the use of the name Hontemuide from the middle of the twelfth century<sup>3</sup> suggests that there was a connecting channel here, at least at high water, from that date; a century or more later this channel was certainly navigable.

Beyond Hontemuide the Scheldt flowed north between the edge of the Brabant *diluvium* and the now almost totally submerged east coast of Zuid-Beveland. In size and character this stretch of the river must have closely resembled that above Hontemuide. The low lands on the left bank were dyked during the thirteenth century, but on the Brabant side the raised edge of the *diluvium*, along which lay the early villages,<sup>4</sup> must long have formed the real river "bank". Here, too, the Scheldt was joined by numerous minor channels. Of those on the left bank, two claim our attention. The first is the Hinkele, a channel running westwards from the Scheldt at Hinkelenoord across Zuid-Beveland and joining the Honte near the village of Die Warde. The triangular "island" bounded by the Scheldt, Honte, and Hinkele was known as the "land between Honte and Hinkele" (*tusschen Honte en Hinkle*). This "island" was itself subdivided by channels which crossed it from north to south. The easternmost of these channels, leaving the Scheldt-Honte junction at Hontemuide and running roughly parallel with the Scheldt, rejoined the river some distance south of Hinkelenoord; known as Den Agger, a name also borne by a neighbouring village, this channel thus formed for a short distance an

<sup>1</sup> Hasse, G., "Hydrographie primitive au nord d'Anvers", in *Bulletin de la Société Royale de Géographie d'Anvers*, LIV (1934), 334-43.

<sup>2</sup> But the conclusion to this effect drawn by Smallegange (*Nieuwe Cronyk van Zeeland*, I, 156-7) and repeated by Engelenburg ("Bijdragen tot de hydrographie en morphologie der Zuidelijke Zeegaten en Riviermonden in Nederland", in *Tijdschrift der Kon. Nederlandsch Aardrijkskundig Genootschap*, 2<sup>de</sup> serie, VII (1890), 314) is based upon an erroneous identification of "Scaftekynspolre", mentioned with lands in Zuid-Beveland in a charter of 1345 (Van Mieris, *Charterboek*, II, 691) with Saeftingen on the Flemish side of the Honte. "Scaftekynspolre", more correctly, "Schachtekijspolder", was in Zuid-Beveland, not far from Ierseke (*Nomina Geographica Neerlandica*, VII (1930), 152).

<sup>3</sup> Kluit, A., *Historia Critica Comitatus Hollandiae et Zeelandiae* (Middelburg, 1777-80), II, i (Cod. Dipl.), 170-2. Goetschalckx in his edition of the *Oorkondenboek der Wittekerenabdij van S.-Michiels te Antwerpen*, I (Eekeren-Donk, 1909), 20, dates this document 5 April, 1148/9.

<sup>4</sup> Weijers, M., "De Hooze Rand van Bergen op Zoom", in *Tijdschr. Kon. Nederl. Aardrijksk. Genootsch.*, 2<sup>de</sup> serie, LIII (1936), 833-44.