

# THE FAIR FACE OF FLANDERS

*by*  
PATRICIA  
CARSON

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Drawings by ~~Herman~~ HERMAN VERBAERE



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## THE FAIR FACE OF FLANDERS

## PREFACE

In the modern world the need for understanding between nations, not least in Western Europe, is constantly growing.

Often, however, the means are lacking. It is, moreover, not so simple for an outside observer to appreciate the particular qualities of a people such as the Flemings who live and work in the framework of a state as complicated as Belgium. Anyone trying to disentangle the threads of Flemish life for the English speaking world faces stiff demands.

It seems to me that Patricia Carson is particularly well-placed to do this. She is English by birth and upbringing, has academic qualifications in history, has married a Flemish scholar and lives with him in the country near Ghent where the heart of Flanders beats. During her already lengthy period here, she has come to terms both with the language of her new home and with the history of the country which has become her own.

What I particularly value in the following pages is the dual standpoint which she continually takes up : on the one hand absorbed by the essential quality of our past, and on the other appreciating what would most interest Anglo-Saxon readers.

I am sure that this book, written with sympathy as well as with knowledge, will obtain the success it deserves.

H. VAN WERVEKE<sup>†</sup>

Professor Emeritus of the University of Ghent;  
Member of the Royal Flemish Academy  
of Science, Letters and Fine Arts;  
Member of the Belgian Royal Commission for History.

*Vlaandren, o welig huis waar we zijn als genooden aan  
rijke taeflen! ...*

*wie kan u weten, en in 't harte niet verblijên;  
niet danke' om dagen, schoon als jonge zege-goden,  
gelijk een beedlaar dankt om warme tarwe-brooden?*

*from De Boom-Gaard der Vogelen en der Vruchten,  
by Karel van de Woestijne (1878-1929).*

*Flanders, o lavish home, where we are like guests  
at rich tables! ...*

*who can know you and not rejoice at heart;  
not be thankful for days, beautiful as triumphant young gods,  
like a beggar is thankful for warm wheat loaves?*

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*To my Flemish friends and all those  
who helped me to write this book.*



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## CHAPTER I

# THE CONTOURS

What do we see in a face? Not only its colour, shape and expression, but also the character, experience, hopes and fears which have moulded it. The fiercer its battles, the deeper its sorrows, the more hectic its joys, the greater are the traces of life it bears. Moods, changing from one moment to the next, show also, while first impressions, acquired at the moment of meeting are never lost. Such is the face of Flanders. To some Flanders means the quiet calm of shimmering plane trees between the white walls of a beguinage, to yet others the cheery, noisy, vulgar happiness of roundabouts and swings, hot dough-nuts and chip potatoes of the Flemish Fairs; to some it recalls

**Memories**

through town and village on every possible occasion. Some think of Flanders as the land of mighty castles, sombre and icy-cold, others are reminded of the soaring beauty of the high, airy towers or the jolly jingle of carillons. While others recall the mud and blood of the Ypres salient in 1914, and Passchendale in 1917, to some Flanders means the rolling hills of the south, to others the flat tree-filled emptiness of the Kempen, heavy with the scent of pines. To some it means the wide sandy beaches of the coast, littered with buckets and spades, the comfortable hotels and huge meals, shops packed with cream cakes and chocolates, to others, the quiet canals and winding rivers cutting up the polders. To some it means the bustle and wealth of Antwerp, or the glitter of Brussels with flood-lights picking out the delicate gables of the gild houses and town hall in the market place, to others the beautiful squares of Lier or Oudenaarde, or boat trips under the endless bridges of Bruges. Some remember Van Eyck, or Memling, others Servaes or Ensor, to some it means architecture, to others, painting. But to all Flanders means long experience, rich historical traditions, and abundant life. It has none of the innocence and wide open spaces of new countries. Its face is marked by a long and busy life.

It is a face full of artifice. Everywhere it is marked by the works of men. To those of us used to nature untouched by human hands, empty and free to be explored, Flanders offers only one small eastern corner

### **Sophistication**

where sandy unfruitful soil slopes gently down through heather and pines to the banks of the river Maas.

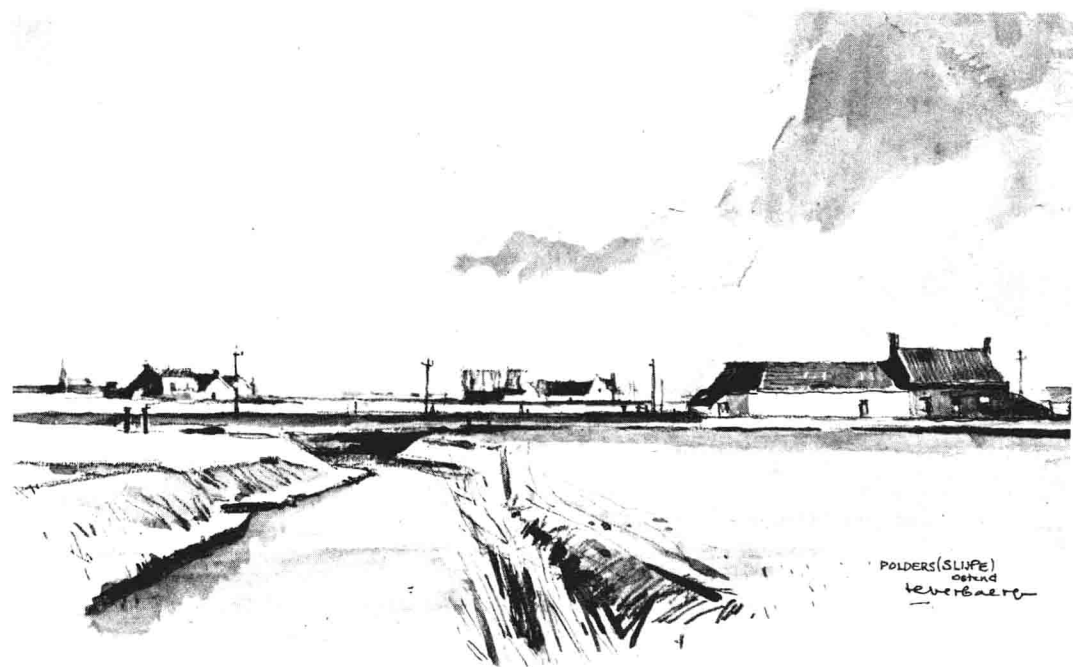
Elsewhere Flanders is full of houses, farms, castles, and, above all, of towns. They are most characteristic not only of the Flemish plain, but also of the rolling hills of Brabant. They span the country like links in a chain, from Bruges, Veurne and Ypres in the west, through Kortrijk, Ghent and Oudenaarde, to Antwerp, Mechelen, Louvain and Brussels, eastwards to Turnhout, Hasselt and Tongeren. Sometimes still clothed in their medieval defences, almost always dominated by their belfries, they hold the history of Flanders in their mailed fists. Even now, when everyone is busy with supra-national organisations, with breaking down frontiers, the Fleming, while enthusiastic for all these things, feels himself above all a Gentenaar, a Bruggeling, an Antwerpenaar, a Mechelaar. He will tell you with pride of his town, and its traditions, and will feel a certain superiority in its dialect, its history, its uniqueness. What has mattered most to the Fleming has been his region, his town, or his village. Even now, in a modern centralised state, these divisions still count for much.

England has always been England—or at least for a very long time!

This is not so simple as far as Flanders is concerned. To-day, it means the northern part of Belgium where Dutch is spoken. The other half of the Belgian state, the southern, French speaking part of the kingdom, is Wallonia. Both are ruled over by a constitutional monarchy dating back to 1831 when the throne of the new state was offered to Leopold of Saxe Coburg, uncle of Queen Victoria. The written constitution created in 1831 is still in force. Parliament includes a Chamber of Representatives and a Senate, both of which are elected by the whole country, under a system of proportional representation. Most questions must obtain a simple majority in both houses. Changes of the constitution must have a two-thirds majority. Recent revision created regional sections of Parliament responsible one for Dutch, the other for French, culture and education. Flanders includes not only the Provinces of East and West Flanders, but also the Provinces of Antwerp and Limburg and the northern part of the Province of Brabant—in fact those parts of the country north of a line stretching roughly from the French frontier in the west, to just south of the town of Eupen in the east. The Belgian capital, Brussels, is a bilingual island in Brabant, just north of the linguistic frontier. Thus, north of the language frontier, we have one Flanders

### Languages in Belgium

—the Flanders of the Dutch language. The official language in this part of Belgium is the same as that of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. One dictionary is common to both. There are some peculiarities, largely caused by Flanders's closeness to France, and in addition, many distinct



dialects. These are not, on the whole, written, except in the sense in which a Scots accent can be imitated in print. They differ strongly from district to district and a really dyed-in-the-wool inhabitant of the town speaking his own dialect, will disclaim any understanding of that spoken in the surrounding countryside. These dialects are colourful and rich and woe-betide any foreigner attempting to speak them. The Fleming, charmingly tolerant of innumerable mistakes made by a foreigner attempting to speak Dutch, will go off into uncontrollable giggles at the same person trying to imitate his dialect. The Fleming feels strongly about his language. His history explains this. For a long time he has had to defend it. To someone coming from a unilingual country, or one in which the vast majority speak one language, it is difficult to understand this susceptibility. It is, to us, so usual to be understood by everyone, at least in our own country, that it is difficult to imagine a situation in which we are not always understood speaking our own language in the capital of our own country. Yet this can happen in Brussels to a Fleming. One may, quite wrongly, get the impression that every Fleming could speak French if only he would. This is quite untrue. In country areas his French is often not much better than that of the average Englishman! Yet he is used to having to do his best, and there is a refreshing lack of embarrassment about using *any* language.

### **The Fleming "has a go"**

The Fleming, unaffected by the stupefying shyness which descends on so many of us when faced by having to speak a foreign language, always "has a go". He has heard, if not spoken, more than one language all his life. He is aware that Dutch is a minor language and that if he wants to widen his contacts, especially in the scientific fields, he must speak and publish in a world language as well as in his own. He is delighted to get a chance to practise one of the world languages and will grasp any opportunity to do so, but is understandably cross when it is assumed that he has no particular attachment to his mother tongue and really no right to use it. Some Flemings prefer to speak French. This has historical roots. It complicates the issue not only for the foreigner but for the Flemings themselves. This group is Flemish by birth, and often resident in Flanders, but belongs to noble, business or financial circles among whom a process of frenchification had already begun in the eighteenth century. Most educated Flemings are bilingual, but it is a mistake to think that they do not mind which language they speak. Most adapt themselves to their friends and colleagues, so that contact between Walloon and Fleming is usually in French. One has sometimes the impression that the Fleming is, in such circumstances, too adaptable.



North of the Dutch frontier, everyone speaks Dutch! A good question to put to the Fleming may seem therefore : "If you speak the same language

### Going north, going south

as your northern neighbours, and you have aggravating and occasionally explosive, differences with your Walloon compatriots, why not join the Dutch? Why not become part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands?" Such an opinion, expressed in all innocence, is likely to provoke derisive comment. The Walloons may sometimes be difficult, violent, doctrinaire, but at least within the Belgian state, Wallonia and Flanders occupy important places! Very few Flemings want to become citizens of the Netherlands. They prefer to form the majority in a bilingual state, rather than to occupy a small corner of the Dutch kingdom which would look upon them also with limited enthusiasm. The Walloons, also, except for a few fanatics who mourn Wellington's victory over Napoleon at Waterloo, prefer to play an important rôle as half of Belgium, rather than to become the ninety-first French *département*. Here history and experience tell. From time to time during the Middle Ages and for a most trying time under the Revolutionaries and Napoleon, the southern Netherlands discovered what it was like to be ruled from Paris, and to be pushed, whether they liked it or not, into the French mould. It is one thing to enjoy French fashions, use the French language and dabble

