

Fragment uit het voorwoord van *A literary history of the Low Countries*, Theo Hermans

The history of literary writing in the Low Countries spans at least a thousand years. It presents a rich and diverse picture, very much part of the European patchwork but with unique features resulting from the area's particular complexion and development [...]. There is much to be discovered here. While the visual artists of the Low Countries gained international fame [...], the written culture that sustained their work has remained beyond reach of those unfamiliar with the language. This is changing, as more literature written in Dutch is being translated than ever before. The present volume offers a historical narrative of that literature.

To speak of "Dutch Literature" would be unsatisfactory: by no means all the literature in question is in Dutch, and in an international context Dutch tends to refer to the Netherlands only and thus to exclude Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. "Literature of the Dutch-language area" does not trip off the tongue, and has history against it, as some areas that were once Dutch-speaking have since adopted other tongues. Although speaking of the "Low Countries" is not entirely accurate either, comprising as it does the whole of the modern Netherlands and Belgium and more, and thus extending beyond the area where Dutch is the main language while still excluding several overseas territories where Dutch plays a significant part, it seems the least objectionable, and has historical resonance in English.

The approach to literary history in the following pages both pays attention to aspects and developments that are specific to literature as a distinct form of communication and adopts a contextualizing outlook that sees literature as interacting with and constitutive of its cultural and social environment. Another key principle underpinning the volume as a whole is the idea that the literature of the Low Countries is best treated as one multiform identity. Politically the area was united for only short periods in history, and for the last 170 or so years it has hosted two nation-states, the Netherlands and Belgium. In matters of verbal culture, however, language is a powerful unifying factor. Today a broad consensus regards Dutch-language literature, especially when viewed from an international vantage point, as one. To argue differently would be to indulge the narcissism of small differences.