CHAPTER FOUR

THE ‘CENTRIPETAL’ DISCURSIVE STRATEGY: NATIONALISING THE TERRITORY

How can a sense of the unity of culture and space be reconciled with Luxembourg’s complex history of belonging to a selection of larger entities, including the Holy Roman Empire, France and the Low Countries under Spain and Austria? This question was felt most strongly in times of intensified nation-building, and particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century and the inter-war period (1918–1939). At those times emerged the ‘centripetal’ discourse, which—for analytical reasons—may be broken down into four distinct strands. The first two follow apparently contradictory lines of argument. The first argument is based on the contention that fidelity to the monarch has been an historical constant, while the second rests on the belief that the period from the fifteenth century to the early nineteenth century was marked by the ‘foreign dominations’ of non-native rulers and administrators. The genealogy of these two discursive strands must be examined in order to find out when and why they come into being and how they are combined or supersede one another.

The ‘centripetal’ strategy is made up of two further strands, seeking to link physical space and its inhabitants: the ‘reification’ and the ‘territorialisation’ of space. The third strand examined in this chapter ‘reifies’ the notion of ‘homeland’, rendering it static in time and space. ‘Reification’ has its hey-day in the inter-war period, when ‘homeland’ was constructed as a time-honoured connection of ancestry/blood and soil. The Luxembourgish term *Heemecht* denotes both the ‘homeland’ and the ‘fatherland’. There is no equivalent of the German *Vaterland*, and no distinction between *petite patrie* (the place where one is born) and *grande patrie* (the Republic), as in the Roman and later French tradition. This linguistic peculiarity would merit further investigation. It may be linked to the tardy process of nation-building and/or to the late development of Luxembourgish as a language regarded as appropriate for serious or solemn topics (see Part Three). The term *Heemecht* has been translated here by ‘homeland’, except when it clearly relates to the Luxembourgian state or nation.
The final strand, ‘territorialisation’, emerges much later and links space to statehood, citizenship and political borders. This strand is particularly tricky to analyse, since it represents a highly potent inter-discourse, that is a popular appropriation of a specific (historiographical) discourse. In the 1980s, some historians set out to examine the discursive construction of national consciousness. They concluded that this feeling of group belonging had not developed ex nihilo, but was based on a pre-existing narrative of particularism, along the lines of ‘monarchical fidelity’ and ‘foreign domination’. Though this historiographical discourse is part of the centrifugal tradition, which gained impetus around that time, it was rapidly translated into a variety of popular media, such as monuments, exhibitions and newspaper articles. It thereby lost its focus on the continuity of discourse between Old Regime particularism and late nineteenth-century nationalism. Instead, a quasi-organic continuity between national consciousness and pre-existing particularism was proclaimed and was embedded in the physical configuration of space, notably in the construction of the foothills of the Ardennes as a natural border. As we shall see, what makes ‘natural borders’ effective is not their actual importance but their suitability as a symbol.¹

1. The topos of ‘Monarchical Loyalty’

Just as in most European countries, state-building preceded nation-building in Luxembourg and, just as elsewhere, learned societies were founded to dig up historical ‘roots’ that would explain and foster the people’s attachment to their ‘homeland’ and to the political entity now conceived as the ‘fatherland’. While the notion of ‘homeland’ was locally bound but otherwise not clearly defined, ‘fatherland’ referred to a political nation. In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, there was some ambiguity as to which nation this was. Luxembourg belonged at that time to the German Confederation (1815 to 1866) and pan-Germanism was not absent from the public debate. In 1848, some politicians declared Germany to be the ‘fatherland’, but with

¹ Werner Köster, Die Rede über den ‘Raum’. Zur semantischen Karriere eines deutschen Konzeptes (Heidelberg: Synchron, 2002), 83.