INTRODUCTION:
MYTH IN HISTORY, HISTORY IN MYTH

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Sometimes, definitions of myth seem as elusive as the myths themselves. In 1975, the Dutch historian C.A. Tamse noted that the venerable Van Dale Dutch dictionary once defined myth as “a cosmogonic account; a groundless story…or an unfounded representation about a person, thing, or case which is taken as accurate.”¹ At present, in 2008, the same dictionary defines myth as a “narrative tradition of a people concerning its religion and world-view, a story about men and gods”, and secondly as a “baseless story, a fable”. It is only in the third meaning of a “historical myth” that the definition as “a groundless representation of a person, thing, or case” now recurs.² The difference in the two is subtle, yet evinces a significant development in attitudes towards and understanding of the function of myths in modern society and scholarship. Tamse wrote these words in his introductory article, “The Political Myth” which set up a volume of conference papers by British and Dutch scholars concerned with studying the usages of history in myth. That conference took place at Southampton in 1973. One generation later, in 2005, a different group of British, Dutch, and American scholars met in New York and considered the question of myth and history once again.

As the changing definitions above suggest, the emphasis in this volume has shifted from debunking myths to rediscovering them as legitimate forms of discourse. In the hands of these authors, myths become


² Translations by Laura Cruz.
less an obstacle towards uncovering historical truth than an object of study in and of themselves. Taken collectively, the case studies presented in the volume reflect upon the production and circulation of historical myths in the traditions of the Low Countries from the middle ages to the present day. The underlying assumption is that the dichotomy between history and myth is a complex one that is often crudely drawn, and while no single alternative emerges from these pages, the mutual conclusion seems to be that historians need to be more careful, more refined, and more balanced in their treatment of historical myths.³

The history of the Low Countries provides an auspicious canvas for examining the role of myth and myth-making. Because it lacked a strong central government for so long, historians have been forced to find the origins of myths in less familiar places than powerful rulers intent on duping their citizens into becoming docile subjects. The fact that their government structures were perpetually unorthodox induced the Dutch, perhaps more than others, to conjure up myths to help give life and shape to their political culture. The early modern Dutch were remarkably literate, giving myths a textual basis lacking in many other countries, and the de facto lack of strong censorship made the young republic a bustling marketplace for competing ideas, including myths. Their empire also made the Dutch more cosmopolitan in outlook than nationalistic, leading to a rather benign legacy of nationalist myths. Finally, perhaps because they are a small country, the Dutch have always exhibited a tendency towards idealism. If they no longer dominate the seas, they do see themselves as a gidsland, a “guiding nation” of moral leaders, setting examples for others to follow, and they continue to collectively hold dear many of the same qualities that arise in their historical myths.⁴

The Dutch have also been strongly influenced by the humanistic notion of balance, and they approach the rapidly globalizing world of the twenty-first century with an eye towards peaceful coexistence; a happily ever after foreshadowed by the mythic interpretations of their past.

The world was a different place in 1973. Tamse found the concept of myth to be disturbing and frequent reference is made throughout the

³ The authors are grateful to an anonymous reader who suggested that this idea be included. The words are a paraphrase of his/her advice.

⁴ James C. Kennedy, De deugden van een gidsland: burgerschap en democratie in Nederland (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2005) [Inaugural lecture, VU-University, Amsterdam].