

Winter 1998

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## Recommended Citation

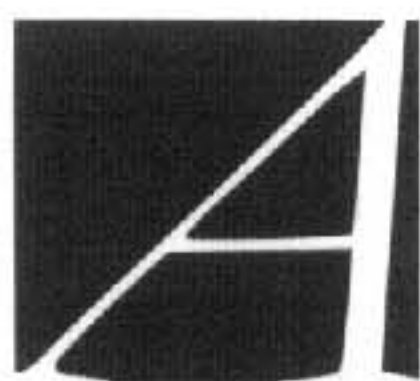
Ayers, Edward L. "When the North is the South: Life in the Netherlands." *Southern Cultures*, 4, no.4 (Winter 1998): 45-49.

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# When the North is the South

## Life in the Netherlands

by **Edward L. Ayers**



After years of watching colleagues fly to Paris, Johannesburg, Beijing, or Bogotá for research trips and speaking engagements, I decided to apply for a posting abroad. Holding only the vaguest and most stereotyped visions, I chose the Netherlands. My application stressed, perhaps impolitely, the direct Dutch involvement in the slave trade and their indirect connection to South African apartheid. Such commonalities with white southerners, I suggested, might serve as the basis for interesting discussions of race and region.

The Fulbright Commission accepted the application and told our family we would be stationed in the city of Groningen. Though on the map it looked a bit far removed from Amsterdam and Leiden, tucked away near the North Sea, the former Fulbright scholar in Groningen allayed our worries with his enthusiasm for the place and the people. Driving to Groningen in early March we predictably commented on the tidiness of the small towns we passed through and admired the stone churches that dominated their centers. No tulips yet, and no one wearing wooden shoes, but it was early in the visit. Things were satisfyingly different but not alien or forbidding. We were pleased and relieved.

As we neared Groningen at sundown we studied the map: Anna Paulownastraat, our appointed address, lay near the center of town in the narrow streets of what had begun as a medieval city. We needed to gain our bearings and, to our surprise, the first convenient place to stop turned out to be a brand new McDonald's restaurant, glowing with a familiar fluorescent sheen. Though it stood alone in an undeveloped area along the highway, the restaurant's parking lot was filled with cars and lounging teenagers. Inside, we confronted a museum of American icons: a Harley, the rear end of a pink Caddy, a life-size Marilyn, posters of Chuck, Buddy, and the King. Early rock music played on a jukebox. We had been in our adopted city for only a few minutes and we already heard familiar accents and reassuring backbeats. Maybe this wouldn't be so hard after all—though, to the astonishment of our children, the fries came covered with mayonnaise.

As we settled in we discovered that not everything had been McDonalds-ized.



Our apartment resided at the top of some satisfyingly European stairs, steep and narrow. Wal-Mart-like hours certainly did not rule in the Netherlands. The stores were shuttered all Saturday afternoon, all day Sunday, and Monday morning as well, with no 7-Elevens to offer a quart of milk or a loaf of bread. If you didn't have what you needed by Saturday at noon, you would do without for the entire weekend. Even the Southern Baptists of our east Tennessee youth had not been so strict.

We loved the Dutchness of the things we saw but reveled in the flashes of the familiar. The television proved a big help in finding the comforts of home, since we could watch *ALF* and the *A-Team* every day, along with episodes of the *Cosby Show* and *Family Ties*. We could also see the Dukes of Hazzard careening around the California landscape that masqueraded, poorly as ever, as north Georgia. Even with Dutch subtitles across the bottom of the screen, the fake South appeared before us with a comforting regularity and with fewer commercial interruptions.

Despite such touches of home, I entered class the first day with some trepidation. What would the students know about the United States? I gained some insight when I was introduced as a visitor from the University of Virginia and heard a male voice in the back of the room stage-whisper, "They're in the final eight this year," referring to our men's basketball team, which had just defeated Kansas in the NCAA tournament. It turned out that a number of the students had lived in the States during high school, though none in the South, and they spoke with easy familiarity and unshakable opinions. They felt certain that the United States was 40 percent African American and that the great majority of black Americans, the Cosbys notwithstanding, lived in urban ghettos.

It soon became clear that the students felt none of the guilt I had presumed they would. They assumed no ancestral culpability for bringing the first slaves to Virginia nor for supplying the Boers to South Africa. They considered racism a peculiarly American problem, one far removed from the Netherlands. The O. J. Simpson trial unfolding hourly on CNN did nothing to dislodge their certainty and their sense of their own tolerance and justice. Racism, like handguns and capital punishment, appeared to them as a special American flaw, not as part of a shared European ancestry.

My Dutch students and colleagues did understand regionalism, however. I came to see that they were proud and defensive about living in the North of the Netherlands. Several of them claimed ancestry from Friesland, the ancient province in the northwest of their country, and proudly demonstrated for me the unique language spoken there. They were grateful when I recognized that Holland was merely one part of their nation and that their country had a more inclusive name. They warned me when I headed to Amsterdam for meetings that people would make fun of Groningen, as indeed they did. The residents of the



densely populated cities and towns of the West saw the two hours separating my university from the metropolis as a distance significant in climate, culture, and sophistication. In their eyes, the North was colder and wetter, lacking in most redeeming qualities, full of empty space and cattle. It was as if the United States had been turned upside down.

I came to understand the pride behind the sign at the train station that announced, "Welcome to the North." A bumper sticker on sale at the travel bureau showed a farmer, wearing wooden shoes and with a cow looking on, kicking a tourist. In case the picture wasn't clear, the slogan, in English, read, "Groningen, Love It or Leave It." Southerners who proclaim themselves "American by Birth, Southern by the Grace of God" would have recognized the spirit and admired the defiance.

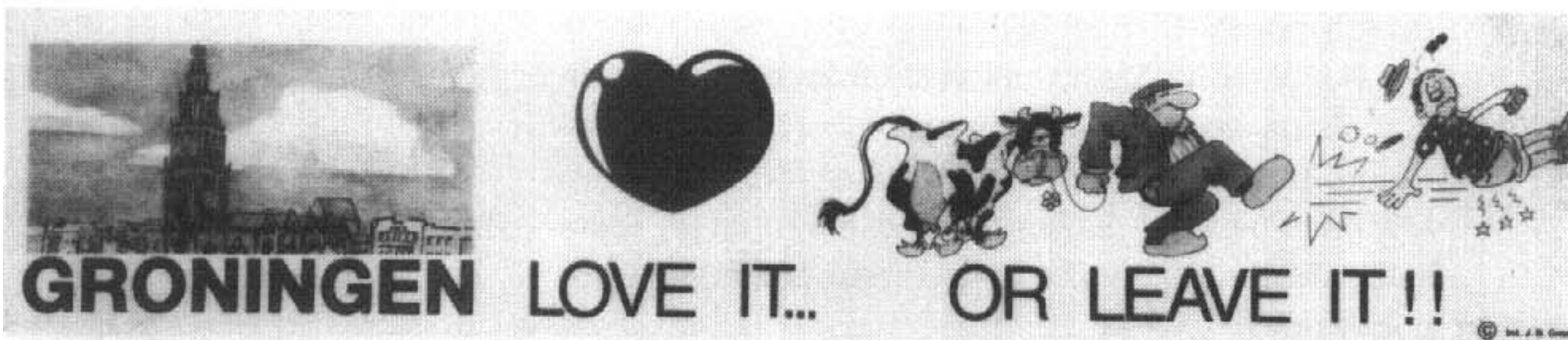
Reminders of the South appeared in unexpected places in this North. I passed a tattoo parlor as I rode my bicycle to the office each day. There, I could have decorated my arm with any number of southern images, most of them involving buxom young women and a Confederate flag. One of the women was a blond, but others bore darker skins. Two blocks away I could buy any number of Faulkner novels or books by Richard Wright. The music stores were filled with American music, the great majority of it southern in inspiration. When the local newspapers advertised that a furniture store was presenting "The American Show," we visited it and found the same imagery we had seen in the McDonald's: lots of Elvis and Cadillacs, lots of 1950s South.

By contrast, the travel sections of the bookstores and tourism bureaus offered few southern destinations. Pictures of New York and San Francisco dominated the covers of the U.S. books. Dutch visitors might want to venture to "Marlboro Country," as the dust jackets labeled the West, or Florida, which appeared as a country of its own, all beach and Disney World. New Orleans, quaint in its gingerbread ironworks and elderly jazzmen, constituted the only recognizably southern place featured on the posters. While the South of the past seemed alluring, the current-day South seemed mainly a blank. The polite Dutch could find few associations to make with the South when we told them where we were from; we began to stress the proximity of Charlottesville to Washington, D.C., which brought some geographic recognition if not admiration.

We were to find the same patterns throughout Europe. Confederate flags turned up in the *piazzas* of Rome; photographs of black jazz and blues greats decorated restaurants in Strasbourg; riverboat themes dominated a lounge in a hotel in France. The South was the America of the past, of the 1850s and 1860s, of the 1950s and early 1960s. The American present was California and New York.

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Even race seemed disconnected from the present-day South. To my students, contemporary African Americans appeared entirely urban, dominated by hip-hop artists and the NBA, with no particular orientation in the South. American popular culture supplied them with no images with which to think about the South after Martin Luther King. Rather, the South of today appeared as shards from the past that could not be assembled into a coherent shape, alternately horrifying and romantic.

The poverty of the southern image abroad seemed especially striking, perhaps, because I was carrying bags of copies with me wherever we traveled, the raw materials of what became *The Oxford Book of the American South*. The war-torn, poverty-stricken, and racially divided South testified to in those blurred and bent pages seemed far away. The testimony of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, of Sarah Morgan and Sam Watkins, of Zora Neale Hurston and Harry Crews had no images to give them shape and place. Their lives seemed disconnected from any South that appeared on the television screens, travel posters, and album covers.

Not that the weight of the past was hard to find in the Netherlands, especially only thirty-five miles away from the German border, where Groningen lay. Eloquent monuments recalled the invasion, the Holocaust, and the sacrifice of the people of the North. Thousands of people observed a long period of silence in the city square as they recalled the liberation of the city by Canadian forces exactly fifty years before. Their quiet proved more powerful than any historical commemoration I had ever seen in the United States.

The American South, just as I had hoped, resonated in Europe, but it did not resonate as I had expected. A sense of place, and the resentment, pride, and arrogance that accompany it, appeared throughout Europe just as it does in the South. If anything, that sense of place was even stronger in the Old World, more concentrated and localized, more nuanced and inflected, deeper and more bitter. Regionalism is a language that the Dutch, the Germans, the Italians, the French, and the British easily understand. They can understand the idea of the South and the war that continues to define it.

The memory of suffering is also universal. But suffering requires translation if

it is to speak across cultural boundaries in the days of mass culture. To learn from each other, we will have to push past the billboard images of tulips and windmills, of riverboats and jazz bands. Southernists, just as I had hoped, have things to say to all people. Getting the words heard through the roar of popular culture is the hard part.