A. Th. van Deursen. *Plain Lives in a Golden Age: Popular Culture, Religion and Society in Seventeenth-Century Holland*, trans. Maarten Ultee. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Pp. ix, 408, 45 illus.

Originally published in Dutch in four volumes between 1978 and 1981, A. Th. van Deursen's magisterial study of ordinary people living in seventeenth-century Holland reaffirms the uniqueness of the tiny Dutch Republic, most especially the province of Holland, the Republic's economic and political centre. In this respect his work is supported by Simon Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches*. Van Deursen, however, is much more concerned with ordinary folk rather than the middle and upper strata of Dutch society which populate Schama's analysis. Schama's study, moreover, was based heavily on a creative interpretation of the visual images of early modern Dutch society. Although also lavishly illustrated, van Deursen's study concentrates on social analysis of the available written records, such as tax assessment roles, state regulations, reformed synod minutes, court records and literature. His use of travellers' accounts, rhetorician plays, and pamphlets is especially well balanced. This translation of van Deursen's work provides English readers with an empirically solid counterpoint to Schama's imaginative interpretation.

Plain Lives is divided into four major parts and seventeen chapters. In many of these analysis of specific topics begins with a remark about Hollanders drawn from the writings of seventeenth-century observers. Van Deursen then plumbs the available sources to evaluate the validity of the cited commentary. He thereby shows how the experiences of ordinary Hollanders were distinctive, usually in a positive way, from those of their contemporaries living elsewhere in Western Europe.

In Part One, "Daily Bread," van Deursen notes how difficult life was for Holland's ordinary artisans, journeymen, farmers, sailors and soldiers. However, when compared with other Europeans the Dutch were far better off, and knew it. For one thing, seventeenth-century Hollanders no longer faced the prospect of starving to death. Poverty there was, but aside from the miserable sea villages with their numerous widows and orphans, various means of poor relief kept most of the poor above the level of abject poverty faced elsewhere.

In Part Two, "Popular Culture," van Deursen discusses ordinary women, men, and children. He acknowledges that his discussion of women is limited by the sources to an analysis of women's relationship with men. Even so, he is able to conclude that the position of married Dutch women was far more favourable "than that of unemancipated groups in early modern times." Dutch women surprised foreign visitors with their independence of spirit, epitomised by their unsuppressible love of dancing. His discussion of male culture is richer, describing the Dutch man's penchant for drinking, smoking, betting and fighting. As with women in their dancing halls, it was in the beer hall and tobacco house that the Dutchman was able to act as he himself chose, again despite the heavy moralizing of preachers and writers. Children of Holland seem to have had decent access to basic education, and literacy rates were

probably higher than the European standard.

What did ordinary Dutch people read? Edifying literature, popular books for relaxation, and the ubiquitous pamphlet. Van Deursen's discussion of the historical usefulness of this last form of printed communication is judicious. He affirms that while the audience of the pamphlet was "the common man," its intent was to change opinion. Pamphlet writers had no intention of presenting a balanced view of their subject; instead, their goal was to simplify issues and make caricatures of their opponents. Pamphlets help us understand the kind of arguments which propagandists believed would work best with the common people.

In Part Three, "People and Government," van Deursen discusses the nature of political life in Holland. Rule by aristocratic regents was clearly atypical for seventeenth-century Europe, and exercised a profound impact on the lives of ordinary Hollanders. For most commoners the stadholders fulfilled a nearly monarchical role and no one conceived of the Republic's society as democratic, a form of government regarded as dangerous by all Dutch writers. Instead, the regents were expected to be men of quality and wealth. While pamphleteers constantly accused regents of corrupt administration of public finances, only two things could cause Dutch folk to rise up against their rulers: concerns about the faith and fears regarding money. Only small-scale tax and bread riots broke out in Golden-Age Holland and even in these, suspicions of class favouritism had to be added to an increase in taxation for action to be taken. Overall, Hollanders bore a relatively fair tax burden, for in the Republic urbanites paid their due along with the rural estates and there was no legally exempted social class.

Plain Lives' last section, "Hell and Heaven," describes religious beliefs within seventeenth-century Holland, beginning with a rather cursory examination of popular belief, and then moving to separate chapters on the appeal and success of the Calvinist, Catholic, and Mennonite churches. As for most early modern Europeans, Hollanders' beliefs were dominated by fears of unseen forces, such as the Devil, magic and witches. What distinguished residents of the Dutch Republic from other Europeans, however, was the religious freedom of choice available to them. The Republic's government did not apply any significant pressure on its subjects to choose in favour of the privileged reformed church (never a State Church). Calvinist leaders made the standards for membership in the Reformed Church very high, and it remained a growing and privileged minority of Holland's population. On the other hand, after the initial persecution of their priests, the Catholics not only survived, with the work of enthusiastic lay women and tireless clerical leaders, adjusted to existence within a Protestant land.

Van Deursen concludes that "between the privileges of the reformed church and the rich traditions of the Catholic Church," the Mennonites "remained stuck as a curious variation." The Mennonite community suffered from the low intellectual level of its leaders, from its teachings which "went against the grain of the age," and by its lack of social status. Without strong doctrinal control, with its heritage of spiritualism, the Mennonite community fell prey to sectarian divisiveness. At this point in his narrative van Deursen's evident distaste for the non-confessional Anabaptist tradition

becomes rather obtrusive. Certainly more recent scholarship on the experience and social make-up of seventeenth-century Mennonites is much less negative.

This point leads us to the one major drawback of van Deursen's important study, one that is likely not his fault. Why did it take ten years to see the work appear in English translation? Van Deursen's excellent and balanced analysis of Dutch society deserves to have had an international audience much sooner. Research conducted by Dutch scholars on popular religion, culture and witchcraft, for example, has virtually exploded in the last decade. As a result, some of *Plain Lives*' conclusions seem outdated by the fascinating findings published since 1981.

On the whole, however, van Deursen's study deserves to be read by all those interested in understanding the world that was early modern Netherlands. Written in a highly readable and engaging fashion, marvellously blending anecdotal and scientific evidence, *Plain Lives* provides a solid evidentiary basis for arguing that the experience of early modern Dutch people diverged considerably from that of their contemporaries elsewhere. Students of European social history will find it a well-documented study proving that the experience of common people in that period was not uniformly bleak.

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David Potter. *War and Government in the French Provinces. Picardy 1470-1560*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. xv, 393.

That war has always played a major role in the development of nation-states can be considered a truism. In fact, so widely recognized is this idea that one can easily overlook the impact of military operations during the Renaissance, when frequent conflicts between dynastic states were the norm. In his book, David Potter shows that wars might very well have moulded early modern France in more than one way. He goes as far as to say that "the initial phase of 'absolutist' state-building from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth centuries can be seen as the engagement of state power in the construction of a war machine adequate for participation in large-scale dynastic conflict" (p. 3). Although this work does not demonstrate clearly the specificity of that period for the development of the French State — one could easily apply Potter's argument to the reigns of Philip IV or Louis XIII — its examination of the effects of war on Picardy is still very interesting.

For much of the fifteenth century, Picardy was controlled by the English or the Burgundians. Wars against England, Burgundy and the Habsburgs helped transform this region into a French province tightly checked by the central government. This process was made through the construction of a military superstructure, as the crown needed to have complete control over what was happening in border regions. The Franco-Burgundian Wars of 1470-1493 gave Picardy to the French kingdom, although no stable border was set by the Treaty of Senlis of 23 May 1493. Inducements and pressures helped Louis XI win over the allegiance of the Picards during that time.