

Remembering Matti Klinge, Willem Frijhoff and Hilde Symoens

In the past two years, the Commission for the History of Universities has lost three eminent members. Members who played an important role in the Commission and in university history as a discipline. They were also important in the development and organisation of the field in their country of origin. All three reached an advanced age, but they were also all three active as historians and public intellectuals until the end, and in the case of Hilde and Willem, they were also actively involved in the Committee and in the Heloise network, which is closely linked to our Commission. I will try to briefly outline the significance of each of them, then I will try to find out what they have in common. I will do this in chronological order of birth, which means that I will first say something about Matti Klinge, then about Willem Frijhoff and finally something about Hilde Symoens. Their work is diverse and extensive. I cannot do justice to their achievements in this short space of time and will therefore briefly try to describe some of its characteristics.

Matti Klinge (1936-2023)

As for Matti Klinge, I must confess that I did not know him personally. But I have always understood from Laura Kolbe that Matti Klinge was a legendary figure in the Finnish academic and intellectual environment. Obituaries show that Klinge sometimes felt like an outsider in the academic environment, someone with strong opinions who could therefore sometimes come across as arrogant. It seems that there dwelled several souls in his chest. Matti Klinge was a maverick who could get people on his back. He once called himself an anarchist with a tie. He was an academic with artistic inclinations: after his retirement he started painting. His academic career can be summarized briefly as follows.

He studied at the University of Helsinki and became a lecturer and research fellow there. He received his PhD in Helsinki in 1969. From 1970 to 1972 Matti Klinge was a visiting professor at the Sorbonne where he was influenced by the Annales historians, especially in the field of cultural and the history of mentalities. In 1976 he became a professor of Nordic history in Helsinki and in 2001 he became a professor emeritus. The importance of Matti Klinge for Finnish historiography cannot be overestimated. Search for Finnish history in catalogues, bibliographies, Jstor or any other database: you will come across Matti Klinge.

Although he had a broad historical interest, nation building occupied a central place in his thinking. And that is perhaps not so surprising because it is a core theme with current political consequences in Finnish history. It is also recognizable in the context of his first love: university history and in particular the history of student life. His dissertation dealt with ideas of citizenship among Finnish students in the nineteenth century in a nation in the making and in fact these are the themes he never let go of. For him, the university and society were never separate entities. They belong together. This is also evidenced by his three-volume history of the University of Helsinki that appeared between 1987 and 1991, of which an abridged version was published in English and in German.

University and Nation: the university and the making of the nation in Northern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries was the title of a conference that was held in Helsinki in 1996 under the auspices of our Commission, a Klinge theme *par excellence*. The collection of articles that appeared from it was introduced by Matti Klinge himself. He also wrote a chapter in the third volume of the major standard

work *A History of the University in Europe*, the part about the long nineteenth century, namely on Teaching.

This theme is no coincidence either. Characteristic of many university historians is that they are close to the historical reality of their field. Students often ask them to tell about their own history or to play a role in their associations. The same applies to Matti Klinge. He was involved in student life in Helsinki all his life and was, among other things, a highly valued *inspektor* of the South Finnish Student Association. Here his history and my history come together a little. A few years ago Laura Kolbe, who succeeded Matti Klinge as *inspektor*, visited Utrecht with a group of students and I showed them around the university. As a thank you they sang to me in a serenade on the central square in the city and they gave me their songbook *Panem et Circenses*. On page 230 they have included a photo of Matti Klinge addressing the students at an anniversary of the association. This involvement with the students is just as characteristic of Matti Klinge as his extensive list of publications, a substantial part of which concerns university history.

Willem Frijhoff (1942-2024)

Willem Frijhoff was not initially trained as a historian, but studied theology and philosophy at a Catholic seminary in order to become a priest. In 1966 he was ordained, but between 1966 and 1971 the church enabled him to further his education in Paris, now as a historian. Initially he studied at the Sorbonne, later also at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, where he became aware of new methods and approaches, in particular quantitative history and the history of mentalities. He eventually said goodbye to priesthood and became a research assistant with Alphonse Dupront. To his regret it was not possible to obtain a permanent position in the French academic system, which is why Willem Frijhoff decided to return to the Netherlands.

However, his years in France did ensure that he gained a much broader, much more cosmopolitan view of the world. He found work as a lecturer at Tilburg University, where he obtained a doctorate in 1981 with a dissertation that breathed a French spirit. His *La société néerlandaise et ses gradués* was based on quantitative, serial sources, which was certainly an absolute novelty for university history in the Netherlands. Frijhoff became a professor at the newly founded Erasmus University in Rotterdam in 1983 and at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in 1997, where he became a colleague of Hilde Symoens. He retired in 2007.

Frijhoff was a very versatile historian, who mainly manifested himself in the field of early modern history of religion and mentality with an emphasis on identity and identity formation. Although his dissertation emphasizes a *longue durée* and is strongly quantitative, as a historian Frijhoff was certainly not a one-trick pony. His great *magnum opus*, a book he himself was very fond of, was the story of a simple orphan boy from the seventeenth century who became a protestant minister and eventually ended up in New Amsterdam, present-day New York: *Wegen van Evert Willemsz. Een Hollands weeskind op zoek naar zichzelf 1607-1647*. It is a micro-history, which also clarifies the history of the Dutch Republic. Although Frijhoff became and remains best known as a historian of mentality, he continued to occupy himself with the history of education throughout his career, not limiting himself to the history of universities, but also paying extensive attention to schools and academies, such as Jesuit colleges. We also see this in his contribution to the second volume of *A History of the University in Europe*. In it, he not only identifies patterns in the development of institutions of higher education, but also has

particularly useful lists and maps of institutions of higher education, their rise and also their disappearance.

Willem Frijhoff played an important role in what I call the infrastructure of historical science. He was a manager par excellence and dragged the faculties of the Humanities in Rotterdam and Amsterdam through far-reaching budget cuts, but was also not averse to doing ordinary manual work. For example, every year he negotiated with the Ministry of Education about what had to be preserved from the university archives according to the law and what not. He also initiated a journal for university and intellectual history, *Batavia Academica*, which would become *the* journal for the communication between Dutch and Belgian university historians. In the first issue in 1983, Hilde Symoens published a nice overview article on the *peregrinatio academica*.

Hilde Symoens (1943-2023)

Hilde Symoens passed away at the beginning of 2023. In one of the obituaries she was called by someone an academic mother, which seems to me to be a striking and deserved qualification. Hilde Symoens grew up in the Belgian colony of Congo, where her father worked in the field of education. Her mother was also a teacher. Although she initially did not want to work as a teacher, she inherited her love for the profession from both of them. But even more than that, she learned from them to be a world citizen. Hilde Symoens had already worked as a student on the registers of the University of Orléans and that determined her entire further academic life. After graduating with professor Van Caeneghem in Ghent, she continued working on the students of Orléans, a project of Van Caeneghem and Robert Feenstra, another eminent former member of our Commission, who passed away in 2013.

In 1969, Hilde obtained her doctorate on the influence of Brabantine jurists on law and institutions in the Netherlands between 1544 and 1555. After her doctorate, she became a researcher for the national Belgian research organization FWO and she kept on working on the Orléans project. In 1986, Hilde Symoens became professor of Medieval History at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, a position she exchanged in 2001 for a chair in Ghent, from where she retired in 2008. Hilde was a visiting professor at the Max Planck Institute in Frankfurt, at Berkeley, UCLA and Merton College in Oxford. Her academic interests are typical of the early years of the International Commission for the History of Universities. Although she was a thoroughbred university historian, her interests were mainly determined by legal history. In these circles she felt very much at home.

Her work is strongly prosopographical in nature. However, she was not only an accurate and erudite publisher of sources, but she also saw that these serial source publications about students at the University of Orléans could change the field of university history. As early as 1976 she published an interesting article on the significance of her type of research in university history. Completely in line with the breakthrough of the *nouvelle histoire* of the *Annales* historians outside France, she wrote about 'a new history of universities'. In that contribution she advocated university history as a source for social history, with which she in fact brought university history out of its institutional isolation. The prosopographical approach, even before it was called as such, has also had consequences for university history in the long term. In a Belgian project called FASTI Hilde tried to shape the prosopographical approach to university history with more modern, digital means. She always pointed out that she kept tens of thousands of index cards in shoe boxes and was afraid that they would be lost if something happened to her. This resulted in the establishment of the Héloïse working group, closely related to our Commission, which is trying to build a database of students enrolled at European universities.

Her role in the four-part project *A History of the University in Europe*, initiated by the European Rectors' Conference and already mentioned in connection with Matti Klinge and Willem Frijhoff, was of great significance. Hilde took on the editing of the first two parts, to which she also made no fewer than three contributions. Two of these dealt with the theme of mobility of students and teachers.

Hilde Symoens' significance does not only lie in the purely scientific field. She was a tireless organizer and administrator; between 1996 and 2005 she was, among other things, secretary and president of our Commission. She was a great networker, founder of a historical committee at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, and a very active member of the organization of Belgian and Dutch university and science historians. She also never shirked administrative responsibilities at the universities where she worked, but as one of her obituaries says: Hilde was never the leader of a group, but positioned herself as the *primus inter pares*. That characterizes her human side: she was a connecting personality, she was empathetic, honest and a role model for women in academia and she was someone with an astonishing work ethic. That is how I will continue to remember her.

Three important historians

Three important members, not only of the Commission for the History of Universities, but also of the field of the history of universities in general passed away. With them we lose an important generation in the development of our field. All three of them were in a sense foundational. Prolific historians also. They were the opposite of the dry-as-dust historians who only dwell in the archives and in their study. That is why they never limited themselves to the history of universities in a narrow sense. It was broadly defined education that they were interested in. Furthermore, they were true internationalists and Europeans and knew their languages. But most of all they were generous colleagues, who liked to share their knowledge, ideas and experience with younger colleagues. They were teachers.

Leen Dorsman, Utrecht University