

# History and commemorations: the Pirenne agenda

PHILIPPE RAXHON<sup>1</sup>

Professeur – Université de Liège

---

## 1. PIRENNE: A HISTORIAN FOR ALL OCCASIONS

"I have never believed that loving country impedes loving children. I no longer perceive at all that internationalism of spirit or of class is irreconcilable with love of country. Or rather, I think, in questioning my own conscience, that there is no contradiction. It is a poor heart that is forbidden to contain more than one love."

It was the French historian Marc Bloch (1946, 158-159) who wrote these lines in *L'Étrange défaite: Témoignage écrit en 1940*, and it was a Nazi execution squad which gave him reason to do so. Without a doubt, the career of Henri Pirenne gives Bloch's words an additional meaning between the lines.<sup>2</sup>

For the centennial anniversary of Belgium, in August 1931, the liberal journal *Le Flambeau* published an article by Henri Pirenne entitled "La tâche de l'historien" (The Job of the Historian), which had already appeared in *Methods in Social Sciences*, published by Stuart A. Rice at the University of Chicago Press. This article has nothing about commemoration. It is a deep reflection on the methods and the role of the historian, the range and limits of his work, and how the historian is at once close to and different from the sociologist or the psychologist. In short, for Pirenne, a commemoration could be an opportunity not only for making history but also for making the historian, remembering what the historical discipline is and explaining its methods of inquiry. The article is a thorough digest of historical criticism and a reminder of the position of history in the human sciences. His writing is lucid:

"Constructing history is telling a story. From the beginning of its existence, it has been made up of tales, narratives of episodes connected with each other. In fact, the essential work of the historian is while exposing the connections between events, to make them comprehensible by re-reading and explaining them. It seems thus that

---

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Philippe Raxhon: p.raxhon@ulg.ac.be

<sup>2</sup> Pirenne's biography has been thoroughly examined. Simply noted, see Ganshof (1959, col. 671-723) and Lyon (1974).

history is a story which explains change in human societies in the past" (Pirenne, 1931, 11).

But what is interesting about this presentation of the historian's profile is that there is not one word about the historian's role in the transmission of patriotic values. Pirenne was definitely not an innocent victim of the image many have held of him on this subject, above all at the beginning of the 1930s, when criticism of the unitarian Belgian historiography already shared the way. No doubt Pirenne was taking the position of a historian outside of time, the historian in a pure state, which was the most intelligent and the most elegant way that he could respond to his detractors who had not always read him.

Did the Pirenne agenda overflow with commemorative activities? This is the question which underlies our article.

## 2. PIRENNE: A SHOWMAN FOR COMMEMORATIVE PRODUCTIONS?

On October 1, 1899, just one year before the French edition of the first volume of his *Histoire de Belgique* appeared at Lamertin in 1900 and just after he had been appointed full professor, Henri Pirenne delivered a speech on events entitled *La Nation belge* at the awards ceremony for the prize-winners of the university competitions and the comparative middle-education exams. It was an opportunity for Pirenne to emphasise how history was important in maintaining citizenship, and how the sharing of a common past by a collective group was indispensable for their involvement in current affairs, especially in Belgium. He disputed the discourse which maintained that Belgium did not have a history, and that it was an artificial creation of European diplomacy in 1830:

"You have all overheard these words from the mouths of even well-educated men; you have read them in the press, you have heard them resound in Parliament. They correspond so well to the public spirit that the Chambers have been able, on a good day, without stirring up the slightest protest, to abolish teaching in our universities about national history from the time preceding the modern period" (Pirenne, 1900, 1).

He then delivered his response which fully justified *a priori* his commitment to public service in national commemorations, seen as ways for citizens to be involved in and aware of their historical patrimony:

"It is necessary to proclaim without hesitation that this way of seeing is as false as it is expansive. And if it is false, duty imperiously demands that we combat it, for we cannot find anything more noxious for the nation, because there is nothing more discouraging for citizens. What is the good, indeed, of devoting themselves to an artificial nation, sacrificing themselves for the benefit of a collectivity born yesterday by the will of Europe, which that same will could suppress tomorrow? Great minds have often declared sadly that in Belgium private interests almost always sweep away public interest, and particularism sweeps away national feeling. How could it be otherwise? Doesn't public opinion consider patriotism a farce and doesn't it thus reduce us, even the best of us, to taking refuge in resigned scepticism, so that all take it more comfortably?" (*Ibid.*, 1-2)

However, despite this profession of faith with its discerning and incisive conclusion, Pirenne's relationship with commemorations is much more complex than it appears.

In fact, Pirenne (1906) wrote very few texts which were listed on the programmes of commemorations or made explicit reference to commemorations, compared to the entirety of his incredible historiographical production. "Les origines de l'État belge", which appeared in the volume *La Nation belge*, was one of them. The first phrases set up the framework:

"During the long period of our national celebrations beginning in spring and winding to a close in fall, two dates continue to appear on the pediments of statues, to ripple in the folds of flags, to glitter in the brilliance of illuminations and amid the crackling of fireworks: 1830-1905. And it is right that they are the object of this apotheosis, since they mark the beginning and end of the most splendid period of prosperity our country has ever known" (Pirenne, 1906, 3).

The following sentences emphasise hope for Belgium's future, solidified by history, for

"it has come far across the centuries, and if 1830 marks one of the summits on its road, it is not the beginning" (*Ibid.*).

Pirenne then explains how this State was formed from roots dating back to the Treaty of Verdun in 843, summarising his ideas in the broad strokes that all commemorations require. Moreover, Pirenne sticks to 1830 as the date of reference, without ever mentioning 1831, the year in which the revolutionary process was completed, with the adoption of the Constitution on February 7, and Leopold I taking the oath on July 21, which is the date of our national celebration today. While the birthday of Belgium paradoxically wavers between 1830 and 1831, despite the fact that July 21 could easily decide between the two, Pirenne also opted for the seductive smoothness of round

dates and rallied around the choice of 1905 to celebrate the anniversary of this Belgium.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. A COMMEMORATION, AN OPPORTUNITY

A commemoration can be an opportunity for clarification and perspective. On October 9, 1905, Pirenne gave a talk at the Royal Academy of Archaeology, on *Les études d'Histoire de Belgique de 1830 à 1905*. It was a historiographical approach to the question.<sup>4</sup> On the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Commission Royal d'Histoire* in 1909 Pirenne, who had been charged with reporting on its activities, seized the opportunity to invoke the potential beneficial ties between education and support of the state. First he paid homage to the pioneers:

"One of the most wonderful of Rogier's glorious accolades is that, surrounded by the absorbing sources of the organisation of the Belgian State during the first uncertain years of its existence, he did not forget his scholarly interests, especially his interest in historical science" (Pirenne, 1909, 21).

After this tribute, Pirenne neatly intercepted recurrent criticism about the interference of the State in the historical domain, which he claimed had been strongly repressed in his era, while he could only have been unaware that this reproach has been universal up to the present day in Belgian history. He had the skills to make a cliché into a timeless theme:

"In an era in which the public spirit was driven by an almost insurmountable defiance against the interference of the State in social life, and it seemed that liberty, so solemnly proclaimed by the Constitution, ought to rule in all domains, it was a novelty to place this new organism 'under the auspices of the government', so much a novelty that we have trouble today understanding how daring it was" (*Ibid.*, 22).

---

<sup>3</sup>. We note in passing that on the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Belgium, there was no exchange of letters on this theme between Pirenne and his master Godefroid Kurth (cf. Rion, 1986, 147-255).

<sup>4</sup>. See the *Chronologie d'Henri Pirenne*, in *Henri Pirenne, hommages et souvenirs* (1938, 133). On February 25, 1910 at the Free University of Brussels (ULB), Pirenne gave a lecture entitled *Les Études d'Histoire en Belgique depuis septante-cinq ans*. He gave it again on March 18 of the same year at the Société académique d'histoire de l'Université de Gand, and again at Hasselt on February 5, 1911; *Henri Pirenne, hommages et souvenirs* (1938, 134-135).

Pirenne reversed the argument that citizens took risks when they allowed the State to intervene in historical matters by emphasising that it was the State which had taken the risks to do this in a country in which the citizens were anxious to preserve their liberties by a liberal Constitution. Pirenne then gave a very precise reason to justify entrusting to the State the organisation of publishing historical sources, which required heavy investment:

"Rogier understood that great scientific endeavours necessarily required public power. Why? Because otherwise these endeavours would fall into the private domain, whereas government involvement would avoid the risk that the publication of historical sources would remain left to private initiative" (*Ibid.*, 22).

Governments have sufficient resources to preserve and circulate sources from the past, while individuals only have limited resources which lead to "partial results" (*Ibid.*, 22), or, we might add, partisan results.

#### 4. LEAFING THROUGH THE PIRENNE AGENDA

What if the public life of the great historian began with a tribute? Just imagine his message of welcome addressed to King Leopold II on July 28, 1878, at the inaugural ceremony of the Barrage of the Gileppe. Pirenne was then barely 16 years old. Did he acquire a taste for inaugurations, celebrations and commemorations? Nothing is less certain.

Strictly speaking, Pirenne gave few speeches and took on few lectures connected with commemorations. He did not seize these opportunities to make a speech, but responded courteously to invitations he received when he was available.<sup>5</sup> For the centenary of Belgium, a commemoration of the greatest importance, he was asked on May 14, 1930, by the editor of the *Revue hebdomadaire*, François Le Grix, to collaborate in a special issue on the Belgian centenary. In May 1930, Radio Paris wanted to have a series of special broadcasts on the centenary beginning on June 13, and invited Pirenne to open the broadcasts, with a fee and all expenses paid. Pirenne was invited to attend the inauguration of the monument to the *Brabançonne* on November 16, 1930, and he was invited by the France-Poland Association to speak at the Sorbonne on the 29<sup>th</sup>, on the centenary of the Polish rebellion.

---

<sup>5</sup> On September 18, 1929, the *Amitiés françaises* of Bruges invited him to give a lecture as part of the centenary. We do not know if Pirenne followed up on this invitation; Archives Pirenne-ULB, *Correspondance générale d'Henri Pirenne*, vol. 1926-1929, 026PP/01/01/027.

Pirenne was very flattered, but he did not respond favourably to all of these requests.<sup>6</sup>

A survey of the major talks held by Henri Pirenne<sup>7</sup> in the course of his entire career shows that on November 20, 1930, he was at the University of London for a conference on the Belgian Revolution of 1830<sup>8</sup>, and he was in Lyon on December 21<sup>st</sup> of that year, invited by the French Alliance of that city to give a lecture as part of the commemoration of the centenary of Belgian Independence that was held in the large amphitheatre of the University of Lyon. Pirenne lectured on this subject because "no voice was more qualified than his", according to the newspaper *Lyon Républicain*<sup>9</sup>, for

"Pirenne is not only a great historian, but he has risen to a magnanimity worthy of the Ancient".<sup>10</sup>

He also gave a talk on the Belgian Revolution at the Algerian Fine Arts Circle in February 1831 where he was already giving courses on other subjects. In Belgium, he dealt with "How was 1831 Possible?" in November 1929 at the *Grandes Conférences Cardinal Mercier* in Brussels, and on April 21, 1930 at the Artistic Circle in Antwerp.<sup>11</sup> The Artistic and Literary Circle of Ghent welcomed him on May 17 to speak on 'Belgium'.<sup>12</sup> On December 14, he gave a talk on Orangism at the *Musée de l'Armée* in Brussels. Not only was the Belgian centenary above all the only national commemoration in which Pirenne participated by giving papers, but he also did so at a reduced rhythm spread out over two years, if not three. No Stakhanovism for him. Thus Pirenne was not a "commemorative fool", nor an automaton of a State in need of celebrations. Pirenne did not run after commemorations; his

---

<sup>6</sup>. See the Archives Pirenne-ULB, *Correspondance générale d'Henri Pirenne*, vol. 1930-1932, 026PP/01/01/028.

<sup>7</sup>. *Cours et conférences donnés par Henri Pirenne dans les universités étrangères* and *Principales conférences faites par Henri Pirenne* in *Henri Pirenne, hommages et souvenirs* (1938, 82, 82-84).

<sup>8</sup>. See the account in *La Libre Belgique*, November 24, 1930.

<sup>9</sup>. *Lyon Républicain*, December 22, 1930.

<sup>10</sup>. *Salut Public (Lyon)*, December 22, 1930.

<sup>11</sup>. On January 12, 1930, the *Gazette de Lausanne* dealt with "The First Evocations of the Belgian Centenary", especially the lectures: "None could be more lively and useful than those which were given in Brussels, with eight hours in between them, by M. Henri Pirenne and Baron Beyens". This lecture by Pirenne opened the 11<sup>th</sup> series of the *Cardinal Mercier* lectures.

<sup>12</sup>. Even in the most dramatic events of his life, those connected to the First World War, Pirenne never had a narrow mind, as Peter Schöttler has amply shown in emphasising the historian's evolution in the historiographical field devoted to universalism and comparatism (Schöttler, 2005, 507-517).

agenda did not overflow with these events. He was not a kingpin of propagandistic or nationalistic celebrations, as was the case with master historians connected with totalitarian regimes in the 1920s.

Outside of the Belgian centenary, Pirenne only spoke *once* at a strictly commemorative event, on July 24, 1930, to commemorate the third centenary of the arrival of *Saint Amand* in Ghent, his city by adoption. One could also mention, in the margins of his work, his talk on the tercentenary of New York on May 19, 1924.

If we look into Henri Pirenne's participation in learned societies, we find hardly any which have commemoration as their primary objective. Among the numerous scholarly, scientific and learned structures in which Pirenne took part, such as the Royal Commission of History, the Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique (F.N.R.S.), the Belgian History Institute of Rome, and too many others to list here, it should be noted that he was president of the Bicentenary Committee for the birth of the Prince of Ligne in July 1935, a few weeks before his death.<sup>13</sup> This was the only post he held in an organisation of this nature with an explicitly commemorative mission. Pirenne did not invest much in associations tied to the celebration of historical events.

Needless to say, the historical and bibliographical production of Henri Pirenne is really extensive. His completed bibliography amounts to nearly 20 pages of references in small print (Ganshof, Sabre, Vercauteren, & Verlinden, 1938, 145-64), touching on every era and numerous domains of history, and demonstrating his mastery of the archives and sources, and the many problems he addressed. And yet, if we search in this forest of historical publications for examples which answered the call of a commemoration, we will find that they are very few. Fewer even than the speeches he made at the funerals of colleagues, such as Paul Fredericq in 1920 for example, or at the event dedicated to Godefroid Kurth at Liège on December 10, 1921, or as tributes to important people, such as Charles Duvivier in 1905, or Paul Thomas in 1923.<sup>14</sup> A special mention should be made of his speech on January 21, 1921, in the presence of King Albert I, in memory of Ghent students who had died for their country.

---

<sup>13</sup>. See *Participation à des sociétés scientifiques et savantes*, in *Henri Pirenne, hommages et souvenirs* (1938, 99-100).

<sup>14</sup>. At the height of his celebrity, Pirenne remained extremely kind in these matters, as in his letter of February 12, 1933, written to commemorate his old schoolmaster Thil Lorrain, which appeared on February 15 in the bulletin of the former students of the Athénée of Verviers, *Notre Trait d'Union*; cf. *Catalogue de l'Exposition Henri Pirenne, organisée à l'occasion du centenaire de sa naissance à Verviers le 23 décembre 1862* (1962, 2).

It is notable that Pirenne produced more historiography for commemorations of institutions, especially scholarly institutions, than for celebrations of past events evoked in a national context, for example. Thus Pirenne published lectures or articles for the centenary of the *École des Chartes* in Paris on February 22, 1921, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Royal Academy of Belgium, and the centenary of the Royal Commission of History (Pirenne, 1921a; 1921b; 1922a; 1922b; 1934). Apart from that, there was only one article for Antwerp in a volume prepared for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Christophe Plantin (Pirenne, 1921c).

## 5. THE CASE OF THE BELGIAN CENTENARY

In sum, for commemorative matters, the centenary of Belgium remains one of the only moments which inevitably retained the attention and the energy of Pirenne, but he only spent that energy in moderation. An examination of the Pirenne archives at the Free University of Brussels provides interesting details on the issue.

The secretary general of the association 'The Volunteers of the 1914-1918 Campaign', who stated that he had been a student in Philosophy and Letters at Ghent in 1914, wrote to Pirenne on March 29, 1928, with a request, first evoking the demise of Pirenne's son, Pierre, killed in combat:

"We are most earnestly trying to exalt the cult of our companions in arms dead on the Field of Honour, and we have decided to publish in a particularly solemn manner the first issue of our journal, 'Le Volontaire Belge' which will appear very shortly. We take the liberty of asking the Historian who has defined the formation of the Belgian nationality with such distinction, to the Patriot who has shown during the war that the Savant is also a man of action, and to the Father sadly tried, to be willing to give us a contribution for this first issue".<sup>15</sup>

The choice of subject was left up to Pirenne.

A letter dated April 18, 1928, signed by René Leclercq, addressed Pirenne in the name of the editors of a project for a prestigious work on Belgian wealth and expertise: *1930. Livre d'Or du Centenaire de l'Indépendance belge* [1930: Golden Book of the Centenary of Belgian Independence], with an imposing honorary commission, one of whom was Jules Destrée. Pirenne was asked to draft a historical introduction covering the period between 1830

---

<sup>15</sup>. Archives Pirenne-ULB, *Correspondance générale d'Henri Pirenne*, vol. 1926-1929, 026PP/01/01/027.

and 1930. He would be given a fee and the freedom to determine the content. Pirenne swiftly declined in a letter dated April 22. The reply of René Leclercq to Pirenne on May 2 reveals the latter's motivation for refusing the original request:

"We are sincerely sorry that because you have previously promised your collaboration to another publication which will also appear for the centenary, you feel that you cannot grant it to us".<sup>16</sup>

René Leclercq did his utmost to convince Pirenne to collaborate, with only two or three pages to furnish by the end of the year.

On August 17, 1928, Pirenne was asked by the editor of the *Auxiliaire de la Presse*, I. Grunberg (pseudonym: J. Montvert), to collaborate on a work about the Belgian press for the centenary of independence. Grunberg asked Pirenne for an article on "the role of the press in the history of the Belgian people or the Belgian press in history", five to 10 pages to be sent before June 30, 1929.<sup>17</sup> The exchange of letters stopped there.

In the summer of 1929, Robert Van de Wynckels, editor of *Éditions Nationales du Souvenir. Glorification du centenaire de l'Indépendance de la Belgique, 1830-1930*, solicited Pirenne to write an article: "About National Restoration". He did so, and the editor sent him an acknowledgment on October 30, 1929. The historian received the proofs on April 23, 1930, with the notation, "ready to print".<sup>18</sup>

Pirenne also participated in an important collective commemorative publication project by writing the historical introduction to *Un Siècle d'Essor économique belge. 1830-1930. Encyclopédie des activités productrices du Pays* [A Century of Belgian Economic Vigour: 1830-1930: Encyclopedia of the Productive Activities of the Country], set to appear in Brussels in 1930, under the patronage and control of the government and the auspices of the *Comité Central Industriel de Belgique*. The Catholic jurist Fernand Passelecq of Brussels edited the work. Pirenne traced the broad outlines of Belgian economic development from the High Middle Ages through the period of national independence. Here again, he had been solicited by letter, dated July 18, 1929, from Fernand Passelecq, who in his request wanted to reassure the historian openly:

---

<sup>16</sup>. Archives Pirenne-ULB, *Correspondance générale d'Henri Pirenne*, vol. 1926-1929, 026PP/01/01/027.

<sup>17</sup>. Archives Pirenne-ULB, *Correspondance générale d'Henri Pirenne*, vol. 1926-1929, 026PP/01/01/027.

<sup>18</sup>. Archives Pirenne-ULB, *Manuscrits divers et correspondance. 1890-1934*, 026PP/01/03/001-002.

"It will be a work not for show, but of scientific exactitude".<sup>19</sup>

The editor promised a nice sum of 1,000 francs for this work, five or six pages of 60 lines, or 900 words per page.

However, the affair did not come off without a hitch. At first, on July 28, 1929, Pirenne wrote back to Passelecq to express some reluctance about his participation. We do not have the contents of Pirenne's letter, but Passelecq wrote him immediately, in a letter dated July 30, to clarify the request. The details given by Passelecq to convince Pirenne show the historian's frame of mind:

"It would not be, properly speaking, a preface to the book (...) It would be an introduction which would be an integral part of the book and would comprise two chapters: I. The broad outlines of the Belgian economy up to 1830; II. The broad outline of Belgian policy for economic affairs from 1830 to 1930. The obstacle which you mention to me (...) would really only appear if I was asking for a sketch of economic policy of the country *after* 1830. But, would the fact that you are preparing the official work of the Academy on the country's economic development from 1830 to 1930 result in an absolute impediment against you then giving us a few pages on Belgian economic development *before* and up to 1830? (...) The official preface preceding your historical review above covers you from the possible reproach that you had agreed to present to the public a work similar to that of the Academy".

Passelecq, continuing to extol the merits and the unique nature of his editorial project, and the impossibility of doing without Henri Pirenne for the sake of credibility, charged forward like a hussar:

"Who besides you can we ask for a serious work, authorised introductory pages on a historical subject that you have marked so forcefully with your stamp? The public will not understand, I think, such a lacuna in a publication of this nature, appearing under government patronage, under the auspices of the Comité Central Industriel and large associations of the nation, and with the official cooperation of all the heads of the requisite services at the involved ministries and the leading experts of Belgian economic science".<sup>20</sup>

What does this infer? Pirenne was reticent at the idea of furnishing pages on the same subject he had addressed elsewhere, in the same commemorative context. Pirenne was lukewarm towards the facile and profitable superfluity of words. Pirenne held back rather than seizing opportunities to set his stamp

---

<sup>19</sup>. Archives Pirenne-ULB, *Manuscrits divers et correspondance. 1890-1934, 026PP/01/03/003.*

<sup>20</sup>. Archives Pirenne-ULB, *Manuscrits divers et correspondance. 1890-1934, 026PP/01/03/003.*

on prestigious initiatives of this nature, or to improve on his usual fare. In contrast to a national incense-bearer who spreads himself out everywhere taking advantage of an exceptional commemoration, to serve the glory of his nation and his own benefit on the way, Pirenne was economical in his historiographical engagements. Pirenne does not leave the impression of a commemorative opportunist, neither for ideological motives, nor for financial reasons or social prestige. He kept a cool head: historian and patriot, of course; patriot but historian, certainly.

On August 6, Pirenne agreed to the sought-after historical introduction. A letter of thanks from Passelecq, dated August 8, shows the relief of the requestor clearly lapping it up and full of largesse:

"If you need a little more space than you have indicated, we can find a way to reserve it for you".<sup>21</sup>

The contract with the publisher Louis Desmet-Verteneuil was signed on August 22, and Pirenne was to send in his manuscript by November 1. Passelecq received it on October 29.

However, Pirenne did not extricate himself readily from Passelecq, who was not going to let go so easily of an author who was so competent, courteous and punctual, all at the same time. Indeed, on May 14, 1930, Passelecq wrote again to Pirenne:

"You will certainly say, on seeing this stubborn person: 'ecce, iterum ... [look, again]' I accept it. But do not condemn me on the battlefield".<sup>22</sup>

This time he asked the historian to complement his editorial project with four pages on the Royal Commission of History and the Commission of National Biography. Pirenne complied and sent him the two entries on May 28.

Pirenne took part in the National Commission of the Centenary Celebration, established by the government. His correspondence contains the accounts of its meetings. Although the historian was not very assiduous, his participation was more than honorific. The first meeting took place on July 19, 1928, with no trace of Pirenne in the accounts, not among those present, nor among those excused. He was not at the following session on October 9 either. He was excused for the next two sessions, on November 14, 1928 and January 15, 1929. He was again excused from the following session on

---

<sup>21</sup>. Archives Pirenne-ULB, *Manuscrits divers et correspondance. 1890-1934*, 026PP/01/03/003.

<sup>22</sup>. Archives Pirenne-ULB, *Manuscrits divers et correspondance. 1890-1934*, 026PP/01/03/003.

March 4, 1929, and absent from the meeting on April 20, 1929. But he did attend the May 10 session, as well as that of June 10, at which he made a decisive speech, illustrating that he knew how to exploit the centenary lever to perform a useful function for historical research. Pirenne spoke there to support the grant of a subsidy for Belgian excavations in Syria at Apamea:

"It is valuable for Belgium, since it concerns the land of the Crusades. Other countries had undertaken magnificent excavations, and it should be emphasised how foreigners notice this patriotic propaganda".<sup>23</sup>

He proposed the sum of 200,000 francs to allow excavations to begin in 1930;

"in the shadow of the Belgian flag floating there. It will honour Belgium to support an initiative undertaken to celebrate the centenary of its independence in a noble, pure and beautiful way".<sup>24</sup>

Pirenne's proposition was accepted unanimously.

## 6. PIRENNE COMMEMORATED

In counterpoint, just as the subject of this colloquium indicates, commemorations or celebrations for Pirenne, during his life or after his death, are opportunities to better understand the man and his work.

From 1912 onwards, there were ardent events held in his honour, on May 5 at the History Society of Ghent on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his professorship in that city<sup>25</sup>; and on May 12 at the *Palais des Académies* in Brussels<sup>26</sup>, where funds were collected to finance a Henri Pirenne Foundation. On April 30, 1921, the National League of Memory organised an event, which paid tribute to his patriotism during the German occupation while commemorating the

---

<sup>23</sup>. Archives Pirenne-ULB, *Correspondance générale d'Henri Pirenne*, vol. 1926-1929, 026PP/01/01/027.

<sup>24</sup>. Archives Pirenne-ULB, *Correspondance générale d'Henri Pirenne*, vol. 1926-1929, 026PP/01/01/027.

<sup>25</sup>. On May 11, 1912, a special edition of the newspaper, *L'Appel*, was dedicated to this ceremony.

<sup>26</sup>. See *La Gazette*, for May 13, 1912, which gives an account of this event. A brochure was published for the occasion, with a talk by Henri Rolin, one of Pirenne's current students. See the *Catalogue de l'exposition* (1962, 14).

anniversary of his deportation for promoting the nobility of intellectuals before the enemy.<sup>27</sup>

In his 40 years of teaching at Ghent University, two volumes of *Mélanges* were dedicated<sup>28</sup> and presented to him on December 5, 1926, before the audience of the Philosophy Faculty.<sup>29</sup> On June 11, 1932, at the Sorbonne in Paris, he was acclaimed by the National Committee of French Historians (Ganshof, 1959, col. 722) on the publication of the *Histoire de Belgique*. On May 31, 1933, the Artistic and Literary Circle of Ghent toasted Pirenne who had been their vice-president for a quarter of a century. He had just received the Frankish prize. And of course, the historian's death resulted in literary tributes.<sup>30</sup>

In 1963, an exposition was organised for the centenary of his birth.<sup>31</sup> In 1985 a commemorative combination, the centenary of Pirenne's debut as part-time lecturer at Liège and the fiftieth anniversary of his death, gave rise to two symposia which made their mark on the historiography of this figure. On December 13, 1985, the history department at the University of Liège organised a symposium suggested by the first academic steps of the great professor. On May 10 and 11 of the same year, a symposium took place at the *Institut des Hautes Études de Belgique*, on the initiative of Georges Despy, professor at ULB, and Adriaan Verhulst, professor at Ghent University. In both cases, the proceedings were published (Bierlaire & Kupper, 1987; Despy & Verhulst, 1986).

Pirenne commemorated encountering Pirenne commemorating when the commemoration is an opportunity to know the past better rather than to settle for merely celebrating it.

---

<sup>27</sup>. See *L'idée nationale. Bulletin officiel de la Ligue du Souvenir*, May 1921, 7<sup>th</sup> series, no. 8.

<sup>28</sup>. *Mélanges d'histoire offerts à Henri Pirenne* (1926).

<sup>29</sup>. See the account in *La Flandre libérale*, December 6-7, 1926.

<sup>30</sup>. *Études d'histoire dédiées à la mémoire de Henri Pirenne* (1937); *Henri Pirenne, hommages et souvenirs* (1938). On August 10, 1937, the *Conseil des Ministres* decided "to contribute a collective payment in the amount of 1,000 francs to the commemoration of Henri Pirenne. This sum will be deducted from the mutual floating funds for charity of the Ministers".

<sup>31</sup>. At *Archives générales du Royaume*. See the *Catalogue de l'exposition Henri Pirenne* (1962). A session of tribute took place for this occasion on December 19, 1962, at the *Palais des Académies*.

---

## ABBREVIATIONS

---

FNRS                      Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

### Sources

#### *Archives*

Archives Pirenne-ULB, Avenue F. Roosevelt 50-CP170. Campus du Solbosch: bâtiment A, 1<sup>er</sup> étage, local AX1.222 – 1050 Brussels  
Archives Générales du Royaume Rue de Ruysbroeck, 2, 1000 Brussels  
*Catalogue de l'Exposition Henri Pirenne, organisée à l'occasion du centenaire de sa naissance à Verviers le 23 décembre 1862*, Brussels, 1962

#### *Published sources*

*L'Appel*  
*Gazette de Lausanne*  
*La Flandre libérale*  
*La Gazette*  
*La Libre Belgique*  
*Lyon Républicain*  
*Salut Public (Lyon)*

### Literature

BIERLAIRE (F.) & KUPPER (J.-L.) (eds.), *Henri Pirenne de la cité de Liège à la ville de Gand. Actes du colloque organisé à Liège le 13 décembre 1985* (Cahiers de Clío, special issue), 1987, no. 86, pp. 13-22.  
BLOCH (M.), *L'Étrange défaite: Témoignage écrit en 1940*, Paris, 1946.  
*Catalogue de l'Exposition Henri Pirenne, organisée à l'occasion du centenaire de sa naissance à Verviers le 23 décembre 1862*, Brussels: Archives Générales du Royaume, 1962.  
DESPY (G.) & VERHULST (A.), *La fortune historiographique des thèses d'Henri Pirenne. Actes du colloque organisé à l'occasion du cinquantenaire de la mort de l'historien belge par l'institut des Hautes Études de Belgique*, Brussels, 1986 (Académies et Bibliothèques de Belgique, 28).  
*Études d'Histoire dédiées à la mémoire de Henri Pirenne par ses anciens élèves*, Brussels, 1937.  
GANSHOF (F.-L.), "Henri Pirenne", *Biographie Nationale*, XXX, Brussels, 1959, col. 671-723.

- GANSHOF (F.-L.), SABRE (E.), VERCAUTEREN (F.), & VERLINDEN (C.), "Bibliographie des travaux historiques d'Henri Pirenne" in: *Henri Pirenne, hommages et souvenirs*, Brussels, 1938, pp. 145-164.
- Henri Pirenne, hommages et souvenirs*, Brussels, 1938.
- L'idée nationale. Bulletin officiel de la Ligue du Souvenir*, May 1921, 7<sup>th</sup> series, no. 8.
- LYON (B.), *Henri Pirenne. A biographical and intellectual study*, Ghent, 1974.
- Mélanges d'histoire offerts à Henri Pirenne par ses anciens élèves et ses amis à l'occasion de sa quarantième année d'enseignement à l'Université de Gand 1886-1926*, Brussels, 1926.
- PIRENNE (H.), "Discours prononcé à l'occasion de la célébration du centenaire de l'École des Chartes", *Bulletin de l'Académie Royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres*, Brussels, 1921a, pp. 16-19.
- PIRENNE (H.), "Discours prononcé à la célébration du cent cinquantième anniversaire de l'Académie Royale de Belgique", *Bulletin de l'Académie Royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres*, Brussels, 1921b, pp. 199-209.
- PIRENNE (H.), "L'importance économique et morale d'Anvers à l'époque de Plantin" in: *Fêtes données en 1920 à Anvers et à Tours à l'occasion du quatrième centenaire de la naissance de Christophe Plantin*, Antwerp, 1921c, pp. 1-10.
- PIRENNE (H.), "Les sciences historiques à l'Académie Royale de Belgique", *L'Académie Royale de Belgique depuis sa fondation, 1772-1922*, Brussels, 1922a, pp. 171-196.
- PIRENNE (H.), *Centenaire de l'École des Chartes, 1821-1921*, Paris, 1922b.
- PIRENNE (H.), *La Nation belge. Discours prononcé à la distribution des prix aux lauréats du concours universitaire et du concours général de l'enseignement moyen le 1<sup>er</sup> octobre 1899*, Ghent, 1900.
- PIRENNE (H.), *Histoire de Belgique*, Brussels, 7 vol., 1900-1932.
- PIRENNE (H.), "Les origines de l'État belge", *La Nation belge*, Liège, 1906, pp. 3-23.
- PIRENNE (H.), *Rapport sur les activités de la Commission royale d'histoire, séance solennelle du 8 novembre 1909*, Brussels, 1909.
- PIRENNE (H.), "What are historians trying to do" in: Stuart A. Rice, *Methods in Social Sciences. A case book*, Chicago, 1931, pp. 435-445.
- PIRENNE (H.), "La tâche de l'historien", *Le Flambeau*, août 1931, pp. 5-22.
- PIRENNE (H.), "La commission royale d'Histoire depuis sa fondation", *Académie Royale de Belgique. La Commission Royale d'Histoire, 1834-1934. Livre jubilaire*, Brussels, 1934, pp. 9-68 [Republished in *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, XCVIII, 1934, pp. 3-26.]
- RION (P.) (ed.), "La correspondance entre G. Kurth et H. Pirenne (1880-1913)", *Bulletin de la Commission royale d'histoire*, CLII, 1986, pp. 147-155.
- SCHÖTTLER (P.), "Henri Pirenne face à l'Allemagne de l'après-guerre ou la (re)naissance du comparatisme en histoire" in: S. JAUMAIN, M. AMARA, B. MAJERUS, & A. VRINTS, *Une guerre totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale. Nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique*, Brussels, 2005, pp. 507-517 (Études sur la Première Guerre mondiale, 11).

## **Geschiedenis en herdenking: Pirennes agenda**

PHILIPPE RAXHON

---

### SAMENVATTING

---

Maakt men de inventaris op van de door Henri Pirenne uitgesproken redes en van de gelegenheidspublicaties die hij op uitnodiging schreef, dan valt op hoe ze een relatief bescheiden ruimte in het totaal oeuvre van de historicus innemen. Indien hij alsnog op een dergelijke uitnodiging inging, dan valt op hoe hij de gelegenheid aangreep om ofwel een historiografische balans van een bepaald thema uit te werken, ofwel de kans die hem geboden werd benutte om op een meer reflectieve wijze op het optreden van de historicus, zijn taak en de opdracht van wetenschappelijke instelling in te gaan. Naar aanleiding van het eeuwfeest van de Belgische staat was hij een veelgevraagd auteur/redenaar. Hij droeg er evenwel zorg voor om bij dergelijke gelegenheden niet in herhalingen te vervallen en om te oppervlakkige of te beperkte voorstellen af te wijzen. Wel heeft hij een bepaald aantal redevoeringen gehouden met betrekking tot de geschiedenis van België voor diverse groeperingen, in binnen- en buitenland. Zijn invloedrijke positie in de schoot van het Nationale comité voor de eeuwfeesten greep hij aan om waar mogelijk via het toekennen van subsidies het resultaat van wetenschappelijk onderzoek door Belgische onderzoekers en indirect van België zelf te valoriseren. De onafhankelijk wetenschapper in hem heeft altijd de keuzevrijheid over zijn publieke optredens trachten te behouden.

## Histoire et commémorations: l'agenda Pirenne

PHILIPPE RAXHON

---

### RÉSUMÉ

---

Un inventaire des discours prononcés par Henri Pirenne et des contributions écrites qui lui furent demandées, en diverses circonstances commémoratives, indique que ce type d'interventions tient une place relativement réduite dans l'œuvre de l'historien. Lorsqu'il accepta de se livrer à l'exercice, il semble qu'il privilégia les occasions lui permettant d'effectuer des bilans historiographiques ou qu'il s'empara d'opportunités lui permettant de mener d'amples réflexions sur le travail de l'historien, sur le rôle et la signification d'institutions scientifiques. Très sollicité au moment du centième anniversaire de la Belgique, il s'investit dans cette célébration mais en veillant à ne pas fournir de textes répétitifs, en refusant les projets superficiels ou étroitement circonstanciels. Par contre, il prononça un certain nombre de conférences, relatives à l'histoire de la Belgique, dans des cénacles d'horizons divers et à l'étranger. Il fit usage de sa position au sein de la Commission nationale des fêtes du Centenaire, afin de favoriser l'octroi de subsides à de grandes entreprises scientifiques valorisant le travail des chercheurs belges et le prestige de la Belgique. C'est en homme de science autonome qu'il a voulu faire le choix de ses interventions publiques.