

DEBATE

Beyond Belgium : Encounters, Exchanges and Entanglements, 1900-1925

Introduction : Transnational Adventures in Belgian History

Daniel Laqua (Northumbria University, Newcastle), Christophe Verbruggen (Ghent University) and Gita Deneckere (Ghent University)

In 2009, we launched *Beyond Belgium* – a project that explored the potentials of transnational history by applying them to Belgian history. Our initiative responded to the extensive literature on transnational approaches and methodologies, but also to a number of individual research projects that were underway. The focus was on the Belle Époque, an age in which economic processes, cultural exchange and political internationalisms coincided and converged in striking fashion. Although the Great War brought this period to an end, it did not end all contacts that cut across national boundaries – and, of course, it generated transnational issues in its own right. We therefore decided to look beyond the year 1914, seeing how transnational bonds and processes can be traced even beyond the evident ruptures caused by the Great War.

Scholarly dialogue was a major aim of this venture – and from the start, transnationalism was woven into its very fabric : we aimed to produce a collection of essays in which each contribution would be co-written by a Belgian and a non-Belgian historian. In other words, *Beyond Belgium* was not only supposed to examine past instances of transnational

practice, but also to test the possibilities and pitfalls of transnational scholarly cooperation. To this end, we convened a workshop that took place in Ghent on the eve of the European Social Science History Conference of 2010. The stimulating discussions encouraged us to pursue the project and culminated in a themed journal issue. We co-edited the final 2012 issue (vol. 90, no. 4) of the *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire / Belgisch tijdschrift voor filologie en geschiedenis*, resulting in the publication *Beyond Belgium : Encounters, Exchanges and Entanglements, 1900-1925*. The volume features ten articles and comprises the work of twenty authors. An overview of the articles, including abstracts for each contribution, can be accessed online via <https://sites.google.com/site/BeyondBelgium>. From the start, we envisaged our project not as a one-off publication but as the invitation to a broader dialogue that would encompass different periodicals and address different constituencies. The annual English-language issue of the *Journal of Belgian History* is the appropriate forum to continue this dialogue in the shape of a roundtable debate : after all, the launch of the journal's English version reflects an internationalisation process in its own right. Moreover, in 2005, the *RBHC/BTNG* engaged in an exercise that is, in many respects, comparable to ours : that year, issue no. 4 was given over to contributions from non-Belgian historians who situated Belgian history within a broader international context¹.

We are therefore happy to build upon these initiatives and to continue our discussions in the pages of the *Journal of Belgian History*. Such ongoing dialogue seems apt as our project raised a number of questions. For instance, transnational history evidently seeks to overcome methodological nationalism. At

1. Open Access available at www.journalbelgianhistory.be.

first sight, it may therefore seem paradoxical that we focused on one particular country – even if ‘Belgium’ in the title was prefixed by the word ‘beyond’. Yet transnational history does not deny the validity of national categories as such. Instead, it can show how these categories have been shaped by various external influences. It is this openness that we wanted to demonstrate.

Another issue raised by our project was the choice of our case study : Belgium. Our introduction explained how the Belgian case can be relevant for historians from other countries². Contributors to our project explored a wealth of historical phenomena : the formation of history as a discipline, tropical medicine, sociology, social reform, socialism, feminism, freethought and freemasonry, world fairs and internationalism. However, when accentuating the Belgian dimension of such phenomena, there is a danger of slipping into the well-established narrative of the Belgian “microcosm”. Indeed, the idea of Belgium as a “crossroads of the nations” or a meeting ground of different “civilisations” formed part of the national discourse of the Belle Époque. Any attempt to explore transnational encounters in their Belgian context therefore must resist of establishing an exceptionalist account of Belgium’s “special path” towards internationalism. Instead, the task is to explore how linguistic, political and economical circumstances provided a stimulating environment for transnational exchanges. That way, Belgium provides us with an instructive test case through which transnational processes can be examined.

In order to continue the reflection on the broader implications of our project, we have invited three distinguished historians to contribute to a virtual roundtable : Pierre-Yves Saunier from the Université Laval, Timothy Baycroft from the University of Sheffield and Martin Conway from the University of Oxford. In soliciting their contributions, we encouraged them to draw on their own research areas, showing how “entanglements” or cross-border connections between Belgium and other countries relate to their own research areas. Their comments provide further indications on what a transnational perspective can tell us about Belgian history, and what, in turn, Belgian history can tell us about the history of transnational contacts or processes.

2. CHRISTOPHE VERBRUGGEN, DANIEL LAQUA & GITA DENECKERE, “Belgium on the Move : Transnational History and the Belle Époque”, in *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire / Belgisch tijdschrift voor filologie en geschiedenis*, no. 9, 2012 (90), p. 1213-1226.

The next big thing...historians, let us all be Belgians ! A few comments about Belgium's heuristic power

Pierre-Yves Saunier (Université Laval, Quebec)

There is not an ounce of irony in the title that I have chosen for my contribution. I am not suggesting that historians of all countries should unite and apply for naturalisation in a country whose disintegration is feared by some and called for by others. No hint, either, to famous quotes in speeches and allocutions by major historical characters. Nor do I wish that we all become historians of Belgium, although it would not hurt. Behind the formula is an invitation to take on board the kind of bet that has been extended by the coordinators of the *Beyond Belgium* project and accepted by the contributors to the publication³. I support the idea that doing history “with” Belgium would be a benefit for us historians in different guises.

In this brief commentary, I will follow the coordinators' lead and put Belgium to work. It is only fair to do so, because Belgium has put me to work in the past. Belgium has been directly connected to the stream of my own work that can be described as researching, writing and teaching history in a transnational perspective. And I suspect that it is partly under the spell of Belgium that this stream came into being during the mid-1990s when I began to explore flows and ties

among and about European municipalities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries⁴. This history involved many things that “had a presence in Belgium”, as mentioned in the *Beyond Belgium* publication's introduction to Belgian individuals, Belgian sites, Belgians institutions and organisations located in Belgium. In order to understand the context in which municipal reformers operated, I had to pay interest to the history of Belgium. But above all, if I wanted to capture the circuits of information, power, knowledge, people and their impact in different locales in different countries and on different continents, this history had to be written with Belgium and not as a series of bilateral or multilateral relations between cities. It was with Belgium that the specific order of circulations and relations in the municipal could be excoriated. It was Belgian protagonists that were pivotal in the establishment, maintenance and modification of such an order⁵.

Beyond the incorporation of Belgium into the territory of my work, my research led me to experience and ponder the heuristic power of Belgium as a tool for the historian's craft. It is this aspect that came to my mind at the moment that I was invited to comment on the contributions in *Beyond Belgium*. The project-publication beautifully stages this heuristic power and its effectiveness in many directions. But commentaries, to be true to their name, should be short. Accordingly, I have selected just three directions among the bunch of possibilities graciously suggested by the project leaders.

3. CHRISTOPHE VERBRUGGEN, DANIEL LAQUA & GITA DENECKERE, *Belgium on the Move*. 4. PIERRE-YVES SAUNIER, “Changing the City : Urban International Information and the Lyon Municipality, 1900-1940”, in *Planning Perspectives*, no.1, 1999 (14), p. 19-48. 5. PIERRE-YVES SAUNIER ‘Sketches from the Urban Internationale : Voluntary Societies, International Organizations and US Foundations at the City's Bedside 1900-1960’, in *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research*, 2001 (25), p. 380-403.

Firstly, doing history with Belgium is a spur in methodological terms. This aspect can be enhanced in many different ways, but I am inclined to choose a couple that deal with the way our sense of spatiality is tested when doing history in a transnational perspective. Several contributors to the *Beyond Belgium* publication insist that the reconstruction of entanglements and intersections among societies and polities in Belle Époque Europe – starting from Belgian protagonists – eventually leads us to work through “levels” or “scales”. The latter are nested into one another by hierarchical relationships, with historical actors moving “from” one “to” the other “below” or “under”: the local, the national, the global; the city, the region, the country, the continent, the oceanic rim, the planet. However, the historical protagonists whom we meet in *Beyond Belgium* were simultaneously operating across and through these scales – whether they were keen to claim the vigour of a city and region through exhibitions, to establish the definition and reputation of a national style of medicine or history, to develop the institutions and activities of women, workers or freethinkers groups or to nurture plans for world capitals. They mustered practical and rhetorical resources that drew on these different levels and developed practices that straddled several of these planes. Not indiscriminately, but in accordance with the expected effectiveness of these locations. In their hands, and in their words, scales were tools that were used to

justify a position or an idea, or to subvert a situation, or to create an institution.

Besides, they did not merely cope with existing levels, but produced scales themselves : on the banks of the Congo river, Belgian doctors created a spatial level of their own which included their French counterparts across the river, sleeping sickness-stricken inhabitants of the Congo basin, flies and parazoa in sub-Saharan Africa, financial partners as well as German drug laboratories and tropical medicine schemes entertained in the British world. These levels were intertwined in their daily activities, and their “local” was not the narrow, permanent and contiguous territory that we associate with the name. In order to capture their activity and resources, it is a wide, transient and un-contiguous space that needs to be considered. Not the way we are used to think of our research space, though, but quite a demonstration of the strain to be faced when one decides to follow flows, ties and relations where they lead us⁶.

This special open-endedness is, I believe, a second aspect where our sense of spatiality is unsettled by doing history with Belgium. Mapping and charting flows, ties and relations that shaped and were shaped by Belgian protagonists does indeed lead contributors of *Beyond Belgium* to include places and regions that are, geographically or politically speaking, expected to have connections with Belgium : the cities across the Dutch

6. For more on this, see RICHARD WHITE, “The Nationalization of Nature”, in *The Journal of American History*, no. 3, 1999 (86), p. 976-86; MATTHIAS MIDDELL & KATJA NAUMANN, “Global History and the Spatial Turn : From the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization”, in *Journal of Global History*, no.1 2010 (5), p.149-170; MICHAEL G. MÜLLER & CORNELIUS TORP, “Conceptualising Transnational Spaces in History”, in *European Review of History*, no. 5, 2009 (16), p. 609-617. See also PIERRE-YVES SAUNIER, *Transnational History*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2013.

border, the German workers' movement, French women's activists, French and German historians, the Congo Free State. But it is also split, distant and unstable spaces that they work with: the divided spheres of freemasonry, the competing but intertwined genealogies of currents and schools in feminism and the social sciences, the twisted channels of intellectual disciplinary affiliations, the "moral empire" of American reformers and its feelers in the field of international arbitration, the rivalry of cities and sites under consideration for the creation of a "word capital". Doing history with Belgium leads us into different landscapes of connections, circulations and relations than the familiar bilateral pairs historians have abundantly studied (France/England, China/Japan, Germany/England, India/England, Mexico/United States). It invites historians to reconstruct the complete international political economy of flows and ties, and to reconstruct the orders that presided to such arrangements. This has, so far, been the work of major synthetic essays, such as Eric Hobsbawm's tetralogy or the history of the world being co-published by Beck and Harvard University Press⁷. The Belgian tree, or hub, or station, invites us to develop views of the forest, or circuit, or network based on first-hand research. Choose your metaphor.

This compelling capacity does not, I argue, merely derive from the fact that Belgium would be a "mini Europe" and as such, could be used as a "test-case". It is us who are put to test by Belgium, and not the opposite. This

should not be obliterated by the capacity of Belgian institutions and individuals to stage Belgium as the country best suited to international undertakings. *Beyond Belgium* allows us to dissipate the effects of a spell that was cast long ago. Several of its contributors decipher the performances that installed the "crossroads" trope in widely held representations and practices of Belgium, both at home and abroad. They excoriate performances by famous Belgians like Adolphe Quetelet, Henri La Fontaine, Paul Otlet or Henri Pirenne but also by a whole range of not so famous Belgians such as Antoine Wiertz who was among the first, possibly as soon as 1842, to broach into the theme of "Brussels, capital of Europe"⁸. This was completed by the works of non Belgians who found advantage in locating activities in one of the European "small countries".

It is not because *fin de siècle* Belgium was a small, bilingual and young country that European historians – and others – can learn from it. Nor because of an "international vocation". Rather, the heuristic capacity of Belgium is an outcome of all the discourse, practices and usages that have associated Belgium with these characteristics: such associations enhance patterns and processes that are more difficult to see elsewhere. Doing history with Belgium, reading Belgian history, collaborating with Belgian historians can make it easier to see how deep and far the foreign runs into the domestic, and vice versa, in the fabric or local, regional and national

7. ERIC J. HOBBSBAM, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962; *Id.*, *The Age of Capital: 1848-1875*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975; *Id.*, *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987; *Id.*, *The Age of Extremes: the Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, London, Michael Joseph, 1994; EMILY ROSENBERG (ed.), *A History of the World: A World Connecting, 1870-1945*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2012. 8. A. J. WIERTZ, "Bruxelles capitale et Paris province", as reproduced in PAUL ARON, *La Belgique artistique et littéraire: une anthologie de langue française*, Brussels, Editions Complexe, 1997, p. 77-83.

societies and communities. This line of thought would need more space than this commentary can afford, but I claim that it is difficult for historians of “big countries” to acknowledge the blurriness of this line between the domestic and the foreign, if only because of the thick layers of nationalisation that have covered the traces left by past promiscuities between national states and foreign contributions. The tropes of “crossroads” and “mini Europe” rip open the multiple relationships of alignment, rejection, imitation, mobilisation and others that historians of Germany, France or England usually capture under the notions of “influence”, and later “transfer”, which are more than often reconnected to another “big country”. *Beyond Belgium*, as a demonstration of how much the Belgian civil society or institutional fabric owes to entanglements with distant and distinct places, is an invitation to historians of other countries to look for homologous motifs.

Likewise, although on a larger plane, doing history with Belgium would help to push aside another roadblock. European history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, according to many a book or article that carry that tag, is still very much a mix of English, French and German history, with crispy Italian croutons and true flakes of Austrian history when the cook was in a good mood. Only a few research monographs or synthetic textbooks would try other recipes. This may have been one product of the “re-nationalisation” of historical narratives in Europe after the Second World War, at a stage where European history “served a stabilising function in the intellectual life of European nation-states”,

as noted by Stefan Berger⁹. In recent years, with the inroads made by global, connected or transnational approaches, the history of Europe may have increasingly become more than the history of European states writ large, as once indicted by Stuart Woolf’s¹⁰. Works such as *Beyond Belgium* can contribute to this process and help it evolve into more than the history of entanglements between European big countries writ large.

The third insight to be gained from a history “with” Belgium relates to the notion of internationalism. *Beyond Belgium* can help us to complete an ongoing move. Not unlike nationalism – which, in chorus, the participants to this special issue underline as not having been internationalism’s opposite for many *Belle Époque* protagonists – internationalism has long been studied as an idea, a cause, a worldview, an organisational set-up. The articles in the *Beyond Belgium* volume, instead, locate it in a number of habits and practices : publishing in foreign journals, visiting or reading about foreign social experiments in cities across the borders, raising funds to build a monument for a Spanish freethought martyr, organising associations and bureaux with members and activities in different countries, sending drugs abroad for testing. More could be added from the domains that *Beyond Belgium* had no space to address : migration, trade, investment, consumption. These practices were daily routines for many actors and it did not always signify an affiliation with internationalism as a project for peace, arbitration and mutual understanding, or as an horizon for a world

9. STEFAN BERGER, “A Return to the National Paradigm? National History Writing in Germany, Italy, France, and Britain from 1945 to the Present”, in *The Journal of Modern History*, no.3, 7, 2005 (77), p. 629-678. 10. STUART WOOLF, “Europe and its Historians”, in *Contemporary European History*, no.3, 2003 (12), p. 323-337.

polity that would supersede national states or local societies. Authors in *Beyond Belgium*, to my eyes, are doing to internationalism what Michael Billig did for nationalism : they call our attention to “banal internationalism”¹¹. Banal internationalism, here, points to the manifold practices of everyday life that installed and reproduced ties, flows and links across borders and the spatial and social formations that they created. From that point of view, banal internationalism is not a kind of minor or major utopia, but what individuals did through and between polities and societies, chiefly but not only polities and societies defined in national terms. And they did it at the same time that they also ran routines that installed and reproduced other types of imagined communities, from the nation to the social group or the religious community of believers.

If we write history with Belgium, then the story of internationalism is not the usual narrative of the wax and wane of a noble-but-weak chimera to prevent war, nor even the history of concerted efforts to create rule for the world through international organisations. It is a story of practices, their operation, their incorporation into habits and outlooks. *Beyond Belgium* is certainly not the first instance where this is suggested. Historians have been studying banal internationalism in economic, social, cultural and material terms for decades. But this was somehow obscured by the debate around the hierarchy of allegiance between nationalism and internationalism, and its inevitable conclusion that nationalism had won in every occasion

(the crucial point of the demonstration being the First World War). More than often, paying attention to the practices of internationalism was, ultimately, an attempt to validate or invalidate internationalism as an idea, a cause or a project. *Beyond Belgium* goes way beyond this and takes these practices seriously.

In 2005, Patrick Pasture noticed that the history of Belgium was not very commonly practiced outside of Belgium, and that even fewer historians studied Belgium as a case to highlight major historical issues and processes¹². *Beyond Belgium* is not trying to redress this situation, but redefines the terms of the question : it is not a “small state by the North Sea” that they urge foreign historians to consider, but an epitome of the history of entanglements in the modern world. That should not lead to more chairs in the history of Belgium abroad, but it has the drive to make history with Belgium into something familiar to many foreign historians.

11. MICHAEL BILLIG, *Banal Nationalism*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1995. 12. PATRICK PASTURE, “Views from Abroad : Foreign Historians on a Small State by the North Sea. With Reflections on Historical Writing in Belgium and Elsewhere”, in *Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine / Belgisch tijdschrift voor nieuwste geschiedenis*, no.4, 2005 (35), p. 413-433.

Belgium – crossroads and conduit

Timothy Baycroft (University of Sheffield)

Belgium has an odd and in some ways enigmatic place in European history. On the one hand, it is seen as the crossroads of Europe, a centre for trade and economy since the Middle Ages, one of the earliest centres for commercial capitalism and industry, later the capital of Europe, the meeting point between Latin and Germanic cultures, the most fought over territory in the continent, the meeting ground of the great European powers, and, as this collection of essays shows very effectively, a centre for the exchange of ideas. On the other hand, it is often ignored in scholarship, unknown among the public and academia, and left out of important comparative case studies of European history. The set of essays published in the *Beyond Belgium* thematic issue¹³, is a good example of how a study of Belgium can be helpful and relevant to many of the questions being asked by historians in a variety of fields.

Across the collection of articles, the most striking element is the extent to which Belgium was at the heart of a wide range of world-wide intellectual trends : from the professionalisation of academic disciplines (sociology, history, medicine etc.) through international organisations aiming to promote welfare, freethinking or feminism, Belgium and Belgians were closely involved. As the authors have shown, this does not always mean that it was Belgium that was the trendsetter, but at the very least that in the period of upheaval at the end of the nineteenth century

– known afterwards as the *Belle Époque* – there was involvement of Belgians in many areas of would-be international collaboration, and that Belgians were fully aware of the new ideas, dilemmas and changes, closely following and participating in European and global transformations. That makes it a useful laboratory to study the *Belle Époque* and how the various European ideas played out in practice in a useful comparative framework.

My own work in the past has also involved the links between Belgian movements and those across the border in France, though at a much more localised, amateur level than those covered in several of the articles from the special issue. Not only the “international private expert organizations” as described by Christian Müller and Jasmien Van Daele, or world renowned academics such as Henri Pirenne (see Geneviève Warland and Matthias Middell’s contribution to *Beyond Belgium*), but also less ambitious organisations such as learned societies or local chapters of Socialist parties corresponded with one another and exchanged publications and speakers across the national border. Most often amateur, as distinct from the formal institutional and professional academic exchanges covered in these chapters, they nevertheless show that those in towns and villages were also interested in what was going on outside of their own country and region. There was interaction between the various Flemish movements of Belgium and those of France, and well-known Flamingant leaders, such as Guido Gezelle, corresponded with leading members of the *Comité Flamand de France*, through both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries¹⁴. It was clear that for those

13. CHRISTOPHE VERBRUGGEN, DANIEL LAQUA & GITA DENECKERE, *Belgium on the Move*. 14. TIMOTHY BAYCROFT, *Culture, Identity and Nationalism : French Flanders in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Woodbridge, Boydell, 2004 (The Royal Historical Society Studies in History Series).

in Socialist parties or the Flemish Movement, one aim of such exchanges was to expand in the hopes of future political success, either via international socialism or through enjoining the French Flemish with the Belgian Flemish into a wider culturo-nationalist movement. That being said, many of the interests were about sharing local poetry, or comparing the philological findings of amateurs interested in their local and regional dialects, and not at all political, regionalist or independentist, or even ideological, properly speaking. Outside of the ideological and political arena, economic exchange was widespread as well, both in terms of trade (sometimes contraband) and the movement of workers to and fro across the border, a process which has altered in form and importance across the last two hundred years. From the nineteenth through to the mid-twentieth century, it was Belgians migrating to France to work, as a result of long-term trends in differences of wages and prices across the border. By the late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century, the trend has reversed, and the changes brought about by the European Union have led to residents of France commuting across to Belgium in order to find work¹⁵.

Turning specifically to the discussion of socialism by Maarten Van Ginderachter and Minte Kamphuis, the comparisons with the Netherlands are quite revealing, and complement the work of myself and others such as Carl Strikwerda who have looked across the

border in the other direction towards France¹⁶. Their analysis of pillarisation, a concept found in much scholarship on the Low Countries, would be of great benefit if applied to France. Thus far, the model of a society as pillarised has not been applied to France in a way that has gained widespread recognition among historians as a useful means to understand social and historical phenomena, although studies of Belgium such as these ones reveal how useful a model it could potentially be. Such wider application is particularly true after its reconceptualisation “as a process without a fixed and strictly national outcome,” which it could be said is also true (ironically) of nationalism itself, and certainly of regionalism, which are both continent-wide processes and benefit from comparative analysis outside of the strict bounds of a single nation or region. Interestingly, some of my findings on the Socialist movement on either side of the border with respect to the Flemish movement have revealed significant differences between the two. Some Belgian Socialists had common points of reference with Flemish cultural regionalism, whereas French Socialists rejected such cultural regionalism¹⁷. In French Flanders, Flemish regionalism was the preserve of the Catholic Church, which was a staunch defender of the unitary Belgian state. Such a comparison of the differences of the Flemish regionalist/nationalist movements confirmed the conclusions of historians and sociologists working on the invented-ness of nations. It showed that the

15. See TIMOTHY BAYCROFT, “Transfrontalier migration between Belgium and France from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century”, in ELIEN DECLERCQ, WALTER KUSTERS & SAARTJE VANDEN BORRE (eds), *Migration, Intercultural Identities and Border Regions (19th and 20th Centuries/Migration, Identités Interculturelles et Espaces Frontalières (XIX^e et XX^e Siècles)*, Brussels, European Interuniversity Press, 2012, p. 195-209. 16. See for example CARL STRIKWERDA, “Regionalism and Internationalism : The Working-Class Movement in the Nord and the Belgian Connection”, in *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, 1984 (12), p. 221-230. 17. For examples, see MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER, “Social Democracy and National Identity : The Ethnic Rift in the Belgian Workers’ Party (1885-1914)”, in *International Review of Social History*, no.2, 2007 (52), p. 215-240.

arguments of nationalists themselves can be quite contingent, not natural or spontaneous, even given the reality of distinctive cultures, and furthermore that identities might or might not develop among cultural groups, depending more upon the socio-political conditions than the actual distinctiveness of the culture. Turning back to socialism, it seems that further comparison between Belgium and all of its immediate neighbours (and possibly those further afield), can sharpen our understanding not only of the rise of socialism and the interconnectedness of the movement, but also of how such political movements interacted in practice with other political objectives, in particular nationalist ones. Such a comparative understanding of common political objectives will provide an extra dimension to conclusions drawn from a study of Belgium as a pillarised society.

The findings of Jeffrey Tyssens and Petri Mirala regarding freethinkers and Freemasonry show another way in which Belgium was at the centre of a social and intellectual movement seeking international cooperation. Freemasonry in the end did not form the basis of “genuine international forum,” they suggest, because of a major division between two forms of Freemasonry – one anticlerical and Latin, and the other pro-religion and Anglo-Saxon. It seems to me that they have raised an extremely interesting question in why such an international organisation, often including members of the elites from the political, economic and intellectual spheres, was unable to form the basis of genuine international cooperation. From my own work and that of one of my students, I am inclined to think

that there is more to the divisions even than they have suggested, and that Freemasonry was not only unable to provide the basis of international institutional cooperation, but often was in fact the vehicle of nationalism and even independence movements. New national Grand Lodges drew together the elites of future nation-states, and served rather as the meeting place where future national (if not nationalist) networks were created, not resisted in favour of international connections. James Daniel has shown this quite convincingly for the national independence movements within the large Dominions of the British Empire in Canada, South Africa and Australia, in a way that will necessarily provoke future work on Freemasonry as a vehicle for independence and the identification and enhancement of regional/national/colonial autonomy¹⁸. Belgium is still an extremely interesting case study, in that analysing the differentiation between the Belgian and French Lodges may well explain much about the ways in which Belgian politics evolved in the nineteenth century, both before and after independence in 1830.

Eric Storm and Hans Vandevoorde’s article on Belgian World Fairs explores a wide range of entanglements between Belgium and other countries through their analysis of the presentation of art and regionalism. Such interesting work touches several recent trends in historiography. The comparisons and contrasts between local, regional, national and international have allowed for a refining of the concepts surrounding the development of cultural and political identities, and rendered understanding of nationalism much more sophisticated¹⁹.

18. JAMES DANIEL, “4th Earl of Carnarvon”, PhD Dissertation, University of Sheffield, 2009. 19. See for example the special issue “Municipalism, Regionalism, Nationalism : Hybrid Identity Formations and the Making of Modern Europe” of the *European Review of History / La Revue européenne d’Histoire*, no. 3, 2008 (15).

Work on *Heimat* in Germany, as well as regionalism around Europe is increasingly throwing up points for comparison of which this article is an excellent example²⁰. Folklore studies, from the historical through the literary and musical, have also begun to be used in the context of nationalism studies. A recent collection edited by David Hopkin and myself included more than one chapter which examined World Fairs, art, architecture and regionalism in many similar ways to how they have been examined here for Belgium, and suggests that there is still much work to do in interdisciplinary comparison across Europe to analyse the process from even more different angles²¹. Storm and Vandevoorde's work is a good example to show Belgium's importance for inclusion in future comparative work, both as a host helping to shape the direction of the Fairs and as a key participant.

Overall, the project and its publication successfully explores a range of entanglements between Belgium and the outside world at the time of the *Belle Époque*, and makes a case for future work to include Belgium in order to understand more completely the nature of the formation of ideas and the changes taking place in Europe at the time. I am not completely convinced, however, by the assertion in the publication's introduction that the links and cooperation between the various ideas and peoples "seem to contradict perceptions of the *Belle Époque* as an age of nationalism". They do show clearly that the development of national ideologies and the creation of national images, institutions and indeed identities, was more entangled than had previously been

though by scholars studying nationalism. There clearly was a great deal of movement of ideas and awareness of what was happening internationally, but this played out differently from place to place. The changing ideas analysed here were sometimes harnessed to promote national identity and sometimes not; it is also clearly shown that nations were not developing in some kind of splendid isolation at this time. Such entanglements, however, do not imply that nationalism was less important, only that it was developing at a time when most of the elites were extremely aware of what was going on elsewhere, and were indeed feeding off one another, for all that the nations themselves would later be rivals in war, the economy and other ways. In the same way that in the European Parliament, the various far-right, anti-immigration neo-nationalist parties from different countries often counter-intuitively form alliances with one another, nationalist thinkers of the *Belle Époque* could share ideas, and indeed mimic each others commemorations, institutions or ideas while at the same time strengthening their nation and their rivalry to other nations. It is the fault of scholarship, rather than some kind of historical truth, that studies of individual nations have treated them as if they were developing without much reference to anywhere else. The studies of Belgium in this collection show how much academics need to learn to think across borders, since those they study did so, and the result will hopefully be much greater awareness and understanding of how entangled European history was at the *Belle Époque*, with Belgium right in the centre – literally and figuratively.

20. ALON CONFINO, "Federalism and the Heimat Idea in Imperial Germany", in MAIKEN UMBACH (ed.), *German Federalism : Past, Present and Future*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002, p. 79-90.

21. DAVID HOPKIN & TIMOTHY BAYCROFT, *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century*, Leiden, Brill, 2012 (National Cultivation of Culture series).

The Frontiers of Belgium, and of Internationalism

Martin Conway (University of Oxford)

Nation-states, as the case of Belgium teaches us very clearly, are neither eternal nor autonomous. Their continuity is illusory, disguising the extent to which they are composed of a series of overlapping but distinct moments. So too is their autonomy : nation-states are laid over other forms of community, both local and more universal, and possess borders which are always much more porous to transnational and international influences than their legislators or policemen would like to think.

The essays contained in the *Beyond Belgium* volume²² very well demonstrate both of these rudimentary but very necessary truths. The second point is perhaps more explicit than the first. This collection takes as its point of departure the insight that the Belgium of the pre-First World War era was not autonomous, but integrated, embedded, and embroiled in the wider networks of knowledge, of culture, and of politics which characterised the modernising ferment of western and central Europe in the decades preceding 1914. Belgians did not live in isolation from those European (and indeed global) trends; but nor did Europeans live in isolation from Belgium. As Pierre-Yves Saunier argues stimulatingly in his own commentary, the project volume is valuable not only for how it proves the international character of Belgium but also for the way in which it demonstrates the centrality of Belgium to wider European trends of the era. This is a volume about Belgian busyness : about Belgians corresponding, travelling, or-

ganising and administering; setting up international organisations for peace and social progress; acting as a cultural bridge between, notably, France and Germany, by encouraging communication between sociologists, historians and many other scientific communities; and serving as hosts to an almost infinite number of international congresses, meetings, and indeed World Fairs. Some of this was the product of the accidents of geography (and of railway systems), which made Belgium a convenient (and neutral) location for such international endeavours; but it was also the achievement of a Belgian elite who were at ease with the practice of such internationalism. Through their linguistic skills, their professional qualifications and their conciliatory spirit, these Belgians were made to be influential actors in the European community which nearly, but not quite, came about in the pre-1914 era.

The time-specific element of that Belgian moment of internationalism forms the second, and less explicit, theme of the volume. This is a collection which rightly regards the years from the 1880s to the First World War as a distinct era in the overlapping histories of the several Belgiums which have succeeded each other since 1830. The Belgium of this volume is one that had got beyond the culture wars of the 1870s and early 1880s; which was engaged in the restless momentum of industrial and commercial growth; and which had developed a distinct international profile that also encompassed possession of an African empire. It also had a ruling class. This is a volume primarily about self-confident elites : not the rather introverted members of the ruling Catholic Party, but the

22. CHRISTOPHE VERBRUGGEN, DANIEL LAQUA & GITA DENECKERE, *Belgium on the Move*.

multi-lingual, well-qualified professionals of Brussels and the other principal cities, notably Gent and Antwerp. Confident in their Belgian (and primarily francophone) identity, possessed of knowledge, skills and economic resources, their energies and ambitions extended effortlessly beyond the frontiers of their nation-state, participating in what Kaat Wils and Anne Rasmussen rightly describe as the “vast European internationalist culture” that developed at the end of the nineteenth century²³.

To point to its class character is also, however, to indicate the limits – social, ideological, geographical, and temporal – of this internationalist culture. *Beyond Belgium* was also, in very different ways, the ambition of Belgium’s Socialists and Catholics: the one embedded in the fraternity of the Second International and its message of worker internationalism; the other drawn into the universal community of Catholicism generated by the nineteenth-century reassertion of the power of the Papacy. Both are present in this volume; but it is no accident that their place is relatively limited. The internationalism of the POB was primarily rhetorical – a matter of slogans, congresses and gestures – which had little impact on the parliamentary and therefore national focus of its political ambitions, and more profoundly on the rooted and local horizons of its working-class communities. There was little internationalism in the lives of Belgium’s miners, textile workers and railway employees, even as the fruits of their labour contributed to the international capitalist economy, in which Belgium’s economic elite were such prominent participants. Indeed, the rela-

tively immobile social structure of pre-1914 Belgium, with low levels of social mobility, of immigration and emigration, and even of long-distance internal migration, formed a marked contrast to the internationalism described in this volume. Most Belgians, if such a generalisation is permissible, lived within much smaller communities, and certainly within the frontiers of the nation-state.

The internationalism of Belgium’s Catholic Church and its rapidly expanding social and spiritual organisations was of a rather different stamp. This was an internationalism less of temperament and choice than of faith and duty. The faithful – be they clergy, members of the religious orders, or the large numbers of the laity who gave their time to Catholic activities – were ever more aware of their membership of a community that transcended state frontiers to reach over the mountains to the universal capital of Rome. How far individual Belgian Catholics ingested and espoused this ultramontane mentality and its distinctive patterns of religious practice is of course open to question; but, as the recent work by Vincent Viaene and others has well demonstrated²⁴, they could scarcely avoid it. Internationalism had become inherent in Catholicism in Belgium in the pre-1914 era: through the international religious orders and missionary activities, through pilgrimages to Rome and the international sites of Marian devotion rendered newly accessible by the European railway system, and through the structures of Catholic propaganda that communicated the ideas (and physical reality) of the Papacy as well as focusing attention on

23. CHRISTOPHE VERBRUGGEN, DANIEL LAQUA & GITA DENECKERE, *Belgium on the Move*, p. 1293.

24. VINCENT VIAENE, *Belgium and the Holy See from Gregory XVI to Pius IX (1831-1859)*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2001; E. LAMBERTS (ed.) *The Black International. The Holy See and Militant Catholicism in Europe*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2002.

the anti-clerical persecution of the Church and of the faithful in lands both close (notably France) and more distant (such as Portugal and latterly Mexico).

The very particular internationalism explored so fruitfully in the *Beyond Belgium* publication was not therefore the only way in which Belgians of the *Belle Époque* participated in communities, both imagined and real, that extended beyond their nation-state. Others, such as Catholics but also industrialists and bankers, had their own international networks, and also their own mental and ideological maps that were rather different from the primarily Franco-German (and, to a lesser extent, Dutch) orientation of the internationalism practiced by the cultural and intellectual elites. In particular, it is striking how limited Britain's role was in the forms of internationalism that feature in this volume. Despite the integration of Belgium within a global economy and a colonial order focused in large part on London, and the presence of British travellers and migrants in Belgium, Britain, and perhaps more especially the English language and intellectual world, remained somewhat distant to those Belgians who by their education and ideological sympathies were more immediately drawn to Germany and France²⁵.

This was also the internationalism of a particular moment. Almost all of the essays in the project volume conclude by referring not only to the end brought to these international conflicts by the German invasion of August 1914, but also to the reduced nature of such international contacts during the 1920s. A

particular mentality and practice of cultural internationalism in Belgium had died during the First World War, and for reasons more profound than the harsh nature of the German Occupation from 1914 to 1918. Not only were Belgians less willing to engage in international initiatives, but the new European order was less permeable to the international network-building that had flourished in the pre-1914 era. Borders were more significant, and antipathies, both national and ideological, were more defined, impeding the voluntary and amateur internationalism described in the *Beyond Belgium* volume. In its place, there developed a more governmental and professional internationalism, focused on the League of Nations, but also on the wide range of international organisations that developed during the inter-war years. Internationalism had become a serious business, but also one that had acquired a more defined political edge, as was made manifest in the Communist and fascist internationalisms of the 1930s and in the international microcosm of the Spanish Civil War.

Belgium, and Belgians, were present in all of these new forms of internationalism; just as they would be in the international contacts generated by the Second World War and by post-1945 West European reconstruction. Indeed, Belgian politicians such as Paul-Henri Spaak, as well as numerous civil servants and technical experts acquired a centrality in the projects of European integration in the 1950s and 1960s which recalls the ways in which so many of the forms of cooperation in the 1900s described in *Beyond Belgium* seemed to rely on the essential role

25. For the converse phenomenon of British attitudes to Belgium, see notably P. FRANÇOIS, "A Little Britain on the Continent": British Perceptions of Belgium, 1830-1870", PhD thesis, London/Ghent, 2006.

of Belgians as mediators and organizers. But the further one moves from the era of the *Belle Époque*, the less apposite the label of internationalism appears. The nature of the international order had of course changed fundamentally, and with it the role of Belgium within it. But Belgium too had changed. Internationalism always begins at home, and that which had flourished in Belgium in the pre-1914 era rested on a particular definition of the country as an open land of commerce and modernity, committed to visions of progress and development, which no longer held true by the middle decades of the twentieth century. There certainly were echoes of the former mentalities of internationalism, evident for example in post-war projects of colonial development in the Congo, or in the Brussels Expo of 1958²⁶; but the contested politics of the 1930s and 1940s, and the ideological, social and linguistic tensions that they generated, had created a society much less secure in its own identity, as well as in its role in international movements. When one studies the decade following the Liberation of 1944, for example, what is striking is how un-international Belgium and its elites had become. The war years had of course imposed a circumstantial internationalism on

Belgium, both through the experience of exile in London and elsewhere, and through the successive German and Allied invasions. But mentalities had become more internal, and more focused on the urgent task of rescuing Belgium from the threats of annexation, internal division and institutional collapse that had variously presented themselves during and after the war²⁷. This of course required international co-operation, but the purposes were always primarily Belgian, as in the military security provided by NATO against the USSR (and tacitly Germany) or the economic modernisation made possible by membership of the ECSC and of the EEC. With time, of course, this would again change. In particular, the European vocation of many Belgian politicians and economic figures in the 1960s and 1970s marked a return to a more outward-looking mentality among Belgian elites. But their ambitions were now regional and European, rather than international and universal. Moreover, this Europeanism had its impulse not in a confidence in the identity and vocation of Belgium, but in an ever more pervasive pessimism regarding the present divisions and future prospects of the Belgian state and nation.

Christophe Verbruggen is Lecturer at the research unit Social History since 1750 and the Institute of Public History, Ghent University. He is specialized in the social history of intellectuals and cultural institutions. He is currently working on transnational dynamics and relationships between intellectuals (1880-1930) and digital history. Among his publications are a book on literary sociability (Schrijverschap tijdens de Belgische belle époque. Een sociaal-culturele geschiedenis, 2009).

Gita Deneckere is Professor at the research group "Social History since 1750" and coordinates the "Institute for Public History" at Ghent University. She has worked on contentious politics and social movements in the long nineteenth century and the interwar years in Belgium. She is vice-chair of Amsab-Institute for Social History and

26. WILLEM ERAUW, "Expo 58 herdacht : Over nostalgie en historische ervaring", in *Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse geschiedenis XX* (2008), p. 257-266. 27. MARTIN CONWAY, *The Sorrows of Belgium : Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944-1947*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

member of the editorial board of the *International Review of Social History*. Her latest book *Leopold I. De eerste koning van Europa* (2011) will be translated in English with the support of the Flemish Literary Fund.

Daniel Laqua is Senior Lecturer in European History at Northumbria University in Newcastle upon Tyne. His research explores the multifarious nature of internationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His book *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880-1930: Peace, Progress and Prestige* has recently been published by Manchester University Press, and he has previously edited *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements between the World Wars*.

Pierre-Yves Saunier is a French historian and teaches at Université Laval (Quebec City). He specializes in the spatial history of cities and the history of international organizations, with a focus on Europe and the North Atlantic world between the late 18th century and the mid-20th century. He has just published *Transnational History for Palgrave Macmillan's Theory & History series*.

Timothy Baycroft is a Senior Lecturer in French History at the University of Sheffield. He has worked on nationalism, regionalism and border studies with particular reference to the Franco-Belgian border and French Flanders, and engaged in comparative studies across Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Recent works include *France: Inventing the Nation* (2008) and an edited work with David Hopkin entitled *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century* (2013).

Martin Conway is Fellow and Tutor in History at Balliol College in the University of Oxford, and also currently the articles editor of the *English Historical Review*. His study of the post-liberation politics of Belgium *The Sorrows of Belgium* was published by Oxford University Press in 2012, and will appear in a French-language translation in 2014. He is currently working on a study of democratic ideas in Western Europe in the era from 1945 to the end of the 1960s.