

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter XIV. The University of Ghent.

There were so many startling sensations in our world that enterprises of great pitch and moment now and then passed unnoticed. When I read my notes of those days I am sometimes amazed to find that I was often scribbling down at great length and in silly detail incidents of which the ultimate importance was very small, though they seemed of importance at the time, while I allowed to pass unnoted, or with only a word of casual reference, some event that bore heavily on the destiny of man. It must be that the ironic spirits, in their *espièglerie*, or in their justifiable contempt for the intelligence of man, continually spite him and use him for their amusement.

For instance, in my notes for the year under notice I find but brief and insufficient references to the first of those events that were destined in their ensemble to form the most evil of all the deeds committed by the Germans in Belgium. On March 25, there appeared in *La Belgique*, the organ of the General Government, this *arrêté* of a German general :

Université de Gand

*Arrêté du commandant en chef de la IV^{ème} armée,
prince Albrecht de Wurtemberg :*

En modification de l'art. 5 de l'arrêté royal du 9 décembre 1849, il est arrêté ce qui suit :

*Les cours de l'Université de Gand se donneront en langue flamande. Le chef de l'administration civile près le Gouverneur général en Belgique pourra, par exception, autoriser l'emploi d'une autre langue dans certaines branches de l'enseignement. Il est chargé de publier les dispositions réglementaires destinées à assurer l'exécution du présent arrêté. **

Why this sudden concern for the education of youth in Belgium ? Why this solicitude for the culture of a people who were being harried and harassed and imprisoned and put to death ? What military necessity was it that required a German general to interfere in the curriculum of a university there in an occupied territory, in the midst of savage warfare, in a city under martial law, and in such abnormal conditions that the University, unable to continue its functions, had been obliged to close its doors ? What had the commander of an army in the field, there in the *Etappengebiet*, to do with education ?

The subject, to be sure, was not new to Belgians ; it was an element of the old difference between the Flemish and the Walloons, and the Belgians — and the Flemish first among them — saw at once the meaning of this manoeuvre that wore the innocent air of a mere academical measure. The Governor-General had already and long since ordered that in the budget for the year 1915 there be included provisions for transforming the University of Ghent into a Flemish university, and at the

New Year he had published a statement that foreshadowed the order of Prince Albrecht of Württemberg. The statement would have it appear that the Governor-General was inspired by concern for the proper education of Flemish youth and for the realization of the ideals of their race. **

The sequel, a year later, showed that this act was but the entering wedge of a policy intended to divide the Belgian nation, and ultimately to annex its territory to the German Empire. The policy was inaugurated, as all particularly odious policies of the German Government were inaugurated, with the unctuous hypocrisy that is the essential quality of the German official lie. Whenever they adopted the pious tone it was an infallible sign that some new deviltry was brewing ; whenever they announced in horror and surprise that the English or the French had performed some ugly and unheard-of deed it meant that they were about to perpetrate that deed themselves — just as, a fortnight before they used asphyxiating gas for the first time in history, they announced at Brussels that the French had used it. Thus their sudden warm concern for the Flemings deceived no one, least of all the Flemings themselves.

The University of Ghent had been for a long time the centre about which the Flamingant movement turned. There were two State universities in Belgium, one in Liege and one in Ghent : both were French, in the sense that French was the language used officially in both, although certain courses of lectures had been

given in Flemish at Ghent. For long years the leading Flamingants had laboured to have the University of Ghent transformed into a Flemish institution. It was proposed at one time to establish a new and exclusively Flemish university at Antwerp, which is the centre of the Flemish life and of the Flemish movement ; but there were no funds available for such an ambitious scheme. Then, in March of 1911 the Flamingants in parliament brought forward a Bill enacting that at the University of Ghent all the lectures be given in Flemish. There was one of those bitter discussions which only questions relating to race, language, or religion can incite, and when the measure was found to be too radical to command the support of a majority a new Bill was presented that recognized the two languages as equal, and lectures were to be given in both, even if a double staff of professors were necessary. This too was found to be too radical, and a third proposal was brought forward that the university be gradually transformed into a Flemish institution. The measure was pending when the war came on and put an end to public discussion in Belgium, for the Flemish and Walloons closed their ranks and stood shoulder to shoulder against the invader.

When the purpose of the Governor- General was revealed a protest was immediately sent to him, written, probably, by Mr. Louis Franck, a deputy for Antwerp and just then acting Burgomaster for that city, whose name headed the list of signatures. Mr. Franck is a lawyer of Antwerp, a Flemish man of culture and

erudition, and recognized as the leader of the Flemish movement in Belgium. He is a strong, broad-shouldered man, with a great flowing red beard and a flashing eye, and endowed with all the qualities that make a fascinating popular leader. He speaks Flemish, French, German and English with equal facility, and is a remarkable orator. From the beginning of the war he had worked untiringly for his people : he had taken on his broad shoulders the direction of the affairs of his own city ; he was a member of the *Comité National* and rendered services to the *ravitaillement* that were invaluable. He was always in intimate relations with the delegates of the C.R.B. and was popular among them. He wielded a large personal influence in Belgium, and as the leader of the Flemish movement, who had himself been in the Chamber of Deputies three years before the war, led the movement for the transformation of the University. The Germans thought, no doubt, that he and the other Flamingants would welcome their intervention in favour of the old and darling project. Their first deception came when this very leader was the first to remark their hypocrisy and to resent their interference. He told them bluntly that the Flemish question was one that concerned Belgians, not Germans, and that Belgians would settle it among themselves and to suit themselves when the Germans were out of their country. The protest — and it was not to be the last in what is the darkest chapter of the whole dark history of these times — was another of those historic documents of the Belgian struggle for liberty, and it places Louis Franck

among the first and most intelligent of the nation's patriots. In a flash of political insight he saw that the act was but the first manoeuvre of a Machiavellian design to divide the Belgian people, and to destroy the Belgian nation. It was not enough that the country be violated, invaded, ravished and despoiled, stripped of all its resources, its industry ruined, and its machinery, even to the last belt or the last wheel, carried off to Germany, not enough that its cities and villages be bombarded and burned, not enough that its people be murdered ; all that was not enough to satisfy the insensate savagery that laid waste the land — the very soul of the nation must be destroyed. This protest was signed by the presidents of the two great Flemish *Bunds*, which have for their object the encouragement of Flemish culture, and by several members of the former commission for the establishment of a Flemish university. After this instant response of the Flamingants themselves there were protests from all the professors of the University and the leading personages in Belgium. *De Vlaamsche Leeuw*, the little forbidden newspaper, excoriated the manoeuvre.

The Governor-General replied to the protest of the Flamingants, and then proceeded to the execution of the measures ; and there was more resistance. Among the professors who taught at Ghent were the historians Paul Frédéricq and Henri Pirenne, both celebrated in the intellectual circles of Europe and America. Professor Fredericq was Flemish, imbued with the ideals of his race. Professor Pirenne was a scholar whose

monumental history of Belgium is the authoritative work on the life of the sturdy little nation that had struggled up through the vicissitudes of a thousand years of turbulent history, determined to be free.

It was told everywhere in Belgium, until it became common talk, that when it was determined by the German authorities to set up a purely Flemish institution Governor-General von Bissing sent for Professor Pirenne and promised him the most splendid and dazzling emoluments if he would accept the position of Rector of the University, and that Professor Pirenne replied that he would be pleased and honoured to accept the position "*if the patent naming me is signed by my sovereign, His Majesty King Albert*". The story was hardly convincing and later von Bissing himself denied it in a letter written to a Swedish philologist.***

The whole of the truth will not be known until Professors Frédéricq and Pirenne are freed and in a position to give to the world their version of the facts ; but at any rate, when the order was given to reopen and to transform the University into a Flemish institution all the professors, led by Professors Frédéricq and Pirenne, refused to obey. The Germans resorted to force : the *Polizei* appeared and on March 18, 1916, arrested Professors Frédéricq and Pirenne, took them to Brussels, and threw them into prison. Ere long they were deported to Germany, where they were provisionally interned in an officers' camp, and later transferred to the prisoners' compounds at Holzminden and Güterslok, where they were treated like other

civilian prisoners — numbered, marked, lodged and fed like the rest, with no consideration shown to their fame, their achievements, their standing or their age. Later on their lot seems to have been ameliorated, and they were treated with something of the respect which was their due.****

The American Government interested itself in the fate of the two distinguished professors, and when I made inquiries at the *Politische Abteilung* I was informed that they had been deported as "*undesirable*"; no other explanation was given beyond an allusion to what was referred to as their "*political activities*". I should like to think that the interest shown by our Government had at least some effect of securing for them that better treatment which was later accorded, for it was stated that they had been allowed to go to Jena and to study there, and, after their experiences in Belgium, refresh their belief in the existence of a moral law by reading Kant, as it were, on the spot.

Another story was told at Brussels which would have it that before they were taken away the Governor-General ordered them brought before him, and that when Professor Frédéricq entered, von Bissing, addressing him and speaking in Flemish, said :

- "*You see. Professor, I have learned Flemish since I have been here.*"

The reply was said to have been instantaneous — and in French :

- "*And I*" — said Professor Frédéricq —, "*since you came, I have forgotten it.*"

The story was so good that I concluded at once that it must be apocryphal, and there is no doubt that it is, since the Governor-General said that he never saw either of the professors in his life. But that and the other story express the spirit that inspired the Flemish patriots. Not that they had forgotten their language, or wished to ; not that they had abandoned their efforts to promote it ; but they would not have it used as a means of helping Germany to destroy the only nation where it is spoken or has a chance to develop.

I suppose that fully to understand the Flemish question one would have to be Flemish oneself. It is not wholly a question of languages. The Belgians, indeed, are famous linguists ; in the first place, they have two languages in general use — French and Flemish. Just to the north of them lies Holland, whose tongue is so akin to Flemish that the Belgians have no difficulty with it. The Flemish language has, too, certain similarities to the German, and it bears so close a resemblance in its roots to that part of our English tongue which is not of Latin derivation — that is, to the base of our language — that it is easy for the Flemish to learn English. The Flemish have no objections speaking French when they possess it ; it is the language of the Court and of the upper classes in Belgium. French was spoken in the Belgian Parliament by all, Flemish or Walloon — except, I believe, in the case of two deputies who were not sufficiently fluent in French to speak it publicly ; when they spoke they used Flemish, and the Chamber listened sympathetically. In the Belgian courts French is used

unless the accused in a criminal case or the witnesses insist on Flemish. All the street-signs in Belgium are lettered in both languages — though in Bruges and in Ghent the Germans ordered the French names stricken off. All laws and public documents are published in both languages, with the French text given first ; the Germans, however, changed the order and printed the Flemish first.

It is said that no matter how many languages one knows, there are three things that one always does in one's own mother-tongue — to wit, pray, count, and make love. I was talking one day about the Flemish question with a Belgian minister, himself a Flemishman and one of the leading exponents of the Flemish movement. He spoke habitually in French, though until the age of twelve he had never known any language but Flemish. French was the language used in his home ; his children, indeed, could not speak Flemish — in fact, as he whimsically avowed, with which his political adherents among the Flemish did not fail to reproach him. I asked him in what language he habitually thought.

- *"In French", he replied, "I made all my law studies in French ; I don't even know the terms in Flemish ; all the sequences of my thought in such affairs are in French."*
- *"In what language do you count ?"*, I said.
- *"In French", he replied.*

I did not like to be too indiscreet, and of the three topics which I have just cited as those on which one

always thinks in one's mother tongue two of them seemed too intimate to raise.

- "*But*", I ventured, "*suppose, as happens sometimes to the best of us, you were suddenly to lose your temper, grow very angry — in what language would you swear?*"
- "*Oh*", he said, without an instant's hesitation, "*in Flemish, of course.*"

Flemish is the language of all the north and west of Belgium, and French the language of the south and east. In Wallonie, the Walloons speak their French with a curious accent that goes back in the centuries for its origins. In Flanders, Flemish is spoken in accents that differ almost from commune to commune. It is in Antwerp that the purest Flemish is spoken, but even there it differs in accent and intonation from the Dutch it so closely resembles. And yet the Flemish would have none of the Dutch ; religion had much to do with that — the old conflict between the Catholic and the Orange. The Walloons would have none of the French either ; even though their language is essentially the same. They were Belgian, and the Flemish and Walloons have always got on well enough together to form a nation. "*Wallon et Flamand sont des prénoms ; le nom de famille est Belge*", says an old adage of Brabant. They prefer to live together, and when there are little quarrels, to keep them in the family.

The Flemish movement, in the view of the most enlightened of its leaders, was, and in the true sense still is, not a political but a cultural movement, the effort of a

race to develop its own powers and to realize its own destinies — though, like all those peculiar and baffling problems inherent in race differences, it has had its repercussion in politics, and politicians in Belgium have made use of it for their own needs, as politicians everywhere, frequently wanting in principles and feeling the need of issues, appeal to the ugly spirit of sectionalism and particularism. The fact that the language of the ruling classes of the court, of society, is French makes no difference to the Walloon peasants and workingmen ; their language is French also. But with the Flemish peasant it is otherwise : sometimes he is prone to feel that he is at a disadvantage ; he has an uneasy sense of inferiority. The Flemish lad conscripted for the army felt embarrassed by the fact that the officers and many of his comrades habitually spoke a language that he did not know. The fact sometimes seemed to close the door of advancement to him ; if he tried to learn French it was to speak it with a Flemish accent, and now and then be laughed at, and perhaps at the same time be accused by his own people of putting on airs, and the result of all this was a kind of resentment that any demagogue could easily fan into a flame.

The Flemish are conscious of their own glorious history; the story of Flanders from the battle of the Golden Spurs is a long story of resistance to French and Dutch and Austrian and Spanish domination. They have a great and wonderful tradition of art, glorified by the names of Rembrandt, Rubens, Jordaens and Teniers.

They have a literature of their own in which, by such writers as Henrik Conscience, their heroism is celebrated. The Lion of Flanders is the oldest heraldic device in the world and the symbol of a brave folk that are not Dutch, nor anything but Flemish — and Belgian.

But there was another tendency that ran parallel to this, the tendency of particularism to mistake itself for democracy, and there were those who hold that there should be a separation of administrative functions in the kingdom ; the government in Flanders to be administered in Flemish, that in Wallonie in French. No such advance had been made in this direction as had been made in the matter of transforming the Ghent University ; the movement had the support of some socialists, even some Walloon socialists, and others who were victims of the old confusion of particularism with democracy. But the majority saw more clearly ; they feared disunion and a cleft in the nation, and opposed it.

And then the Germans came. They knew, long before they arrived, all the currents of political and social thought. The *Politische Abteilung* studied these problems with minute care and a Machiavellian intelligence. The transformation of the University of Ghent lay ready to their hands, to be used as the thin edge of the wedge which, as they hoped, would divide the Belgian people and enable them to kill the very soul of the nation they had already violated and despoiled. And the sequel showed that they wished to do more ; Flanders, and even Holland were included in the Pan-Germanic dream of conquest. Von Bissing had such

great difficulty in procuring Flemish professors that he finally imported teachers from Holland and Germany, what the French call *célébrités inconnues*, and they turned out to be, for the most part, Germans, disclosing a sinister design to transform the University of Ghent, not into a Flemish, but into a German university.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

*** (Translation:)**

University of Ghent

Order of the Commander of the IVth army. Prince
Albrecht of Würtemberg :

In modification of Article 5 of the royal order of
December 9, 1849, it is ordered as follows :

The courses in the University of Ghent will be
given in the Flemish language. The chief of the civil
administration near the Governor-General in Belgium
may, as exception, authorize the use of another language
in certain branches of instruction. He is charged with the
publication of regulations destined to the execution of
this order.

**** « *Université Flamande***

*La question relative à l'érection d'une Université
flamande, question qui à la suite des résolutions
proposées à la Chambre belge, s'était résumée en une
réclamation visant à la transformation de l'Université*

de Gand en établissement flamand, vient de faire un pas décisif en avant.

En effet, M. le Gouverneur-général a ordonné que, dans le budget pour l'exercice 1915, soient inscrites les sommes nécessaires pour acheminer la transformation de l'Université de Gand en haute école flamande. En outre, les mesures propres à organiser la réforme de l'enseignement devront être préparées et commencées avec le concours de personnalités compétentes.

C'est ainsi qu'un des voeux essentiels du mouvement flamand approche de sa réalisation, un voeu dont les Belges aussi ont, à la longue, dû reconnaître la légitimité. En 1840, il y a précisément soixante-quinze ans, la première proposition de loi, tendant à l'organisation d'un enseignement supérieur en langue flamande, fut soumise aux Chambres, tandis que la dernière, celle des députés Franck, Cauwelaert et Huysmans, date de 1912-1913.

Il faut espérer que, désormais, tous les milieux intéressés voudront unir leurs efforts pour envisager et peser avec calme la préparation de mesures aptes à amener une solution conservant à la centenaire Alma Mater le prestige scientifique et la valeur morale qui font sa gloire en lui assurant, en même temps et mieux que jusqu'ici, les moyens d'être la protagoniste de la culture flamande et la grande semeuse du savoir et du pouvoir en ce pays de Flandre. »

La Belgique — N°408

(Translation:)

Flemish University

The question relative to the erection of a Flemish university — a question which, in accordance with the resolutions proposed in the Belgian Chamber, had been embodied in a demand calling for the transformation of the University of Ghent into a Flemish establishment — has just taken a decisive step in advance.

Indeed, the Governor-General has ordered that, in the budget for the expenses of 1915, there be provided the sums immediately necessary for the transformation of the University of Ghent into a high Flemish school. Moreover, the proper measures for organizing the reform in instruction will be devised and undertaken with the assistance of competent persons.

It is thus that one of the principal purposes of the Flemish movement approaches its realization, a purpose the legitimacy of which the Belgians also must all along have recognized. In 1840, exactly seventy-five years ago, the first draft of a law providing for the organization of a superior education in the Flemish language was submitted to the Chambers, while the last, that of the Deputies Franck, Cauwelaert and Huysmans, is dated 1912-1913.

It is to be hoped that henceforth all the classes interested will unite their efforts in order calmly to plan and to consider the preparation of appropriate measures to reach a solution, conserving to the secular Alma Mater the scientific prestige and the moral value which

is the basis of its glory, assuring to it at the same time, and better than heretofore, the means of being the protagonist of Flemish culture and the great disseminator of knowledge and of power in this land of Flanders.

*** "*The Imprisonment of the Ghent Professors*", by Kr. Nydrop, Ph.D. ; Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1917, p. 88.

**** (this note is not from B. W.) PIRENNE, Henri ; Souvenirs de captivité en Allemagne (Mars 1916 - Novembre 1918) ; Bruxelles ; Maurice Lamertin éditeur ; 1921, 94 pages :

<http://www.aml-cfwb.be/docs/previews/elb-aml-mla-12755.pdf>

French translation : « *L'Université de Gand* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre VII (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 313-317.

It would be interesting compare with what **Paul MAX** (cousin of the *bourgmestre Adolphe MAX*) told about the same day in his *Journal de guerre* (*Notes d'un Bruxellois pendant l'Occupation 1914-1918*) :

http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal_de%20guerre_de_Paul_Max_bdef.pdf

It would also be interesting compare with what **Louis GILLE**, **Alphonse OOMS** et **Paul DELANDSHEERE** told about the same days in *50 mois d'occupation allemande* (Volume 2 : 1916) :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/?p=ides&mod=iea&smod=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>