

WAS JOHAN HUIZINGA INTERDISCIPLINARY ?

by

Bryce LYON
Brown University

Twenty years ago in December 1962 when the centenary of Henri Pirenne's birth was celebrated in Belgium by academic ceremonies, speeches, papers, and exhibitions, there was no mystery about the man or his work. He was an open book. When he spoke and wrote, he clearly and directly said what he believed and thought. All those who participated in the colloquia emphasized that Pirenne was, above all, a historical theoretician, who concentrated upon social and economic phenomena, who pioneered not only in comparative history but in the kind of methodology made renowned by Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, and Fernand Braudel. Pirenne willingly admitted that he owed much to the ideas of Karl Lamprecht and, in turn, Bloch and Febvre acknowledged their debt to Pirenne as a prime stimulator of *Annales* history. The only uncertainty expressed by the participants concerned the validity of the various Pirenne theses¹.

Ten years ago in December 1972 a group of historians gathered together at Groningen to mark the centenary of Johan Huizinga's birth in that city. How sharply their papers differed from those on Pirenne! Almost thirty years after Huizinga's death in 1945 there was very little agreement about his methodology, about the ideas that guided his work, or about the man himself. Whereas the publications of Pirenne quickly gained wide recognition, Huizinga's most important book, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, existed for ten years before scholars began to perceive its remarkable qualities. The first to do so were German art historians, followed by Bloch, and then by American scholars. It was only after this outside recognition that Dutch historians took note of the book and grudgingly admitted that it might be history. Across the border in Belgium Huizinga's book was not on

(1) For the papers, speeches, and ceremonies see *Catalogue de l'Exposition Henri Pirenne*, Brussels, 1962; G. Gérardy, *Henri Pirenne, sa vie et son oeuvre*, Brussels, 1962; *Le Soir* (21 December 1962); *La Libre Belgique* (20 December 1962); *Het Laatste Nieuws* (20 December 1962); and *Discours de M. Charles Samaran*, Bulletin de l'Académie royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres, 1963, pp. 45-48. For a fuller discussion of Pirenne's historical ideas, methodology, and writings see Jan Dhondt, *Henri Pirenne: historien des institutions urbaines*, Annali della fondazione Italiana per la storia amministrativa, III, 1966, pp. 81-129; Bryce Lyon, *A Reply to Jan Dhondt's Critique of Henri Pirenne*, Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent, XXIX, 1975, pp. 3-25, *Henri Pirenne: A Biographical and Intellectual Study*, Ghent, 1974, and *The Origins of the Middle Ages: Pirenne's Challenge to Gibbon*, New York, 1972. See also Alfred F. Havighurst, *The Pirenne Thesis: Analysis, Criticism, and Revision*, 3d ed., Lexington, Mass., 1976.

the reading lists of graduate students at Ghent even after World War II. More puzzling and more significant was the confusion at Groningen as to what Huizinga was all about. Was he conservative or liberal, deeply religious with mystical proclivities or a humanist of Erasmian tendency, an innovator or a traditionalist, a pessimist or an optimist, a maladjusted person alienated from society or a commentator of exceptional perspicacity? Did he have a methodology, a philosophy of history, or a theology? Did he think like a historian? Was he repelled by Lamprecht, Spengler, and Freud? Did he understand Burckhardt? Could he write simultaneously in two or three different styles? And finally, a question which concerns us here, was his work truly interdisciplinary?²

Most medievalists would probably respond that of course Huizinga was interdisciplinary. *The Waning of the Middle Ages* is packed with interdisciplinary gems, with something for numerous disciplines — art history, the history of religion, philosophy, psychology, theology, folklore, philology, the various literatures, and the biological sciences. Consider these quotations, but a few that demonstrate Huizinga's awareness of the value of other disciplines for historical understanding: „But in history, as in nature, birth and nature are equally balanced. The decay of overripe forms of civilization is as suggestive a spectacle as the growth of new ones... The desire to discover economic causes is to some degree a craze with us, and sometimes leads us to forget a much simpler psychological explanation of the facts...

It would be interesting to study from the point of view of physiognomy the portraits of that time, which for the most part strike us by their sad expression... It is from literature that we gather the forms of erotic thought belonging to a period, but we should try to picture them functioning as elements of social life... Contemplative life has great dangers... it has made numbers of people melancholy or mad... Here, then, is the psychological foundation from which symbolism arises... With the emblem and the motto we enter the sphere of heraldic thought, of which the psychology is yet to be written... Here is a domain in which the history of art and that of civilization have still a great deal to learn from each other... The superiority of painting to literature in point of expressiveness is not, however, absolute and complete”³.

Dull indeed would be the historian, art historian, or psychologist who missed the drift of these statements. They tell one to get out of his own vineyard, to jump over the wall into others for greater historical perspective and perception. It is not fortuitous that German art historians

(2) For these papers on Huizinga see W.R.H. Kooops, E.H. Kossmann, and Gees Van Der Plaats (eds.), *Johan Huizinga 1872-1972: Papers Delivered to the Johan Huizinga Conference, Groningen 11-15 December 1972*, The Hague, 1973. For the reception of *The Waning of the Middle Ages* see F.W.N. Hugenholtz, *The Fame of a Masterwork*, pp. 91-103. The papers in this volume refer to most of the scholarly publications on Huizinga but see especially Karl J. Weintraub, *Visions of Culture*, Chicago, 1966, pp. 208-246; R.L. Colie, *Johan Huizinga and the Task of Cultural History*, *American Historical Review*, LXIX, 1964, pp. 607-630.

(3) *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Doubleday Anchor, New York, 1954, pp. 5, 22, 34, 119, 194, 202, 232, 273, 302.

were the first to appreciate *The Waning of the Middle Ages* and to regard it as a treasurehouse of ideas for drawing history and art history closer and for opening up new paths to the better understanding of a culture or an age. And, though Huizinga never explicitly made a plea for a more many-splendored approach to history, his writings exude one comparable to that famous call by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre for abandoning old-fashioned history that appeared in 1929 in the first number of their *Annales* where they appealed for a new historical *esprit*, for the collaboration of different disciplines, for more frequent intellectual exchanges, for a pulling down of those walls obstructing visions into other gardens, and for ending those schisms that divided scholarly disciplines. Not surprisingly, then, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* has an appeal to a broad spectrum of readers. Undergraduates are almost uniformly charmed and stimulated by it, and the non-historian can read it with about as much profit as the historian.

While *The Waning of the Middle Ages* may well be the *pièce de résistance* of Huizinga's writings, his other work is of the same genre, especially his *Spirit of the Netherlands*, *The Netherlands as Mediator Between Western and Central Europe*, *The Aesthetic Element in Historical Thought*, *Two Wrestlers with the Angels* (Huizinga's critique of Spengler and H. G. Wells), *Man and the Masses in America*, *Life and Thought in America*, and the extraordinary *Homo Ludens*⁴. If, therefore, Huizinga's history seems interdisciplinary in nature, why labor the point? Why ask whether he was interdisciplinary? Are not all his ideas just ripe for the plucking by scholars of cultural history? Are there not, for example, more ideas in *The Waning of the Middle Ages* than in T.F. Tout's *Chapters in the Administrative History of Medieval England*? But are these ideas usable for historians and scholars of other disciplines? It is here contended that they are not.

Since the appearance of Huizinga's masterpiece in 1919, its central theme has not been used to explain the waning of the Middle Ages in other geographical areas of western Europe; only in the Low Countries and northeastern France has there been a waning of the Middle Ages à la Huizinga. His ideas seemingly have not intrigued historians interested in other regions of western Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The many writings about the social, economic, and political malaise in fourteenth-century France and about the crises of the fourteenth century derive from Pirenne's thesis, first suggested in his *Histoire économique et sociale du moyen âge*, that catastrophes of all sorts dominated this century⁵. In England, where Huizinga never gained much of an

(4) For the dates of these works and comments upon them see *Papers Delivered to the Johan Huizinga Conference*.

(5) See the revised edition by Hans Van Werveke, Paris, 1963. For Pirenne's observations on the fourteenth century see Chapter VII entitled „Les transformations du XIVe et du XVe siècle". For references to other studies on this period see pp. 216-220. It should be noted that although the chapters dealing with the late Middle Ages in the new edition of the *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* revise and correct many of Pirenne's conclusions, they do not use Huizinga's ideas to explain the phenomenon of decline.

audience, the little written about the waning of the Middle Ages is vastly overshadowed by writings on the evolution of parliament, the growth of the wool trade, the incapacity of late medieval kings, changing patterns of land tenure, and the economic consequences of the Wars of the Roses⁶. There has been some incorporation of Huizinga's ideas in studies of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Germany, especially his ideas on the preoccupation with death and the macabre, but no work deals with a waning of the Middle Ages in, for example, Bavaria or the Rhine Valley. In Italy where the Middle Ages had yielded to the Renaissance already in the thirteenth century, only one author approaches art and culture in a manner resembling Huizinga's. Millard Meiss's *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death: The Arts, Religion, and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century* superbly connects stylistic changes to social, economic, and religious developments. Writing of the tension in the arts and literature of the third quarter of the century and of a conflict between an old and newer mode of life and thought, Meiss attributes the tension and change to „the disturbances and disasters of the time. Some of these events, like the plague, were more accidental and unprepared; others, like the financial crisis and the social struggles, were rooted in the new forms of life themselves. They seemed to challenge all at once, in the name of medieval society and medieval Christianity, the new individualism, the new secularity, and the new economic order”⁷. Although he concludes that there was a renewed religiosity and a loss of optimism, it must be emphasized that he considered these as aberrations of short duration with no profound influence upon the course of Italian Renaissance painting. And, curiously, he makes no mention of Huizinga. Nor does a historian of the Renaissance who, commenting upon a reprint of Meiss's book in 1964, stated that „this pioneering study clearly shows the integration of art with all other aspects of life. It helps destroy the too common impression that the history of art is an isolated and compartmentalized phenomenon”⁸.

It seems reasonable to conclude from these examples that Huizinga has been much read but little used. Why? Essentially because his path to historical truth or understanding is one that only he or few can tread. Huizinga was a very special person. His essay entitled „My Path to History” provides a short account of his life and of how he finally decided to leave the field of eastern literatures, especially that of India, for medieval history. Scattered here and there are some revealing reflections and passages. As a schoolboy at Groningen, he took a passionate interest

(6) See, for example, S.B. Chrimes, C.D. Ross, and R.A. Griffiths (eds.), *Fifteenth-Century England, 1399-1509: Studies in Politics and Society*, New York, 1972; J.L. Kirby, *Henry IV of England*, London, 1970; C.D. Ross, *Edward IV*, Berkeley, 1974, and *The Wars of the Roses: A Concise History*, London, 1976; S.B. Chrimes, *Henry VII*, Berkeley, 1972.

(7) This quotation is from the revised edition of 1964 published by Harper and Row, New York, p. 165.

(8) This comment of William M. Bowsky is printed on the back cover of the Meiss book.

in pageants and processions and in the library of his grandfather, a Menonite pastor. His favorite book was Anderson's *Fairy Tales*, which he continued to love, paying no attention to his friends who called it childish. While a student at the University of Groningen, he ignored Dutch politics, read no newspapers, and had slight interest in history. His tastes were literary and led to membership in a literary club and a few friends. At this time he was an incorrigible dreamer and so remained throughout his twenties. „In the afternoons”, he wrote, „when my medical friends would attend their practicals, I would often stroll out of town and remain in the country until it was time to meet again over drinks. On these walks I would enter into a kind of trance, to which I cannot really give a name today, let alone describe it clearly. All I remember is that I allowed my mind to roam freely outside the confines of daily life into a sort of ethereal state of bliss, perhaps akin to nature worship — a state that quickly subsided again in the sober light of reality.” Later, at Leipzig, he wrote that his head was full of dreams, fantasies, and confused emotions. And he admitted that before his happy marriage in 1902 his life had been very much that of a hermit. He had recurring and dominant phases of excited and slightly manic moods interspersed with irregular fits of depression lasting a few weeks and manifesting themselves chiefly in greater taciturnity. Although unable to remember exactly when he conceived of historical understanding to be like a vision, or rather an evocation of images, he believed it prior to 1905 when he became professor of history at Groningen⁹.

Huizinga was essentially a loner. Unlike Pirenne and Bloch, he was not a joiner of historical or academic organizations. He was no editor of learned journals. One could not say of him as Bloch said of Pirenne that „this faculty of understanding the living is, in very truth, the master quality of the historian... How better than by the example of Henri Pirenne — by keeping in constant touch with the present day ?”¹⁰. Huizinga took slight interest in university affairs and was deeply shocked upon learning in 1933 that his colleague H. T. Colenbrander had plagiarized eighty pages from Pirenne's *Histoire de Belgique* for a popular article on William of Orange¹¹.

Huizinga's works are pervaded by nostalgia for the past. He was so much more comfortable in the late Middle Ages or in seventeenth-century Netherlands with the art of these periods, which he could understand, than with the twentieth century and its culture, which he found so unsympathetic. The social sciences, especially sociology of the American variety, repelled him, a feeling that probably accounts for his dislike of Lamprecht's methodology and for his doubts about the young American society¹². In his two books on American society and culture, the second

(9) *Mein Weg zur Geschichte*, trans. Werner Kaegi, Basel, 1947, pp. 9-60.

(10) *The Historian's Craft*, New York, 1959, pp. 43-44.

(11) Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, pp. 384-385.

(12) Gerhard Oestreich, *Huizinga, Lamprecht und die deutsche Geschichtsphilosophie: Huizingas Groninger Antrittsvorlesung von 1905*, in *Papers Delivered to the Johan Huizinga Conference*, pp. 1-28. It should be noted that Pirenne was impressed

written after his visit to the United States in 1926, the individualism of Huizinga is writ large¹³. He was appalled by the American frenzy for progress, by its mania for groups, its „like-mindedness”. These quotations convey the depth of his feelings : „Scholarship is in America a matter of planning and undertaking work as a team much more than among us. It is a job and a conspiracy. The thinkers put their heads together at lunch or in a conference. As they talk together, ideas take shape. But ideas do not thrive in the study as they come from the pen, and the living spirit grows dim in solitude. Or should the cause be looked for precisely in the fact that solitude no longer exists, that the pens lie rusting... The luncheon as a means of intellectual exchange has obtained an almost ritual importance in America. It is the modern symposium... Not all branches of learning lend themselves to the luncheon form ; it is not right for history... Your instruments of civilization and progress, your big cities and your perfect organization, only make us nostalgic for what is old and quiet.” Of American culture he wrote : „But what a bewildering triviality in the forms in which it is enjoyed ! Golf and the auto, the film and light reading, life at the beach or out camping, and even concert-going, what are these *as forms of culture* !” What a contrast in feeling when he walked the streets of a European city at dusk : „I felt the mighty seriousness of a time in which these things were the essence for all men, and I felt that nine-tenths of our present-day cultural life really doesn't matter”¹⁴.

If the present does not matter or does not interest one, the normal reaction is to withdraw from it. And Huizinga did, an act that may account for his deep pessimism about the western world in the 1920's and 1930's. As Pieter Geyl has said, Huizinga was „the accuser of his own times”¹⁵. The first chapter of *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (1936), a work Huizinga dedicated to his children, is entitled „Apprehensions of Doom” and opens with this sentence : „We are living in a demented world. And we know it. It would not come as a surprise to anyone if tomorrow the madness gave way to a frenzy which would leave our poor Europe in a state of distracted stupor, with engines still turning and flags streaming in the breeze, but with the spirit gone”¹⁶.

What has been said about feeling, emotion, dreaming, seriousness, pessimism, isolation, alienation from the present and from material pursuits suggests that they were powerful forces steering Huizinga's history, that

by Lamprecht's ideas and methodology (Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, pp. 128-134, and *The Letters of Henri Pirenne to Karl Lamprecht (1894-1915)*, Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire, CXXXII, 1966, pp. 161-231). See also the essay on Lamprecht by Weintraub, *Visions of Culture*, pp. 161-207.

(13) I have used the English translation of these two works entitled *Man and the Masses in America* and *Life and Thought in America*, in *America: A Dutch Historian's Vision, from Afar and Near*. Johan Huizinga, trans. Herbert H. Rowen, New York, 1972.

(14) For these quotations and scores of others expressing similar reactions see *Life and Thought in America*, pp. 231-326 ; E.H. Gombrich, *Huizinga's Homo Ludens*, in *Papers Delivered to the Johan Huizinga Conference*, p. 143.

(15) *Huizinga as an Accuser of His Age*, History and Theory, III, 1963, pp. 231-262.

(16) P. 15.

they may well explain the kind of historian he was. In studying an age or a culture, he first looked at its art forms and read its literature, its philosophy, its expressions of religiosity, all of which he pondered and then expressed what he felt. This is not to say that he ignored evidence, although he was highly selective in the kind that he used. His *The Waning of the Middle Ages* and his *Dutch Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century* are laden with artistic, literary, and other cultural evidence, but his final judgments stem from his unique impressions and intuitions. On one occasion he asked, „How can the aesthetic approach, with all its evocative powers, heighten our appreciation of history?” and answered, „It does so by helping us to conjure up living pictures in the private theatre of the mind.” Then he added, „Any historian who despises the evocative powers of intuition as scientifically respectable, will lose in depth and scope of vision”¹⁷.

This deeply religious man, convinced of the fundamentality of spiritual values, practiced what he preached. After a marvelously clairvoyant explanation of the Dutch golden age in the seventeenth century, he concluded that it was born by accident, that it was not a reflection of western civilization but was an exception and deviation that he described as a gift of God. Does this not verge upon the Augustinian? But why did this golden age fade away? Because, according to Huizinga, the Dutch became too occupied with their quest for tranquillity¹⁸. Is it possible that his long preoccupation with tranquillity led him to believe that most of the Dutch in the eighteenth century shared his feeling? At the end of *The Waning of the Middle Ages* he concluded that „the soul of Western Christendom itself was outgrowing medieval forms and modes of thought that had become shackles”, a change that transpired because, by an inward ripening, the medieval mind finally began to grasp the spirit of antiquity¹⁹. In his remarkable book *Homo Ludens*, he wrote: „Civilization will in a sense always be played according to certain rules, and true civilization will always demand fair play. Fair play is nothing less than good faith expressed in play terms”. Huizinga’s „play element of culture” is an idea difficult for historians, even those of culture, to grasp and to utilize²⁰.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Huizinga and his ideas, is excited or inspired by him, does not make him interdisciplinary. Historians and scholars in related disciplines have shied away from him. Why? Because to use him one would have to develop or acquire his unusual mental, spiritual, and emotional gifts, obviously a difficult or impossible task.

(17) *The Aesthetic Element in Historical Thought*, London, 1968, especially pp. 222-240.

(18) *Dutch Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century and Other Essays*, selected by Pieter Geyl and F. W. N. Hugenholtz and translated by Arnold J. Pomerans, London, 1968, pp. 102-104. See also E.H. Kossmann, *Postscript*, in *Papers Delivered to the Johan Huizinga Conference*, pp. 223-234.

(19) P. 335.

(20) For an exceptionally sensitive appreciation of Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* see Gombrich’s paper cited in note 14, pp. 133-154.

His perception of history, his image of the late Middle Ages, is uniquely his. How much he resembles his remarkable contemporary Marcel Proust in mind and method ! How often have others been able to use the technique found in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* ? That Huizinga's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts will never be fathomed is simply a sign of his refined and intricate mind, a mind that made him one of the most significant historians of the western world and placed him among the finest but most complicated representatives of western thought during the first half of the twentieth century.