

Memory and the Myth of Albertus C. Van Raalte: How Holland, Michigan, Remembers Its Founding Father

by
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Across the United States, numerous statues commemorate pioneers and the founders of American cities and towns. These memorials honor the doctrines and deeds of exceptional men and, less frequently, women. They are also manifestations of various ideals, promoting such virtues as individualism, sturdiness, sacrifice, leadership, and vision, all essential qualities on the American frontier but thought to be lacking in today's society. John Bodnar observes that "the pioneer was a popular historical symbol in midwestern commemorations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. [The pioneer symbol's] appeal to ordinary people resided in its vernacular meaning of sturdy ancestors who founded ethnic communities and families, preserved traditions in the face of social change, and overcame hardship. These defenders of vernacular culture were especially important to midwesterners who were anxious about the pace of economic centralization and the impact of urban and industrial growth upon their local places."¹

John Higham adds that the social elites who controlled local historical societies in the early twentieth century sought "demonstrable continuity of descent and civic leadership" between the city's early settlers and themselves.² Bodnar and Higham argue that public memory is formed through the interplay of the vernacular culture (the interests of the people) and the official culture (the interests of the state and political leaders). Business leaders and politicians profit from burnishing an image of a city's past that justifies their own positions and actions. But citizens

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¹ John E. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 17.

² John Higham, "The Ethnic Historical Society in Changing Times," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 13 (Winter 1994): 31.

must also agree that the official representation of the city's past is factual, plausible, or at least beneficial to their own goals. Cultures form foundation mythologies through a complex exchange between those who propagate myths and those who choose whether to accept them.

A foundation mythology, furthermore, tends to form when a society faces the threat of cultural changes. In New England, the critical period of mythmaking was the 1830s, when the Revolutionary War generation was passing and large numbers of Irish and German immigrants poured into the United States, causing Americans to question the nature of their national identity. The Founding Fathers and the Puritans were enshrined in the pantheon of American heroes, representing true Americanism. As time passed, the stories of their great deeds became more idealized, according to Michael Kammen.³ In the Midwest, the age of foundation mythology came two generations later. Southern Michigan, for example, was settled in the 1830s and 1840s as an extension of Yankee culture relocated westward along migratory paths.⁴ These pioneers were followed by further waves of Yankees and Canadians, then Northwest European immigrants. By 1900, the pioneer generation had almost entirely passed, and as Frederick Jackson Turner told an audience of historians in 1893, so had the frontier. Like the American East of the 1830s, the Midwest at the turn of the twentieth century sought to honor its origins by erecting statues of city founders and great men. For example, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, honored its founder, Solomon Juneau, with a statue in 1896; in 1904 Indianapolis, Indiana, unveiled a statue of Revolutionary War General George Rogers Clark; Peoria, Illinois, erected a statue of politician and scientist Robert G. Ingersoll in 1911; and St. Louis, Missouri, unveiled a statue of its namesake, King Louis IX of France, in 1906, and in 1916 erected a statue of the city's founder, Pierre Laclède as well. This activity was so pervasive, in fact, that one historian has labeled this phenomenon "statuomania."⁵

³ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 28.

⁴ Susan E. Gray, *The Yankee West: Community Life on the Michigan Frontier* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁵ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 67. A regular viewer of *The Simpsons* might recognize the show's ridicule of this phenomenon. In season 7, episode 16, Jebediah Springfield, the purported founder of the fictional Springfield, is revealed to have been a rogue pirate whose great deeds were inflated or entirely bogus. The "revisionist" historian, Lisa Simpson, challenges the orthodox interpretation of the city's founding when she discovers that Springfield's popular foundation myth completely distorts the truth.

Cities also honor their founders and important citizens by preserving their homes as museums, or by dedicating parks or schools in their memories. Seldom has a historical figure in the American Midwest been as heavily commemorated in his home community as Albertus C. Van Raalte, the founder of Holland, Michigan.⁶ Van Raalte was the dedicated leader of a group of Dutch religious separatists; he spearheaded a mid-nineteenth-century mass migration from the Netherlands to the United States. In the winter of 1846 to 1847, Van Raalte had to choose a suitable place for his many followers to settle as well as guide them to that site. He called the place he chose Holland, because he said that he could not think of a better name. During the settlement's first few years, Van Raalte played an instrumental role in the religious, political, and business spheres of the community, and despite some setbacks—difficulty in constructing a harbor, the turmoil and loss of manpower occasioned by the Civil War, and a major fire in 1871—Holland flourished. As the city grew, however, Van Raalte gradually lost significance and became less important to the city's politicians and businesspeople. Van Raalte's followers split into two irreconcilable Calvinist camps, the Reformed and the Christian Reformed denominations. Van Raalte was involved in many controversies during his lifetime, and his legacy was a point of contention between opposing parties after his death in 1876. Over time, however, Van Raalte came to be regarded in a more favorable light, and this positive view of his legacy achieved nearly total consensus locally. Van Raalte became and remains an iconic figure in Holland.

In 1983 Eric Hobsbawm observed that some cultural practices or traditions are invented to serve ideological ends. Hobsbawm's term, "the invention of tradition," also the title of one of his books, quickly gained currency in social science scholarship.⁷ This article will illustrate how religious, civic, and ethnic components played a role in inventing and building the myth of Albertus C. Van Raalte as the source of Holland's most cherished traditions. In the late nineteenth century, partisans of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) claimed exclusive use of Van Raalte's religious legacy and promoted his image as a defense against the positions of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). In the twentieth century, however, the CRC began to see

⁶ In Holland one may find Van Raalte Park, Van Raalte farm, Van Raalte Avenue, Van Raalte Elementary School, and a statue of Van Raalte. Holland's Hope College once had a Van Raalte Hall, which was built in 1903 but burned down in 1980.

⁷ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

advantages in coopting Van Raalte's image and legacy, leaving behind the religious quarrels that had once divided the popular Dutch minister and that denomination. In civic matters, the city of Holland used Van Raalte's memory to create consensus and promote its vision of a good community. When using the founder's name, civic and business promoters in Holland avoided any mention of conflict. Perhaps most importantly for the viability of Van Raalte's enduring image outside of Holland, filiopietistic historians and proud Dutch Americans remade the Dutch *dominee* (minister) into a symbol of ethnic pride. They turned a good man into a "Great Man," an energetic leader into a legend. Using Van Raalte as an example, this article will show how over time a particular community sought its origins and built a foundation myth. Those making the myth were historians, family members, newspaper editors, city promoters, and all those who had an interest in shaping history to serve an end, however benign. Such a mythology required the backing of those in power and its embrace by the community's citizens.

Van Raalte was involved in controversies during most of his adult life. In the Netherlands, he studied theology at Leiden University, planning to follow in his father's footsteps as a minister in the state-supported Reformed (*Hervormde*) Church. A year before Van Raalte would have graduated, however, an orthodox group of Dutch Calvinists broke away from the Reformed Church to form its own religious body in an action that was called the *Afscheiding* (secession) of 1834. The administration of the *Hervormde* Church determined that Van Raalte sympathized with this secessionist element, and he received a failing grade in his final examinations before the provincial church board of South Holland and was therefore denied ordination. Van Raalte subsequently joined and was ordained in the new Seceder Church, becoming an important minister in Overijssel Province. The Dutch government, meanwhile, judged that the Seceders were disloyal to the nation; it persecuted them by restricting their right to gather for worship, fining and imprisoning their ministers, interfering with their Christian schools, and quartering soldiers in their midst. The general public looked down on the Seceders as well and aided the government in this harassment. Seeking a friendlier religious climate, in the mid-1840s Van Raalte and other Seceder ministers proposed migrating to the United States. Letters sent home by Dutch immigrants in America and reports by scouting parties in 1846 depicted greener pastures in

that country and convinced thousands of both Dutch Seceders and *Hervormde* Church members to make the journey to the New World.⁸

Having led hundreds of individuals to the United States and helped establish a settlement in Michigan in 1847, Van Raalte worked tirelessly to provide for the spiritual life of the Dutch immigrants. Although he had many loyal followers in Michigan, he had critics as well, who called him a theocrat, a dictator, and worst of all, a “pope.”⁹ Their chief complaint stemmed from his successful efforts in 1850 to orchestrate a union between recently arrived Dutch immigrants in the Midwest and the old (Dutch) Reformed Church that had been established in the eastern United States. His opponents argued that in forging this union Van Raalte had turned his back on the spirit of the *Afscheiding*. Critics pointed out that the Reformed Church in America supported public schools, sang hymns in addition to psalms, and tolerated Freemasonry. Seceder immigrants feared losing local church control to a distant church synod (the controlling denominational body), as had happened in the Netherlands. In 1853, in a sign of future difficulties, Van Raalte fought bitterly with Roelof Smit, a minister in Drenthe, Michigan, whose congregation voted to leave the Reformed Church for the United Presbyterians. A larger secession movement in 1857 resulted in the formation of the Christian Reformed Church. Members of the CRC were determined to maintain Dutch identity, preserve a strict religious piety, and avoid the influences of American religion, in particular the free-will, results-oriented evangelism of the Methodists. Although Van Raalte envisioned a religious “city on a hill,” he encouraged the use of English in daily life and never faltered in his support for union with the Reformed Church in the East. He was thus more of an assimilationist than were many of his critics.¹⁰

In business and political matters as well, Van Raalte actively promoted the interests of Dutch immigrants, but once again his actions were often criticized. During the Civil War, Van Raalte openly

⁸ P. R. D. Stokvis, “Afscheiding en Emigratie,” in *Aspecten Van de Afscheiding*, ed. R. H. Bremmer, A. de Groot, and P. L. Schram (Franeker, The Netherlands: T. Wever, 1984), 57-63. The Van Raalte biographies listed in this article agree with Stokvis’s general outline of events concerning the *Afscheiding*.

⁹ Robert P. Swierenga, “Press Censorship: Albertus C. Van Raalte and Hermanus Doesburg of *De Hollander*,” in *Dutch-American Arts and Letters in Historical Perspective*, ed. idem, Jacob E. Nyenhuis, and Nella Kennedy (Holland, Mich.: Van Raalte Press, 2008), 171-90.

¹⁰ Robert P. Swierenga and Elton J. Bruins, *Family Quarrels in the Dutch Reformed Churches in the Nineteenth Century: The Pillar Church Sesquicentennial Lectures* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999).

supported Lincoln and the Union side from his pulpit, but in the 1864 presidential election the majority of his townsmen voted for the Democratic candidate, George McClellan. Van Raalte's failed attempt from 1869 to 1870 to establish a new immigrant colony in Amelia, Virginia, led many to scorn him. Peter Zuidema, who was just eight years old when he moved from the Netherlands to the Amelia colony with his parents, explained that when the venture failed, some "avenged their wrath on Dr. Van Raalte and threatened bodily harm, blaming him for their own mistakes." Zuidema also noted that "the dissatisfied settlers raised so much ado about their disappointment that Dr. Van Raalte, fearing mob violence, went back to Holland, Michigan."¹¹ Holland, however, was not always a sanctuary for its founder. In the 1850s Van Raalte faced local opposition when he solicited funds for the Holland Academy, and in the early 1860s a controversy about using hymns in church led him to consider going to South Africa as a missionary.

Despite these controversies and conflicts, Van Raalte managed to gain and hold the respect of most of his fellow citizens. His dominant personality seemed to preclude forming many close friendships, but his intelligence and his devotion to civic and religious matters won him many admirers. The immediate response to Van Raalte's death in 1876 typified the respect shown a man who had held an honored position in his community. His funeral cortège consisted of eighty carriages, as well as a "large concourse of people on foot."¹² Additional signs of respect and admiration soon followed: The Holland Classis of the Reformed Church, a regional assembly, recorded in its minutes the death of "the founder of the colony," a "good and faithful servant" of the Lord.¹³ The Particular Synod of Chicago voted to raise funds to establish an A. C. Van Raalte endowed chair at Holland's Western Theological Seminary. Although some church members protested, the decision was appealed to the General Synod, which allowed the fundraising to proceed. However, the seminary was closed in 1878 and

¹¹ Peter Zuidema to Willard Wickers, June 14, 1941, folder 1, T88-0271, Peter Zuidema Papers, Holland Historical Trust Collection, Holland Museum Archives, Holland, Mich.

¹² *Holland City News*, February 21, 1880.

¹³ Acts of the Classis of Holland, Convened at Zeeland, Mich., April 4-5, 1877, vol. iv, 89, 9518.A3, Heritage Collection Library, Joint Archives of Holland, Holland, Mich.

it did not reopen until 1884. In the end, the attempt to endow a theology chair in Van Raalte's honor was abandoned.¹⁴

In the years immediately following Van Raalte's death, his staunchest supporters recalled his many accomplishments and commemorations reached an unprecedented, almost embarrassing, level. On Decoration Day in 1877, Van Raalte's grave was adorned despite the fact that he had not been a soldier. The *Holland City News* reported that as the "fatherly chaplain" of the Civil War veterans, Van Raalte was considered one of their own.¹⁵ In 1879 Rokus Kanters bought a black-marble tablet in Chicago, which he had engraved as a memorial to be placed inside Van Raalte's First Reformed Church in Holland. Meanwhile, B. P. Higgins displayed a life-size portrait of Van Raalte in the window of his photography shop downtown. Twelve years after Van Raalte's death, the editor of the local Dutch weekly, *De Grondwet*, suggested that the growing communities along the lakeshore in Ottawa, Allegan, and Muskegon counties should jointly be called the "Van Raalte Colony." When popular opinion failed to support this idea, the editor suggested commissioning a statue of Van Raalte for Centennial Park; this proposal proved to be somewhat premature.¹⁶

It appears that many Holland residents were not prepared to support such enthusiastic early attempts to commemorate Van Raalte. His power over the religious affairs of the city's inhabitants had waned since the early years of the colony and was especially marginal later in his life. Holland's businessmen and politicians had gradually accrued more influence in the community, especially after 1867, when Holland incorporated as a city, a move which Van Raalte had bitterly opposed. Van Raalte's final years were filled with tragedy and loss. His wife died in 1870, and he nearly lost Holland itself in a fire the following year. He turned down a professorship at the local seminary but continued as a moderately influential minister.

Still, Van Raalte's name retained its authority, and it was a powerful appellation to invoke when controversies arose about church policy. In the 1880s, a few years after his death, contention flared regarding the role of Freemasonry in the Reformed Church. In the Netherlands, the Freemasons were held to be a secret society opposed to Christian

¹⁴ *De Grondwet*, May 2, June 18, 1878; *The Acts and Proceedings of the Seventy-Second General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, Convened in Regular Session at Utica, N.Y., June 5-13, 1878* (New York: Reformed Church in America, 1878), 117-19.

¹⁵ *Holland City News*, June 2, 1877.

¹⁶ *De Grondwet*, March 11, 18, 1879; April 22, 1879; December 18, 1888; February 5, 1889.

practices; however, in the United States it was the custom for men of status to belong to that organization as well as to a church.¹⁷ Koenrad Van Leeuwen of Muskegon lamented in 1881 that Van Raalte and the Reverend Cornelius Van der Meulen, the founder of nearby Zeeland, Michigan, were not around to solve this issue.¹⁸ Apparently Van Leeuwen felt that words from the dead leaders of the Dutch immigrants could solve the conflicts that had raged even during their lifetimes. In 1881 and 1882, as the RCA reaffirmed its tolerance of Freemasonry, many midwestern Dutch left the RCA for the CRC. The Freemasonry debates brought out bitter feelings and resulted in numerous accusations of unorthodoxy from both sides of the conflict. The Van Raalte family was disgusted to find that that Van Raalte was being cited as an authority on both sides of the controversy. In 1881, Van Raalte's oldest son, D. B. K. Van Raalte, spoke for the family in *De Grondwet*: "In recent days we have been deeply grieved by the manner, in the current struggle, in which the name of A. C. van Raalte is being used by certain persons who lack both knowledge and sensitivity. We politely ask that individuals no longer make references to van Raalte. We have too much respect and love for his sacrificial and frequently innervating labors bestowed on church and school to remain indifferent when, either indirectly or more directly, groundless accusations are made against him. We believe that he has earned the right to a peaceful cessation of his labor."¹⁹

D. B. K. Van Raalte's request was apparently granted, and for the next few years the written references to Van Raalte's beliefs subsided. Albertus Van Raalte was the subject of a county biographical sketch in 1882, and the Reverend Seine Bolks referred to his guiding light in a speech upon the installation of Nicholas M. Steffens as Professor of Theology at Western Theological Seminary in 1884, but there were no more grand proposals to memorialize him or attempts to exploit the Van Raalte name.²⁰

Beginning in the late 1880s, a few writers sympathetic to the RCA drew on the memory of Van Raalte to support their version of the rift between the two Dutch American denominations. Thus it was through religion that the initial steps were taken to create the myth of Van

¹⁷ Harry Boonstra, "The Dutch Equation in the RCA Freemasonry Controversy: 1867-1885," Van Raalte Institute Visiting Research Fellows Program Lecture Series, 2008, available upon request from the institute.

¹⁸ *De Grondwet*, September 6, 1881.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, August 30, 1881.

²⁰ *De Hope*, December 16, 1884.

Raalte. Writers who were members of the RCA wanted to remind Dutch Americans of Van Raalte's important role in founding a settlement of Dutch Reformed pilgrims.²¹ "The driving spirit of this whole movement," Van Raalte's acquaintance Nicholas Dosker wrote in 1888, "was Dr. Van Raalte. Those who knew him, knew that his royal character was too great for his relative size."²² In a book about the history of the Dutch Reformed Church in America, Dosker heaped praise on Van Raalte, stating that God had chosen him as the leader of hundreds, even thousands of immigrants. In addition, Dosker's book includes perhaps the first written attempt to present Van Raalte as a visionary: "Behind my parsonage, there was a piece of land that used to be a Swamp. When the fever-ridden owner complained to Van Raalte about the property, the [minister] walked over fallen trees and said . . . 'you shall harvest wheat here yet.' 'Harvest wheat,' answered the man, 'harvest frogs is more like it.' And yet, during my time there, Van Raalte's prophecy was fulfilled many times."²³ In this passage, Van Raalte is portrayed as having the ability to determine the colony's success or failure through his commanding words and vision. Those who listened to him would succeed in America.

On the other hand, some in the Christian Reformed Church viewed Van Raalte as a hypocrite because he had opposed the centralized power and liberal views of the state church in the Netherlands but then had promoted the 1850 union between the immigrant churches and the established Reformed churches in New York. In the years after Van Raalte's death, the CRC gained members relative to the RCA, and while the RCA's seminary in the Midwest closed temporarily, the CRC opened a Theological School in Grand Rapids in 1876. Reformed Church members like Nicholas Dosker and his son Henry Elias Dosker felt it their duty to set the historical record straight and thereby aid the stumbling RCA in the Midwest. In the Doskers' view, the Christian Reformed Church separatists had committed theological errors in 1857 by rejecting denominational unity for little reason besides a demand for local control over their churches. Van Raalte had done all that was possible to convince them of their mistake.

²¹ The earliest biographical sketch, published in 1877 in a Dutch periodical, also influenced later writings about Van Raalte's religious role. See Anthony Brummelkamp, "Biographical Sketch of A. C. Van Raalte," in *Zalsman's Jaarboekje voor Kerk, School, en Zending in Nederland voor het jaar* 12 (1877): 91-116.

²² Nicholas Dosker, *De Hollandsche Gereformeerde Kerk in Amerika* (Nijmegen, The Netherlands: P. J. Milborn, 1888), 271.

²³ *Ibid.*, 270.

Thus, Henry Dosker decided in the early 1890s to publish the first biography of Van Raalte. George Harinck argues that Dosker wrote this biography in Dutch because he was interested in convincing the church in the Netherlands—and thereby potential immigrants to America—that Van Raalte had been in the right and his Reformed Church was the proper defender of Calvinist doctrine in America.²⁴ Whether or not this is true, the book did not sell well either among Dutch Americans or in the Netherlands. The younger Dosker had been twenty-two-years old when Van Raalte died, and although the two were friendly, they did not have a close relationship. Much of what Dosker learned about Van Raalte came from conversations with his father, who was a far from unbiased source, and this appears to have influenced his opinions and his writings.²⁵

The Doskers were not alone among RCA members who wanted to commemorate Van Raalte and claim his legacy. At a 1903 meeting in Zeeland, Holland's neighboring colony, the minister of the Second Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Matthew Kolyn, presented a paper titled "Reasons for the Success of Our Settlements." Kolyn's explanations included the people's character, their ability to manage, their persistence, and the quality of the men who led them. Of the last point, Kolyn remarked: "They were not men without faults, but they were specially called by Him to serve us, and I for one shall never allow their names to be stained without raising my voice against it. . . . As Moses and Aaron were given to Israel, so these brethren and fathers were assigned by the Lord for wholly special tasks: for this reason they have had no successors."²⁶

In 1909, the Reverend Seth Vander Werff (RCA) reiterated Kolyn's judgment when he said that Van Raalte "was mighty in words and deeds like Moses, and led his people from bondage into a land of freedom."²⁷ William O. Van Eyck offered another defense of Van Raalte and

²⁴ George Harinck, "Henry Dosker, between Albertus C. Van Raalte and Abraham Kuyper," *Origins* 19, no. 2 (2001): 34-41; Henry E. Dosker, *Levenschets Van A. C. Van Raalte* (Nijkerk, The Netherlands: C. C. Callenbach, 1893).

²⁵ Additional writings from this period affirm Van Raalte's status. See, for example, his biographical entry in *Portrait and Biographical Record of Muskegon and Ottawa Counties, Michigan* (Chicago: Biographical Publishing, 1893), 243-45. Peter Moerdijk used Dosker's biography of Van Raalte as a source for his article. See *idem*, "Life and Labors of Rev. Albertus C. Van Raalte," *Reformed Historical Magazine* 3 (February 1895): 1-9.

²⁶ Matthew Kolyn, "Reasons for the Success of our Settlements," folder 1, T88-0103, Matthew Kolyn Papers, Holland Historical Trust Collection, Holland Museum Archives.

²⁷ *Missionary Monthly*, January 1909.

consequently the heritage of the Reformed Church in 1922. He wrote that “the secession of 1857, in Michigan, was largely based on error, caused by ignorance of what is really ‘Reformed,’ as Dr. Van Raalte also, in 1857, actually said it was.” Van Eyck asserted that “the claim that Van Raalte and others misled their people is an invention of later days, as is also shown by the fact that very few in the colony before 1882 paid the least attention to the claims of the Seceder [CRC] leaders.”²⁸ Van Eyck seems to have believed that because Van Raalte was correct in his teachings and actions, the CRC had no justification for existence.

The RCA found that Van Raalte’s memory was a useful tool with which to bludgeon the CRC in their ongoing battles. This method may have made some RCA members happy, but it did not win many converts. The real reward the RCA reaped from its promotion of Van Raalte was success in elevating the popular view of the former leader. People came to admire the man, even without having known him, and felt he should be seen as Holland’s most important citizen. As such, his purported views could be invoked regarding secular as well as religious issues. Various writers claimed to understand Van Raalte’s vision for the city and critiqued the development of Holland when it strayed from this plan. Therefore, they justified the city’s political, cultural, and social structures by how well they fit their own interpretation of Van Raalte’s dream.

Henry D. Post, an American who befriended Van Raalte in 1847 and moved with his wife and younger brother to Holland, had long touted Van Raalte’s genius. In an 1896 editorial, Post argued that Holland’s growth had been accomplished with an eye toward the realization of Van Raalte’s dream.²⁹ But what was Van Raalte’s “dream”? This question was broad enough to be answered in many ways. If progress was all that Van Raalte had hoped for, then his vision had been fulfilled. But economic growth was at best only a corollary of the community’s religious growth and at worst an obstacle to the city’s spiritual life. For example, Egbert Winter wrote that some developments in Holland’s history had not been welcome or “in harmony with the noble principles of our early history.”³⁰ In 1927 Holland’s John De Bly

²⁸ William O. Van Eyck, *Landmarks of the Reformed Fathers; or What Dr. Van Raalte’s People Believed* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformed Press, 1922), 18, 19.

²⁹ *Holland City News*, August 1, 1896.

³⁰ Egbert Winter, “Rev. Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte, D. D.,” folder 25, box 8, Gerrit Van Schelven Collection, Holland Museum Archives. The 1897 semicentennial

suggested building a toboggan slide and a winter resort in Holland. He said that this would make Albertus Van Raalte proud of how far the city had come.³¹ When William Elliot Griffis spoke at Hope College in 1910, he noted that sometimes a man's best work occurs after his death, referring particularly to Van Raalte.³² It seems likely that Griffis's remarks were meant to indicate that Van Raalte's vision was being realized. But one could also say, with equal validity, that a person's great deeds are sometimes exaggerated after his or her death.

Van Raalte increasingly became a symbol whose name was invoked not only to serve one side of an argument or the other but also to lend prestige to anyone who had a connection to him, however tenuous, or was fortunate enough to have been in his presence. For example, because Van Raalte had owned the original titles to most of the land in the area, Hollanders whose property deeds bore his name cherished them, and no doubt still do. And by the 1890s obituaries of Holland-area residents began mentioning the deceased's connection to Van Raalte. A short statement like "he sailed on the same ship that brought Van Raalte" or "he was one of the original members of Van Raalte's group," certified the deceased's role as a pioneer. As the "old settlers," the members of the pioneer generation of 1847, passed on, the children who had been baptized by Van Raalte inherited the right to have this fact mentioned in their death notices. Well into the 1930s and 1940s, Holland's newspaper obituaries, although no more than a few sentences long, often included the information that the deceased had been baptized by Van Raalte.³³ Firsthand anecdotal memories about Van Raalte were also frequently printed. Anna Broadmore Walter, a Florida resident, had lived in Holland as a child. In 1914 she related that she had seen Van Raalte celebrate the end of the Civil War by cutting a five-foot cake with a sword.³⁴ Meanwhile, organizations also adopted the Van Raalte name: the local chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic was known as A. C. Van Raalte Post No. 262; a Hope College Dutch language

speech was reprinted in the Hope College *Anchor* in October 1903, and in *De Grondwet* on August 11, 1911.

³¹ *Holland City News*, January 20, 1927.

³² *The Leader*, November 16, 1910. Griffis was the author of works that promoted the idea that the Dutch Republic influenced America's Founding Fathers.

³³ *Holland City News*, October 15, 1915; October 26, 1916 (quotations); December 5, 1918. These obituaries might also refer to other relationships the deceased had with Van Raalte. One such notice stated that the individual "had the distinction of having been [for two years] the hired man of Dr. A. C. Van Raalte, founder of the colony."

³⁴ *Holland City News*, July 10, 1914.

club was called the Van Raalte Society, and during the First World War, the A. C. Van Raalte Women's Relief Corps was based in Holland.³⁵

In the twentieth century Van Raalte became a figure of legend, a man chosen by God and given exceptional strength. He was frequently compared to the Pilgrim Fathers. This particular association had a long history. In 1886 Dingman Versteeg published one of the first histories of the Dutch in the Midwest, called *De Pelgrim-vaders van Het Westen*.³⁶ In 1894 Henry Dosker again drew a parallel between the Pilgrim Fathers of Massachusetts and the Dutch in Michigan, whom he called the Pilgrim Fathers of the West.³⁷ In the Netherlands, J. A. Wormser published a Van Raalte biography in 1915 with the cover title *Een Pelgrimsrader*. In the book's introduction, Wormser warned that biographies tended to be untrustworthy. If a writer had not known the subject personally, he or she could not completely trust the views of others and needed to consult primary sources. Wormser's own memories of Van Raalte were too weak to be of much use. He had met the man just once, in 1866, when Van Raalte visited the Wormser household in Amsterdam. Wormser visited Michigan in 1899, stood at Van Raalte's grave, and wondered what he did not know about the man who had been his father's associate. Using letters Van Raalte wrote to his father, and accessing church records, Wormser composed a biographical paean to his father's friend, whom he had grown to admire and venerate long after his death.³⁸

In their attempts to compensate for the lack of new sources or original interpretations, many twentieth-century biographers of Van Raalte told readers how praiseworthy their subject was in stronger and stronger terms. By reinforcing the then-established myth, authors guaranteed sales, avoided controversy, and earned the community's respect. In 1923 Aleida J. Pieters attributed the success of Holland to one man whose activity was "almost incredible."³⁹ Pieters was surely influenced by her father Roelof, who had been Van Raalte's successor

³⁵ *Holland City News*, December 13, 1898; April 16, 1914; Van Raalte Society, Hope College Topical History file, Joint Archives of Holland.

³⁶ Dingman Versteeg, *De Pelgrim-vaders van Het Westen: Eene Geschiedenis van de Worstelingen der Hollandsche Nederzettingen in Michigan, Benevens Eene Schets van de Stichting der Kolonie Pella in Iowa* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: C. M. Loomis, 1886).

³⁷ Henry E. Dosker, "The Pilgrim Fathers of the West," *The Independent* 46 (February 22, 1894): 13.

³⁸ J. A. Wormser, *In Twee Werelddelen: Het Leven Van Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte* (Nijverdaal, The Netherlands: E. J. Bosch, 1915), 1.

³⁹ Aleida J. Pieters, *A Dutch Settlement in Michigan* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans-Sevensma, 1923), 171.

in the pulpit at First Reformed Church. As dean of Milwaukee-Downer College, Aleida Pieters stressed the role of education in the assimilation process. In her filiopietistic rendering, Van Raalte was “loved, revered, and remembered in the hearts of his people.”⁴⁰ Repeating a theme of previous writers, Pieters complained that “people are still very ignorant as to how much they have to thank this benefactor at his true worth.”⁴¹ Pieters felt it was her duty to explain just how important Van Raalte was to those who had not learned of his greatness. Even Jacob Van Hinte, a professional historian from the Netherlands, believed that Van Raalte was a hero, which after all was what all his contacts in America told him. Van Hinte dedicated his seminal 1928 work, *Netherlanders in America*, to Van Raalte.⁴²

Romantic tales of how Van Raalte and his followers pioneered in a forested wilderness were essential to his image. For example, a 1932 newspaper article about the arrival of American surveyors to the colony in 1851 described Van Raalte and his community in the most picturesque terms: “The surveyors began a search through the forests, hoping to find some sign of life. They were rewarded when they heard music, old Dutch psalms, which sounded very strange to their ears. They followed the sounds and broke into a clearing where they found Dr. Van Raalte preaching to his little band from a stump, the remains of a tree recently cut. Around him were gathered all the villagers together with several peaceful Indians, and it was a happy meeting in nature’s beautiful amphitheater when the surveyors and Holland’s first settlers met on that ideal Sunday morning.”⁴³

Nostalgia for pioneer simplicity and ingenuity appealed to a society where automobiles and time-saving machinery were becoming a normal part of life. This veneration is reflected in another story that the Reverend Henry Dosker recalled in *De Hope*. He related how Van Raalte and some volunteers transported the first thieves the colony arrested twenty-five miles north to the Grand Haven County jail. While Van Raalte’s colleagues followed a winding path through the woods, he

⁴⁰ Ibid., 175.

⁴¹ Ibid., 178-79. Similarly, the *Holland City News* of May 18, 1938, notes in regard to the strength of the Reformed Church in the Midwest that “there is little doubt about it that much of the credit must go to this rather little known Dutch pioneer.”

⁴² Jacob Van Hinte, *Netherlanders in America: A Study of Emigration and Settlement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in the United States of America*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga, trans. Adriaan de Wit (1928; repr., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1985).

⁴³ On the subject of Wauakazoo, Local History Topical File, Joint Archives of Holland.

created a makeshift sailboat by using a bedsheet for a sail, and surprised the others by reaching their destination first.⁴⁴

Holland's anniversary celebrations in 1897, 1922, 1947, 1972, and 1997 all drew upon the memory of Van Raalte, the city's great founder. For the seventy-fifth anniversary in 1922, a committee proposed erecting a statue of Van Raalte. The committee chose a sculptor who produced a wax model in his Chicago studio and mailed a photograph of the model to Holland. But with the city's budget in mind, civic leaders reluctantly cancelled the project. John J. Cappon, an industrialist and the son of Holland's first mayor, had set aside enough money to fund a statue in his 1931 will, but his finances took a heavy hit in the Great Depression.⁴⁵ For decades the sculpture project languished, even as the myth of Van Raalte was accepted by more and more people.

In 1936 Holland established February 9, the anniversary of Van Raalte's arrival, as "Founder's Day." On Founder's Day in 1937 the city opened a Netherlands Museum. This interest in Dutch history coincided with the growing importance of Holland's Tulip Time festival, which was a boon to the local economy and drew as many as half a million visitors to the city every May. The festival relied on tourists, whose easy arrival by auto contrasted with the rigors the pioneers faced as they ventured into the wilderness in horse-drawn wagons. In 1939 one of the city's newspapers noted that "those hardy Dutch pioneers" planned the growth of Holland when they had "nothing but a wilderness for a background."⁴⁶ Cornelius Van der Meulen, who chaired the 1957 Founder's Day celebration, wrote a pamphlet about the pioneers, complete with an image of wooden-shoed Volendammers busily hacking down trees: "As they met the challenge of their day so may we meet the challenge of our day."⁴⁷

Marvin Lindeman's explanation in 1947 of Van Raalte's influence on Holland's development combined these two themes of industrious pioneers and an inspired leader. Lindeman judged that the Dutch pioneers were hard workers, but the only dreamer among them was Van Raalte. "Had the Dutch who settled in Holland been left to carry out their plan of living [without Van Raalte], the city would have struggled

⁴⁴ *De Hope*, December 9, 1894.

⁴⁵ Jacob E. Nyenhuis et al., *A Dream Fulfilled: The Van Raalte Sculpture in Centennial Park* (Holland, Mich.: Hope College, 1997), 1-3.

⁴⁶ *Holland City News*, February 2, 1939.

⁴⁷ Founder's Day, subject file, Holland Museum Archives.

on with resolute steadfastness, but certainly without distinction.”⁴⁸ Van Raalte’s aspirations for the city, his vision and his dream, made all the difference to Holland’s development. The Van Raalte myth lent itself to perpetuation and repetition because it was so simple and easy to understand. Brochures, newspaper articles, and pamphlets of all kinds repeated the tale of the beloved leader who came from the Netherlands, founded and named the city, built its schools and churches, and selflessly defended his church, the Union, and God.⁴⁹ In the 1930s and 1940s, the Holland Chamber of Commerce included images of Van Raalte in its municipal advertisement campaigns for the nationally recognized Tulip Time festival. During World War II, a branch of the Netherlands Information Bureau (NIB) opened in Holland to promote the Netherlands as a modern ally of the United States. David Zwart has shown that the NIB was unsuccessful, however, in its attempt to overturn the locally entrenched view of the ethnic homeland, which envisioned a quaint, old-fashioned, and repressive Netherlands based largely on the narrative of Van Raalte and his followers.⁵⁰ By 1947, as the Van Raalte myth grew, there were plans to save the Van Raalte homestead and turn it into a “national shrine.”⁵¹

Albert Hyma, another Van Raalte biographer, was at the center of the events of 1947, Holland’s centennial year. Using what some have called questionable methods and benefiting from an unlikely series of events, Hyma acquired Van Raalte’s personal papers from the Van Raalte family. His biography was published to coincide with the centennial, and he promised to deliver new insights.⁵² Hyma’s book, however, presented a fulsome defense of Van Raalte as a faultless Pilgrim Father, and the work is saturated with hero worship. Hyma saw Van Raalte as a “modern Moses,” an indispensable leader of an ignorant and helpless flock that was unprepared for democracy. According to Hyma, Van Raalte became “a man of national importance,” and his

⁴⁸ Marvin Lindeman, “A Non-Hollander Looks at Holland,” *Michigan History* 37 (December 1947): 411.

⁴⁹ Holland’s 125th Anniversary, Holland’s Sesquicentennial Papers, T97-0316.1, T88-0312, Holland Historical Trust Collection, Holland Museum Archives.

⁵⁰ David Zwart, “Constructing the Homeland: Dutch Americans and the Netherlands Information Bureau during the 1940s,” *Michigan Historical Review* 33 (Fall 2007): 86.

⁵¹ Newspaper clipping, undated, Holland Centennial Celebration (1947), T88-0306.1, Holland Historical Trust Collection, Holland Museum Archives.

⁵² Elton J. Bruins et al., *Albertus and Christina: The Van Raalte Family, Home, and Roots* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 53-63.

detractors were largely uneducated buffoons.⁵³ In addition, Hyma noted that Van Raalte's dream was to build a "center of orthodox Calvinism" in West Michigan. Orthodoxy, however, was a more flexible concept to Hyma than it was to Van Raalte and his contemporaries. Thus, Hyma could attribute the achievements of the Christian Reformed Church to Van Raalte's inspiration. Would Van Raalte have agreed with Hyma's claim that the members of the breakaway Christian Reformed Church were his "spiritual heirs"?⁵⁴

Hyma's biography of Van Raalte did not appeal to everyone, but it helped leaders of the Christian Reformed Church who sought consensus among Calvinists in the Reformed tradition to create a narrative that was favorable to a man who had been the church's adversary. As early as 1898 Foppe M. ten Hoor, a CRC minister, had written that "Van Raalte is, to a certain extent, the common possession of all Reformed Hollanders in America."⁵⁵ In 1918 Henry Beets agreed that Van Raalte had been a "Moses," but added that, like Moses, he had serious weaknesses. Beets felt Van Raalte made grand but shortsighted plans, saw himself as above others in religious matters, and was inflexible in exerting control over the churches.⁵⁶ Indeed, the CRC's justification for its own existence, its *raison d'être*, was that the union of the immigrant churches with the Reformed Church in the 1850s, as encouraged and brokered by Van Raalte, was detrimental to the spirit of orthodoxy expressed in the *Afscheiding* (secession) of 1834.⁵⁷ In 1924 E. J. Tuuk, another CRC minister, described Van Raalte in similar terms, but without Beets's caveats: "Van Raalte was a much greater man than some or many of our Reformed people both of the Reformed and the Christian Reformed churches think or thought him to be. It took some time before it dawned upon the people that a great leader had been provided for them by God to lead them in their colonization enterprise."⁵⁸ Tuuk was one of a long line of writers to credit Van

⁵³ Albert Hyma, *Albertus C. Van Raalte: His Dutch Settlements in the United States* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1947), 254.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵⁵ F. M. ten Hoor, "Rev. Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte, D. D.," *De Gereformeerde Amerikaan* 2 (1898): 75-80. The original can be found in the Western Theological Seminary pamphlet collection, Joint Archives of Holland.

⁵⁶ Henry Beets, *De Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Noord Amerika: Zestig Jaren Van Strijd en Zegen* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Grand Rapids Printing, 1918), 84-86.

⁵⁷ D. H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Tradition: From the Reformation Till the Present* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1943), 107-11.

⁵⁸ E. J. Tuuk, "Some Ideals of Dr. A. C. Van Raalte," part 1, *Religion and Culture* 6 (May 1924): 180-82.

Raalte's arrival to Providence.⁵⁹ He complained that plans to erect a statue to Van Raalte in Holland had been given too little publicity and were not "vigorously agitated." And he chided the authors of a controversial recent work on Calvinist theology because they had referred to Van Raalte as an autocrat.⁶⁰

Why would a minister of the CRC have defended Van Raalte? A cursory answer might relate to the CRC's views on education. The Christian Reformed Church always stressed that private Christian education was essential and non-negotiable. The Reformed Church, however, allowed the children of its members to attend public schools, which in the nineteenth century were usually under local control and commonly incorporated locally acceptable Christian content in their curricula. Tuuk argued that Van Raalte's true vision was to establish a Christian community with Christian education as its unifying force. All his efforts were bent toward achieving this goal. Tuuk argued that Van Raalte's emphasis on Christian education had been overlooked in the Dosker biography. Van Raalte, Tuuk continued, had "singular ability" and was "gifted." He was not just the leader of Holland, but of all the Dutch people in West Michigan.⁶¹

Immediately following the publication of Hyma's biography in 1947, the CRC's Jan Karel Van Baaen, who was related to Van Raalte, echoed Tuuk's comments, saying that Van Raalte "would rejoice in our [CRC] Christian school system."⁶² In their published comments, both Tuuk and Van Baalen recognized that Hyma, who was a member of the CRC, had taken care to portray his church in a positive light. But Hyma created controversy with his claim that Van Raalte was in a sense the *founder* of the CRC. This assertion elicited a number of responses. Holland's Albertus Pieters (RCA) rejected Hyma's position in an editorial he wrote for the *Church Herald*, the RCA's weekly magazine. Henry J. Kuiper (CRC) responded with a defense of Hyma in *The Banner*, the CRC's weekly publication. Hyma felt compelled to clarify his

⁵⁹ For example, the Reverend D. R. Drukker wrote, "God brought Van Raalte here." See *The Leader*, September 11, 1907.

⁶⁰ Tuuk, "Some Ideals of Dr. A. C. Van Raalte," part 5, *Religion and Culture* 6 (September 1924), 181 (quotation). H. Danhof and Herman Hocksema, *Van Zonde en Genade* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Dalm Printing, 1923), is the controversial work to which Tuuk was referring.

⁶¹ E. J. Tuuk, "Some Ideals," part 5, 52-53.

⁶² Jan Karel Van Baalen, review of Albert Hyma, *Albertus C. Van Raalte*, in *The Banner*, May 2, 1947, 568; James Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 110.

opinion, and did so with an editorial in *The Banner*, where he argued that Van Raalte's emphasis on Christian education was maintained by the CRC and that his spirit was carried forward by that church.⁶³

A more important reason why the CRC could now embrace Van Raalte may have been that the church no longer feared Americanization. The divisions among the Dutch in America had their origins in the 1834 *Afscheiding* in the Netherlands, and provincial divisions and personal alliances accentuated longstanding theological differences. It was in the nature of these Dutch immigrants to uphold religious orthodoxy at any cost, even if it meant disunion. And maintaining religious orthodoxy seemed to the CRC to require preserving the Dutch culture in which it had been rooted. From 1890 to 1918, however, according to Henry Zwaanstra's study of the Christian Reformed Church, the CRC reinvented itself. Prior to the 1890s, the CRC had found success in isolation. But it became apparent by the 1890s that Americanization was inevitable and that the Dutch could not form a "little Netherlands" in America. Isolation would lead to decay and the inevitable death of the church.⁶⁴ In the early twentieth century, Dutch Americans became more confident of their identity as Americans. Maintaining their ethnic identity now seemed less crucial than preserving their "Reformed" (religious) identity and the two no longer necessarily went hand-in-hand. As a Reformed minister of Dutch extraction, Van Raalte's positive attitude toward Americanization and his union with the RCA appeared less threatening to the CRC than they had a half-century earlier. Twentieth-century appeals to Dutch ethnicity had less to do with preserving Dutch identity than they did with simply praising Dutch heritage.

Van Raalte's biographers and the city officials who invoked his name in the mid-twentieth century focused on his democratic, enlightened, American side and marginalized his opponents as obstacles to progress. The resulting image of Van Raalte tended to be sentimental, simplistic, and romantic. Marian Schoolland's 1951 biography of Van Raalte was all three. In Schoolland's view, the Holland colony, even its few dissenters, owed their very survival to the Herculean Van Raalte. She put much faith in his abilities. About the Amelia colony failure, she opined, "Had Van Raalte been able to give the colony such direction and support as he had

⁶³ *Church Herald*, July 11, 18, 1947; *The Banner*, August 15, 29, 1947.

⁶⁴ Henry Zwaanstra, *Reformed Thought and Experience in a New World: A Study of the Christian Reformed Church and Its American Environment, 1890-1918* (Kampen, The Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1973).

given the Michigan colony, it might have succeeded.”⁶⁵ Schoolland ended her hagiography with one disclaimer: Van Raalte “was not perfect: there is no perfect life on record except that of the Christ.”⁶⁶ Even the cynic Arnold Mulder thought that Van Raalte was “Napoleonic” in his command of the colony, but that this trait was probably necessary to hold the people together. Mulder felt that Van Raalte’s grand projects and grand failures were both part of his personality.⁶⁷

In the developing historical memory, Van Raalte was perhaps credited with more accomplishments and virtues than he deserved. For example, Van Raalte posthumously acquired the title of “the founder of Hope College,” although he had not been accorded this honor during his lifetime.⁶⁸ Van Raalte had played an integral part in establishing the Pioneer School and Holland Academy, the precursors of Hope College, but by 1866, when the college was founded, Van Raalte had long been occupied with other pursuits. The principal of the Holland Academy, Philip Phelps, was the primary fundraiser, controller, and organizer of the new college, and he became its first president. Van Raalte, on the other hand, was notably absent during the college’s founding period. He did not attend the inauguration or first commencement service. In 1866 he visited the Netherlands, and in 1869 he was in Virginia trying to set up a new Dutch colony. Meanwhile, he was still serving as a pastor. In its official publications, nonetheless, Hope College overlooked Phelps’s role and granted the title of founder to Van Raalte, who after all had seemed to be present at every other important event in Holland’s early history. According to Elton Bruins, the greatest living authority on Van Raalte, there was an additional reason for this decision. The major writings on the college’s history had been penned by Holland insiders “who accepted the mystique and legend that developed around the figure of Van Raalte.”⁶⁹ Phelps’s mismanagement of the school and his forced

⁶⁵ Marian M. Schoolland, *The Story of Van Raalte: “A Man Strong and of Good Courage”* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1951), 104.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁶⁷ Arnold Mulder, *Americans from Holland* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1947), 182.

⁶⁸ In 1877 the General Synod of the Reformed Church referred to Van Raalte as “a” but not “the” founding father of Hope College. See *Acts and Proceedings of the Seventy-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, 1877* (New York: Reformed Church in America, 1877), 13: 700-701.

⁶⁹ Elton J. Bruins, “Early Hope College History as Reflected in the Correspondence of Rev. Albertus C. Van Raalte to Rev. Philip Phelps, Jr., 1857-1875,” in *The Dutch Adapting in North America: Papers Presented at the Thirteenth Biennial Conference for the*

resignation in 1878 made it awkward to commemorate him as the college's rightful "founder." Bruins's convincing 2001 article crediting Phelps and not Van Raalte as the true founder of Hope College gave believers in Holland's folk history a great shock. To his own surprise Bruins concluded that in regard to the title of founder of Hope College, "we have given too much credit to Van Raalte."⁷⁰

John J. Brower made a more radical attempt to overturn the myth of Van Raalte.⁷¹ In a series of letters written in the early 1970s to Willard Wickers at the Netherlands Museum, to Randall VandeWater at the *Holland Sentinel*, and to Mrs. Arden Kiekover—indeed to anyone who would listen—Brower (who was in his eighties at the time) explained why he felt such animosity toward Van Raalte. The ill will had begun 120 years ago when Brower's grandfather, the Reverend Roelof Smit, received a call to serve as a minister in Drenthe, Michigan, at a congregation already disposed against Van Raalte.⁷² First, Van Raalte questioned Smit's credentials. Two years later Smit and Van Raalte butted heads over how to deal with a case of alleged adultery in a neighboring township. On May 15, 1853, at an all-important church meeting that Smit had called to address this issue, Van Raalte arrived uninvited and faced a hostile crowd. One called him a "baasje" (a little boss), another a profiteer. A church elder spoke out and said that his people had not come to America to be with Van Raalte. What followed was an early secession movement among the Dutch immigrants, an event preceding the CRC's origin by four years. Smit's congregation voted by a two-thirds majority to break away from the Holland Classis and join the United Presbyterian Church.⁷³

Association for the Advancement of Dutch American Studies, ed. Richard H. Harms (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Calvin College, 2001), 10.

⁷⁰ "Van Raalte's title as founder . . . is history with a spin," *News from Hope College*, August 2002, 13. It appears that the image of Van Raalte as the college's founder coincided with the construction and dedication of an A. C. Van Raalte Memorial Hall on campus in 1903. Hope College also put on historical pageants that included Van Raalte. For its 1928 tercentenary year, the Reformed Church sponsored a historical pageant in New York. Mrs. C. V. R. Gilmore, daughter of Albertus Van Raalte, watched as in episode nine a young girl reenacted scenes from Gilmore's childhood. *Intelligencer*, May 16, 1928.

⁷¹ John J. Brower (1891-1978) was a dentist in Holland for fifty years.

⁷² Members of the congregation were upset because Van Raalte and the Holland Classis had taken funds from their church, and because Van Raalte allegedly had tried to profit from land sales.

⁷³ Bruins and Swierenga, *Family Quarrels in the Dutch Reformed Churches*, 72-76.

Brower clearly agreed with his ancestor's disdain for Van Raalte. But his criticisms went beyond those relevant to his grandfather's decision to secede from the Holland Classis. Searching his grandfather's papers, the Holland Classis Minutes of 1848-1858 (since translated into English), and letters between Van Raalte and Paulus Den Bleyker, a wealthy Dutchman from Kalamazoo, Brower felt that he had found evidence to discredit Van Raalte.⁷⁴ He chided Van Raalte for leading immigrants to Michigan during the winter, and then staying at the house of a missionary named George Smith while his countrymen perished from exposure and disease. He agreed with an acquaintance's claim that one of Van Raalte's biographers, Henry Dosker, was the "most emotional liar" ever to speak from a pulpit. Brower felt that Dosker had taken too much liberty when he wrote that Van Raalte had knelt in the snow to pray and thank God for the immigrants' safe arrival in West Michigan. Thanks to Dosker, this image of Van Raalte became a centerpiece of Holland folklore. A diorama of this mythic event went on display at the Netherlands Museum in the 1930s and was featured in the *Holland Evening Sentinel* for Founder's Day in 1972, the city's 125th anniversary.⁷⁵ Brower had further complaints, some quite trivial, such as that a bonnet on display in the city's museum had actually belonged not to Mrs. Van Raalte, as its label stated, but to another pioneer's wife.⁷⁶ Brower was certainly an individual who nursed a grudge, and he did not appear to represent any group of living critics of Van Raalte. His disgust was predicated on his belief that the myths surrounding Van Raalte were exaggerated and had made his reputation nearly unassailable. Brower's more critical view, which a number of Van Raalte's contemporaries had once held, had come down through Brower's family but was by now distinctly a minority position.

For Holland's sesquicentennial in 1997, a private source of funding, a willing city council and mayor, and an accepting citizenry joined to honor Van Raalte with a new statue in Holland's Centennial Park. The statue was based on the model first made in 1922. The preacher who was 5 feet 3 inches tall in real life became a bronze giant, standing more than 9 feet tall. His left hand is placed firmly on top of a Bible, which lies on a tree stump. His right arm is raised, and his hand is half-open in blessing, while his eyes gaze on his church and

⁷⁴ Brower had apparently written a full-length book on this subject for which he could not find a publisher.

⁷⁵ *Holland Evening Sentinel*, February 5, 1972.

⁷⁶ John J. Brower Papers, T88-0029, Holland Historical Trust Collection, Holland Museum Archives.

school. Holland, Michigan, has accepted Van Raalte as the symbol of its reputation as a hardworking, religious, democratic American city. No longer is he mentioned in the debates between the Reformed and Christian Reformed churches. The myth of Van Raalte as the great pioneer had grown and flourished in the 120 years since his death. When a proposal for a statue first arose in 1889, not everyone in Holland had a positive opinion of Van Raalte.⁷⁷ Some had known Van Raalte as an aristocrat, a borderline theocrat, and an uncompromising pedant. E. J. Tuuk provides a good description of Van Raalte's reputation as a controversial figure: "There were many who consciously recognized him as the general overseer [of the colony] and it thrilled some to a measure of hero-worship, while others were galled by it and could not condone it, and thus were prompted to resentment and even active, bitter opposition."⁷⁸

In the nineteenth century, opposition to Van Raalte came from the most orthodox Dutch Calvinists. Particularly for the conservative farmers outside of Holland's city limits, Van Raalte appeared to be a proponent of too-rapid Americanization. Conversely, today he is honored by those who seek their Dutch roots.

The Van Raalte Institute, which was established at Hope College in 1993, honors Holland's founder and promotes research in Dutch American history. The first president of the institute, Elton J. Bruins, has worked to create a respectful, but more nuanced view of Van Raalte, even if he has had difficulty at times hiding his admiration for this "American Moses."⁷⁹ A popular biography, coauthored in 1996 by Bruins, Jeanne M. Jacobson, and Larry J. Wagenaar, is well-written, but it is nevertheless a somewhat romantic retelling of Van Raalte's life. It does, however, include recent historical scholarship and is therefore more up to date.⁸⁰ In addition, in *Albertus and Christina: The Van Raalte Family, Home and Roots*, Bruins and his coauthors provide a genealogy of the Van Raalte family and round out the story of his estate and

⁷⁷ *De Grondwet*, February 5, 1889.

⁷⁸ E. J. Tuuk, "Some Ideals of Dr. A. C. Van Raalte," part 2, *Religion and Culture* 6 (June 1924): 8-9.

⁷⁹ Elton J. Bruins, "An American Moses: Albertus C. Van Raalte as Immigrant Leader," in *Sharing the Reformed Tradition: The Dutch-North America Exchange, 1846-1996*, ed. George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: V. U. Press, 1996), 19-34.

⁸⁰ Jeanne M. Jacobson, Elton J. Bruins, and Larry J. Wagenaar, *Albertus C. Van Raalte: Dutch Leader and American Patriot* (Holland, Mich.: Hope College, 1996).

descendants.⁸¹ Recently, Robert P. Swierenga has written an informative article that describes Van Raalte's business acumen and experiences.⁸² These last two works are examples of authors stepping away from focusing solely on Van Raalte as a religious leader. Future works, perhaps a collection of Van Raalte's letters or yet another biography, should not neglect the important role Van Raalte's image has played in the community after his death.

The past is malleable; historical figures are often forgotten or reexamined and made larger than life. Historians commonly assess both a person's significance and influence and also his or her character. Such judgments can be positive or negative and may change over time. Pioneer leaders who played many roles in their communities (minister, businessman, postmaster, notary, and so forth) are especially susceptible to the ebb and flow of praise and disdain.⁸³

Both at the local and national levels, popular historical memory often favors an upbeat view of the past that bolsters a positive communal or national self-perception. In what amounts to a display of allegiance to the country, schoolchildren are often taught to adore wholeheartedly politicians who were highly controversial figures in their day. Such unquestioning veneration of select public figures may be evaporating, however, as we move farther away from the consensus views of the mid-twentieth century. What are we to make of "Great Men?" David Lowenthal wrote that the past is a foreign country and we can never understand it entirely. Much popular and even scholarly history assesses the past according to present-day concerns and uses it

⁸¹ Bruins et al., *Albertus and Christina*.

⁸² Robert P. Swierenga, "Albertus C. Van Raalte as a Businessman," in *A Goodly Heritage: Essays in Honor of the Reverend Dr. Elton J. Bruins at Eighty*, ed. Jacob E. Nyenhuis (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2007).

⁸³ Van Raalte's contemporary, Hendrik P. Scholte, the pioneer minister in Pella, Iowa, faced struggles similar to Van Raalte's. Of the more than two hundred letters of Dutch immigrants published in *Iowa Letters: Dutch Immigrants on the American Frontier*, at least a dozen are directly critical of Scholte. But the positive portrayal of Scholte written and published by his daughter Leonora remains the only readily accessible biography of this immigrant founder who was successful enough to be a Lincoln delegate in the 1860 election. Scholte's house in Pella is also operated as a historic site. See Johannes Stellingwerf, comp., Robert P. Swierenga, ed., and Walter Lagerwey, trans., *Iowa Letters: Dutch Immigrants on the American Frontier* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2005); Leonora R. Keables Scholte, *A Stranger in a Strange Land: The Story of a Dutch Settlement in Iowa under the Leadership of H. P. Scholte* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1946); and Lubbertus Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte, Leader of the Secession of 1834 and Founder of Pella* (Franeker: The Netherlands, 1964). Oostendorp's biography is very technical and difficult to read.

to buttress current ideologies. People seek identity in heritage, and because at our core we often lack a sense of fundamental identity, we have to create one by inventing traditions and rituals, by praising the bones of martyrs or the deeds of heroes.⁸⁴ Especially in the field of public history, there is a dialectical relationship, a discourse between the public and the historian, so that society supports those historians whose values or presentations it finds agreeable. In many ways, culture establishes and defines historical truth.

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⁸⁴ David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).