

Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

New Selection 1

Kervyn de Lettenhove, Joseph C.M.B. (Baron)

Social category: Scholars, scientists, intellectuals

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Joseph (Constantin Marie Bruno), Baron Kervyn de Lettenhove (Sint-Michiels nr Brugge 1817 – Brugge 1891), had an important political career as representative of the Catholic party in the Belgian Chamber of Deputies. First elected in 1861, he held his seat until his death, and played a part in all important political issues of the period: the “Flemish question”, the education debate, the extension of voting rights. In 1870-71 he was Minister of Internal Affairs, a position that brought him more enemies than friends. However, Kervyn de Lettenhove was also a historian. He had received his training in that field in Paris, where he had studied law from 1832 until 1836, and where he remained for another three years to follow history courses at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France from Saint-Marc Girardin, Jules Michelet and François Guizot. During these years, he formed friendships with other leading Romantics: Chateaubriand, the historians Augustin Thierry and Adolphe Thiers, and the literary historian Abel-François Villemain. It was according to their model that he would write history. The theme of that history was initially the ancien-régime County of Flanders. In 1847-50 Kervyn de Lettenhove published a six-volume *Histoire de Flandre*, in which he related the county’s history up to its annexation into France in 1792. The book was based on thorough research on the available source material, but it mainly attracted attention for the way in which its author interpreted the history of Flanders: from his friend Thierry, Kervyn de Lettenhove adopted the notion that all history is in essence a conflict between races. Ancient Flanders, so the *Histoire de Flandre* set forth, had been the theatre of conflict not just between the Flemings and the French, but also between the Frankish-descended Flemings of the centre and south and the Saxon-descended Flemings of the coast. Kervyn de Lettenhove traced these coastal/Saxon Flemings back to a putative tribe called the Kerels, whose origins lay in Scandinavia. This Romantic ancestral myth, combined with gripping accounts of numerous battles, proved very successful. For countless readers, the *Histoire de Flandre* became a Flemish foundational epic. More controversial was the second great work that Kervyn de Lettenhove published about the nation’s past, *Les Huguenots et les Gueux* (6 vols, 1883-85). Appearing more than three decades after the *Histoire de Flandre*, and at the height of the author’s political career, it dealt with the 16th-century

revolt of the Low Countries against Spanish rule. The author showed that erudition and literary talent were not his only qualities as a historian: he also had a taste for polemic. In *Les Huguenots et les Gueux* a partisan account was given of untrustworthy and violent rebels whom the Catholic former minister regarded as the forerunners of his liberal opponents. Besides the narrative *Histoire de Flandre* and *Les Huguenots et les Gueux*, Kervyn de Lettenhove also produced, from the 1860s onwards, numerous editions. As a member (and secretary) of the committee set up within the Académie royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts to publish the works of the country's great writers, he published no fewer than 42 volumes between 1863 and 1882, including the chronicles of Jean Froissart and Philippe de Commines. As a member (and president) of the Commission royale d'Histoire, set up by the government in 1834 to publish historical documents relating to national history, he published another 16 volumes between 1870 and 1891, including a series of chronicles relating to the period of Burgundian rule. This enormous productivity showed how great Kervyn de Lettenhove's archival drive was and remained throughout his life. Among the libraries and archives he managed to get access to (despite their notorious impenetrability at the time) were that of Simancas in Spain and the Vatican archives.

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