Summary

The Groninger boer – a rural landowner in the province of Groningen – is a byword in the Netherlands. “To think of Groningen is to think of its rural landowners and the enormous role they play in society,” wrote the sociologist E. W. Hofsee in his renowned 1937 thesis Het Oldambt. Historian P. C. M. Hoppenbrouwers even described the period 1800 to 1950 in Groningen’s history as “the age of the rural landowner.”

Not every farmer in Groningen was a Groninger boer however. The name only applied to the type of farmer who elsewhere in the Netherlands was known as a herenboer - gentleman farmer - who had at least 40 to 50 hectares of land, hired in large numbers of casual farm labourers and sold most of his produce at market. More particularly, the name was applied to landowners in the clay regions who dominated public and community life, those farmers with enough money, time, education and interest to be members of church boards and the district water board, literary associations, the public welfare association, the rhetorical society and the agricultural association, as well as being local and provincial government members, sometimes even members of the upper or lower houses of parliament. The Groninger boer had some additional typical characteristics. In the political arena he was known for his liberalism, and in the matter of denomination he was a liberal Protestant or had no real preference. Besides being cultured, enterprising and prosperous, he was conscious of his social standing and was materialistic (or at least was seen to be so), and his most negative characteristics were his limited or even non-existent social awareness.

Such stereotyping was by definition always at the cost of more complex realities, and the complexity of the institution of the Groninger boer was already recognised in the nineteenth century. Geuchien Zijlma, himself a Groninger boer, wrote the following in 1881: “The rural gentry (in Groningen) are a mixture of extremely diverse elements, the old and the new, the farmer and the gentleman, stupidity and learning, shortsightedness and enterprise.... If we examine the individual landowner and how he lives, the same things can be observed. In one sense he is a gentleman, in another a farmer. The fine house is sometimes at complete odds with the sturdy fellow in shirtsleeves.
who lives in it. At least, this is the general rule, although there are a lot of exceptions to it.” In short, the Groninger boer was a highly individual being.

The Groninger boer is now a thing of the past. No doubt there are still many farmers in Groningen managing farms larger than 40 or 50 hectares but they have little in common with the traditional concept of the Groninger boer. The concept still lives on, however, particularly in its old stamping grounds. The monumental farmhouses are still there to remind us of their former owners’ importance and way of life, and the polders and dykes remind us of their enterprising spirit. Politics in the Oldambt region are still partly determined by the old distinctions between farmers and labourers. Some topics have remained sensitive elsewhere in the clay regions because of the farmers’ dominant position in the past. Their deeds and their wealth are still providing the material for novels dealing with rural themes, reminiscences, historiography and tall tales.

The rise of the Groninger boer, what he was, and how he achieved his dominant position in the clay regions of the province between the years 1760 to 1880 is the subject of this book. It also investigates the farmers’ self-image and how they were and are seen by others.

One striking aspect associated with the rise of the big landowners of the clay regions of Groningen is that in the post-1760 period, they increasingly modelled their opinions and ideals on the cultured middle classes. The development that the Groninger boer underwent between 1760 and 1880 dovetails with the modernisation that was overtaking the Netherlands at that time, and which it was thus part of. One of its characteristics was the rising cultural influence of the European Enlightenment, which became dominant in the final quarter of the century. This led to a link between Christianity and the Enlightenment, with a firm belief in progress. In the field of politics and government, a sense of national identity started to develop with the creation of a national state in 1798, and half a century later, the creation of a parliamentary democracy. These developments had an effect both on how the Groninger boer managed his farm, with the emphasis shifting to order, rationality and openness to change, and on his religious and political interests. They changed the literary culture and promoted the growth of all types of associations and clubs. All aspects of daily life were affected, from interior decoration to clothing and diet. Middle-class norms and values started to influence relationships, sexual norms and morality. Since the farmer was adopting middle class standards, at least insular as his agricultural activities permitted, these developments can be regarded as the coming into being of a rural middle class.

The University of Groningen played an important role in the modernisation process, particularly in the period 1760-1825. During the second half of the
eighteenth century, the University of Groningen experimented with cattle vaccines, and Professor Petrus Driessen taught agricultural chemistry. Even more importantly, the training that numerous theological students received in Groningen led, when they became rural clergymen, to their disseminating ideas of a more or less enlightened type relating to religion and government. Agricultural science was taught in Groningen from 1815 onwards. An Oeconomisch (experimental) garden was created that was open to the public, and a public collection of agricultural equipment was started. Moreover, the university was training an increasing number of doctors who, throughout the nineteenth century, would take on the role of mentor within the rural population. In the first half of the nineteenth century, there were also a number of socially aware professors who fulfilled the function of inspectors of schools in the province and as such had an influence on the development of education and of educators, and thus the entire cultural and intellectual climate. One last factor that needs to be mentioned was that until the 1830s, the university was dominated by what passed for 'liberal' notions. Some of the professors assisted the farmers who were opposed to the policies of William I to formulate their petitions to the king.

The university's influence in the countryside would not start to wane until 1825-1830. The spiritual climate at the university became less 'liberal', and for the new generation of professors, the notion of social involvement at a local level was less a matter of course.

This book adopts a chronological approach and takes the year 1760 as its starting point. There were, of course, big landowners before that, but it was not until around 1760 that the first signs of the changes to come became evident in the clay regions of Groningen.

Between 1760 and 1790 there was a slow but steady improvement in agricultural prosperity, particularly in the 1770s, when the third and final epidemic of cattle plague had run its course. In the Ommeland coastal lands of Groningen, more intensive use began to be made of the land, a process which led to the farmers concentrating more on crop production. With increasing prosperity, some of the farmers started to want to have greater influence in public life. The patriot movement of the years 1780-1787 brought such notions to the forefront, while the French takeover of 1795 created the opportunity, or at least for the moment.

The farmers were heavily influenced by some remarkable clergymen who were not only spreading Enlightened religious attitudes but also democratic ideas. A number of Reformed landowners gradually broke away from the often stifling pietism of the late Reformation, seeking their salvation in more Enlightened and rational beliefs. At the same time, the religious beliefs of the Enlightenment were starting to influence the often wealthy Mennonite
agriculturalists. There was thus a gradual shift in attitude among some of the large landowners, an effect that was also evident in the way they ran their farms, which in turn had an effect on social relationships.

The prosperity of the landowners rose to new heights during the period 1790-1820. The number of big landowners in the clay regions increased. In 1755 there were 332 farmers with farms of between 40 to 50 hectares, and 386 in 1816. The number of farmers with between 50 and 60 hectares rose in the same period from 170 to 185, and those with more than 60 hectares from 83 to 213. The big landowners, with their larger operations and the increase in cropping, employed more farm personnel. The labour supply remained adequate because of the increase in the rural population and improved agricultural efficiency. Some of the seasonal work was performed by seasonal labourers. The farmer himself had more time at his disposal. The gap between him and his workers increased as a result and was evident in the separate lives led by the farmer and his domestic servants: the farmers lived in the front part of the house, their servants in the back. It was now that the first complaints about the distance between farmers and their personnel started to be heard.

The 1795 French takeover provided farmers with an opportunity to play a part in public life, initially also at a provincial level though that was not for long. However, their dominant position on local boards, and later shire councils, would remain, even after 1801, which ushered in a period of political restoration brought about by the changes at national and international levels. A period of new cultural emancipation was also ushered in. In the post-1800 period, many more public welfare and literary associations came into being, and these would play a major role in the farmers’ further development and self-awareness. Jacobus Albertus Uilken, the clergyman in Eenrum (a village in the north of the region of Hunsingo) and a nationally renowned physicist who taught physics and agricultural science to clergymen, teachers and farmers from far and wide, played a noteworthy role here. A greater gap between farmer and labourer was the unintended but none the less far-reaching side effect of this, however.

Between 1790 and 1820, therefore, the enlightened, cultured and enterprising Groninger boer came into being. It was a concept first described in the introduction to a petition dating back to 1823. The Groninger boer had learned to read, to write and to critically examine what he had read; he was a member of literary societies and he bought books that he thought were useful. He also acquainted the members of his own family with useful books “of a type more suitable for the landed gentry on religious, moral and domestic matters.” He was a member of the public welfare association, and a supporter of benevolent and philanthropic associations. He was, in short, an active and useful - and thus valuable - member of society.
The thirty years that followed were dominated firstly by the economic crisis that started in 1818 and whose effects were exacerbated by natural disasters. By 1835 there were at last signs that it had ended. The crisis caused some slowing of the processes of modernisation, though these were marginal in real terms. It also aroused the farmers' dissatisfaction with the policies of William I, which led to their becoming more politically aware. During this period, informal meetings and personal contacts led to the founding of political clubs and the writing of innumerable petitions expressing their dissatisfaction. Their struggle against political and governmental discrimination led to leading farmers allying themselves with the liberals, the party in opposition.

In the post-1835 period, club membership started to flourish again. Innumerable new associations were founded, and farmers played an increasingly prominent role within them. The concept of the modern and cultured Groninger boer was again described on paper, this time in 1843 and by a farmer from the Oldambt region, Jan Freerks Zijlker. His view, which was received with respect, was based on the concept of the Enlightened farmer in the 1823 Petition.

The constitutional reform of 1848 brought total political emancipation for the big landowners. Liberalism, to which they owed their political emancipation, thus became one of their characteristics. It would remain so, though what this concept meant to most of them is not clear. In the eyes of many farmers, liberalism stood for progress and culture. After the rise of the political parties, it became a way of distinguishing themselves from the church parties and the socialists.

1848 marked the commencement of what can be regarded as the golden age of the Groninger boer: the period between 1848 and 1878. Their prosperity was revealed by the building of increasingly beautiful houses and the creation of ornamental gardens. Pride in their social position and importance grew during this time, and this led to renewed interest in their own past. Hemmo Dijkemans 1851 Proeve van een geschiedenis der landhuishouding en beschaving in de provincie Groningen (Towards a history of agriculture and culture in the province of Groningen) gave the farmers a history of their own. It also brought about an endorsement of middle-class notions of morality and relationships.

By the end of the 1870s, the Groninger boer had become such a clearly delineated concept that he had gained a permanent place in literature. De Golden Kette, published in 1875, was the first novel dealing with rural themes in which the Groninger boer is portrayed with all his typical traits. The writer, Wiepke Bouman-Geertsema from Beerta, approached her theme by drawing comparisons between two farmers. Each embodies a number of typical landowner traits. One of them - Korenhof - represents the positive aspects. He is interested in social issues and politics, he is a member of the public welfare
Korenhof conforms to the ideal Groninger boer as portrayed in the 1823 Petition and Zijlker's tract. In contrast, the much richer Robbers, who is absolutely lacking in any social feeling, is coarse, materialistic and a snob. The writer's aim in depicting these characters was to show both the good and the bad qualities of the Groninger boer. While she would seem to have been successful in doing so, the reality was somewhat more complex. Real-life farmers possessed the striking qualities that the writer of the De Golden Kette had so carefully delineated only to a certain degree, and the good and the bad were frequently inextricably combined.

1880 marked the end of the Groninger boer's heyday. Their once comfortable prosperity and uncontested power was at an end, though they basked in the memory of it for the next three-quarters of a century, until the end of the 1950s. Despite their pride in their existence and their self-importance, they felt increasingly (and not without reason) that the emancipation of smaller farmers and labourers constituted a threat to them. Their optimism and belief in progress started to fade, eventually hardening into a social and political conservatism that usually continued to be called liberalism.

When this research into the Groninger boer was in the planning stages, two choices had to be made, both of which have limited its scope. In the first place, the research has focussed largely on the Ommelant clay region. Enlightenment ideas penetrated this area first, and their effects were more pronounced here. It was here that the discontent with William I's restoration policies first became apparent, here that there were active demands for the introduction of protectionist regulations, and here that liberalism had its first supporters. It was also here that the process of modernisation began, which was so crucial for the emergence of the Groninger boer. The limitations imposed by the second choice lie in this research's focus on a limited number of people: members of several prominent families of landowners and their relatives, friends and mentors. One advantage of such an approach is that it made it possible to follow the process of modernisation from close at hand. It also made clear the role played by chance events, the personal qualities of the individuals involved, and local circumstances.

Several members of the Teenstra family were particularly important for the research. This family of rural landowners were pioneers for several generations. In addition to the Teenstra family, portrait studies have been made of their friends, other relatives, and various kindred spirits. They include the clergymen and community moral leaders Gerrit Jacob George Bacot, Bernard Willem Hoffman, Jacobus Albertus Uilken, and the well-known vaccinator, Geert Reinders and his grandson of the same name, who was a farmer in Groot Zeewijk in the Noordpolder, as well as a number of the
big landowners from the Marne region, including Klaas Jans Beukema, Willem Lammerts Dijkstra, and Geuchien Zijlma.

The history of the Groninger boer in the clay regions between 1760 and 1880 is unique in the sense that it is a history of a region, a group, and a time. However, it goes without saying that the Ommelands clay regions were no isolated island with a completely unique population of landowners. They formed part of the wider coastal regions of the North Sea, and the Groninger boer has many similarities with the Marschbauern of the Ostfriesland region, the agriculturalists in the north of the Dutch province of Friesland and the Protestant agriculturalists in western Dutch Flanders (Zeeuws Vlaanderen). Other farming areas in Western Europe that came under the influence of the ideas of the Enlightenment will certainly also be partly comparable.

The final part of the book consists of a description of the Groninger boer from the end of the eighteenth century to the present time as revealed in literature, travel guides and travel stories, memoranda and historiography. When Cornelis Hendrik Peters, the government architect, published an attractively illustrated book entitled Oud-Groningerland (The Groningen of the past) in 1912, he summarised the history of the landowners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the following words: "There was finally some progress amongst the farmers, cattle plague and the consequences attendant upon it assisting the process. ... The fortified manor and the lord of the manor changed character and eventually vanished, and after a while were replaced by the rural gentry and their model farms, of which Groot Zeewijk was the first. At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, these circles in particular started to realise that knowledge has a practical value, and they found support in scientifically trained practitioners such as the Rev. Uilkens and Geert Reinders, but also in Wester and Van Swinderen, who had reformed the schools and the education system and who also contributed to the development that was to differentiate the region of Groningen from the other provinces." This represented a brief summing up of the then current view of the rise of the landowners. In 1937, Hofstee would locate the start of the process of modernisation in the Osdam region. My views are closer to those of Peters, who based his on the writings of Uilkens, Dijkema and others.

(translation: Talencentrum RUG)