A study of the variety of social and cultural forms in the present day province of Drenthe reveals a striking contrast to the simple Universitas Terre Threntiae of mediaeval documents, a universitas or community of remarkable unity composed only of free peasants, devoid of feudal and manorial institutions, and containing neither towns nor cities. This had grown up within a protecting belt of marsh. But the introduction of capital in the peatbogs at the hands of Amsterdam magnates (regenten) during the seventeenth century began to break up the isolation of this universitas. This was extended to the whole of Drenthe as a result of the French Revolution, and accentuated by Napoleonic war economy and novel laissez-faire doctrines advocated by writers like Bernard Mandeville in his The Fable of the Bees; or, Private Vices, Public Benefits. Such forces and ideas put an end to the holding of property in common, from time immemorial taken for granted, thereby destroying the ancient Drenthe commonwealth of free peasants.

It was during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Era that these new doctrines, thought to be progressive in economic matters, had their day. The 'little merchant kings' of the Restoration period after 1813 exploited the extensive marshes of Drenthe, acquiring great wealth from the new peat industry. This involved an extensive introduction of people from places outside Drenthe. The annihilation of the autonomy of common peasant ownership began to shake the stability which for ages had characterized the life of the universitas. Nevertheless, inasmuch as collective ownership of land was not completely abolished and age old institutions remained unchanged, the ancient spirit lived on. The new conditions penetrated the minds of the people very slowly.

These 'little merchant kings', following the example of William I who himself became known as 'the merchant king' and took great interest in the development of trade, industry, and finance, were representatives of the elite from which the new state drew its officials. They usually had studied in universities. They did not live in ancestral homes as was characteristic of the landed gentry, but in modern country houses, especially in Assen, the rising center of provincial government. They displayed their prosperity by building elegant houses. Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp described Assen as the 'town of palaces'. They derived their prestige mainly from their public positions. Their wealth, in some
instances acquired from marriage or from legacies, was acquired chiefly from their efforts to exploit the natural resources of Drenthe. Inspired by the new economic ideas, they directed their energies toward peat digging, agriculture, and forestry. Their slogans were 'Canals and roads' and 'Division of common land property' (division of the 'marken').

Rapidly developing after Napoleonic times into an urban community, Assen became a kind of Drenthe Canberra, center of governmental administrators and entrepreneurs in economic life. The function of its provincial press deserves study in this connection. It began as a governmental information service and became the means of diffusing the ideas of the Enlightenment whose advocates, the Assen gentry, failed to understand the spirit of the old Drenthe community. Particularly interesting is the character of the ancient distribution of news by means of church channels and of peasants' letters, which gradually disappeared after the rise of the new journalism.

This economic, social, and cultural transformation in Drenthe during the nineteenth century, especially during the agricultural crisis of the eighties (which was accompanied by a structural peat-digging crisis) produced tensions of far-reaching importance. Agitation and threatened violence brought on by these tensions, became the subject of discussion not only in Drenthe but even in Dutch parliamentary circles. Adopting the new attitudes and novel manners of the Assen gentry, the younger generation made their town a lively debating club for the intelligentsia of Drenthe.

In 1885, after the demonstration for universal suffrage in The Hague, Jan Draad, a follower of Domela Nieuwenhuis, the first 'red' agitator in Assen, caused the Assen riots in which differing social codes came into collision. New political groups appeared - 'socialists', 'radicals', and 'clericals' - and the influence of the 'liberal' gentry began to wane.

The notorious strikes of the peatbog workers in 1888 marked a serious crisis. Distinctly bearing the features of a class struggle, they were a novel phenomenon in the social history of The Netherlands, in size as well as in character. A parliamentary enquiry into the state of affairs in the peatbogs was organized. These tensions lasted many years and finally resulted in the emancipation of the peat diggers. The ancient communities (buurschappen) living on the sandy soil
of Drenthe at first manifested uneasiness over their loss of space, not against the entrepreneurs but against the immigrants who had settled on the peat. This uneasiness was expressed in false 'stereotypes' and by the activity of local pressure groups (volksgerichten). By the close of the nineteenth century a tendency toward emancipation became evident among the peasants. The gentry, failing to understand them, thought only to advance their own economic conceptions. The integration of Drenthe into the whole of The Netherlands proved to be an equalization with partially bad consequences, especially in relation to the loss of social prestige and social security.

Drenthe became the storm center of Dutch political agrarian extremism between the two world wars. This can be understood only after serious study of the status of Drenthe farmers as they had lived in bygone centuries and the destruction of this status in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. During the nineteenth century there was little comprehension of the social and psychological conditions under which these people were living.

The dynamics of cultural change, as taught by Malinowski, Sorokin, Bouman and other Sociologists, effected during the period between Napoleon and Hitler, give us a fascinating story. Many problems of this unsettled period present in Drenthe special aspects for the consideration of the investigator. Study of these aspects opens the possibility of a new Drenthe universitas, one that will be harmonious, not through a rigid uniformity, but by an integrated pluriformity.