This book examines the emergence of Groningen regional consciousness during the first six decades of the twentieth century. It looks at the people who championed and encouraged this consciousness, and how their model of Groningen identity was related to various developments in the fields of socio-economics, politics, and culture. The phenomenon of how regional identity was shaped in the Netherlands from the late nineteenth century onwards is analyzed by means of comparison with other regional movements.

**Regional consciousness and the community aspirations of the Groningen elite**

The Groningen elite were one group within which a distinct Groningen regional consciousness was blossoming. At the beginning of the twentieth century they could be characterized by their strong belief in progress, fuelled by the province’s then prospering economy, taking every opportunity to present Groningen as a dynamic, internationally oriented economic centre with a modern industry, with the captain of industry Jan Evert Scholten as *primus inter pares*. In 1917 Scholten’s Groningen pride was somewhat offended when it was rumoured that the University of Groningen was appointing a lecturer in Frisian. This rumour can be traced back to the launch of a Frisian language course, organized by the pro-Frisian movement. In response to this, Scholten founded the Grönneger Sproak society – renamed the Algemene Vereniging Groningen (General Groningen Society) in 1923 – and the monthly journal *Groningen*. During this early period the society propagated an image of the province corresponding with the vision of the Groningen elite, which is logical seeing that the society’s officers were mostly Groningen notables. They came from the city of Groningen and the surrounding countryside, where various branches of the society were set up. However, by the beginning of the 1930s all of the Algemene Vereniging Groningen’s rural branches had closed down; the Groningen city branch went on to develop into a thriving, independent drama and choral society under the original name, Grönneger Sproak.
By this time, the lofty optimism of the provincial elite had come to an end. From the mid-1920s onwards it had been increasingly evident that economic developments in Groningen were lagging behind the west of the country. Growing concerns about the regional economy were strengthened by the global crisis of the 1930s. Fear of polarization and social unrest grew, with compartmentalization along socio-political lines perceived to be an increasing problem. At the end of the 1930s the threat of war was added. The Groningen elite advocated further modernization of the regional economy as a solution to the economic malaise. At the same time, however, they feared that the proposed process of modernization would lead to the destruction of existing social cohesion. In short, they ended up in a spiral of gloomy thoughts, characteristic of the despair of civilization which was rife at that time. In response to this the Groningen elite tried to stimulate both community spirit and mutual cooperation, proposing various forms of sub-national communities upon which the national community could be modelled. For example, the Groningen gentleman farmer and leading agricultural figure Herman Derk Louwes spoke of the ideal of a tight-knit, morally virtuous, rural community. Johannes Linthorst Homan, who took up office as (the equivalent of) Lord Lieutenant of Groningen in 1937, considered the province to be an ideal base for harmonious cooperation. He thought that national unity could best be promoted at provincial level, where political and religious contrasts were less marked. To this end he founded the Groninger Gemeenschap (Groningen Fellowship) in 1939. The liberal and social-democratic Groningen (sub-)elite were entirely approving of this initiative. However, the anti-revolutionaries adhered more strongly still to the principle of sovereignty in their own circle. Linthorst Homan’s initiative therefore became a provincial precursor of the post-Second World War failed attempt, at national level, to bring about a breakthrough in socio-political divisions.

**Regional consciousness of Groningen ex-pats**

Another group within which a strong regional consciousness was blooming was Groningen ex-pats. This group came into existence as a result of the extensive migration that took place as of the final decades of the nineteenth century, seeing movement from the Groningen countryside to, in particular, the western Netherlands, and other areas in which industry and the services sector were prospering. Although Groningen economic migrants were often able to build up a good life for themselves, many of them experienced feelings of homesickness. This led to the foundation of a large number of social clubs for Groningen ex-pats. The first club for Groningen economic migrants was founded in Dordrecht in 1904, followed by tens of similar clubs throughout the whole country, with thousands of members in total. As of 1917, most of the economic migrants’ clubs entered into affiliation with Scholten’s Grönneger Sprowk society, which they soon came to dominate. In 1930 the first committee consisting exclusively of Groningen ex-pats took up office, and in the same year Groningen ceased to be the regular meeting place of the society; from that time on it usually met in Amsterdam, or somewhere else in the western or mid-Netherlands. The
society remained politically and religiously neutral. This was not attractive to conservative sections of the population; in some places separate, Christian Groningen economic migrants’ clubs were formed.

Groningen ex-pats developed a vision of their homeland characteristic of migrants. For them, Groningen was, more than anything else, a place connected with their youth, on which they looked back with nostalgia. As the Groningen ex-pats were looking back at Groningen through childhood memories, the region was, for them, strongly historicized and, as a direct result, Groningen was predominantly represented as an unchanging rural area. This image sat more comfortably with the Groningen ex-pats’ experience than the contrasting image of Groningen as a dynamic, urban, industrial area. This one-sided representation of Groningen as an antiquated farming region was probably the reason why the Groningen elite felt less and less at home in the Algemene Vereniging Groningen, and left the society.

To express their origins the Groningen economic migrants created their own, traditional Groningen rural culture, formed of old and new elements. In doing this they were drawing a sharp divide between, on the one side, their province of birth and, on the other, Holland as a symbol of modernity and cold individualism. Additionally, they drew a distinction between Groningen and Friesland and its inhabitants. According to the pro-Frisian movement, Groningen had originally been part of the area referred to as Greater Frisia. Therefore, they maintained, people from Groningen were actually Frisian. The Groningen ex-pats replied, in turn, that Groningen culture was related not to Friesland but to the adjoining German border area where, as of the end of the nineteenth century, a large number of organizations had been formed, focusing on what was referred to as Low German or Lower Saxon popular culture. In the 1920s a leading Groningen ex-pat, Gerhard Wilhelm Spitzen, was in close contact with this network of organizations; this tendency to lean towards Germany was not a form of separatism, rather a bid to protect Groningen against the Frisian cultural claim, so that it would be considered to be an independent Saxon region by the rest of the Netherlands. By emphasizing their self-assumed Saxon-Groningen-Dutch identity the Groningen ex-pats were associating themselves with both the ideal of unity in diversity and, at the same time, the then common belief that the Dutch people were formed of Frankish, Frisian, and Saxon components. The Groningen ex-pats’ endeavours to be perceived as a distinct people, and not allied to the Frisians, meant that they had little enthusiasm for the Nazis’ propagandizing of Frisian-Saxon cooperation under the German flag during the Occupation.

Confrontation

From the 1930s onwards the Groningen elite, prompted by their despair of civilization, made fanatical attempts to promote community spirit by presenting both provincial community and traditional, rural popular culture as part of the necessary basis for national harmony. In the meantime, members of the Groningen economic migrants’ circles had developed their own
Groningen culture, also developed along the lines of the concept of Groningen as an unchanging, agricultural area, with a close-knit, popular community. This common ground facilitated assimilation of the Groningen ex-pats’ notions of Groningen culture, the influence of which can be seen in the adoption of Spitzen’s *Grönnens Laid* as the Groningen anthem at the end of the 1930s.

In 1946 the Algemene Vereniging Groningen committee, under the inspirational leadership of society chairman Kornelis ter Laan, began campaigning for the introduction of a chair in Lower Saxon at the University of Groningen. They took inspiration from the pro-Frisian movement, which had successfully brought about the creation of a chair in Frisian. Although the Faculty of Arts, under which any chair in Lower Saxon would fall, was fiercely opposed to its creation, there was sympathy for the project within the upper echelons of Groningen society. The Liberal senator Louwes pleaded the case for the chair in Lower Saxon in the Upper Chamber. One of his arguments was that communication with the lower classes was only possible through dialect, and that, therefore, knowledge of this dialect was crucial if that part of society was to be educated. He also saw the chair as a means of strengthening regional culture in the north-eastern Netherlands, so as to preclude what he saw as the threat of strong German influence in the area. In 1953 the Neerlandist K. H. Heeroma was appointed the first professor in Lower Saxon at the University of Groningen.

Despite the overlap between the Groningen elite’s vision of Groningen and that of the Groningen ex-pats, their standpoints remained essentially different. This became clear when, between 1951 and 1957, an umbrella cultural institute was set up in Groningen, involving various parties. The first of these was the committee of the Algemene Vereniging Groningen, which had for decades been trying to bring the nucleus of the society back to Groningen. In pursuit of this goal they urged the provincial government to provide them with a subsidy, and to recognize the society as a platform for Groningen culture. Next to them were the Groningen elite, who were still concerned about the state of the regional economy and still pursuing modernization of the agricultural sector and further industrialization. At the same time they wanted to promote an active cultural policy, aimed at integration at club level. The idea behind this was that club life was a good means of keeping the industrial labour force involved in society, and that, therefore, all efforts needed to be focused on this area. This was a widespread belief in the Netherlands at the time, a country that was concentrating on reconstruction. In Groningen this was embodied by, amongst others, the Ommelander Kring (Ommeland Circle, ‘Ommeland’ referring to rural areas surrounding the city), a debating society for leading Groningen figures, known from 1954 onwards as the Groninger Warf foundation (‘Warf’ refers to a medieval form of administrative/judicial public meeting held in the Ommeland). So as to bring about the desired cooperation between Groningen cultural societies, the Ommelander Kring championed the creation of an umbrella provincial cultural institute. The Kring did not, however, like the idea of the Algemene Vereniging Groningen filling such a role. In their eyes, the Groningen migrants’ cultural
notions, strongly concentrated as they were on the past, inclined to unhealthy regionalism. The Ommelander Kring, in contrast, saw Groningen as a forward-focused, modern area.

In expressing its disquiet, the Ommelander Kring put its finger on the fundamental difference of opinion between the Groningen elite and the Groningen ex-pats. While the Groningen ex-pats had concentrated on preserving a Groningen they believed they remembered from their youth, the Groningen elite had maintained their focus on the modernization of the province. Although this difference of opinion had been masked during the 1930s, when the Groningen elite had temporarily pushed traditional popular culture to the centre stage as a means of stimulating community spirit, it was still there. Individuals such as Louwes, who had in that period been emphasizing the importance of the timeless, rural popular culture, did so because they were fanatical about modernizing the countryside, but fearful of the social consequences. Following the end of the Occupation, the Groningen elite increasingly disassociated themselves from this belief in an unchanging popular culture. This was connected to the increasing criticism in scholarly circles of the old folkloric paradigm that the Netherlands was formed out of Frisian, Frankish, and Saxon tribal heritage. A second factor contributing to the rejection of traditional popular culture as a means of stimulating community spirit was the central position it had occupied in Nazi ideology. For the Groningen elite this was another reason to disassociate themselves from the concept. This meant that common ground between their interpretation of Groningen culture, and that of the Groningen ex-pats, was lost. What was left was the clear-cut contrast between, on the one side, a desire for innovation and, on the other, a dedication to maintaining the status quo.

The upper echelons of Groningen society were also suspicious of the editorial staff of the periodical 't Swieniegeltje (‘little hedgehog’ in Groningen dialect), founded in 1954 and formed of people from the northern German-Dutch border region who both assumed that a Lower Saxon popular culture existed in the area and contended that it could contribute to the process of European integration. The prominent Groningen citizens involved in the Warf feared that this Lower-Saxon regionalism was a form of separatism aimed at political partition from the Netherlands. Although the editorial staff of 't Swieniegeltje denied this, the Warf’s apprehension was understandable. Lower Saxon regionalists involved in 't Swieniegeltje talked about a Saxon renaissance. This expression had previously been used by the Nazis. Although the editorial board of 't Swieniegeltje, just like the Algemene Vereniging Groningen, emphasized the importance of the ancient (Groningen-)Saxon popular culture, they were not interested in the dated romanticism of the Groningen ex-pats, preferring to portray themselves as young and avant-garde.

In 1957 the Provincial Executive of Groningen authorized a joint venture, a provincial cultural platform bridging the Groninger Warf, 't Swieniegeltje, and the Groningen-city-based Grönnger Sproak society. By doing this they cleared the way for subsidies from the state, which wanted to see a cultural council set up in every province as a means of preventing the feared social disintegration. The remit of the Groninger Culturele Gemeenschap (Groningen Cultural Community), as the organization was known, was based on the ideals of the Ommelander Kring and the Groninger
Warf. It was tasked with coordinating cultural life in the province, without laying emphasis on either the advancement of Lower-Saxon regionalism, as 't Swieniegeltje advocated, or the preservation of traditional Groningen popular culture, as the Groningen ex-pats wished. With this move the Groningen ex-pats were denied the opportunity of taking the lead over cultural life in Groningen. Shortly after this unsuccessful attempt to return the nucleus of the Algemeene Vereniging Groningen to its place of origin, coherence between the Groningen economic migrants’ clubs dramatically deteriorated. This was probably because membership had steadily aged as the years passed. The emergence of television, a new source of entertainment symptomatic of a marked national affluence, had also reduced member numbers. After three long decades of crisis, war, and reconstruction, the Netherlands was experiencing a huge economic expansion. At the beginning of the 1960s the Groningen economy also improved. This brought an end to both the Groningen elite’s despair in civilization and, therefore, the strong need it had felt for organizing the regional cultural life in the interest of stimulating community spirit.

**Regional consciousness in the Netherlands**

Similar developments took places in other regions of the Netherlands; as well as the numerous clubs set up for economic migrants from Groningen, there were also societies for economic migrants from Friesland, Drenthe, Overijssel, Gelderland, Limburg, North-Brabant, and Zeeland. From every corner of the nation people were travelling to other areas, only as often as not to reunite there according to their regional roots. In contrast, regional movements bringing together existing inhabitants who felt that their identity was being threatened by the newcomers could be found throughout the Netherlands. This was the case in North-Brabant and Limburg, where the influx of employees coming to find work in the expanding (mining) industry contributed to the increase in regional movements. In Groningen, the stream of incoming Frisians contributed to the blossoming in Groningen consciousness, such as Scholten’s reaction to the Frisian language course shows. As might be expected, the rapid industrialization of Twente had a similar influence on the founding of a Twente movement. All of these developments can be traced back to the same underlying process: that of modernization and integration in the Netherlands in not only a political but also economic, infrastructural, and social sense during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This resulted in diverse variants of regional consciousness and diverse, reshaped regional cultures.

How differing regional identities were interpreted was strongly dependent on the composition of the dominant groups involved in the process of bringing about regional consciousness. In areas within which one organized, elite, socio-political group dominated, such as in North-Brabant or Limburg, regional identity was inseparable from religious identity. In areas in which no one, powerful, organized, elite, socio-political group dominated, such as in Groningen and Drenthe, regional identity was represented as something which transcended political and
religious differences and therefore strengthened national coherence. The important role played by economic migrants implies that the phenomenon of regional consciousness cannot be seen as purely a political reaction of regional elites who felt their position was being threatened by political integration on a national level. It was not just a question of interaction between elite and popular culture; cultural transfer between various migrants’ cultures was also important. These two distinct processes sometimes came into contact with and influenced one another, resulting in cultural elements changing context in multiple respects and taking on a new meaning. We can therefore draw the conclusion that regional consciousness in the Netherlands stemmed from a complex interaction between various population groups, determined not only by political factors but, also, by other factors, the most significant of which were social and economic.

translation: Elizabeth Saville