



## **The Orange Pennant: The Dutch Response to a Flag Dilemma**

**Jos Poels**

### **Abstract**

On certain days of the year the Dutch celebrate their royal family, the House of Orange, by flying an orange pennant above their national flag. The Netherlands is the only country in the world which extends its flag with such an added stripe. It is a reminder of the unsolved question; what is the correct colour of the top stripe of the national flag—red or orange? Orange was the original 16<sup>th</sup>-century colour, to represent Willem of Orange. About fifty years later the top stripe changed to red—and ever since, the Dutch have been divided on this question. The orange pennant, in Dutch a ‘wimpel’, came into use after the Netherlands regained independence in 1815. The ‘old’ republican red, white, and blue flag was reinstated by the newly formed Kingdom of the Netherlands. Half a century later, it became fashionable to show allegiance to the royal family by adding an orange stripe as a pennant attached to the flag. The orange pennant started a new Dutch flag tradition, as nowadays other things fly with the flag as well.



Figure 1. The orange pennant above the Dutch tricolour, flown only on certain days of the year

## The Orange Pennant: The Dutch Response to a Flag Dilemma

### Introduction

The Dutch red, white, and blue flag can be extended five days a year with an additional stripe, by way of an orange pennant. These designated days are all related to the House of Orange, the Dutch royal family. No other country in the world copies the Netherlands in this display of the flag. It is the Dutch response to its flag dilemma: what is the correct colour of the top stripe of the national flag—red or orange? The extension of the national tricolour flag with a fourth, orange stripe is a little of everything, so everybody is happy.

The orange pennant has not had much attention from vexillologists or historians. So far, nobody has made a proper investigation into its history. The reason for this is the absence of any kind of ‘birth certificate’, which is also the case with the Dutch national flag. Somewhere in the past the orange pennant started to be used, but only in 1948 did it receive official recognition. Ever since, it may be attached to the Dutch national flag on designated days related to the House of Orange.

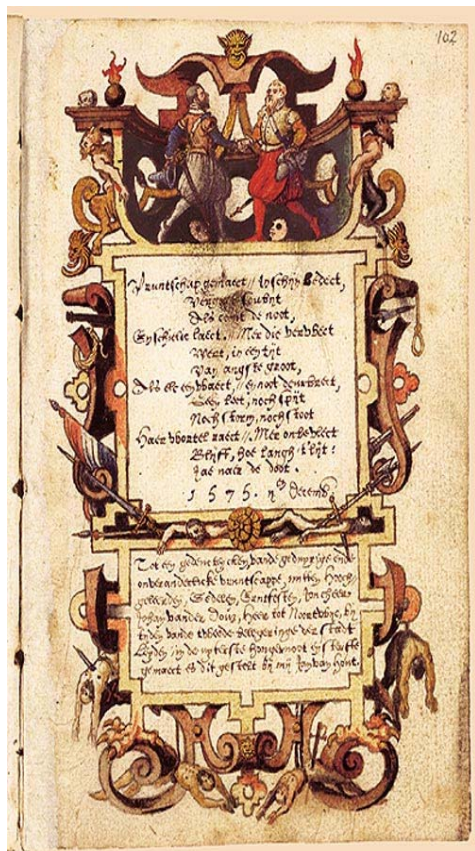
As part of my research into the Dutch national flag over the past 30 years, I have also looked into the orange pennant. Initially, several searches in archives and libraries failed. In the last ten years, however, research has become much easier as museums have made their collections more accessible by putting their paintings, etchings and drawings on the Internet. In addition, libraries have started to publish old books and newspapers on line, which are even searchable. This first attempt to throw light on the story of the orange pennant has only been possible with the use of this modern technology.

### To begin at the beginning...

Firstly, I have to take you back to the year 1568. The area of what is today the Netherlands and Belgium was part of the Spanish Netherlands, also known as the Habsburg Netherlands. In its Netherlands provinces the Spanish King Philip II was represented by so-called *stadtholders*. William of Orange was stadtholder of the provinces of Holland, Zeeland, and Utrecht. He was from Nassau, nowadays in Germany, and had inherited the title ‘Prince of Orange’ in 1544 from his cousin René de Chalôn. So he was also ruler of the Principality of Orange, which is now part of France. Despite his title of Prince of Orange, William had little to do with that principality; his main concerns lay in the Spanish Netherlands.

From 1555 onward the people in the Spanish Netherlands had begun to turn against Spain. They thought they had to pay too much tax and the fact that Spain denied them the growing Protestant religion made them very unhappy. They revolted. The insurgents, called *Geuzen*—which meant ‘beggars’—saw Prince William of Orange as their leader. He was known as ‘The Silent’—not because he was a quiet man, but because he did not tell the Spanish court everything he knew about what was happening in the Netherlands. The Dutch Revolt started in 1568 with the Battle at Heiligerlee, but was lost by Prince William of Orange and his army. It was however the start of the Eighty Year’s War, which only ended in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia, where Spain recognized Dutch independence. However the southern part—nowadays known as Belgium—stayed Spanish.

On 1 April 1572 the Geuzen conquered the fortified town of Den Briel. This came as a complete surprise to everyone, even to the Geuzen themselves. Den Briel is today the town of Brielle, south of Rotterdam. The conquest of Den Briel became a major turning point in Dutch history.



**Figure 2. The *Vruntbuuc van Jan van Hout*, dating from 1575, shows the oldest known contemporary colour illustration of a Dutch flag. The orange, white, and blue flag is sticking out at the left of the top panel.**

At the start of the revolt, the Geuzen did not use any special flags to distinguish them from the Spanish. It was some time later in the 1570s that they started to make use of the colours orange, white, and blue. Why these particular colours were used remains an unsolved question, but there is no doubt that orange referred to the princely title of William of Orange, the leader of the Dutch insurgents. The combination of the colours orange, white, and blue is shown on several contemporary paintings, as well as in written reports and pamphlets of the day. Here is a colour illustration (Figure 2) of the oldest known Dutch tricolour: orange, white, and blue. It dates from 1575 and is found in a *Liber Amicorum* of Jan van Hout, secretary of the town of Leiden and one of the founding members of Leiden University, the oldest university in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup>

The colour combination of orange, white, and blue was later nicknamed *Prinsenvlag*, the Prince's Flag. It is commonly considered the first Dutch flag. However, around 1630, the colour red made its entrance onto the scene. It gradually displaced the orange top stripe of the flag of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, the union of the seven autonomous provinces which had broken away from Spain. Even today it is not known why the colour orange blurred into red. However, the fact is that by around 1660 red had definitely displaced orange. This red, white, and blue flag inherited the nickname *Prinsenvlag*. The rebellious Netherlands was now a republic, but the House of Orange continued to play a significant role because it provided the stadtholders, the highest public function in the republic. The stadtholder title was hereditary.

### The orange pennant

Now we have clarified the significance of the colour orange for the Netherlanders we can consider the pennant. The use of pennants originates at sea. It is assumed they served as decorative features. They are seen in many paintings of marine artists such as the father and son Van der Velde, Ludolf Backhuijsen, and Abraham Storck, to name a few. In these 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century artworks one will not find a single orange pennant. However, you can see quite a few long split pennants in the Dutch colours red, white, and blue (Figure 3). These floating pennants were flown by warships. This painting of Abraham Storck, on display in the Amsterdam Maritime Museum, shows a mock sea battle held on 1 September 1697 in honour of the Russian Tsar, Peter the Great. You see quite a lot of pennants, but none is orange.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 3. Abraham Storck. Mock sea battle held on 1 September 1697 in honour of the visit of the Russian Tsar Peter the Great to the Netherlands. (Image: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam)**

The orange pennant appears for the first time in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By the spring of 1758 stadtholder Prince William V and his wife Wilhelmina of Prussia travelled by boat through the republic. On 2 June both were in Amsterdam where they attended the launch of *De Zon* (The Sun), a new ship owned by the Dutch East India Company (Figure 4).



In this figure<sup>3</sup> one can see they are on the ceremonial yacht of the Amsterdam chamber of the Dutch East India Company, which can be recognized by the Company's emblem on the Dutch flag. Above that flag flies an orange pennant.

**Figure 4. East Indiaman *De Zon* launched in Amsterdam on 2 June 1768. (Image: Maritiem Museum, Rotterdam)**



Two days later, the stadtholder's party left Amsterdam. In a contemporary illustration (Figure 5) of the official farewell to Prince William V and his wife, a single-coloured pennant flies above the flag on the prince's yacht.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately this illustration is only a line drawing.



**Figure 5. Prins William V leaves Amsterdam on 4 June 1768.**  
(Image: Fries Scheepvaartmuseum, Sneek)

Around the same time other authorities started flying pennants above their flags, for distinctive reasons. Yachts of several admiralties used red, white, and blue pennants, sometimes with their own emblem on a white field. For this reason it can be concluded that the orange pennant should be seen as a distinctive sign of the stadtholders from the House of Orange.

#### Civil tension and unrest

By around 1780 the Dutch were uneasy. They fought a war with Britain, which they call the Fourth English War and the English call the Fourth Dutch War. The war had disastrous effects on the Dutch economy, triggering a loud call for political as well as social and economic reform in the country. The proponents of this reform were called Patriots (*patriotten*). Stadtholder William V and his supporters were the Prince-minded (*prinsgezinden*).



### The creation of a kingdom

The exiled Orange family took shelter in England until 1813, the end of the French Era, when they were invited to return to the Netherlands. The eldest son of Stadtholder William V—also a William—was to become king of a new Kingdom of the Netherlands, which was established by the Treaty of Vienna in 1815. The new kingdom consisted of the former Republic of the United Provinces, plus the Spanish Netherlands, which had become the Austrian Netherlands in 1711—today’s Belgium—and Luxembourg.

The future King William I—also a member of the House of Orange—was welcomed in Amsterdam on 24 November 1813. Above the Dam Palace the flag was flying. According to *the Extra Amsterdamsche Courant* that day, it was

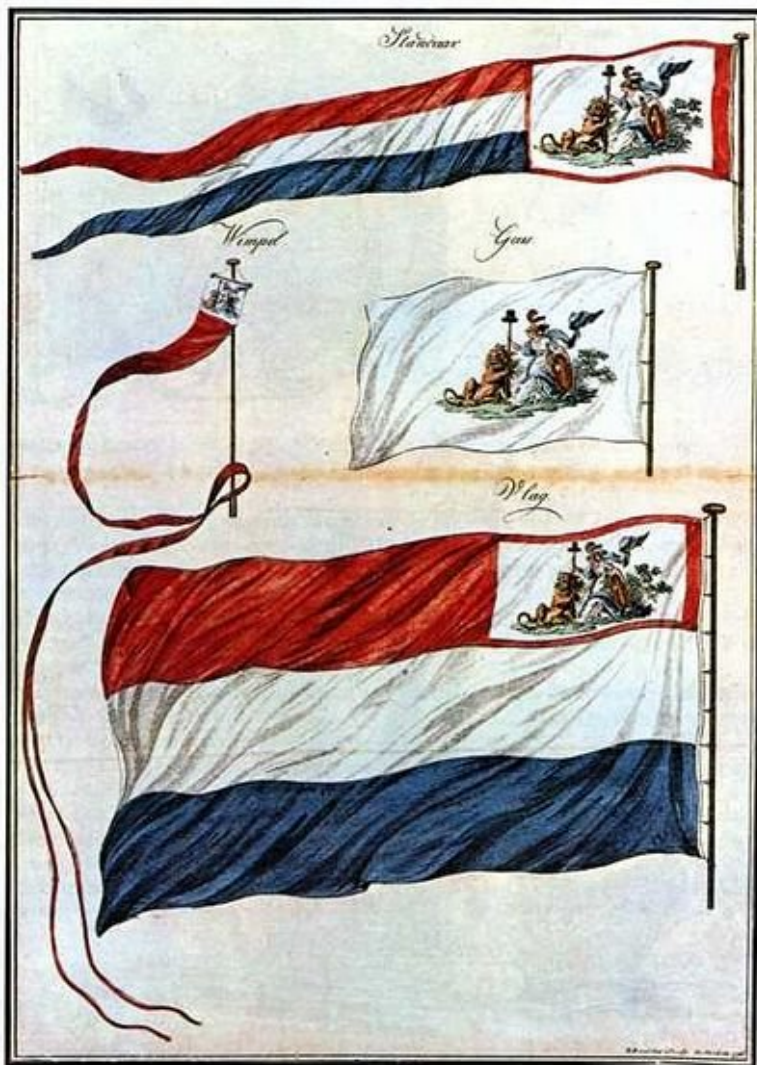
*“the Holland flag decorated with an orange tie”.*<sup>5</sup>

Nearly a week later, on 30 November, an eyewitness in Utrecht wrote in his diary of seeing

*“a Holland flag with an orange pennant”*

flying from the tower of the cathedral of the town.<sup>6</sup> That day, however, the Crown Prince was not in Utrecht.

Contemporary newspaper clippings report that solid-coloured orange flags were displayed in many places in the country. It was the way to show allegiance to the House of Orange. The use of the orange pennant, however, remained reserved to the House of Orange. On 10 June 1846 the Royal Dutch Yacht Club held its first regatta in Rotterdam. The yacht club was an initiative of Prince Henry, ‘the Seafarer’ and was modelled on the yacht clubs which had been established in the United Kingdom. Prince Henry, son of King William II, was present at the Rotterdam regatta, as we can see in this painting by Charles Rochussen (**Figure 8**) on show in the Rotterdam Maritime Museum.<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 7. The Batavian naval flag, introduced on 14 February 1796.**



The boats on the left fly Dutch flags with orange pennants.

*“The pennant, flown on top of the flag, is a sign that the highest authority, the King or his representative, is on board”,*

explained Jacob van Lennep in his *Seamans’ Dictionary*, published ten years later in 1856.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 8. Charles Rochussen’s painting of the first regatta of the Royal Dutch Yacht Club in Rotterdam, 10 June 1846. (Image: Maritiem Museum Rotterdam)**

King William III made an official visit to the province of Zeeland from 21 to 30 May 1862. The *Goessche Courant* ran an advertisement in its edition of 12 May that year (Figure 9) from an entrepreneur in Utrecht, announcing he would be in the Zeeland capital town Middelburg on 16 May when people could rent “national and orange flags and pennants”. The rentals would be at “fair prices”. It seems this entrepreneur began a new fashion. Whether the orange pennants were added to the Dutch flags in Middelburg and Goes during the visit of the King is unknown. But it did happen in Aardenburg, a small town in the southern part of Zeeland near the Belgian border.



**Figure 9. Advertisement in the *Goessche Courant*, 12 May 1862.**



The writer of the commemorative book about the King's Zealand tour noted:<sup>9</sup>

*"The fatherland's tricolour was flown everywhere, not only from ordinary houses, but also from stables and workshops; even the worker had bought one from his meagre wages, and most of them attached orange pennants or bows to it".*

#### Orange abounds

In 1863 the Kingdom of the Netherlands celebrated on a large scale the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of regaining its independence. For reasons unknown the issue of the top stripe of the national flag came back at this time. Next to red, white, and blue flags, people started using flags with orange stripes instead of red. Also orange pennants, attached to red, white, and blue flags, were used on a wide scale to show allegiance to the House of Orange. Newspapers from that time note this new fashion. The *Tijdspiegel* magazine wrote these lines in 1864, after the celebrations:<sup>10</sup>

*"The dispute about the colours of the national flag was renewed. Should it be red, white, and blue, or orange, white, and blue, or should it be for this occasion pure and solely Orange? A difficult question, but orange should be part of it and for that reason many attached the Orange pennant to the national tricolour."*

In 1866 the art magazine *Kunstkronijk* published an article about the national monument dedicated to the events of 1813, which was being erected at Plein in The Hague, and which shows a pennant. About the reason of the inclusion of the pennant, it said:<sup>11</sup>

*"Why would the sculptor not be allowed to choose as being fit the tricolour with the orange pennant, which lately, especially at and after the 1863 celebrations, calibrated as a true symbol of the bond between the Netherlands and Orange."*

In 1871 the *Leidsch Dagblad* copied an article from the *Arnhemse Courant*,<sup>12</sup> which stated:

*"The orange pennant next to the Dutch flag tends to mean: No Netherlands without Orange!"*

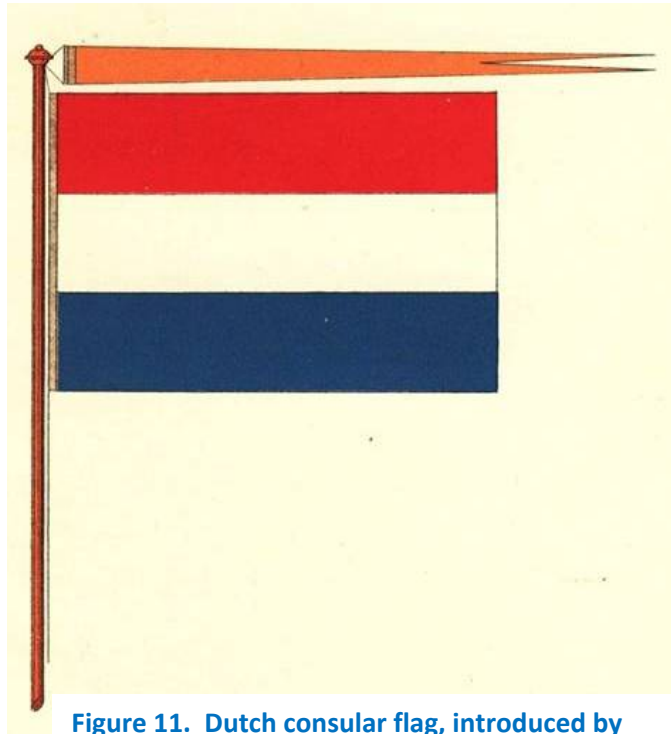
In 1872 the whole country commemorated that three centuries before, on 1 April 1572, Brielle was taken by the Geuzen insurgents. Many advertisements appeared in local newspapers to interest people in buying orange pennants (Figure 10), such as the *Goessche Courant* in its edition of 26 March.<sup>13</sup> The use of the orange pennants was not a temporary phenomenon. Newspapers kept reporting more about flags flown with orange pennants, even without the King being present.



Figure 10. Advertisement in the *Goessche Courant*, 26 March 1872.

Orange protocols

In 1887 the orange pennant appeared in the Netherlands diplomatic service. It was the Dutch consul in the British crown colony Bermuda who unwittingly consolidated the status of the orange pennant. He wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague as to how he should fly the flag properly in



**Figure 11. Dutch consular flag, introduced by ministerial decree 8858, dated 15 October 1887.**

accordance with protocol and rules. After having consulted the Ministry of the Navy, the Foreign Minister ruled in his decree 8858, dated 15 October 1887, that the orange pennant should be twice the length of the flag, and should be swallow-tailed.<sup>14</sup> That

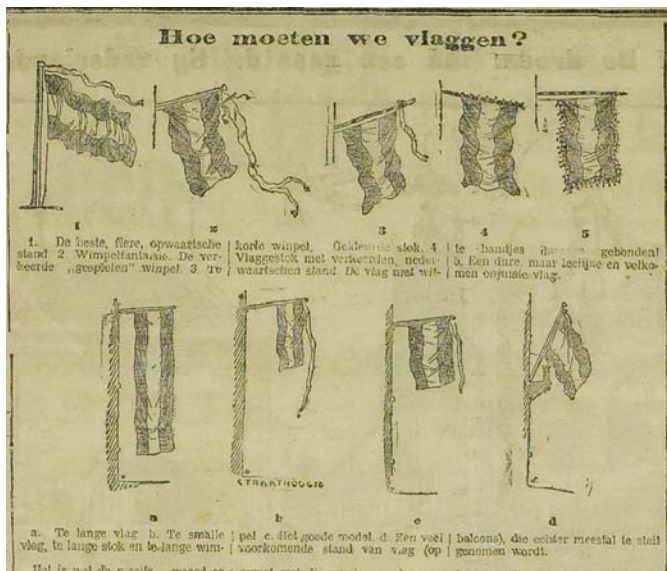
*“The consular officer fly the Dutch flag with the orange pennant”,*

was hence the ruling in the *Manual for the Dutch consular officers*, which also showed an illustration in colour of the flag and pennant (Figure 11).<sup>15</sup> This was how the Dutch flag flew at embassies and consulates until after the end of World War II, leading to the belief that this flag-and-pennant combination were the proper Dutch colours.

The Dutch themselves became attached to the use of the orange pennant. As there was no official ruling on how to use it, everybody used it the way they thought it should be. On 10 April 1909 a person, who does not identify himself, wrote in the *Utrechts Nieuwsblad* that he was not happy with the way the orange pennant was generally used (Figure 12). He stresses that there is only one way to fly the orange pennant, which is the

*“proud, upright position”.*

All other ways are wrong.



**Figure 12. “How to fly flags with pennants.”  
*Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 10 April 1909.**

### An end to uncertainty

In the 1930s, just before the outbreak of World War II, the Netherlands was torn for a third time in its history by the vexing question of the colour of the top stripe of the flag. Just as in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, some people were convinced that orange, white, and blue were the true colours of the Dutch flag. All political parties had members who supported the idea of changing the red stripe of the flag to orange. The colour issue divided the entire country.

Queen Wilhelmina ended all uncertainty on 19 February 1937 when Royal Decree No. 93 laid down the colours of the Dutch flag as red, white and blue. This decree preceded the introduction of a Flag Law, which Bill was laid before Parliament on 22 May 1937. Article 1 of this proposed Law described the Dutch flag as red, white, and blue.

The Flag Law was never discussed in Parliament. Initially this was because of the outbreak of World War II and the German occupation of the Netherlands. After the war in 1945 the need for it had lapsed, as the orange, white, and blue were then strongly out of favour, because the National Socialist Movement (NSB), the party which collaborated with the Nazis, had been propagandists for the restoration of the orange in the flag. The Bill was repealed on 9 January 1952.

It was the independent minister of foreign affairs, Baron Van Boetzelaer van Oosterhout, who in 1948 noticed the lack of uniformity in the use of the orange pennant by the authorities as well as the people in the country. He wondered why the departments of the Ministry of War flew the orange pennant with the national flag on birthdays of the members of the royal family but the Ministry of Naval Affairs did not. His own Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as mentioned earlier, always used the orange pennant. Van Boetzelaar wrote to the prime minister on 23 February 1948.<sup>16</sup>

*“The use of the orange pennant, not sanctioned by Royal Decree [of 19 February 1937], however, is in the course of time already so well established, and should according to me, been seen as an outward sign of the unbreakable bond between [the House of] Orange and the Netherlands, that I think it is wise to, if not legally then officially, sanction this use.”*

Minister Van Boetzelaar proposed as well to fly in future the Dutch flag with an orange pennant on:

1. Birthdays of all members of the royal family and
2. Memorial days concerning the royal family.

His proposals were discussed and approved in the cabinet meeting of 1 March 1948. The orange pennant was officially sanctioned.<sup>17</sup> Uniformity in its practice was established, but only at the government level for the ministries and its institutions.<sup>18</sup> The Dutch people at home were exempted, and do not have to follow this ruling, although in practice they do. Army, Navy, and Air Force were initially exempted as well, but have used the orange pennant since 1973.

The exact colour of the orange pennant was specified on 1 November 1958 by the Netherlands Standards Organisation (Nederlands Normalisatie Instituut). In Norm NEN 3203:1958 it was determined according to the resolutions of the Commission Internationale de l’Eclairage (CIE). The colours of the red and blue in the flag were established in Norm NEN 3055:1958.<sup>19</sup>



The days that the orange pennant can fly above the Dutch flag vary according to the composition of the royal family, which still forms the House of Orange. Nowadays there are five designated days (**Figure 13**). The most important is Queen's Day, 30 April, a national holiday. This day, however, is not the real birthday of Queen Beatrix, which is the 31 January, but that of her late mother. When Beatrix was crowned in 1980 it was decided not to change the date of Queen's Day, but to keep it in the spring when there is more chance of nice weather to celebrate and to fly the flag and pennant.



**Figure 13. Flying the Dutch flag with the orange pennant on Queen's Day (30 April) 2011, in the town of Dordrecht. (Photo: Theun Okkerse)**

The orange pennant does go above the flag 31 January. This is mandatory for government buildings and city councils. The same rule applies to the birthdays of the following: Crown Prince William-Alexander on 27 April; his wife and future queen Maxima on 17 May; and their eldest daughter Amalia, second in line to the throne, on 7 December. The orange pennant is most widely flown on Queen's Day, 30 April.

#### The legacy of the orange pennant

Since the introduction of the orange pennant around 1860, many Dutch people have been inspired to attach different coloured pennants or artefacts to the flag to express different allegiances. Dutch Catholics added a white and yellow pennant—the Papal colours—to the tricolour as a sign of their support for the Pope in 1871 when Italy incorporated the Papal States.<sup>20</sup> The practice lasted at least until the outbreak of World War II.<sup>21</sup> Dutch Catholics also attached purple pennants to the flag when celebrating church festivities.<sup>22</sup>

At the outbreak of the Second Boer War in Southern Africa in 1899, green pennants were attached to the flags. The Dutch stood as one man behind the Boer States—Transvaal and Orange Free State—which the British were going to occupy. A man calling himself 'Cornel' wrote in the *Utrechts Nieuwsblad* about his love for Transvaal.<sup>23</sup> He collected money for the Transvaal Boers and called his fellow-collectors to fly the Dutch flag with green pennant, just like himself.

*“With the green pennant, the colour of freedom, but also, as our national colours, the fourth colour in the flag of our brothers from the Transvaal, under which stripes in the faraway lands the honoured battle is fought for freedom and independence.”*



**Figure 14.** The schoolbag above the Dutch flag tells that in the house a secondary school student passed his exams. This flag tradition started in the 1960s.



**Figure 15.** The future king William-Alexander started using the black pennant immediately after 11 September 2001.

In the 1960s it became a tradition for secondary school students to attach a schoolbag to the flag as soon as they heard they had passed their final examination (**Figure 14**). Nowadays you also see books and notebooks attached to the flag. The students are very happy and proud that they can go to university or start working. There is a Dutch expression, similar to the English ‘flying colours’ which says somebody has passed with *‘flag and pennant’*, meaning somebody passed their exams with excellent results.

The future king William-Alexander is responsible for the introduction of the black pennant (**Figure 15**). This first happened immediately after 11 September 2001, when two planes collapsed the Twin Towers in New York and nearly 3,000 people died. The crown prince started using the black pennant above his personal standard, because it is not appropriate to fly his standard at half-mast.<sup>24</sup> This was, in fact, a re-introduction—a black pennant was displayed during the funeral of Crown Prince William of Orange, the oldest son of King William III, in 1879.<sup>25</sup>

Football (soccer) is the national sport of the Netherlands and when the Dutch national team has qualified for the European or even the World Cup, the whole country turns orange (Figure 16).



**Figure 16. The Netherlands turns orange when its football team has qualified for the European or World Cup.**

It has become the Dutch national sports colour and the national teams are called 'Orange'. The Dutch football team first wore orange shirts in 1907 and the first exuberant use of orange by the Dutch fans was seen very clearly in 1988, the glory days of Dutch football. Orange beat arch-rival Germany in the semi-final, which felt like the final. Orange later beat the Soviet Union in the actual final. Since then the use of orange in the streets has become more enthusiastic, even overtaking Queen's Day. It is not solely a flag and pennant matter anymore, everything which has an orange colour is displayed. From this perspective one can also see orange pennants being used as the football colour (Figure 17). But football is a bit like a king: King Football.



**Figure 17. A lone orange pennant, used as orange dressing during the World Cup in South Africa in June 2010. (Photo: Theun Okkerse)**

The orange pennant is rooted in the Dutch flag tradition. Everybody can be satisfied. All shades of opinion are catered to. The flag can remain as it is—red, white, and blue. Those who support the *Orange on Top* may add an extra stripe to the flag. And those who are not happy with the pennant may add something else to the flag, such as an orange tassel (Figure 18).



**Figure 18. Instead of an orange pennant, today other orange items appear above the Dutch flag. Here is an orange tassel. (Photo: Theun Okkerse)**



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4. Fokke, S: *Afbeelding van het afscheid van Willem V te Amsterdam [4 Juni 1768]*. Copperplate. Maritime Museum, Sneek, inventory E-290.
5. D. F. C. Kuperus suggests in his article "Vice-admiraal Gerrit Verdooren (1757-1824), Enige gedenkwaardigheden uit het marineleven van vice-admiraal Gerrit Verdooren CMWO, in leven Heer van Asperen", *Mars et Historia*, 2008, No. 3, p. 28 that Vice-Admiral Verdooren is the father of the orange pennant. According Kuperus, Verdooren would have given the order to fly the flag with the orange pennant and for that reason he would have invented the current tradition.
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13. Among others: *Vlissingse Courant* (Vlissingen), 25 April 1872, p. 3; *Middelburgsche Courant* (Middelburg), 9 September 1873, p. 3; *De Nieuwe Koerier* (Roermond), 15 November 1888, p. 3.
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18. Circular of the Minister of Home Affairs No. 8583, 23 July 1948. Afdeling B. B., Bureau Bestuurszaken, to Mayor and Aldermen of all councils.
19. Nederlands Normalisatie-Instituut: *Kleuren voor textielgoederen. Vlaggekleuren oranje*. Rijswijk: Nederlands Normalisatie Instituut, November 1958. (NEN 3203).
20. "Wij lezen in de Arnhemse Courant", *Leidsch Dagblad* (Leiden), 19 June 1871, p. 1.
21. W. H. in *De Maasbode* (Rotterdam) 1 June 1937, Avondblad, derde blad, p. 9: "Is it (...) proper usage to attach a so-called Papal pennant to our own national flag, in the same way as we fly an orange pennant during celebrations of the royal family? We made inquiries about this at the Papal Inter

Nunciature, who pointed out there is no papal pennant. So therefore there can't be a direction as to how the papal pennant is composed. The yellow-white pennant, which we in this country recently have been using quite a lot, has to be considered as a Dutch habit."

22. "Consecratie der nieuwe parochiale kerk van het H. Hart", *Tilburgsche Courant* (Tilburg), 9 June 1898.

23. Cornel: "Transvaal", *Utrechts Nieuwsblad* (Utrecht), Vol. 7, No. 157, 1 November 1899, p. 3.

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## About the Author

Jos Poels (1957) is a journalist, working and living in the Netherlands. Although his main topics are retail-based, he writes about flags as well. His main interest lies in the history of the Dutch tricolour, but he studies all other national and sub-national flags of the world as well. He has written several flag books in Dutch and English. Poels served in the *Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vlaggenkunde*, where he held different functions. From 1995-2005 he was editor of the Dutch flag magazine *Vlaggen tijdschrift Vexilla Nostra*.

