

Johan de Witt

Johan de Witt (24 September 1625 – 20 August 1672) was a Dutch statesman and a major political figure in the Dutch Republic in the mid-17th century, when its flourishing sea trade in a period of globalization made the republic a leading European trading and seafaring power – now commonly referred to as the Dutch Golden Age. De Witt controlled the Dutch political system from around 1650 until shortly before his death in 1672, working with various factions from nearly all the major cities, especially his hometown, Dordrecht, and the hometown of his wife, Amsterdam.

As a republican, de Witt opposed the House of Orange-Nassau and the Orangists and preferred a shift of power from the central government to the regenten. However, his neglect of the Dutch army (as the regents focused only on merchant vessels, thinking they could avoid war) proved disastrous when the Dutch Republic suffered numerous early defeats in the *Rampjaar* (1672). In the hysteria that followed the effortless invasion by an alliance of England, France and some German states he and his brother Cornelis de Witt were blamed and lynched in The Hague.^{[1][2]} The rioters were never prosecuted,^[2] and historians have argued that William of Orange may have incited them.^[1]

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Early life and education

Johan de Witt



De Witt in 1652

Grand Pensionary of Holland

In office

30 July 1653 – 4 August 1672

Preceded by Adriaan Pauw

Succeeded by Gaspar Fagel

Pensionary of Dordrecht

In office

21 December 1650 – 30 July 1653

Preceded by Nicolaas Ruys

Succeeded by Govert van Slingelandt

Personal details

Born 24 September 1625
Dordrecht, Dutch Republic

Died 20 August 1672
(aged 46)
The Hague, Dutch Republic

Political party States' Party

Spouse(s) Wendela Bicker (m. 1655)

Children Johan de Witt Jr.

Father Jacob de Witt



Family coat of arms^{[3][4]}

Johan de Witt was a member of the old Dutch patrician family De Witt. His father was Jacob de Witt, an influential regent and burgher from the patrician class in the city of Dordrecht, which in the seventeenth century, was one of the most important cities of the dominating province of Holland. Johan and his older brother, Cornelis de Witt, grew up in an elite social environment in terms of education, his father having as good acquaintances important scholars and scientists, such as Isaac Beeckman, Jacob Cats, Gerardus Vossius and Andreas Colvius. Johan and Cornelis attended the Latin school in Dordrecht, which imbued both brothers with the values of the Roman Republic.

Relatives	<u>Cornelis de Witt</u> (brother) <u>Andries de Witt</u> (uncle)
Alma mater	<u>University of Leiden</u>

After having attended the Latin school in Dordrecht, he studied at the Leiden University, where he excelled at mathematics and law. He received his doctorate from the University of Angers in 1645. He practiced law as a lawyer in The Hague as an associate with the firm of Frans van Schooten. In 1650 (the year that stadtholder William II, Prince of Orange died) he was appointed leader of the deputation of Dordrecht to the States of Holland and West Friesland. In December 1650, De Witt became the pensionary of Dordrecht.^[5] In 1652, in the city of Flushing, De Witt found himself faced with a mob of angry demonstrators of sailors and fishermen. An ugly situation was developing.^[6] However, Johan's cool-headedness at the age of 27 calmed the situation. Elders saw greatness in him.

Marriage and children

On 16 February 1655, De Witt married Wendela Bicker, the daughter of Jan Bicker, an influential patrician from Amsterdam, and Agneta de Graeff van Polsbroek. Jan Bicker served as mayor of Amsterdam in 1653. De Witt became a relative to the strong republican-minded brothers Cornelis and Andries de Graeff, and to Andries Bicker. The couple had four children, three daughters and one son.^[7]

1. Anna de Witt (1655–1725), married to Herman van den Honert
2. Agnes de Witt (1658–1688), married to Simon Teresteyn van Halewijn
3. Maria de Witt (1660–1689), married to Willem Hooft
4. Johan de Witt Jr. (1662–1701), secretary of the city of Dordrecht; married to Wilhelmina de Witt



Wendela Bicker

After De Witt's death, his brother in law Pieter de Graeff became a guardian over his children.^[8]

Grand Pensionary

In 1653, the States of Holland elected De Witt councilor pensionary. Since Holland was the Republic's most powerful province, he was effectively the political leader of the United Provinces as a whole—especially during periods when no stadtholder had been elected by the States of most Provinces. The *raadpensionaris* of Holland was often referred to as the Grand Pensionary by foreigners as he represented the preponderant province in the Union of the Dutch Republic. He was a servant who led the States of province by his experience, tenure, familiarity with the issues, and use of the staff at his disposal. He was in no manner equivalent to a modern Prime Minister.^{[9][10]}

Representing the province of Holland, De Witt tended to identify with the economic interests of the shipping and trading interests in the United Provinces. These interests were largely concentrated in the province of Holland, and to a lesser degree in the province of Zeeland.^[11] In the religious conflict between the Calvinists and the more moderate members of the Dutch Reformed Church that arose in 1618,^[12] Holland tended to belong to the Dutch Reformed faction in the United Provinces. Not surprisingly, De Witt also held views of toleration of religious beliefs.

Act of Seclusion

De Witt's power base was the wealthy merchant class into which he was born. This class broadly coincided politically with the "States faction", stressing Protestant religious moderation and pragmatic foreign policy defending commercial interests. The "Orange faction", consisting of the middle class, preferred a strong leader from the Dutch Royal House of Orange as a counterweight against the rich upper-classes in economic and religious matters. Although leaders that did emerge from the House of Orange rarely were strict Calvinists themselves, they tended to identify with Calvinism,^[13] which was popular among the middle classes in the United Provinces during this time. William II of Orange was a prime example of this tendency among the leaders of the House of Orange to support Calvinism. William II was elected Stadholder in 1647, and continued to serve until his death in November 1650.^[14] Eight days after his death, William II's wife delivered a male heir—William III of Orange. Many citizens of the United Provinces urged the election of the infant William III as stadholder under a regency until he came of age. However, the Provinces, under the dominance of the province of Holland^[15] did not fill the office of Stadholder.



The Threatened Swan by Jan Asselijn is an allegory of De Witt protecting his country from its enemies

Together with his uncle, Cornelis de Graeff, De Witt brought about peace with England after the First Anglo-Dutch War with the Treaty of Westminster in May 1654.^[16] The peace treaty had a secret annex, the Act of Seclusion, forbidding the Dutch ever to appoint William II's posthumous son, the infant William, as stadholder. This annex had been attached on instigation of Cromwell, who felt that since William III was a grandson of the executed Charles I, it was not in the interests of his own republican regime to see William ever gain political power.

On 25 September 1660, the States of Holland under the prime movers of De Witt, Cornelis de Graeff, his younger brother Andries de Graeff and Gillis Valckenier resolved to take charge of William's education to ensure he would acquire the skills to serve in a future—though undetermined—state function.^[17] Influenced by the values of the Roman republic, De Witt did his utmost anyway to prevent any member of the House of Orange from gaining power, convincing many provinces to abolish the stadtholderate entirely. He bolstered his policy by publicly endorsing the theory of republicanism. He is supposed to have contributed personally to the *Interest of Holland*, a radical republican textbook published in 1662, by his supporter Pieter de la Court.^[18]

In the period following the Treaty of Westminster, the Republic grew in wealth and influence under De Witt's leadership. De Witt created a strong navy, appointing one of his political allies, Lieutenant Admiral Jacob van Wassenaer Obdam, as supreme commander of the confederate fleet.^[19] Later De Witt became a personal friend of Lieutenant Admiral Michiel de Ruyter.

Perpetual Edict

The Second Anglo-Dutch War began in 1665, lasting until 1667, when it ended with the Treaty of Breda, in which De Witt negotiated very favorable agreements for the Republic after the partial destruction of the English fleet in the Raid on the Medway, initiated by De Witt himself and executed in 1667 by De Ruyter.

At about the time the Treaty of Breda was concluded, De Witt made another attempt at pacification of the quarrel between States Party and Orangists over the position of the Prince of Orange. He proposed to have William appointed captain-general of the Union on reaching the age of majority (23); on condition, however, that this office would be declared incompatible with that of stadtholder in all of the provinces. For good measure the stadtholderate was abolished in Holland itself. This Perpetual Edict (1667) was enacted by the States of Holland on 5 August 1667, and recognised by the States General on a four-to-three vote in January, 1668. This edict was added by Gaspar Fagel, then Pensionary of Haarlem, Gillis Valckenier and Andries de Graeff, two prominent Amsterdam regents, which abolished the stadtholderate in Holland "for ever".

Disaster year

During 1672, which the Dutch refer to as the disaster year, France and England attacked the Republic in the Franco-Dutch War. De Witt was severely wounded by a knife-wielding assassin on 21 June. He resigned as Grand Pensionary on 4 August, but this was not enough for his enemies. His brother Cornelis (De Ruyter's deputy-in-the-field at the Raid on the Medway), particularly hated by the Orangists, was arrested on trumped up charges of treason. He was tortured (as was usual under Roman-Dutch law, which required a confession before a conviction was possible) but refused to confess. Nevertheless, he was sentenced to exile. When his brother went over to the jail (which was only a few steps from his house) to help him get

started on his journey, both were attacked by members of The Hague's civic militia in a clearly orchestrated assassination. The brothers were shot and then left to the mob. Their naked, mutilated bodies were strung up on the nearby public gibbet, while the Orangist mob partook of their roasted livers in a cannibalistic frenzy. Throughout it all, a remarkable discipline was maintained by the mob, according to contemporary observers, making one doubt the spontaneity of the event.^[20] The same portraitist who had made paintings of the brothers in life, Jan de Baen, also portrayed them in death: *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers*.



The murder of the brothers De Witt

De Witt had in effect ruled the Republic for almost 20 years. His regime outlasted him only a few more days. Though no more people were killed, the lynching of the De Witts lent renewed impetus to the mob attacks, and to help restore public order the States of Holland empowered William on 27 August to purge the city councils in any way he would see fit to restore public order. The following purges in the early days of September were accompanied by large, but peaceful, Orangist demonstrations, that had a remarkable political character. The demonstrations delivered petitions that demanded certain additional reforms with a, in a sense, "reactionary" flavour: the "ancient" privileges of the guilds and civic militias—who were traditionally seen as mouthpieces of the citizenry as a whole—to curb the regent's powers were to be recognised again (as in pre-Burgundian times). The demonstrators also demanded more influence of the Calvinist preachers on the content of government policies and a roll-back of the toleration of Catholics and other dissenting denominations. The purges of the city governments were not everywhere equally thoroughgoing (and, of course, there was little mention of popular influence later on, as the new regents shared the abhorrence of the old ones of real democratic reforms). But as a whole, the new Orangist regime of the Stadtholder was well-entrenched during his following reign.^[21]

The question whether William had a hand in the murder of the De Witt brothers will always remain unanswered, like his exact role in the later Massacre of Glencoe. The fact that he ordered the withdrawal of a federal cavalry detachment that otherwise might have prevented the lynching has always raised eyebrows;

neither did he prosecute well-known ringleaders like Johan van Banchem, Cornelis Tromp and his relative, Johan Kievit, even advancing their careers. But maybe firm measures against the conspirators were not feasible in the political climate of autumn 1672. In any case, the political turmoil did not enable the allies an opportunity to finish the Republic off. The French were effectively stymied by the water defenses. Only when the inundations froze over in the following winter was there, briefly, a chance for Marshal Luxembourg, who had taken over command of the invading army from Louis, to make an incursion with 10,000 troops on skates. This almost ended in disaster, when they were ambushed. Meanwhile, the States General managed to conclude alliances with the German emperor and Brandenburg, which helped relieve the French pressure in the East.^[22]

Mathematics

In presentation of conic sections, de Witt sought kinematic motivation, independent of cross sections of a cone. Johannes Kepler, for example, had used kinematic geometric constructions. From 1647 to 1650 de Witt did legal work in The Hague and composed *Elementa Curvarum Linearum, Liber Secundus*, when he had the chance. In 1658 the *Liber Primus* was submitted to Frans van Schooten to introduce *Liber Secundus*. The first is purely verbal, the second uses algebra: a, b, c as known quantities, u, v, w, x, y, z unknowns.

The kinematic description of ellipses dates from Archimedes and Proclus, as well as the contemporary Claude Mydorge. Witt describes the hyperbola with a rotating line and a sliding angle, and a parabola by means of a rotating angle and sliding line. In 1661, de Witt's work appeared in the second volume of von Schooten's Latin translation of *La Géométrie*. *Elementa Curvarum Linearum* has been described as the first textbook in analytic geometry.^[23]

De Witt contributed to financial mathematics: *The Worth of Life Annuities Compared to Redemption Bonds*. This work combined his roles as statesman and as mathematician, and was discussed in the correspondence between Leibniz and Bernoulli concerning the use of probabilities. Ever since the Middle Ages, a life annuity was a way to obtain a regular income from a reliable source. The state, for instance, could provide a widow with a regular income until her death, in exchange for a 'lump sum' up front. There were also redemption bonds that were more like a regular state loan. De Witt showed that for the same principal a bond paying 4% interest would result in the same profit as a life annuity of 6% (1 in 17). But the 'Staten' at the time were paying over 7% (1 in 14). The publication about life annuities is "one of the first applications of probability in economics."^{[23]:1} After the violent deaths of the brothers the 'Staten' issued new life annuities in 1673 for the old rate of 1 in 14.

In 1671, De Witt conceived of a life annuity as a weighted average of annuities certain where the weights were mortality probabilities (that sum to one), thereby producing the present value of a life annuity. Edmond Halley's (of comet fame) representation of the life annuity dates to 1693, when he re-expressed a life annuity as the discounted value of each annual payment, multiplied by the probability of surviving long enough to receive the payment, and summed until there are no survivors. De Witt's approach was especially insightful and ahead of its time. In modern terminology, De Witt expressed the value of a life annuity as the expected value of a random variable.

Legacy

The lynching of the De Witt brothers is depicted with a dramatic intensity in the first four chapters of *The Black Tulip*, a historical novel by Alexandre Dumas, père in 1850, and this event has implications for the whole plot line of the book. In its time, Dumas's book helped make this tragedy known to a French readership (and a readership in other countries into whose languages the book was translated) who were otherwise ignorant of Dutch history.

The important role of De Witt in Dutch politics and his murder was subject of the 2015 film *Michiel de Ruyter*, called *The Admiral* in the English version.

Currently one Dutch warship is named after De Witt, HNLMS *Johan de Witt* (L801).

References

Footnotes

1. Rowen 1977, p. 891.
2. Byrne, Eugene. "Is it true that an angry mob of Dutchmen killed and ate their own prime minister in 1672?" (<http://www.historyextra.com/qa/power-hungry>). *HistoryExtra*.
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5. Israel 1995, p. 712.
6. Israel 1995, p. 719.
7. Anna de Witt at *Heren van Holland* (<http://www.herenvanholland.nl/eigenaar.cfm?eigenaarnummer=1729>) (in Dutch)
8. Rowen 1985, p. 220.
9. Rowen 1977, p. 59.
10. Temple, Sir William (1705), *Observations upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands, orig published 1668* (https://books.google.com/books?id=_Su2ogKHsUEC&source=gbs_navlinks_s) (7th ed.), London: Jacob Tonfon within Grays-Inn Gate next Grays-Inn Lane, and Awnfoam and John Churchill at the Black Swan in Tater-No/ler-Row*, pp. 104–105
11. Israel 1995, p. 467.
12. Israel 1995, pp. 450–477.
13. Israel 1995, p. 600.
14. Israel 1995, p. 702.
15. Israel 1995, p. 733.
16. Israel 1995, p. 722.
17. Troost 2005, p. 43.
18. Israel 1995, pp. 759–760.
19. Israel 1995, p. 721.



Wilhelmina of the Netherlands unveiling a statue of De Witt in 1918

20. Israel 1995, p. 803.
21. Israel 1995, pp. 804–806.
22. Israel 1995, p. 812.
23. Albert W. Grootendorst (2000, 10) Jan de Witt's *Elementa Curvarum Linearum*, in two volumes, *Liber Primus* (2000) ISBN 0-387-98748-7 and *Liber Secundus* (2010), Springer books ISBN 9780857291417

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External links

- Johan de Witt (<https://mathgenealogy.org/id.php?id=125560>) at the Mathematics Genealogy Project
- Works by Johan de Witt (<https://openlibrary.org/authors/OL148646A>) at Open Library
- Works by or about Johan de Witt (<https://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n50048488>) in libraries (WorldCat catalog)

Political offices		
Preceded by Nicolaas Ruys	Pensionary of Dordrecht 1650–1653	Succeeded by Govert van Slingelandt
Preceded by Adriaan Pauw	Grand Pensionary 1653–1672	Succeeded by Gaspar Fagel

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