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MEMORIES OF AN EVOLVING EUROPE

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Mansholt

A biography

INTRODUCTION

Questions for Mansholt's biographer

For the Dutch, Mansholt is not just a name but a symbol – a symbol of agriculture, Europe, socialism and environmental awareness. Behind the symbol stands the man Sicco Leendert Mansholt, who died in 1995 at the age of 86. Many people remember Mansholt as the European administrator whose plans for agriculture destroyed millions of small farms, forcing European farmers to increase the scale of their operations and ruining the landscape. Others see him as the creator of the disastrous common agricultural policy emanating from Brussels that costs European citizens a fortune in return for a steadily growing butter mountain and wine lake. Some point out that Mansholt changed his ways in later life and became a supporter of small-scale organic farming. Others mention the little-known fact that he once had an affair with Petra Kelly, one of the founders of the German Green Party.

Many Dutch pensioners remember Mansholt as one of the big names of the post-war reconstruction era in the Netherlands: as minister of Agriculture, Fishery and Food Distribution in the first Dutch cabinet after the end of the war, he was responsible for ensuring that people had enough to eat in that time of shortages and disruption. A few of them still retain a mental image of him as a tall, self-assured man with a round bald head, formulating his ideas carefully and slowly in a slight Groningen accent. He is still regarded in his own party, the *Partij van de Arbeid* (Dutch Labour Party), as one of their great figures. Residents of the Wieringermeer district in the province of Noord-Holland know him as one of the pioneers of the Wieringermeer polder, created in the 1930s. In Groningen finally, the Dutch province in which he was born, Mansholt is a hero who did not have a statue to commemorate him until recently, though his likeness does appear on a number of postage stamps. In fact, a statue of Mansholt made by the local artist Marten Grupstra was unveiled by Gerda Verburg, the minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, and Mansholt's daughter Theda Aghina in Blauwestad, a new town in the east of Groningen, on Saturday 13 September 2008 – the centenary of his birth. This event was part of a year of celebrations organized to mark "100 years of Sicco Mansholt". I have been informed that the appearance of the Dutch version of this

biography was the key factor that sparked the decision to create this statue.

What kind of a story can a biographer weave around these isolated facts? I would like to start off with a number of introductory remarks in this connection, with reference to the following eight questions.

1. Is the person in question worth a book? This is a question that every biographer should start by asking. In the case of Sicco Mansholt, the answer must be “yes”. He was minister of Agriculture, Fishery and Food Distribution in six successive Dutch cabinets, from June 1945 to December 1957, Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner for Agriculture from January 1958 to March 1972 and then President of the Commission till December 1972. He is recognized as the initiator of the European common agricultural policy, and one of the founding fathers of the European Union.

Mansholt’s Dutch legacy alone is probably enough to justify a biography. He was an active member of the Resistance during the Second World War. He organized food distribution for illegal workers and was involved in the dropping of supplies and the clandestine transport of weapons. But it is his European legacy above all that deserves to be commemorated. After having set his stamp on agricultural developments in his native country for twelve and a half years, he continued to do the same in the six Member States of the EEC – France, Italy, Western Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg – for the next fifteen. He assisted at the birth of the European Union. Economic integration demanded continual political struggle. Mansholt left his own distinctive marks in this struggle at Brussels between 1958 and 1973.

Certain other aspects of Mansholt’s life are also grist to the biographer’s mill. I will mention three examples here. Firstly, Mansholt was a farmer and a socialist – an unusual combination. How did he manage to combine these two facets of his personality? Secondly, he went to the Dutch East Indies in 1934 to start a life as a tea planter but returned to the Netherlands two years later, disillusioned with colonial capitalism. At the end of the ‘forties, however, as a Dutch government minister he shared the collective responsibility for his country’s repressive colonial war against Indonesia. Thirty years later, he regarded this as the blackest page of his whole political career. What had happened in the intervening years? And finally, at the end of his political career, Mansholt underwent a remarkable change of course, from strong proponent of socialist planning to a believer in environmental protection and a prophet of zero growth. Why?

2. What sparked my interest in Mansholt? In 1991, I wrote the chapter on agriculture in a book on the Dutch cabinet headed by Willem Drees of the PvdA and J.R.H. (Josef) van Schaik of the KVP, which lasted from 1948 to 1951. This book was a publication of the Centre for Dutch Parliamentary History (Dutch abbreviation CPG) in Nijmegen. Ex-minister Mansholt was one of the people who read the book. In a brief comment on this contribution, he expressed his admiration for the members of the *Tweede Kamer* (the House of Representatives of the Dutch parliament) from that post-war period who, he wrote, were still “firmly rooted in society... They were true representatives of the people; compared with them, most present-day parliamentarians are a mere shadow of the past ...”¹

This chapter devoted considerable space to a portrait of Mansholt as a minister in the above-mentioned cabinet. After this first taste of “Mansholt the man,” I started to collect more material about him, and in late 1992 I asked him whether I could come and talk to him about the possibility of writing a political biography of him that would take the form of a doctoral thesis. He replied promptly, writing:

You would of course be very welcome to come and discuss the possibility of writing a political biography of me. I must however make it clear right from the start that the amount of time and effort I myself could devote to this project would be limited. I have often been asked to write an autobiography, but I have always refused. I have not kept any records that could be used as a basis for such a work, and I have so far never spent much time looking back at the past. All my attention is still concentrated on problems of the future and I hope that my health will allow me to continue to do so.

He drew my attention to the book *La crise* (The crisis), a published collection of interviews with the French journalist Janine Delaunay that explored his life and his vision of the future. The crisis referred to in the title was the ecological crisis due to unbridled economic growth and population expansion predicted in the report of the Club of Rome in the early ‘seventies. It has been translated not only into Dutch but also into German, Spanish and even Japanese, and certain passages are available in English on the website www.ena.lu – a very useful source of information about the history of the European Community. Mansholt himself added much useful information not present in the original French version to the Dutch and German versions of *La crise*, entitled *De crisis* and *Die Krise* respectively. It is for this reason that *De Crisis* has been used as the source of quotations for the present biography, since it contains much relevant information not to be found in *La Crise*.

¹ Letter from Mansholt to the author, 20 Sept. 1991.

Mansholt also had dozens of scrap-books at home with cuttings that his wife had collected, stacks of material that he made use of in speeches and a few cardboard boxes full of papers that he had taken with him from Brussels (“unsorted, tied together in bundles”). After 1973, he had devoted much of his energy to plans for agricultural reform and “arguments for an economics of sufficiency”. He concluded with the statement: “I am writing you all this to give you an impression of the chaos you will encounter among my papers, so that you can prepare yourself to deal with the problems that will face you if you embark on the planned political biography.”²

I visited him at home in Wapserveen in the Dutch province of Drenthe on 16 March 1993. Mansholt and his wife lived in a huge old farmhouse, tastefully converted for residential purposes and no longer used as a farm. My first impression on meeting him was that here was an old farmer, worn out by half a century’s intensive labour on the land. He was tall, and he had charisma, but he found walking – and sometimes even talking – difficult. Mansholt was 84 years old at the time, and he told me that he had had a stroke eight years before and a more recent relapse in his condition.

We talked about all manner of things – his parents, the Resistance, Willem Drees, his hobbies, President Kennedy, kneeling coolies in the Dutch East Indies, the EEC treaty, people hiding out from the Nazis in the Wieringermeer, his nephews Stefan and Herman Louwes, and so on, and so on. His memory failed him from time to time, and on a couple of occasions he was overcome by emotion when he tried to remember certain people or events. At the end of the afternoon – his wife had come in a couple of times to complain that he was getting overtired, but he simply waved her away – he squeezed himself into his car and took me to the station. It was a long drive, but he would not hear of me phoning a taxi. He preferred to drive me there himself – and he was not a slow driver.

It had already been estimated that this study would take me five years – alongside my regular work for the CPG. A few years would have to be added to the total if it proved necessary to start by bringing order in the chaos Mansholt had warned me to expect. The project was started up cautiously, but before much serious effort had been devoted to study of the available archives Mansholt died – quite unexpectedly – in June 1995. I used the material I had already collected as a basis for the article “Het avontuur van Sicco Mansholt” (The Adventure of Sicco

² Letter from Mansholt to the author, 29 Jan. 1993.

Mansholt), that was published the following year in CPG's series of *Politieke opstellen* (Political essays).³

After that, the Mansholt project was mothballed for a while. After ex-MEP Herman Verbeek – who had been a good friend of Mansholt and his wife during the last few years of his life – had stated his intention to write a biography of Mansholt, I decided to restrict my doctoral study to the period from 1945 to 1958, when Mansholt had been a cabinet minister. It should be more or less possible to combine this with the work on the books about the final Dutch cabinets under Willem Drees in preparation for the CPG. It proved difficult to realize these plans when it was decided in 1998 that I should work with Jan Willem Brouwer on the biography of ex-Prime Minister P.J.S. De Jong, which was published in November 2001.

I decided to pick up the threads of the Mansholt story in 2002. Mansholt deserved a fully fledged biography. In the meantime, the material that I had encountered in Wapserveen had been transferred to the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam and meticulously catalogued.⁴ Verbeek had abandoned his idea of writing a biography. He had given it a try, but had got no further than the first chapter. He was relieved to be able to take the millstone from his neck. The staff and management of the CPG took steps to enable me to complete the study, and the writing of the book.

3. Am I the right person to write this book? In other words, am I capable of putting myself in Mansholt's shoes to the extent needed to understand his motives and his actions? The last member of my own family who had earned his living from the land had been my grandfather, a farm labourer with twelve children to support who lived in the village of Achthuizen, a Catholic enclave on the island of Flakkee in the Dutch province of Zuid-Holland. The Mansholts were gentleman farmers with a big farm in Vierhuizen, in the Westpolder region of Groningen. Sicco's parents were not religious, and were active socialists. It must thus be concluded that there is a wide difference in background between the author and his subject.

This gap is filled to a certain extent by my expertise as a historian specialised in post-war Dutch politics and my study of European law, but it is reasonable to ask whether this is sufficient. Mansholt grew up

³ J.C.F.J. van Merriënboer, "Het avontuur van Sicco Mansholt," in *Politieke opstellen* 15/16, 1996, pp. 137-168.

⁴ Also available online at www.iisg.nl/archives/nl/files/m/10760380full.php [accessed April 2011].

on a farm on the shores of the Wadden Sea with wide vistas of the surrounding landscape, where life was determined by the rhythm of the seasons and where the family sang socialist battle songs, accompanied by his mother on the piano. This left a stamp on him, and his biographer should ideally be imbued by the same spirit.

But does this demand not go too far? Mansholt did not come from another planet, and it will be sufficient if his biographer does his best to gain an insight into his behaviour as a human being – albeit a unique one. Of course, the biographer must have a certain gift for this discipline, a feeling for the time in which his hero lived, an understanding of universal aspects of human behaviour and a grasp of individual characteristics.⁵ Just as there are historians who do not have much feeling for biography, there are also plenty of Socialists, farmers and people from Groningen who really had no idea what Mansholt was up to.

4. What kind of biography do I want to write? “People are a programme and a policy and a direction,” wrote Mansholt’s friend, the Dutch social democrat Jaap Burger in 1947.⁶ While it is true that Mansholt was primarily a Dutch and European politician, as I have indicated in my answer to question 1 above, the added value of this study lies mainly in the link it creates between the public figure and the private face, in the analysis and recognition of certain human aspects of Mansholt’s character. Politics is a highly personal affair, and as I have just remarked Mansholt was a politician above all else. His leadership is the real theme of this book. *What* he achieved is often less important than *how* he did it. In fact, failures are often more interesting in this connection than successes.

Every biographer aims to bring his subject to life in the pages of his book, and that is as true in the case of Mansholt as in any other biography. The closer the author comes to Mansholt’s head and heart, the more likely he is to succeed in this aim. I don’t want to lose sight of Mansholt behind masses of figures about agricultural problems or the minutes of cabinet meetings. He must come to life on every page. Of course, this is only possible if enough material is available about his life – but on the other hand, if you include every single detail the book is bound to be boring. Each biographer has to find his own way through this maze: there is no golden rule. In a purely political biography,

⁵ This threefold division into historical time, universal human aspects and individual factors is taken from Henriëtte L.T. de Beaufort, “De biografie. Een theoretisch onderzoek?”, in *NRC*, 30 Feb. 1957.

⁶ J.A.W. Burger, “De ‘noodzaak’ van het militair gezag,” *S&D* 4, 1947, p. 151.

Mansholt would not be “born” until 24 June 1945, the day when he became a government minister. He was already 36 then, with nearly half his life behind him. My choice is more Mansholt and less politics.

5. What should the biography look like? That depends, of course, on the material that is used and the questions that are asked. A book about Mansholt should be of a manageable size, should be readable and suitable for a wider public than professional historians. These requirements are more or less self-evident. In addition, it makes sense to lay down a few ground rules, mainly in connection with the proposed length of the study. At a certain point, you have to wrap up the work on the book and go on to the next topic.

I set a number of criteria concerning the size and form of the book in advance. About 350 pages seemed enough to me for a good picture of the man – though the Dutch edition eventually turned into 420 pages, or 480 pages if you count the end-notes and reference list. Mansholt’s life would be spread evenly over a certain number of chapters, each 15 to 25 pages long – line spacing 1.5 – which would in principle be arranged chronologically apart from a number of special themes and crisis situations that would demand separate attention. The contours of the highs and lows in his life were already visible in the article I had written in 1996. It goes without saying that the approach and the annotations would have to be academically justified, and that I would have to wrap things up at the end of the book and give my overall vision of Mansholt.

I would have to learn to slow down where necessary while writing, and to avoid unnecessary detours. When considering what to include and what to omit, I would have to bear in mind the interests of a wider reading public that would include people like Mansholt’s daughter, my own father and the student from Madrid who once asked if I could send her a translation of my article “The Adventure of Sicco Mansholt”. The style and tone would have to be adapted to suit this wider audience, insofar as that was possible in an academic dissertation. Jargon would have to be avoided, and each chapter would have to be divided into short sections with catchy headings that would appeal to the general reader; Mansholt’s own voice, and those of other players in this drama, would have to be heard regularly via indented quotations from written or spoken work. Finally, two to four suitable illustrations would have to be sought for each chapter.

6. What material should I select, and why? Some form of selection is inevitable. So much has been written and said about Mansholt that it would be impossible for one person to review it all within the time

available. And it should also be remembered that this mountain of material still covers only a few per cent of all the man did during his lifetime. As I mentioned in my answer to question 4 above, the main focus here is on Mansholt's *personality*, on his leadership qualities and on an attempt to get into his head and heart.

This approach leads to a number of concrete questions. What drove him? What were his ideals, ambitions and dreams? Where did they come from? What role did his upbringing play, and who else apart from his parents and teachers had a major influence on him? How did he interact with his family and friends, colleagues, political allies and opponents? What was his political style? It is important to indicate not only *what* he achieved, but also how he achieved it (including details of crucial interventions, failures, pet notions etc.). Finally, is the picture of Mansholt that is generally held – as sketched in the first few paragraphs of this introduction – accurate?

This led to the following rule of thumb: personal sources are to be preferred to political ones, and political sources to administrative ones. A letter or interview generally yields more useful information than the minutes of meetings or policy notes. The basic material consists of Mansholt's own archives and those of Alfred Mozer, his private secretary during his time in Brussels, the private correspondence that is in the possession of Mansholt's family and all kinds of interviews with Mansholt (published in newspapers and periodicals, broadcast on the radio and television, and recorded in various versions of *La crise*).

Speeches and articles attributed to Mansholt are rarely used as primary sources. Most of these were written by his officials (as various documents from Mansholt's own archives and those of Alfred Mozer testify). CPG studies provide ample material on his time as a Dutch cabinet minister (1945-1958), while the minutes of cabinet meetings and the *Handelingen* (verbatim reports of the proceedings) of the Dutch Parliament can also provide useful information. There are no comparable sources covering his time in Brussels. The minutes of the European Commission are mainly restricted to the decisions taken, and give very few details of the underlying discussions. The debates in the European Parliament were also much less informative for my purposes than those in the two chambers of the Dutch Parliament.

The only sources I have consulted in the archives of the ministry of Agriculture were cabinet papers. The topics dealt with here were those which Mansholt considered important enough to handle himself (or "hot" dossiers that were so urgent or sensitive as to require his intervention). There is plenty of comparable material for the Brussels period (1958-1973) in Mansholt's own archives and those of Alfred Mozer. I also interviewed a number of people myself to gain supplementary

information, and performed a systematic search for thumbnail sketches of Mansholt derived from material (diaries, memoirs, interviews, biographies etc.) published by or about his German, French, British and American political contacts.

Of course, the main lines of Mansholt's story were already clear to me – I had been studying him for years – and that helped to shape my selection. For example, the final "Green" period of his political career receives relatively little attention. Most of what Mansholt did after 1973 was based on his own ideas, but may be regarded as of less significance than his previous work. The main contours of his contribution had already been defined. Given the thematic importance of the period from 1945 to 1958 and the ups and downs in Brussels, it was relatively easy to look for key biographical documents that provided the answers to the questions I posed.

7. Do I expect this study to reveal any new insights? Yes I do, since some of the sources I have used were unavailable before. For example, Mansholt's private correspondence throws more light on his parents, his years as a student, the time he spent in the Dutch East Indies, the pioneering years in the Wieringermeer and his experiences during the Second World War. Practically nothing was known about these topics before. Most of the papers from Mansholt's own archives and those of Alfred Mozer had never been studied before and yield new data, especially on Mansholt's time in Brussels (1958-1973).

Special attention has been paid to a number of themes in the expectation that the material might yield new "revelations," for example about the place Mansholt's mother occupied in his life, the influence of his wartime activities (which have not been well documented so far), the development of the relationship between the EEC and the USA, the line from Mansholt's activities as a tea planter via his efforts in favour of international development during his time as a Dutch cabinet minister to the report of the Club of Rome, Mansholt's financial position and his affair with Petra Kelly.

Mansholt is a historical figure who deserves a biography. The main "new" thing about the biography is the fact that it exists at all. Mansholt's political leadership, his views on Europe and perhaps this biography of him as a whole can represent a source of inspiration for the present generation. The European Union – not a very exciting entity in itself – gets a human face via Mansholt, who was a key figure in the early days and one of the greatest Dutch Europeans. A human life means more to the average European citizen than a learned explanation of the significance of the Lisbon Treaty.

8. What risks does the biographer of Sicco Mansholt run? On the one hand, he could fail to see the wood for the trees because of the huge mass of material he has to study. Mansholt's life is an exemplar of the 20th century, where agriculture, socialism, colonialism, the Second World War, European integration, international development and environmental awareness all play a role. Too much factual information on these various aspects leaves our hero in the shade, though we do need enough context to be able to understand his behaviour properly. The various volumes of the series *Parlementaire geschiedenis van Nederland na 1945* (Parliamentary history of the Netherlands since 1945) contain a total of no fewer than three hundred closely printed pages about Dutch agricultural policy between 1945 and 1958. In the present book, we are only interested in the essence of this policy and Mansholt's role in shaping it.

The problem of context is even more pressing when complicated European questions are discussed. How can you make the situation clear to a reader who is not schooled in the history of the EU without swamping Mansholt in detail and boring the reader? The pile of material to choose from is even higher here, because relevant documents are produced in every Member State.

Another problem is that of incomplete or unreliable sources. The biographer must accept the fact that he is not going to learn everything he wants to know about his hero, that inconsistencies are part and parcel of human life – and that goes for Mansholt too, of course – and that he as an author is subjective. Of course, he always does his best to come up with a balanced judgment, but all his views inevitably have a personal tinge. He must do his best to find the right balance between subjectivity and objectivity. While one of the tasks of a historian is to prick the bubble of inflated reputations, he must not devote too much energy to this aspect of his work. Negative criticism, where appropriate, must be balanced by the right amount of constructive comment.

Finally, the biographer must not sweep relevant facts that do not fit into his world view under the carpet. And he must be circumspect in expressing moral judgments. His ideas about right and wrong will not necessarily agree with those of Mansholt – or of the reader. Of course, ethical considerations do play a role when facts are to be weighed up. Every historian is subjective by definition. He poses questions, weighs up the answer and adds the necessary nuances, but must not be too afraid of making judgements.

Mansholt as a shining example? Maybe this was the idea that – sub-consciously – motivated this biographer. The article I wrote about Mansholt in 1996 drew the picture of a charismatic politician who had the courage of his convictions, who was committed, had his heart in the right place and was guided by an idealistic vision of society; someone, moreover, who had played a heroic role in the Resistance and was a democrat in heart and soul. Reader, you have been warned.