

Laudatio Louis (A.M.J.A.) Berkvens

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Louis Berkvens' career shows that the best research does not always come from countries far away in foreign languages, but can also be found in our own and neighbouring countries. Louis Berkvens was born in Eindhoven in 1952 and was awarded a history degree in 1980 from Nijmegen University. The latter was also the university where his academic career took off with a position at the Gerard Noodt Institute of Legal History. A Ph.D. thesis followed in 1990. By then, Louis Berkvens had already moved on to Maastricht University, where he would go through all the stages from lecturer to professor by special appointment. The name of his chair indicates his life's work: legal history, not in general, but of the Limburg territories. The regional history organisation, Limburgs Geschied- en Oudheidkundig genootschap provides the funding for this endowed chair and it is probably one of the best investments in academia ever made, as Louis Berkvens has given the Dutch province of Limburg a prominent place in the world of legal history.

The difficulties he had to cope with can hardly be overestimated, as before the French Revolution this region had a bewildering institutional diversity. Some territories depended of the Dutch Republic, others of the Habsburgs Netherlands and there were also many other larger and smaller principalities which were or became involved in the Limburg imbroglio, like for example the ecclesiastic principality of Thorn. Regime changes and complex local situations of shared power (e.g. the joint sovereignty over Maastricht of the catholic bishop of Liège and the protestant Dutch Republic) added new twists to this complexity. In short, the legal history of Limburg confuses out- and insiders. It is impossible for the modern researcher to catch all details, but Louis Berkvens has gone far on the road to perfection in his studies of Spanish Guelders, Prussian Guelders and Guelders of the States (i.e. of the Dutch Republic) and also of smaller territories like Thorn, Dalhem and Kessenich. Moreover, he has always paid particular attention to the history of the Habsburg Netherlands, so that Belgian legal historians consider him to be also a historian of their country. Louis Berkvens specializes in the study of the law as contemporaries practiced it. Hence, he has devoted a lot of time to the sources of daily life of the law. He has published the lists of the edicts of the Upper Guelders (the part of the old principality of Guelders which is now largely incorporated into the Dutch province of Limburg). His interest in the law in action directed his research towards the courts and tribunals active in Limburg, their staff, their rules of procedure and their famous and lesser cases.

It would be wrong to see Louis Berkvens solely as an individual scholar, as his personality and research have inspired many others. The Limburgs Geschied- en Oudheidkundig Genootschap has published many of his works. Most of all, Louis Berkvens works closely with Limburg archivists. Under his supervision two of them, Hans van Hall and Jacques van Rensch wrote impressive theses on the liberty of Eijsden and the sun fief Gronsveld. The enthusiasm Louis Berkvens and his friends of the Limburgs Geschied- en Oudheidkundig genootschap have generated is so great that their recent book on the history of Limburg, was sold out almost immediately, in spite of a print run of thousands of copies.

Many outsiders harbour a wrong impression of local legal history. They assume that researchers working on the history of the highest courts share in the latter's greatness, whereas researchers of more modest courts and tribunals are as low as the courts they study. This is, of course, nonsense.

The real life of the law played itself out not in the great law suits of the highest courts, but in the run of the mill cases before the lower courts and tribunals. However, these sometimes pedestrian cases took place in the context of a larger regional, national, European and global history. Louis Berkvens has always embedded his 'local' publications in a broader worldview, giving their due to events elsewhere, in particular in the capitals which decided over the fate of the Limburg territories. He has also ensured that others followed him in this, like, for example, his student Bram Van Hofstraeten who has already become an expert of the EU-region Meuse-Rhine in his own right. A hard to destroy fallacy concerning local legal history is that only those academics who publish in English can become members of the Champions League of legal history. However, foreign colleagues are too ignorant of the local and regional intricacies and they will not even notice when an author wrongly interprets a convoluted local legal situation. On the other hand, it is very hard to speak for an audience of local historians and archivists who by heart know every little corner of their part of the world and will not at all hesitate to criticise the learned professor for even the tiniest error. So, one should not underestimate the achievements of Louis Berkvens. Moreover, he has also worked on the broader topics of Dutch and European legal history and has published in Dutch, English, French and German.

Louis Berkvens, lover of archives and old books, has, nevertheless, also been a pioneer of digital humanities. Nowadays, that sounds less exciting, but at the time he blazed the trail for many other projects and initiatives. For example, the electronic newsletter, the *Rechtshistorische Courant*, of the Ghent Legal History Institute, would have been unthinkable without the example Louis Berkvens provided. He was also a pioneer in another field. If today many other scholars in the Low Countries are reaping the harvest of legal iconography studies, they are well aware of their debt to Louis Berkvens and his colleagues involved in earlier projects.

In short, there is ample justification for awarding a Sarton medal to Louis Berkvens. If his friends and admirers have a point of criticism, it may be that he is too modest. As Dutch editor in chief of the legal history review *Pro Memorie* he has helped, together with his colleagues Georges Martyn and Paul Brood, countless others, even at the cost of his own career. Thus, the award of the Sarton medal is a chance to shine a light on a scholar who has always graciously put others in the spotlight.