

The Meuse

The Story of a River

Wim Peumans

An extract pp 4-5; 7-14

Original title De Maas. Het verhaal van een rivier
Publisher Manteau, 2024

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Jane Hedley-Prole

©Wim Peumans/Jane Hedley-Prole/Manteau/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

p 4-5

Contents

- 1 The sources
- 2 Natural drama
- 3 A giant task
- 4 Prophecy
- 5 Rooted
- 6 Holy
- 7 Muse
- 8 Revolution
- 9 Meuse dwellers
- Intermezzo – Taking the plunge
- 10 Border
- 11 Crossroads
- 12 Cretaceous Sea
- 13 Lifeline
- 14 Wings and webbed feet
- 15 Dunes
- Intermezzo – Floating
- 16 Fish tithe
- 17 Flood
- 18 Murky
- 19 Estuary
- 20 Mother Meuse
- Acknowledgements

Chronological summary

Illustrations

Quotation references

Sources

Index of names

Index of place names

p 7-14

1. The Sources

To those who knew him, Justin Evrard was *un personnage hors du commun*, an extraordinary character. In 1967 the priest from Liège lived up to that reputation when he rolled up his sleeves, determined to finally settle a never-ending saga – the wrangling about the true primary source of the Meuse.

Back then, three sources in a tiny northern French village all vied for the title. But the surrounding villages had entered the fray, eager to claim the glory. As befits a priest, Evrard's first encounter with the sources of the Meuse has a mystical tinge. Armed with a pickaxe in one hand and a walking stick in the other, he sets off from the village, followed by a gaggle of children. On reaching the highest spot where water bubbles out of the ground, he slips and tumbles into the spring, cassock and all. In a posthumous tribute in 1991, the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* summarised *curé* Evrard's baptismal moment at the source as follows: 'The Meuse had chosen him as her confidant: it was to him that she revealed her sources.' At Father Evrard's request, the French *Institut National de Géographie* (National Geographic Institute) confirmed that the source next to the D130B highway was the primary source, being the furthest away from the estuary in the North Sea.

But the cleric doesn't stop there. As far as he's concerned, the primary source of his beloved river deserves a monument, just like other great European rivers. With support from major Belgian and Dutch cities and ports along the Meuse he scrapes together the funds for a bronze monument which – it later turns out – was built right on top of a nineteenth-century cesspit. 'From now on, tourists who follow the river upstream will no longer be left floundering,' the regional French newspaper *Journal de la Haute-Marne* reported on the occasion of the festive inauguration. 'The beginning of the river is well marked – indeed, beautifully marked, thanks to the monument's artistic design'. The monument was officially unveiled on 30 May 1980 to the accompaniment of a brass band playing the Belgian, Dutch and French national anthems. It features a line from a poem by Charles Péguy: *Meuse endormeuse et douce à mon enfance qui demeure aux prés où tu coules tout bas*. (Gentle, slumberous Meuse of my childhood, dwelling still in the meadows where you softly flow.)

On arrival we drove straight to what Google Maps calls 'Source of the Meuse', which lies half a kilometre south of the village. The icy east wind buffeted the plateau, slicing right through me, hurling my scarf in my face as if it were thoroughly fed up. A lonely thicket of hawthorn bushes huddled together against the cold in the bare, cropped meadow on the other side of the road. Downy feathers fell from the sky, light snowflakes stuck to my face. Like an avalanche, a mass of dark grey and inky-blue clouds hung ominously above the source.

I couldn't relate at all to the warnings from people who had visited the primary source before me. Again and again, they commented sarcastically: 'Yeah, it's *super* impressive. Brace yourself for a

disappointment.' Nor did I share the sentiments of Belgian writers visiting the source in the mid-twentieth century. In *Tranquille coule la Meuse* (Gently Flows the Meuse), Roger Gillard speaks of '...a pathetic baptismal font! On this rugged patch of ground, where the water soundlessly awakens, wildfowl quack and frolic. Jesus chose to be born in a donkey's manger; the Meuse opted for a turkeys' water trough.' I don't know what everyone was hoping for: perhaps for the water to burst out of the ground spectacularly, like a geyser? To me, the sight of the source was inspiring.

At 7:20 the next morning, warmly dressed, yet completely unprepared for -8°, I wander through the streets. Some of the houses I pass are inhabited, others are abandoned. Two teenage girls wait for the school bus at the bus stop, which resembles a Christmas crib. Out here in the open, the biting wind whips unchecked across the plateau. It's merciless, even gloves prove useless. The sun bathes the landscape in a soft, early morning glow that looks deceptively warm. A car zooms past, a villager on her way to work. To her, the sight of the source must be as commonplace as the grazing cows and the old lime tree, but to me, it's almost as if a small miracle is taking place here. The Meuse flows alongside the road through a narrow little ditch; sometimes you can see the water, sometimes it's choked with grass.

Now that the source has reached the respectable age of a few million years, the local authorities decided it could use a €100,000 facelift. So in 2022, they installed a car park and created a little park. A new monument was built from regional limestone. Clusters of young dog rose shrubs shiver along its top. A few deciduous trees have survived the redevelopment; their bark is pockmarked with pale splodges: light-grey patches of lichen. New trees have been planted alongside the little stream that sets off hesitatingly from the source. The only thing left of the 1980s monument is the bronze memorial plaque. A poem and a map of the river basin hang next to a new plaque. With the redevelopment, the authorities are hoping for a tenfold increase in the number of annual visitors: at present around three thousand. They're mainly aiming at Belgian and Dutch tourists, who regard a visit to the primary source of their beloved river as a kind of pilgrimage.

At the centre of the monument there's a tank from which the spring water flows through a stone channel into a small pool. The infant Meuse dives underground just before it reaches the first house in the village, reemerging halfway through the village. When I dip my hand in the pool to fill some plastic bottles, the water feels fresh, soft, full of promise and hope.

The smooth stems of brooklime intertwine below the waterline, while their fleshy leaves float on the surface, along with those of another water-loving species: creeping buttercup. Both plants depend on water for their development. Raindrops falling on the seed capsules of brooklime make them burst open, allowing their seeds to spread. At first I found all this human intervention – a monument, a car park and a picnic spot – typical of the way we've bent so many sections of the Meuse to our will. But given the history of the region where, as we will see, springs were venerated and beautiful little stone *lavoirs* were built at washing places, I've come to see it as a modest tribute to a river that makes human and more-than-human life possible. Even here, in this clear, refreshing pool, less than a metre from the source.

In northeastern France, in the Meuse department of the Grand Est region, lies the Langres plateau. To the south of the village of Récourt, at 453 metres above sea level, is a feature that geologists call a triple divide. A unique spot, where three catchment areas meet. A catchment area, or basin, is the land from which all surface water drains into a main river and its tributaries, eventually reaching the sea. The three basins involved belong to the Rhône, which flows into the Mediterranean; the Seine, which empties into the English Channel; and the Meuse, whose waters carry to the North Sea. Not far from the triple divide lie two other basins. The source of the Arroux – a tributary of the Loire – is a mere hundred kilometres away, while the Moselle – a tributary of the Rhine – passes to the east of the divide. The Langres plateau mainly consists of oolitic limestone,

which is composed of tiny, egg-shaped grains of calcium carbonate (ooids). The limestone has worn away in many places, forming a karst landscape of caves and fissures through which water can easily find its way underground. As a result, the Meuse department is an almost magical spot, with a number of springs bubbling up here and there. Some lie at the source of a river. Water courses like the Vingeanne, a tributary of the Saône, are born here. But also famous rivers like the Marne and the Aube – both tributaries of the Seine – and of course, the Meuse.

The municipality of Le Châtelet-sur-Meuse lies on the Langres plateau. Surface area: 21 square kilometres. Elevation: 409 metres. Inhabitants: 157. In the nineteenth century, the village had an average population of over six hundred. Since then, nearly everyone has drifted away to the city. In the entire Meuse department there are more cows (210,000) than people (184,000). Verdun, the largest town, boasts a mere 16,000 inhabitants. There used to be forty farmers in Le Châtelet-sur-Meuse – now there are only three. The village seems to be gradually dying out. The same mayor has been calling the shots for twenty-two years. If you want to know where to pick up free bin bags, you won't find the information on a council website. You just drop in at the *mairie*, the town hall, on the corner of Rue de la Mairie and Rue de l'Eglise, which have recently also been given a facelift. Just like the primary source, the *mairie* is a symbol with which the French Republic can impress many a foreign visitor. The most well-known local in the village's history was *général de division* (major general) Paul Gabriel Barbier, born in 1866. But if you're looking for truly famous figures from the region you're best off going down the Meuse to Domrémy-la-Pucelle, birthplace of Joan of Arc, or to Charleville-Mézières, birthplace of Arthur Rimbaud. By the way, the suffix 'sur-Meuse' in Le Châtelet-sur-Meuse isn't terribly original in these parts. In the French region of the basin alone I count forty place names that incorporate 'Meuse'. It says a lot about the place the river holds in the hearts and minds of local people, both past and present.

The Meuse – or 'Mûce' as it's known in the *patois meusien*, the local dialect – rises in the sleepy hamlet of Pouilly-en-Bassigne, part of Le Châtelet-sur-Meuse. The sources of the Meuse are just as unassuming as the river's beginning. To find them, I don't have to teeter along narrow paths above dizzying cliffs or scale forbidding peaks. In the case of the primary source, it's straightforward: you just walk away from the village for a few hundred metres. Third meadow on the left, second cow on the right as it were. Locating the sources seems so effortless – just a few taps on the screen of my smartphone and they appear on a digital map. But for many centuries, the existence of so many sources in the region was a headache. In 1585, the famous Flemish cartographer Gerard Mercator published two maps of France and Picardy-Champagne. On one he identifies Martigny as the source of the Meuse, whereas it's actually the source of the Mouzon, a tributary of the Meuse. People often mixed up the names of both rivers. The seventeenth-century cartographer Nicolaas Visscher confirms that the Meuse is the most westerly of the rivers near Neufchâteau. Cassini's famous map of France (1760-1761) bears the magic words '*Fontaine de Meuse*' in Pouilly-en-Bassigny. It's the first appearance of the hydronym 'Meuse'. The nineteenth-century staff maps drawn up on military initiative could have introduced more precision. But uncertainty remained regarding the elevation and exact location of the sources of the Meuse. The Larousse dictionary of 1874 (and later editions) emphatically maintains that the river's source can be found in the eponymous village of Meuse. The consolidation of agriculture in the twentieth century marked the appearance of semi-artificial springs, wells and drainage ditches, which didn't make cartographers' work any easier. The water in and around the village sometimes flows above ground, sometimes beneath it. Writers like the above-mentioned Roger Gillard even confused ditches with the source. It wouldn't be until 1955 that the source was first indicated on a map. And it is almost sixty years since – with the help of Father Evrard, the cleric from Liège – the exact location of the primary source was officially designated.

And yet. The saga of the sources of the Meuse appears far from over. Some residents and the farmer of the adjacent plot complained in the local press that the reconstruction of the spring's bed

would have ecological and hydrological impacts. Such was the disgruntlement that a small action group threatened to disrupt the much-hyped unveiling of the new monument. The village is also the site of three secondary sources – Araize, Maillouze and Fontaine du Val – not to be confused with three additional drainage ditches. I had to press Jean-Louis, the owner of the *chambre d'hôtes* where I'm staying, before he would tell me more about the exact location of all the sources in and around the village.

He shrugged and heaved a sigh: '*Beh oui*, the Meuse has a number of sources. The one that you saw, the primary source, is for tourists.'

Geographically speaking, the Meuse basin currently lies in five countries: France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Luxembourg, though the two latter countries are home only to tributaries of the Meuse. The length of the Meuse is estimated to be 925 km, with 492 km flowing through France, 194 km through Belgium and 239 km through the Netherlands. The basin's surface area totals 34,548 kilometres, with 25.8% in France, 40.2% in Belgium (35.6% in Wallonia and 4.6% in Flanders), 22.3% in the Netherlands, 11.5% in Germany and 0.2% in Luxembourg. Interestingly, at a mere 280 kilometres long, the middle section of the Meuse – roughly the stretch between Sedan and Maastricht – accounts for 24,110 square kilometres of the surface area or two-thirds of the total basin.

In 2008, the 8.8 million inhabitants of the basin could be divided as follows: 39.7% Dutch, 24.9% Walloon, 22.6% German, 7.6% French, 4.7% Flemish and a modest half percent from Luxembourg. Although only 11.5% (4,000 square kilometres) of the basin lies in Germany, Germans make up nearly a quarter of the Meuse population. Wallonia accounts for the largest share of the area (12,000 square kilometres or 35.6%), but accounts for only a quarter of its inhabitants. Despite the modest size of the Flemish share (2,000 square kilometres), the Flemish, as we shall see in chapter 13, are heavily dependent on the Meuse for their drinking water supply. In fact, all the Flemish users of that supply live outside the basin.

From source to estuary, the Meuse bears a variety of names. In France it's referred to as 'Vallée française de la Meuse' (the French Meuse valley, while the stretch in Lorraine is sometimes dubbed 'la Meuse lorraine' (the Lorraine Meuse). Between Givet and Namur lies the Haute Meuse (Upper Meuse), between Namur and Liège the Meuse moyenne (Middle Meuse) and between Liège and Maastricht the Basse Meuse (Lower Meuse). The Grensmaas (Border Meuse or Common Meuse) forms the border between Belgian and Dutch Limburg. The Netherlands has been more inventive in thinking up names. The section from Thorn to Roermond is called the Plassenmaas (Lake Meuse), from Roermond to Cuijk the Zandmaas (Sand Meuse), from Cuijk to Lith the Bedijkte Maas (Dyked Meuse) and from Lith to Geertruidenberg the Getijdenmaas (Tidal Meuse) – though as of Heusden it's actually known as the Bergsche Maas (the Bergse branch of the Meuse), which flows over into the Amer, then the Hollandsch Diep and eventually into the Haringvliet.

Now that we know where the primary source lies, an important question remains: where does the word 'Meuse' come from? The hydronym Mosa appears several times in Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, penned in the first century BCE: '*Mosa profluit ex monte Vosego*' (The Meuse is born in the Vosges Mountains). This is thought to be the first written instance of the word. But what about its etymological origin? Luckily there are linguists like Jean Loicq of the University of Liège, who look beyond the Romans and have studied this subject in depth. Loicq's lifelong research shows that many names of rivers in Wallonia are of Celtic origin. In his lexicon *Les noms de rivières de la Wallonie*, Loicq sets out various hypotheses about the origin of the word 'Meuse/Maas'. One is that it derives from a pre-Celtic language, is perhaps even of pre-Indo-European origin – but that is now impossible to establish. The similarities to Latin words like '*toga*' ('mantle', in this case something that covers land) and '*roto*' ('I flow / I run') support this theory. Comparisons have also been made with words from

North Eurasian languages such as Proto-Sami (which has the word ‘*mãššu*’, meaning ‘to roll’). Rivers such as the north-Russian Mosha (Russian: Момма) and the Latvian-Lithuanian Mūša back up this hypothesis. If the river is named after an old word for ‘meander’ (as is the case of the tributaries Lesse and Ourthe), then through linguistic reconstruction, its origin might be traced to its source in Western Europe, dating back to the departure of the last hunter gatherers, some ten thousand years ago. Finally, it might derive from a pre-Gallic word: *mod-sa* (‘being fluid, spreading out’). We may never know the origin of the modern name of the Meuse: it is lost in the mists of time. But in light of all these theories, it seems likely that it goes back thousands of years.
