

Brutopia

Brussels' Dreams

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Introduction

Gentle reader,

I am Michael. Since 1455 I have been perched, sparkling in gold leaf, atop the spire of the Town Hall on the Grand Place in Brussels to protect its residents against disaster. It is a job like any other. Sometimes a blessing, at others a curse. I won't bore you any further with this.

The author of this book has asked me to write a foreword. At first I did not feel much like doing so. My hand has a better grip around the hilt of a sword than around a pen. But then he started to talk me into it.

'Your eyes see everything,' he began. 'Day and night.'

This is true. I record meticulously, without hierarchy or ranking things and events. In the winter I see the first frost flowers appear on the attic windows in Anderlecht-Kuregem, in the spring I see the last drops of meltwater drain away in a Woluwe gutter. I see the blade of grass pop up between the cobbles of a quay no one visits any longer, I see the discarded metro ticket getting blown in the air by a passing taxi. I see the last specks of blood in a heroin syringe, disposed of behind an electricity substation. I see the polished table silver at the Club des Nobles shine in expectation of a European banquet, and at the same time I see families from far-away countries enter the western suburbs in the back of a lorry. I can see all of this from the top of my spire. I do not have to make any effort. It is a gift.

During the period after the Second World War in particular everything was often spinning in front of my eyes, the city was changing at such dizzying speed that I nearly toppled off my spire. In a relatively short time Brussels became a quilt of around 180 different nationalities. A centrifuge of globalisation.

Brussels is not one city, it is many cities, and this makes it so intangible, even to native Brussels folk. Get off one metro stop later, walk around the corner and you arrive in a different world, a different time, a different language zone. This causes friction and chafing. In Brussels you feel lost sooner than you feel safe and secure. And yet different communities have never let rip at each other with machine guns. Of all the miracles to have happened in this city, this may be the most extraordinary one.

'And you hear everything,' he continues.

This is something I cannot deny either. Not a sob from a newborn in the Marolles, not a sigh from an old greybeard in Sint-Gillis, not even the tap of an acorn dropping to the ground in the Warande Park has ever escaped me. But what strikes me most is the repugnance against this city I hear everywhere. Its status rouses indignation and envy. Because Brussels has been a capital city for centuries. Of the Duchy of Brabant. Of the Dutch Republic. Of the Spanish Netherlands. Of the Austrian Netherlands. Of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. Of the Kingdom of Belgium. Of Europe.

Bruxellophobia I call this feeling of fear and loathing. It reaches far and endures. In our divided Belgium the Flemish and Walloons are even fraternally united in their aversion of Brussels, the city which, bizarrely enough, holds the country together because it is impossible to split up. In the countries of the European Union, Brussels has been evoking doom-laden images of a nannying bureaucracy which does not know when to stop. Is the legal limit on the curve in a cucumber eight millimetres per ten extending centimetres? Brussels! Donald Trump, who saw no more of the city than Melsbroek Air Base, the NATO headquarters and the interior of a luxury hotel on the Avenue Louise, described Brussels as 'a hellhole'.

And yet this cursed hellhole has often been a breeding ground for utopias in politics, society, the arts, urban development and religion. As if a mysterious energy hangs in the air here, which makes the light blaze and minds ferment. Some Big Plans have changed Brussel and even the world, others I saw being woefully smashed to pieces on the paving stones. Each time I witnessed their flight and not infrequently their fall from the front row.

Countless European exiles began a new life in Brussels: anarchists, utopian socialists, revolutionaries, Communards and lost artistic souls. The city has been their refuge, and continues to be so today. To return the favour they transformed it into a focus of the international political and artistic avant-garde. Karl Marx, for instance, who washed up as an asylum seeker after his revolutionary ideas had been deemed too dangerous in Germany and France. Here, he wrote his Communist Manifesto. Or Charles Baudelaire, the dark poet-regent, to whom Brussels was a salvation. Yet no one has fulminated more viciously against this city. If Trump knew the one-liners from his anti-Brussels diatribes he would happily re-tweet them, all day long.

Brussels itself also begot numerous people who wanted to make the world a better place. Take Marx' contemporary Joseph Charlier, who walked the pestilent streets of Notre-Dame-aux-Neiges, deeply buried in his coat, thinking about the introduction of unconditional basic income. He wanted to eradicate poverty with revolutionary ideas about income redistribution. Brussels was his experimental garden. Charlier had been forgotten during his lifetime, but his ideas are being increasingly examined and tested. Because in Brussels of all places, Marx's social underworld has made a comeback: one in three people in Brussels lives in poverty, one in three children grows up in a family without income from work. More than a thousand children roam the streets because there is no room for them at school. Of all the European capitals, Brussels has the highest percentage of unemployed people. And at the same time Brussels is the third richest region in Europe. Nowhere in Europe do the extremes collide more forcefully than here.

Paul Otlet too suffered the fate of a pioneer who entered the stage too soon with a revolutionary brainchild. He wanted to open up all printed knowledge in the world with millions of index cards which cross-referenced each other. A Google avant-la-lettre in the service of world peace. He died misunderstood at the end of the Second World War.

Barely a hundred metres up from the Rue de l'Alliance, where Marx lived, the towers of the European Quarter rise up. I see them soar behind my right shoulder. In 1958, the EU came to Brussels as a shaky utopian peace project; today, 'Brussels' decides the social-economic fate of half a billion Europeans. And as the first European officials settled behind their desks, Modern Times landed. Expo 58, the biggest world fair in history, was the mecca of post-war optimism, an exuberant hymn to the blessings of nuclear energy, consumerism and motor traffic. In the euphoria surrounding it, part of the old city was destroyed.

That even the gleaming Expo was responsible for havoc is telling. I sometimes think that change, or more precisely destruction, is the city's deepest essence. The rich, densely-populated 17th century Brussels had one of the most dazzling skylines in Europe. It can still be seen in the painting 'View of Brussels' (1665) by Jean-Baptiste Bonnecroy. Thirty years later, French fire bombs razed it to the ground. A war crime. After a two day siege almost half the city was destroyed with the same uncompromising thoroughness that would later befall Warsaw and Aleppo. On the Grand Place, only my spire and I remained undamaged.

But much more so than the foreign armies, Brussels was its own enemy. No other European city has torn itself apart, ripped itself open, dug itself over and burnt itself to the ground so ruthlessly. As if a rage is seething in the Brussels gut that has to erupt at regular intervals. During the 19th century, a large part of poor Brussels was flattened to build the Palais de Justice, to cover the river Senne and for Leopold II's architectural prestige projects. For the Senne works alone, 40,000 local people had to hit the road. Since then, the demolition has continued apace.

Not infrequently these were plans that were presented as dazzling visions. For the development of the Northern Quarter, a futuristic model city, more than 10,000 people were evicted. The construction of the underground railway line 0, the North-South Connection, gouged a deep scar in the city. It was the finale of the Belgian railway dream that began on 5 May 1835, at Brussels Allée-Verte, with the first train journey on the European continent. The blind destruction of the old neighbourhoods has even given rise to a new word in French: Bruxellisation (Brusselisation). The building that is most missed may well be the Maison du Peuple by Art Nouveau master Victor Horta in the Marolles, a jewel-like palace entirely at the service of the edification of the people. But somewhere in the garden cities with optimistic names such as Bon Air and Cité Moderne, once built to alleviate housing shortages, the old spirit of solidarity lives on.

Brussels is one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. More than 60 per cent of the population was born in another country or has a migration background. Dubai is the only place with a higher proportion. No ethnic group dominates. Over the next five years a further 200,000 people at least will join the ranks as a result of immigration and a baby boom. This is not counting the war victims, many of whom reaching Belgium settle in Brussels.

More clearly than in other European metropolises such as Amsterdam or Berlin, you can see the future of a post-national Europe here, in this very last remnant of the multi-lingual Habsburg Empire, where Germanic and Latin Europe clashed. Utopia or dystopia? The jury is still out on that. The laboratory is open.

I, Michael, have never climbed down from my spire to meet the people of this city. 'Flying into' the streets to listen to Brussels folk is the privilege of the writer of this book. He has worn down the soles of many shoes on its pavements, day and night. Walking, without map or step counter.

Reporting, gleaning stories and histories. In the next chapters he follows the city's old dream trails that lead to a new world.

Read. Join him on the walk. And stumble.
