

Remembering the martyrs of Bloemkamp

A ghost story

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On August 29, 2004, a Dutch Roman Catholic priest named Jan Romkes van der Wal led a workshop to draw attention to a group of people he identified as “the martyrs of Bloemkamp.” The event was part of an ecumenical gathering known locally as the *Kerkendag* (Church Days), which takes place every four years in different locations in the Dutch province of Friesland. Van der Wal was serving at the time as the pastor of the church of Saint Francis in Bolsward. One of the notable features of the church is a large stained-glass window that celebrates the martyrs of Gorkum—a group of nineteen Dutch Catholic clerics from the southern city of Brielle who were hanged in 1572 by anti-Catholic Calvinist rebels known as the *Watergeuzen* (Sea Beggars). The *Watergeuzen* are known for their fierce opposition to Spanish rule during the Eighty Years War, and their campaign of terror was a key turning point in the establishment of an independent Dutch Republic.

The turbulent years of the sixteenth century that saw the making of so many martyrs, the emergence of new religious traditions, and the formation of a new state remain tangibly present in the structure of this contemporary Dutch Catholic church. But it wasn't the Gorkum martyrs or any other Catholic martyrs who were the focus of van der Wal's workshop. Rather, he was interested in discussing a comparably obscure “piece of drama” that is, he suggests, “all too often concealed.”¹ The goal of his workshop was to draw attention to a group of Anabaptists who were put to death in 1535 at the Bloemkamp Abbey near Bolsward. He was also hoping to raise funds for the creation of a monument that would serve as an appropriate way to honour their memory. Just why a Catholic priest in 2004 would seek to commemorate a controversial group of Anabaptists

1 Gerhard Bakker, “De martelaren van Bloemkamp,” *Friesch Dagblad*, August 19, 2004, www.odulphuspad.nl/vanderwal.pdf. Unless otherwise specified, all other references to van der Wal will be drawn from this article. Translations are my own.

who perished almost five hundred years earlier and why he insisted on referring to them as martyrs raises a thorny tangle of issues that captures the difficulty of memory.

I stumbled on van der Wal's interest in the martyrs of Bloemkamp while I was doing some research for a cycling trip structured around various aspects of the Dutch Mennonite martyrological tradition that I did with my son Jonah in the spring of 2022. I was aware of the Bloemkamp Abbey and wanted to figure out where it was located so it could be included as a stop on our itinerary. When I first saw the title of the article on van der Wal—"The Martyrs of Bloemkamp"—I assumed that it was an allusion to some Catholic priests who were killed when the abbey was stormed by a group of revolutionary Anabaptists. I read on, wondering what new details he was going shed on this story. But when it became clear that he was talking about the Anabaptists who took control of the abbey, the article became more interesting in a way I had not anticipated. The site of the former monastery is rather underwhelming. It is little more than a small mound in a pasture behind two farmyards. If one did not already know it was there, it is not something one would notice. But the questions raised by van der Wal's account of the events and issues that are symbolized by this barely noticeable mound gave me plenty to think about as I cycled the many kilometers between the old prisons, castles, churches, town squares, forests, and country estates that served as the destinations of our journey.


The story of the Bloemkamp abbey

The Bloemkamp abbey (also referred to as the Oldeklooster) was a Cistercian monastery that left a profound and lasting mark on landscapes both religious and secular.² It was founded during a period when monasteries were multiplying and generally enjoying significant prosperity. The first buildings of the abbey were constructed in 1191. As the abbey grew in stature and size, it became entangled in a series of significant disputes. At various times, it was engaged in armed conflict against rival monastic orders, the landed nobility, and peasant rebels. Despite extended periods of decline, the abbey managed to survive in an era that was scarred by intense factionalism and civil strife. The beginning of the end for the Bloemkamp abbey arrived in 1572 when it was badly damaged and set

² Details of the history of the Bloemkamp abbey are drawn from the following two sources: Hyco Bouwstra, "Bloemkamp: Geschiedenis van het Cisterciënzer klooster Bloemkamp 1191-1580" (self-published pamphlet, 2008), and "De twa Kleasters by Hartwert," <https://hartwerd.com/2020/10/03/de-twa-kleasters-by-hartwert/>.

on fire by the same group of Calvinist rebels who executed the martyrs of Gorkum. It was finally demolished for good in 1580 when the newly formed States of Friesland ordered the demolition of all remaining monasteries in the area, a move that coincided with the region's embrace of Reformed Christianity and its incorporation into the Dutch Republic. Although no physical trace of the monastery remains today, there is a road named Oldeclooster that runs by two farms that sit on the land where the abbey once stood. In this and other ways, the memory of the Bloemkamp abbey retains a certain power for the people who live in the surrounding area.

Given the eventful and tumultuous saga of the Bloemkamp abbey, it is notable that van der Wal zeroed in on a single, brief episode from its almost four-hundred-year-old history. It is also striking that he, a Catholic

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priest, chose to highlight one of the moments at which the religious life of the abbey was at its most vulnerable. And it is all the more remarkable that he was interested in celebrating as martyrs the figures who were responsible for causing that sense of vulnerability. The incident involving van der Wal's "mar-

tyrs of Bloemkamp" took place in the spring of 1535. This was during the period when a group of millenarian revolutionary Anabaptists had taken control of the Westphalian city of Münster and established a notoriously cruel and intolerant government, violently enforcing its ideals of equality and the eradication of private property, which they apparently thought would hasten the arrival of the New Jerusalem that their leaders had prophesied. Two emissaries from Münster named Jan van Geelen and Peter Simons were sent out to recruit new supporters for the cause. Though they had limited success elsewhere in the low countries, their apocalyptic vision seems to have resonated powerfully among the people of Friesland. Equipped with apologetic material written by Münster's court theologian Bernhard Rothmann and loaded down with money for the purchase of weapons, they managed to persuade a sizeable number of people to embrace their millenarian vision of revolutionary Anabaptism.

On Easter Sunday, March 28, a group of some three hundred Anabaptists, including van Geelen and Simons, gathered in the village of Tzum, close to Franeker, and held their own worship service as an alternative to the Easter mass that was being celebrated in the established churches of

Friesland. When a group of soldiers descended on their gathering, they mounted a surprising and successful defense and managed to ward them off before ultimately finding refuge in the abbey of Bloemkamp. How exactly they came to be in control of the abbey is not known. But they overpowered and expelled the monks and lay brothers who lived there and took over possession of the property. It is said that they devised a plan to use this stronghold as a base of operations from which to mount further incursions in the hopes of ultimately winning control over the whole of Friesland. But they were met with significant military resistance. They were able to fend off a series of counterattacks for a number of days. But after about a week, the governor's forces unleashed a more severe and ultimately more successful incursion that allowed them to regain possession of the abbey. It is said that they were tipped off by a monk who had been released by the Anabaptist revolutionaries and who informed them where the weakest part of the fortification was located. Approximately forty Anabaptists were immediately executed outside the walls of the abbey, some by hanging and others by beheading. Another 132 were taken to prison in the regional capital of Leeuwarden, where they stood trial. Of these, fifty-five were executed, including a group of thirty women who were drowned in a nearby river. Van der Wal notes that this was the "largest massacre of Protestants in the history of Friesland." Jan van Geelen managed to escape, but he was killed two months later when he participated in another revolutionary attack designed to take control of Amsterdam's city hall. It is not clear what happened to Peter Simons.

Bloemkamp and the *Martyrs Mirror*

The story of Bloemkamp abbey doesn't figure prominently in the memories of most contemporary Mennonites. But there is no question that it played a critical role in the development of the Mennonite tradition as we have come to understand it. Indeed, it is precisely because of the way it played this role that it has come to be largely forgotten. There are two developments that serve to illustrate this claim. First, it is said that Peter Simons was the brother of Menno Simons. His brother's involvement in the Münster rebellion and the spiritual crisis that Menno is said to have experienced in the aftermath of the Bloemkamp affair is frequently cited as a key reason that he went on to develop the more peaceful version of Anabaptism for which he is known. Van der Wal repeats this claim and relates it to the sense of embarrassment he perceives among North Ameri-

can tourists who are occasionally brought to the site of the former abbey.³ Some scholars have cast doubt on the veracity of the claim that Peter and Menno were related.⁴ So it is now common to offer the qualification that they “may have been” or were “most likely” brothers.⁵ Whether or not Menno or Peter were brothers is likely to remain under a cloud of doubt. But what cannot be doubted is the fact that this connection continues to lie at the heart of the story that Mennonites have learned to tell about themselves. And it is this story that sets up the conditions of forgetfulness of the people whose memory van der Wal was seeking to preserve. That

is because Menno articulated his theology in explicit contrast to the theological convictions that motivated the Bloemkamp Anabaptists. They thereby became the foil over against which Menno’s Anabaptist vision was elaborated.

If the theology of Menno set out the conditions for forgetting the martyrs of Bloemkamp, their erasure was cemented by developments in the Mennonite martyrological tradition that culminated in

the *Martyrs Mirror*. One of the criteria deployed by Thieleman Jansz van Braght to determine who counts as a true example of faithfulness was what he called defenselessness (*weereeloose*), or nonresistance. One of his primary goals was to excise from the record of Anabaptist martyrs anyone who was associated with the Münster rebellion or any other instance of revolutionary Anabaptism like the seizure of the Bloemkamp abbey. In one of his editorial remarks, van Braght boldly proclaims that he has “exerted [his] utmost diligence, so that as far as we know, there are not found among the martyrs of whom we have given, or may yet give, an account,

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3 Van der Wal’s own words are as follows: “[Menno] had wished to retain the positive elements of Anabaptism, but to remove its aggressive sting, and so he laid the foundations for the strictly peaceful doctrine of what were afterwards called the *doopsgezinden*” (translation mine). The distinction between “anabaptisme” and “doopsgezinden” is drawn by van der Wal. I have left “doopsgezinden” in the original Dutch to differentiate it from the more customary English-speaking tendency to draw a contrast between Anabaptists and Mennonites when navigating this territory.

4 See Nanne van der Zijpp, “Peter Simons (16th century),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Peter_Simons_\(16th_century\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Peter_Simons_(16th_century)).

5 See James Stayer, “Menno and Münster,” *Mennonite Life* 64 (2010); Machiel van Zanten, “Menno’s Life,” <https://mennosimons.net/life>.

any who can be shown to have been guilty of gross errors, much less the shedding of blood.”⁶ In this way, van Braght sought to erase any memory of van der Wal’s martyrs of Bloemkamp from the pages of the *Martyrs Mirror*. According to his criteria, they are neither martyrs nor Anabaptists in any meaningful sense.

The problem with strict criteria such as these is that they are bound to be disappointing. They never reach the level of certainty they are designed to achieve.⁷ One of the many things I find interesting about the *Martyrs*

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Mirror is the way it includes traces of this kind of disappointment. Like many other early modern martyrologies, the *Martyrs Mirror* presents itself as an impenetrable fortification against various forms of unfaithfulness. But when you read it closely, it reads more like a hastily erected edifice that over time comes to be streaked with cracks. As the Anabaptists

walled up in the Bloemkamp abbey came to realize, fortifications always have their weak points. Subsequent research has identified a number of revolutionary-minded people who have slipped through those cracks and found themselves on the pages of the *Martyrs Mirror* alongside more well-known icons of defenselessness like Dirk Willems. The most well-known example is Anna Jansz of Rotterdam, who is remembered as a “model martyr” despite evidence that she also had a “revolutionary past.”⁸ But there are similar stories that are more closely related to the Bloemkamp affair.

6 Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 174. Henceforth referred to as the *Martyrs Mirror*.

7 This notion of “disappointing criteria” is drawn from the American philosopher Stanley Cavell, whose reflections on criteria lie at the heart of his attempt to challenge the way we might think about the “problem of skepticism.” Cavell’s account is developed in part I of his important book, Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3–125. For a helpful discussion of Cavell on these matters, see Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 120–32; Tyler Roberts, *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Religion After Secularism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 201–229.

8 See Werner Packull, “Anna Jansz of Rotterdam,” in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women*, ed. C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1996), 336–51.

The *Martyrs Mirror* includes an account of a man named John Walen from Crommenies Dijk (Krommeniedijk) in the Waterland region of North Holland. He was arrested in 1527, along with two unnamed companions, and subsequently burned at the stake in the Hague. The *Martyrs Mirror* states that “they suffered all this for the name of Jesus and the Word of God, and not on account of any misdeed committed, but only in order to testify to and confess the firm foundation of the truth before this false and adulterous generation.”⁹ More recent research based on surviving legal records suggests that they were apprehended and executed not in 1527 but in the spring of 1534. They were captured when they arrived by boat in the village of Bergklooster, which was the designated gathering point for a large group of Anabaptists (some estimates say there were as many as 3,000) who were on their way to participate in the Münster rebellion. Some of those captured were deemed by authorities to be “innocent” people who were caught up in the revolutionary agenda of others. They were imprisoned briefly and soon released. Only those who were identified as the leaders of the operation were eventually executed. If this is correct, then by van Braght’s own criteria John Walen and his companions should not have been included in the *Martyrs Mirror*.

There is another, more complicated case more directly related to the question of Menno’s relationship to the martyrs of Bloemkamp. Tjaert Reynerts, a “God-fearing peasant” who lived near Harlingen in Friesland, was executed in Leeuwarden in February of 1539. The reason for his arrest, according to the *Martyrs Mirror*, was that he had provided shelter to Menno Simons.¹⁰ But there is significant debate about the identity of this person that in turn raises questions about whether he satisfies van Braght’s criteria for martyrdom. Some maintain that Reynerts was engaged in a variety of revolutionary activities in Friesland, including the occupation of the Bloemkamp abbey. Others suggest that this claim is the result of a confusion of identity between two similarly named people—Tjaert Renickx of Kimsward and Tjaert van Sneek. The former, they suggest, was a friend of Menno and a legitimate martyr. It was the latter who was involved in the Bloemkamp affair and so rightly omitted from the *Martyrs Mirror*.¹¹ It is likely that these questions will never be sorted out

9 *Martyrs Mirror*, 424.

10 *Martyrs Mirror*, 454.

11 For a summary of this debate, see Nanne van der Zijpp, “Tjaert Renickx (d. 1539),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Tjaert_Renickx_\(d._1539\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Tjaert_Renickx_(d._1539)).

in a conclusive way. But what is undeniable is the extent to which threads associated with various movements of revolutionary Anabaptism are woven into the fabric of the *Martyrs Mirror*. Even those whose stories were excluded, like the majority of those who were executed in the aftermath of the events at Bloemkamp, haunt the text in a kind of ghostly manner. Van Braght's martyrological project is obsessed with these figures, and his text bears numerous traces of his efforts to erase them from the *Martyrs Mirror*. It is in this sense that the story of the martyrs of Bloemkamp can be described as a ghost story.

Early modern Mennonites were known for their tendency to respond with skepticism to their contemporaries' belief in witches.¹² So it is reasonable to surmise that they may have been skeptical about the existence

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of ghosts as well. But the ghosts to which I am pointing suggest that there is another form of skepticism that animates the spirit of the *Martyrs Mirror*. Earlier I referred to Stanley Cavell's notion of disappointing criteria. This is part of his effort to reconceive the so-called problem of skepticism by demonstrating that it is not merely a theoretical option in a

debate about the possibility of knowledge in general but also and more importantly names an ethical and affective posture, a question about the character of our desire. In particular, Cavell demonstrates that the skeptic is not so much opposed to knowledge as fanatically obsessed with it. Skepticism names a desire for knowledge that is, if anything, far too strong. It conceives of knowledge as being governed by criteria that do not tolerate any disappointment. It demands a kind of certainty that is purified of the possibility of doubt. In this regard, both the skeptic and the anti-skeptic share the same attitude toward knowledge. Cavell's most important and original insight about this is his observation that philosophical expressions of epistemological skepticism tend to be structured by forms of desire that are similar to those that drive the plots of Shakespearean tragedies. This is especially apparent in Shakespeare's depiction of jealous husbands like Othello and Leontes. These men come to grief because they demand forms of intimacy and faithfulness that are absolute. They treat

12 See Gary Waite, *Eradicating the Devil's Minions: Anabaptists and Witches in Reformation Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

love as a possession, something that belongs exclusively to them. This is evident when they fail to find the love they expect and respond by acts of supreme silencing that strip their wives of the power to speak, and ultimately of their lives.¹³

It is in this sense that the *Martyrs Mirror* can be read as a skeptical and tragic text. Van Braght demands a form of all-or-nothing faithfulness. And when he does not find the figures of absolute purity he desires, his response is one of silencing and erasure. For Van Braght, there simply are no martyrs of Bloemkamp. Because to be a martyr is incompatible with the forms of violence in which they were caught up. The fact that the people associated with this story do not register in the memories of most contemporary Mennonites demonstrates the lasting power of his influence.

Remembering the martyrs of Bloemkamp abbey

The posture of Van der Wal is strikingly different from van Braght's. Van der Wal is not simply drawing attention to the lasting influence of a group of early Anabaptists but, remarkably, is insisting on describing them as martyrs. By identifying a group of martyrs who were denied the status of martyrdom by their own tradition, he is raising questions that cut to the heart of the Anabaptist martyrological tradition in a subtle but powerful way by challenging the desire for absolute purity on which it is based.

Van der Wal does not attempt to justify the use of force to hasten the coming of the Kingdom of God. And he suggests that the Bloemkamp martyrs embraced an understanding of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love that was profoundly unbalanced. He applauds them for their "strong faith," but he suggests that they went wrong in embracing a conception of hope that moved too quickly. This, in turn, distorted the character of their love, which is where they got into trouble. Nevertheless, he insists that they were right about one important thing: "The Anabaptists," he explains, "taught that each person is personally responsible to God." And he adds that this "has become an important pillar in our Dutch norms and values." In this respect, he suggests that a contemporary Dutch Catholic priest like himself has been shaped by their legacy. And it

13 See Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1–37. For a more extended discussion of Cavell's understanding of skepticism in relation to a theological reflection the figure of the martyr, see Chris K. Huebner, "Absent Mothers, Invisible Fathers, and the Theological Dance of Knowledge and Love," *Conrad Grebel Review* 39, no. 3 (2021): 192–213.

is for this reason that he wanted to honour their memory, as complicated as it may be.

An anniversary is, among other things, a celebration of faithfulness. We sometimes treat anniversaries as events that provide evidence that our criteria of faithfulness have been met, if not exceeded. But the evidence is often more modest and somewhat mixed. We may be disposed to celebrat-

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ing anniversaries because they provide us with a cover to mask moments of infidelity, even as we discover that our lives do not reflect the forms of faithfulness we use anniversaries to commemorate. For contemporary Mennonites, one of the gifts that van der Wal offers is captured

by the way he claims to be motivated by a “love for these people I do not want to forget.” If we have not long since forgotten about these same people, we are likely to be deeply embarrassed by them. In this regard, van der Wall gives contemporary Mennonites the gift of reconstituting our own memories. I find in all this an expression of charitable grace that breathes new life into something that used to feel dead or at least deadening. He redirects our attention to the possibility of thinking of an anniversary less as a celebration of something we might claim to own and more as an opportunity to structure our lives in ways other than those of ownership.

All of this is difficult work. When we arrived at the site of the Bloemkamp abbey on May 15, 2022, there was no sign of the memorial van der Wal had hoped to build. But on June 10, 2023, a new and different monument was unveiled. It is located just off the main road on the lane leading to the two farms where the abbey once stood. This monument is built in the form of an arched window like those that would have lined the external walls of the abbey. It is made out of old bricks that still survive from the original buildings. Inside the window frame is a thick pane of glass that allows viewers to see a superimposed image of the old Bloemkamp abbey from its heyday projected onto the contemporary landscape. Underneath the image of the abbey are the following Frisian words: “Op Fryske grûn, troch leauwe en strûd ferbûn” (On Frisian soil, connected by faith and struggle).¹⁴

¹⁴ For some images and a description of the monument, see <https://hartwerd.com/stifting-monumint-aldekleaster/>.

The philosopher of religion Tyler Roberts elaborates a distinction between two forms of memory. The first and most common he describes as a “historicist view of causality and context that . . . put[s] the events of the past in their place.” Drawing on the work of Cavell, Roberts elaborates and defends a different form of memory he calls the work of “remembrance.” He describes this as “a form of responsiveness to the past that dislodges the events and texts from cause and context to bring them to life in the present.”¹⁵ I take Van der Wal’s workshop during the Kerkendag to be an instance of the work of remembrance in Roberts’ sense of the term. The new monument, on the other hand, reflects the more common historicist understanding of memory. The fact that the latter has been completed while the former remains an exercise of imagination bears testimony to just how rare the work of remembrance is.

About the author

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15 Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 201.