

Dear absentees,

The Dies of a university, the celebration of its birthday, is a true ritual. *Rta* means order, rule, in Sanskrit, and at its heart is continuity. A prayer passed on from one worshipper to the next continues like an eternal flame. The young French poet Du Bartas did not leave his study until long after midnight, when his place was taken by his poet friend De Bellay, allowing the studies to continue uninterrupted. How meaningful it is that De Bellay's personal motto (*Musa coelo beat: the muse rewards with immortality*) once again adorns a flagstone outside our Academy Building, just as it did in the past.

There has never been a year when the Dies of our University has not been celebrated. Even during the Second World War, this day was marked in small groups and at times in dangerous or depressing circumstances. In Sint-Michielsgestel on 8 February 1943, the University's 365th birthday was celebrated more or less as usual by 54 Leiden citizens, professors and alumni. We are celebrating it in difficult circumstances this year too, and perhaps, now you are not here in person, the event is making a greater impression on you than ever before.

For me personally, there are three times when this ritual has been particularly special, each of them marking the presentation of one of the three volumes of my University history. I would hold up the book in front of a full church, at which point the organ would play a rousing melody. Now that organ remains silent, but I know: through its silence it gives its consent, *cum tacet, clamat*.

Now, at the end of the journey, after four thick volumes, each describing a century of Leiden University's past, I know above all that its history almost writes itself. The natural periodisation, the swinging of the pendulum between grandeur and hardship, political servitude and the heroic quest for freedom, the eminent scholars and their glittering scholarship: this was all to be found in the paper sources, just as Michelangelo's slave statues were to be found in the marble from which they were hewn.

The characteristic equilibrium in the University's governance – between city and states, senate and curator – and the same equilibrium among different intellectual movements: all this has caused the University to evolve so gradually that this borders on the self-evident. The strangely adequate appointment policy over the centuries, and the harmonious development of a curriculum, these too prove my central theory that the University is a delicate balancing act.

This equilibrium between tradition and innovation is also the theme of the final volume, which describes the modern University. It was, in fact, by embracing

tradition that Leiden University was able to find an answer to the enormous challenges of the modern era, with its dramatic developments and political disasters. Tolerance, precision, clarity: according to philosopher Land in 1886, these were the defining features of Leiden. And they still are.

The big question remains: are we still a university? As Joe Biden has tirelessly responded to the divisions in his country by invoking the *United States* of America, so too do we need to defend the University from what is known as the ‘multiversity’. Here too one only needs to look to history.

I describe, for instance, how, for his legal work, Cornelis van Vollenhoven sought inspiration in biology and linguistics, and how Johan Huizinga made anthropology fertile ground for history. And one of the best examples is how the astronomer Oort called on the assistance of the sinologist Duijvendak to determine the precise date on which his Crab Nebula was first observed (4 July 1054).

These kinds of ‘cross overs’, as we now call them – this breath that goes back and forth between specialisation and interdisciplinarity – are the University’s lifeblood, not only preserving its unity, but also justifying its existence. In archaeolinguistics this has been termed ‘cognitive fluidity’, ‘the capacity for metaphor, which underlies art, science and religion.’

Amid all our yearning for steadfastness, what I wish for Leiden University is much more of this fluidity.