



New Netherland Institute
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

THE FIRST SHOT HEARD AROUND THE WORLD

By Peter Douglas



“The Awful End of Prince William the Silent: the First Assassination of a Head of State with a Handgun,” by Lisa Jardine (Harper Collins, 2006, 176pp, \$21.95, pbk \$12.95).

William I, Prince of Orange (1533-84), often known as William the Silent (Willem de Zwijger), is to the Dutch what George Washington is to Americans. He was Stadtholder of Holland, Zeeland, and Utrecht, founder of the House of Orange-Nassau, and the principal leader in the Dutch revolt against Habsburg Spain that ignited the Eighty Years War. Such is his standing that he is honored in the Dutch national anthem, *Het Wilhelmus*.

In 1584 William was shot to death in his home in Delft by a French assassin, Balthazar Gérard, a Catholic fanatic responding to Philip II of Spain's offer of 25,000 crowns to anyone who would kill the tolerant Protestant prince. Jardine's short book is an account of what led up to that assassination, William's death, and its aftermath. There were immediate and far-reaching political consequences to the shooting, not the least a serious setback to the Protestant cause in the Netherlands in the struggle for independence from the Habsburgs' Catholic rule.

Of interest to trivia buffs as well as historians, Jardine notes in her book that, as stated in the subtitle, William has the dubious honor of being the first head of state to be killed at close range

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with a handgun, in this case a wheel-lock pistol, known at the time as a “dag.” A substantial part of the book deals with the impact of this novel manner of William’s death, and even today’s reader, saturated in the world’s daily violence, can here feel anew the true shock of how a single event, executed in seconds, can have grave historical implications.

Now, it seemed, anyone with a small concealed weapon can change the course of history, as subsequent events were to prove with three US Presidents alone. This new and lethal threat to the lives and security of monarchs and other notables sent shockwaves throughout the courts of Europe, especially William’s Protestant ally Queen Elizabeth I. The possibility of a similar attack on the Queen led to an upsurge in official paranoia, legislation, surveillance, and arrests, a scenario that is all too familiar to us today. Back in the 16th century, Jardine’s fast-paced account gives us a snapshot of this dramatic event and deftly puts it in the political, religious, social, and cultural context of the period.