

Minnaert's citizenship

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Abstract

There is some confusion about the nationality of the Belgium-born Dutch astronomy professor Minnaert (author of *Light and Colour in the Open Air*). Historically, the best way is to call him either a 'Dutch astronomer' or a 'Belgium-born Dutch astronomer'.

1. Background

Minnaert was born in 1893 in Brugge (Belgium), got his first PhD in biology in 1914 (Gent, Belgium) and a second PhD in 1925 astronomy in Utrecht (Netherlands).

In his Belgium years, he considered himself as 'Great-Dutch', that is: member of a virtual merge between Dutch-speaking Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands. He was a language activist, promoting Dutch teaching at the universities. During World War I, he taught at the Flemish University, founded with the support of the German occupier.

To escape a trail for collaboration, he fled by the end of WWI to the Netherlands (and got asylum – just as the German Emperor Wilhelm II had gotten), and was banned from Belgium. He changed nationality and discipline, and became professor in astronomy in Utrecht.

2. Minnaert's citizenship

I inquired on 21 May 2011 by phone with Cornelis de Jager, PhD student of Minnaert and his successor as astronomy professor (born 1921) about the attitude of Minnaert with respect to his citizenship.

De Jager told me that Minnaert still considered himself as Dutch (or Great-Dutch). He disliked to be addressed as Belgian (as is nowadays done in e.g. Wikipedia¹). He never introduced himself as such.

This information is consistent with my own observation: once I witnessed that when he showed some French guests his observatory, one of them expressed his surprise about Minnaert's excellent French. Minnaert's only comment was 'Je suis né en Belgique' – with no hint that he considered himself Belgian.

In line with this is how my father considered himself: born in Austria (1913), he went to the Netherlands at the age of 6. He considered himself as an Austrian-born Dutchman.

De Jager told me that I would do Minnaert a posthumous favour when I present him either as 'Dutch astronomer' or as 'Belgium-born Dutch astronomer'.

Reference

1. Wikipedia, *Marcel Minnaert*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minnaert>