

## *De IJzeren Man* (The Iron Man): Rise and Decline of a Dutch Water Name

JOHANNES A. HUISMAN

THE TOWN OF 'S-HERTOGENBOSCH ("The Duke's Wood" – also known by the French name *Bois-le-Duc* in the English-speaking world) is situated in the southern part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, a few miles from the Maas River. Originally a hunting castle of the Dukes of Brabant, built in the midst of swampy woodlands, it developed into a formidable fortress, a heavily fortified triangular city. It could easily be rendered almost impregnable by inundating the surrounding marshlands. After the Franco-German war of 1870–71 the old European fortresses lost their strategic importance: the walls were demolished, the cities got rid of their irksome armor<sup>1</sup> and started the expansion which is now undergoing an embarrassing acceleration.

's-Hertogenbosch could not expand unless the adjacent fields were substantially raised. In the late eighties the railway, steadily creeping forward on the continent, had reached the town. The station had to be located outside the former walls on the north side of the fortress, the sand required for the purpose being obtained from the higher diluvial grounds of Vught, some three miles south of the city. Starting in 1880, an artificial lake was dug, initially by hand, later on by means of a huge steampowered excavator. This ominous monster made people jobless. They named it *De IJzeren Man* (The Iron Man).<sup>2</sup> This name was extended to the ever-growing lake. In 1896 the first living area outside the old city was realized. It was called *Het Zand* (The Sands).<sup>3</sup>

The name showed itself to be very productive. In 1912 a similar excavator was installed near Weert, in the neighboring Province of Limburg. The resulting lake was also called *De IJzeren Man*, the sand being used for building a railway dam through the peaty region of *De Peel*. Between the

---

<sup>1</sup> The town lost its status of fortress by the Fortification Law of 1874.

<sup>2</sup> *Van Dale Groot Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal*, 8th ed., rev. by C. Kruyskamp ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), s.v. *IJzeren Man*, with the remark "in de volkstaal" (in popular speech). Cf. also M. J. Koenen-Endepols, *Verklarend Handwoordenboek der Nederlandse Taal*, 24th ed., rev. (Groningen, 1956), s.v. *IJzeren Man*.

<sup>3</sup> *Algemene Winkler Prins Encyclopedie* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1957), s.v. *'s-Hertogenbosch*.

two World Wars a third Iron Man was born at Eindhoven, the rapidly growing homestead of the Philips Concern. During the Great Depression the excavation was partially turned over to manual labor as an employment-procuring project. These sands were also used mainly for railway-building purposes.

The fourth brother of The Iron Man originated after World War II, at Geldrop,<sup>4</sup> some three miles south-east of Eindhoven. Its sands were used for raising ground for building, and for the E 3, the nearby European highway from Lisbon to Stockholm. The name *De IJzeren Man* is now used by old-timers only; it is falling into disuse and being replaced by *De Smelen* (the dry blades of grass), the name of its swimming pool. A fifth site is located in the central Province of Gelderland, on the diluvial hills of De Veluwe, southwest of the village of Hoenderlo, in the National Park *De Hoge Veluwe* (The High Veluwe).<sup>5</sup>

Local namelore confirms the supposed origin from the focus of 's-Hertogenbosch: about 60 years ago a member of the Dutch royal family, hunting in the Park, is reported to have asked a woodcutter the name of the pool. The puzzled man, who was born in the Province of North Brabant, is said to have answered "It's called The Iron Man" to the great satisfaction of His Highness.

The situation of the hitherto-discussed artificial lakes and pools clearly shows a regionally limited fertility of the water-name. It proved to possess, however, a capacity for expanding in another direction. The Iron Man at Vught suggested the name of a lake east of 's-Hertogenbosch. It was dug in 1918 and following years, in order to obtain material for raising the level of marshy fields for new suburbs called *De Muntel*, *De Vliert*, and *De Graafse Wijk*. Its name turned up quite soon: *De IJzeren Vrouw* (The Iron Woman).<sup>6</sup> The Iron Man at Eindhoven also gave up his bachelorship; a second adjacent pit was named *De IJzeren Vrouw*, induced by the example of 's-Hertogenbosch. Another, less imaginative name, competing from the beginning with the Iron Woman of Eindhoven, was *De Nieuwe IJzeren Man* (The New Iron Man). A more recent name, in common use at present, is *Karpendonkse Plas*.<sup>7</sup> This was by no means the end of the people's inventiveness. A further sandpit north of the town

<sup>4</sup> *Topografische kaart der Nederlanden* 1:25.000, blad nr. 670 Nunen ('s-Gravenhage: Ministerie van Defensie, Topografische Dienst, 1928).

<sup>5</sup> *Topografische kaart der Nederlanden* 1:25.000, blad nr. 33 c Hoenderlo ('s-Gravenhage: Ministerie van Defensie, Topografische Dienst, 1965).

<sup>6</sup> The greater part of the sands used for these suburbs was provided by the Maas Regulation Project. This project was carried out in the thirties and consisted of straightening the course of the river in order to improve the water discharge in winter and the building of barrages and locks for shipping in summer.

<sup>7</sup> *Plattegrond van Eindhoven*, 8th ed. rev. (Eindhoven: J. Konings Jz., 1967).

of 's-Hertogenbosch, near the Dieze River, was termed *De IJzeren Oom* (The Iron Uncle).<sup>8</sup> A younger name for the same lake is *Ertveldplas* or *Ertveldse Plas*.<sup>9</sup>

One would expect an Iron Child in this happy family. It actually showed up as the name of a small pond south of the adjacent village of Hintham, east of the town. This pond is situated in a large meadow, owned by the Roman Catholic church of Hintham. For several years after 1931 the sands continued to be sold to the community of 's-Hertogenbosch.<sup>10</sup> The new pool was facetiously called, by the local people, *Het Gat van de Pastoor* (The Priest's Hole). Shortly afterwards, in any case before World War II, a competing name arose: *Het IJzeren Kind* (The Iron Child). Both names are still in use, but they do not appear in official records. The pool was considerably widened and deepened in 1961 for raising the level of Hintham-Zuid (Southern Hintham), popularly called *Heijmansdorp* (Village of Heijmans), after the contractor. One informant mentioned a second Iron Child, a small pond between high blocks of flats in a new residential quarter of 's-Hertogenbosch, but I could not locate it, nor did I find any confirmation of it.

Shortly after World War II the Iron Man and his clan reached their greatest extension. Since then their position has not been strengthened by any new members; instead, several losses were sustained by name replacement. When we draw up a list of lost items and of the names of ponds and lakes of recent origin, the winning competitor clearly shows up:

's-Hertogenbosch:	<i>IJzeren Oom</i>	<i>Ertveldse Plas</i>
Eindhoven:	<i>IJzeren Vrouw</i> or <i>Nieuwe IJzeren Man</i>	<i>Karpendonkse Plas</i>
Geldrop:	<i>IJzeren Man</i>	<i>De Smelen</i>
New water surfaces:		
's-Hertogenbosch:	<i>Ploossche Plas</i> <sup>11</sup> <i>Pettelaarse Plas</i> or <i>Zuiderplas</i> <sup>12</sup> <i>Oosterplas</i> <sup>13</sup> <i>Het Meertje</i> <sup>14</sup>	

<sup>8</sup> Its sands were used for raising the ground of the suburb plans *West I*, *West II* and the *Industrieterrein*.

<sup>9</sup> *Plattegrond van 's-Hertogenbosch* ('s-Hertogenbosch: Vereniging voor Vreemdelingenverkeer, 1967).

<sup>10</sup> The sands were used for the *Hinthammerpark*, also called *Villapark*. In 1965 the church of Hintham sold *Het IJzeren Kind* to the community of Rosmalen. It will be transformed into an aquatic sports center.

<sup>11</sup> Between 's-Hertogenbosch-Noord and Empel, south of the railway line from 's-Hertogenbosch to Utrecht.

<sup>12</sup> 1949; in 1959 a recreation center was built on its shore.

<sup>13</sup> East of the town, with swimming accomodation. See *Reisboek voor Nederland*, 3rd ed. rev. (no place: Koninklijke Nederlandse Toeristenbond, 1965), p. 532.

<sup>14</sup> Near the Ertveldplas, excavated in 1963.

The word *plas* is the winner. It is an early Germanic termination, found in Old English and Middle Dutch, a seaborne word, not appearing in Old High German.<sup>15</sup> The victorious advance of the word *plas* is a direct result of the aquatics boom after World War II. The Netherlands had been heavily weakened in the last war, but after the injection of the Marshall aid the country rose again and managed to develop from a chiefly agrarian country into an industrial nation, in spite of (or stimulated by?) the loss of her vast Indonesian empire. The population recently passed the number of 13 million, the densest in the world. The so-called *Randstad* (literally "peripheral city") is closing more and more its horseshoe shape. It is an urban agglomeration consisting of the towns of Rotterdam, Delft, Den Haag, Leiden, Haarlem, Amsterdam, Hilversum, Utrecht and several adjacent urbanizing villages. In the southern provinces the main focal points of urban development are Eindhoven and the former coal mining district of Limburg. This sweeping change of the Dutch dwelling and working pattern gave birth to a hitherto unknown recreation demand, the greater part of which is aimed at aquatics.

Between the two Wars aquatic sports were located almost exclusively in the northwestern provinces, where the word *plas* was indigenous. In the course of the extension of water recreation the word *plas* migrated to inland provinces,<sup>16</sup> where the resulting lakes of a great number of gravel and sand excavations (each up to a thousand acres or more) offered splendid opportunities. The position of the Iron Man was, simultaneously, weakened by the linguistic abandonment of the appellative "Iron Man" as a word for excavators. This circumstance accelerated the advance of the "modern" termination *plas*, with its sportive and "with-it" atmosphere of the leading *Randstad*.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Old English *plæsc*, Middle Dutch *plas(ch)*, English *plash*, Dutch *plas*. See M. Schönfeld, *Nederlandse Waternamen* (Amsterdam, 1955), p. 239. In Old Frisian the word is not recorded, which may be caused by the scarceness of the texts; in Middle Frisian it occurs in the typical Frisian form *plis*: a. 1640 *ynne Plis*; a. 1650 *plis . . . exponitur plas*; a. 1688 *druwck-plis* (for these quotations I am indebted to Mr. Teake Hoekema of the Frysk Ynstitút of the University of Groningen). These early recorded forms disprove the alleged recent onomatopoeic origin as Van Haeringen suggests (Frankk-Van Wijk, *Etymologisch Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal, Supplement* by C. B. Van Haeringen [’s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1936], p. 128). Old Germanic origin of the word does not imply ablaut relation with *\*pōl*, rightly rejected by Van Haeringen. Jan de Vries, *Nederlands Etymologisch Woordenboek* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1963), p. 526, derives *plas* from the recent verb *plassen*, in flat contradiction with the tradition of both words.

<sup>16</sup> So far it had seldom been used in this area, but then mostly with the specific meaning of a water-mill pond, e.g., *De Plasmolen*, some nine miles south of Nijmegen.

<sup>17</sup> The numerous recent pits along the Maas, dredged for obtaining construction sands and gravel, were also named *plassen*, e.g., *De Paesplas* at Gennep (named after the contractor *Paes*) and *De Plas* or *Mookse Plas* at Middelaer.

The name of the above-mentioned *Meertje* provides evidence of a second competing word: *meer* ("lake"). Originally it meant a wind-widened track of a river, passing through soft peaty grounds. The greatest of these fluminal varices was the *Aelmere*, later called the *Zuiderzee*, originally *Lake Flevo*, which was the result of the widening of an ancient branch of the Rhine, flowing from the German town of Wesel to the island of Vlieland.<sup>18</sup> The new polders reclaimed in the *Zuiderzee* reduced its surface by nearly one million acres; the remaining lake received the name *IJsselmeer* (Ijssel Lake) after the Ijssel River.<sup>19</sup> *Plas* originally denoted an artificial lake which owed its origin to peat removal from the bog. But the word extended its meaning: the sailing center of *De Kager Plas*<sup>20</sup> is recorded in 1594 as *Cagermeer*.<sup>21</sup> The famous lake district of Friesland vindicates the old term: as appears in Dutch form, from *Sneekermeer*, *Schotermeer*, *Bergumermeer*, *Tjeukemeer*, and others. In the case of the *IJzeren Oom* (Iron Uncle) the winning name *Ertveldplas* may owe its victory to the yacht harbor that was built there: stepping into the aquatics market required a new name on an interregional level.

The factors discussed may be expected to cause a further reduction of the Iron Clan. It is not likely that more than four accepted and well-established members will survive: the Iron Men of Vught, Eindhoven and Weert, and the founder's wife, the Iron Woman of 's-Hertogenbosch.

### University of Utrecht

---

<sup>18</sup> The name *Vlie-land* has still preserved the old name of Lake Flevo, which has been recorded since Roman times. This word *meer* is feminine gender (*de meer*; cf. the family-name Van der Meer); it is also being used for dead river meanders, e.g., *De Wijchense Meer* and *De Meer*, both near Nijmegen. The neutral word *het meer* means in older Dutch "sea" or "lake," nowadays only "lake." There are a great number of contaminations on record, the confusion being increased by the also double-gendered form *mar*, *maar* (cf. *Alkmaar*) and several dialectal variations in vocalism, meaning and gender (the masculine gender occurs as well as the feminine and the neuter).

<sup>19</sup> Other lakes of this type are *De Haarlemmermeer* (reclaimed in the nineteenth century), *De Braasemermeer*, *De Bijlmermeer*. In cases like *De Wijde Aa* (Prov. of Zuid-Holland) or *De Wijde Ee* (Prov. of Friesland) the process of widening was stopped by man in historical times. By now all river banks in the Netherlands are under absolute control; the seafront will be after the completion of the Delta Plan (1954–1980) and the closing of the row of *Waddeneilanden* (to be completed around the year 2000).

<sup>20</sup> In professional jargon the shorter terms *De Kaag*, *De Brasem*, etc., are commonly used nowadays.

<sup>21</sup> M. Schönfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 203.