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Preface

This book resulted from a desire to understand the role of pamphlets in the political life of that most curious early modern state, the Dutch Republic. The virtues of abundance and occasional liveliness have made “little blue books,” as they were called, a favorite historical source—that is why I came to study them in the first place.¹ But the more I dug into pamphlets for this fact or that, the more questions I had about their contemporary purpose and role.² Who wrote pamphlets and why? For whom were they intended? How and by whom were pamphlets brought to press and distributed, and what does this reveal? Why did their number increase so greatly? Who read them? How were pamphlets different from other media? In short, I began to view pamphlets not as repositories of historical facts but as a historical phenomenon in their own right.³

I have looked for answers to these questions in governmental and church records, private letters, publishing records and related materials about printers, booksellers, and pamphleteers, and of course in pamphlets themselves. Like so many other students of the early press and its products, I discovered only scattered, incomplete images of *actual* conditions, such as the readership or popularity of pamphlets. On the other hand, I found much material which reflected what people *believed* about “little books.” Because pamphlets were printed and usually of political significance, I organized much of the research and writing around the concepts of print and political culture. These are slippery terms to apply

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to the seventeenth century, especially, as Robert Darnton and others have pointed out, that word “political.”⁴ By print culture I mean not so much the culture of the literate, but rather those features which distinguished printed materials from other media.⁵ And by political culture I mean the shared values and attitudes associated with “affairs of state,” including “war, taxation, economic and religious problems,” as well as the relationship between rulers and the ruled.⁶ I have brought together these evidences and concepts to try to form a picture of Dutch pamphleteering and its consequences between about 1565 and 1648.

For those readers unfamiliar with the history of the Low Countries, I should note here that Antwerp and then Holland were the printing centers of Europe from about 1550 onward, and that during the past two decades English-speaking historians have turned out an unprecedented number of books and articles illustrating what native Dutch scholars have argued in their own tongue for over a century—the economic, cultural, and political importance of the Netherlands in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe.⁷ I hope this book will demonstrate further that the Dutch Republic was much more than a charming little country of picturesque windmills, master artists, and brave little boys who stopped up dikes.

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