

**2003**

## **THE SKATER**

Do you think Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende is a skating fan?

The popularity of skating in the Netherlands says a lot about the changes that have taken place in our boggy country over the last century. Our national self-image was previously formed by our struggle against water, but these days the national anthem, the *Wilhelmus*, primarily resounds if Dutch skaters have once again achieved a proud victory on the ice.

In earlier times, ice was not the domain of the Netherlander, but of the devil. Just like floods and inundations, ice was a phenomenon for which Our Dear Lord had a visceral aversion. As far back as the Middle Ages, skaters were accused of being sorcerers, and were regularly brought before the Inquisition. The 17<sup>th</sup> century poet Bredero made short shrift with this superstition, but he then got his come-uppance for his brazen impertinence: he died on the ice.

The oldest skating poem dates from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, but the work seems to be an allegory for carnal knowledge, another domain of the devil. Translation of a version in modern Dutch of one verse goes something like this:

She revelled in lengthy play, to be sure,  
And I suffered, looking forward to respite.  
But she hauled me back on the sleigh  
And in her clutch pushed me onward,  
Back and forth until the ice was cracked  
By the stroking, without exaggeration.

Surprisingly enough, it is not the godless city-dwellers who can claim the right to call themselves the best skaters. It is often the Reformed farmers and country folk from our land's Bible Belt who provide our nation with such cheer in the wintertime. The appendages of these men in tights and leotards being frozen insensitive during the 'Elfstedentocht' skating marathons in Friesland – alternative or not – plays no small part in the predicate 'extreme sports'. During the bitterly cold Elfstedentocht of 1963, the famous skater and later trainer Henk Gemser had to defrost his member with hot chocolate. Other skaters lay on carts and had their noble meat massaged on the spot in public view.

Nowadays skating is a symbol for the Netherlands as it complacently de-christianises, a nation which after winning the struggle against water now thinks it has vanquished ice as well. We win every European and World Championship, but as right-minded provincials we refuse to concede that they are in effect Dutch Championships. Skating is thus the polder model in 'full effect'. Who would like to wager that the Reformed and eternally outgoing Dutch Prime Minister, Jan Peter Balkenende, is a skating fan?