

A SHORT HISTORY OF BELGIUM

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A Short History of Belgium by Léon van der Essen

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LÉON VAN DER ESSEN

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OF BELGIUM**

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BY

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TO
ALBERT I
KING OF THE BELGIANS
THE KNIGHT WITHOUT FEAR AND WITHOUT REPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

The "New York Times Review of Books" of June 20, 1915, called attention to the comparative scarcity of books on Belgium among the literary productions resulting from the war, and continued: "Why Belgium finds so scant a space in the war bibliographies is a question difficult to answer. Certainly, no country has aroused the popular sympathy and enthusiasm of the world to a like degree with this little kingdom, occupying a geographical area of about one-fourth the state of Pennsylvania, yet performing deeds of valour and enduring martyrdoms that place it beyond all comparison in greatness. If the war has a hero it is Belgium: hence, one argues, that country should fill a prominent instead of a slight section in the literature of the great conflict."

This idea, doubtless, it was that induced the University of Chicago Press to propose that I write and publish under its auspices a *Short History of Belgium*, with material drawn from the course of lectures I gave on the history of Belgium at the University of Chicago during the Winter Quarter of 1915.

This *Short History of Belgium*, of course, is not a "war book" and cannot be placed among those books classed as war literature. The circumstances of its being written have some connection, of course, with the great war, but it hardly needs to be said that this history is objective and tries simply to give an account of the past history of the Belgian people, leaving entirely out of consideration their present deeds and sufferings. By consulting that history

the reader will, however, be able to understand much more clearly than he did before why the Belgian nation of today took the stand it has taken in the great war and preferred honor in place of dishonor, and struggle for freedom in place of ease. The fight of the Flemish communes against the King of France in the fourteenth century, the great struggle against Spain in the sixteenth century, the revolt against Austrian rule in the eighteenth century, and the revolution of 1830 are examples and inspiration for the Belgians of today.

There has been much discussion about the time at which Belgian history should be said to begin. Belgium, as an entirely autonomous, independent kingdom, has existed only since 1830. But the Belgium of 1830 was, in a certain way, a creation of European diplomacy and the result of centuries of struggle for personal and political freedom. Belgium, as a country, and the Belgians, as a people, existed long before. Since the time of Caesar (57 B.C.), history tells us of the Belgians, "the bravest of all the people of Gaul," and, although the Germanic invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries have added a new ethnical element to the old Belgian stock, it is from the time of the Roman conqueror that the history of the Belgian people really begins. As for Belgium as a united political body, one must go back to the fifteenth century, when the dukes of Burgundy succeeded in unifying all the Belgian duchies and counties under one dynasty. Before that time, Belgium had practically consisted of two very distinct parts, Lotharingia in the east, Flanders in the west, separated by the river Scheldt. Lotharingia was, politically speaking, a part of the mediaeval German empire; Flanders was in subjugation to the kingdom of France. Each succeeded