

## Laudatio Fred Stevens

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Whatever definition one has of a legal historian, there is no doubt that Fred Stevens is one, as he has studied both law and history. Although his first historical research concerned Belgium's economic history in the 1930's, Fred Stevens soon turned to legal history with a three volume Ph. D. thesis about the Antwerp notaries from 1794 until 1814, which he defended in 1989. When the major part of it was published in 1994, it established his name not only as Belgium's specialist of its notaries, but also as one of its best historians, a fact which was recognized by the Flemish Community which awarded him its prestigious three year prize for historical sciences in 1994. At that time, notaries in Belgium and in foreign countries had already acclaimed Fred Stevens as the great historian of their profession. For example, in 1993 he was the laureate of the Prix Fochrot of the Institute International d'Histoire du Notariat and in 1996 he was the co-author of a book in Italian about notaries in the Low Countries. Speaking from my own experience as co-editor of a book about the history of the administration of justice in Belgium, I can say that as soon as the subject of notaries is mentioned the name of Fred Stevens immediately comes to mind. Consequently, he has written about the most diverse aspects of the history of notaries in Belgium, like the first women to be allowed to the profession, the training of notaries, the languages they used and so on. From this, however, one should not derive that Fred Stevens is now wasting his time studying only some small details. In fact, two of his major books about the notaries were published only a few years ago. I refer here to his study of the famous Ventöse statute of the French Revolution, which even today is still the point of reference for the organization of the notarial profession, and also to his book about the notaries from the Dierckx family

in Turnhout during the last two centuries. At first sight, this book looks to be about local history, but it far transcends that level and is in fact a model study and it is hoped that it will be emulated by younger legal historians, because Fred Stevens here shows that he is a hands on historian, who delves into the archives and brings the past to life. The old notaries are dead, but the law they made comes to life again in Fred Stevens' writings. His work about the Antwerp notaries around 1800 almost inevitably led him to study the so-called French era of Belgian history. As Belgium's law still is to a large extent French, the two decades between 1795 and 1815 are beyond any doubt the most important ones in Belgian legal history and anyone studying them will have to turn to Fred Stevens' work about the introduction of the French legislation in Belgium, Belgian constitutions around 1800 or labour and criminal law at that time.

As may be expected of a legal historian who is very much aware of the social background of the legal phenomena he studies, Fred Stevens has also published extensively on the history of Antwerp, Turnhout and the Campines area. Once again, it would be wrong here to assume his work is not of interest to a wider audience, because he writes from a local angle. For example, in my personal opinion, his very extensive article about religious institutions in the Campines area during the long nineteenth century is actually about religious institutions in Belgium and even more about the legal status of nonprofit organizations and its wider implications for the relationship between church and state in nineteenth century Belgium, but the author is too modest to advertise this.

The paragraphs above may give the reader the impression that Fred Stevens is only working about notaries, the French era in Belgium and the local history of Antwerp and its province, but that is not true. He has written about so many subjects that it is impossible to list of all them here. However, even mentioning only a few of them will make clear to the reader that Fred Stevens is an extremely versatile scholar, who is

able to tackle any subject. He has written articles about the history of the law faculties and legal education, court bailiffs, the influence of Italian lawyers on law in the Southern Netherlands during the sixteenth century, company law in nineteenth century Belgium, the slave trade, the history of codification, legal statistics, nineteenth century labour law, the relationship between theology and law under the emperor Charles V, the publication of new statutes, forced succession and so many other issues. For example, he has also written some biographical articles about famous lawyers. (He will also prove his versatility in the article following this laudatio, which is about the League of Nations, i.e. international law.) Remarkable here is that his publications run from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, and occasionally even go beyond that, like an article dealing with Roman law, a text about legal historians and the internet or his article about the history of terrorism. Fred Stevens' willingness to tackle so many subjects is to his credit, but even more so is the fact that he always displays a mastery of them which many others only achieve after decades of research. To all this, one should add that Fred Stevens has also given many lectures about, once again, the most diverse subjects of legal history and that he was also for many years the secretary of the legal history committee of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Arts and Sciences. Moreover, he has almost singlehandedly revived the Belgian chapter of the International Commission for the History of Representative and Parliamentary Institutions, which under his leadership is now returning to its glory as a leading institution for the study of the history of public law in Belgium.

As strange as it may sound, in his own country, Fred Stevens has up to now not really received the tribute which is due to him, whereas in other countries, like Germany, but most of all France, he is considered to be one of Europe's leading legal historians. A professor at Leuven University in Belgium, Fred Stevens has also been invited to teach several times at French universities and he was even asked by his French colleagues to

organize the 2008 congress of their Société d' histoire du droit. Although notaries were aware of his qualities from the start, only now it is dawning upon his Belgian colleagues that this modest scholar is one of their best. Therefore, the Institute for Legal History of the University of Ghent is glad that the Law Faculty put his name forward for the Sarton medal and that the committee has awarded it to him. Thus, a debt is paid.