

Tribute to Karel Velle

Academic session on the occasion of Karel Velle's departure as national Archivist (5.2.2024 at 10:00hrs)

Distinguished guests,
Dear colleagues and friends of Karel,
Beste Karel, beste Vriend,

It is a great honor and a pleasure for me to give a speech in recognition and respect of our colleague Karel Velle on the occasion of his retirement.

A few months ago, when Karin Van Honacker and Sébastien Dubois asked if I would like to give this speech, I gladly accepted. Then I started thinking about a few things, such as: What can I possibly say about someone who has experienced and accomplished so much? Who has already left so many traces. What should I leave out and what should I emphasize?

I'll try to limit myself to the essentials....

What I'm about to recount are just parts or glimpses of Karel's career: events or memories which essentially concern his archival career that I know best. I am going to talk about Karel's international involvement, the memories that have stayed with me and stuck in my mind. And I'm sure you all have your own memories and think of many other events that are important to you and that link you personally to Karel.

Over the past 20 years our paths have often crossed, and we've come a long way together.

Let's start from the beginning:

Karel Velle was born in Ghent in 1959, the same year as me, and studied history at the State University of Ghent. In fact, he has always remained loyal to the town of Ghent, where he still lives today, in the small municipality of Pinte, from where, for many years, he commuted to his office in Brussels – early in the morning – at about 5 a.m. if I am right – in order to avoid traffic jams.

Karel holds various certificates, including: one of historical demography at the “Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales” in Paris, several of intensive courses in archival sciences from the National Archives in Paris and The Archive school in Amsterdam, and one of an intensive Public Management Program at the Public Management Institute from Leuven.

Karel received his PhD in history at the University of Ghent in March 1988 for a study on the medicalisation of the Belgian society since the 19th century.

As an historian, he has published works on the social, cultural, and political history of medicine and society since the late 18th century, on the social and political history of law and justice over the same period, and on the history of institutions and the public sector in

the 19th and 20th centuries. The commercial edition of his thesis, “The New Confessors” (De nieuwe biechtvaders. De sociale geschiedenis van de arts in België), was awarded the Prize for Medical Culture by Ghent University in 1998 and, for his outstanding work in the history of science, he received the Sarton Medal in the same year.

In addition to his career as an archivist, Karel has held an impressive number of other positions including that of an Deputy director of the cabinet of the Minister for Science Policy, a lecturer in the History Department and in the Faculty of Medicine of Ghent University and a part-time member of the cabinet of the Minister of Justice.

From 2022 to 2023, Karel finally took over the management of the Africa Museum in Tervuren for eight months, until the appointment of the current director Bart Ouvry.

Karel was also Member of the Executive Board of the Research Foundation – Flanders and President of the scientific Council of the Belgian Historical Institute in Rome. Currently, he is permanent Secretary of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for the Sciences and the Arts, and chairman of the Royal Historical Commission.

But let’s get back to his career as an archivist:

Karel Velle entered the Belgian State Archives in late 1989 and mainly devoted himself to the selection and intellectual control of archives of the judiciary and to different aspects of archival and information law.

He then was appointed National archivist and director-general of the Belgian State Archives in 2005.

After taking over the direction of the National Archives, Karel played a constant and effective role in the work of the European Archives Group, the EAG, – a group in which I met Karel first in 2006.

The European Archives Group is an official Commission expert group that has been established at the beginning of 2006. It is composed of representatives from National Archives in EU Member countries and meets twice a year in the country that holds the presidency of the Council of the European Union. The mission of this Group is to ensure cooperation and coordination on topics relating to archives.

In the EAG group, all together with our European colleagues, we were engaged in fascinating reflections around the transformations of the practices of our profession in an approach that was open and attentive to innovations - and in which Karel took a very active part.

One example would be our discussion around the GDPR, the General Data Protection Regulation, which still causes us a lot of headaches. With the help of the French delegation, and thanks to the close collaboration between archival colleagues and the Secretariat from the Commission, we managed to get the famous article 89 included in the text. This article provides an exception to process sensitive data for archiving, research and statistics purposes and possible derogations to rights granted to individuals by the GDPR.

We frequently had lively discussions around data protection, copyright, governance, democratic transparency, the right to forget, the right to privacy, artificial intelligence, records by design and many other subjects. In case of disagreement among the group, it was often Karel who found a suitable compromise.

He was the one who communicated with everyone.

He was the one who found the right words.

He was the one who pulled the strings in the background.

Karel acted as a link and a key player in international cooperation, and he had a decisive role in numerous projects.

The unity of Europe and the international archival community has always been important to Karel. He consistently wished for greater cohabitation between people and countries. It was important to him to advance archiving work at the European level. The project for the Archives portal Europe, an online network for European archives - is a perfect example:

In 2014, the founding countries of the Archives Portal Europe Foundation, the APEF, were - not surprisingly – first Belgium, then the Netherlands. During several phone calls Karel convinced me in his irresistible way and with his unbeatable arguments to join. So finally, Luxemburg became the third founding member. The foundation took over the responsibility of maintaining and developing the portal from the APEX project and Karel became the first chairman of the Assembly of Associates.

Today, 10 years later, I have to say: it was a good decision, and your foresight, Karel, back then, has paid off. The European archive portal is now consulted by thousands of historians, students and interested citizens worldwide. From the small BENELUX taskforce, the number of members has now grown to more than 20 European countries. Colleagues from all over Europe and beyond collaborate to constantly add more material to the portal to enable users to find information more efficiently from millions of archival materials held in thousands of archival institutions scattered around the world.

As part of his international activities, Karel was also strongly dedicated to cross-border cultural promotion in the region between the Rhine and the Meuse - this is another group in which we have regularly met with our Dutch and German colleagues to organize every year a symposium on common archival themes.

His efforts in this area were recognized by the award of the “Rheinlandtaler” in 2014. This distinction honors people who are committed to the European idea of a common cultural space.

Karel was dedicated far beyond his profession to international co-operation between archivists. For several years, he was involved in the International Council on Archives, ICA, of which I have the honor of being President today. He assumed various responsibilities on the

Board of Directors. He was Chairman of the Audit Commission, Secretary general of EURBICA – the European branch of ICA - and an active member of the Executive Committee.

Karel, you have always been committed to the improvement of the archival sector. As a very active and influent member of the European and the larger international community, you were able to significantly influence the developments in the archival field and you contributed remarkably to the development of the archival cause on the international level.

You are highly appreciated not only for your professional competence but also for your human qualities. To prove this, I started to run a small survey – as we always do in our working groups. All the colleagues who I have contacted emphasize your helpfulness, your intellectual curiosity, your sense of humor and your inexhaustible energy.

You are a good listener, you soak up all the information like a sponge and make notes on cards, old envelopes, and loose sheets of paper, which you then carry around with you all day long. This was very confusing to me, and I wondered how you would use these notes afterwards, how you would sort them and how you would find your way around - with all these pieces of information.

This will probably remain your secret forever.....

Prof. Lorentz Mikoletzky, the former Director general of the Austrian National Archives from 1994-2011 and President of the International Council on Archives wrote the following:

“I got to know Karel not only during my presidency of the ICA as a real friendly colleague. He always came up with good ideas for ICA activities, but also for internal ICA processes. He always tried to find a balance in his calm manner, because such a large organization naturally also offers areas of “unrest”.

At the EBNA conferences, Austria was always placed next to Belgium, which helped to deepen the personal, human contact and I was able to get to know Karel's wide range of interests in the cultural field.

It was a wonderful friendship to build up with him.”

And here the statement from Hervé Lemoine, Director general of the “Service interministériel des Archives de France” from 2010-2018:

“As for Karel ... I can testify to his bonhomie, his permanent joie de vivre and the enthusiasm and cordiality he always displayed! I think he was much appreciated by his French and French-speaking colleagues.”

Martine de Boisdeffre, Director general of the “Archives de France” from 2001-2010 wrote as follows:

“Of the memories of Karel that you ask me to evoke, I have above all that of a great commitment to his internal mission, as well as to his involvement in the Archives' international meetings. His frankness, his very pleasant and warm character, his taste for

jokes, were accompanied by great finesse and subtlety, a real political sense, in the good sense of the word, discernment of the issues at stake... He was someone who made the Belgian State Archives shine, and with whom I personally had great pleasure and interest in working.”

There's a lot more to say about you Karel. Everything you have done and thought up to now. You have never stopped thinking, engaging, reading, teaching, promoting, encouraging, and acting!

On a personal level, you often gave me good advice, during a coffee break, between meetings, in a taxi, a bus or in an airport waiting room, in conversations about staff restrictions or budget cuts.

Today is a great day for you, Karel, for your family, your colleagues, and your friends. You continue to be present in our work, in our meetings, in our evenings together over a meal and a glass of wine. Through your actions, your commitment, your positions, and your knowledge through your books and publications, you will leave a lasting mark on the archival work. Our exchanges are and will remain fruitful, enriched by your vision and experience.

I'd like to warmly congratulate you on your well-deserved retirement after almost 20 years of dedicated service as national archivist. This is a special moment in your life, and I'm honored to have been able to be a part of it together with this numerous and prestigious audience gathered here today.

I've been lucky enough to share many memorable moments with you, both on and off the job. You've always been a loyal colleague and friend, and I'll miss your presence.

But, if there's one thing I know, it's that you're going to make the most of your retirement! You'll be able to devote yourself to your passions and your family, your wife Katrien, your children Elisabeth, Thomas and Matthias and their partners. You will have time to spend with your grandchildren, telling stories and taking photographs and – may be - planting flowers in your garden with Oda.

I am sure you'll continue to excel in everything you do!

Thank you for your attention.

Josée Kirps
Director of the *Archives nationales/Nationalarchiv* – Luxemburg
President of ICA