

The formation of the border between Belgium and Luxembourg in 1830-1839: a story about the importance of being a map lover

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Introduction

Maps play an important role in human history. Knowing how to use them can be a major advantage when you are a revolutionary, creating a new state, as we shall see (Fig. 1).

The territory concerned here is the southern part of what is called *The Low Countries*, or what was known in the 14th-15th century as the Burgundian Netherlands, and later as the (Habsburg) Spanish (1556-1715) or Austrian (1715-1795) Netherlands.

The white dotted line shows the current Belgian borders. The bright pink territory is the *Zuidelijke Nederlanden*, the Southern Netherlands; the darker pink parts indicate land that was lost in the Eighty Years War by the Spanish to the Dutch. The green territories have never been part of the Netherlands.

1830: the birth of Belgium, a country without frontiers

In 1830 a country is born that from then on will be called Belgium. It is the result of an uprising, caused by many different factors, much too long to comment on here¹. The facts: the new Belgium is the southern part of what is then the United Kingdom of the Netherlands², a state constructed

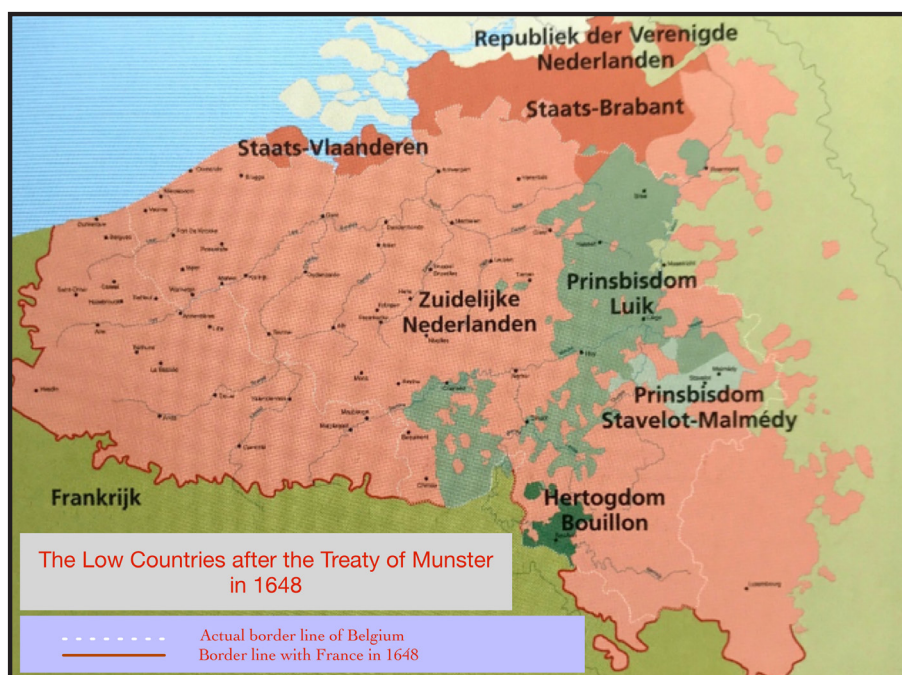


Fig. 1 : The map of The Low Countries as in 1648

in the aftermath of the defeat of Napoleon, when an eager William of Orange-Nassau proclaimed himself king at the urging of the Congress of Vienna³. The latter had one major goal: building a buffer around France with its dangerous revolutionary ideas, meanwhile restoring the old order in Europe: hence the re-installing of a French king and the consecration of a new king for this new state in 1815.

From 1815 until 1830 the territory that since the Middle Ages was referred to as The Low Countries was reunited, but without the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, which was 'given' to William by the Congress in Personal Union: therefore, not formally a part of the new state, although it had always been part of the Low Countries (see further⁴).

4 The former Prince-Bishopric of Liège and Principality of Malmédy-Stavelot, and the Duchy of Bouillon - never parts of the Low Countries - were incorporated in the new state: again a story in its own; finally, it should be mentioned that another reason for annexing the 'Belgian' provinces to the Dutch ones is compensation for the Cape Colony and Ceylon (Dutch) that the British held occupied and kept

1 It is impossible to go into the name 'Belgium' the rebels chose and its history here

2 To be precise: *Le Royaume des Pays-Bas* was the term the Congress of Vienna used, French being the international language of diplomacy at that time; Kingdom of the Netherlands in the Treaty

of London; the word United was added later by historians to avoid confusion with today's Kingdom of the Netherlands

3 In fact, the Peace Treaty of Paris of 1814 (between the reinstated French king and the Coalition) decided about this, forerunning the decisions of the Vienna Congress

After the September 1830 rebellion, a Parliament, the Congrès National, is formed in no time and a — for the time — very modern Constitution is written. It is decided the new country will be a monarchy and so the search for a head of state is on ... Also, vital ingredients of national pride are at hand: a national hymn is composed and some industrious lady has sewn together what will henceforth be the national flag. Only one thing is lacking: a country.

The problem is: how to convince the contemporary Major Powers ⁵ to accept this new state, as they are not amused by this breaking up of the buffer around France and the precious new balance they had installed in Europe in 1815 ...

A delegation is dispatched to London ⁶ to advocate the good cause. The so-called London Conference of December 1830 confirms, one could say grants, the Belgian independence⁷ as a neutral state. The official protocols from 20 and 27 January 1831, the *Bases de Séparation*, state that the borders 'from before 1790'⁸ will be restored.

5 On 20 November 1815 the Quadruple Alliance was formed between Austria, Britain, Prussia and Russia; the aim was to have regular diplomatic contact, as mutual watch-dogs

6 Since 4 November 1830 the Quadruple Alliance Members were already conveying in London, for this occasion joined by France, in the form of ambassador Talleyrand

7 One could say surprisingly swift: an armed interference from the Major Powers would certainly not have been impossible, but due to several factors in the advantage of the Belgians, the secession was approved.

8 It is nowhere clearly explained why this date was chosen and not for example 1795 when the Republic of the Seven Provinces was formally ended; my guess is that from 1790 on many upheavals started both in the Republic and the Austrian Netherlands as a consequence of the French Revolution, like the formation of the *Etats belgiques unis* and the Powers didn't want any reference to those events and play safe: in 1790, when Joseph II died, there was (still) a stable

Also, Luxembourg will remain a separate Grand-Duchy under the House of Nassau and part of the German Confederation.

Borderlines

To become a 'country', in the sense of a state, recognized as such by the rest of the world, two ingredients are necessary: people⁹ and land, a territory. And who says territory says physical borders. Now this is a bit of a problem: how do you split up a state, formed by several units? One would think by simply de-assembling the parts with which the United Kingdom of the Netherlands had been formed in the first place. This may sound relatively straightforward but in reality, it isn't, because: what does 'several units' mean, exactly? Does it mean *three* units: 'Holland' in the north and in the south 'Belgium' but without Luxembourg? Or does it mean two: 'Holland' in the north and in the south Belgium *and* Luxembourg, the former south part of the Austrian Netherlands? From the start it is clear the Major Powers share the first view, as does King William, while the Belgian rebels take the second: after all, hadn't it always been part of the Low Countries? Hadn't its civilians supported the rebellion?

There are other problems still in this geopolitical imbroglio, for example Maastricht – key strategic town on the river Meuse and 'capital' of the province of Limburg – where both 'Holland' and the Prince-Bishop of Liège held powers.¹⁰ So, who is to get Maastricht?

The Duchy of Luxembourg

Since the 14th century, this territory has always been part of the Low Countries. Once a much bigger entity, the Duchy first lost territory in 1659

territory

9 Again, we cannot go into the feelings and opinions about the upheaval of the people concerned; let's just say they were very diverse, in as far as they were ever polled.

10 Recognized by the parties in a treaty of 1679.

with the Treaty of the Pyrenees.

This was the price the king of Spain (the Low Countries were his then) paid for marrying his oldest daughter to Louis XIV, at the same time ending one of these interminable wars between Spain and France.

So, why was it 'given' to King William in 1815 and not simply incorporated in the new Kingdom? For different reasons: first, as a kind of compensation for his loss of hereditary land in Germany (from the Nassau family) to Prussia. Secondly, the Prussians knew the value of the formidable fortress Luxembourg city, so Luxembourg was made part of the German Confederation (Prussian troops in the fortress could watch over the French border). In this movement, the so-called second partition, a part of the Luxembourg territory was lost to the Prussians who annexed everything east of the rivers Mosel, Sauer/Sûre and Our ¹¹, to secure what was now the border between the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the German Confederation ¹². After all, didn't the German Confederation give up the Prince-Bishopric Liège, since time immemorial part of the Holy Roman Empire, to be added to the new kingdom?

Another border that needed to be defined in 1815 was that between Luxembourg (part of the German Confederation) and the Kingdom of the Netherlands. In reality, it was a kind of interior border, since King William simply added Luxembourg to his new kingdom and governed it like the rest. Of course, when in 1830 rebellion breaks loose in Belgium, this border becomes important again¹³ (Fig. 2).

11 Among others: Cantons Eupen, Kronenburg, Malmédy, Sankt-Vith, Schleiden and part of Aubel

12 As a form of compensation, part of the Prince-Bishopric Liège and Duchy Bouillon were added to Luxembourg.

13 It runs from Pussemange (in today Vresse-sur-Semois in Belgium) in the south to Deiffelt (in today Gouvy in Belgium).



Fig. 2 : The map of Belgium as in 1839

Enters ...Jean-Baptiste Nothomb

It will come as no surprise that none of the gentlemen in London who had decided on this matter was particularly bothered by any geographical notion and certainly not by any insight in the long and complex history of what was called The Low Countries. The Austrians who had last ruled the region before the French Revolution probably weren't paying attention in class when the subject was treated, the Prussians were only interested in the military potential of Luxembourg fortress, the British were mainly interested in the port of Antwerp (in French hands a military threat and in Dutch a commercial one) and the Russians couldn't care less. Only sly Talleyrand was as usual well informed. His partition plan was rejected but he managed to eventually secure Bouillon, 'the key to the Ardennes' as Vauban called it, as part of Belgium and not of Luxembourg, that member of the

German Confederation, as we shall see. So, when in June 1831 Jean-Baptiste Nothomb¹⁴ is sent to London after the *Bases de Séparation* have been decided on by the Great Powers, but before they are put into what would become the *Treaty of the Eighteen Articles*, he is really the man who saves the day.

Born in 1805 in Messancy¹⁵, he has studied law at the University of Liège¹⁶. He is a supporter of the Belgian Rebellion from the start and in 1830 is elected as member of the Congrès National as representative for Arlon. From early on, Nothomb is very interested in historical

¹⁴ Together with Devaux; there were other delegations sent by the Belgian rebels before and after and even simultaneously, which didn't add to the clarity of the situation; for the sake of this clarity we focus on Nothomb here.

¹⁵ Then in the French *Département des Forêts*, formerly the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg and today Belgium.

¹⁶ Ironically enough founded by William I in 1817.

cartography. How much he valued cartographical knowledge is proven by this sentence: 'How many mistakes would be avoided, if diplomats only knew geography! In the negotiations with lords Grey and Palmerston about the borders of Belgium, my strength was that I perfectly knew the historical geography of my country and they didn't'.¹⁷

He has a plan to solve the geographical difficulties. In favour of Belgium, of course. Article 1 of the *Bases de Séparation* assigned to Belgium all territories that in 1790 were NOT in the possession of The United Provinces. Well, Nothomb argues, at that moment many enclaves there were owned

¹⁷ Original text: 'Wie viele Fehler würden in der Politik vermieden, wenn die Diplomaten die Geographie kannten! Bei den Verhandlungen mit Lord Grey und Lord Palmerston über die Grenzen Belgiens war meine Stärke, dass ich die historische Geographie meines Landes genau kannte und sie nicht.'; Watelet, Marcel, *Cartografie en politiek in het België van de 19de eeuw*, Brussels, 1987, p. 71



Fig. 3 : A map of the Austrian possessions in the Netherlands or Low Countries, published by William Faden , Geographer

in the Trigonometric Survey made by order of H·R·H· THE PRINCE CHARLES OF LORRAINE.



to His Majesty, Jany. 1st, 1789.

by either the Spanish king or by a German prince¹⁸. So strictly speaking these enclaves would have to become Belgian. But of course, being in 'Holland', Belgium would be happy to trade them for Dutch enclaves in Limburg (thus making the whole province Belgian). Moreover, the 'Belgians' as successors of the Prince-Bishop of Liège, could put their rights over Maastricht all in the 'bargain'. The aim is clear: obtaining both Limburg and hopefully Luxembourg ...

So there he is in London, a man with a mission. On 9 June he is received by Lord Palmerston, the new Whig Foreign Secretary. 'The noble lord, who at first had been talking about the protocols with utmost stiffness, seemed more inclined to appreciate what we were saying by the end of the conversation.'¹⁹ The next day Lord Grey, Prime Minister, grants him an interview. 'At first, he seemed to regard the whole thing as a phantasm. I used an atlas. The map of the Low Countries was open while I explained the issue of Limbourg and the enclaves. He ended up admitting that the conference hadn't grasped the full extent of the principles it had proclaimed. Things have been decided, he said, just stick to them. Nothomb didn't ask any better.'²⁰

Later Nothomb will write about his stay in London he didn't notice the city, nor the weather: 'J'étais comme un amoureux'.²¹ He is then 25.

18 Too much to enumerate here

19 Original text: 'Le noble lord qui avait d'abord parlé des protocoles avec je ne sais quelle raideur, paraissait vers la fin de la conversation mieux apprécier ce que nous lui disions'.

20 Original text: 'Il parut d'abord traiter la chose de chimère. J'ai eu recours à un atlas. La carte des Pays-Bas était ouverte devant nous tandis que j'expliquais la question du Limbourg et des enclaves. Il finit par convenir que la conférence n'avait pas envisagé toute la portée des prémisses qu'elle avait posées dans son texte. La chose est faite, conclut-il, tenez-vous-y.' Nothomb ne demandait pas autre chose; Ruzette, Jacques, J.-B. Nothomb, Brussels, (La Renaissance du Livre, coll. 'Notre Passé'), 1946; p. 53

21 'I felt like I was in love'; Ruzette, o.c., p.

Which maps did Nothomb, the British ministers and the Powers in London use?

A key to the answer lies in a secret protocol from 17 November 1830, issued by the Powers, explaining why they wouldn't give in to the Belgian territorial claims: they would give prevalence to those of King William I. .

More important for our question: two maps were added to this protocol.

They were made in 1789 by the geographer Faden and attributed Zeelandic Flanders and Maastricht (in as far as the sovereignty of the States General stretched) to the United Provinces.²²

The maps to which is referred must be *A map of the Austrian possessions in the Netherlands or Low Countries, with the principalities of Liege and Stavelo (sic), &c. Reduced from the trigonometric survey made by order of H.R.H. the Prince Charles of Lorraine*.

London, published by William Faden, Geographer to His Majesty, Jan. 1st, 1789. (see Fig. 3– centrefold)

They were inserted in his World Atlas from 1811. If the previous quotation is referring to two maps, I think we are only talking about one map here: indeed, Faden's map consists of two pages and each page 'addresses' a problem Belgium was facing: the attribution of Zeelandic Flanders on the one hand, the issue of Limburg and Luxembourg on the other.

So, since the Powers were using Faden a couple of months earlier, it isn't illogical to think the Atlas Nothomb was referring to in Grey's cabinet was also Faden's World Atlas. But that is speculation. We will probably never know.

Passing on the hot potato

So Nothomb has made quite an impression in London, one could say. On 26 June 1831 the Treaty of the Eighteen Articles is issued, intended to be the legal translation of the Bases de Séparation (protocols of 20 and 27 January 1831). Although, not quite so ...

56

22 Trévire et Nervien, Les traités de 1831 et 1839, Bruxelles et Paris, 1918, p. 40, n. 2

'The five Powers offer their good offices to keep the status quo (my own underlining) in the Duchy of Luxembourg for as long as the separate negotiations will take.'²³ So, although the Powers confirm Luxembourg will remain a separate country²⁴, the tone in the second document is much less definite and much seems to be left open for negotiation.

The 'statu quo'?

In 1831, the situation in the Duchy is as follows: the Belgian rebels are dominating and administrating the country but the fortress itself remains in Prussian hands. The Prussians, who are after all sitting at the conference table in London, are very confident the Duchy will remain in the German Confederation. Besides, who would be able to defy their military power? Surely not a bunch of Brussels hooligans?

As for the province of Limburg, here also the Belgian rebels are in control, except for the city of Maastricht, held by the Dutch.

All hell breaks loose!

It is clear King William cannot accept the *Treaty of the Eighteen Articles*: he wants to keep both Luxembourg and Limburg. In August 1831 a Dutch army invades Belgium: it is the start of the Ten Days Campaign. The Belgian army lacks unity in command due to political and military discord and is soon in a state of complete confusion. The brand new Belgian king Leopold I sees no other option than to call in the help of the French. French troops arrive and on 12 August 1831 an armistice is signed.

The reaction in London

The Major Powers are not amused: they see the French intervention as proof of the incapacity of the new state

23 Original text 'Les cinq puissances emploieront leurs bons offices pour que le statu quo (my own underlining) dans le Duché de Luxembourg soit maintenu pendant le cours de la négociation séparée..'

24 On the other hand, the question of the joined rights of both parties over Maastricht is confirmed in the Treaty.

to aptly defend itself. Great-Britain fears the absorption of Belgium by France, Prussia doesn't want to see Holland weakened, so doesn't want to see Maastricht in Belgian hands and the German Confederation leaves it to the London Conference to decide about Luxembourg. All territorial hopes for Belgium are lost, which is what Nothomb learns when he is sent to London again for a very short visit. And this is what reflects in a new treaty: the Treaty of the XXIV articles²⁵. Gone are the open endings that 'parties will negotiate...', gone are the vague terms. It is a package deal with a Judgement of Solomon: Belgium gets *part of* Luxembourg, meaning King William loses it. To compensate this, William gets the right bank of the river Meuse and Maastricht.

The third partition of Luxembourg

How was this part of Luxembourg outlined? In fact, the idea comes from the French (remember Talleyrand, though his initial partition plan for Belgium was never accepted) who saw the whole buffer theory the other way around, of course, and who wanted a buffer against the German Confederation. Also, they wanted to secure their economic interests in the region: Liège was very much a market for French produce, so the roads connecting it to that part of France, via Arlon, were very important. And the French city of Sedan would be better 'protected' in their view by adding the Bouillon area²⁶ to Belgium instead of leaving it to Luxembourg.

So, Luxembourg is split up again, along a line that is roughly described in the Treaty and sketched on a map. To the east of the line the territory would remain Luxembourgian, to the west it would become Belgian: the province of Luxembourg²⁷.

²⁵ aka the Treaty of London of 1839, also called the First Treaty of London, the Convention of 1839, the Treaty of Separation, the Quintuple Treaty of 1839.

²⁶ This is the city of Bouillon and the canton Paliseul.

²⁷ The road Arlon (B) - Longwy (F) and Arlon - Bastogne (B) is explicitly mentioned as important guideline, as is the river Sûre and the borders of the

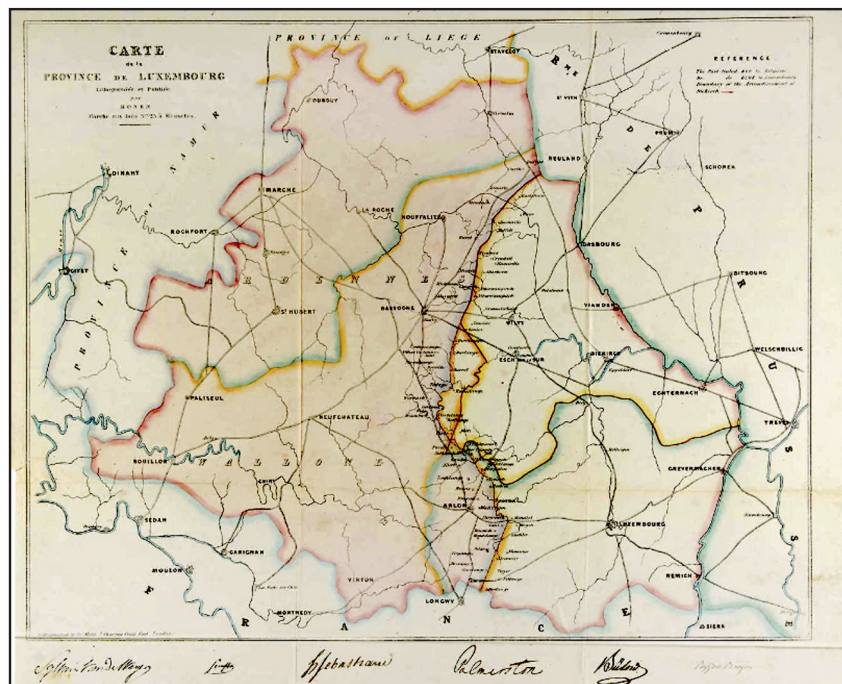


Fig. 4. *Carte de la province de Luxembourg: annexe à l'article 2 des traités signés à Londres le 19 avril 1839 entre la Belgique d'une part et les Pays-Bas de l'autre part, et l'Autriche, la France, la Grande-Bretagne, la Prusse et la Russie de l'autre part/lithographiée et publiée par Konen.*

Source: Musée Dräi Eechelen, Luxembourg.

Succession of events

- September 1830: troubles and fighting with Dutch troops
- 4 October 1830: the *Gouvernement Provisoire* (formed by nine leaders of the rebellion) declares independence of the new state Belgium
- 4 November 1830: a ceasefire is proposed to the belligerent parties by London
- 17 November 1830: a secret protocol is made with two maps by Faden
- 20 & 27 January 1831: Protocol with the *Bases de Séparation*
- 26 June 1831: Treaty of the Eighteen Articles, confirming the *Bases de Séparation*
- 21 July 1831: King Leopold I is sworn in
- 2 August 1831: start of the Ten Days Campaign
- 12 August 1831: Armistice
- 4 October 1831: Treaty of the XXIV Articles
- 8 June 1839: ratification of the Treaty of the XXIV Articles

The map being used is the *Carte de la province de Luxembourg* annexed to article 2 of the treaties signed in London on 19 April 1839 between Belgium and The Low Countries, and between Austria, France, Great-Britain, Prussia and Russia/ lithographed and published by Konen. (Fig. 4)

Jean-Jacques Konen, a Brussels engraver, printer and publisher made the original map on which the borderline was drawn; it was then re-lithographed with the colours showing which parts went to which party by James Wyld (Geographer to Queen Victoria), London; in all the different versions one can find in the different national archives, the signatures differ: sometimes Talleyrand's is on it, sometimes the Dutch one is missing (versions from before 1839, no doubt), sometimes the Belgian one is missing; and the copy in The Hague is a different map altogether: 'réduite sur la carte officielle' and published by Mary-Muller et Cie, Bruxelles.

Nothomb, no longer present in London, is heartbroken. When he learns the border will be drawn in Rodange, he writes to Le Hon: 'You cut me in half.

arrondissement Diekirch (L).



Fig. 5. Carte de la province de Luxembourg, Bruxelles, Etablissement géographique de Bruxelles fondé par Ph. Vandermaelen en 1830, in Atlas de la Belgique en 10 feuilles: comprenant la carte générale du royaume et chacune des provinces ou se trouvent toutes les communes, les routes, rivières et canaux, 1834.

Philippe Vandermaelen was arguably Belgium's greatest geographer and cartographer of the 19th century. He is best known for his *Atlas Universel* (1825-1827), the first world atlas with all maps made on the same scale and using lithography. He also made the first topographic map of the new country, using the *carte marchande* by Ferraris.

Your line drawn on Rodange crosses my commune... But let's leave aside personal interests, it is necessary that the line is drawn so that it meets the Chiers between Longwy and Halanzy.²⁸ (which it will not). To which a fretful Le Hon responds: 'Why is your family going astray beyond Rodange?'²⁹

As in all Solomonian Judgements this Treaty has the characteristic that none of the parties is really happy with it. And indeed, the Belgian *Congrès National* has great difficulty with it but finally accepts it (on strong instigation of Nothomb, among others). King William however refuses to sign and will continue refusing until 1839. And all that time the *statu quo* we saw earlier will remain: Belgium holds Limburg and Luxembourg, except

28 Original text : 'Vous me coupez en deux. Votre ligne tirée sur Rodange traverse ma commune... Mais laissons de côté les intérêts personnels, il faut que la ligne soit tracée de manière qu'elle rencontre la Chiers entre Longwy et Halanzy.'

29 'Pourquoi aussi votre famille va-t-elle s'égarer par delà Rodange?': Ruzette, o.c., p. 64

for its two 'capitals', Maastricht and Luxembourg city. And all is peace and quiet for eight long years.

1839

On 14 March 1838, after a lot of pressure, King William informs London he will sign the Treaty. Political Belgium is flabbergasted. There's Belgian flags and manifestations everywhere: Limburg and Luxembourg simply belong to Belgium now!

During the debate in the Chamber a delegate gets a stroke and dies. There is even a negotiation with the House of Rothschild in Paris for a loan, to buy the territory Belgium will lose. To no avail, the Powers are adamant: the Treaty will be executed. It is ratified on 8 June 1839. In accordance with art. 6 a mixed Belgian-Dutch commission is appointed to implement the borderline. On 7 and 8 August 1843 (sic!) an agreement is signed in Maastricht and a map is attached, showing the borderline between the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg and Belgium in gold, signed by the different commissaries³⁰.

30 Watelet, Marcel, Luxembourg en

And so, thirteen years after the 1830 Belgian Rebellion, a country was finally formed, with official borderlines and with a territory that could have been very different, possibly not containing a province of Luxembourg ... (Fig. 5).

cartes et plans, cartographie historique de l'espace luxembourgeois XVe-XIX siècle, Tielt, Lannoo, 1989, p. 51; unfortunately, Watelet doesn't mention the whereabouts of this map; During our excursion to Luxembourg in May (see elsewhere in this magazine) efforts will be made to see this map too.