Laudatio by Jan Valkier, chairman De Club Rotterdam (Rotterdam business community), Mandeville Lecture, 5 June 2014

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Rotterdam distinguishes itself through its private initiatives. Far more than any other Dutch city, if you don’t mind my saying so. The citizens of Rotterdam think nothing of banding together to launch an initiative, or give a new project a bit of a push – particularly in times of need. In our history, you can find countless cases where a small group of private Rotterdam citizens stood at the cradle of a new ambitious project: the Euromast, De Kuip (the Netherlands’ cosiest stadium, which will fortunately be preserved for future generations), the Boijmans Van Beuningen museum, the Benelux Tunnel – and let’s not forget one of the world’s leading asset management firms, Robeco, which originated in Club Rotterdam.

Club Rotterdam was founded in 1928. At that time, the leaders of the Rotterdam business community wanted to take a stand against the government’s plans to help the Belgians strengthen the port of Antwerp, which would weaken the position of the Rotterdam port. The so-called Treaty of Belgium. Their lobby against this proposal proved successful, and the gentlemen decided to reconvene from time to time under the banner of Club Rotterdam. To this day, this association meets once a month, to enjoy lunch and listen to an interesting guest speaker or to debate how we can steer the town’s development in the right direction or support the city in a specific project. Most of its members are involved in a variety of social or cultural initiatives. The tradition is being carried on. Incidentally, a few years before the establishment of Club Rotterdam, a number of the initiators were involved in the foundation of this wonderful, world-renowned university. Once again – as noted by the Rector – a private initiative that, thanks to its focus on practical relevance, has had a strong impact on Dutch education and research in general. Indeed, from a historical perspective, it is wonderful that the Rotterdam business community and Erasmus University jointly conceived this lecture to honour individuals for their valuable contributions to society. Over the past 25 years, the Mandeville Lecture has been held by a truly impressive succession of laureates. It is a list that Rotterdam can be duly proud of.

So why on earth are we presenting this year’s Mandeville Medal to Russell Shorto, a gentleman who remains wholeheartedly focussed on Amsterdam? Who has written a book about the tolerance of the Dutch, but consistently takes the residents of our capital as a point of reference? Who has authored a fascinating work about the birth of Manhattan, which at the time was known as New Amsterdam (again that infernal name!)? About the influence of the Dutch (or does he really mean the ‘Amstelmanners’?) in that corner of the U.S. East Coast, and the impact that this has had on free thought in American society, and on its liberal foundations.

It’s easy to explain. America is the Land of Opportunity, where enterprise gets countless chances to thrive. The country of private initiatives, where people attach tremendous value to growth and development. People make the impossible possible there. In this sense, the US is far more similar to Rotterdam than any other Dutch city. Over the past century, Rotterdam has enjoyed
unprecedented expansion. For years, the city’s port was the largest in the world, and only recently – due to the rise of the ports of Asia – have we been forced to content ourselves with being the largest port in Europe. We have become the gateway to Europe, and we are determined to maintain this position. A lack of available land has led us to construct the different Maasvlaktes – with the new Second Maasvlakte as our crowning achievement. This port area can accommodate the very largest class of ships: vessels that can only dock at four or five other ports worldwide.

Like the citizens of the US, we have made the impossible possible in this speck of a country. Our port’s development mirrors that of Manhattan, which, as Shorto recounts, was forged in the heat of relentless competition and hard work to become the great city it is today: New York. The large-scale industry that has emerged from Rotterdam’s competitive logistics position is unrivalled in Europe. It comes as no surprise that the Dutch equivalent of the expression ‘deeds not words’ is closely associated with our town. And let’s not forget that on the passages of the Holland-America Line, more Europeans have departed for the New World from Rotterdam than from any other place in the world.

Shorto has shown us how tolerance and an open mind can promote economic growth. And this certainly also applies to Rotterdam. Once again, the analysis fits Rotterdam to a T. Our city is home to 120 nationalities. If people from such a wide range of backgrounds hope to live together peacefully, tolerance is of the utmost importance. And Rotterdam is doing an excellent job in this area. We are proud of the fact that our Mayor is a first-generation Moroccan immigrant. This is unique in the Netherlands, and unique in Europe. I wouldn’t place it in the same league as Barack Obama’s election as the first African-American President, but it is definitely in the same spirit!

We are indebted to Mr Shorto for showing in his books to which extent the Netherlands has influenced the historical development of the United States. In his articles for The New York Times (which are easily found online, should you be interested in reading them), he has shared some amusing stories from his years living in Amsterdam: comparing the curious customs encountered in our country with those in the States. Our idiotic tax system, for example, which is currently all over the papers again. Through his writing, Mr Shorto has significantly contributed to the American public’s awareness of our country, and indeed rectified a number of misunderstandings regarding achievements frequently attributed to the English settlers.

In closing, I wonder if – in light of the body of thought exported from the Netherlands to America in the 16th and 17th centuries – it wouldn’t be a good idea to import some of America’s present mental legacy in return. Travelling to the States with some regularity, I see a country that is pulling out all the stops to overcome the present crisis. Economic growth is picking up again, and the percentages are over four times as high as those found in the Netherlands and other European countries. People are less spoiled; they have a drive to excel. The State is less inclined to simply hold everyone’s hand from cradle to grave. Many Americans have a burning ambition to rise above the crowd. The country’s education system focuses on the specific qualities of the individual child, and at American universities, there is fierce competition among the students that raises the general academic level. None of the shiftlessness found here so
often! It would be great if we could imbue Dutch culture with some of this mind-set. Maybe this could be a fitting subject for one of your upcoming projects.

Thank you.