Opening speech Mandeville Lecture, by Rector Magnificus Professor Huibert Pols, 5 June 2014

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to this special academic session of Erasmus University Rotterdam. Of course, a special welcome to our esteemed laureate mr. Russell Shorto.

In New York, you can come across the same statue of Desiderius Erasmus as found in Rotterdam: a bronze copy erected in the courtyard of Erasmus Hall High School – the mother of all American high schools, according to the institution itself. In the late 1920’s, the Rotterdam engineer L.J. van Dunné was asked for help in producing a copy of the statue when he was a member of a delegation sent to study the Holland Tunnel in New York. Rotterdam wanted its own tunnel too, the Maastunnel. Richard Young, former governor of the High School, wanted a statue of Desiderius Erasmus for his school. Well, we will never know if this was a trade off.

Erasmus served as an example for America’s new citizens, as illustrated by the lines engraved in the base of the statue at Erasmus Hall High School: “Desiderius Erasmus, the maintainer and restorer of the sciences and polite literature, the greatest man of his century, the excellent citizen who, through his immortal writings, acquired an everlasting fame.” In the 17th century, busy trade between the citizens of New York and the Netherlands stimulated the exchange of ideas. Indeed, the Dutch Act of Abjuration was a major inspiration for the U.S. Declaration of Independence. However, by the end of the 19th and the start of the 20th century, roles had reversed. America, and specifically New York, had become a shining example for the Dutch – and particularly the citizens of Rotterdam, who preferred to look ahead rather than back, and who embraced the modern age.

Desiderius Erasmus was and remains a source of inspiration for those who see the world as their spiritual home. Rotterdam citizens were the first people to recognise his impact as a brand. With Erasmus, Rotterdam can be said to have invented City Marketing. The locals were quick to realise that ‘world citizen’ Erasmus formed an excellent mascot for promoting the city itself. Later on, due to the presence of rich merchants who built the foundations for the city’s status as a centre of the Enlightenment, Rotterdam exercised a strong appeal on foreign intellectuals. The best-known example is Pierre Bayle, the French Huguenot who was appointed professor at the local Illustrious School in 1681.

The Rotterdam philosopher Bayle was one of the great thinkers who in the late 17th century were part of a circle around the Quaker merchant Benjamin Furly. The man whom this honorary lecture is named after, Bernard Mandeville, had been one of Bayle’s pupils, and after departing for England, Mandeville took inspiration from Bayle’s philosophy and referred to his conception of a society made up solely of atheists. After all, it was Mandeville who claimed that a society whose members were all perfect Christians was doomed to fail. When we look at the present situation in the U.S., where the Christian faith forms a major
source of inspiration for so many citizens – not in the last place politicians – we have to conclude that the impact of the Rotterdam philosophers has proven somewhat limited.

Nevertheless, commercial contacts between the residents of Rotterdam and America stimulated the spread of Enlightenment ideals to the New World. In other words: our international ambitions as a country and a city are shaped in part by an international humanism that promoted tolerance, an open mind and, consequently, free trade. And it is precisely this ‘spirit’ that our present laureate, Mr Russell Shorto, aims to describe in his work. In his books, Shorto faces up to the challenge of conveying the results of serious academic research to a wide readership. His book *Island at the Center of the World* shows just how well he knows his trade, and the same can be said of his most recent work, *Amsterdam: A History of the World’s Most Liberal City*. In this book, Shorto argues that as a sea port, Amsterdam was the first city in the world to build the cultural and political foundations of liberalism: a society that serves the interests of the individual, but that at the same time is governed by individuals working together. While Amsterdam is central to Shorto’s analysis of the Netherlands’ role on the world stage, his view of the Dutch could just as well be applied to the citizens of Rotterdam. In the Netherlands of the 17th century, tolerance, intellectual substance and a spirit of enterprise were closely interwoven. Combined, they created a climate in which intellectual and cultural life was able to flourish.

Nevertheless, the popular image of Rotterdam is mainly build up by its development in the 19th and 20th centuries. A hard-working city, an industrial centre – where intellectual and cultural trends always appear to play second fiddle to business and trade. We are always looking ahead – which is why we set store by a pioneering spirit that is geared to innovation. This ‘geen woorden maar daden’ - ‘deeds-not-words’ - mentality has brought Rotterdam a long way, and the city’s university has likewise benefited. In the best Rotterdam tradition, it was founded in 1913 by local merchants. Dedicated, progressive scientists took advantage of the opportunities offered to them to experiment with various new degree programmes. Their approach is occasionally referred to as the ‘Rotterdam formula’. This is not a magic spell, but an approach based on the fundamental idea that scientific research should be in the interest of society at large. As a result, Rotterdam’s university has often been viewed as the odd one out among Dutch universities. A good example is the development of my own School of Medicine. Our founding dean, Professor Andries Querido, came to Rotterdam in the 1960s to set up a medical degree programme that placed stronger emphasis on bridging the laboratory to the bedside and on the application of scientific knowledge. At the time, Querido’s ideas were received with some scepticism. But concepts that only a few decades ago were considered alien to the science of medicine have since become the standard. Where institutions elsewhere often find it difficult to establish criteria with a clear social relevance for their curricula, this focus has virtually become an EUR trademark. This undoubtedly creates advantages for a university operating in a rapidly changing
international environment, in which the student population is becoming more and more diverse – and indeed footloose.

The University is a product of the unique Rotterdam mentality. But at the same time, it also helps shape it. If only because of the many thousands of international students and researchers it attracts to the city. Rotterdam is an international town – in the past thanks to its port, but today, above all, thanks to the impact of its extremely diverse population. While Rotterdam still cherishes its port, it is increasingly shifting its sight from the North Sea to a larger, globalised world.

The city’s appearance is not the only thing that has undergone a radical transformation. In the Travel section of The New York Times, Rotterdam – where according to the writer “striking, cubed architecture gives shape to the most modern skyline in the country” – ranks 8th in the Top 10 of ‘Cities to See in 2014’. While Rotterdam may still be considered a bit ‘rough’ by the rest of the Netherlands, this is precisely what makes the town interesting for those of us who view it as a centre of innovation. In this sense, Rotterdam and New York could also be seen as sister cities, joined by the spirit of Desiderius Erasmus. In this spirit, Rotterdam is creating new world citizens. While Amsterdam, to quote Mr Shorto, may be the world’s most liberal city, let’s call Rotterdam the most international city, whose window on the world is always wide open.

Ladies and gentlemen

As you know, the Mandeville Lecture acknowledges the recipient’s exceptional contributions to society in general. It can be seen as an honorary degree for significant social achievements. The University organises this annual lecture in partnership with the Rotterdam business community, Club Rotterdam, and the Erasmus Trust Fund. The Lecture has previously been given by renowned individuals such as Bernard Kouchner, Carla del Ponte, Lilian Gonçalves and Jean-Claude Trichet. In their lectures, these laureates have reflected on major international challenges. But on this occasion, in our centennial year, we have taken the liberty to invite someone to reflect on us, the Dutch. To see which lessons, if any, we can draw from our past. The title of Mr Shorto’s contribution is ‘The Advantage of a Threat’.

Allow me to make one final point before I give the floor to Mr Shorto. You may recall my mentioning Amsterdam once or twice in my speech. With some reluctance. You are undoubtedly aware of the rivalry between the Netherlands’ two leading cities. In the spirit of Desiderius Erasmus, I will endeavour to tolerate – gedogen, to use the proper Dutch term – your mentioning our capital in the course of your lecture. But please… only once or twice.