Dutch Printing and Bookselling in the Golden Age

P.G. HOFTIJZER
University of Amsterdam

Around 1600 printing and bookselling in the newly-created Dutch Republic went through a period of fast and unprecedented growth. This remarkable phenomenon has been called "the Dutch miracle," and rightly so, for whereas until the 1580s the book trade in the Northern Netherlands had been a fairly modest activity, within only a few decades it grew into a full-blown and flourishing enterprise. In towns all over the country, but particularly in the densely-populated province of Holland, new printing establishments and bookshops were opened and the output of books and other printed matter multiplied. The books were on all subjects and in all formats and languages. In contrast to the sixteenth century, they were no longer intended only for the local or regional market, but increasingly for international distribution. Thus an industry came into being, which would eventually make the Dutch Republic -- as one historian has put it -- "the intellectual entrepot of Europe." Nowhere else in Europe during the seventeenth century were so many books printed -- the total Dutch book production for this period numbers well over a 100.000 titles. Thousands of highly specialized and skilled workers earned a living in this new branch of industry and trade: punchcutters and typefounders; paper merchants; typesetters, printers, and proofreaders; booksellers and bookbinders; hawkers, illustrators, woodcutters, engravers, and illuminators; and, of course, authors, translators, editors, and journalists.

This contribution aims to present a survey of the Dutch book trade during the seventeenth century, giving particular attention to the factors that contributed to its unparalleled success. This overview uses a model first introduced by the American historian Robert Darnton. In a conference paper entitled "What is the history of books?" he argued that book history should be concerned with what he called the "communications circuit," the life cycle of books from authors, via printers, publishers, and booksellers to readers.[1] Naturally, the circuit is not cut off from society at large: it should be seen, according to Darnton, "in all its variations over space and time and in all its relations with other systems, economic, social, political, and cultural, in the surrounding environment." When speaking about the Dutch book trade, one should, therefore, first ask in which environment and under what conditions—economic, social, political, and cultural—printers and booksellers in the Low Countries operated.

"No country can be found either in this present age, or upon record of any story, where so vast a trade has been managed, as in the narrow compass of the four maritime provinces of the commonwealth." Thus the English diplomat Sir William Temple described the great economic prosperity of the Dutch Republic, and particularly that of its western and northern provinces Zeeland, Holland, Friesland, and Groningen, in his still highly readable *Observations upon the United Provinces* of 1673.[2] Indeed, between the end of the sixteenth century and approximately the 1660s, Dutch trade and industry had expanded at breakneck speed, turning the United Provinces into the commercial clearing house of Europe and, at the same time, its financial centre.

Printers and booksellers greatly benefited from the favourable economic and financial situation. As printing was a capital-intensive enterprise, the easy availability of capital at low rates of interest significantly lowered the production costs of books, which could then be distributed via an extensive international trade network. In many ways, the operation of the book trade was similar to that of other branches of trade and industry in the advanced Dutch market economy, that is as a commodity subject to supply and demand. Foreign books were imported, for instance, via the Frankfurt book fairs, both for sale at home and for re-export to other countries. Some printers produced books simply as bulk commodities, to be shipped to those places where they were most in demand: cheap English bibles to Britain and the English colonies, Hebrew and Yiddish texts to Poland, catholic church books to Germany and the Southern Netherlands, pirate reprints of French best-sellers to France.

The same mechanism can be seen in related activities. The large quantities of paper which local merchants imported from France, were only partly consumed by Dutch printers, while the rest was sold to other countries. Moreover, much of the printing type cast by Dutch typefounders found its way across the Republic's borders, especially to England, where Dutch type remained in general use well into the second half of the eighteenth century.

Another economic advantage enjoyed by the Dutch book trade was the absence of strict external and internal regulation. The authorities rarely interfered with this branch of industry and the rules and regulations of the majority of the guilds of printers and booksellers, most of which were founded in the seventeenth century (previous to that, printers and booksellers had belonged to the painters' guild of St. Luke), were fairly lenient. In Amsterdam, for instance, membership of the guild was not obligatory; women were allowed to succeed to the businesses of their deceased husbands or fathers; and even Catholics and Jews were admitted as members.

Last but not least, economic and maritime activities made the Dutch Republic

into an important communications centre. From all over the world, information of all sorts was sent and brought to the country, by merchants, couriers, diplomats, travellers, boatmen, and others. On arrival it was immediately published and distributed by printers and booksellers in the form of newspapers, pamphlets, price lists, travel accounts, etc.

In the wake of the economy, the Dutch population underwent a considerable growth. During the first half of the seventeenth century, the number of inhabitants steadily increased, from about 1.5 million people to about 1.9 million in 1650. The population growth was most dramatic in the cities: in Leiden, for instance, the population rose from 15.000 in 1570 to 60.000 by 1650. Many of these people were born outside the Netherlands. In the decades around 1600 large numbers of immigrants arrived from the Southern Netherlands; later, many also came from Germany, Britain, France, and Eastern Europe. The predominant motive of these newcomers was to participate in the country's prosperity, but many came also for religious motives, and some for intellectual freedom. A de-centralized political structure, the absence of an established national church, and deep-rooted notions of tolerance, made the Dutch Republic, and Amsterdam in particular, a place of refuge for those who in their own country were prosecuted for their beliefs and ideas, whether they were Flemish Protestants, Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, Polish Socinians, English nonconformists, or French Huguenots.

The sympathy generally shown by the Dutch population and magistrates to immigrants and refugees also encouraged foreign printers and booksellers to settle and work in the Republic. That applied in particular to the many experienced printers and booksellers coming from the Southern Netherlands at the end of the sixteenth century, and from France during the final decades of the seventeenth. The most important Dutch booksellers of the period around 1600, the Raphelengius family (active 1586-1618) and Louis Elsevier (active 1580-1617) in Leiden; Jan van Waesberge (active 1587-1625) in Rotterdam; Van Paschier van Wesbusch (active 1604-1612) in Haarlem; Cornelis Claesz (active 1582-1609), Jan Commelin (active 1582-1615) and Jodocus Hondius (active 1593-1612) in Amsterdam, all came from the South. Amsterdam also was an important centre of Hebrew printing. Most Jewish printers had come from the Iberian peninsula, among them the prominent Hebrew teacher and rabbi Menasseh Ben Israel (active 1627-1655), who set up a successful printing house in 1627. The French printers and booksellers who resided in large numbers in such cities as Rotterdam, The Hague and Amsterdam at the end of the seventeenth century were all Huguenots, who had fled from religious oppression under Louis XIV. The influx of many French Huguenot printers and booksellers may even have reversed a decline in the Dutch book industry.

Other nationalities were less well represented, but in many cities German and English printers and booksellers could be found, the latter mostly exiled Puritan nonconformists, who looked upon the printing press as a powerful ally in the struggle against their enemies in England. Other strangers came to the Netherlands simply to learn the trade, for example the famous Hungarian punchcutter Miklos Kis, who, after having served an apprenticeship at the Amsterdam typefoundry of Joan Blaeu in the 1680s, returned to his native country. Another interesting figure is the Armenian printer Mattheus Avac, who was sent by his church to Amsterdam around 1658 to order type and print a bible in the Armenian language.

An additional result of the remarkable tolerance found in the Dutch Republic was freedom of printing. This is not to say that censorship did not exist, but the various decrees against illicit and seditious books were often ignored by both printers and authorities alike. Sometimes patronage played a part in this, as in the case of the Amsterdam printer Willem Jansz Blaeu (active 1599-1639), whose good connections among the city magistrates in the 1620s and 1630s protected him when the local Reformed church council complained about his printing catholic and Socinian books. But the authorities also realized that in some cases action against an illicit publication would only draw more attention to it. At least, that was the impression of the English envoy Thomas Chudleigh, who in 1683 had complained to the States-General in The Hague about the publication of two pamphlets against the English government. According to the report he sent to London, the secretary of the States-General had answered that his action would "onely serve to publish the thing & make people curious to gett the libells, but doe no good as to suppressing of them." Even if a printer or bookseller was caught, punishment normally was relatively mild: he might be fined, his printing equipment confiscated, or his shop closed for a while, but it is difficult to find examples of more severe punishment for printing or selling prohibited books.

Apart from their cosmopolitan character, the Dutch were relatively well educated. Partly because of efforts by the Reformed and other Protestant churches to enable their believers to read the Bible, but perhaps even more as the result of commercial needs, by 1650 about half of the adult males and one third of the women in the major cities had received some form of elementary education, proportions which were higher than those in many other areas in Europe, and which were rising. In addition, many members of the higher strata of Dutch society had received some form of secondary education, for instance in the municipal Latin Schools, in the numerous privately run "French" schools, or, even better, at the numerous universities. Schooling

gave strong impulses to cultural and intellectual life, which was further enhanced by various literary and scholarly societies and by public institutions such as the city libraries, open, to quote one contemporary, "to all enthusiasts who did not have the means to buy all sorts of books themselves."

High levels of literacy and education and the lively cultural climate boosted printing and book selling. In studies of the seventeenth-century Dutch book trade much emphasis has always been put on its international outlook, but is has recently been argued that the Dutch book industry cannot properly be understood without reference to the substantial national and local book market. Not only was there a continuous supply of a great variety of copy from Dutch authors, who now began to be paid for their work -- the emergence of the Dutch Grub Street writer dates from this period --, but there was also an increasing demand for all sorts of printed matter, from expensive and serious books to cheap popular print: newspapers, pamphlets, almanacs, godly tracts, chapbooks, songbooks, and illustrated broadsides. The great popularity of these publications can be judged from the impressive numbers printed. For example, the dramatic account of the adventures of the East-India skipper Willem IJsbrantsz Bontekoe, first published in 1646, had been reprinted at least 70 times by 1800.

Economic prosperity, an open and permissive society, a literate and relatively well-educated population, and a thriving cultural and intellectual climate, all provided a fertile breeding ground for the Dutch book trade. Yet its great success can only be partially explained by these general circumstances. Printing and book selling also involved the actions of individual human beings, people with professional skills, a talent for business, and the genius to perceive what the public wanted. Perhaps the favourable conditions created an opportunity for such qualities to come to the fore. Whatever the case may be, the great renown of the seventeenth-century Dutch book trade was also the product of the skills and commitment of many individual printers and booksellers. A few examples for Amsterdam, the city which produced something like eighty percent of the total output of books in the Dutch Republic during the Golden Age, may illustrate this. Clustering together along "Het Water" (the old inner port of the city), on the Dam square next to Town Hall and the Exchange, or in the adjacent streets and alleys, they all tried to find their niche in the market.

One such Amsterdam printer and bookseller was Willem Jansz Blaeu. He began his career in 1599 when he opened a shop on "Het Water." From his youth Blaeu had a great interest in the mathematical sciences and initially he specialized in making navigational instruments, maps and globes, for which there was a great demand in this city of seafarers. Despite strong competition he managed to expand his business into a

printing office and publishing house of the first rank, which his descendants kept up into the early eighteenth century. Blaeu's publishing list was extremely varied. Apart from books on mathematics, astronomy, geography, and the art of navigation, including his own seamen's guide *Het licht der zee-vaert* (1608; translated into English in 1612 under the title *The Light of Navigation*), he published fine editions in small pocketbook format of the classical authors, works on calligraphy, emblem books, travel journals, and the writings of leading Dutch scholars and literary writers. His greatest fame, however, he achieved through the publication of his maps and atlases, in particular the two-volume *Theatrum orbis terrarum*, which appeared in four different language editions in 1634 and 1635. When Blaeu died, in 1638, he left his sons a new printing establishment, which accommodated nine printing presses, named after the Muses, and six plate presses for producing maps and illustrations. According to the French traveller Claude Joly, who visited the new workshop in 1646, it was "l'imprimerie la plus belle de toute l'Europe."

Willem Jansz Blaeu belongs to the first generation of great Amsterdam booksellers of the Golden Age. Louis and Daniel Elsevier, who came to Amsterdam from Leiden around the middle of the century, belong to the second. Louis Elsevier (active 1638-1665), who contrary to his Leiden relatives held unorthodox beliefs and was interested in modern philosophy (that may have been one reason why he left Leiden in 1637), was entrusted by René Descartes (1596-1650) with the task of printing all his works and subsequently became the publisher of all major Dutch Cartesian scholars. But he also published books by great contemporaries such as Pierre Gassendi, Thomas Hobbes, and John Milton. Daniel Elsevier (active 1652-1680), Louis' nephew and associate between 1655 and 1664, continued along these lines. He also collaborated with his friend, the great scholar and diplomat Nicolaas Heinsius in the publication of a famous series of editions of classical authors. Moreover, he was one of the best general wholesale booksellers of his time, as can be seen from his 1674 stock catalogue, which in nearly 800 pages lists some 20,000 titles from all over Europe.

Daniel Elsevier's death in 1680 marks the end of the second period of great Amsterdam booksellers. As representatives of the next generation one could mention such lesser-known figures as Daniel Elsvier's former assistant Hendrik Wetstein, or Johannes and Gillis Janssonius van Waesberge, whose activities extended as far as Danzig in Poland, where they had a branch store. Perhaps more characteristic of this period, however, are the many French printers and booksellers who worked in Amsterdam at the end of the century. The most prominent were the brothers Jean, Pierre and Marc Huguetan (active 1687-1703), who descended from a great Lyon printing dynasty. What makes them important is not so much the quality of their

publishing list, as the sheer scope of their activities. With a partnership that may have been worth more than half a million guilders and with immense book stocks all over Europe and in the Levant, they truly can be seen as pre-modern book trade tycoons. Their unscrupulous way of doing business, however, was not much liked by their colleagues. One complained that the Huguetans had twelve to thirteen printing presses at their disposal, which they kept in constant operation, "without making any distinction whom they damage or where."

Much of the activity of the French booksellers indeed was in the printing and trading of pirated French books. But they also produced original publications, mostly written by Huguenot refugees who tried to scrape together a living in the book trade. Among these publications were various newspapers and periodicals, which because they were in French, found an audience throughout Europe. In particular, such scholarly journals as the renowned *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* had a great impact. This critical journal, from 1684 onwards published by the Amsterdam bookseller Henri Desbordes (active 1683-1700) and edited by the philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) and others, would serve as the model for numerous other French periodicals subsequently to be published in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague.

Printers and booksellers like the Blaeus, Elseviers, Van Waesberges, and Huguetans were the elite of the Amsterdam book trade. But many lesser-known entrepreneurs also left their mark. One of them was Broer Jansz (active 1604-1652), who as early as 1619 began the publication of a weekly Dutch newspaper, the *Tijdinghe uyt verscheyden quartieren* ("News from various quarters"), which also appeared in an English edition. Another of his initiatives was the serial publication *Catalogus universalis* (1640-1652), the first Dutch trade catalogue of newly published books. An equally interesting figure is Gillis Joosten Saeghman (1643-1699), a nephew of Broer Jansz, who during his long career became the leading publisher of almanacs, of which he printed hundreds of thousands of copies in various forms. There was the dissenter Jan Rieuwertsz (active 1640-1687), who remarkably combined his official position as town printer with publishing banned works by Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677) and his followers and whose shop was a meeting point of radical philosophers. Of the numerous women engaged in the Amsterdam book trade, Susanna Veselaer (active 1671-1699) should be mentioned, who during the second half of the seventeenth century expanded the business of her late husband, Jan Jacobsz Schipper, into one of the city's largest printing establishments. Together with the Jewish printer Joseph Athias (active 1661-1696), she pirated large numbers of English bibles and other profitable books of foreign publishers. An astounded Oxford student, who visited her

printing office in 1678, wrote in his travel diary:

> ... there were eighteen hard at work printing and six or seven setting letters. They print here many English bibles of all sizes; upon the title-pages of which they sett: London printed by R. Barker and the Assigns of John Bill &c. And they were (whilst I lookt on), printeing a small English bible in octavo, which they sett printed by the aforesaid A.D. 1669. They showed me also severall books printed here with the title pages as if at Collen, Leipsick, Mentz, &c. whence it comes to pass that you may buy bookes cheaper at Amsterdam, in all languages, then at the places where they are first printed ...[3]

These mixed expressions of admiration and envy one often finds in comments of foreign authors on the flourishing state of the Amsterdam book trade. Admiration for the industry and accomplishments of these printers and booksellers, envy of the fame and fruits it brought to them, and not to their own countrymen. Yet, eventually the hegemony of the Dutch printers and booksellers would come to an end. In the course of the eighteenth century the roles were reversed. Booksellers in other countries (in France, Switzerland, Germany, and to a lesser extent also England), finally caught up with the Dutch. The causes were many. As one Leiden bookseller complained in 1783, at a time when the Republic was in a deep economic and political crisis:

> Nothing is left of [our] advantages but licentiousness instead of freedom, all the rest is gone. Elsewhere they now have paper of the same quality but cheaper than ours; they print as well but cheaper than we and they have more beautiful type; and although we may have political hackwriters in abundance, we lack serious scholars.[4]

Other changes were more fundamental. The economic balance had turned against a country that had already dominated the European market for a disproportionally long time. Moreover, everywhere the book trade went through a period of profound change, resulting from the gradual disappearance of Latin as the universal language of the Republic of Letters, the rise of the vernacular languages, and the emergence of new markets and groups of readers. Contrary to what most contemporary Dutch booksellers hoped, the crisis could not be redressed. The miracle had simply worn off.

NOTES

1. R. Darnton, "What Is History of Books," in: K.E. Carpenter (Ed.), *Books and Society in History. Papers of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Rare Books and Manuscripts Preconference, Boston (Mass.), 24-28 June, 1980.* New York/London, 1983, pp. 3-28. Also published in R. Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette. Reflections in Cultural History*. New York, 1990, pp. 107-135.
2. The quotation, the opening sentence of chapter VI "Of Their Trade," is taken from a later Dutch edition of Temple's *Observations* (Amsterdam, 1696), p. 245.
3. Cf. P.G. Hoftijzer, "A Study Tour into the Low Countries and the German States. William Nicolson's *Iter Hollandicum* and *Iter Germanicum*, 1678-1679," *Lias* 15 (1989), p. 100.
4. Translated quotation taken from Elie Luzac, *Hollands rijkdom*, 4 vols (Leiden, 1783-84), Vol. IV, p. 425.

SUGGESTIONS for FURTHER READING

Berkvens-Stevelinck et al. (Eds), *Le Magasin de l'Univers. The Dutch Republic as the Centre of the European Book Trade. Papers Presented at the International Colloquium, Held at Wassenaar, 5-7 July 1990.* Leiden etc., 1992.

D.W. Davies, *The World of the Elzeviers 1580-1712*. The Hague, 1960.

H. de la Fontaine Verwey, "The Netherlands Book. An Historical Sketch," in: W.Gs. Hellinga, *Copy and Print in the Netherlands*. Amsterdam, 1962, pp. 3-68.

G.C. Gibbs, "The Role of the Dutch Republic as the Intellectual Entrepôt of Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 86 (1971), pp. 323-349.

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J. Keuning & M. Donkersloot-de Vrij, *Willem Janszoon Blaeu. A Biography and History of His Work as a Cartographer and Publisher*. Amsterdam, 1973.