“Quality First!” American Aid to the Nijmegen University Library, 1945–1949

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Introduction

This article is about the aid that was given to the Library of Nijmegen University from 1945 to 1949, more specifically about the help received from the “American Committee to Aid the University of Nijmegen” (ACA) under the inspiring leadership of its executive secretary P.J.M.H. Mommersteeg,¹ a Dutch priest who had been active in the United States of America since 1939. The other protagonists in this story are Dr. Ch.M.J.H.J. (Karel) Smits, the librarian of Nijmegen University, the jurist F.M.E. Haan, secretary to the Board of Governors, and Prof. Dr. W. M. (Willibald) Ploechl,² an Austrian professor of Canon Law in Washington and assistant to Mommersteeg. The ACA’s purpose went much further than just reconstructing and expanding the University Library: what it had in mind was a substantial aiding program for the University in its entirety, including preparations for a brand

- 1 P.J.M.H. (Piet) Mommersteeg (1897–1966): in 1939, just before the war broke out, he had left for the USA to attend the Pax-Romana congress for Catholic students and graduates in Washington and New York. After the German invasion of Poland Mommersteeg decided to stay in America because of his pre-war connections with German clergymen in high places who were openly opposed to the Nazis. Mommersteeg was employed as rector of a hospital in Dubuque from August 1940 to March 1942. Until 1 January 1946 Mommersteeg was registered as ‘adviser on Catholic affairs to the Netherlands embassy in Washington’, which is to say as a government official, on the recommendation of the Dutch government in exile. He stayed in the USA until 1949. An interesting biographical detail is that in this pre-war period Mommersteeg had been the rector of Huize St. Anna on the Groesbeekseweg, the very same institution that for a short while had offered shelter to the University Library. Many of the biographical data are in Rijn (1994).
- 2 Willibald M. Ploechl (1907–1984) had been an unsalaried University lecturer at the Catholic University for a very brief period at the beginning of the war. He had been appointed professor of Canon Law at the Catholic University of America in Washington, the first University of that denomination, founded by the American episcopate in 1887. For further biographical details on Ploechl see Bautz, 1111–1116.

new Faculty of Medicine. This article aims to be a case study of post-war American aid to The Netherlands and therefore concentrates on a more or less tangible aspect of the ACA: the book aid to the library. In the end, as I will show, the outcome of this book aid was relatively meagre: only a small percentage of the total shipment of books ended up in the book depository, and one can have serious doubts about the quality and usefulness of the collection as a whole. Yet, a study of the book aid program offers important insights into the nature and extent of the activities of a relief committee, whose history has not yet been written, as far as I know. The short life of the ACA (1946–1949), it turns out, was characterised by the energetic and full commitment of a few people involved, notably Mommersteeg and Ploechl. Accordingly, a brief outline of the historical contours of this example of post-war American aid to a Dutch institution may be in order. There is a handful of publications about the University Library during and shortly after the war,³ but the following reconstruction of the history of the book aid by the ACA is mainly based on a new examination of the University archives.⁴

The Nijmegen University Library, 1943–1945

A survey of the situation in which the University Library found itself at the end of the war and in the immediate postwar years is required here. After the formal closure of the Catholic University⁵ in 1943, due to the board's refusal to sign a declaration of loyalty to the German invaders, the library remained open to students and staff, in spite of the difficulties in maintaining a decent level of service. The number of students had increased from 370 (1939–1940) to 639 (1942–1943) and the number of book loans had increased accordingly, reaching a record number of 16,455 volumes in

3 Arpots, *Capita Selecta*, 1995: especially the contributions of O.S. Lankhorst, A.H. Laeven and A.J.M. Dobbelaer; Jefcoate, "A difficult modernity" 104–122; Brabers, *Proeven van eigen cultuur*, 1, 292–297; relevant information can also be found in: Laeven, *Radboudstichting*, 44–45; and Rijn, "De huisvesting van de R.K. Universiteit," 144–149.

4 I would like to express my gratitude to Anton van Dorp and Marianne Waldekker (University Archive) and Ramses Peters, Anneke Nuy and Lennie van Orsouw (Archive of the Catholic Documentation Center, which also contains the archive of the University Library).

5 The Catholic University Nijmegen was the official name of Nijmegen University from its foundation in 1923 until September 2004, when the name was changed to Radboud University.

1942–1943 (Brabers, 453; *Jaarboek* 1942–1945, p. 297). The majority of books were stored in the main book depository, only a short walking distance away from the main building in the Snijderstraat: the rest of the book collection consisted of the reference collection in the University Library's reading room and the collections of the small-scaled institutional libraries of theology, philosophy, history and art history. Rare and precious books had been removed from the library in time and given into the custody of reliable individuals "in order to protect the books from undue German attention" (Smits 4–5). However, when the Allied forces were finally making progress in Belgium, it was decided to close the library. In September 1944 Nijmegen became front city and the main library building, which had been spared at the infamous bombardment of the city on 22 February 1944, was deliberately set on fire by the Germans (figure 1A). "A first assessment ... revealed the

Ancient Dutch library seeks aid

Carolus Magnus University at Nymegen, a point of fiercest resistance, painfully rebuilds its valuable collections

FIGURE 1A Photograph of the "Ancient Dutch Library" in Nijmegen.

FIGURE 1 B–D Three of the main characters: Karel Smits (left), Willibald Ploechl (middle) and Piet Mommersteeg (right).

entire reading room, containing more than 7000 volumes of general reference works, the periodicals room, all the staff rooms and catalogues had been completely burnt.” (Smits 5–6). The aforementioned institutional libraries were also lost. The institutes for classical and modern languages and literature were located elsewhere in Nijmegen and remained intact. The book depository was spared, although the book elevator was out of order and the main entrance blocked by debris.

The Board of Governors of the University wasted no time and as early as November 1944 they urged the librarian to resume the library services. The library re-opened in a temporary, rather cramped accommodation at Huize Sint Anna on the Groesbeekseweg, home to the Sint Anna Foundation and the police library. If you wanted to borrow a book, you had to go there and wait for an indefinite period, because the route to the book depository in the center of town was by no means safe. Chief Librarian Smits reported: “Library staff has to wait for days and hours which are relatively free of the danger of shelling, before they can find their way through the rubble to the preserved depository” (*Jaarboek* 1942–1945, 298). The library’s catalogue, which had been painstakingly compiled, and consisted, among other things, of a title catalogue, a systematic catalogue, a subject catalogue, and a printers’ catalogue, had been completely destroyed in the fire and had to be reconstructed from (partial) duplicate catalogues at the Jesuit cloister Berchmanianum and the office of Bishop Van Welie.

It took until April 1945 before the library could return to “what remained of the library’s main building” at the Snijderstraat (Smits 7). The pressure of work was high, partly due to the fact that many students tried to catch up, but mostly because the physical circumstances were abominable: the building was badly equipped for its tasks and a library can hardly be expected to function properly without a decent catalogue. In the summer of 1945 the University acquired the villa Stella Maris at the

Schaeck-Mathonsingel. In September of that same year the library moved to these new and far more suitable quarters: the official opening took place on 26 September 1945.

Almost immediately after the liberation of The Netherlands support and aid began to come from individuals and from academic and educational institutions and libraries. Even the University Library of Leuven, twice victim of German acts of war, was able to donate books. In his annual report for 1942–1945 the librarian stated: “In the meantime we have received quite a number of donations, even from abroad. This meant that by the end of 1945 we had as many as 2000 acquisitions” (*Jaarboek* 1942–1945, 298). And about Leuven: “An important exchange with Leuven was realised. This badly damaged sister University was among the first to offer help and donated several brand new books on philosophy” (*Jaarboek* 1942–1945, 299). In most cases the donating individual or institution sent a list of selected titles from which a choice could be made; “In this way one can avoid the donation of superfluous duplicates” (Smits 1946, 9). A careful selection in advance was indeed necessary: “The donations keep flowing in and have to be checked increasingly according to quality and usefulness” (*ibid.*). A few years later Smits emphatically stated in a letter to the ACA: “Quality first!”⁶

After moving the library to Stella Maris the previously mentioned institutes also found shelter in this relatively luxurious villa. In spite of Smits’ diplomatic remark that his assessment “did not stem from dissatisfaction with whatever has been achieved,” he pointed out that “much remained to be desired at the end of 1946. On the contrary, but good management requires looking ahead to the demands that will be made by academic education in the future and to respond to these adequately” (Smits 1946, 11). Smits also mentioned the necessity for the Catholic University to specialise: “[The library] will do so especially within the field of catholic studies, in accordance with the character and purposes of the University” (13). However, the plan to enhance this specialization did not come to much, if we consider the post-war donations from the United States: American Catholic institutions certainly contributed, but more in the sense of supplementing existing collections than in adding new titles. Mommersteeg and others would, at a later stage, urge the Americans to donate on a much broader basis (see below).

In the years following the war the University and its library were persistently hampered by the lack of space, the considerable geographical distance between University buildings and an urgent need to expand: for

6 Letter to Mae Rooney, 12 September 1948 (Archief UB, inv.nr. 224).

example, the book depository remained in the city centre, which meant that books, requested by students and staff, had to be transported by handcart to Stella Maris over a distance of more than one kilometer. New construction plans for University buildings and a University campus were made, including a design by the American architect Raphael Hume (see below), but the partial realization of these plans was brought about only much later.⁷ Hume's specific plans, which included a new library building, were never realised at all, mainly because they were never meant to be: they were designed as propaganda in support of the activities of the ACA. It would only be in 1968 that a new library took shape on the present Heyendaal campus site.

Post-War Aid to the University Library and Expansion of the Collection

The total number of books in the library before the destructive actions in 1944 had been 200,000 volumes, some 7,000 volumes of which made up the Reading Room collection. The rest was stored in the book depository or other institute collections in the Nijmegen city area or, in some cases, was placed in the care of individuals. Although the war damage had a profound effect on the library and University, librarian Smits could soon report: "Registered (new acquisitions) some 17,000 volumes. (...) The total number of books in possession of the damaged institutes is now again roundabout 3200. (...) The reading room contains some 300 volumes again" (*Jaarboek* 1942–1945, 298). In the annual report for 1945–1946 Smits was able to state (although he gave no further details): "The book donation in America has expanded enormously due to the energetic efforts of Reverend Mommersteeg and Dr Plöchl" (*Jaarboek* 1942–1945, 299). This American book donation ("boeken-actie") and its results is what we shall concentrate on here.

In his report for the years 1946–1947 Smits wrote: "The number of donations was 7,296 volumes, and at least 10,000 volumes that had been shipped from America, as a result of the activities of Rev. Mommersteeg. We have gradually been able to manage this outcome of his much appreciated efforts, in cooperation with Prof. Dr Poechl, both in respect to space and registration. The total number of 17,296 volumes may very well be higher, because we have not been able to process the complete shipment from America" (*Jaarboek*

7 For the building history of the new university, see Van Rijn (1994) and Wolf (1998).

1946–1947, 290). The annual report has an appendix containing 34 titles of important book gifts that same year, but none of these titles can be traced to the book donations from the United States.

In the academic year of 1946–1947 a new foundation came into being: “Friends of the Library of the Catholic University” (“Vrienden der Bibliotheek van de R.K. Universiteit”). Its purpose was “to have money raised by a group of Friends, that is to say those that share an uncommon interest in our University Library, (...) in order to enable the librarian to purchase special works or technical equipment which would otherwise be beyond his means.” (*Jaarboek* 1946–1947, 293). Lawyer C. Prinzen was secretary and treasurer of the foundation. His name appears regularly in the correspondence relating to the book donations, although the connections between the Friends and the ACA are but indirect.

Before June 1946 a number of relief actions had taken place, but these were individual and hardly coordinated actions, among them a “Book action,” which even had its own special stationary. In a memo of 11 October 1945 secretary Haan had mentioned this “book action” and described it as the initiative of “a circle of graduates and sympathizers under the supervision of Mr. C. Prinzen.” Among the foreign institutions that reached a helping hand Leuven and Brussels were mentioned, as well as Switzerland and the United States. In January 1946 Prinzen had received a letter in which Haan discussed starting a “Committee in the matter of aid”; chief librarian Smits was to be one of its members.⁸ One of the major concerns that led to this initiative was the fact that the relief actions from abroad were apparently largely directed at the western part of the Netherlands, actions that were mainly in the hands of institutions like the “Stichting Volksherstel”, the “Stichting Nederlandsche Studentenhulp”, the European Student Relief Fund in Geneva, the Royal Library in The Hague and the Dutch Red Cross. Even the Nijmegen newspaper *De Gelderlander* briefly collaborated in helping the University Library, as a letter from the chief editor on 31 January 1946 seems to corroborate. The newspaper apparently mediated in a book transport that had been initiated by the Dutch government: in the letter references are made to contacts within the Government Information Service (“Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst”): chief press officer D.J. Lambooy of that institute addresses the Nijmegen rector J.D.M. Cornelissen on the matter of a number of American activities to aid the library.⁹

8 WH, box 1, folder 1.

9 WH, box 1, folder 12.

Relief actions for the Netherlands were generally rather indiscriminate and took place on an international scale. As far as the United States were involved, support mostly consisted of occasional and individual actions, as is apparent from letters in the archives, directed to and from such diverse organizations as the Library of Congress, the World Peace Foundation in Boston, the American Library Association, the Institute of Pacific Relations, the United States International Book Association and the Rockefeller Foundation.¹⁰

In June 1946 the “American Committee to Aid the University of Nijmegen” was founded in Washington, under the supervision of father P.J.M.H. Mommersteeg. The committee aimed at realizing a large-scale American relief action for the University: the book donation to the University Library was originally only one part of a much larger project. Executive secretary Mommersteeg was assigned an assistant executive secretary, the Austrian Willibald M. Ploechl, and an energetic and very capable secretary, Eunice Lisowska, who was later replaced by Mae Rooney. For the most part, the communication with the Catholic University took place between the secretary of the Board, Mr. F.M.E. Haan, librarian Karel Smits, the Sint Radboudstichting and the Dutch episcopate, represented by the formidable figure of Cardinal De Jong. The episcopate had, after all, been the institution that had appointed Mommersteeg as the chief organizer of the large-scale relief action, after his eloquent recommendation and assessment that America offered excellent opportunities to raise money for war-ridden Europe. Mommersteeg could do so convincingly: just before the war broke out, in 1939, he had left for the United States and had decided to stay in America (see note 1).

The losses that the University and its library suffered were vividly depicted in a brochure, written for the express purpose of obtaining foreign aid. In later publications describing the war damage to the Catholic University these losses were painted in even brighter hues, using a text by Mommersteeg’s assistant Ploechl.¹¹ The brochure in question was titled “The Saga of Nijmegen”

10 ARCHIEF UB, inv.nr. 110.

11 An official letter of 23 January 1943 by the president of The Canon Law Society, Walter J. Furlong, to all contacts of that institution serves as a good example. He summons them to help rebuild the Nijmegen Institute for Canon Law: “Of this there is absolutely nothing left.” That was indeed the case, but the statement that the Germans had tracked down possessions that had been stored elsewhere and destroyed them, was at best an exaggeration that served the purpose of soliciting help all too well (Archief UB, inv.nr. 227).

and appeared in *America: A Catholic Review of the Week* of 23 February 1946 (552–553). After a concise description of the origins, foundation and goals of the University, the attention was directed towards the difficulties of the war period, in appropriately resounding words: “The price paid by the University of Nijmegen was enormous. (...) Only the spirit of the University survived.” The role of the Americans and Canadians in liberating Nijmegen was emphatically present in the text and a strong appeal was made to the (Catholic) American readers of the magazine: “the Catholics of Holland cannot be expected to restore their University to its full capacity without help from outside.”

A year later a second article by Ploechl appeared in the American magazine *Library Journal* (June 1947) under the dramatic, but somewhat misleading title “Ancient Dutch library seeks aid.” At the time of publication the ‘ancient’ library was exactly 24 years old. Ploechl sent three copies of the magazine to Smits, together with a letter from 1 July 1947 in which he apologized for the exaggerations in the text “or—better said—what became of it in the hands of the Editor. This is something which cannot be helped. Thus, if there is anything in it which does not report the story properly, please be forgiving, and do not hold it against me.”¹² The apology was appropriate, because Ploechl had based his text on a brochure written by Smits, *De Roomsche-Katholieke Universiteitsbibliotheek te Nijmegen. Aan allen die ons hielpen* (1946), which in turn had been printed to thank those who had been among the first to send support and aid.¹³ Thanks had been included to Mommersteeg as well, for contributing his “personal information,” and to another person who had been of the greatest importance in founding the Committee: major general James M. Gavin, whose 82nd Airborne Division had played an invaluable role in liberating Nijmegen in September 1944. His name is also prominently mentioned on the stationary of the ACA. It is remarkable that both articles carefully avoid any mention of the devastating bombardment of Nijmegen by the American forces on 22 February 1944.

The Foundation of the Committee

The first serious attempt to coordinate the aid to the University from the United States and the first time a committee was mentioned, can be found in a series of letters from secretary Haan and Prinzen in January 1946: Haan suggested to Prinzen that “a committee concerning an aid program” be established, with

¹² Archief UB, inv.nr. 224.

¹³ Archief UB, inv.nr. 534. See also UBN Br 26670.

the librarian as one of its members.¹⁴ As we have seen earlier on, this initiative partly sprang from the concern that the greater part of the books from abroad went to institutions in the west of the country.¹⁵

Haan had already been thinking along these lines since the days of a visit by J. Anton de Haas, professor of International Relationships at the Graduate School of Business Administration at Harvard University and a resident of the United States for many years. Haan had accompanied De Haas on a trip to Cardinal De Jong on 6 October 1945, when they obtained permission to realize the plans for cooperation. In a letter dated 6 December 1945, Haan writes to De Haas about his proposal to combine the efforts of De Haas, Secretary Treasurer of the International University Foundation, and Mommersteeg and his (as yet unnamed) Committee, but every attempt by Haan to solicit a reaction from De Haas, who had returned to America, failed.

In a report by Haan to Cardinal De Jong “concerning the action for the Nijmegen University by the Dutch Delegation of the Carolina” the strategy to approach the American episcopate is made clear: Archbishop McNicholas had accepted the task to clarify the position of the Nijmegen University and had made personal visits to the bishops of Chicago, Detroit, New York, St. Paul, Dubuque, Columbus and Belleville, preceding an already planned Episcopal conference. This conference had not resulted in any real commitment, but at least gave rise to “optimistic expectations”, although the bishops voiced their concern that so many other Catholic universities were making an appeal to the American Catholics. Nijmegen certainly had made an impression (the bishops had cast a vote in favour of the afflicted city), but a decision on the distribution of the available funds still had to be made. The report of the conference contained a plea for founding an American “committee of recommendation for the aid to Nijmegen University.” Preparations for collecting books and money to relieve the plight of European Catholic universities were already well under way. To ensure that Nijmegen would receive the appropriate amount of help (no more than 4% of the total amount of books was to go to the Netherlands) it was essential for the University to close ranks and present a unified front.¹⁶

Another problem was pointed out by Mommersteeg: “Most Americans, including most American bishops, have very little understanding of European universities and their troubles.”¹⁷ Haan estimated that one million dollars were needed “for the reconstruction of the University” (in the following years the

14 Letter 14 January 1946, WH, box 1, folder 1.

15 Letter 16 January 1946, id.

16 [30 November 1945], WH, box 3, folder 1.

17 Report to Cardinal De Jong of 28 October 1945, WH, box 3, folder 1.

amount would be adjusted to two and even four million), a sum that, according to Mommersteeg, would compare unfavourably to the eight million dollars that were requested by Leuven; it would lead the American parties involved “inevitably to the conclusion that the University of Nijmegen was only an insignificant institution, as there are quite a few over here, calling themselves “University” at no cost at all,”¹⁸ as Mommersteeg wrote in his characteristically direct manner. Even as late as 16 March 1949 Mommersteeg once again urged Smits to have the professors of Nijmegen University create a catalogue of academic publications in order to counter-balance the American idea that they were dealing with a “second degree college.”¹⁹

In November 1945, the University received a visit from Dr. H.L.F. Deelen: this somewhat enigmatic person, a psychiatrist in Amsterdam and an acquaintance of Smits, was described in a report on his visit as “a half-time assistant to rector Mommersteeg.”²⁰ Deelen pointed out that the Dutch were quite popular in the United States and that Americans were eager to donate money. However, he also stressed the need to cooperate with well-known Americans (he, too, mentioned Gavin and his men from the 82nd Airborne Division), and the need to enlist the help of a professional fundraising organization. He also mentioned a new aspect, which was not to be realized until 1947: the presentation of a plan for a new campus for the University, based on American examples. As Deelen explained: “The objection has been made that American and Dutch universities are fundamentally different, especially when [the] strict [American] regime concerning lectures is compared to the liberties of a student’s life in the Netherlands (...), but the plan could be executed in wholly Dutch fashion.” It would be an excellent instrument of propaganda. Deelen’s idea was in fact put to paper at a later stage by the American architect Raphael Hume, as has already been mentioned. His design would play a minor role in the story to come. Mommersteeg and the American bishops were, incidentally, opposed to the employment of a professional organization, because they feared that it would “make use of the same [financial] sources (...) and [would] thus be harmful to their own action. Rector Mommersteeg is therefore much inclined to favour his own activities.” In that case, Deelen urged, proper funding and a proper organization would be of vital importance.

18 Report of 28 October 1945, WH, box 3, folder 2. Mommersteeg writes in detail about his dealings with the American episcopate and mentions, among other things, the dubious outcome of his meetings and conversations.

19 Archief UB, inv.nr. 224.

20 Undated report, probably December 1945, WH, box 3, folder 2.

From the second half of 1945 onwards, contact with Mommersteeg became “more and more lively” and the “work in progress on an American Sponsoring Committee” with the American bishop Francis J. Haas as president was mentioned.²¹ Two days earlier, another letter had disclosed much of Mommersteeg’s character: energetic, tenacious, enthusiastic, precise, direct and purposeful. He writes about his attendance at a seminar in Havana in the first half of January 1945, which in itself reveals enough of his ambition and of his willingness to travel great distances. The letter contains detailed proposals to include Canada and South-America and thus extend the aid to the Nijmegen University: institutions and their contacts are mentioned by name.²² On 5 April 1946, the indefatigable rector wrote from Chicago in a *Memorandum concerning the status of the University Action in the USA* that a “Committee to Promote the Rehabilitation of the Catholic University of Nijmegen” had been established under his secretarial supervision. The list of members of this committee contained an impressive number of names of (more often than not Catholic) institutions in the eastern parts of the United States. It was still no more than a provisional committee, awaiting the official approval of the American government. No mention was made of De Haas and his initiative. Elsewhere the memorandum urgently advised to seek assistance from “a professional person who is well informed about the needs of Nijmegen” and Mommersteeg is convinced he has found such a person in Willibald Ploechl, who has “more than six years of experience with America and has great ease in dealing with Americans.”²³ In a letter dated 8 June, Mommersteeg again emphasized the importance of Ploechl and his personal contacts (“a weighty matter over here”). Moreover, he wrote that Ploechl was in the possession of “very extensive lists of books which are missing in Nijmegen.”²⁴ Ploechl had already consented to cooperate, but only until September 1946, and had expressed his willingness to travel around, visiting libraries and other institutions, together with his wife. Financing this assistance would be entirely dependent on the American episcopate, but Mommersteeg was confident of success, which meant that Ploechl could be paid and would even have a car at his disposal, enabling him to travel extensively and with ease. Ploechl could avail himself of the lists mentioned above because he had already been in contact with Smits. In a letter to Haas dated 14 June 1946, Mommersteeg expressed relief that he could announce the execution of the foundation act

21 Letter from Mommersteeg to Haas, 30 January 1946, WH, box 1, folder 4.

22 WH, box 3, folder 2.

23 WH, box 1, folder 4.

24 WH, box 3, folder 2.

of the American Committee to Aid the University of Nijmegen, which marked the beginning of its official existence.²⁵

The articles of association contained the following text: "The objects and purposes for which this corporation is formed are to aid in the reconstruction, rehabilitation and restoration of the war-damaged University of Nijmegen in Holland, a non-profit, religious and educational institution; by collecting funds and receiving and acquiring property in the United States of America for the purpose of hereinbefore described by way of gift, deed, bequest, devise or otherwise."²⁶ The Trustees of this new committee were: "The Most Reverend Francis J. Haas, Reverend Robert Gannon S.J., Reverend Raymond A. McGowan, Dr. George N. Shuster, Dr. Willibald M. Ploechl, Henry Mann." Mommersteeg's name was missing, but he reappeared on the letterhead of the impressive stationary of the ACA as "Executive Secretary." Only one of the trustees, Henry Mann, was to visit Nijmegen in person, in February 1948. Besides the official stationary, there was also an official form for donations, which served for gifts in books or money (figure 2). The stationary also contained a long list of members, including major general James M. Gavin. His involvement and that of other prominent Americans will be related in more detail below.

In a memo of 3 September 1946, Mommersteeg urgently wrote that the efforts from Nijmegen should be focussed on creating well-defined plans

AMERICAN COMMITTEE TO AID THE UNIVERSITY OF NYMEGEN INC.
5 BEEKMAN STREET, NEW YORK 7, N. Y.
ROOM 810—CORTLANDT 7-2375

Dear Sirs,

We are willing to donate to you some duplicate volumes from our library and would therefore welcome the visit of your representative to consult with our librarian about their selection. The most convenient time will be _____

We enclose a check for \$_____ as a token of sympathy for the rebuilding of your University, made out to the AMERICAN COMMITTEE TO AID THE UNIVERSITY OF NYMEGEN, INC.

Signature: _____

Address: _____

FIGURE 2 *Donation form used by the American Committee to Aid the University of Nijmegen.*

25 WH, box 3, folder 2.

26 Dated 6 July 1946. WH, box 3, folder 2.

for the future, instead of a restoration of pre-war conditions. Tangible plans were what the Americans were looking for: only these would persuade them to donate money, and Mommersteeg added weight to his urgent request by mentioning, for the first time, the Rockefeller Foundation.²⁷ As a result of his memo, a number of professors became more involved in plans to expand the University by founding the Faculty of Medicine. Mommersteeg saw this future faculty as a logical development of the strong position of the Nijmegen chair in Missiology. The idea would lead to an extensive correspondence, concerning the foundation of an “Institute for Positive Human Studies” (“Instituut voor Positieve Menskunde”).

The Memoranda

On 5 November 1946, Mommersteeg sent the first of four official Memoranda,²⁸ which contained ample updates on the book action, based on the reports that had been written by Ploechl to Mommersteeg and Haan.²⁹ By the time Memorandum I was compiled a total of seven of these reports had been made: they show impressive progress in establishing contacts, securing commitments and encouraging book donations: Mommersteeg mentioned more than 10,000 volumes.³⁰ The haste can partly be explained by the fact that Ploechl knew he had to resume his duties at Washington University in September. The book lists of the donating institutions were sent to Ploechl, who then decided what was useful for Nijmegen: for example, in September 1946 he announced a large gift of 3600–4000 volumes, including the complete *Migne Scripturae* (the *Patres* were missing).³¹ In his Memorandum Mommersteeg also suggested that an exchange program be created between

27 WH, box 2, folder 22.

28 Memoranda II and III were to follow on 25 February 1947 and 12 September 1947; the fourth memorandum of August 1948 contained no remarks concerning the book action.

29 Of these crucial documents several copies are extant; WH, box 2, folder 24 contains all four of them together.

30 The first letters to Smits in which shipments of books from the USA are mentioned, date from 30 and 31 December 1946. A total amount of 35 of this type of letters have survived, containing reference to a total of 355 book crates. The numbers begin to decline from the beginning of 1948 onwards, with a few marked exceptions, such as the 22 crates on 15 May 1948. Archief UB, inv.nr. 223.

31 As mentioned in a letter by Mommersteeg to Haan, Archief UB, inv.nr. 227. In October 1946 an extensive list was announced of intended book donations by the Library of Congress, (id.).

the Nijmegen University Library and the library of Ann Arbor, which was in his opinion an excellent example of a fully developed professionalized library. Nijmegen would do well to look to Ann Arbor and become an equally professional library (Nijmegen hardly responded to the idea, as Mommersteeg did not neglect to note in his third memorandum). Four months later, in Memorandum II, it was reported that by late February some 20,000 volumes had been donated, but that shipment was unfortunately slow due to the insufficient storage capability by shipping agent United Services to Holland. Mommersteeg was rather satisfied about the public relations: there had been enough promotional material; those who had donated had received letters of thanks; there was a design for an official note of thanks (a 'diploma') by the librarian; and a sketch had been made by architect W.A. Maas for a University hospital. The effect all this had on the Americans was as expected.

Memorandum III of September 1947 showed Mommersteeg slightly irritated by the lack of cooperation and appreciation from Nijmegen. By now, no less than 30,000 volumes had been gathered which Mommersteeg assessed as follows: "The number of volumes that has been collected is not necessarily proof of success. Of more value is the fact that the books have been selected according to solid criteria and are in themselves an important contribution to a collection of mostly modern 'Americana,' unlikely to be found in any other library in the Netherlands." He continued: "We have doubts whether this aspect of the book action is properly appreciated in Nijmegen. People in the Netherlands tend to look down on America's academic achievements, but it is an undeniable fact that the United States play an increasingly important role on a global level. That is why it seems to me that a good selection of American history, American law, American literature and American science in various areas is a great asset for a modern library."³²

Mommersteeg's passionate appeal for appreciation of what the Americans were collecting and donating is more proof of his vexation at feeling undervalued and neglected by the professors of the Catholic University of Nijmegen: "We are not interested in receiving colourful letters of thanks, we want clear proof

32 In a letter by Mommersteeg to Smits of 16 April the rector had mentioned another category of 'Americana', but with far less enthusiasm: "There are a number of books that contain nothing but pure heresy, as I noticed in haste, but you will know what to do with them. The worst kind was sent to us only the other day, by The Beacon Press. However, for those who want to study modern spiritual life in contemporary America, they may not be without interest" (Archief UB, inv.nr. 227). This is a good indication regarding the diverse institutions which donated books: Beacon Press was of a distinct Unitarian and leftwing signature.

that both parties are working together to ensure success for this undertaking." An exception is made for librarian Smits and his positive reactions (in spite of his negative decision about the exchange program suggested by Mommersteeg in his Memorandum 1) and professors Van Welie and Beaufort. Furthermore, the Americans had by now gotten "the impression that the way 'Nijmegen' deals with the matter, shows little or no consensus." Mommersteeg, however, remained hopeful and suggested that the visit of Ploechl to Nijmegen should be used for "a serious discussion of this subject." Both visit and discussion took place near the end of October 1947, including a dinner at the 'Piusconvict' on 26 October, as can be read in a letter of Van Rijn, the assistant secretary of the Board of Governors, to Mommersteeg on 31 October 1947.³³ Smits was not present, but Ploechl did meet him separately and they talked about the book donations.

Smits's reaction to Mommersteeg's third memorandum (30 September 1947, sent by Haan to the Board of Governors on 16 October) slightly modified the negative assessment of the academic attitude.³⁴ Smits explained the lack of response by the Nijmegen professors by pointing out that there was a considerable backlog in unpacking and processing the books that were sent: "The desiderata, including those of the staff, were all registered in our lists. However, as long as we do not have an overview of what volumes have arrived, it is rather hard to make new suggestions." On the matter of 'Americana' he wrote: "In spite of the fact that I fully endorse the importance of a collection of modern Americana, we must look at it in the light of what we are reconstructing now and of the practical capacity of the University Library." It is clear that Smits was trying to find his way between rebuilding the former library, with its financial and logistic restrictions, and dealing adequately with an increasingly overwhelming amount of books from and about America. Moreover, as we saw above, the library was still trying to piece together a reliable catalogue.³⁵ Smits described the difficulties he had to deal with at some length:

"Does Rector Mommersteeg realise that we began our work without catalogues, registers of magazines, serial works etcetera, and that on top of that there followed a deluge of book gifts, 20 to 30,000 from America and at least 27,000 from other countries? The number of some 50 to 60,000 donated volumes equals 1/3 of the total collection of the library. The maximum capacity to catalogue books is some 10 to 12,000 volumes per year, so you will understand that we have no man to spare. To send someone on an exchange program

33 WH, box 2, folder 23.

34 WH, box 3, folder 1.

35 On this aspect of the library's history, see Arpots (1995), 71–87, in particular 73–78.

means that we have to train an unskilled person and impose a heavy burden on our future. We sincerely hope that Rector Mommersteeg will accept these motives for what they are: they stem from a frank appreciation and sincere will to cooperate. But please bear in mind that our organisation is completely disrupted and only slowly recovering as compared to an unscathed country like America."³⁶

1948 represented a turning point in the short history of the ACA. From the beginning of that year onwards no large shipments of books were sent to Nijmegen and it became clear that the attempts to gain the support of high-ranking American officials, like ex-president Herbert Hoover and president Harry Truman, would come to nothing. The decline in success was partly due to the fact that the United States became increasingly critical of the Netherlands and its policy towards the struggle for independence of Indonesia. Moreover, the Americans became tired of being constantly on the giving side and asked for something tangible, however slight, in return. An article in *Time* of 12 January 1948 contained a warning: "U.S. citizens, complacent over their own generosity to ravaged Europe, got a dash of cold water last week. Writing in *Freedom & Union*, organ of Clarence Streit's Federal Unionists, former Supreme Court Justice Owen Roberts reminded them of an old adage: every time you lend, you lose a friend. Roberts was blunt. 'Can the present European Recovery Plan do other than place us in the poisonous rich-uncle, poor-relationship situation that has severed so many family ties?'" The article was noticed and sent to Nijmegen in response to an exchange of letters, expressing the strong wish to obtain copies of the magazine.³⁷ As for getting something in return: a letter dated 9 January 1948, sent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of Harvard University to Eunice Lisowska of the ACA, announced that the policy would be to exchange goods only, and that doubt had arisen whether Nijmegen was a good trading partner: "It does not appear, however, that before the war any large section of their teaching was devoted to Anthropology."³⁸ Other rejections were based on the fact that donations had already been effected through other channels, for example the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Art and Sciences.

In January and February 1948 Dutch newspapers, such as *De Gelderlander*, *de Volkskrant* en *De Tijd*, published articles on the American support for the Nijmegen University, and included a brand new sketch for a University campus. The sketch, as noted above, was made by the American architect

36 [30 September 1947], WH, box 3, folder 1.

37 WH, box 2, folder 23; a copy of *Time* is in box 4.

38 Archief UB, inv.nr. 224.

Raphael Hume, but was in fact intended only as propaganda material to win the hearts of the American public and was never meant to be realised in the first place.³⁹ Another propagandist idea that was reported in the articles was the creation of a commemoration plaque: within the broad canvas of rebuilding the University the ACA had envisioned this as a proper tribute to Gavin and his 800 men from the 82d Airborne Division, according to a lavish prospectus they had published. Indeed, the ties between Mommersteeg and major general Gavin and his division were strong: on 5 July 1947 the rector had addressed the men in person.⁴⁰ Gavin was very willing to cooperate, and was pleased that the ‘Carolus Magnus University’ (a fictitious name that was used in propaganda, apparently to avoid the word “Catholic” that could lead to misunderstanding in America, as we have seen above) had promised him a “permanent memorial (...) to the European war dead of the U.S. 82d Airborne Division”. It is not unlikely that Gavin’s name had opened the door to the highest circles. Three photos have survived in which both Gavin and Mommersteeg are visible and these may serve as silent witnesses to this fact (figure 3). One of these pictures dates from 16 March 1948 and shows President Truman behind his desk, smilingly accepting the honorary membership of the U.S. 82d Airborne Division Association: Gavin and Mommersteeg are in the background, watching. Another picture shows the major general and the rector in the company of Hugh Gibson, former US ambassador in Belgium and Chairman of the ACA, together with former president Herbert Hoover. In January 1947, Hoover had been present at a press conference of the ACA, as Mommersteeg later recalled in a report

FIGURES 3 A–C Photographs of Mommersteeg with James Gavin, Herbert Hoover, and Harry Truman.

- 39 The piece was published and commented on in *Jaarboek Numaga* (1994), 148. See also Wolf (1998), 44, and Hakvoort (2005), 74–75. WH, box 4, contains a photocopy of a sketch that Hume made of the inner court of the campus, which suggests that he may have been inspired by drawings of the Grote Markt in Nijmegen.
- 40 A copy of the glowing speech can be found in WH, box 3, folder 1.

from September 1949: "On that occasion he had said to me that he probably might be of help in acquiring books for Nijmegen, which I acknowledged, of course, with gratitude."⁴¹ Mommersteeg had Smits prepare a new list of desiderata: in his view a previous list had been too modest: "A list of some thousand books, considered urgently needed, but also the most expensive, is what serves our purpose best. I do not need to explain to you how precious this help offered by Mr Hoover can be. There is the Hoover Library in California, but also the fact that the former president is increasingly popular again and has great influence in academic circles."⁴² Smits replied on 29 January 1948 that he had sent a list of "extremely important" desiderata and furthermore, with the rector's criticisms of Memorandum III in mind, tried to boost Mommersteeg's morale: "Several professors are by now selecting titles from the Americana section on a regular basis. You may be gratified to know that Psychology has accepted almost everything that was sent on this subject." However, in the end all further attempts to contact Hoover failed. In his report, Mommersteeg has not yet abandoned hope, but on 9 June 1948, a letter was received from Hoover's secretary, confirming a negative decision.⁴³ The commemoration plaque was postponed until some five years later, when a bronze plaque, designed by the famous Brom workshop, was installed in the—no longer extant—main building of the "Prekliniek" of the Faculty of Medicine, and was unveiled on 17 September 1953 by major general Gavin in the presence of the mayor of Nijmegen, Mr Hustinx.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, Mommersteeg kept sending letters, informing Nijmegen of the latest news, based on the detailed reports by Miss Eunice Lisowska, who had succeeded Ploechl and continued his methodical and careful way of conveying what had been done at each and every institution.⁴⁵ On 13 May

41 WH, box 2, folder 24.

42 Letter from Mommersteeg to Smits d.d. 6 January 1948, Archief UB, inv.nr. 224.

43 Archief UB, inv.nr. 224.

44 The plaque was stored away when the building was demolished, but has only recently been reinstalled near the entrance of the Anatomical Museum at the Geert Grooteplein.

45 The list of institutions that were contacted by letter or in person contains some 86 names, including 11 publishing houses (Ploechl seems to have visited primarily catholic institutions, but Lisowska and Rooney cast a wider net). A random selection: Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, NY; New York Public Library; Augustinian College Washington; American Anthropological Society; American Library Association; Rosary College, Ill.; New York County Lawyers Association; Catholic University Emmetsburg; U.S. Infantry Association; Nazareth College Library, NY; Duns Scotus College, Detroit; De Paul University, Chicago; Mount Mercy College, Pittsburgh; Loyola University. (Archief UB, inv.nr. 225)

1948, Mommersteeg confirmed that he would visit The Netherlands in July and August, but he bluntly refused to meet the Board of Governors: "What do I have to expect from these gentlemen, who show so little understanding for my work. I will tell you this: that so far, I have no respect at all for the way this board is conducting its business. If these gentlemen want to see me, they are welcome to come with a proposal." His letter ends with words that betray a certain bitterness: "I am beginning to get tired of it all."⁴⁶ The contrast between his contacts with prominent Americans, including a meeting with the American president himself, and the inertia from the ranks of the Nijmegen academia could not be greater, according to Mommersteeg, in spite of the encouraging words from Smits' reaction to the rector's third Memorandum (see above).

However, after Mommersteeg had returned to the United States after his visit to his home country, he was also disappointed with what had been done in his absence. Miss Mae Rooney, who had taken over Eunice Lisowska's task but was by no means as well connected or competent, had been able to gather a "nice collection of books," but that was "about all that had been done."⁴⁷ After this, only one more shipment of books would take place, as can be deduced from the fact that after this letter hardly any mention was made of donations, and even then they were slight, as witnesses a letter of 28 January 1949 from Van Rijn to Mommersteeg: a former member of the 82nd Airborne Division had sent 20 issues of the magazine *Arizona*, a nice, but rather futile gesture. The magazine cannot be found in the present-day collection of the University Library, and it is doubtful whether it was ever accepted: the backlog in processing the book shipments was, at that time, as huge as ever before, and the limited interest of the Nijmegen library to extend their collection with unique Americana, as described earlier in this article, will certainly have played a role. Nevertheless, a considerable portion of the book gifts that has been recovered within the library's collection can be filed under the term 'Americana,' such as the 13-volume *Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, which are mentioned in a letter by Eunice Lisowska to Smits: Max McCullough, who donated this multivolume publication had "only a few sets of these valuable papers. We are proud to think that Nijmegen was one of the few institutions chosen for a similar gift."⁴⁸ In 1948, the number and quality of the books that had been shipped to Nijmegen from the United States induced the library staff to stage an exhibition, showing a selection of book gifts through the ACA. There is a handwritten, unsigned report, most probably written by Smits, in which a number of the more substantial reference works among the

46 WH, box 2, folder 23.

47 Letter to Haan and Van Rijn, 17 September 1948, WH, box 2, folder 23.

48 11 November 1947, Archief UB, inv.nr. 227.

exhibited books are recorded in some detail.⁴⁹ Virtually all titles continue to be part of the library's collection today.

The Final Stage

By the summer of 1949, time was running out for Mommersteeg and his staff: on 1 July 1949 the loan and insurance for the Committee's support expired. On 13 June 1949 Mommersteeg wrote to Van Rijn with considerable resignation: "There is nothing left but to admit that we have failed where the campaign is concerned."⁵⁰ Folder 226 of the library's archive for the largest part contains correspondence about book gifts from other sources than the ACA, mainly on medical topics, in preparation for the realisation of a brand new Faculty of Medicine in Nijmegen: book gifts came from several American hospitals, the American College of Surgeons, the American College of Physicians, the American Public Health Association, and many other institutions.

In September 1949, Mommersteeg sent his final report to the Dutch episcopate: "The once flourishing book action has to end, since we no longer have the money to pay our staff." Nevertheless, Mommersteeg was not entirely without hope: there still was his contact with former president Hoover (in spite of the formal refusal to help, as mentioned before) and the activities of CARE, a new relief organization. But in the end it all came to nothing. Towards the end of 1949 Mommersteeg left the United States and returned to the Netherlands.

The Collection

Until the end of his position as a librarian in 1958, Karel Smits remained unable to clear the considerable backlog in processing the book gifts. Lack of funds and lack of staff kept haunting the poor librarian, in spite of the fact that the Board of Governors had regularly granted financial supplements to the library budget.⁵¹ Smits's annual report for 1948–1949 does mention, however, a successful processing of "the most important Americana" (*Jaarboek* 1948–1949, 347), but it remains a mystery which titles he referred to and, more importantly, how many.

49 Archief UB, inv.nr. 224.

50 WH, box 2, folder 23. We must bear in mind that the intentions of the ACA were much broader than a book action only.

51 See for example several letters in the period of 1945–1947 from the Board to Smits, Archief UB, inv.nr. 246.

Meanwhile the gradual expansion of the University, in particular the foundation of the Faculty of Medicine in 1951, only increased the work pressure for the library. Smits was well aware of the positive effects of the American book donations for the new faculty: "Preparations were made for the creation of the library of medicine, and the book action by Rector Mommersteeg proved extremely useful" (*Jaarboek* 1950–1951, 14). But still, the reduction of the backlog must have been only by a fraction of the total shipment of 30,000 volumes; because even the successors of Smits, Dr A.P.M. Kievits and Mr G.G.A.M. Pijnenborg, were hard pressed to find a solution for the problem of processing the many, many books.

A thorough analysis of the intrinsic value of the book gifts is virtually impossible, because only a small percentage of the books that were shipped from America can be retrieved. One of the reasons for this is that the detailed shipment reports do not mention specific titles: the only thing we know is that some 30,000 volumes arrived in Nijmegen and that it took many years to cope with this immense bulk, notwithstanding the optimistic reports by Smits in the first post-war years. The motivation to deal with the backlog may have been negatively affected by the suspicion that the relevance or usefulness of the books for the existing collection was not necessarily particularly high. Besides, much of the book material may have become scattered all over the depository, or was moved or even removed. With considerable difficulty some 10 percent of the books donated by the ACA and other American institutions has been identified, the evidence for this origin being that the books contain a modified library stamp reading "Schenking [Gift] U.S.A." (figure 4) or bear the stamp of the original American owner, for example the Library of Congress. In other cases, vignettes (figure 5) or emblems of American booksellers were found and even handwritten dedications (for instance "Compliments of the Ohio Society of New York, 10/3/45" in James H. Kennedy's *History of the Ohio Society of New York, 1885–1905*). A substantial number of unmarked books were retrieved simply because they were standing shoulder to shoulder with the marked volumes, shelf after shelf. Nevertheless, no more than 3,000 volumes have been accounted for.

In my efforts to reconstruct what happened here I received help from a few (former) members of the library staff,⁵² who remembered that as late as 1973 (!) Mr. Jacques van Gent, then head of the cataloguing department, had put a small number of library staff to work on unpacking and processing the backlog of donated books. The ACA books were immediately identifiable by the fact that they were divided per dozen and strapped together with a piece of rope. They were dust-covered, but generally in mint condition. The book titles were compared to the titles in the alphabetical catalogue, and in the case of identical

52 The foremost of these are G. Schoonenberg and A.H. Laeven.

FIGURE 4 *Schenking [Gift] U.S.A.*

volumes the best copy (usually the American one) was kept. It is likely that over the years selections were made according to subject and that the more exotic or odd titles were discarded, but there is hardly any evidence for this hypothesis. The final result of van Gent's initiative has been that within four or five years the major part of the complete backlog (including the American donations, some 15%) had been eliminated, but the selection process had been fairly rigorous. The annual report for the library from 1974/1975 reads: "Of the 195,000 volumes [of book gifts—LS] that were there in January 1973 some 60% has been processed. 9% found their way to the depository, 22% of the titles were already present and 69% were deemed unsuitable." And the report for 1979 explains: "In December 1978 a milestone was reached in the treatment of donated books.

FIGURE 5 *Presentation vignette of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt's public papers and addresses, donated to the University of Nijmegen Library.*

Every monograph that has come into the possession of the library before 1968 has now been processed.⁵³ To be sure, these numbers apply to *all* book gifts, but can, with due caution, be applied to the 'Americana' collection as well. Furthermore, based on what it is possible to deduce from the reconstruction of the ACA book collection—a broad mixture of books on subjects as widely

53 Annual Report UB 1975, p. 89 and 1979, p. 61.

varied as European, American and global politics, agriculture, American history, local history, catholic education, literature, popular art and science—we must inevitably conclude, however speculative that the failure of Mommersteeg's attempts is visible in this respect as well. Mr G.G.A.M. Pijnenborg, one of Smits' successors, was more than once heard remarking: "If this amount of money had been spent at the New York antiquarian bookseller H.P. Kraus, the Nijmegen library would probably have become famous" (qtd. in Laeven and Winkeler 2005, 45). On this regrettable note we must end our history of the "American Committee to Aid the University of Nymegen."

Abbreviations

WH	Werkarchief F. Haan (University Archives) (provisional numbering)
Archief UB	Archief 798: UB Nijmegen (Catholic Documentation Centre)
ACA	American Committee to Aid the University of Nymegen
Jaarboek	Jaarboek der R.K. Universiteit (Annual Report of the Catholic University Nijmegen)

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