CHAPTER THREE

THE PEDLAR IN THE DUTCH DISTRIBUTION NETWORK

This chapter addresses the character and extent of the itinerant book trade in the Netherlands.¹ It assesses both the economic impact of this trade in the period 1600 to 1850, when it functioned alongside the extensive official book trade in the highly urbanised Dutch context, and the role of the pedlar as a link in the distribution network. Chapter 2 considered attempts by booksellers’ guilds and political authorities in England to contain itinerant book peddling – did similar bodies in the Netherlands respond in similar ways? This chapter replicates the structure and considers the same concepts as chapter 2 in order that comparisons between itinerant trade in England and itinerant trade in the Netherlands be consistent and clear.

THE SCALE OF ITINERANT DISTRIBUTION

How many itinerant tradesmen either operated within a Dutch city or used a Dutch city as a base for their travels? Dutch sources do not readily provide an answer to this question. In England and France official ordinances against peddling allow us to estimate the size of such trade in towns and villages, and when they are viewed together with complaints from local organisations such as guilds, we can build up a picture of where and how chapmen travelled. In the Netherlands, however, there were few commercial and administrative obstacles to itinerant trade. A recent study has shown how ineffective the decentralised Dutch censorship was.² Furthermore, printers and publishers faced repressive, rather than more rigorous preventative, censorship, although at times of particular turmoil, as in 1672, this repression could be fierce.³ Pedlars in the Netherlands were not confronted with measures similar to the English

¹ ‘Itinerant book trade’ is used here as a general term for the sale of books, pamphlets, prints, songs and other forms of printed matter.
² Weekhout, Boekencensuur.
Licensing Act, which in 1696 ordered all pedlars registered.\(^4\) The number of pedlars in the Netherlands can be calculated only with the aid of a multitude of sources from tax data, trade licences, patents, book bans, market-stall rentals, town tolls, criminal sentences, and other incidental forms of registration, such as the Napoleonic surveys of 1810–1813.

That economic realities had an impact on the activities and regulation of the itinerant book trade is certain, but the extent of that impact has yet to be established. As we noted in chapter 2, the eighteenth century saw remarkable growth in itinerant trade in general in several European countries.\(^5\) In England, however, itinerant distribution of print seems to have fallen in the eighteenth century. In the Dutch Republic, the economy and the publishing industry flourished in the seventeenth century and started to decline in the eighteenth – what were the repercussions for itinerant trade? Would the booming book industry in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic have provided many opportunities for itinerants to earn a small living? And would economic decline have produced a large army of poor and needy people who might have turned to street trade as a last resort?\(^6\) This chapter cannot provide empirical evidence of the impact of economic conditions on the scale of the itinerant trade, not least because we lack reliable and uniform sources that would allow us to track such effects. At most we have evidence for numbers over a shorter period, such as a decade. But we can trace the number of pedlars who fell victim to repression in court records that also provide information about the social characteristics of this group, its merchandise and its trading practices.

This study begins in 1600 and focuses on specific cities, but pedlars were also a presence in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century. One well-known example is provided by the Delft printer and publisher Harman Schinckel, who was arrested and executed in 1568. Under interrogation Schinckel claimed that he had sold forbidden books to ‘at least’ a hundred pedlars from Flanders, Gelderland, Friesland, and other provinces.\(^7\) A sixteenth-century ballad seller in Leeuwarden (Friesland) was accused of singing and selling seditious songs that insulted the church and ministers; he had bought a thousand songs for one guilder (fifty copies for one

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\(^6\) Frijhoff and Prak, *Geschiedenis van Amsterdam*, vol. 2.2, p. 259.