CHAPTER TWO

MOVING UP IN THE WORLD. THE FIRM OF ABRAHAM BLUSSÉ & SON, C. 1771

Our virtue and trust did not wane, and we worked enthusiastically on building our family home. Unremitting diligence and thrifty consideration filled my spouse’s head. Meanwhile, striving to secure and expand my business on the way paved by my father, I saw, with God’s blessing, my pleasure increase and I was able to earn a great deal of favour, both near and far.

Exploring the Market. New Developments in the Book Trade in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century

International and Domestic Trade

If we can believe the book historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the heyday of the Dutch book trade—the ‘Wonder of Holland’—was already a thing of the past when Pieter Blussé took over the business from his father around 1770. The famous nineteenth-century publisher Kruseman set the tone in 1893, when he blamed the decline in the international market for French books printed in the Netherlands—a decline that took place in the second half of the eighteenth century—on the careless, nonchalant attitude of Dutch booksellers:

The old fire of the past had been extinguished, and the desire to make a fortune as easily and inexpensively as possible had taken the place of constant effort and unrelenting zeal. This lackadaisical tendency to rest on one’s laurels was bound to lead to ruin. Little by little, our printers and paper manufacturers had been declining woefully, and as far as our publishers were concerned, instead of striving for sound content and a neat appearance, they were guilty of a sloppiness that could not fail to cause offence.¹

It was for this very reason that renowned foreign authors—such as Voltaire, who complained about the many printing errors in various books

¹ A.C. Kruseman, Aanteekeningen betreffende den boekhandel van Noord-Nederland in de 17de en 18de eeuw (Amsterdam 1893) [= Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van den Nederlandschen boekhandel 6] 91-92.
of his that had been printed in Amsterdam—were thought to have taken their custom to French and English competitors. Even the Dutch reprints of foreign literature, once famous for their high quality, supposedly lost their good name and share of the market when they became ‘mere run-of-the-mill work’. Kruseman was just as negative about the writing produced in his own country: ‘Our national literature did not provide much work for our printing presses in the second half of the eighteenth century, and our Republic, for its part, did very little to encourage studies in our native language. Everything had to be French, it made no difference, in the case of fashionable literature, whether it could pass muster, morally speaking: on the contrary, its ‘cavalier’ quality only served to recommend it.’

Kruseman constantly called upon the same eye-witnesses to support his claims: the publisher–lawyer Elie Luzac, who wistfully recalled the days when ‘Dutch books surpassed all others in merit and beauty, and were preferred everywhere’; and the journal De Koopman (The Merchant), whose lucid observations on the state of the book trade in the 1770s were voiced by writers with pseudonyms such as Henry Misprint:

Every overgrown bookseller’s apprentice who has completed his four-year training and is still as ignorant as a pig about the business, let alone about other things, becomes a master, sets up shop, hangs out a sign, and begins, with not the slightest understanding of the business and no capital whatsoever, and so he remains, ploddingly selling his trashy tomes, his ointment for corns and salve for burns, or, worse still, aphrodisiacs and pox potions. He goes in search of a trashy writer, a salaried fame-robber, and ruins the book trade and book-learning. This deterioration has gained ground among the people: others follow suit; it’s raining rubbish and libellous writings, and true geniuses are neglected.

A contemporary of Kruseman, the bookseller Van der Meulen, gratefully referred to Luzac in his historical overview when describing the decline of the book trade in the second half of the eighteenth century: ‘If anyone is still in doubt about this decline, let him travel through our provinces and towns to observe how things used to be and how they are today and then draw his own conclusions.’ In this period the Dutch book trade

---

2 Kruseman, Aanteekeningen, 93.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 114.
5 See Kruseman (ibid. 174-76).
6 R. van der Meulen, De boekenwereld. Theorie en practijk van den boekhandel (2nd ed.; Leiden; n.d. [c. 1897]) 70.