CHAPTER FIVE

SOCIAL WORLD

During the first years in which Otto kept his diary, his world was still small and sparsely populated. In May 1791, when he was eleven, he wrote in his diary nearly every day, but his entries involved mostly his parents and sisters, and he mentions only three other people by name: his Uncle and Aunt Paulus and a clergyman. The entries for May 1793 include thirteen names, and in the course of the year he mentions, in addition to family members, the Berkhouts (their neighbours), various clergymen, a teacher, and a Miss Mortier, the last-mentioned being the only one from outside Otto’s immediate circle. By 1794 the people populating Otto’s diary have risen in number to twenty-eight, and they include distant cousins, acquaintances of his father, and a number of other people outside the family circle. As Otto grows up, we see in his diary an accurate reflection of his widening social world.

No diary kept by Otto’s father has survived, but we do have his album amicorum, to which friends and acquaintances contributed sayings, poems, drawings and short declarations of affection. Such albums were useful in keeping track of one’s personal relations and social contacts. Lambert van Eck began his album amicorum during his student days in Leiden, the perfect time to make new friends. The contributors include various members of families who also figure in Otto’s diary, such as the Brantsens, the Van den Burchs and the Teding van Berk- houts. On 12 January 1778, Pieter Paulus – later to become Lambert’s brother-in-law and, later still, Otto’s uncle – described the nature of his friendship with Lambert in the latter’s album amicorum: ‘I consider it completely impossible and unnecessary to describe true friendship; moreover, much has already been written about it. It is such as exists between us. We experience it, but cannot express it.’ Later on, Ysbrand van Hamelsveld and other politicians also appear in Lambert’s album. Contributions were often reciprocated: thus we find an inscription by Lambert in Van Hamelsveld’s album amicorum, as well as in those of his fellow students Anthonie van der Heim, C.H.W. Anthing, J.A. van der Spijk and Jacobus Kantelaar.¹
From 1797 onwards, Otto’s sister Doortje kept a poetry album, a handsome, leather-bound book, in which we again encounter various acquaintances from Otto’s diary: P. Teding van Berkhout, for example, who made a lovely drawing of a sailing boat; her ‘friend and cousin’ J.A. van Olivier; Mrs J.E. Hartman and Tietje Philip, who enriched the album with verse; and Cornelia Vockestaert and Aunt van Doeveren, whose presence in Doortje’s life is evident from their drawings in this album.\(^2\)

The family book – in essence an elaborate birthday calendar used to jot down information about one’s family – was sometimes extended to include distant relatives and acquaintances. A good example is the volume belonging to Lambert’s friend Jacob van Vredenburch: his family book, started in 1775, contains the names of many people known to Otto. In 1781 Van Vredenburch recorded the marriage of Uncle and Aunt Paulus, for example, and in 1793 the marriage of Otto’s cousin Franco van den Burch to Maria Jacoba van der Steen at Wadestein Castle.\(^3\) Like this notebook and his father’s *album amicorum*, Otto’s diary also served as a ledger in which to keep an account of his social capital.\(^4\)