THE ANTWERP YEARS OF NICLAES MOLLIJNS,
1579 to 1586

In March 1588 the city council of Riga sent a delegation to Warsaw in order to present itself to the new Polish king, Sigismund III, who had acceded to the throne a few months earlier. The last section of the instructions which the mission received from the council contained a request to the King for a privilegium for a printing-office which would be to the advantage of both the city and the country in general (‘weill solches beide zu Stadt und des algemeinen landes bestem gereicht’). Although we don’t know whether a decision was made at the time, the town had apparently already taken steps to satisfy this need. For in the same year there appeared, as the first product of the recently established press, an edition of the church ordinance of Riga and the hymns there used. The printer in question was Niclaes Mollijns and he came from Antwerp.

With his removal to Riga, Niclaes Mollijns not only became the prototypographer of the city but also of the entire Baltic area. After the King had accorded him a privilege as printer on 16 May 1590, the municipality gave him a permanent appointment on 1 January 1591, which was defined more closely two years later. He also obtained the right to operate as book dealer. Indeed, from 1592 on he was the only man in town who had such a permit. From July 1597 he was assisted in his bookshop by his son-in-law Peter van (der) Meren. After the liberation of the city from the hated Polish regime, Mollijns also received a general privilege from the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus. When he died in 1625, his list would seem to have consisted of a good 160 titles. Copies of most of these publications, which also include engravings, have survived. Many editions, including a number of occasional works for the city intelligentsia, appeared in Latin, but he also printed texts – particularly theological ones – in German, and, for the use of the native population, three ecclesiastical works in the local vernacular. In all this period Mollijns was the only printer in Riga.


Even if we give no further details, this brief survey provides sufficiently full information about Mollijns' career in Latvia and stands in marked contrast to what is known about his Antwerp years. We know little more than that he was a son of the printer and wood-engraver Jan (I) Mollijns, who had settled in Antwerp as an independent publisher in 1551. Besides two large books on the history and the counts of Brabant, the father mainly printed shorter works, pamphlets and other ephemera. He had converted to Protestantism and, over the years, his publications included ever more forbidden titles. In 1566 he at last ran into trouble with the authorities and was banished from Brabant for six years – a period which he spent entirely, or anyhow partly, in Sliedrecht, on the river Merwede in the northern Netherlands.3

We can assume that Niclaes learnt the printing trade from his father, even if we have no information on the matter and do not even know his year of birth. All that is certain is that he was admitted as the son of a guildsman to membership of the St Lucas guild in 1575,4 having worked for two years, from 1573 to 1575, as a printer (‘imprimeur’) at Plantin’s printing-office.5 After leaving Plantin he obtained a privilege as printer on 4 April 1576 in order to carry on the business of his father, who had died in the meantime.6 Presumably in contrast to his brother Jan (II), there are no indications that he was also a woodcutter like his father.

Where Jan (II) is concerned more biographical information is available from the certificate he obtained from Plantin in 1576.7 Although he, too, learnt the printing trade from his father, he opted for a living as a book dealer and, together with a colleague (probably a brother-in-law), he opened a shop. It suffered badly from the looting during the Spanish Fury in the same year, however, and shortly after

3 For biographical details and further literature on Jan (I) and Niclaes Mollijns, see A. Rouzet, Dictionnaire des imprimeurs, libraires et éditeurs des XVe et XVIe siècles dans les limites géographiques de la Belgique actuelle (Nieuwkoop 1975), pp. 150-2.


5 He appears to have worked there from 1 May 1573 until 1 May 1575. He received his first salary on 9 May 1573, and the last on 29 April 1575. See Plantin–Moretus Museum (PMM), Arch. 32 (‘Livre des ouvriers’ 1571-9), ff. 120, 192.


7 Certificats délivrés aux imprimeurs des Pays-Bas par Christophe Plantin, ed. P. Rombouts (Antwerpen/Gent 1881), pp. 42-3.