In a 1952 article entitled “The Geographic Extent of the Dutch Book Trade in the Seventeenth Century” David W. Davies described the range of the Dutch international book trade based on the meager number of available commercial records, especially the documents from Amsterdam booksellers collected (and published) by M.M. Kleerkooper and W.P. Van Stockum. He looked at these records with the simple aim of outlining the scope of the Dutch trade in books outside of Holland and his conclusion reflects this:

[A]t least enough evidence has survived to show that it was not at all unusual for Dutch seventeenth century booksellers to trade in Poland, Lithuania, Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, Smyrna, Spain, Portugal, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, England and Scotland.¹

His was one of the first baby steps towards the creation of a history of the Dutch trade in books, a worthy goal that has still not seen completion. In light of recent developments in the scholarship of the Dutch book, especially the increased availability of source material, the issue of the distribution of Dutch books in the seventeenth century is ripe for reexamination and refinement.

The history of books in the Netherlands has indeed received a great deal of attention since 1952 including the creation of the Short-Title Catalogue, Netherlands (1460–1800), consisting of over 110,000 titles; and the publication of numerous primary source materials, notably I.H. van Eeghen’s impressive multi-volumed history of the Amsterdam book trade (1960) and Bert van Selm and J.C. Gruys’ microscie collection of Book Sales Catalogues (1990). Several universities now offer intensive programs in book-related disciplines, including Leiden’s Center for the Book. There has been an upsurge in scholarship of the Dutch

book, which has gone from being the preoccupation of bibliographers to including scholars of history, language, and economics.

Thanks to projects such as these we know a great deal more about the interworkings of the Dutch trade in books and, like so many things in history, we find that nothing is that simple. While Davies’ work sketched the outlines of the trade, he was less concerned with the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the Dutch book trade. He made some broad suggestions about transportation networks, literacy, lack of censorship, and the uncanny ability of the Dutch to cut costs and find “starved markets”, arguments that have all received continuing treatment by historians. Many of these arguments fall under the broad heading of the ‘precocious modernity’ thesis, which posits that Dutch economic success came because of their possession of attributes more familiar to the twentieth century than the seventeenth, especially the adherence to political, economic, and cultural liberty.

More recent scholarship, such as Simon Groenvelt’s article “The Mecca of Authors” has cast doubts on the liberal thesis and the degree to which the Dutch enjoyed freedom of ideas remains an open question. Groenvelt argued that the Dutch did not lack censorship because of an ideological commitment to the importance of free speech, but rather the Estates General lacked the ability to enforce such laws and to prosecute transgressions. Others have looked at other aspects of the thesis, such as republicanism, and cast similar aspersions on the idea that the Dutch were really forward-thinking, finding reasons for their exceptionality firmly imbedded in the historical context of the seventeenth century, not the twentieth. These findings have pushed historians of the Dutch book to seek new explanatory frameworks for Dutch success.

Davies also tended to treat the Dutch trade in books very monolithically and assumed that Amsterdam was representative of national trends. While this may have been true in the golden years of the Plantijn Press, circumstances were different in the age of crisis. In the sixteenth century, the European book markets had been relatively open. Printers with desired merchandise could expect to sell to any interested parties they might find (though that was the tricky part). In the United Provinces, as elsewhere, print shops proliferated at exponential rates.

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