The comptoir-almanacs of Gillis Joosten Saeghman

Research into seventeenth-century almanacs in the Dutch Republic*

Research into the history of the book in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic has until now concentrated mostly on the position of Dutch publishers and booksellers in the European book trade. This aspect still took centre stage at a colloquium held at Wassenaar in 1990. But one of the speakers at that conference, the book historian Bert van Selm who died in 1991, argued on the contrary for more attention to be given to the domestic book trade. He suggested that a flourishing trade in books and other printed works with a local or regional market existed within the borders of the seventeenth-century Republic. Side by side with the internationally oriented entrepreneurs, existed a sizeable group of publishers producing almost exclusively works in the vernacular and directed above all towards a Dutch readership. Van Selm suggests that it was in the first place the domestic book trade that profited from the favourable local conditions (the presence of a large potential readership, the relatively high degree of literacy within the population, the freedom of the press, the good infrastructure) and was therefore the determining factor for the flourishing of the book trade in the Republic.

To gain insight into the operations of this domestic book trade, research into the production of the so-called ‘popular press’ is also necessary. This was, after all, an important part of the domestic book market. In this regard, we need to consider works of both fiction and non-fiction, ranging in variety from edifying works, burlesques, and song books to almanacs, pamphlets, news-sheets, etc. Up to now, this category of printing has been barely studied by historians or specialists in Dutch language and culture; abroad, however, various researches in this field have already led to an extensive discussion.

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3 There is, however, Craig E. Harline's *Pamphlets, printing and political culture in the early Dutch Republic* (Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster 1987). For an analysis of these discussions, see the article.
The first point for discussion is the definition of the object of the research. In the past, a wide variety of designations have been used, such as ‘volksliteratuur’, ‘triviaalliteratuur’, ‘populaire literatuur’, etc., that have unintentionally raised more questions than they have answered. It is not clear how we are to interpret the words ‘volk’ and ‘literatuur’, and the question arises as to whether we are dealing with printing of the people or for the people. Could ‘the folk’ actually read, and were these ‘folk’-books also read in the higher levels of the society?

A second debate deals with the question as to how far the popular press can be used as an historical source. What can we infer from its content? The third point for discussion is concerned with research into the popular press as a cultural phenomenon. The question here is whether one should concentrate on book-historical aspects – the production, distribution, and consumption of the printed works – or should choose a more literary-historical point of departure, directed towards an analysis of their content.

Even though there has still been little work devoted to the study of the Dutch popular press, it has been increasingly appreciated, as witness the publication of two programmatic articles. In 1982, the literary historian Grootes formulated a few theoretical points as a basis for the study of popular literature, and added a few practical suggestions for further research. A few years later, the book historian Van Selm gave a survey of the possibilities and limits of research into the popular press from a book-historical perspective, and added his suggestions for possible research as well. In provocative language, Van Selm argued for the study of the popular press and especially of one category of printed works: almanacs: ‘Might they actually contain the remains of a folk-culture lost forever? Do they reflect the thoughts and attitudes of the [learned] authors or the intended users? How much can they tell us about daily life in earlier centuries? Might these serial sources even reflect new ideas and a changing world-view, or are small


