In memoriam Paul Valkema Blouw (1916-2000)

The antiquarian, bibliographer and book historian Paul Valkema Blouw died on Saturday, 25 November 2000, six weeks before his eighty-fifth birthday. Despite his age and what had long been the fragile state of his health the news of Paul's death came as a shock for many people in the book world - even for the ever smaller circle of friends and acquaintances who were in regular touch with him and who, over the past few months, had realised that the end was approaching.

For it seems so recently that we saw Paul in our midst at the meetings of the book historical Petrus Scrivcrius Society, that we could congratulate him at the Amsterdam University Library on the appearance of his impressive Typographia Batava 1541-1600. We still have such a clear image of the old gentleman in a dark blue raincoat, his grey hair neatly combed, a black briefcase under his arm, limping along with his walking stick. We can still remember his courtesy, modesty and helpfulness - seldom was an appeal to his immense knowledge of the early Dutch book made in vain - and we can still see him sitting between twelve and one in the staff canteen of the University Library, behind his copy of Het Parool or another daily, nibbling at his spiced biscuit - his usual lunch - and hoping for a conversation with somebody. We can still hear his characteristic, sometimes somewhat affected, tone of voice. And not so long ago we received the last number of De Gulden Passer with his article 'Anonieme drukken van Gillis van den Rade (Antwerpen 1577-1585)', which he had been looking forward to for so long.

It has become ever more customary, at least in the Low Countries, to speak of 'the end of an era' when commemorating people who made their mark in a particular domain. Whether the expression has lost its meaning through excessive use is as may be, but I do suggest that the death of Paul Valkema Blouw constitutes a break: the time in which a bibliographer could devote, in all tranquillity, a good thirty years of his life to a work such as Typographia Batava 1541-1600, with all the accumulation of bibliographical knowledge which that entails, is over.

In the last few years Valkema Blouw's work has been discussed on various occasions. What follows should be regarded as a personal recollection of the period of some thirty years in which I have known Paul, supplemented by information derived from interviews with old friends, archives and surviving papers.  


2 Particularly with Paul's old friends C.H. Koene in Amsterdam (a friend since 1934) and the
Paul was born in Dordrecht on 7 January 1916, the eldest child of Jan Paul Valkema Blouw and Afina Maria Dekker. He grew up in Apeldoorn with his sister Marion (*1919) and his brother Jankees (*1926). His father, a graduate engineer, had been employed there since 1921 as a teacher of mathematics at the secondary school and teacher of physics at the Gymnasium. Known as the author of a series of successful boys’ books, a few novels, popular scientific works, stage adaptations and school books, he had also acquired a reputation as a painter and a graphic artist. From the early 1930s, and permanently after 1933, Paul’s mother had to be looked after in a nursing home, which meant that the household was in the hands of a series of ‘aunts’. The surviving correspondence shows that the children grew up with close reciprocal ties, unconnected with any church but with considerable attention to culture and sport.

Paul, a good-looking, athletic boy who made friends easily, took an active part in school life and was an enthusiastic and successful tennis player. Junior tennis champion of Gelderland three times running (1930, 1931, 1932), he continued to take part in national competitions until the late 1940s. He also continued to follow tennis with the greatest interest for the rest of his life – grand slam tournaments on the television meant so many interruptions of his daily trip to the Amsterdam University Library. Without being a genius he obtained his final Gymnasium beta diploma in 1934. In the same year, on the recommendation of an uncle on his mother’s side, A.H. Zahn, the son of a former director of the Utrecht auctioneers and antiquarian book dealers J.L. Beijers, he went to work for that firm as a volunteer. Some sixty years later he said in an interview: ‘It was at the heart of the slump. My father thought he should find me an alternative to academic studies. Nor did I have any great desire to go to university. I rather liked being able to leave home and lead a life of my own.’ In those days Paul was still not particularly interested in books: ‘My keenness on books only came gradually.’

late Frits Knul in Buren (a friend from the Hertzberger days). Information has also been collected from the Gemeentearchief Apeldoorn, the Bevolkingregister Arnhem, the Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie, and the surviving papers of Jan Paul Valkema Blouw and Paul Valkema Blouw.

3 In the nineteenth century the Blouws had adopted the habit of giving all children born in the family ‘Valkema’ for their last Christian name. Although it was used as such in speech and writing it is not a double-barrelled surname. For the father, Jan Paul Valkema Blouw (Haarlem 23.10.1884-Den Dolder 18.02.1954), as the author of children’s books, see D.L. Daalder, Wereldkunst voor schoolkinderen (Amsterdam 1950), pp. 141-2; for him as an artist see P.A. Scheen, Lexicon Nederlandse beeldende kunstenaars 1750-1950. A-L. (Den Haag 1969), p. 107. Paul’s mother Alina Maria (Marie) Dekker, born in Zwammerdam 21.02.1890, died in Apeldoorn on 28.02.1943. In the autumn of 1948 Marion Valkema Blouw emigrated to Canada, where she married F.W. Young in Montreal on 27.08.1949 and still lives. Jankees Valkema Blouw lost his life in an accident as a sergeant in Batavia (present-day Jakarta) on 2.02.1949.