The antiquarian book trade in the Netherlands during the Second World War*

HISTORY WITHOUT HISTORIOGRAPHY

Start looking into the history of the antiquarian book trade in the Netherlands during the Second World War and you immediately come up against a number of obstacles. Right from the start, however you approach it, it is always going to be about individuals and it is always going to involve moral judgements about those individuals. It is, accordingly, a sensitive subject. The eyewitnesses are now almost all dead, and those still living are reluctant to talk about the wartime past. Some fear painful revelations of an inquisitorial nature. There are also those who believe that after the flood of books and articles about the occupation the last word on the subject has already been said. However, this is far from being the case when it comes to the history of the antiquarian book trade in the Netherlands during the Second World War. It is a page in history that is neither black nor highlighted with gold: it is quite simply almost completely blank. So how do we fill it in with the truth?

This brings me to an obstacle that is closely tied in with the particular character of the group concerned. Dutch antiquarian booksellers (leaving aside notorious exceptions such as Anton Gerits)* turn out to be remarkably reticent when it comes to their own dealings. Books of memoirs by members of the trade – so common in Britain, Germany and America – are here counted amongst the real rarities. Max Elte (1909-84) of The Hague, for example, was always full of anecdotes, but he preferred to leave letter-writing to his assistant, and when towards the end of his turbulent career Menno Hertzberger (1897-1982) set about writing his Flashbacks the result was no more than a superficial rhapsody of 'jokes'.

However, not only do our home-grown antiquarians shun the pen, they also pay remarkably little attention to keeping proper archives of their businesses, as Bubb Kuyper, somewhat to his embarrassment, was forced to observe in the book commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the Dutch Antiquarian

* The present article is the updated and translated version of my Het Nederlandse antiquariaat tijdens de tweede wereldoorlog [Zesde Bert van Selm-lezing; Amsterdam, De Buitenkant, 1997]. Many people have provided me with information on which I have drawn for this article; their names will be found here in the notes. I am particularly grateful to Nico Kool of the bkvb (Amsterdam University Library), Fred Vooren of the former riood (Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation, now niod, Netherlands Institute for War Documentation), and Ton Croiset van Uchelen, Chief Curator (retd.) of Amsterdam University Library. Others spurred me on through their deliberate attempts at obstruction; their contribution too is gratefully acknowledged here.

Booksellers’ Association (NVvA). In consequence, the archives of the NVvA provide only minimal information about the history of the antiquarian book trade in this country before and during the Second World War — and even then it is confined to the uppermost echelons. If one wishes to describe the bigger picture of the trade as a whole, one is forced largely to rely on information straight from the horse’s mouth: the antiquarian book trade as oral history.

Several antiquarians were prepared to help me, others sadly clamped their jaws firmly shut as soon as the subject of the occupation was mentioned. And there was much that was said strictly off the record. So it is, then, that my story can be no more than an interim report with all the lacunae and unexpressed thoughts that that entails.

I said earlier that Dutch antiquarians are not writers. Whence comes this evident reluctance to commit their own experiences and thoughts to paper? The answer, I believe, lies partly in the status, or rather, perhaps, the lack of status, of the Dutch antiquarian in the years before the war. First, then, it is essential to say something about this before we can turn to the vicissitudes of the trade during the German occupation.

THE DUTCH ANTIQUARIAN BOOK TRADE IN THE THIRTIES

Antiquarians (like book collectors) tend to be born and bred individualists, often colourful, idiosyncratic types of the kind you have to know how to handle. To the outside world the kind of business they do is what can only be described as a closed book, witness what happens when large publishing houses like Elsevier and Kluwer try to get in on the act. Conversely, antiquarians will generally have little truck with anything that even hints of bureaucracy or government intervention — though few will allow this aversion become so manifest as the Arnhem antiquarian Bob Israël (brother of Nico and Max), who refused to keep any accounts and consequently received a constant stream of tax demands, some of which he paid. One day he rang the tax office and spoke to the Inspector of Taxes himself. ‘What can I do for you, Mr Israël?’ ‘Nothing at all. I am merely calling to inform you that I hereby terminate any connection I have with the revenue.’

As a young student in the fifties I often called in on Bob Israël (1904-70) and his shop on the Bakkerstraat in Arnhem. He was one of the small group of Jewish antiquarians who had survived the war, though in his recalcitrant behaviour (as I realized later) he daily exhibited the scars it had left.3

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3 For example, shortly after the war Bernhard Mensing, one of van Frederik Muller’s successors at Frederik Muller & Co., destroyed almost the whole of the company’s archives.