The Publication of Anne Frank’s Diary

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Abstract
Anne Frank’s diary is probably the most famous book ever published in Dutch. Since its appearance as Het Achterhuis in 1947 it has been translated into many languages and still sells in vast numbers all over the world. Now that the Anne Frank Stichting has opened Otto Frank’s archives to researchers and it has been possible to investigate the publisher’s archives, the Diary’s printing history in the Netherlands – hitherto untold because archive material was either inaccessible or had yet to be discovered – is told here for the first time.

Keywords
Anne Frank, Second World War, publishing, autobiography, best-seller

There is no recipe for a best-seller. It is generally agreed, however, that success is often determined by a chance combination of factors. This seems to be true, at all events, for Anne Frank’s Het Achterhuis. In wretched wartime circumstances a charismatic personality writes a wonderful book that is published when the war is over and the writer dead. But it is not as simple as that. Because why then did other diaries published just after the war, no doubt by equally charismatic personalities and equally well written, fail to find worldwide success? Some of the other diaries published in the Netherlands shortly after the war, such as Loden Vogel’s Dagboek uit een Kamp [Diary from a camp], or Dagboek uit Bergen Belsen [Diary from Bergen Belsen] by Renata

1 This article is based on a paper presented on the sixtieth anniversary of Het Achterhuis, in 2007, in De Rode Hoed in Amsterdam. A Dutch version has been published in De Boekenwereld, 24: 1 (2007), pp. 18-27. For the translation I am very grateful to the Anne Frank Fonds in Basle, and to the translator Jo Nesbitt. I should like to thank the Anne Frank Stichting for their support, and Susanne Goossens, who examined the archives of Otto Frank. She has since graduated from the University of Amsterdam with a thesis on Otto Frank’s correspondence with the readers of the diary.
Laqueur, are famed among researchers and other specialists, but not really beyond those circles. Many diaries are still lying unpublished in the Netherlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (NIOD), the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, in Amsterdam. Others only appeared in print decades after the war, so that the effect of publication cannot be compared with a diary that appeared in 1947. The diary of Helga Deen, ‘the Anne Frank of Tilburg’, appeared in 2007, for example, and the Dutch quality newspaper NRC Handelsblad recently trumpeted ‘Diary of Polish Anne Frank discovered’, referring to the war diary of a fourteen-year-old Polish girl.²

The success of Het Achterhuis, even in 1947, was not exactly a matter of course. Looking at the publication of the diary from the publisher’s point of view, there were numerous reasons for not publishing it. After the war, for example, most Dutch publishers were deluged with manuscripts ready for publication. That was certainly the case at Contact, the Amsterdam publishing house which was to bring out Het Achterhuis (illus. 1). During the war years the firm had bought dozens of manuscripts, translations and agreements, often as a way of helping authors through the difficult years of the occupation: many writers had failed to register with the Kultuurkamer established by the Nazis and it was therefore impossible for them to publish their work. Contact had enough work on its shelves to last for years. Besides, so many books about the war – good, bad and indifferent – had already been published. It was a subject that loomed large in the books appearing in the shops in 1946 and 1947. Indeed, taking the Netherlands and Flanders together the period 1946-50 saw the publication of 218 works that could be classified under the heading Second World War.

‘Books about the persecution of the Jews and the concentration camps sold particularly well – they were subjects people knew so little about’, said publisher van Dishoeck, looking back on his publishing policy.³ To put this in perspective, the total number of new books published in 1945 was 2,436, while in the year 1947 no fewer than 7,086 new books were brought out. Of the 218 war books from the immediate post-war period 1946-50 – see the list below – there are twenty-three about concentration camps and at least five diaries.⁴

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² NRC Handelsblad June 8th, 2007.
⁴ Brinkmans Repertorium is the register of the national bibliography of the Netherlands, Brinkmans Catalogus. The fact that this source has its limitations is shown by the fact that Anne Frank’s diary is not classed with war books, as are several other diaries, but under the category ‘novels and short stories’.