The Enschedé sale was most disappointing...

On 5 April 1868 Henry Bradshaw, Librarian to the University of Cambridge, wrote his last letter to his colleague and friend Johan Willem Holtrop, then seriously ill. In it he made, more or less in passing, a remark concerning the now justifiably famous Enschedé sale which comes as something of a surprise: “The Enschedé sale was most disappointing in its results, except that I trust the heirs were pleased with the very large prices which the books fetched”.

The background and circumstances of this observation are discussed in Vol. II of Henry Bradshaw’s correspondence on incunabula with J. W. Holtrop and M. F. A. G. Campbell, the Commentary, which is due to be published by A. L. van Gendt & Co., Amsterdam, during the course of next year. This episode, which is in itself a piece of bibliographical history, is retold here for the benefit of readers of Quaerendo.

The auction of the large and well-stocked library, ‘formée pendant le 18e siècle par Messieurs Izaak, Johannes et le Dr Johannes Enschedé, Imprimeurs-Libraires à Haarlem’ took place from 9 to 14 December ‘dans la Maison-Enschedé à Haarlem’. The sale itself was in the hands of Frederik Muller and Martinus Nijhoff, here, with reason, working together. Understandably, the great name of the Enschedés as type-founders and printers was in itself sufficient to cause particular interest in the sale, but a further contribution was made by the contents and presentation of the catalogue and its introduction, which was signed jointly by Muller and Nijhoff. This introduction is interesting on several counts, not the least being that the two authors explained briefly and with great clarity the reasons for this remarkable and surprising event:

It is understandable that not all those who now had an opportunity of enriching their collections, whether public or private, with editions...
which had hitherto been considered more or less unobtainable, were particularly happy about the changed circumstances. The feelings of the family itself may be left aside here, but outside the family circle, too, there were those who deeply regretted the disappearance of such a magnificent collection, even though they were themselves about to join battle for the possession of various highly coveted lots. Campbell wasted no words in expressing such sentiments in a contribution to the Nederlandsche Spectator of 2 November 1867, the whole of which deserves to be reprinted (in translation) here:

Reflections occasioned by the sale catalogue of the Enschedé library

You expect of me, Mr. Spectator, an announcement of the sale of the library which for a century and a half has been the property and pride of the Enschede family. You expect this from me in the first place because you assume that I, at least as much as another, can appreciate the rich contents of the catalogue, and that of the contributors to your journal I may be regarded as the natural choice for this task. You might add that through many years’ beneficence on the part of the owners I have had the opportunity of estimating the value of the collection by my own use of it, and that I have not let that opportunity pass by unused.

And so it is. And precisely as I have been allowed to penetrate more deeply the knowledge of the riches of the Enschedian library, so it is the more painful for me now that the day approaches on which so many treasures, gathered together by father and son and grandson, are to be dispersed like chaff before the wind, and, just like this, will be transported in capricious proportions either to England or to France and Belgium, depending on the extent to which richly endowed public libraries or milder private persons—and in particular the kings of the money market—find approval in this catalogue. For what of it will remain in the Netherlands? Much, let us hope, because there is so much that is truly national, that belongs here and here above all; let us hope that, in contrast to what, alas! has all too often happened in the past, the state, the towns and cities, the private citizens, each for their public or private collections, will make vigorous efforts to retain that which above all belongs to the nation.

And of what can this be more true than the pieces with which the catalogue opens, namely the actual proofs of the infancy of the art of printing as it originated in Holland? The Abecedarium, hailed by Meerman as the oldest printed work—the Donat fragment which first echoed Zell’s testimony in the Cologne chronicle that the Germans had invented printing on the inspiration of the ‘Donatuses’ from Holland—the complete copy of the Speghel der menscheliker behoudenisse, a supremely rare monument to the earliest combination of blockbook with movable type—the Facecie morales Laurentii Vallensis, the Singularia juris by Ludovicus de Roma, etc., all printing ‘firsts’ from Dutch presses?

But also belonging, even if to a lesser degree, to that category of national treasures which it may above all be considered desirable to keep for Holland, is the rich series of incunables printed in this country, from the Haarlem and Gouda incunables, magnificently decorated with woodcuts, by Bellaert and Leeu, to the humbler printed works of Deventer and Delft.

And among the numerous manuscripts both on parchment and on paper there is so much that is peculiarly Dutch, and then there are those series of works in the field of theology which so clearly speak of our forefathers’ penchant for a serious, even