

REVIEWS

Dutch Messengers: A History of Science Publishing, 1930–1980

By Cornelis D. Andriessse
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A scientist writing book history

As far back as the seventeenth century Archbishop Ussher of Armagh managed with extraordinary precision – and from our enlightened perspective enviable naiveté – to calculate the exact day on which God set out to create heaven and earth. This was Sunday 23 October 4004 BCE. Although the outcome of his calculations has since been discredited, it remains a remarkable milestone in the history of ideas to this day.

It may at first sight seem a rather long jump from Archbishop Ussher (1581–1656) to Cornelis D. Andriessse's concerns in his recent monograph on an important episode of the twentieth-century history of scientific publishing in the Netherlands: *Messengers: A History of Science Publishing, 1930–1980*. However, we don't have far to go to see the connection. Opening the book at Chapter 1, the very first sentences proclaim that:

The universe is 13.7 billion years old. Let that be said straightaway. Not 13.6 or 13.8 billion years. So accurate is the message of the strange cold light that fills the cosmos and all of outer space. [...] The very idea that a final answer exists for the age of the world...

Immediately following his lapidary pronouncement of the 'final answer' to the question about the world's age, Andriessse proceeds to discuss other estimates, made in earlier, scientifically more benighted times. Ussher's famous pronouncement is, however, surprisingly not one of them. Why? Was Ussher's method not sufficiently scientific? If not, then what to make of the examples Andriessse does cite? Was Georges-Louis Buffon's eighteenth-century tally of 75.000 years more 'scientific' just because it made the earth older than Ussher's painstaking calculation? If so, was the 'bright Scot' William Thomson even more right, and therefore more scientific, with his estimate of 98 million years, which he published in the *Philosophical Magazine* in 1863? More importantly, if everyone got it wrong before, can we trust that 13.7 billion years is the right figure? I will return to these matters shortly.

In *Messengers: A History of Science Publishing, 1930–1980* Andriessse adds a fascinating chapter to the long and remarkable history of the Dutch contribution to international scientific publishing. The book focuses on what is known in the trade as STM (science, technology and medical) publishing, which began in the Early Modern period, with the occasional bit of social science and humanities thrown in. Apart from giving an account of the major expansion of the Dutch role in international science publishing in that half century, Andriessse announces in his introduction that he proposes to answer the question how the Dutch contribution grew to become so dispro-

portionally large. It is by no means a new question, but to date it still hasn't received a satisfactory answer.

Before the actual text of the book begins (with the statement about the age of the world we have already encountered) the reader has already leafed through a four-page preface and a 32-page gallery of portraits of many of the book's main protagonists. The prominent location of that portrait gallery, as well as its generous size, is significant. One of the author's main points is the importance of individuals in the developments he describes. The emphasis on the individual also fits well, incidentally, with Andriessse's somewhat quirky, highly personable style. In placing his personalities squarely inside the wider social and scientific context, Andriessse mixes an old-fashioned celebration of Great Individuals with social history and history of ideas. Some names in his pantheon of Great Individuals in publishing will be more widely familiar, like Wouter Nijhoff, Dolf van den Brink and Pierre Vinken, but others did not necessarily play less important roles for being less – or at least less publicly – known. In all cases Andriessse stresses the importance of the personal element in the texture of chaos and happenstance of history: chance meetings, the chemistry of friendship versus the friction of incompatible personalities, and the unpredictable ways in which individuals are affected by the trends and beliefs that are current at a particular economic, social and political conjuncture.

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In the case of scientific publications an important aspect of that wider conjuncture is obviously the vicissitudes of scientific research itself. So Andriessse draws many links between developments in publishing and events in the scientific world. As a scientist himself, he is well aware of the importance of the major scientific breakthroughs in making – and breaking – scientific fields. He has a good eye for the way publishing follows the often rapid shifts in scientific focus and, more notably in the period under scrutiny, the breakup of formerly large unified areas into smaller but rapidly expanding new, and increasingly specialised, fields. Often publishers follow such developments at a slight remove, closing down operations when a market has become saturated, or conversely starting up new ventures when new scientific concepts, such as the quantum or the gene, start to be productive. Occasionally you get the sense that a single deft publishing decision as it were brings into being a new field of research. Naming a journal or book series helps to conceptualise the field it is meant to cover, thus making it more visible, and legitimising it in the eyes of the world and, not unimportantly, in the eyes of administrators and funding agencies.

Specialisation, and the coming into being of ever newer fields of scientific research, is one of the fascinating themes of the book: the scientific turbulence of the time is fully reflected in the world of publishing. In this connection the brief piece of history of science with which the book opens is also of particular interest. Not only does it draw attention to the ever-evolving nature of scientific insight, but it also leads one to wonder if here, too, we may be seeing the process of scientific specialisation at work. Is it coincidence that

the estimates of the age of the world cited show exponential growth? If not, may this growth and the increasing correctness (if that is indeed what it is) of the figures correlate with the increasing specialisation that has historically attended the scientific revolution? And does that confirm that our knowledge and understanding of the natural world not so much vacillates, but actually progresses? Even so, if we agree to call all of the earlier calculations of the world's age 'scientific', the only way to bridge the discrepancy between the various outcomes seems to be to regard science somehow as a matter of interpretation of the 'facts' – including of course the decision which observations to interpret as facts in the first place. It does lead one to ponder again the question if – outside of poetry, and perhaps mathematics – facts of any permanence actually exist.

And so that same bold opening statement about the age of the world also, and perhaps more interestingly, draws attention to another central – if submerged – theme in the book: the tension between scientific and humanistic forms of scholarship. The confident presentation of scientific facts sits uneasily with the pursuit of history, which is always interpretation, always bound by current wisdom: a narrative needing to be retold over and over again to suit the local and temporal conditions of humanity's current insights and understanding of the world. These tensions are particularly strong in the face of the author's own almost religious faith in the status of scientific truth evinced in many places in the book.

But enough of these philosophic musings. The subject at hand is the importance of the Dutch contribution to twentieth-century scientific publish-

ing. This is notable by any standards, but extraordinary in relation to the country's size. Historically, we have witnessed this state of affairs before. The pivotal role of the seventeenth-century Dutch book trade in the dissemination of scholarship in Europe has been extensively documented. But the remarkable way the Dutch book trade managed to climb back out of the slump it had slid into in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has not yet received a similarly in-depth and comprehensive treatment. Of course this is in no small measure the consequence of the fact that there is so much more material – which it is not necessarily easy to access – and less historical distance from which to study it.

So what about Andriessse's central and intriguing question? Why *was* the Dutch presence on the international scene so disproportional? For a book historian it is tempting to look first for historical continuities. Andriessse does mention the need for retrospection, but does not really look back much beyond 1900, except anecdotally. This is a pity, as the position in the history of Dutch nineteenth-century publishing of the first and oldest of the publishing houses treated in the book, Martinus Nijhoff, offers one possible clue. The grand firm of Nijhoff, which is today the law imprint of Brill publishers, was founded in 1853. Besides publishing Nijhoff was also active in (antiquarian) bookselling with a decidedly international outlook. Amid the declining fortunes of Dutch publishing in the nineteenth century, international bookselling, both antiquarian and new, remained consistently strong. This led in the twentieth century to the growing Dutch prominence in international subscription agencies. After buying Martinus Nijhoff Inter-

national and Blackwell's Information Services, Swets (founded in 1901 in Amsterdam as Swets & Zeitlinger) has become the world's leading subscription management agency. At the end of the nineteenth century, where Andriess begins his narrative, international bookselling certainly contributed to the international outlook the firm of Nijhoff brought naturally to all its ventures, including publishing.

In publishing there was no such continuity as in the case of the antiquarian book trade. Despite the nineteenth-century Dutch fixation on its seventeenth-century prowess in the field of publishing, by then this was unmistakably a case of lost grandeur. The decline that had set in in the late eighteenth century had by the beginning of the nineteenth century become almost total as a result of the severe trading restrictions during the French period. Barring some very few exceptions, such as Luchtmans–Brill, international scholarly publishing had to reinvent itself from scratch, which it did, starting in the second half of the nineteenth century. Apart from Martinus Nijhoff, this revival included the firms of Bohn (founded in 1752) and Elsevier (1880). Although Bohn did show early signs of a relatively strong interest in academic and professional publishing, the firm's twentieth-century specialisation in medical publishing was yet to take place, and initially they published just as many humanities as science titles. The STM boom did not take off until the period Andriess investigates.

Rather than exploring this historical background in depth, Andriess's working hypothesis in trying to account for the Dutch prominence in scientific publishing is that it was the chance formation of teams of remarkable

publishers and scientists that was of paramount importance:

[W]e look, not for the double-talented, but for doubles, for those couples – of editor and publisher – who took to working together.

Here are some of those couples: Adriaan Fokker & Wouter Nijhoff; Fritz Radt & Ted Klautz; Earnest Rodd & Willem Gaade; Léon Rosenfeld or Kai Siegbahn & Daan Frank; Gerald Brown & Wim Wimmers; Konrad Akert & Jacques Remarque; Prakash Datta & Bart van Tongeren; Michael Lederer & Marc Atkins; Cornelis de Jager & Anton Reidel; and Tuzo Wilson & Frans van Eysinga.

We could easily name ten more. They belong to the science publishing world of the Netherlands, and enable us to understand its recent history. This, at least, is our thesis. The great quality of these couples must have been a cause of the undeniable success of Dutch publishing in the world market. (p. 9)

This fits in with the theme of the social context of publishing and the people-focused approach that I noted before. Yet thinking about it, this is hardly a satisfactory explanation. People being in the right place at the right time is a recurring theme, but as an explanation it somehow falls short of our expectations. Was it coincidence (in the chaos and happenstance mentioned earlier) that these all-important personal contacts were forged in the Netherlands? Why did not such duos as Andriess lists occur in other countries? Surely such happy people mixes could have happened anywhere. Indeed, frequently the key events described happened only partly in the Netherlands, and what is more, they often involved foreigners.

While the role of chance (and perhaps even the role of that age-old cliché of the Dutch trading spirit) should not be ruled out, rationally we would surely prefer an argument based on more substantial and convincing factors, including historical, geographical, and cultural ones. I am convinced that such an argument can indeed be formulated, and Andriess even provides most of its ingredients. However, perhaps because he is too focused on the couples thesis, he leaves that argument largely implicit – indeed, he hardly even comes back to the question at all. For the curious reader there is nothing for it but to piece together a convincing argument himself. This is certainly doable, using a modicum of common sense and the many clues Andriess is fortunately generous enough to sprinkle through the book.

In the most general terms the outline of such an argument could run as follows. International expansion is the theme that dominates the twentieth-century European, and later global, world of publishing as it did the world of commerce and enterprise at large. But the Dutch, lacking the sizeable home market of a Germany or France, naturally first looked abroad for publishing opportunities. In finding them, the country was aided by a number of felicitous historic events. Before WWI the Netherlands, with Van't Hoff (Utrecht), Van der Waals, Zeeman (both at Amsterdam), Lorentz, and Kamerlingh Onnes (both at Leiden), was the scene of some ground-breaking discoveries in physics, briefly making the country a focus of considerable international scientific attention. Along with the presence of just enough remaining scientific publishing nous (notably in the shape of the firm of Wouter Nijhoff) to catch the significance of this extraordinary

scientific outburst, this kindled a first small flame. This small flame was then, fortuitously, fed by a number of further factors. A crucial one is the diaspora of Jewish German intellectuals, including many scientists, following the rise to power of Hitler and National Socialism, which severely weakened the German scientific infrastructure. This, together with the fast growth of the American scientific infrastructure, caused the world's scientific epicentre to drift from Germany to America. In the linguistic change that this entailed – the search for a new *lingua franca* – the Dutch managed to seize the initiative. Dutch physicists, who were used to addressing their colleagues in French, German or English anyway, saw nothing out of the ordinary in, for example, starting a multilingual physics journal. The publication by Martinus Nijhoff of *Physica* in three languages began in 1933. Then Elsevier, which had in the 1930s begun to buy English language rights for various important German scientific reference works, entered into a joint venture in New York in 1937 for their publication in English, opening an office there in 1940. The rest, you might say, is history.

In this scenario, too, a certain amount of happenstance unmistakably prevails. However, when the opportunity presented itself, language and culture obviously played a central role in enabling the Dutch to seize the initiative, and it is good to examine it more closely. Again, Andriessse drops a number of hints on this extremely complex matter, without, however, garnering them into an argument. Andriessse's observation that the Dutch language area is so small that Dutch was never a contender to follow Latin as the *lingua franca* of science is of course correct, but it is only the first step. It is the attitude

that was taken toward this simple but incontrovertible fact (itself the product of historical accident, but never mind that) that was crucial. This attitude was one of a straightforward realistic appraisal, not marred by chauvinism or other sentiments. That this was indeed significant factor is certainly suggested by numerous observations made by Andriessse in passing. For example, as he duly notes, until the death of Ferdinand Springer in 1965, neither Springer-Verlag nor any other German science publisher took on any books or journals in English, because Springer 'continued to believe that German could regain its old role as an important language of science' (p. 164). And again, 'The French and German astronomers had found it hard to give up their national journals' (p. 169). Compare this with the real or perceived lack of self-importance in the case of the Dutch. That this non-chauvinistic attitude was a consciously cultivated Dutch national trait is suggested by a telling quote about Pierre Vinken: 'Publishing was an international business, and discussions about national identity were therefore "nonsense" to him.' (p. 240) However that may be, such calm acceptance of the facts must surely have helped the Dutch to act as a neutral force during that crucial time when English was establishing itself as the new *lingua franca* of science.

Most of the ingredients for this larger narrative are there, but they remain somewhat buried beneath the many detailed accounts of the individual publisher-scientist teams. This is a pity – however fascinating in themselves these accounts frequently are. For example, one feels privileged to be able to witness the bumbling beginnings of Elsevier's empire in science publishing in such casual but exquisite detail.

There is of course no simple answer to the question Andriessse poses in his introduction; rather, many fine strands combine to compose the semblance of an argument. Could it be that the Netherlands with their fine nose for the shift in the centre of scientific gravity from the Continent of Europe to the United States were a more likely bridge than other European countries between old Europe and new America as a result of their long tradition of being traders, go-betweens, where the ability to repress national chauvinism was a precondition for success? At the very least it was one of those fine strands, but I suspect it was a crucial factor. It is certainly an essential ingredient of that elusive Dutch 'trading spirit' that has helped to determine the country's fate for so many centuries. □

By Adriaan van der Weel,
Leiden University