

### Biographical note

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## Scouting for Popular Fiction between the World Wars

Adriaan van der Weel

It was March 1931 and the streets of London were covered in snow. Mr. Wouter Stuijbergen, recently arrived from Holland, was sitting in his rented room, feeling cold and rather lonely. He was reading a novel entitled *Kitty Carstairs*, by someone called J.J. Bell. Halfway through the book, he put it down and applied himself to the pleasant task of composing a letter to his old colleague and mentor, Mr. Douwes in Amsterdam:

Dear Mr. Douwes,

At the moment I am reading a book by the well-known English writer J.J. Bell, entitled *Kitty Carstairs*. Apparently there isn't a Dutch translation of it yet, since we are being offered the rights by a literary agent. So far — I have read about half — it appears to me to be quite a nice story. I think I will finish it tomorrow. It needs no changes to be made, and the English will be very easy to translate.<sup>1</sup>

Over the next few years, Wouter Stuijbergen, who was a member of the editorial staff of Drukkerij De Spaarnestad since 1919, was to write a few dozen letters to Douwes, one of his superiors. Stuijbergen's letters from various foreign postings discuss a wide range of professional activities in the world of books and publishing, and give a general account of his life abroad. But above all they contain detailed reports of his extensive professional reading of popular literature. They make clear that while Stuijbergen had been sent abroad to help De Spaarnestad in its drive to expand its business activities, his chief mission was to locate cheap sources of popular books for publication in the Netherlands.

The letters, which form part of the well-ordered but fragmentary Spaarnestad archive, not only bring to light the existence of such a functionary as Stuijbergen, acting in the capacity of what we would now call a scout, but also allow us to make a detailed reconstruction of his activities. The vast bulk of the fiction published by De Spaarnestad in the early 1930s was translated from British and American sources located by him. Besides information about the international book trade in general these unique letters give an insight into the self-censorship of a Catholic publisher and offer unusually detailed factual information about the trade in translation rights, the fees paid, methods used, print runs etcetera. The rich source of this correspondence allows us to go a long way towards recreating Stuijbergen's role as a scout, and to write a fascinating chapter in the history of the publication of popular reading matter in the Netherlands in the period leading up to World War II.

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<sup>1</sup> Archief Drukkerij De Spaarnestad, Noord-Hollands Archief, 100640, box 11, 'Boekuitgaven 1931-1943': letter to Mr. J.A.M. Douwes, Amsterdam, 11 March 1931. The cold and loneliness of the opening scene have, with some scholarly license, been taken from a letter of ten days earlier, 21 March 1931. To avoid cumbering the footnotes unnecessarily, I will omit the original Dutch texts. Note that all letters by Stuijbergen quoted below are from this source.

### *De Spaarnestad and its book publications*

De Spaarnestad was founded in 1906, when the *Nieuwe Haarlemsche courant* (itself founded in 1883 as the Catholic counterpart to the renowned *Oprechte Haerlemsche courant* of 1662) was bought from its previous owners. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Netherlands saw a ‘vertical social segregation’ of the main religious and political groups. This columnar division of Dutch society was not just based on political allegiance *or* faith, but on combinations of both in varying degrees of admixture, the chief ingredients being Catholicism, Protestantism, liberalism and socialism. Within the confines of its Roman Catholic vertical partition (some 40 per cent of the population) De Spaarnestad aimed to publish reading matter that fell safely within the margins prescribed by the church. The company maintained intimate relations with the Catholic hierarchy, especially with the Bishop of Haarlem, who, in return for a measure of control, at one stage even took a financial interest.<sup>2</sup>

Having started as a newspaper publisher De Spaarnestad soon branched out into periodicals. In 1910 it acquired the exploitation rights to *Katholieke illustratie*. Founded in 1850 this was one of the oldest family magazines in the Netherlands. The company was highly successful with its exploitation of the weekly *Katholieke illustratie* and, having cornered the market for Catholic family entertainment, started the publication of a series of illustrated weeklies in several city and regional editions, beginning with *De stad Amsterdam* in 1921 and ending with *Ons land*. These were later to merge with *Panorama*, which De Spaarnestad took over from A.W. Sijthoff in Leiden around 1929.<sup>3</sup> *Panorama* was an illustrated magazine intended like *Katholieke illustratie*, which it also resembled in many other respects, for a general readership — but in this case a non-denominational one. The expansion in illustrated magazine publication most likely resulted from the economic imperative to make better use of the investment in the rotogravure printing plant which the company had bought in 1911 to print *Katholieke illustratie*, and which had cost as much as 50,000 guilders.

To have the neutral *Panorama* compete with the company’s own *Katholieke illustratie* seems a surprising commercial decision, but it represents precisely the sort of internal competition which is typical of many of today’s large business conglomerates. At any rate, the purchase represented a pivotal moment in the company’s development from publishing for an almost entirely Roman Catholic to a more general readership (a process which was not completed till after WWII).<sup>4</sup>

Magazine publishing proved to be successful and profitable. In 1929 the illustrated magazines, excluding *Panorama*, had a combined circulation of 412,943.<sup>5</sup> The successful formula, in terms

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Chronologie Spaarnestad’, box 13, ‘Geschiedenis’.

<sup>3</sup> For the two years 1929-1930 the publisher was listed in the trade address book, *Sijthoffs adresboek voor den boekhandel*, as N.V. Uitgevers Maatschappij ‘Panorama’, Stationsweg 34a, Den Haag. In 1931, it was published by De Spaarnestad. The publication details given by the Dutch national union catalogue, NCC, are not correct.

<sup>4</sup> The real watershed had occurred less publicly in 1927, with the death of F. van der Griendt, who had been the company’s director since 1907. The company’s success in publishing the largest general-interest Dutch illustrated weekly nicely illustrates the Catholic emancipation in the inter-war period. Significantly, 1927 was also the year when De Spaarnestad began publishing its popular book series.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to the directors of the Maatschappij De Katholieke Illustratie (the owners of the title), 12 June 1929.

of editorial content, was the combination of pictorial content (photographs of picturesque spots in the Netherlands — frequently peaceful scenes of country life, apparently untouched by progress — and national and international events of a newsworthy or sensational nature, but also some drawings), and popular fiction in the form of short stories and serialised novels. Serialising fiction was one way to persuade readers to subscribe — and to remain subscribed: ‘Make sure not to miss a single installment’ was an almost weekly admonishment. If this slogan sounded a little lame, a more powerful incentive was the offer of free accident insurance for subscribers. The weekly photographs of railway, natural and other disasters would have increased the appeal of this free insurance, if only subconsciously. To make the link more explicit, there were regular brief vignettes of distressing cases of human frailty and the financial solace offered to survivors by the free accident insurance. In 1927, to add further to the attraction of taking out a subscription, De Spaarnestad began to exploit the concept of ‘premieboeken’.<sup>6</sup>

‘Premieboeken’ were popular novels, offered to readers at extremely low prices.<sup>7</sup> Taking De Hollandsche Bibliotheek as our example (the other series were very similar), prices were 17.5 cents (paper, stapled or sewn), and 70 cents (bound in linen). The books were printed on newsprint, probably using stereotypes on a rotary press. They were bound in illustrated paper covers printed in one or two colours (later full colour), or in cloth casings. (The hardcover editions may have had paper dust jackets; however, no trace of these survives.) The page length was uniform at 224 pages in seven 32-page quires printed from a single sheet.<sup>8</sup> In order to achieve such a uniform length, the type size and margins were varied or, as we shall see, the text itself was freely edited. The print run in 1931 was 135,000.<sup>9</sup>

### *In Search of Copy*

In 1932, De Spaarnestad published a detective novel entitled *Op zoek naar kopij* (‘In Search of Copy’) in its Spaarnestad-Bibliotheek.<sup>10</sup> Although it is probably entirely coincidental, the title of this book, by a man called Martin Berden, who was probably an editor of the Catholic daily *De Tijd*, reads like a programmatic description of Stuijbergen’s scouting job, which was to take him to London, Berlin and New York. His mission was to help find some some fifty or so book titles for De Spaarnestad’s book publishing programme every year (not counting titles bought for serialisation or for De Spaarnestad’s German operations).

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<sup>6</sup> *Katholieke illustratie* had been publishing book titles for its readers for some decades in the series *Leesbibliotheek voor christelijke huisgezinnen* (Library for Christian Families).

<sup>7</sup> ‘The original price of these [...] books, which is usually *f* 3.50 [guilders] to *f* 4.50 and more, has been reduced in our edition to a mere *f*0.15 [cents]’ (*Katholieke illustratie* 67 (1933), p. 1165).

<sup>8</sup> The original print order, to sister company ‘Het Centrum: Dagblad voor Nederland’, of 19 September 1927 survives (box 5, ‘Documenten’, 1925-1929).

<sup>9</sup> ‘A *premieboek* run is still 135,000 x 17 1/2 cents: a sum of around *f* 20,000’ (letter from Stuijbergen, London, 9 May 1931). By the middle of 1934 this had dwindled to 50,000. Stuijbergen forcefully denied any causal relationship between a fall of sales and the move of his scouting activities from London to New York in 1933: ‘If in 1930 we were able to sell more than 120,000 copies of a lousy writer like Garvice and in 1934 just 50,000 of authors like Kyne, Hill en Ruck, the cause of this decline is less the material itself than the general malaise’ (letter, New York, 13 July 1934).

<sup>10</sup> Haarlem, no date; its appearance was announced in *Katholieke illustratie* 66 (1932), p. 42.

In the selection of its titles De Spaarnestad had to bear in mind that it catered to a sizeable market of Catholic readers. *Panorama* was not a Catholic publication, but the firm itself remained inextricably bound up with the Catholic establishment, which it could not afford to alienate. This background placed its demands on the procurement of the 'right' type of fiction. Why did Stuijbergen have to go abroad to search for copy? The main reason was that the sheer quantity De Spaarnestad required was more than the Dutch market was capable of producing. The limited print runs that the small language area of the Netherlands allowed did not foster the institution of professional authorship. Translations had long been an important source of fiction in the Netherlands, especially of the more popular varieties. The lack of protection granted to foreign authors and publishers under Dutch copyright legislation was an added benefit, and one that was eagerly exploited.<sup>11</sup>

When De Spaarnestad turned to translations to fuel its ambitious book publishing programme, it did so in a more structured way than had ever been done before. In the early spring of 1931 Wouter Stuijbergen was despatched to London, presumably in order to create a permanent Spaarnestad presence there. No indication of the reasons for the decision can be found in the Spaarnestad archives, but it made sound business sense. With its much larger home market, London had long been a major publication centre for popular literature. Famous popular authors lived and worked there, such as Edgar Wallace, Baroness Orczy (the daughter of a Hungarian baron, who had married an Englishman), Ruby Ayres, Effie Adelaide Rowlands, and many others, most of them all but forgotten now. In addition, one cannot avoid the impression that during the inter-war period the Dutch public's taste in popular reading was moving increasingly away from France and Germany in favour of Britain and America. Prominent among the factors contributing to this shift was the sense that Britain and America were on the rise economically as well as culturally. From Stuijbergen's letters it becomes clear that the competition from Spaarnestad's rivals was sometimes fierce, and in London he found himself closer to the source.

Stuijbergen had been with the company for 12 years, and he was the founding editor of *Ons land*, one of the series of periodicals competing with the *Katholieke illustratie* and *Panorama*. Although on occasion his letters confer the impression of a Herculean, if not Sisyphean, labour, Stuijbergen proved up to the task of keeping the voracious presses of De Spaarnestad supplied with copy. In London he energetically set about developing a network, contacting all of the literary agents (of which he alleges there were as many as forty) as well as some individual authors (such as Edgar Wallace) and many publishers. The agents he mentions in his letters to Mr. Douwes include such well-known names as A.P. Watt & Son, Curtis Brown Ltd, Christy & Moore, and many others.

#### *Stuijbergen and the popular fiction market*

The fees for translation rights which Stuijbergen negotiated range from £8 to £15 per title on average (i.e., between 95 and 175 guilders). The amount varied according to territory (at £25 Germany was more expensive than the Netherlands), the nature of the resulting publication (serialisation was cheaper than book publication), and the fame of the author (Baroness Orczy demanded £45 for *A Child of the Revolution*, which Stuijbergen was not prepared to offer, as 'we normally pay no more than £15 for a good story').<sup>12</sup> But negotiating skills played a decisive role,

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<sup>11</sup> Cf Adriaan van der Weel, 'Dutch Nineteenth-century Attitudes to International Copyright', *Publishing History* 47 (2000), pp. 31-44.

<sup>12</sup> Letter, London, 6 April 1932.

as shown by the following account of his purchase of the serial-rights for Edgar Wallace's *The Devil Man*:

Watt & Son agree with the condition already mentioned, that the book rights may not be sold to another Dutch publisher until six months after signing the contract. I trust that I did a good job. Wallace procrastinated dreadfully, hoping to make a better deal. On Saturday I received a letter from his literary agent to the effect that £35 was not acceptable: they would await an improved offer by return of post. Monday morning I went straight to Watt and told him without more ado that Wallace could have £15 under the above-mentioned condition for the serial rights or else could go to the Devil. So they decided to accept. I think I should apply the 'take it or leave it' method more often; at any rate it has saved De Spaarnestad £20 this time.<sup>13</sup>

Stuifbergen's brief, insofar as it may be reconstructed from the correspondence, involved more than just scouting for possible book titles for translation. He also writes, for example, about renewing, and changing, the contracts with various international photo agencies, which were crucial to the illustrated weeklies. He bought drawings by British illustrators, and commissioned new ones, for the cover of *De humorist*.<sup>14</sup> De Spaarnestad's management were constantly on the lookout for business opportunities of all kinds. English advertisements, especially in the field of tourism, appear in their periodicals, and Stuifbergen may well have been involved as an intermediary. It is likely that he also investigated opportunities for various new ventures, such as co-publications and print orders.

Initially, the two series clamouring for titles were the Hollandsche Bibliotheek (publishing fortnightly) and the Spaarnestad Bibliotheek (monthly). In 1932 the Nieuwe Jeugdbibliotheek and in 1937 the Kennemer-serie (both monthly) were to be added to the list (although the Jeugdbibliotheek did publish a fair amount of Dutch material), and then there were the perennial serialisations in the company's many newspapers and magazines. The exact criteria for inclusion in any particular series are certainly not obvious from a browse through the titles actually published. They were, however, as clear to Stuifbergen as they were to all other parties concerned, namely his fellow editors, the management of De Spaarnestad and, probably, the readers too. And so with a firm and apparently rarely erring hand, Stuifbergen sifted his 'stories' and, discarding all material that was beyond redemption, sorted the remaining titles carefully into different piles. These he would give such labels as 'SB', 'HB', 'serial De Stad'.

De Spaarnestad had a predilection, often referred to in Stuifbergen's letters, for stories with 'a love interest', also in the case of the murder and mystery genres. Naturally, however, De Spaarnestad's Catholic character posed special demands on the author's handling of this sensitive theme. Though a love interest was virtually obligatory, it should not offend the Catholic morality of its readership — not to mention that of the Catholic hierarchy. (Given these restrictions, the narratives that were deemed publishable were in fact remarkably lurid. Their presentation too, in title and appearance, was as sensational as their cheap means of production allowed.)

In September 1933 the results of a reader survey of *Katholieke illustratie* found that readers preferred good Catholic Dutch books to translated ones (though Dante was thought acceptable).

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<sup>13</sup> Letter, London, 11 August 1931.

<sup>14</sup> *De humorist: Humoristisch weekblad* was founded in 1928; it ceased publication in 1948.

The editors were forced to reply, with obvious regret, that it was simply not possible to find such books:

Show us good Catholic Dutch authors who are capable of delivering good novels, suitable for a large, mixed audience, writers, moreover, who do not think it beneath their dignity to see their products sold at a low price, and we should be very grateful indeed!

Experience has, however, taught us that such authors may not be found these days, however hard we try. A small, limited print run of some few thousand copies at a price that most people cannot afford is still preferred to a print run of many tens of thousands at the exceptionally low price of 15 cents!

Stuifbergen was duly pressed by his superiors for more Catholic novels. However, as Stuifbergen explained to Douwes, the problem was more complicated than his colleagues at De Spaarnestad suspected:

There are plenty of Catholic authors to be found in England and America, but they don't write any Catholic novels, since they cannot find an audience for that type of writing. *Mrs. Kathleen Norris*, one of the cleverest American authors, Catholic and very versatile, has written about 40 stories, but almost all her books are useless to us (adultery, divorce, etc.). *Ernst* [sic] *Hemingway*, a Catholic convert, has published the novel *Farewell to Arms*, which was later later turned into a movie. This story is 100% unsuitable. *Mrs. Belloc-Lowndes*, a sister of the famous Hilaire Belloc, writes books like *The Avenger* [*The Lodger*], *Another man's wife*, etc. etc. *Lucille Borden* has written some six or seven Catholic novels, flexible as Wrigley's chewing gum and as tough as a buffalo in the zoo. *Willa Cather*, also a Catholic novelist, would be unreadable for our audience because of her far too liberal opinions; *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, a Catholic convert, is unintelligible to the average reader; *Hilaire Belloc*, more of the same; *Father Knox* writes horrific murder and mystery stories; *Sheila Kaye-Smith*, an English Catholic novelist, has some days ago perpetrated on us the novel *Superstition Corner*, a story from Queen Elizabeth's time. The content: a married man has a duel with his wife's lover; a lapsed priest is in love with a Catholic girl. She does not want to marry him, since, as she puts it: 'We should be a priest and his concubine'.<sup>15</sup>

If even countries like Britain and America, Meccas of popular writing, had no better supply of Catholic material to offer, there was clearly only one way out, and that was to accept whatever material could be found, however imperfect, and then to subject it to a process of judicious bowdlerisation by editor and/or translator. Hence Stuifbergen's satisfaction that *Kitty Carstairs* 'needs no changes to be made'. Perhaps because of its rather direct connections with the hierarchy, De Spaarnestad was not required to submit its books to the Catholic censor.<sup>16</sup> This, however, would of course have been all the more reason to exert the utmost care. Even when a book was selected, there always remained the need for applying the finest of combs to its contents.

Often Stuifbergen leaves the nature and extent of the changes he has made — or suggests should be made — unspecified, as is the case with his comment on Patrick Wynnton's *The Agent Outside*:

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<sup>15</sup> Letter, New York, 12 May 1934.

<sup>16</sup> The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* was still an important guide for publishers. Many books intended for Catholic readers in the Netherlands at that time carry an official 'nihil obstat'.

A few changes need to be made to make the work suitable for our readers.<sup>17</sup>

Concerning some titles, however, he was moved to write at greater length. After providing a synopsis of *A Child of the Revolution* by Baroness Orczy, Stuijbergen continues:

It would be topping if we could enrich the H.B. series with this book. However, there is one *but!* There are some sections that need to be toned down or adapted. The following passage, for example: ‘Le bon Dieu, he thought, only bothered Himself about rich and powerful people — nobles, bishops and their ilk — so what was the good of murmuring [sic] prayers which were never listened to, and asking for things that were never granted.’ And here’s another one: ‘Well! if le bon Dieu wouldn’t help the poor and downtrodden to defend themselves against injustice, then they would fight on their own without help from anywhere.’ There are many such dangerous statements that need to be cut or changed. I am convinced that *A child of the revolution* can be transformed into a great book, provided that the translation is produced by a well-versed translator.<sup>18</sup>

Often the editorial interventions mean the difference between a HB and SB fate — where the difference was possibly that between books for a general public (HB) and books more specifically for Catholics (SB):

The novel *Princess Proxy* by J. Russell Warren was bought by us for £8. I had initially intended this work for the H.B., but with proper care a good translator could transform it into an S.B. Mr. Van der Valk could probably do this.<sup>19</sup>

There were other drawbacks inherent in the system of procuring novels from abroad. Books might, for example, need to be adapted because their setting was regarded as too foreign for Dutch readers. This was the case with *Nellie* by Charles Garvice, which Stuijbergen laboured to make suitable for the Hollandsche Bibliotheek:

Yet another Garvice you will no doubt say. But this is a very nice story, and exciting to boot. ... I have cut the claptrap about lords en ladies as much as possible, turned nobility into common people, and got rid of all the society-blather altogether. The result is a sort of revitalised Garvice.<sup>20</sup>

It is not clear from the correspondence who took the initiative, but not long after Stuijbergen settled in London plans were being made to found an international translation rights agency in Amsterdam.<sup>21</sup> This was a rather bold venture, especially in view of the fact that the Netherlands

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<sup>17</sup> Letter, Kew Gardens, 5 October 1931.

<sup>18</sup> Letter, London, 20 March 1932. Hypnotism, too, was apparently regarded as a doubtful subject for Catholics: ‘On Saturday I finished reading *Thou shalt not kill* by Mrs Belloc Lowndes. I haven’t been able to buy it yet, since I first needed to ask Mr. Weterings for advice about a case of hypnosis that it deals with. It will probably be acceptable, but I prefer to be sure about it’ (letter, London, 2 November 1931). A letter of 9 November shows that Mr. Weterings’ verdict was positive.

<sup>19</sup> Letter, London, 13 February 1932.

<sup>20</sup> Letter, New York, 23 January 1933.

<sup>21</sup> The plans are first mentioned in Stuijbergen’s letter of 17 November 1931.

had no tradition of such intermediation, and that a major part of the proposed agency's market was presumably those Dutch publishers of popular novels who were operating in direct competition with De Spaarnestad. In addition, negotiations with the London literary agencies to which Stuijbergen introduced the new agency's services proved tough. Nevertheless, there did appear to be a market. Some time presumably in March Stuijbergen was able to report that Curtis Brown had sent 40 'stories' for the new agency to deal with, and that another agent, Stephen Aske, had placed his entire Dutch business in the agency's hands. Shortly afterwards, on 9 February 1932, the foundation of a publication and literary agency by the name of Tolle Moras was announced in the *Nieuwsblad voor den boekhandel*.<sup>22</sup> The agency's name, meaning 'seize without delay', was probably not without significance in the competitive world of popular publishing.

The persistence among Dutch publishers of the notion that copyright on translations was a hindrance to the transnational flow of culture<sup>23</sup> (and to the stream of income to be generated from it), as well as the fact that the US had still not joined the Berne Convention, may help to account for the failure of Tolle Moras, of which no more was heard after the announcement of its foundation. Certainly from Stuijbergen's correspondence we may infer that if there was any law regulating the behaviour of publishers in the field of popular fiction it was that of the jungle:

In my opinion [...] *The Flying Courtship* by E.J. Rath, is suitable for serialisation in *Stad Amsterdam*. There is a story connected to this novel. I discovered it in April 1933, and was about to send it to Haarlem when I became aware that the Committee for Translations in Amsterdam had awarded it to a publisher in Amsterdam the week before. *The Flying Courtship* was first published in 1927; so it was purely by chance that one of our competitors had beaten me to it. This would have been impossible had the book been *new*. Now the curious thing is that the book has still not appeared. The Amsterdam publisher has managed to renew his publication rights some three times, but a publication in Dutch has still not appeared. I suspect that he is waiting for better times and is attempting to retain the Dutch copyright by applying for renewals. We could really get the better of him if we started serialisation unexpectedly. I doubt that there would be anything in our way: *Rath*, the author, is an American and his book was first published in the United States. The story as such is not so very long, and serialisation could be completed within a month or two.<sup>24</sup>

And again, shortly after the publication of E.J. Rath's *Too Much Efficiency* in the HB:

There are other publishers in Holland who have an eye on Rath, so I'm sending every story I can lay my hands on.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The *Nieuwsblad voor den boekhandel* (9 februari 1932, p. 105) lists the agency in the 'Newly founded' section: 'Exploitatatie maatschappij "Tolle Moras" (Grip without hesitation), in Amsterdam. Purpose: the exploitation of a publishing business, act as an agent for publishers, authors etc.'

<sup>23</sup> 'Even after the possible passing of this Bill, our country is likely to remain so gluttonous, especially regarding its huge consumption of light reading, that our renowned Dutch wit will not be able to find enough to feed on and will have to keep foraging abroad' (*De uitgever* (1931), p. 82).

<sup>24</sup> Letter, New York, 13 July 1934. The Committee for Translations was the body responsible for regulating the Dutch book trade in regard to the publication of translations.

<sup>25</sup> Letter, New York, 26 October 1934.

In the middle of his posting in London, Stuijbergen moved briefly to Berlin. About his stay there we don't know much except that he was in the city for at the most four weeks, around October 1931, and that, for whatever reason, he did not consider his activities there to have been very successful. This may well have been because German popular writing did not have the same appeal in the Netherlands as its Anglo-Saxon counterpart. More than once he discusses the setback in terms of the number of titles De Spaarnestad held in portfolio after his Berlin sojourn. Presumably he was there on the same scouting mission, since the title lists he mailed from New York in the first four months of 1933 name a couple of German titles. Vice versa, after his return to London his records also included titles for De Spaarnestad's German office.<sup>26</sup>

At the end of 1933 Stuijbergen left London for New York. In New York, as in London, his work involved a great deal more than just locating suitable titles for De Spaarnestad. Business in the US, which had still not signed the Berne Convention, was pleasantly straightforward:

The writer [S.S. Smith, of *The Glacier Mystery*] is a subject of Uncle Sam — so we needn't worry about translation rights.<sup>27</sup>

Selecting illustrations for the Spaarnestad publications proved an equally informal, if apparently strenuous, affair:

I have augmented the Koning Hermelijn-series of Mr. Vierhout in the *Humorist* with some forty new pictures; he can now continue the weekly publication for about a year. It was quite an effort to collect these illustrations. I bought a large number of old *New Yorkers* in second-hand shops and cut them out. At least it's a nice series, and it doesn't cost us anything. I also thought of Witte Raaf. The directors have received some seventy or eighty illustrated anecdotes from me, which I collected from old humorous magazines. Some are really funny, and probably haven't yet been published in the Netherlands. I shall try to find more.<sup>28</sup>

### *Concluding remarks*

The Stuijbergen correspondence is a unique source of information about the popular fiction publishing programme of De Spaarnestad. The company embarked on its ambitious programme in the late 1920s as part of its commercial strategy to stimulate subscriber loyalty. The programme presented a number of challenges. Not only was there a shortage of Catholic popular books in the Netherlands, there was a shortage of Dutch popular books in the Netherlands in general. Even abroad, Catholic popular books were difficult to find. What could be found was a large supply of foreign fiction that was sufficiently popular as well as sufficiently cheap to warrant the extra expense of translation and editorial time. The solution to De Spaarnestad's hunger for copy was to find the least offensive and cheapest popular titles from the major — and fashionable — production centres of popular books: London and New York, and to adapt them to suit De Spaarnestad's requirements as a Catholic publisher.

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<sup>26</sup> In a letter from London of 17 November 1931, for example, Stuijbergen refers to buying the German rights of *The Brute* by Douglas Newton for £15.

<sup>27</sup> Letter, New York, 31 March 1934.

<sup>28</sup> Letter, New York, 12 October 1933. *De Witte Raaf* was a humorous supplement to *Katholieke illustratie*, 1932-1934.

De Spaarnestad was not the only publisher on the lookout for cheap popular fiction, and competition was often fierce. Sending Wouter Stuijbergen to London — *ad fontes* so to speak — was a way of pre-empting that competition. In London, Stuijbergen's job was primarily getting to know the right people locally: everything revolved around networking and the negotiation of deals. The correspondence shows that Stuijbergen in effect functioned as what we would today call a scout. The existence of such a function has not been documented anywhere else for the period, at least not in the Netherlands. While Stuijbergen's scouting operations for De Spaarnestad's book publications were substantial, at times they give the impression of being inspired by sheer amateur enthusiasm. With the benefit of hindsight, of course, we know that after WWII De Spaarnestad was to become one of the largest Dutch publishing and printing consortia, VNU. In this light we can more easily recognize the serious business side of the operations. Obviously the trade in copyrights was lucrative, even after 1931, when the Netherlands finally made up its mind in to subscribe in full to the Berne Convention. Stuijbergen's work was very varied and his responsibilities ranged much more widely than supplying the book series with titles: he was alert to business opportunities of all kinds.<sup>29</sup> He was also hard working and efficient, and made rapid progress. A progression from notes written by hand on plain ruled notepaper in a rented room in Fulham to a proud letterhead featuring a more salubrious address in Kew Gardens (and the arrival of an assistant) took no more than a year.

About the reasons why Stuijbergen was moved to New York we know just as little as we do about why he was originally sent to London. It was obviously attractive for De Spaarnestad to have Stuijbergen in a country that produced a huge amount of popular writing *and* was not a signatory to the Berne Convention. Indeed it would not be idle to speculate that he was sent there precisely because the Netherlands had recently joined the Berne Convention. This had, after all, put an end to the old Dutch claim that — since the Netherlands were not bound by the Convention — any money proffered to British authors and publishers should be considered as a windfall. The free-for-all on offer in the U.S. more than made up for the loss of this bargaining advantage, for American authors and publishers had no bargaining position at all. However this may be, the absence of any need for financial negotiations made New York an entirely different working experience to Stuijbergen. Without the need to negotiate with either authors or publishers, his operations were much more solitary, if not downright secretive. The letters barely mention any human contact. All he did was hunt for writing — new or old — that had not previously been published in the Netherlands, and make sure that De Spaarnestad could be the first to claim it.

In its international orientation and aspirations, De Spaarnestad was typical of its time. Many of the well-known multinationals of Dutch origin, such as Unilever, Shell, Elsevier, and Wolters Kluwer, have their international roots in the 1930s. It is fascinating to see how Stuijbergen, almost casually, gained a first toehold in the English-speaking world, thereby preparing for the company's future international expansion. De Spaarnestad was already active in Belgium and Germany, and was about to launch into France. Its London office would be incorporated in the 1950s.

Culturally, De Spaarnestad's book publishing programme offers a fascinating example of the many ways in which popular reading was struggling to gain a legitimate place in the interwar period. More specifically, it shows De Spaarnestad's attempt at creating its own, Roman Catholic, brand of

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<sup>29</sup> Indeed, after Stuijbergen settled back in Haarlem he was soon, in 1941, to take up a much more senior position as editor-in-chief of *Libelle* and *Panorama*.

popular literature in the face of the flood of popular culture washing over the country. Recognising that this tide could not be stemmed, the company did all it could do to minimise the damage. The editor writing about the outcome of the 1933 *Katholieke illustratie* reader survey was quite explicit about the nature of its premium books as ‘innocent entertainment reading for the masses’.<sup>30</sup> That De Spaarnestad’s cheap series were published and sold entirely outside of the retail trade is illustrative of the divide that still persisted between popular books and the literary establishment. De Spaarnestad’s book publishing programme has left little trace in the NCC (the national union catalogue) or in Brinkman’s (the national bibliography) before 1931, and none whatsoever in *Het Nederlandsche boek* (an annual catalogue of new books for the general book buying public, sponsored by the Dutch publishers’ association). After 1931 titles begin to appear in the translation rights listings in the *Nieuwsblad voor den boekhandel* and in Brinkman’s. Even then, the vast amount of translated fiction serialised in the popular periodicals remains completely absent from the bibliographic record.

De Spaarnestad’s book series are significant in terms of both the number of titles and their large print runs, and the mechanics of their publication give more than a hint of what went on in the submerged part of the inter-war book trade iceberg. Greater scholarly attention to this vast bulk of barely recorded publishing activity would seem to be amply warranted.

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<sup>30</sup> *Katholieke illustratie* 67 (1933), p. 1164.