

OLD AND RARE BOOKS*by Ton and Gé Bolland – Somsen [4750 and 109]*

*In the centre of Amsterdam, quite close to the Anne Frank house and the Westertoren (West Tower), has been an antiquarian bookshop since 1897 which is run today by **Ton and Gé Bolland – Somsen**.*

In 1897 Hendrik Arnold van Bottenburg set up a bookshop / antiquarian bookshop and publishing firm at the Prinsengracht. The address at the Prinsengracht turned out to be very well chosen! A few hundred yards from the Free University, which was situated at the Keizersgracht at the time.

The ties between Van Bottenburg and the Free University were very tight.

Publishing firm and bookshop

Most students, especially the future theologians and lawyers, bought their books at Van Bottenburg. Later, having written a thesis, most of them returned to Van Bottenburg to have it published. Many professors also published their studies at Van Bottenburg. With Abraham Kuyper, founder of the Free University, political leader of the Dutch Reformed and Prime Minister for four years, Van Bottenburg had a special relationship. Kuyper was chief editor of the newspaper 'De Standaard' and Van Bottenburg was its financial manager.

Especially in the twenties and thirties Van Bottenburg developed into an influential and big publishing firm and bookshop.

The war years 1940 – 1945 were very difficult. A resistance group had settled in the big building at the Prinsengracht and students of the Free University had secret meetings there. The Germans had forbidden student organisations.

The founder of the firm died quite suddenly in 1941. His son Arnold, together with his wife Hilly, continued the business. A dangerous time, for Arnold was active in the Resistance. The first issues of the by then still underground paper *Trouw* were printed there most secretly. Arnold was betrayed and caught by the Germans and taken to a concentration camp. Especially for Mrs Van Bottenburg this was a very difficult time. Happily her husband survived the camp.

After the war the business had to be built up again from scratch. Several changes were carried out. The publishing department declined, the bookshop remained stable but the antiquarian bookshop and the book auctions became more and more important.

Arnold van Bottenburg died fairly young and his wife continued the business for some time.

In 1969 she sold the bookshop and the rest to Ton.

Ton and Gé owners together

The world of books was not unknown to us. Actually we had been working in the business for years. Gé in a bookshop and Ton in the antiquarian bookshop. The business we could take over went for 100% with our education and interests. We have never regretted this step for a single moment. At the beginning we continued the business as we found it. Later it became possible to

implement our own ideas. The bookshop declined more and more but the antiquarian bookshop started growing tremendously. The publishing firm grew bigger and bigger as well. We published many scientific studies, theses etc. almost exclusively in the field of theology and history, in which church history was an important element.

In the eighties the work in the publishing firm grew so drastically that there was less and less time for the other departments. After consulting our accountant we decided to sell the publishing firm and to specialise much more in antiquarian books. This turned out to be a fortunate choice.

Through the years we had built up an extensive circle of relations, both at home and abroad. We posted our catalogues with old and rare books to our relations. Very often they handed these catalogues over to friends who also collected old books or to librarians of Universities where they were employed.

Theology and church history

We have invested much time and money in making contacts ourselves. In the past 15 years we have grown into one of the biggest and best-known antiquarian bookshops with the specialization theology and church history. We are quite regularly asked to buy libraries of monasteries. Many monasteries in Europe are being closed. It is important to find a use for such libraries. When we have bought the library of a monastery we make a catalogue that is posted worldwide. We also buy books and libraries from private collectors.

Sometimes a newly acquired library is completely resold. This happened some years ago. We received a request from Switzerland to purchase a complete library. Ton went there first for appraisal. Soon the deal was made. It was the library of a professor of church history who had died. He really owned a unique collection. It was not difficult to sell the library for we have many requests for special collections. There are libraries in the USA, Japan and Korea we work for. This Swiss library suited the collection of a Korean library perfectly well. After some correspondence, some phone calls etc. the complete Swiss library went to Korea.

We also buy many old Bibles from the 17th and

18th centuries. There are quite a few people who are interested to buy them. Some people buy these Bibles as a memory of their parental home and will hand them down afterwards to a son or a daughter as an heirloom.

Quite regularly emigrants who want to buy something in the field of history like a book, especially with topographical maps, something about the history of the town or province where they used to live, approach us. In most cases we can manage to find something that suits their desires. If there is no book then there is the possibility that there is a beautiful topographical map, showing something of the town where they lived or where their ancestors came from.

Travelling and appraisals

Our business is extremely fascinating. We have very good contacts with libraries, scientists and private collectors. Many relationships have developed into friendships.

There is one aspect of our business I have not yet mentioned and that is travelling!

In order to buy books and libraries we travel throughout Europe, which we enjoy very much.

Visiting other countries and other cities is very fascinating. Gé does not always accompany me to the business address but she is always there for pleasant company and for the first negotiations. This year, for example, we were in Vienna in the period of Advent. I had to appraise a library of the Jesuits and Gé visited the city and some museums. In the evening we deliberated quite extensively and the following day I concluded the negotiations. We stayed in Vienna that weekend where we enjoyed the atmosphere, a good concert and the beautiful city.

Thus our business, in which we have to work hard, also affords the possibilities to enjoy the beauty of nature and the splendour of cities. This is stimulating to carry on enthusiastically after a journey.

Fortunately we are still young, 58 and 57.

Sometimes people ask us: 'When do you stop working?' And then we say: 'Never!'

This work is our hobby and we love it and we cannot miss it.

We do hope that we will be able to be at everybody's service for a long time. ■



Ton Bolland and Gé Somsen - Bolland in front of their monumental building at the Pinsengracht (the house with the staircase and gate)