

The Ruusbroec Institute and its library

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Establishment

The Ruusbroec Institute Library developed alongside the vision of its founders, led by Father Stracke († 1970), whose aim was to study the history of spirituality in the Low Countries. When Stracke received his doctorate in Germanic Philology from Leuven in 1903-1904 with a thesis on the lives of Christina of Sint-Truiden and Lutgardis of Tongeren, his mentor Louis Scharpé († 1935) encouraged him in his ambition to establish the *Bibliotheca Ascetica Patrum Societatis Jesu Provinciae Flandrensis*. This central library of the Order would provide the necessary resources and study materials for conducting research into the spirituality of the Jesuit Society in the Low Countries between the Counter Reformation and the eighteenth century. This was because the *Bibliographie de la Compagnie de Jésus*, assembled in twelve successive parts by Augustin and Alois De Backer († 1873 and 1883 respectively) and Carlos Sommervogel († 1902), was deemed to be in need of expansion and improvement with regard to the Jesuit writers of both the southern and northern Low Countries.

However, since ascetic and mystical writings had often been overlooked and treated disparagingly in Dutch literary history books, and in light of the emancipation of *Arm Vlaanderen* (Poor Flanders) – Stracke's remarkable speech to the Katholieke Vlaamsche Wacht in Borgerhout on 13 November 1913 – the original plan, which was never actually realized, gradually transformed into a more general exploration of the Low Countries' spiritual history, beginning in the Middle Ages.

Three Jesuits, all Germanics graduates of the Leuven Alma Mater – Desideer A. Stracke († 1970), Jozef Van Mierlo († 1958) and Leonce Reypens († 1972) – were the founding scholars of a new working community formed in 1925. Stracke immersed himself in the study of the Christianization of the Low Countries and the lives of the Merovingian saints, while Van Mierlo and Reypens turned their attention to Hadewijch and Ruusbroec, respectively. In 1913, under the direction of the Ghent medievalist Willem De Vreese († 1938) and with the help of their colleague Jozef-Jan Nieuwenhuyzen († 1958), who later joined the Norbertines in Postel, these three men searched the libraries of the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy for mystical texts from the Low Countries contained within medieval manuscripts and incunabula. The following year, Stracke published the results of their research trip in the *Verslagen en Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Vlaamsche Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde* (Ghent, 1914, p. 750-788). Over 20 000 artefacts, including devotional books and working tools essential to the study of the history of spiritual devotion in the Low Countries, were assembled in Leuven. Reflecting in 1935 upon Stracke's restless zeal in collecting all kinds of devotional artefacts (mainly prints) from religious folk history, Titus Brandsma († 1942), a Carmelite friar and professor from Nijmegen (and one of the first Dutch staff members) noted: "If there was any cause for regret among the previous owners, having relinquished a lovely old book to the engaging Father Stracke, they need not to be sorry since they couldn't have given it to a better person, and in fact, it was in better hands with him than it ever had been".

The need to build a library along with a systematic approach to the research compelled the pioneers to relocate to Antwerp in 1924-1925, where they settled in a separate wing of the College of Our Lady. Meanwhile, a fourth Jesuit, the classicist Jan-Baptist Poukens († 1962), came to join them. He had originally been working for the Bollandists in Brussels but his Flemish sensibilities had prevented him from settling there. Now, the time was ripe to go ahead and found the Institute. The founders decided to name the Institute after the great Brabantine mystic Jan van Ruusbroec, who they considered to be the embodiment of contemplation in its highest and purest form since the dawn of spirituality in the Low Countries. Jan van Ruusbroec, originally from Brussels, lived from 1293 to 1381. Following his

time as chaplain at St Gudula's in Brussels, he joined two other St Gudula priests, one of whom was his uncle, in order to found Groenendael Priory at Hoeilaart in the Sonian Forest. As their first prior, Jan van Ruusbroec became known for his kindness; people affectionately called him the 'good prior'. In 1909 he was beatified by Pope Pius X, and in the Flemish dioceses he was venerated as 'John the Astonishing' on 2 December, the date of his death.

Early Years

In 1926, during the closing sessions of the Flemish Scientific Congresses in Ghent, Stracke gave a lecture entitled *On literature and mysticism in the Low Countries* (Antwerp, 1926), in which he explained what he meant by 'the history of spirituality in the Low Countries'. In 1927, he and his colleagues set up a quarterly journal entitled *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, thus filling a void in the Dutch-language literary canon and catering to a growing interest in spirituality across Western Europe. This interest had become apparent in the preceding years in the emergence of a new set of scientific journals in this area: *La vie spirituelle* (1919) and the *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* (1920) in France, *La vida sobrenatural* (1921) and *Manresa* (1925) in Spain, and *Zeitschrift für Ascese und Mystik* (1925) in Germany. The publication's subtitle, 'Journal for the history of spirituality in the Low Countries from the conversion to Christianity to circa 1750', clearly stated its purpose: the historical study of spirituality, both in literary and popular expressions, in Dutch linguistic and cultural regions including northern France and the Rhineland between the sixth century and the end of the Ancien Régime, when, under the influence of eighteenth century rationalism, an unmistakable decline occurred in pious life. The intention was by no means "to ground the theory of the inner life in more robust theological foundations, nor to describe it or explain it in more accurate psychological terms", which was a type of analysis more in keeping with the journal *Ons Geestelijk Leven*, founded a few years earlier in 1921. The word "spirituality" or "piety" (Dutch: *vroomheid*) in the subtitle deserves some explanation. Stracke, an outspoken man, defended this term to Catholics from the north (= Netherlands) who felt the word had a certain Protestant feel to it, asserting that they needed to reclaim this word for themselves, because it was full of accurate meaning: in fact, the word applies to both ascetism and mysticism.

From the outset, the aim was to work towards collaboration with the Netherlands. There was a need for a common journal for the Low Countries collectively, and in this respect the Institute played a pioneering role long before any talk of cultural integration surfaced. Titus Brandsma took the initiative of launching the popular series *Bloemen van Ons Geestelijk Erf* (1929-1932, NS 1949-1973), which published medieval Dutch literature in its original form and juxtaposed it with a contemporary translation in Dutch for the edification of a broadly cultured and loyal readership. This series continued under the name *Ruusbroec hertaald* when, in a solo undertaking, Father Lodewijk Moereels († 1986) – director of the Ruusbroec Institute from 1945 till 1973 – made the writings of Jan van Ruusbroec available to the general public by publishing them through Lannoo (see below) between 1976 and 1983. Brandsma is also to thank for the 'Congresses of the editorial team and staff of *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, which were held in Nijmegen in 1930 and 1931 and in Heeswijk (Berne Abbey) in 1934, attracting considerable interest from both north and south. More recently, in 1989 and 1993, the Ruusbroec Institute held two conferences in Antwerp with, respectively, a threeday symposium on *Vrouwen en mystiek in de Nederlanden, 12de-16de eeuw* (ed. Th. Mertens, Antwerp, 1994) and a seminar on '*Siet de brudegom comt*' respectively. *Facetten van 'Die geestelijke brulocht' van Jan van Ruusbroec* (ed. Th. Mertens, Kampen, 1995) on the 700th anniversary of Ruusbroec's birth.

Highlights from the early years of the Ruusbroec Institute include the commemoration of the 550th anniversary of Ruusbroec's death in 1931 with the publication of a commemorative edition of *Jan van Ruusbroec: Leven, werken*, and the establishment of the scientific series *Studiën en Tekstuitgaven van Ons Geestelijk Erf*, which currently consists of 25 parts. Part 20, once completed, will contain the prestigious publication of Ruusbroec's collected works in ten

volumes, thus comprising the definitive new "critical" edition of his writings. These were previously published in 1932-1934 (four vols., Mechelen, Het Kompas & Amsterdam, De Spieghel), and later reissued – this time with an improved layout and new insight into the authenticity of some texts – in 1944-1948 (four vols., Tielt, Lannoo), albeit with only a limited degree of completeness. In the new version, the medieval Dutch text is accompanied by a modern English translation and the 1552 Latin translation by the Cologne Carthusian Laurentius Surius († 1578). So far, a total of seven volumes have been published by Lannoo in Tielt, initially in collaboration with Brill in Leiden (vols. 1-2, 1981) and later with Brepols in Turnhout (vols. 3 et seq., 1988-). The latter publishers are set to compile the complete works of Ruusbroec in the renowned series *Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis*.

Ruusbroec House

As the number of books in the collection grew, the Ruusbroec Institute was forced to look for more spacious headquarters. In 1931, the Ruusbroec members moved out of the College of Our Lady, where there was an acute shortage of classrooms, to an adjacent townhouse property located at Rubenslei 15 in order to reorganize the library, which in 1933 numbered 17 000 items (De Standaard, 15 april 1933). In 1937-1938, they moved again and settled in an eighteenth century townhouse built before the French Revolution located at Prinsstraat 17, close to the St. Ignatius College of Commerce. This property was to be named Ruusbroec House. On 27 April 1937, the feast of the Dutch Jesuit saint Petrus Canisius († 1597) – who, oddly enough, could easily have become the Institute's namesake when it was founded in 1925 – the Institute finally had its statues approved canonically by Superior General Włodimir Ledóchowski († 1942) in Rome. This official confirmation and approval did not come about easily: Stracke actually had to make a personal visit to the Father General in November 1936 in order to convince him of the international importance of the spiritual history of the Low Countries while assuring him that such study would not stand in the way of the Bollandists's scientific work in the area.

Inside the Institute, things were not going according to plan either. The energy and enthusiasm of the earlier years had abated somewhat. The question arose as to whether the Institute should be located elsewhere and there was even talk of a possible move to Nijmegen. The creation of new Order journals, also engaged in historical research, led to the Institute's losing some of its employees, while the journal's financial struggles – caused by its obviously limited market – also increased the pressure. The Second World War, then, caused a certain amount of friction between north and south. In 1945, with the advent of Stracke's charismatic successor Father Moereels, the Institute was given a new impetus.

University institution

Under Father Moereels's leadership, which lasted 28 years, a new generation of researchers was introduced: Dutchman Bernard Spaapen in 1946 († 1977), Albert Ampe in 1947 (until 1997), Jozef Andriessen in 1955 and Albert Deblaere from 1956 to 1958 († 1994). The latter's appointment was short-lived but had a great influence on the next generation of researchers who took office at the end of 1973, when the Ruusbroec Institute – without losing its identity – was integrated into at the University Faculties of Saint Ignatius Antwerp (UFSIA) as the 'Centre for Spirituality' in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. Meanwhile, Father Moereels had passed the age limit to work at the university and subsequently moved to the Jesuit house in Heverlee (Leuven) in order to devote himself, undisturbed, to an old dream – the retranslation of the works of Jan van Ruusbroec (see above).

In 1974, the baton was passed on to Jos Alaerts (until 1989) and Paul Mommaers, and Paul Verdeyen in 1978. In 1985, the Jesuits were joined by the Nijmegen Dutch scholar Thom Mertens, who succeeded Father Andriessen at the Ruusbroec Institute. Then, in 1989, Father Alaerts was given other duties within the Order and passed on to his colleague Guido de Baere

the difficult task of bringing the critical edition of the collected works of Jan van Ruusbroec to a successful conclusion (G. de Baere, 'De editie van Ruusbroecs *Opera Omnia* in wording. Bij het verschijnen van *Vanden XII beghinen*', in *Ons Geestelijk Erf*, 74, 2000, p. 255-263). In the near future two new researchers are expected to succeed the Jesuits Verdeyen and Mommaers who, respectively, will retire in 2000 and 2001. They will function within the new structures of the Religious Sciences department (as the Ruusbroec Institute is now called following the overhaul of university education and research structures which took effect in academic year 1998-1999). This new structure entails a broadening of horizons with regard to research into spirituality, along with the assurance, however, that the Institute's own independent research, as outlined by its founders, could continue unhindered.

A new library

In the Ruusbroec house (Prinsstraat 17) the Institute was still lacking its own library. The books piled up, constituting a very real fire hazard, while the ever-increasing numbers of visitors were unable to find a quiet spot to work undisturbed. At the first jubilee celebrations in 1950, the library's collection already numbered 40 000 volumes. Thanks to financial support from the estate of Antwerp industrialist Lieven Gevaert († 1935), an adjacent building, formerly belonging to a coffee roasting company, was purchased in 1952 and converted in 1953-1954 into a modern, comparatively fire-proof book storage facility, where 50 000 volumes immediately found a home. A more accessible reading room was specially designed for visitors, providing comfortable surroundings for conducting academic research. This material overhaul proved to be a worthwhile investment when UFSIA was established a few years later in 1965, and the library increasingly began to provide other services to students; for a while it even functioned as a seminar library for history students.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning, in passing, a number of figures relating to the size of the collection: in 1961, the catalogued filing cabinets contained a total of 90 000 index cards documenting 51 000 volumes, excluding journals; in 1970, three years before the Ruusbroec Institute became part of UFSIA, the library – remaining the property of the Loyola Association Jesuits – contained 60 000 volumes; by 1981, the year that marked the sixth centenary of Ruusbroec's death, commemorated by several scientific events such as an international conference at Leuven's Institute of Medieval Studies and a large-scale exhibition in Belgium's Royal Library in Brussels, the number of volumes had increased to 90 000.

Thirty years after the creation of this first book storage facility, extension and renovation were urgently needed especially with regard to the outdated infrastructure of the reading room, special library departments and staff rooms. The local Loyola Jesuit community decided to tear down the old library and build a new library and staff quarters on the existing site. An extension of equal size was added to the old, four storey book storage facility, with a spacious new reading room and ample working and administrative spaces. The new building was erected between 1985 and 1988, which means that the entire library was moved twice in just three years. At the generous invitation of UFSIA's head librarian, the late Father Jo Van Brabant († 2001), the Ruusbroec Institute's books and other documents were housed in the storage rooms of the old central library throughout the reconstruction work.

Translation of: Frans Hendrickx, 'Een bibliotheek in dienst van Ruusbroec en zijn Genootschap te Antwerpen', in: *Vlaanderen* 50 (2001), pp. 276-280.