

BoonBerichten

Nieuwsbrief van het Louis Paul Boon Genootschap
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In ons Boonbericht nummer 160 publiceerden we een fragment uit de Engelse vertaling van *Het Geuzenboek* door Frank Vlaeminck met daarbij een illustratie van de hand van grafisch kunstenaar Inez Michiels. In het vorige bericht lieten we wat meer zien van haar werk dat werd geïnspireerd door boeken van Boon. Hieronder volgt een tweede voorproefje van *The Geuzen Book*, voorzien van een van haar afbeeldingen.

LOUIS PAUL BOON

THE GEUZEN BOOK

Extract from Book 1 chapter 2 Munster, God's realm of the Anabaptists

Translation: Frank Vlaeminck

Illustration: Inez Michiels

BOTH THE NEW FLOWERS OF ANABAPTISM AS WELL AS THE WEED OF THE WICKED ROMAN FAITH were budding as spring arrived in that promising year 1530. The pope-appointed grand-inquisitor for the Netherlands De la Marcke, who as bishop of Cambrai had to make sure that all who rebelled against the godless faith of Rome were killed, had his bishopric run by others to be all the more able to fulfil the task given to him by the pope. In the meantime he himself lived a debauched life and he had the audacity to hold over the font his own children conceived with different whores. And not wanting to vail to the pope all of the canons followed the example set by the heathen popes. They joined in the hunting and the worldly parties, publicly entertained their concubines and collected the necessary funds in shameless fashion by appropriating as many benefices and privileges as possible. One and the same incumbent was deacon of Saint-Peter in Leuven, canon in Anderlecht, dean of Saint-Quentin in Maubeuge, deacon of Our-Lady in Antwerp, dean of Saint-Sauveur, and all this brought him ample money to squander on feasts, games and alcohol and whores. And not only on whores but just as well on the nuns who stayed at their monasteries as fornicators and housed their offspring in what they called orphanages.

And so the horrific example set by Rome had pervaded the whole of Europe.

And should it give rise to wonder then that Melchior Hoffman felt an aversion for any church that protected its inner rot with iron armour? He had turned away from Luther and relishing it he was now waiting for the advent of Christ among those of them who were re-baptised. And after he had a taste in Strasbourg of what the Kingdom of God on Earth might amount to, he then spoke about a life of communalism in one city after another, rid of all impurity stuck to this world they would live naked and without possession. "Fully naked and dispossessed of everything they would enter the true Realm of God." There was at the onset no revenge in the hearts of the Anabaptists. They desired merely this island, this city won by them, where they could safely behold from behind its walls the demise of the rest of the world. But persecuted and prosecuted time and again it roused them to conquer their desired city by force.

When Hoffman too was chased from Emden and the intolerance of the Lutheran preachers was also directed at his successor Jan Volkerts, whom they called Trijpmaker because he fabricated trijpen, or shoes with a wooden sole, the latter had to flee to Amsterdam where he founded a new community. It was there that he appointed Peter the woodcutter, Bartholomew the bookbinder and Willem the cooper, all of which from Brabant and apostles of the all overthrowing new faith. But it was primarily in the South of the Netherlands they were preparing to convert one of their cities into God's Realm, even before the big test in Munster started.

In one of their cities at Mount-Cassel in French-Flanders now called Mont-Cassel, a boy later to become known as Peter Dathenus was born in the midst of the troubles, and after a brief episode of monastic life with the Carmelites in Ypres he would rouse the city of Ghent to become the one and true revolutionary republic of the entire Netherlands.

And in the spring of that remarkable year 1530 when the first Anabaptists in the North and the South of the Netherlands were tracked down and killed, it also occurred that Margaret of Austria, emperor Charles' aunt and Regentess of our territories, became very ill. More than twenty years she had governed and now that she knew her end was near she wrote a farewell letter to Charles whom she had raised as her child and served as her master.

And before his aunt had died he already asked his younger sister Maria to succeed her in governing the Netherlands. Nine years earlier Maria had become queen of Hungary, but she lost the Hungarian crown when her husband fell in one of these many unimportant wars. Queen without a kingdom and as a twenty-six year old woman already dressed in the sables of the widows, she rejected all marriage proposals. She was delighted to become Regentess and as her aunt still lay dying in the palace in Mechelen, she took up residence in the old and somewhat neglected palace of the dukes of Brabant in Brussels. A small army of servants and maids had to clean the palace of dirt and dust, and she summoned roofers and chimney sweeps, cabinet makers and painters and sculptors to transform the decrepit building into a veritable Renaissance palace. And the first day of December of the year 1530 things came to a head then for her aunt Margaret of Austria: the old widow was no more and the new widow ascended the Regentess' throne. And from the money flowing in from the too heavy taxes she had, in addition to her Brussels palace, two more renaissance castles built in the land of the Walloons, one in Mariemont and one in Binche. For she loved to go for long and far horse rides, and she loved hunting, and she loved to organize colourful pantomimes. She loved tapestry weaving and bobbin lace, but she was equally educated in military exercises and fortification construction. And foremost and above all she was to be considered very knowledgeable in matters of finance.

Now governing the Netherlands, she too held on to French as the court language, the language of the former big Burgundy empire. The Flemish nobility at her court spoke French and in her famed library worked Jean Lemaire from Hainaut, one of the acclaimed stars of the time. She even knew Erasmus of Rotterdam as the very enlightened spirit who had dedicated to her his book *Vidua Christiana*. The Renaissance was an expression of rejuvenating splendour in a foundering world, a precious flower on a dung heap of misery, and Erasmus preached tolerance in a time when there was no longer room for tolerance. Such was her court, such was life at the old palace in Brussels and in the new castles of Mariemont and Binche. But the Anabaptists who wanted to build their New Jerusalem were mercilessly squashed and exterminated.

In her world of fools' gold and false pretence she was surrounded by the nobility and knights of the Golden Fleece who, despite their grand names and landownership, continued to have less and less power and money as the monasteries and abbeys devoured everything. Now it was true that the nobility and knights could only distinguish themselves on the battlefield and further at tournaments and jousts and

binges, and that in the monasteries and abbeys they were committing usury.

And the nobility demanded more power and especially a well paid say in government and affairs of state, so Maria the Regentess divided the General Council into three separate main bodies: the Council of State, the Secret Council and the Council of Finance. In this way the nobility and knights were able to burnish their useless reputations and receive money from the treasury. But other than that their say in all three of these councils remained next to nothing.

Even Maria had very little to say, for although Charles was waging war somewhere in Europe most of the time, it was still he who taxed the cities in the Netherlands and everything happened according to his design. Once Henry of Nassau had been his advisor in these matters, yet Henry was slowly getting on and world-weary and he retired to his castle in Breda. But his son René, who did not bear the name of the Nassau's after his father but was christened René of Chalon after his mother, became Charles' inseparable friend and received as heritage the principality of Orange in France, contiguous with the papal Avignon property. Together they had adventures on the battlefields and together they experienced equally exciting adventures now with this, then with another willing woman. They gobbled and drank, waged war and squandered so much money that on a certain day he had to sell the city of Toledo out of a lack of cash. And to whom else but the Fuggers, the bankers?

Charles and his friend René, the prince of Orange, were very rarely seen in the Netherlands proper. But despite his absence the Regentess Maria ruled as a mere stooge, executing her brother's orders. And in addition to mercilessly persecute heretics, one of these orders then was for her to receive his little daughter to her Brussels court. Margaret, the child he had conceived with the girl servant Jeanneke van der Gheynst, had been raised by his aunt in the rather sombre palace in Mechelen, but having reached the age of nine she was to be transferred to the Brussels court. And the Regentess had the girl sit by her side when conversations were held on affairs of state, politics and art. She was raised in a very masculine manner, so that later on she would be able to govern with a firm hand Brabant and Flanders, Hainaut and Artois, Zeeland and Holland. This had already been decided by her father, yet he shared his decision with no one, making his friend René, the Prince of Orange, no exception. And little Margaret was taught how to fence and shoot a pistol, to horse ride and hunt in the Ardennes. And taking her stride too big and kicking her heels she wanted a manly footfall to resound in the palace halls. For was she not the daughter of the big emperor Charles? Yet she did not inquire after her mother, Jeanneke van der Gheynst.

IN THE MONTH OF APRIL OF THE YEAR 1532 DARK CLOUDS WERE DRIFTING OVER THE CITY OF Brussels, and from the palace emperor Charles' eleven year old little daughter Margaret witnessed a spectacle as yet unfamiliar to her. On the Grande Place by the Bread House all writings and printings of the newcomers had been thrown onto a pile by ordinance of her father and to the satisfaction of her aunt, the Regentess. It no longer exclusively involved Luther's works but also those of Jan Huss, Filippus Melancton and many others. Of all these nothing was allowed to be either printed or bought long since, but with force and through threats, and notwithstanding the heavy penalties, they collected so much from the houses of the Bruxellois, that it became a vast mountain which was set alight. The red glow danced across the façades of the pretty guild houses until late on that windy April evening.

And next to little Margaret the Regentess Maria looked on with glee. For reasons unknown she had been lauded by Erasmus as "the very Christian widow", as she had encouraged the novel spirit of the Renaissance and supported famous artists and scientists. Yet the people were not allowed any part in it and had to remain meek and dumb and loyal to the Roman faith. To her brother the emperor she wrote that "in her opinion all heretics should be persecuted to the degree that the heresy itself be exterminated root and all and they should only be careful the land did not become wholly and utterly depopulated". And bearing in mind this humanitarian restriction, the "very Christian widow" set about executing a comprehensive murder plan.

But leading the Anabaptists was Melchior Hoffman who may have been preaching meekness and patient suffering of the persecution, but as dreamer and zealot described to the commoners and little people how they would receive the reward of the Anabaptists and how their persecutors would be struck with terrible punishment. And as he preached, it felt as if the Devine Judgment would happen that same day, or at least within the next couple of months. As a result Earth and Heaven, present and future, all merged into each other. They knew by and large when it would happen, for in a dream it had been revealed to him: "A certain day, not long from now, he would return to Strasbourg and remain incarcerated there a full six months, and on the last day of these six months the kingdom of God would arrive".

To turn the conclusion of this dream into reality he left for Strasbourg from where he had been banned and where effectively and immediately they locked him up. Yet the six months passed and he stayed in prison - indeed, he would die there - and God's Realm did not materialize. Then baker Jan Matthysen from Harlem and tailor Jan Beukelssen from Leiden took over the helm and sent followers through the entire Netherlands to proclaim that the



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realm of God was upon them and the new Jerusalem would be founded. And the scattered seed reached Antwerp and Brussels, Ghent and Bruges and fell in that most fertile soil: the West Quarter of Flanders and the very peculiar spot that was Hondschoote.

In the West Quarter the earth lay waiting for the new and the world there became a different world. The knights and nobility, the powerful, the abbots and bishops, they did not know. Only the craftsmen and traders from the big cities saw it coming, yet did not understand, for in the West Quarter something had started that much and much later would be called "industry". Within the walled cities the crafts and trades were wilting and in their guilds first a probation was in order, then one became an apprentice and later a journeyman, and only after years one became a qualified master craftsman. But Hondschoote did not have city walls, everybody came and went and nobody was asked about their name or business. They produced serge and diligent hands were in short supply and evermore new labourers arrived. The Lutherans and the Sacramentalists and the Anabaptists, all who were exiled, all who had fled and had no possessions left, shouted at each other: "To Hondschoote!"

They arrived in Hondschoote and were put to work. In a hovel only this big they huddled together in their tens and twenties, slept under a rickety lean-to and quickly built a hut of straw and branches somewhere. They manned the mills and produced thousands and thousands of balls of yarn and from this yarn they made endless rolls of a fabric they called serge. The beggars came rushing from far and wide and the redundant soldiers coming back from the battlefields of Europe were put to work there. But the more who came and jostled for a position, the lower the wages were set and the harder one had to work for less food. Unknown among these masses lived the exiled or escaped Lutherans, and arrived the Anabaptists who wanted to bring God's Realm to earth. They gathered in their shanties and sang the psalms of David, "...Who prepares the meal for the raven when her brood cry onto God, when they err for the lack of food? Who undid the bonds of the wild mule? I have made the wilderness his home and the sea his dwelling."

Thus sang the Lutherans, and mixing with them were the Anabaptists who chanted: "Now gird your loins like a man and spread the anger of your wrath, behold the proud and humiliate them, bring them down and squash the godless in their dens. Then I shall praise you, for your right hand will have set you free". They lived in a dying world and a world being born, and nobody saw the distinction between the old and the new as everything merged imperceptibly and inextricably into everything else.

The same month in which all the writings of the newcomers had been thrown on a pile and set alight on the market place in Brussels, one could in that same city - as well as in the port city of Antwerp - purchase puppets made by Italian Roman faithful that made merry of Jesus Christ and his mother the Holy Virgin. They were laughable but scandalous effigies of which one could lift Mary's skirt, part the puppet thighs and behold her virginity, and the loin cloth of Jesus on the cross could be removed and then a hard protruding cock sprang out. And as all this was being openly sold, new and terrible punishments were devised for those who read the word of God and sang the psalms of David in their communities, "Now gird your loins like a man and spread the anger of your wrath." For following the latest ordinance by the Inquisition, the printers and buyers and readers of the rebellious writings had to be branded with a red glowing iron in the shape of the cross, and it was permitted to gouge out an eye, cut off their ears, and chop off a hand.

And it was also on the same evening in the month of April in the small town of Oudenaarde, where the tapestry weaving businesses were failing, that the charred body of an Anabaptist was removed from the pyre. It was Adrian de Man, who already had many followers and was monikered "Light of God" by them. Eleven year old Margaret had been conceived and born in that same small town of Oudenaarde, but she remained unaware Adrian de Man had climbed the pyre there or whether her mother Jeanneke van der Gheynst still lived in Oudenaarde.

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