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Cultural promotion and imperialism: the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council contesting the Mediterranean in the 1930s

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PREFACE

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Act I, Scene 3)

One of the inevitable questions in the globalized world of the twenty-first century is whether national cultural expression in an international context can ever be entirely free of moral or political values. Working from the beginning of 2004 until autumn 2006 for the European non-governmental heritage organisation Europa Nostra, I was confronted with the tension between wishing to protect cultural sites for their intrinsic value and justifying such protection with the argument that these sites strengthen the sense of a European collective heritage. Where does the cultural mission end and the political ideal begin? When, for example, heritage organisations in Western Europe try to transmit to former Communist countries their way of safeguarding cultural heritage, are they not hampered by their own national concepts of culture? Is there a way of encouraging greater knowledge and understanding of each other's cultures, for the sake of peace and stability, without conveying a particular model of society in the process? Intrigued by these questions, I embarked on a PhD dissertation that would deal with many such thorny issues. I decided to look at the phenomenon of foreign cultural policy in the early twentieth-century, where some of the developments we see today – soft power politics and the perceived need to win hearts and minds – were already emerging.

Now that I have completed the dissertation, I wish to thank my supervisor Pim den Boer and my co-supervisor Rob van der Laarse. Their unwavering faith in what I would be able to produce has been a source of encouragement throughout and so too their stimulating comments and advice. Whatever hesitations one may have about analysing the culture of two countries side by side, there can be no doubt that being supervised by two different personalities is a challenging but also enriching experience. Already when I was an MA student studying at the University of Amsterdam, Rob van der Laarse's lectures – full of exciting ideas, like a string of colourful beads – reminded me of what I loved about studying history. With this same flair and creativity he has given me feedback as I progressed with my PhD research. Pim den Boer, with passion for the classics and for concepts through time, never seemed depleted of curiosity or of edifying observations. He also encouraged me to look beyond the borders, both in the choice of research sources and

through the concrete opportunity to be involved in the organization of the 2010 International Congress of Historical Sciences held in Amsterdam.

As with most Ph.D. research, the road to the completion of the thesis has been a scientific and a personal odyssey, complete with tempting mermaids, multi-headed monsters and storms at sea, but also moments of smooth sailing and joyful discovery. I am extremely grateful to the Institute of Culture and History (University of Amsterdam) for having granted me the financial means and intellectual freedom to pursue this journey, and the Huizinga Institute for providing a fruitful academic platform that rises above the interests of individual universities. Thanks to the two scholarships awarded to me by the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome, I had the best haven from which to set out on my archive research that a scholar could wish for. I greatly appreciated the moral support and practical help that the staff there gave me: *grazie mille a tutti voi*. As a crucial mediator in the scientific and cultural relations between the Netherlands and Italy, and as the place where as a child I learnt to write Dutch, this Institute will always remain a part of my living history. Indispensable to my research was the access to the private archives of the Dante Alighieri Society in Rome, which was kindly granted to me. Dottoressa Padellaro, in charge of the archive, went beyond the call of duty in providing me with espressos and almost motherly care when a serious knee injury obstructed my research.

Participating in international conferences and using the wonderful tool of email communication has allowed me to exchange thoughts with several 'fellow travellers' in terms of research interests. Scott Anthony, Alice Byrne, Krishan Kumar, Peter Mandler, Peter Rietbergen and Perry Scott have been particularly stimulating in their comments and I hope to do them further justice in a future published edition of this thesis. Romke Visser has been a singular mentor to me, with great generosity of heart and spirit.

All this would not have been possible without some wonderful friends to share the highs and lows of the arduous PhD odyssey with. My 'guardian angel' at the National Archives, Roger, did much to make me feel at home in this bunker-like building and to help me find my way through the files. London can be an alienating place, even for someone like me who went to an English international school, but Anke, Anna and Astrid always make the sun shine for me in that city. I thank Emma, Minou, Nina, Machiel and Thomas for their warm support at all times. Furthermore, thinking of the colleagues I had the joy of sharing an office with, it is clear that I owe many of my smiling days working at my desk to Caroline, Cigdem, Claartje, Durkje, Hanneke, Karin and Roumiana. My regular coffees with Benjamin not only made me keep track of time but also showed me that my old school motto – *nil difficile volenti* – could be proven right. I ask Davide and Michele to forgive me for not having the Italian education that would have allowed me to understand so much more of what I wrote in this thesis: you have been helpful guides, also in the search for

where I stand. In the final stages of the thesis, I found in Carlos a patient, critical and illuminating listener and reader, as well as a mirror for the self-created obstacles in my quest.

My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, Peter and Elisja, and my brother, Quinten, for their enduring love, their laughter and their untiring will to question and explore. People who need people are indeed the luckiest people in the world, in the sense implied by the Broadway song. Thank you for having helped me to understand this.

Researchers who need researchers are perhaps the second luckiest people in the world. For is it not in open, unguarded dialogue, "true to ourselves", that we learn to identify our own blind spots and biases? Only then can we come closer to what is, even if as ungraspable as a lizard that leaves you with only its tail in your hands, the present and past reality, a striving that I perhaps naïvely hold on to. I hasten to add that regardless of the dialogue, any errors or shortcomings in this thesis are entirely my own responsibility.