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'Een republiek in het klein': Noord-Nederlandse leesgezelschappen en hun lectuurkeuze in het Verenigd Koninkrijk der Nederlanden, 1815-1830

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Synopsis

In historical literature the period of the early nineteenth century is described as a period in which nationalism is rampant in the Netherlands. The standards and values through which the Dutch get taught their patriotism, they mostly get by reading books and magazines in which the Dutch past is put on a pedestal. Besides, it makes sense that commitment to and love for the motherland are invigorated after being freed from French oppression, when the freedom of expression can be experienced again in full.

In the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, between 1815 and 1830, when the Netherlands is in one political union with Belgium and Luxembourg, King William I stimulates nationalism, by taking several measures to further the political union of the country parts. Despite his efforts to bring the Northern and Southern Dutch closer together in the domains of language, culture, religion, economy and politics, after 1830 the kingdom falls apart when the Belgians secede.

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The early nineteenth century is also characterized by a surge in the number of a particular kind of voluntary organizations in the Northern Netherlands: the book clubs. Especially in the decades from 1820 to 1840 hundreds of these organizations exist in the country, at least, according to what can still be measured. In previous research there has been interest for these book clubs incidentally, but by using the ongoing expanding digital options to search through archive inventories, it is currently possible to track down archive material of a multitude of book clubs. This way primary source material of 56 book clubs has been found. The laws and regulations of 41 of those have been found and of 21 information remains about the books and magazines that the contemporary members have bought.

Investigating the laws, regulations and reading matter purchasing habits offers the possibility to look into the heads of the Northern Dutch from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands up to a certain degree. In doing so, it is possible to study to what extent there was an interest for the motherland or the nation. In short: the contemporary reading matter

purchasing habits have been studied to see if and to what extent book clubs have contributed to the nation building process.

The laws and regulations of book clubs show an image of an extraordinary active associational life: tens to hundreds of thousands of Northern Dutch request membership voluntarily and annually order dozens of different books and magazines. The topics vary hugely. Books are read on travels to Suriname, the lives of well known criminals, adventures of knights, but also on floodings in the Netherlands and on famous seafarers from the so-called Golden Age. A part of the reading matter can be called patriotic, but in the end that is a small part of the total purchase of the book clubs.

Furthermore, the Northern Dutch read translated reading matter to a high degree, mainly from Germany and to a lesser extent from France and England. That way they get in touch with standards and values that are shared in several countries in Western Europe. In that regard it seems that the interests of the members of book clubs are not limited to the borders of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. In the case the reading matter has contributed to the nation building process by introducing various standards and values, those have been Western European and not exclusively Dutch. On that point the purchases resemble the phenomenon of book clubs: the development of those is also an international development. Both Dutch culture and reading culture have international features.

Moreover, in book clubs potentially controversial topics are avoided beforehand. Religion is hardly read about, because the topic could incite discussions. It seems in the book clubs barely any discussions took place. The harmony and rest that they pursue, closely connect to the societal peace that is longed for.

In the end, the nation building, unifying influence of book clubs should mostly be sought in their sheer existence. The members form closely knit organizations with strict laws and regulations. By participating, between 1815 and 1830 a Northern Dutchman gains experience with a democratic way of thinking and acting. That way book clubs contribute to the development of civil society in the Netherlands, which eventually forms the foundation of the democratic society.