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Summary

Geert van Oorschot, publisher

This dissertation tells the life story of Geert van Oorschot (1909-1987), one of the most prominent Dutch publishers of the years following the Second World War. The company he founded in 1945 became famous as a result of the series of Dutch classics he published in India-paper editions, by authors including Multatuli, Menno ter Braak and Herman Heijermans, as well as his Russian Library, begun in the 1950s, monumental series of translations of classic nineteenth-century Russian novels and stories that included major works by Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev and Tolstoy. In the post-war decades Van Oorschot also published the work of Gerard Reve and Willem Frederik Hermans, then controversial authors, now regarded as among the most important Dutch writers of the twentieth century.

On 20 November 1986, at the age of seventy-seven, Geert van Oorschot was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Catholic University of Brabant in Tilburg, in recognition of his achievements as a publisher and disseminator of literary heritage and the often unusual personal choices he made along the way. At the ceremony, honorary supervisor Hugo Verdaasdonk pointed to Van Oorschot as evidence of the assertion that ‘there is a connection between two factors regarded in more traditional literature studies as incompatible: professionalism and artistry’. This study takes that proposition as its starting point and attempts to answer the following question: to what extent did the publisher G.A. van Oorschot combine artistic sensibility and business acumen, and how did the relationship between the two develop over the course of his life?

The question is bound up with a myth that Geert van Oorschot liked to perpetuate: that his publishing house primarily served a cultural goal and that he always struggled to keep his head above water. This display of cultural noble-mindedness had a commercial purpose. Van Oorschot used it to obtain subsidies and to persuade copyright-holders, whether authors or heirs, to be content with low royalties. He claimed that publishing must be seen in terms of the implementation of ‘a programme’, both political and literary, that embraced a radical individualism. In this he drew heavily on the ideas of Multatuli, Menno ter Braak, E. du Perron and Jacques de Kadt.

The basis of his ‘programme’ was laid down in Van Oorschot’s childhood in Vlissingen, where he grew up in a working class family that attached great importance to the theatre, especially socialist drama. His father served on the

local council for the small, radical Socialist Party, his mother worked as a household help and instilled in her son a fierce class consciousness, impressing upon him that he must always solve his own problems and never ask others for help. In his teens Van Oorschot joined the young teetotallers of the Jeugdbond voor Onthouding (JVO) and proved himself a talented canvasser and organizer. He also wrote for the organization's magazine, *De Jonge Onthouder* (The Young Abstainer). His work included poetry; the young Geert van Oorschot's great ambition was to become a revolutionary poet.

After finishing high school, Van Oorschot left for Rotterdam and among the places he worked was the cooperative Handelskamer. In 1929 he was called up for military service but refused to serve in uniform on principle. As a result he was sentenced to ten months in jail, which he spent in the Special Penitentiary in Scheveningen. He continued to write, including pacifist poetry for the magazine *De Vrijdenker* (The Freethinker). After his release he tried in vain to establish himself as a literary writer. He garnered a long series of rejections, and consequently became depressed. He also left the temperance movement. He earned a living by giving political lectures to workers all over the Netherlands, as well as running the JVO's Sales Centre and selling books. He published three volumes of poetry: *De turfgravers* (The Turf-Diggers; 1930), *Gevangenis* (Prison; 1931) and *Van Oudegeest tot Revolutie* (From Oudegeest to Revolution; 1932). In every case he was involved in the publication of his work, financially, organizationally or both.

After a short time with the artists' collective Links Richten, in early 1932 Van Oorschot joined the Independent Socialist Party (OSP), a leftist splinter from the Social Democratic Workers' Party (SDAP). He travelled the country as a propagandist and wrote for the party's newspaper, *De Fakkel*, where he met writer Jacques de Kadt. The OSP was one of the first Dutch political parties to oppose National Socialism and, under the influence of De Kadt, Van Oorschot gradually distanced himself from pacifism: Adolf Hitler could be opposed only by force of arms. Along with De Kadt, Van Oorschot left the OSP in mid-1934. He took on an organizational role in a magazine founded by De Kadt called *De Nieuwe Kern* (The New Core).

In November 1932 Van Oorschot married Tine Smit, with whom he had two children, Geert Jr. (b. 1933) and Levien (b. 1937). He began a travelling bookshop, a job he later combined with a role as agent for the small publishing company Stols. He claimed it was at Stols that he learned how to make beautiful books. His boss praised him for managing to tap a new market of workers who never entered bookshops by visiting them at their homes. After some years he left to work for the leftwing publishing house Querido in Amsterdam.

During the German occupation of the Netherlands, Jewish owner Emanuel Querido was forced to go into hiding, soon followed by practically all the company's employees. Van Oorschot was asked to carry on the business for as

long as he could. By improvising he managed to keep it going until it was put into liquidation by the Germans in 1944. He succeeded in hiding a great many books from the occupier, and Querido plucked the fruits of those efforts after the war. When the company was wound up, Van Oorschot received generous severance pay, some of which he used to set up his own publishing house in 1945. His marriage had foundered in 1943 and with his new wife Hillie Munneke he had a son, Guido, in 1944. In 1952 Wouter van Oorschot was born.

The first book to be published by the Van Oorschot Publishing House was the poetry collection *Gestalten en seizoenen* (Forms and Seasons) by Charles B. Timmer. Van Oorschot's brother-in-law Jan Bloemsma was initially a partner in the company, but he left a year later, after an argument. At the end of 1945 the company moved to Herengracht 613 in Amsterdam, where it remains to this day. In the early years Van Oorschot pursued an eclectic publishing policy that was influenced by the paper shortage: there was not enough paper for all the books, so priority was given to works of social or cultural importance. Van Oorschot saved money on staff by doing almost everything himself, including the packaging and posting of books. He travelled around the bookshops twice a year, which brought him a degree of fame in the book world for his talent as a salesman and his custom of never accepting returns. After several good years the house ran into difficulties and in the late 1940s it ran at a loss for two years.

Partly through the magazines *De baanbreker* (The Trailblazer; 1945-1947) and *Libertinage* (1948-1953), Van Oorschot gathered a group of writers and journalists around him that included the young Willem Frederik Hermans, Gerard Reve, Adriaan Morriën Vasalis and the expert on Dutch literature Hans Gomperts, many of whose books he published. The running of the magazines was problematic, especially in a financial sense. With *Libertinage* there was an additional problem; Van Oorschot continually reproached several of the editors for being insufficiently combative. He was told that he was interfering too much in editorial policy and had a dictatorial attitude. What he called his 'non-interfering interference' led to an almost endless series of conflicts with editorial staff, often centred upon articles by Jacques de Kadt. Van Oorschot supported his old mentor unconditionally, even when editors at his magazines claimed De Kadt's contributions were substandard. Similar conflicts occurred at *Tirade*, founded in 1958, but unlike its predecessors, that magazine outlived G.A. van Oorschot.

In 1949 Van Oorschot published *De tranen der acacia's* (The Acacia's Tears) by Willem Frederik Hermans and *Werther Nieland* by Gerard Reve. These two, who started out as friends, would be the most important Dutch authors of the Van Oorschot stable for years to come. The relationship with Hermans soon ran into trouble. Van Oorschot greatly admired Hermans' literary work and supported his author absolutely when he was prosecuted for insulting Catholics after the publication of *Ik heb altijd gelijk* (I'm always right).

Hermans, however, found Van Oorschot careless and an unreliable businessman, and he was annoyed by the continual appeals made by the publisher to their ‘friendship’, which according to Hermans did not exist. When his novel *De donkere kamer van Damokles* (The Darkroom of Damocles) became a bestseller, their conflict escalated after Van Oorschot, in compliance with the precise terms of their contract, reissued *De tranen der acacia’s* without the author’s permission. A number of legal battles followed and Hermans left for De Bezige Bij. Events took a similar course with Gerard Reve, although Van Oorschot’s friendship with Reve was more sincere and profound than with Hermans. Reve was supported by Van Oorschot for many years, but in the 1960s – after he became a bestselling author with the success of *Op weg naar het einde* (On My Way to the End; 1963) and *Nader tot u* (Nearer to Thee; 1967) – they too clashed, mainly over financial matters.

Important for Van Oorschot was the publication, in German, of *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts* (1954) by German author Albert Vigoleis Thelen. He sold over twenty thousand copies of the book in Germany. With Thelen, too, he became caught up in a fierce argument, although relations remained good with other Dutch authors, including two who were later awarded the P.C. Hooft Prize: A. Koolhaas and A. Alberts.

From the late 1950s onwards, clear publishing streams emerged at Van Oorschot. An important place was occupied by the India-paper editions, featuring the work of great Dutch authors, often in series. They included Couperus (in collaboration with other publishing houses), Ter Braak, Jacob Israël de Haan, Leopold, Du Perron and Multatuli. Like other Van Oorschot editions, they were designed for many years by the German typographer Helmut Salden and they brought the company much prestige. Van Oorschot devoted a great deal of time and energy to financing these series, limiting the financial risks as far as possible by seeking subsidies from both private individuals and the Dutch authorities. He liked to take a broad approach to the commercial possibilities when dealing with authors and rights-holders, to negotiate as low a royalty percentage as possible. These methods, along with his successful sales techniques, enabled him to make a profit even on high-minded literary works. Moreover, Van Oorschot took more risks than other publishers. He was able to publish the collected works of Multatuli and Du Perron after their publisher Contact took its leave of those projects.

Van Oorschot’s greatest and most risky undertaking was the Russian Library. It all started with Charles B. Timmer’s decision to translate one book by Chekhov and grew into a forty-volume series on India paper, designed by Helmut Salden. In 1956 Van Oorschot established a public limited company to attract investors and after a very troubled early period, in which additional loans were required, the series developed into a major success that came to symbolize the stamp of quality that the Van Oorschot publishing house had become. It was

also an opportunity for Van Oorschot to collaborate with Slavist Karel van het Reve (brother of Gerard Reve), who over time became one of the company's most important political authors.

Something similar applied to the 'vignette series' of hardback volumes of poetry, which included work by Vasalis, Elisabeth Eybers, Jan van Nijlen, Hans Lodeizen and Chris van Geel. It made Van Oorschot into a favoured poetry publisher in the 1950s, and it has remained so ever since. In the 1960s poets whose work sold well, such as Judith Herzberg and Rutger Kopland, opted to be published by Van Oorschot.

Whereas in the 1950s the foundations were laid for the prosperity of later years (the house was very profitable from the early sixties onwards), Van Oorschot's personal life had its ups and downs. In the late 1940s his son Levien was abducted by his mother and taken to England (after the war the custody of the children from the first marriage had been granted to the father), and he had little contact with the boy for years after that. Geert Jr. later went to live with his uncle Adrie. Guido, oldest son of Geert and Hillie, was an unhappy child and from 1960 onwards he attracted attention with a series of incidents. After damaging several cars by joyriding, Guido was sent to live elsewhere and in 1963, only nineteen years old, he put an end to his life, leaving behind a letter full of bitter reproaches aimed at his parents. They never recovered from the blow, although Geert and Hillie's marriage survived, despite a number of crises.

In the 1960s Van Oorschot, partly on the initiative of his son Geert jr., who had joined the company, published two commercial series, the White Elephants (fiction) and the STOA series of autobiographical works. He also published a novel that was to acquire legendary status, *Bij nader inzien* (On Second Thoughts) by J.J. Voskuil. In the early 1970s, by which time Geert Jr. had left, the number of books had declined to a handful per year. On the initiative of Geert's youngest son Wouter and a new member of staff, Gemma Nefkens, new authors were sought and the relationship with those who had left, including Reve and Hermans, was normalized. Graphic designer Gerrit Noordzij was taken on to improve the look of Van Oorschot books, which had declined since Helmut Salden's falling out with Van Oorschot. Conflict always accompanied Van Oorschot's publishing ventures. He was once described in a newspaper as 'the most highly-trained fight-picker in Dutch literature'.

In a political sense Van Oorschot became involved in a conflict with the spirit of the times in the 1960s. A member of the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA), he had developed into a social democrat with a pronounced anti-Communist bent and a profound distrust of Catholic dignitaries. At the time of the Hungarian Revolt he spoke out vehemently against fellow travellers and rejected all thought of compromise with the Soviet Union. When public opinion shifted to the left, partly because of the Vietnam War, and the reform movement New Left gained more and more of a foothold in the PvdA, Van Oorschot was horrified.

He left the party to join the new DS'70, although he soon turned his back on it, disillusioned.

Gradually he began to lose interest in the publishing house in favour of his old dream of becoming a writer. In 1964 he had published a collection of stories under the pseudonym R.J. Peskens called *Uitgestelde vragen* (Deferred Questions), which attracted little attention. A series of stories published in *Tirade* followed, mostly about his childhood in Vlissingen. This led to the publication of an extremely successful collection called *Twee vorstinnen en een vorst* (Two Queens and a King) and a year later the novel in stories *Mijn tante Coleta* (My Aunt Coleta). Not only did the books make him a celebrity, with frequent appearances on television, he was suddenly one of his own bestselling authors. The books were filmed as *Twee vorstinnen en een vorst*. Success had a paralyzing effect on Van Oorschot, however. He published only another two short-story collections, (*Mijn moeder was eigenlijk een Italiaanse* (My Mother was Actually Italian; 1977) and *De man met de urn* (The Man with the Urn; 1981). Both were dominated by old work.

Van Oorschot called himself a 'magician with money' and he proved as much in the final fifteen years of his life, mainly with major projects of which the most impressive was the publication of the complete works of Belle van Zuylen. Shortly before his death he worked with the Multatuli Society to have a statue of the writer erected in Amsterdam. From the early 1980s onwards the publishing house was increasingly run by his son Wouter, along with Gemma Nefkens.

In a personal sense Van Oorschot's final years were unhappy. The death of Hillie in 1979 (she was eleven years his junior) propelled him into a period of depression from which he struggled to recover. He also had a series of quarrels with his son Wouter. In September 1987 he married his third wife, Rita Campfens. He already knew by this stage that he was terminally ill. He sent many of his friends large sums of cash as a parting gift. He also gave away most of his book collection. Geert van Oorschot died on 18 December 1987.

Much of the success of the Van Oorschot publishing house can be traced back to the ability of its founder to place his creative powers at the service of his business enterprise. Almost all his major successes can be attributed to his ability to make projects grow in his imagination and then to act according to the ambitious ideas that emerged. Especially in view of the limited means available, the Van Oorschot publishing house is the product of a brilliant imagination.

Van Oorschot deployed his creative, artistic talents for commercial ends, but that is not the whole story. However talented he may have been as a publisher, his ultimate goals were far beyond mere profit margins. This is obvious first of all from his literary aspirations; Geert van Oorschot never had any greater ambition than to write. But the publishing house itself was more than

a business. Van Oorschot loved to talk about his ‘programme’, although that suggests a coherence that barely existed at all in reality. In essence all the publishing decisions he made were intuitive. In matters of detail he often allowed himself to be guided by the advice of others. Up to a point, therefore, the unity of the Van Oorschot list was an illusion, but one that was disseminated with verve by its publisher: in his letters, in his conversations, in his articles and in the media.

Only to a very limited degree did Van Oorschot ever boast about the financial output of his successes. Ultimately it was more about the books than about the money. It was the books he was proud of, that flattered his vanity. From this perspective Geert van Oorschot was indeed a man with a unique combination of artistic and business sense. His business talents provided the foundation and his artistic yearnings the engine. His restless temperament, which often led to trouble in his personal life, ensured that the engine always ran at full capacity. It made him the most important publisher of his time.