

Review
Paul van Capelleveen and Clemens de Wolf (eds):
The Ideal Book:
Private presses in the Netherlands, 1910-2010

Nijmegen: Vantilt Publishers, 2010. 256 p.
ISBN 9789460040603

Reviewed by William Rueter

The modern private press movement in the Netherlands is now a century old. Like its British counterpart it has a fascinating history, and in this extraordinary book the richness and beauty of its volumes and the dedication of its creators is revealed with sympathy and skill.

What exactly is a private press? Despite varying terminology, basically it's a printing venture reflecting an individual's desire, idealism, and sometimes obsession to personally create beautifully printed work – books and ephemera – for pleasure and satisfaction, not motivated by commercial considerations. The proprietor (usually only one or two individuals are involved) will often set up a print shop in a home, basement, garage, or studio; purchase type, paper, and equipment; handset texts in appropriate typefaces; select, possibly edit, and print texts and images; and possibly bind the resulting books. Some presses choose to print unpublished work; others (re)interpret standard literature. Books may be produced in traditional or experimental formats in quantities often limited to 100 or fewer copies. Books are often signed or numbered. Special bindings or other features may be offered within an edition. Each press is a laboratory for personal interest and individual creativity, limited only by the proprietor's finances, creative skills, and imagination.

Two essays (by Paul van Capelleveen and Marieke van Delft – placed, oddly, at the end of the book) discuss the origin of the term 'private press' and its early development in the Netherlands. The authors investigate the many variations in concept and purpose of the private press and show how complicated the term has become, but they emphasize some of the goals and issues of the private press movement: its exclusive nature, the production of quality work, the importance of good design, and the concept of privacy.

The Dutch movement may have been inspired by British private press activity, but it has its own history. The appreciation of early 'bibliophile' books (i.e., sumptuous volumes with illustrations and calligraphy produced for the wealthy) existed during the centuries of hand-copied manuscripts. The first dated Dutch printed book was produced in 1473 and emulated the manuscript tradition. Purchasers could buy books produced with the new printing

technology, choosing (when available) paper or vellum editions, rubrication of initials, and binding materials.

The early 17th century saw some books produced with hand-coloured etchings, but the matter-of-fact Dutch court was not interested in bibliophily. Some religious orders like the Brothers of the Common Life established printing presses to produce commercial work. A Leiden scholar set up a press in his home to print Arabic texts, furthering the dissemination of knowledge. Another scholar produced detailed engravings of insects on his private press and its success led to the formation of a publishing company. Anti-English and religious texts were purportedly printed in private by the Pilgrim Fathers before their departure to America.

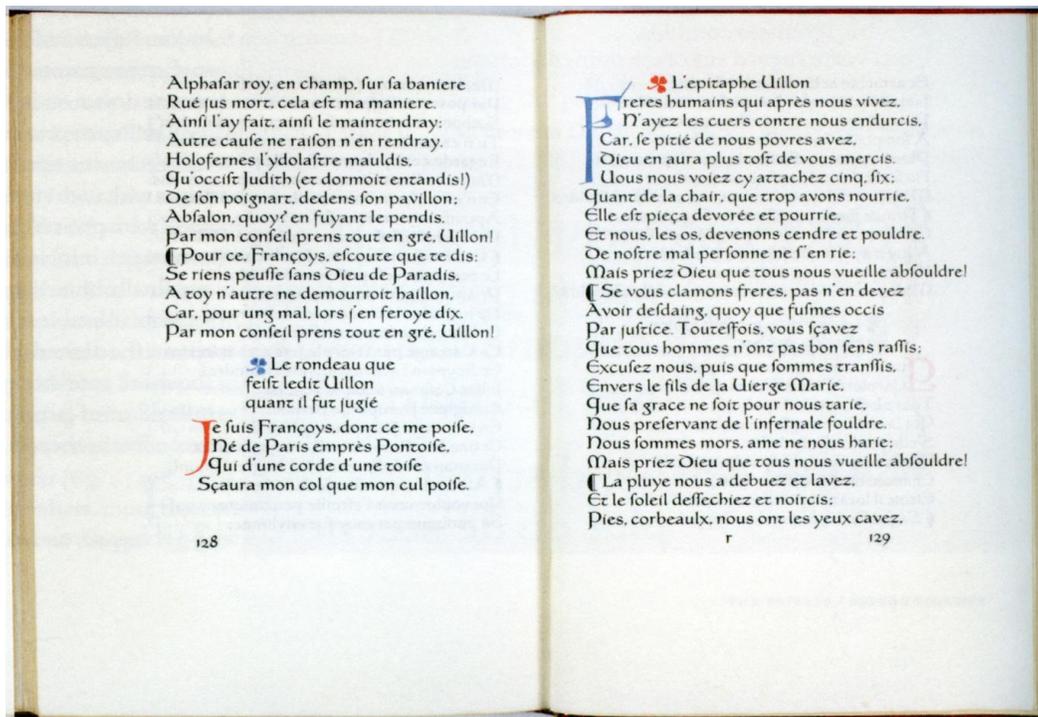


Plate 1. François Villon: *Oeuvres*. Kunera Pers, 1926.

The Ideal Book traces the limited-edition book tradition to early 19th century England, where the Roxburghe Club issued privately printed books to its members. As book collectors developed, previously unpublished and literary texts were produced (aided by the amateur press movement of the 1860s), often with unexceptional printing. The craft of printing was revived in 1891 with William Morris's Kelmscott Press. Its books were elaborately decorated and illustrated, resulting in a plethora of British and American neo-medieval imitations. T.J. Cobden-Sanderson's Doves Press, founded in 1900, was notable

for the visual austerity of its books. With their emphasis on craftsmanship, proprietary typefaces, and use of quality materials, both these British presses strongly influenced the Dutch private press movement of the early 20th century.

Paul Capelleveen also investigates the convoluted history of *De Zilverdistel*. Arguably the first modern Dutch private press venture, it was founded in 1909 or 1910 by the poet J.C. Bloem, the critic Jan Greshoff and Prof. P.N. van Eyck as a form of vanity publishing. The first book was printed by the Haarlem firm of Enschedé. Editions were small and each book was designed by the partners to a format, without utilizing the expertise of the printers involved. Each partner received a copy of a published book and one-third of any profit.

By 1912 Greshoff and Bloem dropped out of the partnership and Jan van Royen stepped in. Van Royen had contact with the major British private presses of the period, collected private press books, and had tremendous enthusiasm. His involvement changed the press's direction. He commissioned the *Zilver* private typeface from the designer S.H. de Roos, later adding the *Distel* type, specially designed by Lucien Pissarro. He set up a hand press and a well-equipped print shop on the top floor of his house in The Hague. When Van Royen's relationship with Van Eyck became strained, he changed the press name to *Kunerapers* without consultation. Under that imprint Van Royen produced five books in 20 years. Sundays were usually printing days and members of the family often helped. In 1942 Van Royen was wrongfully arrested by the Nazis and died in the Amersfoort transit camp. His press and archive are now in the *Museum van het Boek* in The Hague.

The appreciation of well-wrought books extends to the bibliophile edition: the limited-edition book produced as much for its rarity and exclusivity as its beauty. Following on the tradition of *De Zilverdistel*, the *Heuvelpers* (1926-35) was established by S.H. de Roos in his home in Hilversum. De Roos designed his *Meidoorn* typeface exclusively for his press, which was operated by his son. One of the co-founders was Menno Herzberger, an antiquarian bookseller. The books were usually printed in 125 copies on handmade paper. Like the early work of *De Zilverdistel*, Latin, German, English and French texts were chosen in part for their international marketability. Dutch works would have been less popular (though a number of Dutch private presses printed works by 'classic' Dutch writers like A. Roland Holst, Van Eyck, and Verwey). By the late 1930s, with a major change in the economic climate, fewer purchasers were interested in bibliophile books.

Other presses took a less commercial approach. *De Marnix-Pers* (1932-46) produced 18 publications before the Second World War. Working from an Amsterdam basement print shop purely for the pleasure of the craft, the press became a model for the post-war 'Sunday printers'. For the *Marnix-Pers* proprietors, their hobby became almost a drug. (Full disclosure: I know the feeling. My own private press, *The Aliquando Press*, has been active for almost a half-century

– years filled with frustration and ultimate satisfaction in personally producing the printed word.)

Several essays in *The Ideal Book* deal with the purpose and achievements of the private press vis-à-vis the commercially printed books of the pre-war period. The concern for aesthetics, good typography, and quality printing evinced by the best Dutch private presses influenced some commercial printing. Training courses, exhibitions, lectures, criticism, and journals like *Het Drukkersjaarboek* ('The Printer's Yearbook') increased the public's awareness of fine printing in the Netherlands.

The design and aesthetics of the private press and the bibliophile editions became divided into two camps: 'formal' traditional design with classical typefaces, and 'informal,' more innovative typography. S.H. de Roos was an idealist, like Cobden-Sanderson, who regarded the book as a work of art, an expression of the ideal. The great designer and exponent of formal typography, Jan van Krimpen, saw printing as a form of craftsmanship rather than art. De Roos and Van Krimpen were major influences on the development of Dutch traditional design principles in books and publishing.

The bibliophile book series (*Halcyon* and *Palladium*, among others) was similar in concept to subscription series like the American limited-edition ventures of the period: caught somewhere between the private presses and commercial publishing. Illustrations were rarely used, quality materials were employed, and the classically austere style of the Van Krimpen / De Roos school, based on tradition-based design, was in evidence everywhere. These principles were far removed from the rectilinear and Constructivist typographic styles then used in advertising and in magazines like *Wendigen* and not always easily adaptable to publishing. By the 1930s the Netherlands was producing its first major trade paperbacks and there was some experimentation with asymmetry.

The essays by Sjoerd van Fassen and Kees Thomassen deal brilliantly with the complex history and variety of clandestine and illegal publications during the Second World War – some produced more for vanity and commerce than idealism and rebellion. As the war progressed there was little legally available paper and limited quantities of worn type available. Occasional lack of electricity interfered with the full operation of the presses. Every published work needed the imprimatur of the *Kultuurkamer* – a great restriction to freedom of speech. By the end of the war more than 100 publications were produced by about 90 clandestine printers, often under unbelievably difficult circumstances. This period of Dutch private press history is so important that I wish the essays had been even longer and more detailed.

Perhaps the most extraordinary wartime printing venture was *De Blauwe Schuit* ('The Blue Barge'), presided over by the Groningen printer H. N. Werkman, whose amusing and touching stencil-print images enlivened the rather

pedestrian typography of some *Blauwe Schuit* publications. Werkman's books express energy and enthusiasm – the antithesis of Van Krimpen's classicism – and pushed experimentation in Dutch private press book design well into the 20th century. Of 40 books produced by *De Blauwe Schuit*, *Chassidische Legendes* ('Hassidic Legends') is perhaps the most outstanding: a profoundly moving testament to the power of the private press, working under duress. Werkman was executed by the Nazis just days before the liberation of Holland.



Plate 2. Martin Buber. *Chassidische legendes*. Illustration for the Journey to Jerusalem. *De Blauwe Schuit*, 1942-43.

Other presses published illegal anti-Nazi texts; presented the work of Dutch authors; and helped the Dutch Resistance. For example, *De Mansarde Pers*, established in 1943, produced poems by Gerrit Achterberg. *De Bezige Bij*, founded in 1942, printed work whose sales benefitted Jewish children in hiding. Later it became a leading post-war publisher. All these presses kept literature and freedom of speech alive in wartime Holland.

The post-war development of Dutch printing is well handled in essays on the gradual reconstruction of commercial publishing. Prosperity meant more readers, the explosion of Dutch popular books via the affordable paperback, and

the development of the profession book designer. Organizations like the *Stichting De Roos* ('The Rose Society') revived bibliophile books for the love of typography and quality book production.



Plate 3. *Plop. Pers No 14*, 2005.

In the 1960s and 1970s the demise of lead type and commercial letter-press printing made presses and equipment available and affordable to the enthusiastic amateur printer. Classic private presses like the *Tuinwijkpers* of Sem Hartz, the graphic designer at Enschedé, were an inspiration. Frans de Jong founded *Typotent*, producing unique, highly creative printing from an Amsterdam attic print shop. By 1973 his studio had become *Het Drukhuis*, giving more than 100 keen amateurs a taste of letterpress printing.

By 1975 the Dutch private press movement was energized with the founding of the *Stichting Drukwerk in de Marge* ('Society of Marginal Printers') by printers who regarded themselves as 'marginal' printers, hobbyists, and Sunday printers, and whose work places them delightfully 'on the edge'. Initially 45 participants, they made close contact amongst each other, discussing work, organizing a roller-recasting campaign, exchanging skill and materials, organizing exhibitions (including a major event in 1985 at the *Museum van het Boek*), publishing a newsletter, creating a website, and – amazingly – producing a nation-wide inventory of members' type, presses, and other printing material: a project that will virtually guarantee the preservation of letterpress printing in

Holland. All this was done with co-operation and an intense dedication to the printing craft.

It is impossible to discuss the many design approaches of contemporary Dutch private presses or the variety of their output. Some proprietors, like Bram de Does, are professionals who produce outstanding typography. Others are artists with printmaking experience and/or the knowledge of printing machinery. Some love type and are inspired by literature to attempt to reflect it with the most appropriate typeface. Others are self-taught, caught by the printing bug. Many of these categories overlap. But most printers, I think, understand the importance of using the best quality materials to present their work in the best possible light.

Some private printers collaborate in that delightful Dutch custom: the commemorative book. This might be a portfolio for the birthday of a member printer, collections of ephemera, or other work – ideal projects for members with limited supplies of type – always ensuring that each participant receives a copy. Such communal activities are only possible in a small, progressive country like the Netherlands.

This article cannot begin to mention all the major Dutch private presses operating in the past 50 years. Fortunately, several articles discuss them in detail and display some highly imaginative and experimental work. An appendix lists the names of private presses as well as co-operatives and workshops.

Distribution of private press work is always challenging. Book fairs have helped. Some antiquarian booksellers show an interest, as do specialty booksellers like *Minotaurus* in Amsterdam. The internet is proving helpful. Exhibitions and publications like *Mooi marginal* ('Pretty marginal') keep private press work in the public eye.

Printing museums and workshops also help to preserve letterpress printing (there are about 20 printing workshops throughout the Netherlands). But controversial issues remain: the changing forms of bookmaking (i.e., artists' books) and new directions in manufacture (i.e., the use of digital technology). Artists' books, in which an artist's images have more dominance than text, have always held interest, and one-of-a-kind book objects increase in appeal – and possible value – for collectors.

Private presses, in contrast, are generally more focused on presenting the author's word in its most appropriate form. Part of the delight of a private press book is its tactility: the feel of type impressed on paper; its three-dimensionality as light rakes across the surface of the page; the touch of quality paper enticing the reader. But setting up a printing shop in the 21st century to produce such pages would be prohibitively expensive, and relatively new, crisp type is hard to find. The advent of desktop publishing, in which anyone can be a designer/typesetter (with all the aesthetic dangers that this entails), allows for remarkable

design flexibility compared to the often rectilinear rigidity of the letterpress-printed page. Sophisticated computer printers are capable of good colour and high resolution work. Hybrid books (partly printed by letterpress) could be produced with the aid of a computer and a quality printer. Whatever the future of the private press, the Netherlands will continue to produce some of the most interesting and challenging books in the genre.

This brief synopsis of *the Ideal Book* cannot show the detailed research the authors have done or the deep affection they feel for their subject. The book is handsomely designed in a large format (31 x 24 cm) with well-printed, generous photos. The translation reads well, though there is some inevitable overlap, occasional inconsistencies in terminology, and a few inaccuracies. Photographs of flat book pages can be boring (the viewer is unable to enjoy the pleasure of turning actual pages), so some photos showing unexpected details of pages and bindings give a feeling of movement. A few photos use models, presumably to show the scale of the books, but their presence (and in one case, the model's teeth braces) distracts from the subject matter.

The Ideal Book is an excellent record of an exhibition organized by the *Koninklijke Bibliotheek* and *Museum Meermanno / Huis van het Boek*, shown in The Hague from November 2010 to February 2011. But it stands alone as a model of scholarship balanced with love in the service of the private press. It will be enjoyed by anyone who loves books and the making of books.