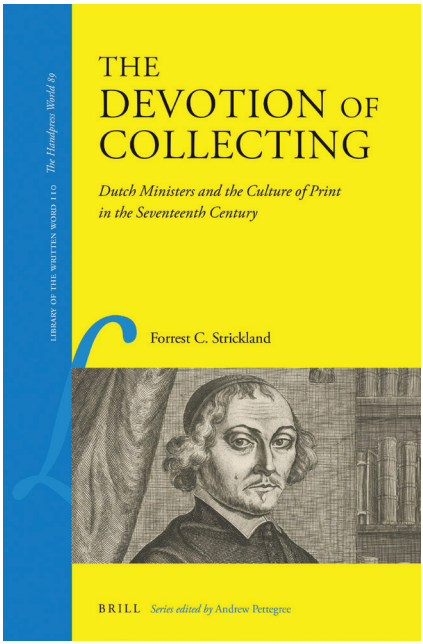
Review

Forrest C. Strickland, *The Devotion of Collecting. Dutch Ministers and the Culture of Print in the Seventeenth Century*, Leiden, Brill, 2023, 278 pp. ISBN 9789004538184.



What books did Dutch Protestant ministers own, and what does that say about their work, their position in Dutch society, their participation in the print culture in the Dutch Republic, and their contribution to the sociology of knowledge and the history of ideas? In this book, an adaptation of his doctoral thesis at the University of St Andrews, Forrest Strickland looks for the answers to these questions in the auction catalogues of Dutch ministers, a corpus that has not yet been systematically explored.

Based on earlier studies of book auctions in the Dutch Republic, notably those by Bert van Selm, Strickland describes how the auction catalogue, that was already in use throughout Europe from het early sixteenth century, became exceptionally widespread in the Dutch Republic. The printing industry was booming business here, due to the freedom of the press and a prosperous and highly literate society that generated a huge demand for books, both new and second-hand. However, books were still a relatively expensive commodity. Private libraries were usually sold quickly at public auctions after the deaths of their owners. Over two thousand printed auction catalogues have been preserved. As well as lawyers, doctors, and public officials, a surprising number of professional men auctioned their books, but ministers made up the largest group of sellers.

Ministers were bookworms. Their work required them to study the Bible and theological literature thoroughly, including pamphlets in which the many theological controversies of the period were publicly debated, as well as of issues of general interest. They began collecting books as students and continued to do so throughout their careers. Although the universities in the Republic built institutional libraries, they were

DOI 10.51750/emlc.29180 - URL: http://www.emlc-journal.org
Publisher: Stichting EMLC
Copyright: The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

relatively small and access was very restricted. Ministers therefore needed their own collections. On average, seventeenth-century auction catalogues of ministers' libraries listed 1141 titles. This figure is similar to that for jurists or medical doctors' libraries, while some professionals also owned sizeable libraries. The catalogues used for this study together contain over 315,000 individual book titles. These were analysed using bibliometrics and contextualised with a wealth of anecdotes from contemporary authors and more recent literature. The published correspondence of André Rivet was a great help, even though he was hardly a representative figure for the ministry as a whole.

Following a general introduction, the material is analysed in four chapters. Chapter 2, 'That all may be instructed', describes how ministers were active at all levels within the world of books. Strickland views ministers almost exclusively through the lens of their preaching ministry, including the professors among the owners of the catalogued libraries. They collected and studied books, to strengthen their faith and to enable them to guide their flocks towards godliness. They also wrote books to spread the faith beyond the reach of their voice and after their deaths. Their bookish approach to religion boosted literacy among the Dutch population and increased demand for more books. As critical readers, authors, correctors, translators, and censors, they cultivated a symbiotic relationship with printers and booksellers. The third chapter, 'Buyers of truth', delves deeper into the composition of ministers' collections. It presents statistics on the size of libraries, the relative numbers for Latin books, books in other ancient languages, and books in European vernaculars. Dutch books predominate among the latter, while French was not yet very popular in the seventeenth century, except of course among Walloon ministers. Only the anglophile Jacobus Koelman owned many English books and a former minister to the Dutch embassy in Venice had developed a reading habit in Italian.

Chapter 4, 'Guardians of the faith', discusses the genres represented in minister' libraries. As expected, their collections included Bibles, in various languages and editions, as well as catechisms. They also owned works by medieval schoolmen, particularly the more devotional writers, and works by the sixteenth-century Reformers and contemporary theological debates. They also owned books by theological opponents, including Catholics and Remonstrants. Strickland devotes a paragraph to English Puritan authors that were mostly read in translation. In the last chapter, 'Learned servants', the author further widens the scope: almost a third of the books listed in the auction catalogues were on non-theological subjects, ranging from political theory and economy to foreign lands and pagan religions. After all, ministers were also public intellectuals. According to the author, they used this knowledge to explain the world to their congregations and teaching them to view all of creation through a theological lens.

While informative, the book does not reveal much that is new. The auction catalogues do not provide a representative image of ministers' reading habits, let alone their contribution to intellectual history. There are simply too few of them and they are too diverse. Furthermore, this study lacks a solid interpretative framework. Strickland never questions the traditional image of ministers as men from a middle-class background, who

were poorly paid and had a pietistic outlook, even when his own material contradicts this. However, he does present some findings that could open new avenues for research. For example, how did the books by Franciscus Ridderus become popular among Lutheran ministers in Norway (28)? Why was Johannes Cocceius among the top twenty authors represented in the catalogues, but not Gisbertus Voetius (134)? A more rigorous analysis and the formulation of more precise research questions could have produced a much more interesting book.

Joke Spaans, Utrecht University