

A passion for Dutch

Winner of the Vondel Prize, Paul Vincent talks to Aletta Stevens about the development of his translation career and discusses the impact of Low Countries literature



Aletta Stevens is a freelance Dutch translator and founder member of ITI. Her translation of the biography of Dutch film director Paul Verhoeven was published by Faber and Faber. She is a regular contributor to *ITI Bulletin*. Her profile can be viewed on <http://uk.linkedin.com/in/alettastevens>.

Paul Vincent is the winner of the 2011 Vondel Translation Prize for *My Little War*, his translation of *Mijn kleine oorlog* by the Flemish writer Louis Paul Boon. A literary translator from Dutch into English for over 20 years, his translations have been published by Penguin, Faber and Faber, Pushkin Press, Granta and Viking, and include the work of some of the Netherlands' and Flanders' best-known novelists, such as Harry Mulisch, Louis Couperus and Willem Elsschot. In addition, he has translated non-fiction and poetry, has worked as a commercial translator and member of ITI, acts as a tutor for translation workshops and courses, and is a member of the Society for Dutch Literature (*Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde*). In 2006 he won the David Reid Poetry Translation Prize for his rendering of Hendrik Marsman's quintessential Dutch poem, *Herinnering aan Holland (Memory of Holland)*.

When you graduated from Cambridge University with a BA in Modern Languages (German, Dutch, French), what made you decide to teach the least common language of the three?

I added Dutch in my second year in an attempt to break away from the well-trodden path of German and French. I was lucky to find both an inspiring teacher, Peter King, and a small group of highly motivated contemporaries, who supplied both comradeship and a competitive edge. When I graduated, I found Dutch not only an interesting, but a relatively uncrowded, field.

What was it like in the swinging sixties in Amsterdam when you undertook your postgraduate studies there?

I'm afraid I saw Swinging Amsterdam mostly at a distance. I was living near Haarlem with my wife and son, and also did a variety of manual jobs throughout North Holland (good for broadening my idiomatic range). Afterwards I learned to my surprise that people I attended lectures with were activists, *Provos* (anarchists),

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etc. One thing that struck me was how the country seemed to be able to accommodate extreme opposites: I vividly remember sharing a train compartment with an old lady in traditional dress and a flamboyant transvestite, and neither batting an eyelid! The Netherlands I remember was 'in your face' in a way that was shocking to someone brought up on English public deference. Once I'd adjusted, I came to treasure Dutch forthrightness, and hope that it will long survive.

From 1967 to 1989 you were a full-time lecturer and senior lecturer in Dutch Language and Literature at Bedford College, University of London, and University College London, and

Head of Department from 1983-1984 and 1988-1989. To what extent was this the ideal training ground for literary translation?

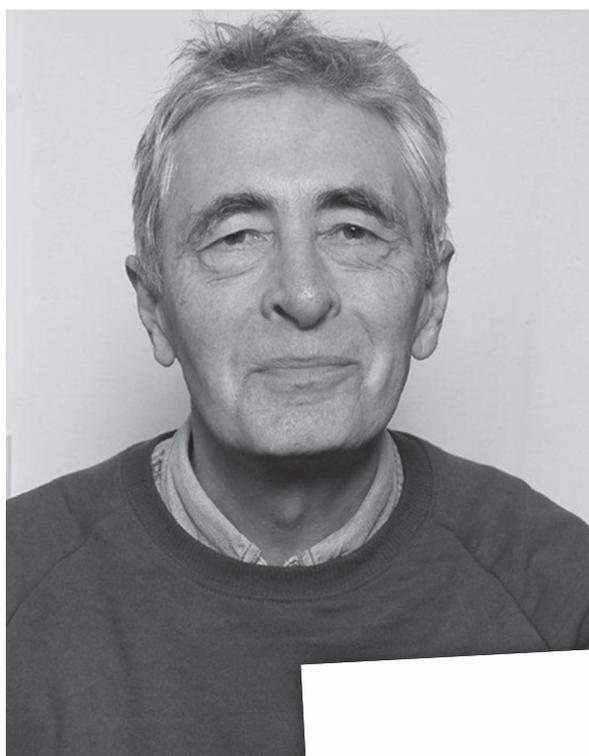
When I entered university teaching, translation played a big part in the curriculum: firstly in language instruction itself (these were the days before language labs and sophisticated pedagogical methods), and secondly, since many students were tackling Dutch *ab initio*, in introducing them to literary texts. In addition, a common extra-curricular activity was writing reports and translating samples of books for publishers. So I had some basic experience, but still had a great deal to learn, about deadlines, discipline, negotiation, translation aids, etc.

In 1989 you left academe to become a freelance translator. What was your first break in Dutch literary translation?

My first big break was the chance of translating Harry Mulisch's *De ontdekking van de hemel*. The translation (*The Discovery of Heaven*) appeared in 1996. I enjoyed doing it, and went on to translate two more books by Mulisch, but it was a steep learning curve. The project was rushed from start to finish, and the deadline for proofreading was particularly tight. I have been unable to persuade the publishers (Penguin) to allow me to revise my version. It also remains regrettable that Jeroen Krabbé's interesting English-language film of the book (2001) was never released in the UK or the US.

What in your view are the most important attributes that a translator should have to become a literary translator, and what advice would you give to someone starting out in literary translation?

All translation can be seen as a problem-solving activity, but literature poses special problems that call for particular qualities in a translator: besides literary interest and knowledge in both source and target



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is true that Flemish, both in its 'standard' form and in its many dialects, poses special challenges and requires its own tools, like Walter de Clerck's invaluable *Zuidnederlands Woordenboek* and a host of dialect dictionaries. Today the language of Flemish writers published in the Northern Netherlands is regularly edited to make their work more accessible to Dutch readers.

Why do you think it is more difficult for Dutch literature to

make an impact in the English-speaking world than for other literatures, such as the French, German and Italian?

The facile answer is that the three cultures mentioned are all bigger and richer and spend more on cultural promotion as part of a well-defined cultural policy. Both the Netherlands and Flanders have agencies dedicated to literary promotion, which are active on the international scene. The reality, however, is that they are struggling to

compete with a tide of literary products from all over the world in a world constantly hungry for the new, the marketable and the exotic. I think the real news is not how little quality work from the Low Countries reaches the Anglo-American marketplace, but how much.

Do you think the e-book will have a detrimental effect on the publishing and reading of literary works?

It will certainly affect the contractual position of authors and translators, but I don't see why the medium itself should necessarily lead to a dumbing down.

***Mijn kleine oorlog* was published**

in 1947. Why has it taken all this time for it to be translated into English? And why is it worthwhile for an English-speaking audience to read a book that was written so long ago?

Belgium gets even less attention abroad than the Netherlands, besides which Boon was for a long time never really regarded as a mainstream writer – even though three other books of his have been translated.

Dalkey Archive Press, the publisher of *My Little War*, would, I know, like to publish more Boon, if subsidy were available on acceptable terms.

Is it sufficient for readers of this book to know something about the Second World War or do they need to be made aware of the situation in occupied Belgium and the state of Flemish literature at the time?

There are a number of specific historical and cultural references, but to my mind they are not central enough to require annotation. The impact of war and occupation on ordinary lives in this book remains topical, indeed universal.

You are currently working on a translation of *De stille kracht* (1900) by the Dutch writer Louis Couperus, to be published by Pushkin Press as *The Hidden Force* in September this year. What do you think its relevance might be to an English-speaking readership beyond the specific setting of the Dutch in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), for example in terms of colonial power and East versus West?

Besides having a powerful plot and an atmospheric setting, the book is prophetic in seeing Dutch colonial power in the East Indies as doomed because of the eternal incompatibility of Western and Eastern culture and spirituality. It can be compared in some respects with an English classic like *A Passage to India*. The director Paul Verhoeven has expressed his wish to film the book, and Verhoeven's brand of evocative action movie could certainly help raise the international profile of this Dutch classic. 

***My Little War* will be reviewed by Aletta Stevens in the next issue of *ITI Bulletin*.**

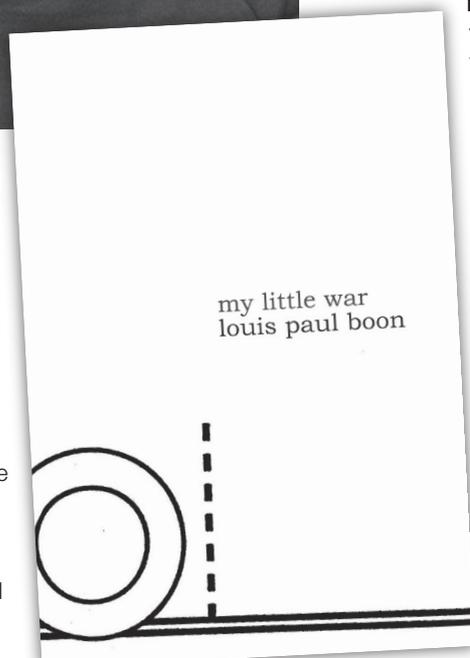
languages, intuition and taste are invaluable. A fairly recent development is the introduction of so-called mentoring schemes for would-be translators. Mentees are assigned for a set period to an experienced practitioner, who will look critically at their work and advise on practical issues like contracts and negotiation.

Is the present economic climate likely to affect the financial support provided by governmental organisations such as the Flemish Literature Fund and the Dutch Foundation for Literature?

Sadly, yes. Subsidy criteria and procedures have already been tightened up, reducing the likelihood that small publishers will risk publishing foreign work.

What are the differences in translating literary works from the Netherlands as opposed to the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, both linguistically and culturally?

The cliché contrast is that Dutch prose is spare and Classical and Flemish prose is baroque. One need only mention names like Rosenboom or Elsschot to demolish that myth. It



***My Little War* is published by Dalkey Archive Press at £9.99**