

## *The Frisian Collections in the British Library*

Marja Kingma

### Gearfetting

*Yn dit artikel freegje ik omtinken foar de Fryske kolleksjes fan 'e British Library. Ik sil de Fryske kolleksjes teplak sette yn it gruttere ramt fan 'e British Library yn it algemien en fan 'e kolleksjes op it mêd fan 'e Nederlânske taal yn it bysûnder. Dêrby wurdt útlis jûn oer wat oft de grutte fan 'e kolleksjes oanbelanget, ynhoeft dy kolleksjes digitalisearre binne en 'e kritearia op grûn wêrfan't de kolleksjes gearstald en útwreide wurde. By einsluten besprek ik de ûnderskate wizen dêr't kuratoaren harren kolleksjes op yn 't omtinken bringe fan 'e wittenskip en fan it algemiene publyk, sadat dy kolleksjes mear en better brûkt wurde.*

### *Introduction*

What has Frisian to do with the British Library? How do Frisian publications end up in the collections of the British Library, and most importantly perhaps, why?

With this paper I hope to raise awareness of the Frisian collections at the British Library amongst Frisian researchers. In order to do this, I shall place the Frisian collections within the context of the British Library in general and the Dutch Language Collections in particular; explain the selection process and give some figures about the collections. I shall discuss the ways in which curators promote the collections in order to boost usage, as well as the research opportunities that have opened up, due to the Library's status as an Independent Research Institution. This gives hope for the future of the Frisian collections.

### *The British Library*

The British Library was established by Act of Parliament of 1972 as the National Library of the United Kingdom, which came into force in 1973.<sup>1</sup> The Act brought together several libraries, including the library of the British Museum (hence the confusion between the two institutions to this day). The latter had been the de-facto national library of the UK

1 British Library Act 1972 <https://www.bl.uk/aboutus/governance/blact/>

for many years. In 1753 the great collector Hans Sloane (1660-1753) bequeathed his vast collections of objects and library to the nation, thus founding the British Museum. Over time more private collections were added: those of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571-1631), Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) and the collection of Thomas Grenville MP (1755-1846), which contains *Friesche Rymlerye* by Gysbert Japicx of 1668.<sup>2</sup> The collections grew further because of the legal deposit regulations. These were introduced in 1662, as a censorship and protectionist measure and later developed into a more benign policy of safeguarding the nation's intellectual heritage. Since 2013 the Legal Deposit Libraries (Non-Print Works) Regulations 2013 has extended the legal deposit to e-books, e-journals, blogs, and websites within the UK web domain.<sup>3</sup>

*Antonio Panizzi (1797-1879)*

Collection development really took off in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, due to the vast efforts of Antonio Panizzi (1797-1879), Principal Librarian of the British Museum from 1856-1866. He pursued a collection policy that aimed to fill the huge gaps in the Museum's book collections, buying large quantities of foreign published books.<sup>4</sup> Under his management the library grew to the global research library it still is. This global character is what makes the British Library unique amongst other national libraries. Its collections are unequalled in breadth and depth, totalling 150 million items, from manuscripts to born digital, covering every academic subject, virtually every country and over 400 languages.

*St. Pancras and Boston Spa*

Considering the growth of the collections it is no surprise that the British Museum became too small to hold the collections. Apart from lack of space at the Museum, storage conditions deteriorated rapidly, so in 1974 plans by architect Sir Colin St John Wilson (1922-2007) for a new building on the Euston Road were approved and funding provided. Building started in 1988 and finally in November 1997 collections and staff moved from the famous Round Reading Room of the British Museum to the brand new building for the new British Library at St. Pancras.<sup>5</sup> Ten years later St. Pancras International Station re-opened next door.

---

2 G. Japicx, *Friesche Rymlerye*. Bôalsert, 1668. Shelf mark 11557.h.27.

3 Legal Deposit. <https://www.bl.uk/aboutus/legaldeposit/introduction/>

4 P. J. Weimerskirch, *Antonio Panizzi's acquisitions policies for the Library of the British Museum*. [New York], 1977.

5 History of the British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/aboutus/quickinfo/facts/history/>

Although it is the largest public sector building in the UK built in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it is now too small and plans are well underway for an extension to the North of the site, where a new Learning Centre and exhibition spaces will be built.<sup>6</sup>

The British Library has a second site, based in Boston Spa, West-Yorkshire, where once stood a munitions factory. Some of the old buildings are still in use. This is where the Document Supply Centre's collection is stored, and books and articles are shipped to libraries across the world, as well as to and from London. Most of the IT-and administrative staff is based there, too. In recent years two state-of-the-art storage facilities were built to house lesser used material and the National Newspaper Collection. The site also has a reading room, open to anyone with a reader's pass. Plans are underway for a major overhaul of the site, to attract more visitors and to improve storage conditions.

*Living Knowledge: The British Library 2015-2023* sets out our mission, vision and strategy until 2023, when the Library hopes to celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>7</sup>

#### *The Dutch Language Collections*

Currently, the Dutch Language Collections form part of the Germanic Collections, which include German speaking countries, Scandinavia, Finland and Iceland and Dutch speaking countries: the Netherlands, Flanders, also known as 'The Low Countries' and South-Africa, albeit only for fiction published in Afrikaans.

The main criterion that defines 'Dutch Language Collections' is the place of publication. This means that titles can be published in other languages than Dutch and about other topics than the Low Countries. Ever since the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century the Low Countries were 'the bookshop of the world'<sup>8</sup>, the place with the best printers, book binders, cartographers, and book sellers this side of the Alps, whose products sold well in Britain. The Dutch published not only in Dutch and Frisian, but in Latin, English, French and German. Especially the Latin and English languages found their way to London. Maps and atlases were also highly coveted, especially by the English kings and aristocracy.

---

6 Building the Future. <https://www.bl.uk/projects/building-the-future> (visited 29/8/2018)

7 Living Knowledge: The British Library 2015 -2023, <https://www.bl.uk/projects/living-knowledge-the-british-library-2015-2023>

8 Hellinga, L. (ed) et al., *The Bookshop of the World: the role of the Low Countries in the book-trade 1473-1941*. [Houten], 2001. Shelf mark YA.2002.b.3745.

How big the Dutch collections are is difficult to say. This is due to the long history of the British Library, with its amalgamation of various libraries, numerous catalogues, and cataloguing systems and practices, some more accurate than others.

Most of the early printed holdings (ca. 1500-1800) is included in The Short Title Catalogue Netherlands, thanks to the efforts of the former curator Dr. Jacob Harskamp. He added most of the 29,339 titles of the British Library holdings mentioned in the STCN<sup>9</sup>. Over the past ten years curators selected roughly 500 new titles per year, but this figure is increasing. Other Library departments receive titles on standing order, or on subscription, for instance from big publishers, such as Brill (1000 titles per year) and Wolters Kluwer (ca.1800 titles per year), as well as periodicals. The total may sit somewhere around the 70,000 titles.

#### *Selection criteria*

Dutch language material is selected based on place of publication, subject matter and academic level, or cultural importance. Apart from academic titles biographies of Dutch football players and coaches who played in England and collections of newspaper columns are selected. When a title is available in Dutch and English the latter is preferred, because it will reach a wider audience. This does not always work, especially when an English translation follows the Dutch original a few years later, meaning that both editions end up in our collections. When published in the UK, or the USA the English translation is not considered part of the Dutch Language Collections.

Subjects cover the arts, literature and history, as well as philosophy and to a lesser degree the Social Sciences. The emphasis for history lies very much on the Dutch Golden Age, with strong collections of poetry, drama, and political pamphlets. The Second World War is equally well represented. The large collection of clandestinely published monograph titles and a small collection of 'druksels' by Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman deserve a special mention here.

Contemporary literature is also selected, with an emphasis on well-established Dutch, Flemish and Frisian authors.

#### *The Frisian Collections*

Selection for the Frisian collections follows the same rules as those for the Dutch collections, with particularly strong holdings in 19<sup>th</sup> century plays and poetry throughout the ages. The wider British Library collec-

---

9 Short Title Catalogue Netherlands: <http://bit.ly/2STCNFrIs>

tions hold publications in English mainly about the Frisian language. An example is *The Frisian Language and Literature: A Historical Study*, by W.T. Hewett, published in Ithaca, New York in 1879 (shelfmark 12972. ee.21.) and reprinted in 1974, by Gordon (shelf mark 75/17898).

The Frisian collections hold around 2,500 titles. I reached this figure through a count of titles published in Frisian cities and towns, as well as in Amsterdam, starting from 1500 up to the present day, in various languages. The oldest title in Frisian held by the Library is Gysbert Japicx' *Fryske Rymlery*, from the library of Thomas Grenville MP (1755-1846).

It won't come as a surprise that almost half of the titles (1293) were published in Leeuwarden. Currently most titles stem from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, twice as many as the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries combined, although this will obviously shift as time progresses.

Franeker is the second most represented Frisian city, followed by Sneek. This is true for both Dutch and Frisian titles. By far the most English language titles are from Leeuwarden, a third of which were published by The Fryske Akademy, whose publications are held from its inception to the present day.

Examples of titles from the Frisian collections include catalogues and publications by the Frisian Provinciale Bibliotheekcentrale, bibliographies, including one about dictionaries.<sup>10</sup>

Almost as if to prove the point that the Frisian collections follow the same patterns as the Dutch Collections in general, plays form a substantial part of the Frisian collections, especially plays from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A search for 'Ljouwert + toanielstik' resulted in 36 hits (1883-1939) whilst 'Blijspil' returned 39 titles, published between 1870 and 1936.

Then there is poetry. Titles range from Gysbert Japicx' 'Friesche Rymle-rye' to 'Snot & Triennen en oare gedichten' by Baukje Wytsma and Babs Wijnstra.

Periodicals are less well represented, but the most important literary titles are present in the collections: *De Moanne* ; *De Tsjerne* ; *Ensafh* and of course *It Beaken*.

Whether the collections reflect the actual publishing trend of Frisian titles in the Netherlands is as yet unknown. There are undoubtedly gaps in the holdings which will be filled where titles are still available.

---

10 : F. Claes, P. Kramer and B. van der Veen, *A Bibliography of Frisian Dictionaries*, Groningen, 1984. Shelfmark Ac.939.ba.[33/1]

FRISIAN COLLECTIONS											LIBRARY HILLIER
FRISIAN COLLECTION BRITISH LIBRARY APRIL 2018 BY PLACE OF PUBLICATION LANGUAGES AND TIME PERIOD											
PLACE OF PUBL.	TOTAL TITLES	FRIES	DUTCH	ENGLISH	OTHER	18TH- 17TH C	18TH C	19TH C	20TH C	21ST C	DIJITIE XCL TOTAL
LEEWARDEN	792	108	632	50	2	31	102	324	210	125	139
LJOUWERT	406	366	20	20		0	0	8	308	90	0
LEOVARDAE	95	0	0		95	27	52	15	1	0	30
SNEEK	132	5	124	1	2	0	0	127	25	0	20
SNITS	109	108	1	0	0	0	0	7	102	0	2
WORKUM	21	5	16	0	0	0	1	18	2	0	4
WARKUM	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
BOLSWARD	41	4	34	2	1	0	0	5	34	2	1
BOALSERT	108	104	2	0	0	1	0	0	104	1	0
HARLINGEN	89	1	87	1	0	11	32	25	12	9	22
HARNS	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
FRANEKER	254	5	236	4	9	35	10	28	145	36	29
FRENTSJER	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0
DOKKUM	31	22	9	0	0	0	0	4	27	0	0
DRACHTEN	130	83	45	1	1	0	0	0	128	2	0
JOURE	6	3	3	0	0	0	0	4	2	0	1
HEERENVEEN	76	1	70	5	0	0	0	16	32	28	7
GROU	16	16	0	0	0	0	0	1	15	0	0
AMSTERDAM	57	4	33	18	2	0	3	3	28	23	0
TOTAL	2369	843	1312	102	112	105	200	580	1178	316	255
S_FRYSKJE AKADEMY	265	118	118	24	7	0	2	0(1839)	228	35	0
www.bl.uk											16

Fig. 1. Overview of the Frisian Collections at the British Library, april 2018.

Promoting the Frisian collections

You may ask yourself: Who uses the collections? There is no simple way to find out, unfortunately. Use is probably limited to academics interested in the subject and therefore fairly low. This is true for most foreign language collections. That is why curators spend a lot of time promoting the collections, through contributions to blogs and exhibitions.

The European Studies blog reaches a global audience. I received comments from people in Britain and the Netherlands about my two blog on the Frisian collections: ‘Gysbert Japicx: founder of Frisian literature’ on the occasion of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death<sup>11</sup> and one about Obe Postma and his admiration for Emily Dickenson.<sup>12</sup> More will follow.

Although children’s literature is beyond our scope, some titles are bought. For our exhibition ‘Harry Potter: A History of Magic’. I purchased both the Dutch and the Frisian translation of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* were purchased to be displayed amongst other Harry Potter translations held by the Library.<sup>13</sup>

11 M.A. Kingma, *Gysbert Japicx: founder of Frisian literature* <http://bit.ly/GysbertJpcx2ifgtOo>  
 12 M.A. Kingma, *Obe Postma and Emily Dickinson’s Bees*, 29 March 2018 <http://bit.ly/2IdloOe>  
 13 J.K.Rowling, *Harry Potter en de stien fan ‘e wizen*. Oersetting Jetske Bilker. Ljouwert, 2007. Shelfmark YF.2017.a.11390

From 19<sup>th</sup> of October 2018 until 19<sup>th</sup> February 2019 the exhibition *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word and War* will showcase the Library's treasures from the time.<sup>14</sup> It will show some of the earliest English writing and literature, which makes it interesting to look out for any Old Frisian. In June 2012, when London hosted the Olympic Games, the Library organised a study day around sports resources. I presented a paper on our holdings on Frisian sports, which was met with great interest by the academics present, none of whom had heard before about the *Alvestêdetocht* (Dutch: *Elfstedentocht*, a skating race), or *Skûtsjesilen* (a boat race), or *keatsen* (Dutch: *kaatsen*, a ball sport akin to cricket). There was even a link between *fierljeppen* (jumping with a pole) and English history. The story goes that King Henry VIII nearly drowned when out hunting in a marsh. The pole he used to jump across the marsh broke, which landed him head first in the mud. Henry had to be rescued by an officer, or he would have drowned.<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 2. Three plays from the Frisian Collections at the British Library.

---

14 *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War*. <https://www.bl.uk/events/anglo-saxon-kingdoms>

15 A. Weir, *Henry VIII: King and Court*. London, 2001. Shelfmark mo1/32867

*The Future of the Frisian Collections*

The British Library has recently acquired the status of Independent Research Institution, which means it is able to set up partnerships with other research institutions, both in Britain and abroad.<sup>16</sup> This opens up exciting opportunities for (Frisian) researchers to use our collections and help make them become more accessible. Researching this paper I found that we know still very little about its scope, size, how well it represents the Frisian literature and history and where the main gaps are that would need to be filled.

More of the Library's collections are now becoming available online, in particular through the Google Books digitisation project, making it possible for people everywhere to access items such as *Woordenboek op de gedichten en verdere geschriften van G. Japix*<sup>17</sup>, from their homes or offices. 250 Frisian titles have been digitised so far and more will follow. Hopefully this will give the Frisian collections much more exposure and encourage researchers to use them more.

The British Library welcomes any suggestions for collaborations to improve knowledge of and access to its Frisian Collections.



---

16 Independent Research Organisations. <https://ahrc.ukri.org/funding/research/iro/>

17 E. Epkema, *De tredde druwck, op nijz trognoaze in forbettere trog* (Woordenboek op de gedichten en verdere geschriften van G. Japix, als een vervolg op de II. vorige deelen van dat werk.), Freantsjer, 1853. Shelf mark DRT Digital Store 839.f.43.