

Struggling with the European Atlas

Voskuil's Portrait of European Ethnology

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In 1995 the Dutch ethnologist J.J. Voskuil caused quite a stir with the first volume of the massive narrative about the life at a scientific institute entitled *Het Bureau*. In this contribution we will elaborate on the role foreign ethnologists play in this roman à clef, since Voskuil among other things reports by way of ethnographic fiction quite some details of international atlas conferences which he attended as staff member of the Amsterdam (P.J.) Meertens-Institute. In order to situate author and book we firstly introduce Dutch ethnology and Voskuil's position as scientist and novelist. The literary evocation of the atlas conferences concludes with some observations on the relation between fiction and faction and the ethics of writing about colleagues.

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"In fact one should write a book about this, he thought, as if it concerns a black tribe in Africa, and he smiled imagining the profound indignation this would evoke. But that joy was immediately gone by the thought that he would be granted a place in this ritual and the certainty that he would never know how to move properly in this society."¹

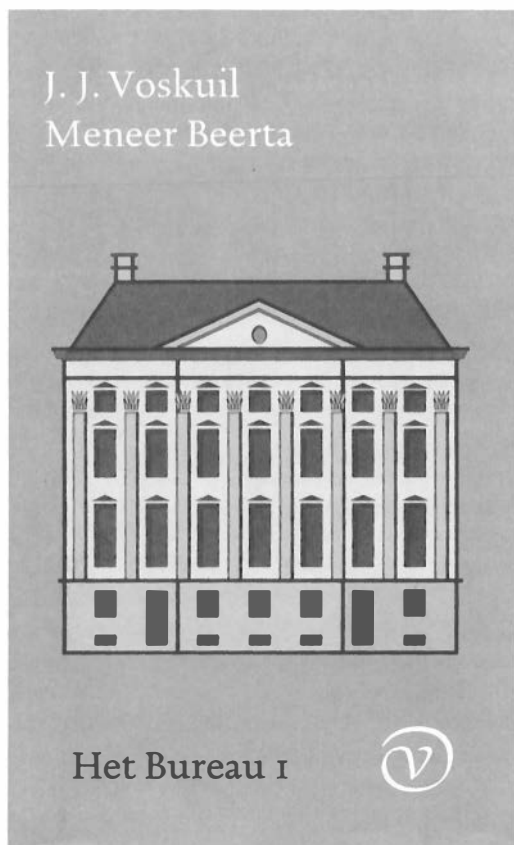
A Literary Hype

"He opened the door of the chart-room and stood still on the threshold. 'Can we talk now?' he asked. Lien looked up confused, red-faced by the intense reading. 'Yes.' He waited, while she stood up looking at her desk. 'Do you bring those papers?' 'O yes.' She looked for them between the piles on the corner of her desk, also grabbed a pen and followed him into his room. 'Please, take a seat over there,' he pointed at the place next to the head of the table. 'It looks a bit like the doctor, but I can't help that.' While she drew her chair up, still under the spell of what she had just read, he himself took place at the head

of the table. 'On what are you working now?' 'On *Ethnologia Europaea*.' 'Difficult?' She nodded" (V, 878).

This scene is situated at the "Department of Folk Culture" at "the Office", which stands for the former Ethnology Department of the P.J. Meertens-Institute of the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences in Amsterdam. This research institute is the place where the author J.J. Voskuil has set his novel, entitled *Het Bureau*. It is not just a setting but also the place where Voskuil gained inspiration as scientific head of department.

Johannes Jacobus Voskuil (The Hague, 1926) made his debut as a novelist in 1963 with the book *Bij nader inzien*, about which a fuss was made. This firstling of 1 200 pages was received with mixed opinions and was moderately sold, until it was rediscovered halfway through the 1980s. The book provided the basis for a Dutch serial broadcasted on television by which it reached a large audience. This novel, describing the lives and thoughts of a group of students in meticulous detail, is now considered a modern



Book jacket from the first volume of Voskuil's novel 'Het Bureau' (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1996).

classic, which paints a striking picture of the intellectual Dutch culture of the 50s (Voskuil 1963). Between his literary debut and *Het Bureau* is a period of as long as thirty-three years in which Voskuil, in a literary way, has not been in touch. Until recently he was known among literati as the writer of one book only.

Between 1957 and 1987 – he completed his thirty years' jubilee to the day precisely – Voskuil worked at the Ethnology Department of the research bureau of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in Amsterdam where the documentation and study of dialectology and onomastics was also domiciled. In 1979 this institute was named after the first director P.J. Meertens (1899–1985).² Just as his episode as a student resulted in *Bijnader inzien*, his experiences at the bureau finally resulted not only in a rich scientific production³

but also in an almost obsessional retrospect on the (non)sense and meaning of his career as a scientific public servant. Between September 1990 and February 1995 he wrote at breakneck speed, not without therapeutic meaning (like he stated himself in an interview), a novel in seven volumes of approximately 5 500 pages.

Voskuil wrote his office chronicle in the first place to straighten himself out and a publication in book form did not seem very realistic, considering the theme and the size, but to the publisher's and author's surprise the book became a great success at once. It became the literary sensation of the year and remained a success. Since the national sale starts at one and the same time it results in a tremendous run combined with the necessary publicity. The first volume is already in its thirteenth edition and the hype does not seem to come to an end just yet. Apparently size, price and the not exactly spectacular subject do not put the Dutch readers, at about 50,000 in total, off. Also by the literary critics Voskuil's *roman-fleuve* was almost unanimously very well received at which among other things comparisons were made with Kafka. The book was praised, as "The Great Dutch Novel" in which there is an awful lot to laugh at the pointlessness of life. For individual volumes of the novel the author received several literary awards, among which the prestigious "Libris-price" in 1998.

Dutch Ethnology and Voskuil

Ethnology as a scientific branch does not have a large tradition in the Netherlands and to the present day the institutional basis of the discipline, which was not expanded until the first half of the twentieth century, is relatively narrow (Dekker/Post/Roodenburg 1994, van Gin- kel 1998). The focus of traditional Dutch cultural history was until the nineteenth century on the way of life of townsmen and urban elite. They were interested in their own culture, of which the roots were sought at the legendary Batavians, which culminated in the early modern glory of the Golden Age. According to the romantic and mythologically inspired ethnology one took a special interest in traditional oral culture, which, following the Grimm brothers,

was considered a source for the reconstruction of the "heathen mythology". It is typical for the low attention in the Netherlands, however, that during the first half of the nineteenth century some German researchers like J. Grimm, H. Hoffmann von Fallersleben, F.J. Mone and J.W. Wolf made the first move themselves to collect Dutch legends, fairy tales and songs. With his collecting activities Wolf wanted to stimulate the regional awakening and had strong bonds with leading men from the regional movements in Flanders and Friesland. During the second half of the nineteenth century, especially in the southern and eastern parts of the Netherlands, folklorists are found who tried to collect and "save" as much as possible before the definite breakthrough of modernization and industrialization.

A decisive moment is the foundation of the journal *Volkskunde* by the Fleming Pol de Mont and August Gittée in 1888, by which a scientific Dutch-language medium of communication was created between ethnologists from North and South. At first it mostly concerned the Flemings, but after the turn of the century we often find researchers from the northern part of the Netherlands like J.H. Gallée, J. Rasch, C. van de Graft, J. de Vries and J. Schrijnen. In 1915 Schrijnen published the first Dutch handbook entitled *Nederlandse volkskunde*, which is best known from the two-volume second edition from 1930–32 and has had a lot of influence (Schrijnen 1915–16).⁴ The collecting and studying of material culture received a strong impulse in 1912 when the Dutch Open Air Museum was founded in Arnhem. This also made ethnology more popular for the general audience and it stimulated processes of popularization and folklorization. The journalist D.J. van der Ven has made an important contribution to this; his name was most of all associated with the organization of an ambitious national popular festival in 1919, which lasted as long as one week and where typical costumes, trades, folk-dancing, patron guilds and wagons were presented. The Interbellum period has been of great importance for the establishing of the discipline. Inspired by a German "megaproject", the *Atlas der Deutschen Volkskunde*, ethnologists in the Netherlands started to mobilize resources in

order to make a similar atlas possible for the Dutch-speaking regions. To describe in detail the organizational problems and the scientific and personal divisions would take us too far from the subject, but they can illustrate the high level of activity in those years (see Dekker 1989/1990, van der Kooi 1994, Jacobs 1989). When De Vries and Van der Ven had stopped playing a scientific and organizational role after the war, because of collaboration with the occupying forces, silence fell around ethnology. During the 50s and 60s the tone is set by the Netherlands specialist P.J. Meertens, who was appointed as the only public servant at the bureau from 1934.

As from July 1st, 1957, he is reinforced, for the purpose of the Dutch atlas project, by the person of J.J. (Han) Voskuil, also a Netherlands specialist. In these years the collecting and documenting was emphasized, especially with the help of questionnaires which were filled in by correspondents in the field (Dekker 1989). From approx. 1965 the staff of the ethnology bureau is increased in stages and one reflects on the fundamentals and principles of the profession. This finally results in the rift with the Flemish editors of *Volkskunde*, in the novel entitled *Ons Tijdschrift (Our Journal)*. In 1975 Meertens and Voskuil withdrew from the editorial staff and started their own journal: the *Volkkundig Bulletin* (from 1989 with the subtitle *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Cultuurwetenschap (Ethnological Bulletin. Journal for Dutch Cultural Studies)*). From the beginning this journal is open to social scientific interdisciplinary cooperation. The *Bulletin*, as it is called in the novel, wants to provide a platform for research into Dutch cultural phenomena in past and present, in which tradition and fashion play an overriding role, like feasts, rituals, religious ideas, clothing, food, lifestyle, etiquette or musical and literary expressions. Attention was not only focused on historical development and geographic or social spread of these phenomena but also on their functions, symbolic meanings, social and cultural contexts. This type of ethnological research is characterized by the fact that it departs from a concrete cultural phenomenon paying more attention to structure than events, more to groups than to individuals and at which

the emphasis is more on development, spread and change than on continuity.⁶

Voskuil's work was especially focused on mapping ethnological phenomena. It was this work that put him in touch with foreign colleagues. Dissatisfied with the theoretical principles of the geographical method, he focused more and more on ethnohistorical research, which resulted in studies of the walls of the farmhouse and probate inventories. Apart from that he wrote several more reflective articles on practising ethnology. His work has had a large influence on the emancipation of ethnology in the Netherlands (Dekker 1988, Doelman 1988). Voskuil's sensitivity to the cultural-political connotations of the profession and his aversion to academic bragging however resulted in the character of the ethnology department in those years, being a rather introvert, closed bulwark where ambitious outsiders were considered a threat.

Ethnographic Fiction of Office Life

Het Bureau is a roman à clef in which at about two hundred persons act, among them forty

foreign colleagues. Most of these persons meet each other at or around the Bureau, an imposing canalside house in Amsterdam with many rooms, corridors, stairways, rattling heating pipes and documentation cellars. In a way the building itself is a kind of central figure, evoking a make-believe world from which the employees derive their status and identity. Behind seemingly significant, but in reality according to Voskuil useless activities, the Bureau-persons mask their need of attention, recognition and power, which causes a lot of tension and friction. Maarten Koning, Voskuil's alter ego, reluctantly plays a main role in this world, at which he feels constantly threatened. He also knows that, when it is really important, he is lonely between all those employees and that only he has to bear responsibility. And so the essence of his authorship consists of a very personal exploration of his own shortcoming and that of his colleagues. Although he initially had chosen a life at the Bureau because it had no status in the scientific world at all, the institute, also with his own help, ironically distinguishes itself more and more in a scientific sense.



The Keizersgracht in Amsterdam where from 1969 until 1998 the P. J. Meertens-Institute was housed in the canal-building with the arched windows. Photo: Meertens Institute.



The old-fashioned desk ('the bureau at the bureau') of P. J. Meertens at his office, Amsterdam. Photo: Meertens Institute, 1997.

The novel gives a detailed description of daily reality of office life, a subject that had not been explored yet in this way in Dutch literature. The world as described in *Het Bureau* is exemplary for the human condition in which the "bureaucratized" person of the twentieth century is caught. Many readers can identify with the characters from the book and project their own situation at the office into Voskuil's often, hilarious prose. Apart from a description of daily routines and power games the novel gives an intriguing personal and literary picture of the development of ethnology in the Netherlands and abroad. With regard to the foreign situation emphasis is laid on the relations with Flemish colleagues as well as on Voskuil's commitment to the project of the European Atlas. In the novel the international atlas-conferences are described in detail, telling us outspokenly how Maarten Koning, alias Voskuil, experienced the behavior and meanings of his colleagues personally. In this contribution we want to make especially these observations accessible for foreign colleagues. His meticulous approach, of which we saw an example in the beginning with the journal *Ethnologia Europaea* acting in it, is the cause for the enormous size of the novel in which the dialogue and in particular the incapacity to com-

municate adequately is the central subject. When reading one gets the feeling to sit around the table oneself during meetings or to be part of conversations in the corridors of conferences.

The European Atlas as a Frustrated Project

In 1982 Voskuil published a critical scientific evaluation in *Volkskundig Bulletin* with reference to the first issue of the European Atlas (Voskuil 1982a, Cox 1988, Zender ed. 1980). Many international meetings to discuss work preceded the publishing of this edition about the annual fires in 1980. Already in 1938 Sigurd Erixon had convened a meeting in Copenhagen to accomplish a European ethnological atlas. It was decided to make a questionnaire, which started with questions about seasonal fires. The project was thwarted by the war and not until 1953 Erixon took it up again with a conference in Namen (Belgium). The first official atlas-conference however did not take place until 1966 in Zagreb (*Bericht* 1968), primarily because of organizational problems to draw Southern and Eastern Europe into the activities. Since then meetings were organized every two years, namely in Bonn (*Bericht* 1970), Helsinki (Fellenberg gen. Reinold ed. 1972), Stockholm

(*Beschlüsse* 1972), Visegrád (Kisbán ed.1974), St. Pölten (*Bericht* 1977) and Enniskillen (*Report* 1981).

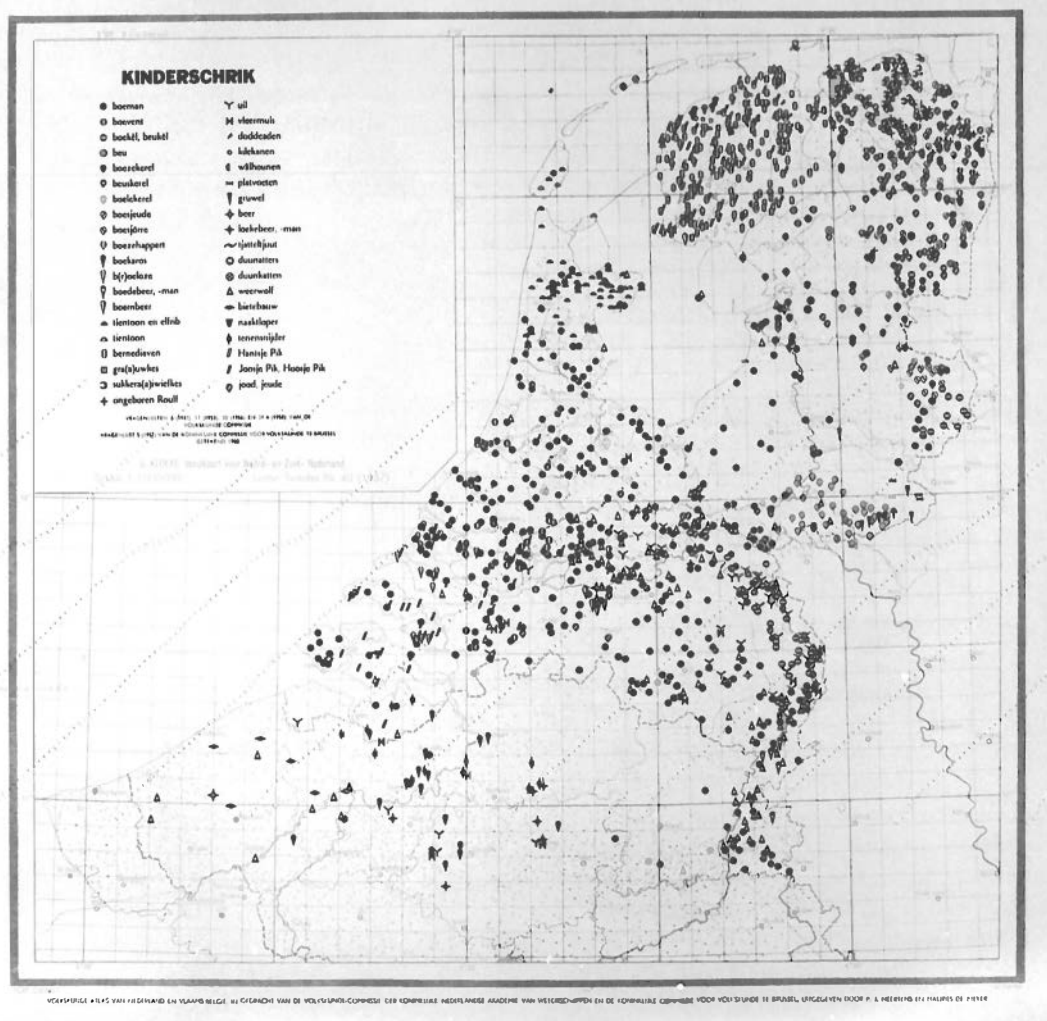
Voskuil describes the problems with which the composers of the atlas – which according to him was destined to fail from the start – were faced. He expresses his wonder about the fact that the discussion about the fundamental principles of the atlas actually was not held until the 70s and even then little adequately. In his article the scientist Voskuil looks back upon the meetings to discuss work, trying to find an answer to the question why this all led to such a dissatisfied result as the issue about the *Termine der Jahresfeier*. With the help of some concrete examples he puts his finger on the, in his opinion, sore spots like passing over the functions and meanings of the objects to be mapped by fixing on the morphologic aspects. In this way in his opinion the Dutch and Swedish May fires, as a result of a concentration on calendar dates, were deficiently mapped with a similar symbol. Furthermore he enters at length to the period which was represented with the atlas maps. The methodological objections expressed during the meetings against mapping the “pre-industrial phase”, as if it would entangle a static period with a continuity going back to the early Middle Ages or even the Roman period, were hardly found in the final publication.

Voskuil did acknowledge the importance of geographic maps as an instrument to classify and locate ethnographic data. But especially this schematic reproduction of reality involved the danger of speculative simplification by removing or trivializing historical facts in order to maintain an outdated theoretical principle by pulling out all the stops. For Voskuil, together with generation partners like Gerda Grober-Glück, Günter Wiegmann and Henri Klees, it was of great importance to consider maps a momentary indication, assuming simultaneity of data. This was brushed aside by the chairman Branimir Bratanić and to a lesser degree also by Matthias Zender, with the remark that this did not make much difference providing that the data came from the period before the “smoothing” industrialization. Pleas for drawing maps on the basis of contemporary data

were disregarded and so it came to pass that data from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were combined with information from around 1900. After all, Bratanić said, the large continental connections are important: “Wenn wir die Zeit um 1900 wählen, werden sich große Unterschiede zeigen, und die Karte wird ganz anders aussehen. Das heißt, wir erforschen in diesem Falle die Unterschiede zwischen den Völkern zu einem bestimmten Zeitpunkt. Mit der anderen Betrachtungsweise erforschen wir die Zusammenhänge zwischen den einzelnen Völkern und Kulturen, also nicht was sie zu einem bestimmten Zeitpunkt unterscheidet, sondern was sie einmal, vor der Industrialisierung, verband oder trennte” (*Bericht* 1972: 12–13).

The evaluation contains a vicious attack on the chairman at that time, the Yugoslavian Branimir Bratanić, and also the other leaders of the project, like Matthias Zender and Voskuil’s superior Piet Meertens, are not spared. In 1982 Voskuil makes no attempt to disguise his frustration about especially the autocratic performance of the chairman, who obstructed new ideas and rigidly held on to his own outdated views. Reviewing everything he brought the failure of the European atlas back to a conflict of generations with the inability to communicate with each other as the central point. However, it is evident that the European Atlas-project, which was loaded with a mortgage of opposite views, would have had a totally distinct course with a different chairman.

Twenty years later the emotion about this international “co-operation” is apparently not ebbed away yet. In *Het Bureau* Voskuil gives a great deal of prominence to the atlas-conferences, at which it becomes clear how he experienced these personally in retrospective. So next to a more analytical, scientific review we now also dispose of a literary evaluation. The outburst during the conference in Visegrád, about which Voskuil cryptically writes in 1982 that it had an absurd ending, is in the novel described in full detail.



Map of the different types of 'bogeymen' in the Netherlands and Flanders from the *Volkskunde-atlas voor Nederland an Vlaams-België* (issue II, map 18, 1965).

"Conferences are No Jaunts"

In a number of paragraphs, returning in every volume of the novel, Voskuil typifies his meetings with foreign colleagues and especially the adventures of the ethnologists who were working on the project of the European Atlas in which the Meertens-Institute participated through his director P.J. Meertens (in the book acting under the name of Anton P. Beerta) and Voskuil himself. The first contacts with German colleagues go back to 1959. In that year Voskuil visited the conference of the *Atlas der deutschen*

Volkskunde, held in Bonn (I, 217–227). With him he took the first issue of the *Volkskunde-Atlas voor Nederland en Vlaams-België*, which was published a few days earlier. In that company Beerta is referred to as "der Herr Professor" (I, 218), which would be very striking in the Netherlands if one would not actually have that title. They are given "a warm welcome" (I, 220) by Professor Seiner, or Matthias Zender. Apparently most of them knew Beerta. "He shook hands on all sides, stiffly standing". Wolf Güntermann (Günter Wiegelmann) he refers to as a young man of his age, who "was apparently well

informed about what was going on in the Netherlands and since he had not the faintest notion of the content of the German atlas himself this was a surprise to him" (I, 220–221).

From 1968 Voskuil alias Maarten Koning was a regular participant of the Atlas conferences. He describes his own part in them: from surprised neophyte to someone who is pitchforked against his will into the role of leader of the critical second generation. His amazement in the beginning makes more and more room for anger about the hollow pretensions and the absurdity of the project, annoyance about the parasitic performance, the smugness and insipidness of his colleagues and finally frustrations about the dictatorial attitude of "der Vorstand", in Visegrád culminating in a downright punitive expedition against Bratanić. The Dutch audience, who has never become acquainted with this project or with its lions, enjoys this literary masterpiece in large numbers through *Het Bureau*.

The first conference of the European Atlas in 1966 does not come up. The conference in Bonn in 1968 gets full attention (II, 191–216). Here Voskuil sees the international gang for the first time: "some forty scientists from almost every country in Europe" (II, 194). Beerta, Horvatić (Bratanić) and Seiner are mentioned as members of the *Ständige Internationale Atlaskommission* (Regular International Atlas Committee). Furthermore habitual figures are: Tränkle, Güntermann, Appel, Frau Grübler, Stanton, Klastrup and more vague persons like the Rumanian, the Russian, the Bulgarian and the Frenchman as a descendant of one of the oldest noble families (II, 212).⁶ At this conference he meets Bratanić, during breakfast, for the first time. He is described as a baleful Frankenstein. "Near his table a tall heavy man in a shiny, dark gray suit, a bit saggy in the shoulders, with a white, delicate hysterical face was standing, in whom he thought to recognize Horvatić" (II, 191–192). This man instantly complains about his health, which will be a returning refrain during all future meetings: "Falls mir die Kräfte nicht fehlen", "denn mit meiner schwachen Gesundheit ist das eine außerordentlich schwere Aufgabe." Voskuil strongly passes judgment on him when he typifies the performance of this

chairman "as if the Pope addressed his congregation and he concluded they were dealing with an infantile tyrant" (III 628).

The second meeting is the conference in Helsinki in 1970 (II, 368–387). The conference tigers meet again and get more depth now like Stanton ("hello, in his slow lilting way", II, 369) and Klee ("a short, resolute man", "with a low humming voice", II, 370, 374). Also present are the Soviet Block, and for example Lopez from Portugal: a "remarkably well-dressed elderly man" who especially focused attention on the five women present (II, 381). "Behind his glasses his eyes were big and round, a bit like those of an owl", Klastrup begins his introduction. Like in a dynamic organization Horvatić announces, at the end of the conference, the division of tasks for Stockholm in two years, where the first Atlas results will be harvested. Klastrup has to do the "scythe", Petsch "the flail". Lopez is allotted the "Christmas tree" but he refuses: "Aber ich bin ein alter kranker Mann", to which Horvatić naturally replied "Ich habe auch eine schwache Gesundheit". Finally Maarten Koning accepts this task (II, 384).

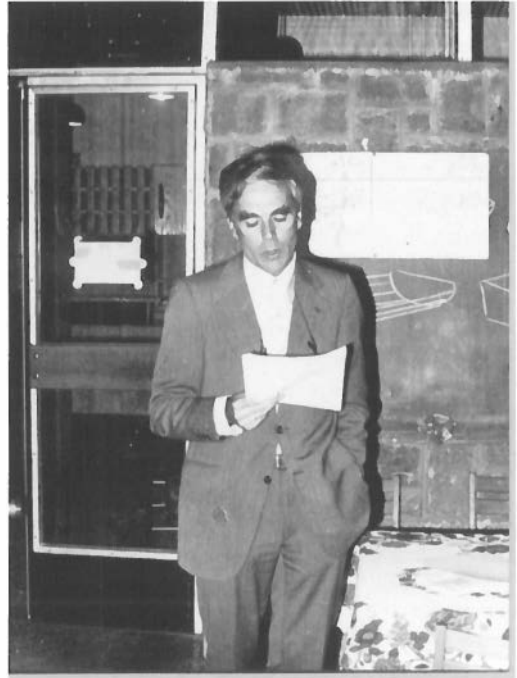
During the conference in Stockholm in 1972 (II, 526–546) Maarten himself strongly stands out. Remarkable is the subtle portrayal of Slovencevicova as "a remarkably pretty woman with a regular classic face, but she also made a somewhat suffering impression, as if she had been wronged more than other people had" (II, 527). At this occasion Koning gives his first lecture, about the Christmas tree (II, 531–535). Beerta was already worried in advance: "as long as you don't argue". Maarten compares the Dutch map from 1934 with the one from 1900 and makes the shortcomings of combining anachronical data clear. "Die Karte mag das erste Wort sein, das letzte hat die Geschichtsforschung". He gets lectured by Bratanić. In his presentation Koning had mentioned his grandmother, a maid from Lithuania. "Was sollen wir [damit] bei einer Arbeit die darauf gerichtet ist die grossen Kulturgebiete und Kulturströmungen unserer europäischen Zivilisation aufzudecken. So etwas kann man nicht Ernst nehmen. Am besten kann man es verneinen", Horvatić says (II, 535). However, Maarten Koning is supported by colleagues during the break: "ein

sehr mutiger Vortrag" (Güntermann), "Endlich einer der sagt was gesagt werden sollte" (Nils-son), "Sie haben den Horvatić endlich die Wahrheit unter die Nase gerieben" (Klee). Also Grübler heartens him (II, 536).

The Final Convulsions of the Atlas

At great length Voskuil describes his experiences at the conference of Visegrád in 1974 (III, 606–663). The "tyrant" Horvatić has written his letter of resignation after severe criticism from the audience and is crying on his bed in his hotel room (III, 628, 652). The attempt at this conference to set an age limit and elect the board in a democratic way failed, because this chairman, a Yugoslavian, was the only acceptable compromise, for political reasons, for the researchers from the East bloc – as Voskuil in 1982 evaluated in a scientific article (Voskuil 1982b: 56). In the novel, despite all the commotion the meeting is ended with roars of laughter during a social gathering at which Fischbächle gives his best performance of a self-composed and -written song about the atlas, "with many strophes and a chorus which was loudly sung along", while Horvatić was moaning upstairs in his room. Maarten himself suffered from a severe headache and was absent too, hearing them sing beneath (III, 657–658).⁷

Since then the atlas-project was in an impasse. In 1975 Jan Nelissen asks Maarten Koning, as if concerned, if he had heard anything about the European Atlas. "No, and you? Neither have you. Surely you have not reduced Horvatić to silence once and for all?" (IV, 194). In the autumn of 1978 there is another conference in Enniskillen in Northern Ireland (IV, 852–871). At the airport he meets the phlegmatic Alan Bailey, a man with "a long face with slightly high cheekbones and sunken cheeks" (IV, 855). The meeting is described as dessert after dinner, as an evidence of a failed project. Horvatić has called off. He was said to be ill, one stated with sarcasm. Also Güntermann has stayed home. "Überbelastet", Frau Grübler told him, "aber wenn Sie mich fragen, Herr Koning, dann interessiert der Europa Atlas ihn gar nicht mehr. (...) Güntermann interessiert sich jetzt nur noch für die Nahrungsforschung."



J. J. Voskuil lecturing on the cradle in the Netherlands at the atlas-conference in Visegrád, 1974. Photo: Meertens Institute.

Maarten Koning could understand that the social and regional differences would emerge better in that research, but regretted his decision. "With Güntermann the most important man of his generation was gone, also the only one he considered capable of taking over the lead" (IV, 853–854).

The unsuspecting reader of the novel could think that this had sealed the fate of the Atlas. But in 1980, as said, the first and ultimate edition of the European Atlas came out. In the fifth volume of the novel a conference is mentioned about the geographical method in Aix-en-Provence (V, 846). Seiner, Horvatić and Güntermann do not give a speech there, which seems peculiar to Maarten Koning and his Flemish colleague and friend (without him Maarten does not even go) Jan Nelissen. The alienation strikes there. Koning observes with melancholy that people who had supported each other in Visegrád in 1974 had become almost unrecognizable. "That shocked Maarten. Of the man who had stepped into the breach for him then, only little was left: an old man, slightly

growing demented, who was not capable anymore of carrying his own briefcase. He suddenly realized that his generation had imperceptibly ended up at those places which were taken in those days by the generation of *Sonderregger*" (V, 908). When he returns from this conference he is overcome, in the crucial last paragraph of this volume, by a confusing emotion of melancholy and joy. "He felt very light, as if with this conference he had fulfilled his assignment in this life and as if he was on his way to heaven. That thought made him feel happy, but at the same time filled him with melancholy, even if he had no idea, when thinking about it, what of that made him melancholic" (V, 916).

With a provocative irony Voskuil describes in detail the moment when the edition arrives at the Amsterdam Department of Folk Culture and the employees take a curious look at it. „He closed the door of the chart-room, opened the window, hung up his coat and pulled back his chair. On top of the files and papers which had been put down there the previous day during his absence, was a cardboard cylinder. He looked at the label, concluded that it came from Germany and took it with him to the table. It contained a roll of maps. He rolled them out, then rolled them backward, so that they lay flat, and spread them out. They were six maps together making the map of Europe, covered with many hundreds of signs: spheres, squares, diamonds, triangles, stripes, some open or half-open, others closed: the European map of the seasonal fires. He bent over the part showing western Europe and looked at his country, not much larger than his thumb. In the eastern part it was covered with red spheres. The western part was largely empty, except for a single diamond and square, almost without exception in the coastal area. The sight of that familiar borders, the Frisian islands, the Zuider Zee, the Zeeland Delta, the big rivers moved him. It reminded him of the poem by Potgieter which he had recited in the classroom a few months after the German occupation: *Your sky is grey and your beach stormy, Pomperdepom, pomperdepom, Yet, my land, I love you dearly!* – one of the few poems he almost knew by heart. While he was coping with that emotion, not capable of seeing the scientific consequence of that map,

Joop entered the room. (...) The comments to the map spread on the table had arrived by mail. He took it out of the envelope. Ad had come up to the map and looked at it. "Is that the first map of the Atlas?" "Yes." He joined him. Ad had bent forward and took a close look at the map. Standing next to him Maarten watched, the comments in his hand. "And just how does he explain that?" Ad asked. "No idea." Lien entered the room. "Hello Maarten, hello Ad." "Hello Lien," they said. She stopped near them, hesitating. "Is that the map of the European Atlas?" she shyly asked. "Yes," Maarten said. "That's us," he put his forefinger on the map. She bent forward beside him. "You can hardly see anything of it, can you?" "When you compare that to our map..." he walked back to his desk and searched in the bookshelf opposite his seat. "Do you remember when our map was published?" he asked Ad, while at random pulling an edition of *Ons Tijdschrift* out of the line. "1969?" Ad guessed, he walked to his desk. "I've got it!" He came to the table with the edition. "1970, eleven years ago." He put the opened edition showing the Dutch map on top of the European one and pulled back a little in order to give Lien opportunity to take a look at it. "That makes much more subtle distinctions." "Then who simplified that map?" Lien asked. "Seiner." He looked from a distance at the European map. "In a way it is very German, isn't it? – such a European map. You see those signs march from the center of Europe towards the edges." "Do you think that this European Atlas initially is a German project?" Ad asked with disbelief. "Definitely! Just like the European Community. They are both a product of the national-socialism." Ad laughed a bit. "So in a way you don't even like it, that this map exists," Lien concluded. "Well, don't like it... I'm not interested in it. I'm only interested in my own country. I don't give a damn about Europe!" He laughed. "And what about France," Ad said. "And Auvergne," Maarten admitted. He looked at the door. Mark entered the room. "Hello Mark." Mark smiled amused. "Am I interrupting?" "No, you are not." Lien turned away and walked on to the chart-room. "Is that a map of the European Atlas?" Mark asked, approaching. He bent forward, his face just above the map and searched it. "The map of

the seasonal fires.” “Interesting.” (...) The dividing door opened, Sien came in the room. (...) She turned away and saw the map on the table. “Has the European Atlas come out?” she asked with surprise. “At least the first edition,” he stood up. “How wonderful!” Ad too remained standing. They stood next to each other in front of the map and looked at it. “You should treat us to something,” she said turning towards Maarten. “After all this is a milestone! How long did it take you?” “Twenty-five years?” Maarten estimated. “Actually even forty-five years, because they already made a start with it before the war.” She bent over the map. “And what can you conclude from that?” He shook his head. “I don’t know yet. I have to read the comments first” (V, 685–688, 691).⁸

Conditio Humana: People’s Incapacity

In 1968 the amazement domineers over Voskuil, in 1970 in Helsinki we see the first signs of a growing criticism, in 1972 in Stockholm the project is almost unbearable and in 1974 in Visegrád the bombshell is dropped: over and out! His experiences referring to the atlas-project have made a deep impression on Voskuil and apart from scientific contributions he has not definitely written the anger out of his system until the early 90s. Next to a literary and ethnographical value, his descriptions also have a meaning from a sociological point of view, especially where it concerns generation conflict and factions within cultural circuits. With reference to *The Masters*, the famous *campus-novel* by C.P. Snow from 1956, Robert Paine made an analysis of the interpersonal and small-groups dynamics at a Cambridge college, at which feelings of friendship and hostility are connected among other things to generational power relations. How do respected persons behave in a power struggle within an institution without the existence of commonly accepted rules, like in the political culture.⁹ Here the question always is who can define what is meant by normality, or better: by the to be accepted version of reality. And, even though factions are not always the result of changes, they are always in a dynamic situation of competitive rivalry with regard to the desired changes (Bois-

sevain 1977). In the novel by Voskuil the main character is disappointed again and again in the alleged loyalty of his faction partners: when it’s really important, they do not give up their loyalty for the *Vorstand*, too anxious for blowing up the project, and with that their own positions and hidden interests.

During the conference in Stockholm the assembly e.g. visits the columbarium where the urn of Erik Sigurdson (Sigurd Erixon, 1888–1968) had been placed. With his face directed to the urn Horvatić holds a bombastic speech – he who was not used of protest anyhow, certainly did not have to fear for that here. But look, to the dissatisfaction of Horvatić – who was walking away already – Nilsson too addresses himself to the cinerary urn. This, according to Voskuil, “stocky, slightly corpulent man, with a square back of the head and a bit tight summer jacket”, had succeeded Sigurdson¹⁰ and Maarten Koning rated him among the best of his generation. Maarten, however, was speechless with amazement as he watched this scene. He asked Beerta what had been said exactly. “They both said that they are the real successor of Sigurdson”, Beerta seriously replied. “Horvatić and Nilsson do not like each other and that worries me sometimes” (II, 530–531).

In the book Beerta personifies the generation of Maarten’s father, and in a way he considers him such. Until the end he stays loyal to him, also when his former director, among other things, loses his power of speech because of a stroke and ends up in a nursing home – a traumatic event which coincides with the death of Maarten’s natural father: a dominant man to whom the author owes his father complex. Voskuil feels very strongly about loyalty, and this also implies his sincerity to the bone. As such he writes about his fathers. Meertens is bit by bit depicted as an opportunistic but charming poser, who deep down knows that what he is doing does not amount too much, but ironically knows how to play the game with success. Also his homosexuality and erotic insinuations are given a place. Characteristic of both the physiognomic interest and the frankness of Voskuil is the extract about Endre Füzes. “That man Füzes has a peculiar face”, he said to Beerta at a conference. “My first reaction was one of aver-



The board of the European atlas with Branimir Bratanić (standing) speaking at the conference in Visegrád 1974. Second from the right is P. J. Meertens sitting. Photo: Meertens Institute.

sion and only after that I saw that he is sympathetic". Beerta took a close look at Füzes. "A nice young man", he decided, "but to me an erotic aspect always plays a part in it too" (III, 630). In this way a touching, loving and most of all honest portrait is created – only from the author's point of view of course – at which the process of decay ("Anton has become plankton") and social isolation is not missed out either.

Maarten can feel terribly abandoned when Beerta lets him down and takes the side of generation partners. At one of the first conferences for example Horvatić, almost physically hated by Maarten, reprimands him as a youngster by saying that we "immer von neuem die alten Leute befragen, sie zwingen in ihrer Erinnerung nachzusehen was dort alles noch aufbewahrt auf uns wartet! (...) Aber die jungen Leute sind manchmal ungeduldig (...) und wollen sofort Resultate sehen. Resultate!" There was some acridity in his voice, Voskuil writes, after which Beerta adds a little extra: "Du sollst Geduld haben, denn wir arbeiten nicht für uns

selbst, sondern für die Ewigkeit." "So ist es genau", Horvatić said, "es freut mich sehr so etwas von Ihnen zu hören. Wir sind ganz einig, wie immer." "Wie immer", Beerta seriously repeated (I, 193). During the conference in Visegrád the generations become clearly visible. Bratanić brushes the suggested problems aside by saying that the issues have already been solved in the past. Vilkuňa reads a statement, in which he declares his wish to make way for younger persons. Voskuil responds to this by saying that he has nothing against older persons but to old-fashioned ideas.

At this point Meertens intervenes. Although he usually cut short unpleasant discussions in the past, he now openly speaks up for his younger employee: "Ich bin auch alt, aber Sie wissen (...) daß ich schon seit vielen Jahren der Meinung bin, daß es ungerecht ist, wenn die Mitarbeiter gar keinen Einfluß auf die allgemeinen Richtlinien der SIA [Ständige Internationale Atlaskommission] haben. Ich glaube, daß das in unserer Zeit nicht mehr möglich ist. Seit 1953,

als wir in dieser Form angefangen haben, sind 21 Jahre vergangen, die viele Änderungen in der Welt, aber auch in der Wissenschaft gebracht haben. Es sind auch in unserer Wissenschaft neue Ideen aufgekommen, denen in unserer Leitung m.E. nicht genügend Rechnung getragen wurde. Ich meine auch, daß es notwendig ist, der jüngeren Generation aber auch allgemein den Mitarbeitern, einen größeren Einfluß auf die Richtlinien einzuräumen, wie Herr Voskuil, der ein kluger Mann und ein guter Mensch ist und den ich als Mitarbeiter und auch als Nachfolger sehr schätze, und auch Frau Grober bereits gesagt habe. Ich meine, daß dies eine Notwendigkeit ist, und wenn wir dem hier keine Rechnung tragen, dann sehe ich die Sache der SIA verloren. [Große Beifallskundgebung]" (Cox 1988: 39). This extract in the official conference report – and that illustrates the intertwining of fiction and faction clearly – could easily have been from *Het Bureau*, which is full of biting observations, at which the author does not spare himself for that matter. Deep in his heart Maarten Koning – in interviews Voskuil is using both his real and fictional name when he refers to his ego – is dissatisfied with himself and his environment. In his eyes practicing science is a luxury, one should not be paid, not to mention be honored for. It is more something for recreation, a sort of hobby, from which one should definitely not derive a status.¹¹

He would rather, just like his grandfather, have become an ordinary baker. Or mailman. But that destiny was not granted to him. His *conditio humana* is to fill his days with useless scientific work. However, he tries to make the best of it. When you are appointed by community for this kind of work, it should put its finger as a sort of intellectual hygienism on particular illusions and especially also on hidden personal motives in practising science. Voskuil does not believe in the existence of something like neutral objective science. He analyzed a German introduction to ethnology, assuming the different generations and personal backgrounds of the authors who, not by accident, also play a role in the atlas project, for which he initially was not thanked (Voskuil 1979).¹² In the novel Maarten Koning gets almost desperate of it,

that scientific criticism obviously immediately leads to disturbed personal contacts. Contrary to many of his colleagues he does not believe in the progress of science but considers scientific publications a veiled way of writing about the philosophy of life of oneself (IV, 935–940).

To the tendency to psychologize, which also can be sensed in his scientific work, Voskuil has been able to give free rein in his novel. People do not change, they are stuck in their social and cultural situation. Over and over again his loyalty turns out to be a mistake: when it's really important people whom he deeply trusts, let him down. In other words mankind is lonely and is thrown back on his own resources. The only freedom available is the one of (self)reflection: to analyze how and why things happened, how one (deliberately) misunderstood the other and of course the uncontrollable inevitability of it all. Especially this drill Voskuil has carried out in his novel in order to get things clear, after his leaving the P.J. Meertens-Institute where his presence as dominant "old boss" was not appreciated anymore, "so that you can work out for yourself who you have really been".¹³

From this background also many of his observations at foreign conferences can be understood. When, during a conference in Helsinki in 1970, the group led by the host Kustaa Vilkuna (Valkura) makes a trip to publishing house Werner Söderström who had also sponsored the meeting, Maarten Koning feels shame. There he saw people drag themselves into a sweat with paper and books, useless books from pedantic scientists and felt surrounded by useless profiteers who put up with the obedience of the true workers (II, 386). Especially the thought that he needed his conference partners, as Beerta keeps confronting him with, he can not stand. During the first conference already his boss orders him to make contact with Güntermann, since he would also be the first one to review the first issue of the Dutch-Flemish Atlas (I, 225). With another pupil of Seiner, the Dutchman Appel (Cox), contacts should for strategic reasons also be kept on good terms: "Seiner has high expectations for him", Beerta says (I, 303), so that he was left with no choice.

The social incapacity of the main character to move in this company and to play along

shows itself in a very physical way. At every single conference Maarten is tormented by attacks of migraine, has to vomit at toilets he has hastily gone to, stands charming ladies on their toes, says the wrong things to the wrong person at the wrong moment and moves clumsily during coffee breaks. In short, he has a constant feeling of being a failure or being threatened, except for the moment when he has the floor. Then his fear of failure and threat turns to a feeling of power: the power to hold his audience spellbound and the capacity to convince them of his point of view. Maarten's physical suffering almost seems a sort of indictment of what others subconsciously do to him and against which his biological ego is revolting. This is expressed in a very pregnant way in the description of the conference on the occasion of Seiner's seventy-fifth birthday in Bonn in 1982.

"Towards morning he woke up with a terrible headache. The duvet had slipped off. He was cold. Sick with headache he searched with his eyes closed next to his bed on the floor without finding it. One moment he laid down exhausted, then he lifted his head a little and opened his eyes. It was getting light already. The duvet had slipped off backward and hung at the foot on the floor. He got up a bit more, pulled it towards him and sank back with his head deep into the pillow. From a distance he was made aware of the rolling of a train and right after that the talking from the station loudspeaker, but he was too miserable to hold the sound for more than a few seconds. He dozed off, started out of his sleep again, looked through his eyelids at the alarm on the night table next to his bed, dozed off again and woke up with a start by the alarm of his clock. He switched it off, stayed down like that for a moment and sat up then with difficulty. At the edge of his bed he stayed, exhausted, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. "God, how terrible I feel", he mumbled. It sounded like the voice of a stranger. Pulling himself together he stood up, went to the sink, opened the cold-water tap and leaned forward, his neck under the jet of water. While standing there like this, he looked for the hot-water tap with his right hand, opened it, closed the cold-water tap and changed this a few times until he got cramp in his arm. He searched for

the towel, rose, wrapped the towel around him and looked in the mirror. His face was gray, his eyes dull. He brushed his teeth automatically, turned away to his toilet bag, which was lying on a white-painted stool next to the sink and took out his shaving things."

In the breakfast room most tables were taken. Sick with headache he walked through them, hardly capable of looking around, so that it was only at the last moment, as he wanted to take a seat at a table, that he noticed Henri Klee waving to him. He was sitting with Jan Nelissen and Axel Klastrup at a table near the window. "Morning", he said, while joining them. The waitress came. "Tee oder Kaffee", she asked. – "Tee bitte. Und ein Ei bitte." – "Gekocht oder gebacken?" – "Gekocht." The mere thought of a fried egg was hard to bear. "How did you sleep, Maarten?" Jan informed. "Troubled. And you?" He found it hard to look at him against the light, almost as if he had no eyes. "Well. I always sleep well, as you know." "Worüber sprechen Sie heute, Herr Koning?", Klee asked. "Über volkswirtschaftliche Karten und das Rekonstruieren kultureller Prozesse", Maarten said with reluctance. "Ein Tee und ein Ei", the waitress said, putting the pot and the saucer with the egg next to Maarten's plate on the table. "Danke." Jan Nelissen held a basket with bread rolls out to him. Maarten raised his hand warding off. "No, no bread roll!" "You aren't sick, are you?", Jan asked concerned. "Sick no, but I have such a damned attack of migraine again." He lifted the pot of tea. His hand was shaking so much that he hastily had to put it down again before he could lift it again. "Do you want a pill?", Jan tenderly asked. "Pills don't help for me." "Not even a tranquilizer?" "Do you have those too?" – he tried to smile. "I'm always carrying such pills with me." "Wisdom is better than strength," Maarten understood. "Do you want me to get them?" – he wanted to get up. Maarten shook his head. "No, really." He could not bear to think about it. "Und kommen Sie dabei auch noch über die Sense zu sprechen?" Axel Klastrup asked. "Nein, hauptsächlich über die Jahresfeier," Maarten responded, stealthily wiping off his forehead. "Über die Karte von Seiner?" Klee asked. Maarten nodded. "Sehr gut", Klee said satisfied. "Ich freue mich schon jetzt darüber."

"On the way to the university building he dropped back a little. While they were walking ahead of him across the Kaiserplatz, loudly speaking, he followed them at a few meters distance, without looking around and so weak in his legs that he had to be careful not to stumble. The fresh air of the early spring morning gave a feeling of well being, but as soon as he thought of what was coming to him, the headache returned so severely that it looked as if he had to vomit. He stood still, turned with his hand to a little tree for support and took a deep breath, before he continued on his way again."

The first one they saw was Ulrich Panzer. He was standing with another man in the front of the hall and looked very pleased when welcoming him: "Dies hier ist Professor Hoffmann," he said, introducing the other to him. "Sie haben sehr schön über mein Buch geschrieben," Hoffmann said to Maarten, "wirklich sehr schön." "Weil es ein sehr schönes Buch ist," Maarten said at random. The name Hoffmann sounded familiar, but he had no idea which book he was talking about. "Herr Koning ist der größte Falsifikator Europas," Panzer said. "Nur weiß ich noch immer nicht was das ist," Maarten confessed. He tried to smile. Panzer's face reeled before his eyes as the headache returned with great intensity. "Eine besondere Art von Schwindler," Klee said laughing. "Nein, nein." Panzer said with protest, shaken. The exertion of the conversation brought him on the verge of vomiting. "Entschuldigung," he mumbled, hastily turning away. He walked blindly through the people talking, in panic looking for the toilets, managed to reach them in time, closed the door behind him and vomited – the egg. Gasping he sat in front of the pot, with a terribly throbbing head, his bag with the lecture clasped in his hand, not capable of any thought" (V, 820–823).

Fiction or Faction

In contemporary literature autobiographic material is more and more used, by which fiction and reality are often mixed up. The amount of reality of a novel can be that high that readers do not realize anymore that writer use a recognizable setting to tell for example a fictitious story. But also when the story itself

seems to be almost similar to the reality outside the book, the confusion is complete. It is obvious that *Het Bureau* should be considered in essence a literary novel. For the fact that the reader gets almost addicted to the rhythm of the main character who makes his daily trip to the office, we can thank the cunning composition of the author. Although he does endlessly describe all kinds of repetitions and office rituals, no description is identical and yet very recognizable.

Of course to this refined composition also the instrument of selection belongs. After all the author decides what is worth telling. With reference to a Nijmegen collection of most academic reading experiences Voskuil aptly noted that memories and perceptions between people hardly ever match. A female reader, for example, who also acted in the novel, described some events at the office at the time when she was working at the P.J. Meertens-Institute, which would possibly be used in the next volumes (Gerritsen 1999). However, no single memory of the contacts she had with Voskuil, the author said, will be mentioned in the book – to top it all: apparently they had not stuck in his memory. It is through the eyes of the author, who in this case is similar to his *alter ego* Maarten Koning, that we observe reality and, for our part as readers, appropriate and give meaning to it.

But despite the composition, selection and distortion the high percentage of reality of the novel can not be denied. Those who ought to know can state that the described situations and events mostly – but not always – correspond to what really happened. Jan Theuwsen for example stated in some reviews that it is really true what Voskuil describes: that's how it was!¹⁴ Others confirm that more or less, although some things were combined, eliminated or enlarged at some places. What they can usually read only in the novel, is how Voskuil experienced the situations deep down in his heart. The large audience in the Netherlands is on the wrong track, as for the relation between fiction and faction. It gets a very strange impression of that curious discipline ethnology and especially of that bizarre institute at an Amsterdam canal. Even within the board of the Royal Dutch Academy of Art and Sciences, of

which the stylized picture of the main agency has been given a prominent place on every volume, questions were asked about the scientific content of the work at the institute and the “blemishing” portrait of it. Apparently it is not easy, even for intellectuals, to consider *Het Bureau* a purely literary product.

Voskuil documented himself well with the help of official reports, diary notes, his own scientific articles and correspondence. But he also has an exceptional talent of observing, which should fully be acknowledged and valued next to the literary quality. After all, Voskuil holds a mirror of a bureaucratized society up to the faces of his readers, in which reality seems to be defined by public servants. The daily life at the office in *Het Bureau*, a microcosm where people make life hell for each other, makes the A.P. Beerta-institute to an outstanding universal, illustrative version of the ultimate Dutch bureau. Considered like this, *Het Bureau* goes beyond reality, especially by its hyperrealism, and is symbol for the human incapacity to lead a life with each other in a loyal way. The office as an inevitable *total institution*, with typical rituals and power games – in short a kind of *asylum* in the meaning of Goffman (Driessen 1999). It is telling, that not only public servants identify with it, but also for example employees from multinationals like Philips and Shell. At some offices colleagues are already branded with names of characters from the novel, by which the book itself ironically starts playing a role in all kinds of office plots...

The complex relation between faction and fiction irrevocably leads to questions about the ethical acceptability of this literary project. Is it allowed as a former boss to write in such a way about persons you have worked with so intensively for so many years and whom you have mostly appointed yourself. In the last volume Voskuil for example does not hesitate to describe job evaluations with his office people. The author has given all characters a fictitious name, but for both insiders and outsiders these can easily be unveiled. In the Netherlands several name keys circulate through fax and Internet, so that anonymity can hardly be guaranteed.¹⁵ To the question if Voskuil does not make his characters look twits he takes a characteristic

stand of principle. “In a way,” he said in an interview “they should be happy to finally hear how I have experienced them all these years. After all you never really hear what somebody thinks of you? And they should know what they have done to me, instead of stating that I’m doing something to them. What’s keeping them from writing about me like that? I would very much appreciate that.”¹⁶

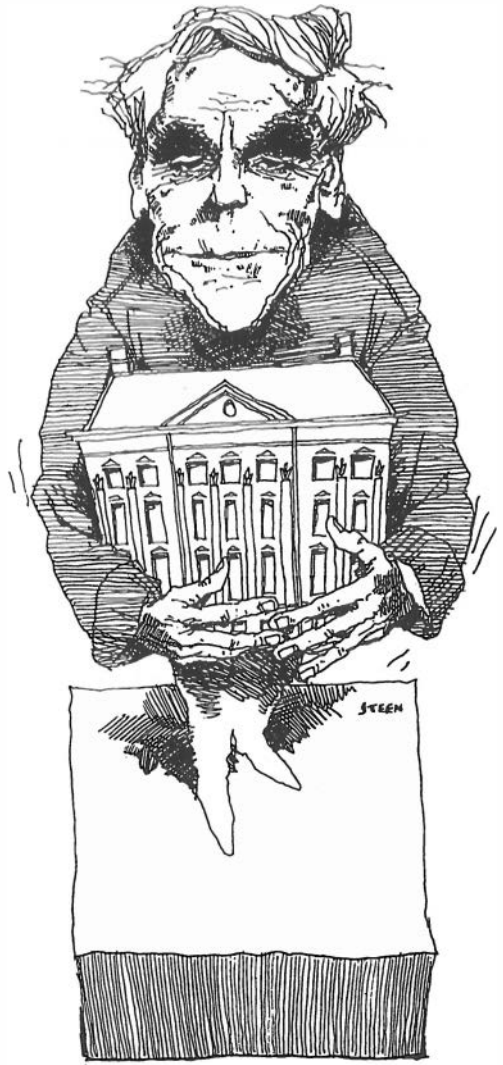
Freedom of literary speech is a valuable thing, also in the Netherlands. In the recent past two famous Dutch authors, W.F. Hermans and Gerard Reve, were pressed charges against for offensive remarks in their novels because of “deliberate insult of a group of persons” (Art. 137c of the Dutch penal code), they were however never convicted. The judges acknowledged the strict separation between the fictitious world of literature, in which characters can say anything, and the real world. Stepping on or exceeding the bounds of what is supposed to be acceptable in community can be especially one of the qualities of literature. Furthermore, these bounds are constantly in motion. Voskuil’s novel for example has an influence on that already. For historiographers of institutions, academic or otherwise, it will be even implausible in future to ignore factions, trivial rivalries and veiled power figurations. The book also draws extra attention to the performance of individual persons, who are described with all their oddities from a more or less ethnographical perspective. So here we see that literature indeed affects reality.

Writers are powerful, the reluctantly depicted characters are helpless. The last-mentioned ones have no other option than to resign themselves to the role appointed to them and must accept, like in *Het Bureau*, that the moral right rests with the main character, or if he fails, with his wife Nicolien who acts as his external conscience at home. The only thing the described persons can do – supposed they do not put pen to paper themselves – is to ignore the novel or to let the book unread, which happens in some cases. Apart from the main character and some fellow characters, most persons in the novel are (inevitably) reduced to their professional or office life, which of course gives a distorted view of the total life of the person in question. Pro-

ducing such a novel the author can't help it.¹⁷

The fascination of Voskuil for the looks and the locomotion of the characters is remarkable. There is no person in the novel that is not physiognomically described and characterized. These observations are often both offensive and funny, but always candid – even if hardly anybody would dare to describe his fellow men so openly. It's the courage of Voskuil to be frank and to make no concessions in his novel, something he was supposed to do constantly at his former working place. It must have been a relief for him to be able to write it all down like this and the writing itself, the author emphasizes, was more important than the appearing of the text in print.¹⁸ The consequences of that publication are beyond the power of the writer – a radical view (according to some people even feeble) which seems to be open to discussion.

Apart from the feeling of threat and failure we can also sense the conceit of the author in the novel when he, like so many times, hauls some pseudo-scientist over the coals. Voskuil alias Maarten Koning is, paradoxically enough considering his opinion about science as senseless activity, indisputably proud of his scientific work and quotes not without vainglory quite some parts from his articles and lectures word for word. These extracts however are functional and interesting in the novel, which consequently gets the character of a subjective, literary history of science (Frijhoff 1996, Frijhoff 1997: 134–135). Maarten Koning, as a dominant person who is increasingly involved with the power he detests elsewhere, however takes a lot of credit for it himself. His employees, who often provided substantial parts for his lectures and articles, do not get much recognition for it. But Voskuil was not after the person himself, his reaction is, but after the interest of the institute which had to act as one big loyal clan and of which he was the spokesman. The fact that he has reduced his colleagues to documenting water carriers, who endlessly need to be trained before they can take a step in the evil world outside, was inevitable to his point of view. Maarten Koning was there to stand up for them, to protect them and to show the research results. Only with the introduction of a new periodical in 1975, the *Volkskundig Bulletin*, a



Newspaper-caricature of J. J. Voskuil with the main building of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (of which the P. J. Meertens-Institute is part) in his hands (1999).

forum was started, by which also the private employees could come from behind the scenes; after all, the journal had to be filled well-considered and unacceptable outsiders had to be kept out as much as possible.

The satisfaction about his own scientific contributions is also a bit ludicrous in another way. Maarten Koning appeals to it, that he reluc-

tantly has been chosen as the spokesman of the new generation of scientists (in fact he was not that young anymore at that time) in the international atlas project. Honesty compels to admit that his opinion that things had to be done differently has come little by little. Initially he worked completely within the geographical paradigm and it took almost fifteen years before he could break away from it definitely and started to publish frequently, whereas for example Hermann Bausinger *cum suis* put several ideological/ethnological concepts behind them in Tübingen in the early 60s already. Still in 1969 he stated from a traditional static point of view that the geographical dissemination of a custom is the key to the dating of the culture in which it has arisen (Voskuil 1969: 44). It is ironical that Voskuil became an agent of a young generation within an outdated rear: the conventional circuit where the geographical method was still valid. The truly scientific front was already much further. That some generation partners dropped out within the atlas project disturbed him possibly as a kind of disloyalty, but in fact they were very right of course. Voskuil plays his heroic part with great verve, he personally – loyal to the ideals of Meertens – has got his teeth into the project, which explains his disappointment and anger in articles and novel respectively. As a consequence, in the late 70s also Voskuil would make a definite choice for ethnohistorical depth, as illustrated by a large-scale project in the field of material culture studies based on probate inventories.

It is paradoxical of the writer who, almost misanthropic and avoiding every surprise, barricades himself at the *Bureau* or in his study, where he is in control of the situation and on the other hand enjoys his literary success, which he however depicts as an inevitable agony he – *conditio humana* – has to stand, not the least because of his loyalty to the publisher.¹⁹ Also the paradox to drag himself with unwilling steps to the office every day and to go on working there for as long as thirty years; in his opinion to see time and time again how his trust in others is being damaged, but faithfully to fall on his face over and over again. It is also the irony of the man who does not want to make a social career, consciously refuses to take his doctoral degree,

and yet becomes a scientific and literary heavyweight. The European Atlas itself pales into insignificance beside these universal subjects, but does make a splendid setting with conferences as a scenery with quaint figures identifiable for many people.

Appendix: Who is who in *Het Bureau*

In this list, in which only names are mentioned which come up in this article, the name in the novel is given first, followed by the real name.²⁰

- Karl Appel = H.L. Cox (Bonn)
- Alan Bailey = Alan Gailey (Belfast)
- Anton P. Beerta = P.J. (Piet) Meertens (Amsterdam)
- Bloch = S. Bruk (Moscow)
- Fischbächle = Richard Wolfram (Vienna)
- Füzes = Endre Füzes (Budapest)
- Mark Grosz = Rudi Künzel (Amsterdam)
- Frau Dr. Grübler = Gerda Grober-Glück (Bonn)
- Wolf Güntermann = Günter Wiegmann (Münster)
- Horvatić = Branimir Bratanić (Zagreb)
- Lien Kiepe = Eveline Doelman (Amsterdam)
- Axel Klastrop = Ole Højrup (Copenhagen)
- Henri Klee = Henri Klees (Luxembourg)
- Lopez = A. Jorge Dias (Lisboa)
- Ad Muller = Ton Dekker (Amsterdam)
- Jan Nelissen = Jan Theuwissen (Antwerpen)
- Arvid Nilsson = Nils-Arvid Bringéus (Lund)
- Sien de Nooijer-Flipse = Jozien Jobse-van Putten (Amsterdam)
- Ulrich Panzer = Hans-Ulrich Bentzien (Rostock/former GDR)
- Petsch = Reinhard Peesch (Berlin/former GDR)
- Joop Schenk = Koos Schell (Amsterdam)
- Seiner = Matthias Zender (Bonn)
- Erik Sigurdson = Sigurd Erixon (Stockholm)
- Helena Slovicevicova = Soňa Kovačevićová (Bratislava)
- Dr. Sonderegger = Dr. Rudolf Wildhaber (Basel)
- Alex Stanton = Alexander Fenton (Edinburgh)
- Kusta Valkura = Kustaa Vilkkuna (Helsinki)
- Tränkle = Walter Escher (Basel)

Notes

1. With reference to the 1959 conference of the *Atlas der Deutschen Volkskunde* in Bonn; I, 222. A quotation from *Het Bureau* is shown in quotation marks, followed by a Roman numeral, indicating the volume, and the page number. From the novel which will contain seven volumes, following volumes have already been issued at the publishing house G.A. van Oorschot in Amsterdam: J.J. Voskuil 1996: I *Meneer Beerta* (*Mister Beerta*); 1996: II *Vuile Handen* (*Filthy Hands*); 1997: III *Plankton*; 1998: IV *Het A.P. Beerta-Instituut* and 1999: V *En ook weemoedigheid* (*And melancholy too*). The volumes VI *Afgang* (*Break Down*) and VII *De dood van Maarten Koning* (*The Death of Maarten Koning*) will come out in 2000. In principle the fictive names of the characters of the novel are used in this article, the real names are mentioned in the appendix.
2. See his life report in 1989: *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde te Leiden 1987–1988* (*Annual of the Society of Dutch Literature in Leiden 1987–1988*): 197–227. Leiden: Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde.
3. An evaluation of Voskuil's works as well as a bibliography are printed in a farewell issue, especially dedicated to him, of 1988: *Volkskundig Bulletin* 14, 1 (in the corridors this journal was also called "Voskuil's bulletin" by way of a joke).
4. About the journal *Volkskunde* see the introductions in *Nederlandse volkskundige Bibliografie* (*Dutch ethnological bibliography*), I (Antwerp 1964), II (Antwerp 1965) and XXXV (Antwerp 1993).
5. Editorial statement 1989: *Volkskundig Bulletin. Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Cultuurwetenschap* 15.
6. For a key to the novel names see the appendix.
7. "Once I have turned on the chairman of the meeting during an international conference in Hungary, a man who snapped at everybody and whom everybody detested and who, in my opinion, had horrible opinions about the profession. He did not want to bring these opinions up for discussion. Then I have stood up during the meeting and I have demanded it. He did not want to and said: why don't you do that in Amsterdam. But I said: No, I want to bring it up for discussion here. This went on until the meeting was adjourned and he cleared off crying, to everybody's great relief. After that it became a great party, but I went to bed. I can never enjoy a victory" (Fontijn 1991: 43–44).
8. "I can say that the war has been a determinant of my whole life. Everything I do is still related to the war. At the outbreak of the war (I was thirteen years old) I was confronted with the fact that the authority of your father and the people around you was trampled on. (...) What I have left from the war, is that I always think in terms of friends and enemies (...). If you were not careful, you were betrayed. (...) Until today I am still anti-German" (Fontijn 1991: 33–36).
9. R. Paine 1977 With thanks to Jeremy Boissevain for this reference.
10. N.-A. Bringéus did not succeed S. Erixon in the chair (he had a chair in Lund), but rather in his position in Swedish ethnology.
11. "I am still opposed to science as a social institution, a caste. Such a caste doesn't play a game, they cover for each other. It's all about money, about power. They are not capable of introspection; they are part of a system. (...) It is not only the institution, but also the international contacts. You have contact with more and more people and you feel more and more awkward. At meetings I always said the wrong things: personal things, which were not "to the point". I put things in perspective. But you learn. It took me fifteen years. (...) What I would prefer most is that those of the humanities would not be paid, or would get a salary on social security level. Then you would directly be rid of many people and you can probably read much more interesting articles. People who are really intrigued by problems and pick them out, are a minority. Most people are spoilt, if only because they derive the meaning of life from their hobby. And in my opinion you can only derive the meaning of life from yourself, from the way you think about yourself. Watch out for those who say: my work is only a game. They are the most dangerous ones. To them it is not a game at all. They are only in for power and status. I'd rather prefer the man who says: I believe in my profession" (Fontijn 1991: 42–44).
12. "In that article I have tried to show how their scientific point of view is connected with their personality. They really blamed me for that. I have the tendency to psychologize. That is not appreciated. I don't do it out of spite. I can't help it. I must have a personal reason to write, something I can turn to" (Fontijn 1991: 43).
13. "What it's all about: first of all, how do you get to know Maarten, because it's about me. Writing like this for me is a way to discover myself. (...) The idea that people can change is something that rubs me up the wrong way. When you take a close look at people you'll see they are fixed. The unchanging thing of people is in their behavior in relation to their surroundings. That is predictable. In other words they can be mapped quite precisely" (Fontijn 1991: 24–25).
14. See the reviews of the novel volumes by J. Theuwissen in 1997: *Volkskunde* 98: 219–223; 1998: *Volkskunde* 99: 125–126; 1999: *Volkskunde* 100: 216–217.
15. A list of key names can be consulted on <http://www.baserv.kun.nl/~salemans/970716.html>.
16. In response to his first book, *Bij nader inzien*, Voskuil states that he is aware of the moral

- pressure the writing of a roman à clef involves: „I dislike people who consider my book a roman à clef and say: ‘O, that’s mister so and so, he’s such a jerk’” (Fontijn 1991: 9–10).
17. “I know very well that from all those people I only see what I can understand. With which I can identify. It is very likely that those people do not recognize themselves in it at all. That they are totally different persons, to their opinion. It is my world I’m creating” (Fontijn 1991: 14).
 18. “A book has to be thick, a book has to be detailed, a book has to be ‘boring’ to those people who are not my actual readers. If you can scare readers off, you should do so. So that finally are left the people you can rely on” (Fontijn 1991: 14).
 19. “The necessity to take part in a competitive struggle, to blow yourself up, to take part in the literary life, that’s what resented me” (Fontijn 1991: 14).
 20. With thanks to Rob Rentenaar, Amsterdam.

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