

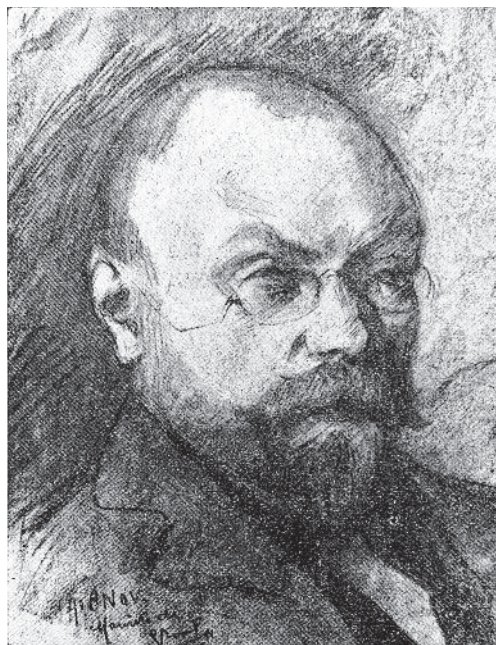
In Honour of a Forerunner

The First Gay Novel in Modern World Literature

In 1904, twenty-three-year old Jacob de Haan wrote a novel called *Pijpelijntjes*. It was written in the naturalistic style of the French writer Émile Zola. De Haan depicted the day-to-day life of two men who lived in the Amsterdam neighbourhood the *Pijp*. The only difference with many novels from that era is that the two men had a sexual relationship. It is known as the first book ever in Dutch and world literature – that is not pornography – in which an author wrote so clearly about two men who were involved in a same-sex relationship. The other main reason the book is important is that de Haan portrayed the two characters as if it were the most common thing in the world to write about. Thirdly, he published it under his own name and not with an alias or anonymously. The title gave away that the book was not a common story; for all readers it must have been obvious that, with the storyline set in the Amsterdam neighbourhood the *Pijp*, it also had another connotation, as *pijpen* is the Dutch verb for to perform *fellatio*.

De Haan dedicated his book to another writer and medical doctor, Arnold Aletrino (1858-1916). For the in-crowd it was clear that the bisexual protagonist Sam, with his sadistic disposition, looked very much like Aletrino. The antagonist Joop very much resembled de Haan. It is an understatement to say that Aletrino was not happy about the publication. He bought as many books as he could lay his hands on and destroyed them. Aletrino never acknowledged that the main character was modelled after him. He called the main character perverse and he called de Haan 'the most depraved and unreliable individual I have ever met'. The first publication of *Pijpelijntjes* is known as one of the rarest books in modern Dutch literature.

A few months after the initial publication, de Haan published a second edition, but this time he left out the name of Aletrino and any allusions to his friend and changed the names of the two main characters to Koos and Hans. Several critics wrote



Maurits de Groot, *Portrait of Jacob Israël de Haan*, November 1918, burin © Universiteitsbibliotheek Amsterdam

reviews, but all were disgusted by the openly homosexual relationship between the two characters. P.L. Tak, the chief editor of newspaper *Het Volk*, for which de Haan worked, fired him, and the writer was likewise sacked from the primary school where he taught. Life became very difficult for him. In a *Public letter to P.L. Tak*, de Haan sought justice and reconciliation.

In the introduction to his second novel, de Haan also tries to solve the misunderstandings about his first controversial novel. '*Pijpelijntjes* was not confiscated by the police or by a public prosecutor, nor was the edition stopped due to other reasons. I am still content, as a literary artist, to have written *Pijpelijntjes*, although my life as a member of society has become much more difficult. As soon as circumstances allow me, I will publish the second

part of *Pijpelijntjes*, which I have finished writing'. Unfortunately, it has never been published and the manuscript has never been found.

De Haan also sought support from well-established Dutch writers such as Frederik van Eeden and Lodewijk van Deyszel; they would not support de Haan publicly, only privately. He did find support, however, from Belgian novelist Georges Eekhoud, who wrote the prologue for his second novel. Eekhoud claims that 'the novel will establish de Haan's name forever as a literary artist'. He saw it as a very important document in which the psychologist de Haan writes about deviant inclinations, i.e. *uranism* (homosexuality). Eekhoud says of *Pijpelijntjes*: 'De Haan wrote tactfully and with moving authenticity about the lives of two 'nervunhealthy' young men, who belong to a group of the extremely dejected, and who are deprived of love. At last scientists, and especially those involved in literature, are showing a bit more fairness towards these people'.

Eekhoud continues: 'Law and public opinion have to take into account that this deviant inclination is not *perversité*, but *perversion*' (The distinction in the French connoting the difference between moral character - the former, and sexual aberration - the latter). That is to say, that people need a certain predisposition in order to develop this, which, in many cases, is an illness. This is a scientific fact and must end the involuntary prejudice due to which people are despised and judged. The only thing for which one can blame these people is that Their beliefs have given them homosexual feelings and inclinations. Everyone who loves justice and mankind will hear with deep satisfaction that the deviant, in his quest for Love, is therefore not a criminal, but indeed often times will be unhappy. He is neither a violator of mankind, nor does he deserve to be disdained as someone who was born with a physical handicap. It is someone who is gifted by Mother Nature in an unfortunate manner'. The scientific fact Eekhoud speaks of undoubtedly refers to the findings of Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935) who founded his Humanitarian Committee in



The *Iewaje* or funeral of Jacob Israël de Haan in Jerusalem, July 1924.

1897 with a view to doing research in order to defend the rights of homosexuals.

However, de Haan continued writing and published a few short stories in literary magazines, and was able to publish a second novel in 1908: *Pathologies*, a novel in the European literary decadent tradition of the Englishman Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well as that of the Dane, Herman Bang, and the aforementioned George Eekhoud. Some works of another famous and successful Dutch writer and novelist, Louis Couperus, may also be counted in this tradition. This time de Haan went even further and the two main characters partook in a homosexual sadomasochistic relationship. Hardly anyone reviewed it; it was, critics thought, simply too disgusting.

De Haan carried on writing poems and started studying law. In 1912, he went to Russia and visited several prisons to investigate the situation of political inmates. He also published his findings in a book, *In Russian Prisons*. He founded a committee to protest the situation in them too. De Haan began working as a professor of law at the University of Amsterdam and became a specialist in the field of legal significance. Amnesty International mentions de Haan as one of its forerunners.

Raised as an orthodox Jew, de Haan became interested in socialism as an adolescent and later in Zionism, adding *Israel* to his last name. Emigrating to Palestine in 1919, he then became an anti-Zionist and started writing as a correspondent for the Dutch national newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad*. In 1924 de Haan was murdered in Palestine for his anti-Zionistic ideals, just shortly before his intended return to the Netherlands.

De Haan's two novels, short stories and poems were not in great demand during his life, and after his death the man and his work were largely forgotten. Yet a very small group of people saw the importance of de Haan's work and founded the De Haan Society in 1952 in order to give him the credit they felt he deserved and to make his work better known. The society published a few short articles in limited editions, but were unable to introduce de Haan to a large public. The society died a slow death, but in 1967 J. Meijer published a biography of de Haan. However, Meijer was mostly interested in his politics and stance on Judaism, not his literature. In 2015 Jan Fontijn published a complete biography.¹

The novel was finally republished for a larger public in 1974, when the publication right expired, fifty years after de Haan's death and seventy years after its first publication. In 1975, L. Ross and R. Delvigne released a new edition that includes a short introduction to this controversial novel, explaining why it was of such importance. Subsequently, Ross and Delvigne would publish most of de Haan's literary work, even the short stories that de Haan had published in lesser-known magazines and newspapers. The result was that, after so many years, de Haan was finally recognized and rediscovered by important Dutch critics as a writer who wrote beautiful novels and poems about men loving men. In 1987 the city of Amsterdam erected the *homomonument*, a symbol for gay emancipation in the Netherlands and abroad. It would be the first monument of its kind in the world. A pink marble triangle with a text atop reads: *Naar vriendschap zulk een mateloos verlangen* [Such an endless desire for friendship]. The words are Jacob Israël de Haan's.

In 1996, a new De Haan Society was founded. Again it is a society dedicated to introducing the general public to the importance of de Haan's literary legacy. In recent decades streets have been named for de Haan as well. On 26th February 2013, another monument to commemorate de Haan was inaugurated in Zaandam, the town where he had lived with his parents, across from the synagogue where his father had been a cantor.

De Haan's *Pijpelijntjes* was translated into Czech in 2006 and into Serbian in 2011. Only a few poems have been translated into English. For the very first time a complete chapter has now been translated into English and can be read by an international public.²

BONNY WASSING & MARC NASSAU-WOODWORTH

1 Jan Fontijn, *Onrust. Het leven van Jacob Israël de Haan* (Unrest. The Life of Jacob Israël de Haan), De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 2015.

2 You can read the chapter 'A Beloved Student' from the novel at www.onserfdeel.be/en/a-beloved-student.

The authors of this article are currently translating the complete novel.