



Father Pieter-Jan De Smet (1801-1873),
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division –
Brady-Handy Photograph Collection

Father De Smet was a man of his time. Was he a paternalist who regarded the Indians as small children? Undoubtedly. Was he a warmonger who wanted to assimilate the Indian peoples? Absolutely not; he respected their culture and their history too much for that. The fact that he was ultimately forced to watch on with chagrin as the American government shamelessly infringed all the treaties, caused him sorrow to his dying day. The fact that the descendants of Sitting Bull have today achieved an historic victory in North Dakota against the American government is however a posthumous feather in De Smet's cap.

KARL VAN DEN BROECK

Translated by Julian Ross

The author of this article published a book in 2016 entitled *Waarom ik de indianen wil redden - Op zoek naar het kruis van Sitting Bull* (Why I Want to Save the Indians. In Search of the Crucifix of Sitting Bull), Polis, Antwerp.

500 Years Old

The 'Collegium Trilingue' in Leuven

Canon Hieronymus Busleyden (ca. 1470-1517), member of the Great Council of Mechelen, played host at his Mechelen residence to visits from Erasmus, Thomas More and Adriaan Boeyens, later Pope Adrianus VI. When the humanist and patron Busleyden died in 1517, he left enough money to enable an idea cherished by Erasmus finally to be turned into a reality: the founding of a school in Leuven dedicated to the study of the three classical languages Hebrew, Greek and Latin, in accordance with the philological principles of the humanists. Erasmus had published his first critical edition of the New Testament in Greek in 1516, and more importantly had produced a Latin translation which made many corrections to the 'sacred' translation by the fourth-century church father Jerome (the well-known Vulgate edition). His edition, however imperfect, marks the beginning of the scientific approach to Bible texts.

The *Collegium Trilingue* or *Collegium trium linguarum* was the first of its kind in Europe. Leuven University, and in particular the conservative Faculty of Theology and the Artes faculty, which was afraid of losing students, initially regarded the Collegium with distrust. It was not until 1519 that the Collegium, founded by will in 1517, and officially launching its teaching programme in 1518, was formally recognised by the university as a full-status institution.

Erasmus did not teach at the Collegium himself, but did recruit the best teachers and was the driving force behind the institution. A meagre remnant of the original buildings can still be seen on Busleidengang, a short alleyway leading off the Vismarkt in Leuven. King Francis I of France took inspiration from the Leuven Collegium when founding the *Collège Royal* (now the *Collège de France*) in Paris in 1530. He tried to attract Erasmus, but his invitation was turned down.

The Collegium quickly became a success. Renowned alumni included the anatomist Vesalius,

the botanist Clusius, the philologist and humanist Justus Lipsius and the diplomat Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq.

In one of his last letters from Basel (28 June 1536) to his great ally in Leuven and a teacher of Latin at the Collegium, Conrad Goclenius, Erasmus wrote about his nostalgia for Brabant, saying that this was where he would like to end his life. At this time he was still involved with his brainchild, the Collegium, where there was a problem with the Professor of Greek: Rutgerus Rescius.

He had been appointed in 1518 at a young age (around the age of 21!), and received a modest stipend in view of his limited teaching experience. Initially, as was expected of the teachers, he lived in the Trilingue. He married in around 1525 and started a large family. That prompted him to look around for additional income and to move with his family to live outside the college, thereby somewhat neglecting the Collegium. This academic neglect appeared to increase when, following the retirement of the printer Dirk Martens, he set up his own printing press in Leuven which he used mainly to print Greek works (he had lived in Dirk Martens's house in Leuven between 1515 and 1518 and assisted him with his Greek printing). The final straw came when he began giving Greek lessons in the Trilingue based on a Greek work that he himself had printed (with the obvious intention of driving up his income). This led to conflict with the Faculty of Law, which naturally claimed this work for itself.

Erasmus had welcomed the appointment of Rescius at the Trilingue, though he had opined that it might have been better to appoint someone who was a little older and with a greater reputation as a Hellenist. Erasmus had also supported Rescius later, after the latter's marriage. Gradually, however, he began to see that it was not good for the Trilingue that Rescius had been allowed to live outside the college with his family.

In his letter, Erasmus criticises the fact that Rescius uses second-rate Greek literature in his teaching. He was obviously aware that Rescius was thinking of his own profit and was in danger of sparking conflicts with the Law Faculty. Put somewhat dramatically, in doing so he was effectively destroying the Collegium.

The Collegium was not destroyed, however. It did not disappear until 1797, together with the

other university colleges, when the French occupiers abolished the Catholic University of Leuven and declared its possessions forfeit.

After a gap of almost twenty years, in 1817 King William I of the Netherlands opened what was intended as a neutral state university in Leuven. At the initiative of the Belgian bishops, this institution was once again replaced in 1834 by a Catholic university. But the Collegium did not return. As an alumnus of Leuven University who studied Latin and Greek there and was taught by the great neo-Latinist Jozef IJsewijn, I wonder if it would not be a good idea to reinstate the Collegium, bringing the teaching of Latin, Greek and Hebrew back under one roof and perhaps giving these three classical languages new impetus. The shining past is still there; it could be used as a springboard for the future.

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Erasmus's edition of the New Testament in Greek and Latin, Basel, 1516

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