

PROFILES: Peter De Klerk (1927-1997): Bibliographer Extraordinaire

by Lugene L. Schemper

In 1973 Peter De Klerk made a presentation at the ATLA Annual Conference held at Moravian Theological Seminary in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He advocated that ATLA “initiate a more scholarly publication with a broader scope and a wider circulation” than that of its current *Newsletter*. He proposed that ATLA publish a professional journal to disseminate studies in theological librarianship.¹ Forty-one years later he would no doubt be delighted to see the journal *Theological Librarianship* in its seventh year of publication. He might be surprised, but not disappointed, that the breadth of its distribution is accomplished solely in a digital format. His library world was primarily a world of print, although in the last decade of his work he began to use and appreciate the impressive electronic tools coming over the horizon.

Peter’s early years were spent in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where he was born in 1927 and where he received his early education. As an adolescent he experienced the trauma of the Nazi occupation of that city. In 1945 he attempted to enlist in the Royal Dutch Navy, though any thoughts of a military career ended when his application was rejected because he could not measure up to its standards for eyesight. Three years later he graduated from the Royal School of Landscape Architecture in Boskoop, the Netherlands. In the meantime he also studied in Gouda and received a government certificate in floral design.

As a young man he saw opportunity in North America, and emigrated to Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1951. In his local congregation of the Christian Reformed Church of North America his involvement in youth work and an interest in theology led him to begin study for the Christian ministry. He graduated from Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1956, and continued his study at Calvin Theological Seminary. After working for several years in Toronto, he enrolled at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, where he received his M.Div. degree in 1963. Further study brought him to Emory University, where he received his M.Ln. degree in 1968, and where he worked as a cataloging librarian at the Pitts Theological Library of Candler School of Theology from 1967 to 1969.

In 1969 he accepted a position as Theological Librarian for Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary and as head of the Theological Division of Hekman Library (a joint college and seminary library) in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In 1971 he was also appointed as curator of the Calvinism Collection of the library, which in 1983 became the H. H. Meeter Center for Calvin Studies. As theological librarian he saw himself as a servant of the church and its seminary. One of his faculty colleagues, John Stek, remarked that “his office and its overflow may not have been a model for others, but all who sought Peter’s help in mining the library’s resources...benefited from his sure sense of where to dig.” His master’s thesis at Emory was entitled “A Study of the Reading Interests of Ministers of the Christian Reformed Church,” and he continued a lifelong interest in serving not only his local academic community but also pastors with bibliographic needs. That interest was international in scope. From 1976 until 1995 Peter served as a member of his denominational Committee for Educational Assistance to Churches Abroad. In this work he was instrumental in distributing many books and periodicals to numerous theological libraries and academic institutions in developing countries. This included travel to some of those countries in Africa as library consultant.

¹ Peter De Klerk, “Does ATLA Need a Journal,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 27 (January 1, 1973): 97–98.

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As theological librarian at Calvin he worked hard to develop the range and depth of the library's theological holdings. One particular area of bibliographic interest was John Calvin. His pursuit of Calvin bibliography is legendary. Whenever he travelled in the United States, he would visit theological or university libraries and check their holdings on Calvin and Calvinism against a case of 4x6 cards in shoeboxes, noting special or unique items that he found. On international trips he would do the same, but with a more modest paper file. He notes that "while attending an ATLA Conference, you might enjoy some free time or a concert or a tourist trap, but you probably would find me near the card catalog of the library with my shoeboxes, adding cards to my file."² A colleague tells me that in the mid-1980s a high-school-age nephew was visiting Peter from the Netherlands for the summer. Peter invited my colleague's high-school son to accompany them on a six-week road trip in his Volkswagen bus. The three of them travelled across the country from Grand Rapids to San Francisco, back across to the East Coast, and back again to the Midwest. The two young men soon found out (to their dismay) that this was not to be a trip interrupted by frequent excursions to Disneyland, national parks, ocean beaches, or other tourist attractions, but was primarily focused on zigzagging across the country, visiting a host of large university libraries as well as small theological libraries in dogged pursuit of Calvin bibliography.

On the basis of this bibliographic research he built up a massive collection of books, monographs, pamphlets, and dissertations by and about John Calvin and early Calvinism, including many works by and about Calvin's closest associates, such as William Farel, Theodore Beza, Martin Bucer, and Pierre Viret. The goal that he established for the H. H. Meeter Center was to collect exhaustively in the area of John Calvin. This included all books written by and about Calvin, in all editions and in any language. As part of this work he developed a "Calvin Article File" containing copies of articles and essays published about John Calvin. At the time of his retirement this file contained over 12,000 items (it currently contains approximately 23,000 items, and its bibliographic contents can be accessed through the Calvinism Resources Database [<http://www.calvin.edu/library/database/card>]). For 24 years, from 1972 until 1995, Peter published an annual Calvin Bibliography in the fall issue of the *Calvin Theological Journal*. This work has kept the scholarly world informed about Calvin studies throughout the world, and continues to be published annually in the *Calvin Theological Journal* by Peter's successor at the Meeter Center, Paul Fields.

Peter's bibliographic work extended beyond John Calvin. He compiled an exhaustive *Bibliography of the Writings of the Professors of Calvin Theological Seminary* (1980), as well as bibliographies of Henry Stob, Ford Lewis Battles, A. C. Van Raalte, Willem van 't Spijker, W. H. Neuser, Cornelis Augustijn, and others. Most of these appeared as chapters in collected works and festschriften. As a member of the Calvin Studies Society, he regularly edited collections of the papers presented at their colloquia held biennially throughout the United States.

As an immigrant from the Netherlands, Peter had an interest in the Dutch immigrant experience in North America. His research in this area focused on a disastrous episode of Dutch immigration to Colorado in the late nineteenth century, and also the migration of various Dutch-American immigrant colonies to Texas early in the twentieth century. This research took him to state and national archives throughout the U.S. (again, in his Volkswagen home on wheels), the Netherlands, and South Africa. The results of this research have been published in various local history publications as well as the *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*.

Peter was a member of ATLA from 1968 until his death in 1997. He hosted the Thirtieth Annual Conference of ATLA in Grand Rapids, Michigan, as part of the 1976 centennial celebration of Calvin College and Seminary. He served on the Publications Committee from 1977 to 1981. He was a member of the ATLA Board of Directors from 1983 to 1986. In 1980 he served as co-editor of *Essays on Theological Librarianship: Presented to Calvin Henry Schmitt*, published by ATLA.

In the late 1990s an international group of Calvin scholars prepared a festschrift for Peter to be presented to him on his seventieth birthday. When Peter got wind of the project his bibliographical inclinations (or obsessions) moved him to volunteer to prepare a bibliography of his published works. In the festschrift, entitled *Calvin's Books*,³ the editors gave Peter a tribute worthy of the envy and aspirations of any librarian: "Peter De Klerk is the expert in the field of the

² Peter De Klerk, "Developing the Calvinism Collection," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 35 (January 1, 1981): 10–15.

³ Wilhelm H. Neuser, Herman J. Selderhuis, and W. van 't Spijker, *Calvin's Books: Festschrift Dedicated to Peter De Klerk on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (Heerenveen: J. J. Groen & Zoon, 1997).

countless number of books and contributions which appeared on John Calvin. This knowledge he made available to anyone who consulted him, often with great personal effort With a gift from their hands and hearts they would like to gladly and sincerely thank him for his permanent helpfulness and warm friendship.” In early 1997 Peter experienced a sudden illness and died on March 18, a month shy of his seventieth birthday. The volume became not only a tribute, but also a commemorative work, with the revised preface noting, “We remember Peter as a diligent scholar, a faithful friend, and a brother in the Lord.”