

## BOOK REVIEWS

MEYERS, JAN. Domela. Een hemel op aarde. Leven en streven van Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis. Uitgeverij De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 1993. 438 pp. Ill. D.fl. 55.00.

Domela Nieuwenhuis (1846–1919) is one of the best known Dutch figures in the international history of the labour movement. He represented the Dutch socialists at the congresses of the Second International in Paris (1889), Brussels (1891), Zurich (1893) and London (1896), where he became famous as a result of his conflicts with the leading German social democrats. After his overt decision in 1897 to support anarchism, or free socialism as he preferred to call it, international libertarian circles regarded him as the nominal leader of radicalism in the Netherlands. Outside the Netherlands he also enjoyed a reputation as a free-thinker, vegetarian, teetotaler and antimilitarist.

Within the Netherlands he was regarded as the first great apostle of the workers. But during his life, and in the later social histories of the period too, his significance for the development of the labour movement was controversial, not least because of his support for anarchism. For the social democrats who left the Socialistenbond in 1894 to establish the Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiders Partij (SDAP), he was simultaneously a forerunner and an opponent. He became acceptable to the anarchists only after his conversion to anarchism in 1897.

His career as the socialist leader began when he was thirty-three. He was the son of an Amsterdam Lutheran ecclesiastical professor and himself became a Lutheran preacher. Increasing doubts about his faith and the growing tide of social criticism led him to resign his post in 1879, something he could easily do at that time on account of an inheritance. He launched his own weekly, *Recht voor Allen*, which he opened to the burgeoning Dutch labour movement and eventually gave to it, though he remained the editor. In the 1880s he even rose to become the messianic leader of Dutch socialism, which, at that time, one could characterize as millenarian. His extreme inclination for suffering and sacrifice was more than gratified when, as the editor responsible, he was sent to prison in 1887 for an article deemed insulting to the sovereign. After his release he became the first socialist to sit in the Dutch parliament, a role that gave him little pleasure. At the same time, doubts grew within the labour movement over the usefulness of political action in the beginning of the 1890s, which led to the breakaway of those supporting change by parliamentary means; they set up the SDAP in 1894 under the leadership of Troelstra, a lawyer. For many years the most significant element within the labour movement continued to be the trade unions, united in the more or less syndicalist Nationaal Arbeids Secretariaat. Domela vacillated until 1897, when he threw in his lot with the anarchists. It is not often that the leader of a socialist movement moves more in the direction of libertarianism. The opposite is more often the case. Domela's close friend, the Belgian foreman Caesar de Paepe – after whom Domela named his youngest son – was one example of this.

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In his personal life Domela experienced many dramas. He lost three wives and several children. His financial situation deteriorated towards the end of his life, as a result of his patronage within the movement, the poor management of his assets, and the squandering of money by one of his sons who could never be trusted with anything. The consequence was that by the end of his life this proud man was being supported by a special assistance fund set up by sympathizers. As a political force, his significance was much diminished by then, and the SDAP and the trade unions with whom it had close links had grown to become the dominant mass movement within Dutch socialism. Yet Domela's name became important again when, during the First World War, he supported antimilitarism, which meant adopting a position opposed to that of such old friends as Kropotkin, Čerkessov and Grave, and his former colleague Cornelissen, who so feared the "Prussian threat" that they publicly campaigned for an allied victory in the famous, or infamous, "Déclaration des Seize" of 1916.

Even during his life, Domela showed that there were many sides to him. His most recent biographer, Jan Meyers, adds several more. The man regarded as the first apostle of the workers now deserves an exhaustive biography. His former colleague, and later leading reformist socialist, W.H. Vliegen provided an early keen portrait of Domela in his *Dageraad der Volksbevrijding*, and hagiographic commemorative books were already appearing during Domela's life. The vilification to which he was subjected in the early historiographies written by the SDAP became more nuanced during the inter-war period in such works as Rüter's *Spoorwegstaking* and in Jan and Annie Romein's *Erflaters der Nederlandse beschaving*, a book that canonized Domela as a "great man". The Romeins's book made Domela into a tragic hero, consumed with guilt about his wealthy middle-class origins, and this crude Freudian interpretation has coloured the image of Domela ever since. After the war the anarcho-syndicalist Albert de Jong made the first attempt to replace the prevailing view of Domela, which owed much to social-democratic prejudice and the simplistic use of psychology, and to encourage an understanding of Domela's anarchism. A further step towards rehabilitation was Evert Zandstra's brilliantly documented *vie romancée* of Domela. And renewed interest since the 1960s in the history of the labour movement has resulted in several articles on particular facets of Domela's life. So far, however, there has been no synthesis.

Domela is no easy subject for a biographer, as the source material is immense. The Domela bibliography, published by Nabrink, alone runs to around one thousand pages. The Domela archive at the IISG is six metres long, and the archives of Dutch and foreign correspondents have been more or less entirely preserved. His collection of books – many of which have comments by Domela written in the margin – is largely intact too. To assimilate all this information in three years – the period stipulated by the publisher – is impossible. This pressure has, however, prevented Meyers from getting bogged down in the mass of information available, a problem on which earlier attempts to write a biography of Domela have foundered.

Given the extent of the information available, it might seem unreasonable to criticize Meyers for not using particular sources. But one is obliged to point out that the correspondence between Domela Nieuwenhuis and foreign correspondents has not been used sufficiently, and this has important consequences for the biography. Too little attention is paid to Domela as an international figure, and his views on developments in the Netherlands and on people which unfold in those letters do not emerge.

Further, Meyers was unable to consult the letters from Domela to his daughter Johanna. These were released only recently, after the death of her brother Ceasar Domela, who had fled the Netherlands to become something other than the son of a famous man. It is in Domela's letters to Johanna that one comes closest to seeing the intimate, sometimes even hesitant Domela.

Though some material has been used too little, too much use has been made of other sources, such as Domela's own memoirs. Although Meyers distances himself from Nieuwenhuis's inflexible egomaniacal self-image, he has not always succeeded in freeing himself from Domela's resentments. This is clearest in the one-sided and hostile critique of Domela's social-democratic opponent, Troelstra. Meyers has also borrowed too uncritically from the extensive unpublished memoirs of Domela's co-editor at *Recht voor Allen*, the syndicalist Christiaan Cornelissen, without, incidentally, providing page numbers for his references.

It is the chapters on Domela's youth and his becoming a preacher up to his break with the church and his conversion to socialism (22 per cent of the book, covering 44 per cent of Domela's life) which particularly offer new perspectives. Meyers has thoroughly researched and sketched relations within Domela's family. The middle section of the book covers the period 1878–1898 (half of the book, 23 per cent of Domela's life). Domela's development in relation to that of Dutch socialism up to 1891 is described in a balanced way, although Domela's significance is more apparent than that of Dutch socialism. The later years, when Domela moved towards anarchism and eventually left the social-democratic movement, are less coherent. The chronological arrangement is dispensed with in favour of an uneven thematic arrangement, which scarcely gets beyond the level of anecdote. Apart from this, the consideration the author gives to libertarian socialism at the turn of the century is greater than his insight into the movement at that time. Or so it would appear from his treatment of the last twenty years of Domela's life.

A certain lack of distance can also be seen from Meyers's style, which reminds one very much of the sarcastic invective prose style of Domela himself. Of course a biographer has to relive the past, to replay the life gone by. But does he not also have an obligation to distance himself from his subject and to provide considered criticism? That Meyers sometimes fails to achieve that balance cannot be blamed on his skills as a historian, which he has already ably demonstrated in studies on the young Vincent van Gogh and the Dutch national-socialist leader Mussert and which are evident in many parts of his biography of Domela. The fact the book was commissioned and written to a tight deadline probably explains why the work is incomplete, and why there are also many slight errors and a scholarly apparatus that is too limited. The frequent passages in which the author comments bluntly on the recent history of Dutch society are peculiar – for some readers amusing, for others irritating.

Meyers has written an extremely vivid and readable book. Perhaps it will be appreciated by professional historians if it is regarded as a historical novel accompanied by annotations. Despite its many virtues, the book leads one to hope the Dutch habit of unleashing just one biography on important people will be broken. A book could certainly be written about Domela as an international figure.

*Homme Wedman*