

The repertory of Belgian Trade Catalogues

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Trade catalogues have been in existence for more than one hundred years. They constitute an irreplaceable source of information for historian and ethnographer alike (1). Practically every saleable object can be found there, sometimes with its technical characteristics, illustration and price. The list is impressive: tools, machines, fertilizers, plants and seeds, construction stone, toys, surgical apparatus, metal stoves, etc. With few exceptions, they are either dated or datable (2); localization is rarely problematic.

We are in a position then, to ascertain what was introduced (3) or still (4) for sale at any given time, not to mention the production and significance of factories and stores. Aside from information on the products themselves, the catalogues often furnish photographs of factories and workshops, jobs accomplished using the products which are offered for sale (5), institutions which use them (6), prizes won by factories, a brief history of the firm (7), and so on. Even philologists can hope to derive information from these sources: attestations of rare, foreign or dialectal words are to be had therein.

Unfortunately, no attempt has yet been made to preserve the catalogues. Here and there one finds small collections, generally including only a few copies (8) and most often in private hands. The systematic utilization of this documentation is therefore denied the researcher. Moreover, even if he should locate and cite a document, only the most fortunate of researchers will be able to find it in his turn (9).

It is necessary, therefore, to draw up a list of all surviving trade catalogues, which, among other information, would indicate their place of deposit for future consultation. A table of products and firms would facilitate utilization of such a document.

Such is the intent of the Repertory of Belgian Trade Catalogues (10). Although the project's dimensions are large, they are manageable. It will require an extended effort. Research would certainly be dispatched however, if it were possible to count on collaboration on an international level. The reason for this is that foreign catalogues have often survived in another country's collections (11) and foreign firms tend to publish catalogues in the countries in which they sell their wares (12). Even a limited exchange of information of this nature would advance the Repertory's completion, for it would lessen the greatest single problem: the discovery of a catalogue's existence.

The objective of the present paper is to introduce the Repertory of Belgian Trade Catalogues which we undertook last year (13). We will begin by defining "trade catalogues" and the limits of the Repertory. We will then describe the method of entry of individual items, and the deployed for the detection of new items.

A trade catalogue may be defined as a printed (14) list of products (15) which are manufactured or offered for sale (16) by a person or firm (17). It might be a mere one page or a volume of a thousand or more pages. It may or may not be bound into another work (18) or magazine, and include the products price and or technical characteristics, as well as an illustration (19). Other information sometimes occurs as well (20).

There do exist, however other documents which, although they might not correspond exactly to this description, do offer comparable information.

In the first place we might cite advertisements for one or more products (21) as well as technical reports on a given product which may have appeared in specialized periodicals and studies of new products published by manufacturing or merchandising firms (22).

In the second place, valuable information is often to be had from instruction sheets for one or more products. In the latter instance the instructions usually consist of a series of practical suggestions supplied by a manufacturer. These instructions frequently contain some publicity for further products (23).

A third category is represented by the libri memoriales (24) which give résumés of a company's history and, more often than not, allude to a few noteworthy products (25).

Another group consist of acts which aim only to inform of or announce the existence of a company. In this case the products are generally not cited. Examples would be a flyer announcing that x Inc. manufactures or sells a given article, a factory-visit guide book, a short history of a product, and so on. (26)

A final group includes the magazines published by firms (27).

Om aal te pompen.. moet ge er zooveel zweet niet bij laten !

DURZAAM !



GOEDKOOP !

Hij heeft geen tijd om te drinken Hij heeft geen tijd meer om te drinken

Landbouwers ! Let wel op !

Een nieuw mechanisch stelsel voor uwe aalpompen. Met den motor der waschmachine zuigt het 150 l. per minuut.

Gieterijen en Werkhuizen H. LEBEAU, Gilly (bij Charleroi, België)
Tél. : Charleroi 4222

The Repertory of Belgian Trade Catalogues includes all four kinds of documents, and thus offers a kind of inventory of publicity (28). It is limited to catalogues which were published by Belgian manufacturers or merchandisers (29) before 1945 (30) irrespective of the kind of product in question (31). We shall justify this last point in a moment. The Repertory consist of a card index (12,5 x 7,5) in which each item has been numbered and succinctly described. Two additional indexes, organized according to product and firm, complement the first.

onderwerp				datum	R.C.		
firma:							
titel:							
adres:							
aard	ingeb.	gedr.	afb.	prijs	afmet.	taal	bijlage
formaat		bladzijden		bewaarpplaats			

SAMPLE CARD

Line 1:

- *Product. Because of the great number of different products which can occur in the same catalogue, only a general characterization is given, for the time being (32). An exception is made when the catalogue is devoted to only one kind of article.*
- *Date. When the catalogue does not specifically mention the date of publication, but the latter can be determined by another means, the date is listed in parentheses (30).*
- *Item number. Every factory or store has been assigned a number, as well as each one of the catalogues (33). Thus, all the catalogues of a given firm are grouped under the first number.*
- *The first line thus allows a triple classification of the material (34).*

Line 2:

- *Name of the company. Listed under personal or place-name, whenever possible. Otherwise we list the firm under the first substantive other than "maatschappij", "société", etc.*
- *In the small square: the letter "F" (manufacturer) or "w" (for stores) (35).*

Line 3:

- *Catalogue title and if possible, the edition number.*

Line 4:

- *Address as it appears on the catalogue (36).*

Line 5:

- *Kind of catalogue: "C", "O", "G", "A" or "T" (37).*
- *Bound: "1" (yes) or "0" (no) indicating whether it is a separate document or has been bound along with the book in which it appeared.*
- *Printed: "1" (yes) or "S" (stencil).*
- *Illustration: "0" (no), "T" (drawing), "F" (photo).*
- *Price: listed ("1") or not ("0").*
- *Language: "N" (Dutch), "F" (French), "N-F" (both), "D" (German), etc.*
- *Appendices: presence ("1") or absence ("0") (e.g. photographs of factory, list of satisfied users of product, etc).*

Line 6:

- *Format: given in centimetres*
- *Pages: calculated according to the number of sheets which have been printed on one side and not folded in half.*

- *Place of deposit: public institution where a copy may be consulted (38)*

Additional notes concerning the date, firm, etc. are referred to by "a)", "b)", etc. and are placed at the bottom of the card.

The index of firms (12,5 x 7,5) bears the name of the company (see above) and the first digits of the item number.

It would be more accurate to speak of the absence of research method rather than a research method. The essential problem is, as we have indicated, that of the discovery of the existence of a catalogue.

Those catalogues which are found in libraries are not usually mentioned in the subject catalogue. If they are mentioned at all, they appear in the alphabetical catalogue, usually under the first word of the title. The result is that systematic research is practically impossible (39).

In order to uncover potential collections, we will place several brief notices in specialized or local periodicals. Once discovered, these fonds present further difficulties: they are usually unclassified, which implies a long preliminary effort. Moreover, it is frequently difficult to borrow the document, in order to obtain reproductions.

Old book sellers frequently offer catalogues for sale; although the prices are generally prohibitive, especially in the absence of financial support.

Our methodological point of departure is the catalogue itself, although it is possible to imagine another approach. One could begin with the telephone book and trade guides, and inquire whether each firm published catalogues prior to 1945. In fact, this method has severe limitations. In the first place, quite a bit of time is wasted because of the considerable growth in the number of companies since 1945 (40). In the second, error cannot be excluded, for we would be basing our enquiry on the memory of a person whose interest and competence in the matter are open to question. Finally, many firms have disappeared in the course of the century under study, and many more smaller establishments (e.g. local blacksmiths) were never mentioned in any inventory. This method cannot, however, be entirely overlooked. Once we will have ascertained a catalogue's existence, it is indispensable to determine whether the company still exists and whether it has kept its old catalogues.





The aforesaid obviously concerns only separate catalogues. The discovery of those which have been bound into another book is a question of luck. Those which were published in periodicals should present no problem, as long as the periodical has survived.

The analysis of these last is less urgent, because they are stocked in libraries and are therefore theoretically well protected from disappearance. Nevertheless they often offer information of greatest interest: it is in local newspapers or specialized periodicals that we are liable to find advertisements by a village blacksmith who never published a separate catalogue. The existence of this industry down to early twentieth century is surely not to be neglected in the history of the industrialization of agriculture: it might however entirely escape notice because of an almost total lack of advertisements or other documents (41).

The repertory is not limited to one type of products: it embraces all catalogues. For two reasons. First it would be unfortunate to neglect documents which have been uncovered after great effort, solely because they don't interest us. To do so would be a waste of time and would seriously limit the possibilities for collaboration between researchers. The second reason is that it would be exceedingly difficult to define the limits of such an inventory: for the history of agricultural techniques, the enquire could not fruitfully be limited to tools and machines. (It might be noted in passing that a lot of information for these are found in catalogues devoted to other products). It is clear that fertilizers, means of transportation, steam engines etc. must enter into this study.

In conclusion, a word on the problems posed by the Repertory's publications. On one hand, the sale of the Repertory will most likely be limited. Moreover, the Repertory will require periodical updating. Publication on index cards, accompanied by printed and bound indices would seem the best solution. This is unfortunately a rather costly solution, and present numerous of storage, classification and sending.

But perhaps it is premature to speak of publication ?

Johan David

NOTES

- (1) WELSH, A.C. Woodworking tools. 1600-1900. in *Contributions from the Museum of History and Technology*. Paper 51. Washington. 1966.221: "in the last quarter of the 19 th century the tool catalogue replaced Moxon, Duhamel, Diderot and the builder's manuals as the primary source for the study and indentification of hand tools". They were already used as sources early in this century by VAN HOUCKE, A. *Ambacht van*

den loodgieter en zinkbewerker. In verhandeling van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde. Gent. 1901-1902. 8, 14.

- (2) Thanks to a list of medals and awards, production figures accompanied by dates, the telephone or postal checking account number, the name of a director, etc.
- (3) The catalogue does not tell us what was in use, but what was available for use at a given time.
- (4) It does happen that products were cited in catalogues even though they were no longer available. To avoid the expense of a new catalogue, companies sometimes used the same until its stock was exhausted.
- (5) Or for example, a sometimes surprisingly long list of the buildings in which a certain material was used.
- (6) See e.g. the photographs of greenhouses fabricated by J. Van Lierde and constructed in various schools of agriculture and horticulture (R.C.B. 99.1,2).
- (7) The significance of such information for industrial archaeology is quite clear.
- (8) With the exception of a few large collections like that of the University of Hohenheim in Stuttgart.
- (9) The fastest means is to write directly to the author whenever feasible.
- (10) Dutch: Repertorium van den Belgische Handelscatalogi; French: Répertoire des catalogues commerciaux belges. Abbreviated as R.C.B.; "B" may be replaced by "D" (Deutschland), "E" (England), "N" (Netherlands), etc.
- (11) So far we have located English, Dutch, German, French, Italian and American catalogues in Belgium.
- (12) See note 29.
- (13) DAVID, J. Het Repertorium van de Belgische Handelscatalogi. In Industriële Archeologie. 1975.
- (14) We have not yet encountered manuscript catalogues. There do exist stencilled catalogues.
- (15) A catalogue does not necessarily list all products.
- (16) In this case of course finds products of different makes in the same catalogue.
- (17) Although it would seem infrequent, it does happen that the various makers of one kind of product publish a catalogue for that product in common. Examples: Compendium des produits pharmaceutiques belges. 1931-32. = R.C.B. 75.1.; HULET, J. Album des produits métallurgiques belges: = R.C.B. 44.1. This kind of document may be assimilated to a catalogue. Because of the great number of companies which can and do figure in such documents, they have been temporarily excluded from the firm index. They are grouped under the rubric "varia".
- (18) Among the earliest known agricultural catalogues attested for Belgium, we may cite five equipment lists (plows, harrows, seeders, etc.): R.C.B. 38.2, 3; 64.1, 2; 66.1, 2; 67.1, 2. which appear in LE DOCTE, M. Traité élémentaire des instruments aratoires. Brussel. 1851. published in Dutch as Beknopte verhandeling over de landbouwwerktuigen. Brussel. 1852.
- (19) The catalogue frequently comprises two documents: an atlas of plates, and occasionally, technical data, and a separate price list. The latter underwent continual revision, while the atlas remained unchanged. It is not therefore unusual to find one of these documents without the other. For these reasons, such documents are treated as two separate pieces and bear different numbers in the Repertory.
- (20) Cf. supra.
- (21) The catalogue itself and advertisements for one or more products figure under the symbol "C" (= catalogues).
- (22) See the notes on new tools which appeared in Belgian agricultural and horticultural periodicals in the last century (e.g. DAVID, J. Het handgereedschap op de hoeve. Technische documentatie voor 1860 verschenen. Keulen. 1975. 48, 50, 150, 164, 177, 178, 188, 190, 192, 208, 221.
- (23) Instructions figure under the symbol "O" (= onderrichting).
- (24) We know of no pre 1945 Belgian example
- (25) Under the symbol "G" (= Gedenkboek).
- (26) Under the symbol "A" (= aankondiging).
- (27) Under the symbol "T" (= tijdschrift).

- (28) Exhibition catalogues are themselves a form of publicity. In the early 19th century (Gent. 1820) the first national exhibitions were organized for industry and agriculture. They later became international in scope. These catalogues are often disappointing: illustrations are rare and it is not unusual that the product's name alone is cited. Nor are they very numerous; they have been excluded from the Repertory, because several copies of them are ordinarily to be found in public libraries. A limit case would be brochures published by firms for an exposition (e.g. Catalogue des machines exposées à l'exposition internationale de Gand. 1913. par Platt Brothers and Co. Ltd. Hartford "Orks, Oldham, Angleterre ...). These documents may legitimately be considered catalogues.
- (29) I.e. catalogues and periodicals of foreign establishments, even though they may have been published in Belgium, have not been included. So too with catalogues of foreign manufacturers who maintained a factory or agency in Belgium. Example: Conseils pratique pour l'outilleur, published by Agence aciéries Firth Sheffield Ltd. Ernest J. Dartois. Liège.
- (30) See note 35.
- (31) Booksellers, publishers and antique dealers catalogues have been excluded.
- (32) Ideally, each product would be mentioned in the index: unfortunately, this is an impossible objective. However that may be, the categories can be subdivided at a future time.
- (33) See note 19.
- (34) The company index already exists on another set of cards.
- (35) In drawing up the Repertory of Catalogues, we are at present limiting our efforts to the data offered by the catalogue itself. The date (when it is not mentioned) and the indication "store" or "factory" may therefore be erroneous. Considering that one too many catalogue is better than one too few, it may occasionally happen that a more recent document has been included.
- (36) I.e. in the same language and without replacing an old street name by the new one.
- (37) See notes 21, 23, 25, 26, 27
- (38) This does not imply that no other copy exists. Since private collections are more subject to the vicissitudes of dispersion or disappearance, it is necessary to base ourselves on public institutions. Whenever possible, however, we obtain photocopies or microfilms of the catalogues of private collections.
- (39) The volume of "varia" devoted to techniques, railroads, trade etc; sometimes contain catalogs. It is therefore necessary to examine them all – once their existence is known... A librarian who know his collection well can evidently save quite a bit of tome for the researcher.
- (40) For certain products or kinds of products (e.g. tobacco, textiles, etc.) the existence of pre 1945 repertories obviates this difficulty.
- (41) For example the Ateliers de Haine-Saint-Pierre, manufacturers of machines, instruments and tools for agricultural use (R.C.B. 38.1.: catalogue of 1851) was subsidized by the state, and therefore appears in official documents, and is better known than other manufacturers for instance E. Van Maele of Tielt (R.C.B. 67.1,2) who "without the slightest help from the state managed to produce equipments which could compete with that of state-subsidized firms, like Haine-Saint-Pierre... as well as with foreign, i.e. English equipment" (De Vlaamsche werktuigen in De Akkerbouw. 7. 1855.8).