Groen van Prinsterer: His Life and Work
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by

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Preface

The text of this translation is based on my book of 1976 entitled Mr. G. Groen van Prinsterer (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre), with small additions from the revised edition of 1977. Some new materials have been added from my later writings.

This little book does not claim to be offering any new facts or new interpretations. It is certainly not the comprehensive scholarly biography that Groen van Prinsterer deserves in view of the important place he occupies in Dutch history.

In 1895, one biographer noted that it was surprising how little people knew, even in Christian circles, about the life and work of Groen van Prinsterer. That observation still seems true today, a century and a quarter after Groen's death.

It is my hope that this little book—which can be no more than a popular introduction to a serious study of Groen—will whet the reader's appetite for a broader and deeper acquaintance with the person and work of the eminent Dutch Christian historian and statesman Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer.

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Chapter 1

Formative Years

The subject of our biographical sketch, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, has a rather interesting family-tree. His father, Pieter Jacobus Groen van Prinsterer, was a medical doctor, but his grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather had been respectable, if not very prominent, village pastors of the Dutch Reformed Church. When Pieter Jacobus went to university, however, he chose medicine instead of theology. Upon graduation he set up a practice in The Hague and became a skilful doctor who attracted many patients, also from well-to-do families. In 1797 he married the 23-year-old orphan Adriana Hendrika Caan. It was a happy union, also socially, because Adriana Hendrika was heir to the fortunes of a Rotterdam merchant family which in the 18th century had come to belong to the Regents, the governing burgher class. Her mother was a sister of the well-known Patriot bankers from Amsterdam, the Van Staphorst family. No wonder jealous tongues commented enviously that the smartest thing the doctor with the long nose had done in his life was to marry one of Holland’s richest heiresses.

Groen’s parents
That comment was not quite fair. Dr. Groen van Prinsterer was the kind of man to whom a wife can entrust herself with the fullest confidence. He was a caring husband and would be a loving father. His career was well on track: he was court physician in turn to Grand Pensionary Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck, to King Louis
Groen van Prinsterer

Napoleon, and after 1813 to King William I. Dr. Groen—the double surname is usually shortened to the first part—served on all kinds of state medical committees, held a seat for thirty years in the Provincial States or legislature of Holland, and received the highest recognition for his life of service to the nation when he was appointed to the Council of State. He was an active and capable man with fresh, modern ideas who propagated smallpox inoculation and sea-bathing. As an opponent of the age-old custom of burial inside the church he was the initiator of the founding of a new burial plot on the outskirts of The Hague, which was given the fitting name Ter Navolging ("To Be Followed"), in the hope that his example would be followed by more cemeteries in the rest of the country.

Many years later, in his son's Handbook of Dutch History, Dr. Groen’s generation was aptly characterized as follows: they were people who did not want to miss out on the progress of the age. They felt that remaining true to the gospel in church and at home could easily be reconciled with the independent pursuit of science. Averse to "enthusiasts" and other "religious extremists," they believed that a Christianity rightly understood would not be at variance with the light of Reason. Rather, a serious effort to reconcile religion and philosophy would be the key to a bright future. The modern project of renewal was resulting in amazing material advancements. All kinds of social improvements were being realized as well, and the seeds of civil and political liberty were being sown everywhere.

Some of the champions of renewal were radicals, as in 1795, when they replaced the old Dutch Republic by the Batavian Republic. They were like the revolutionary Jacobins in France who knocked down the old institutions with a battering-ram. But revolutionary overthrow turned out to be easier than the laborious task of reconstruction. Political instability was the result, punctuated by many coups. Moreover, the Dutch had surrendered themselves to
their French "brothers" and so they were lowered to the status of a French satellite. Later generations feel embarrassed at the years 1795–1813, which is known in Dutch history as "The French Period." Others poke fun at it. Both groups have reasons enough, yet one must not forget that the French Period was also a very constructive time in which the revolutionary storms removed much dead wood and made room for new life forms. The steady labours of those who were preparing a new justice system, working at a new economic and social order, and pursuing what can be called scientific and technological progress, were extremely significant even if less conspicuous than all those political experiments.

Dr. Groen belonged to that quiet but determined group of people who were preparing the country for the inevitable process of modernization. The lifelong desire of this practical and prosaic man was to contribute to the creation of more rational and more decent society. He probably picked up this idea in his parental home: his father, Rev. Cornelis Groen van Prinsterer (1731–97), belonged to the moderate wing of the Patriot party which during the 1780's had agitated for enlightened democratic reforms. Through his marriage the son of Cornelis came into closer contact with Patriot circles. Dr. Groen did not indulge in party politics, however; he stuck to medicine. But his cordial relations with Schimmelpenninck, his appointments under successive regimes in the cause of modernizing medical care (he became what was in effect the first inspector of public health in the Netherlands), all this shows that Dr. Groen figured among those people who were striving for the renewal of society without too many political preconceptions.

Doctor and Madame Groen were blessed with three children. The eldest daughter, Cornelia Adriana (usually called Keetje) was born in 1799. In 1821 she married Mari Hoffman, a well-to-do merchant from Rotterdam who for 25 years was to hold a seat in the Second Chamber or lower house of parliament. The youngest
daughter, Mimi (Maria Clazina), born in 1806, stayed home a little longer. She was married in 1828 to Johan Antoni Philipse, a lawyer who first had a career in the justice system and later would be president of the First Chamber or upper house and was finally honoured with an appointment as Minister of State. Between the birth of the two daughters came the birth of their only son: Guillaume, on August 21, 1801. The birth took place in “Vreugd en Rust,” the country-house an hour’s ride by coach from The Hague, the beautiful estate that Madame Groen had brought into the marriage. It would later be said that there is nothing un-Dutch about Groen van Prinsterer except his first name. Perhaps he owes his French name to the fact that he was baptized in the Walloon church of The Hague—in those days the church of the upper crust. The question is not entirely clear. Use of the French language was common among the upper classes at the time; Guillaume’s mother in particular spoke mostly French, although later she did encourage her son to try and become proficient in Dutch as well.

Formative years
The childhood years of Willem Groen—for that was the Dutch-language name his friends and family would mostly know him by—were spent in his parental home, in the security of a loving and genteel atmosphere. After 1805 the family spent the winter season in The Hague, residing in a magnificent mansion along the Korte Vijverberg, where the son, too, would live from 1838 till his death in 1876. Father Groen started early with a systematic approach to Willem’s education. The boy quickly showed himself to be a talented and promising lad, and we may safely assume that the father had great plans for his only son. Had he not himself, by dint of personal effort and through his marriage, gained acceptance in the highest circles in the land? The best would not be good enough for his son. Until his death in 1837, Papa Groen continued to keep a close watch over his son’s career.
This paternal care extended to the minutest details and according to the custom of the time was wielded with unquestioned authority, rather pedantically almost. But Willem never felt anything like a generation conflict, and all his life he remained grateful to his father for his many cares, even though he did not always agree with his plans.

Willem Groen’s first lessons were received at home, from his father and from a governess. At the age of 8 he began to attend, during the winter months, the private school run by the The Hague chapter of the Society for the Common Utility. Utility schools had a good reputation; in those days of educational renewal they offered its most progressive form. In 1813 Willem for a short while stayed at a boarding school in Haarlem, but the imminent collapse of the French regime persuaded Papa Groen to call him home again. Thus the 12-year-old was again living in The Hague when the relatively bloodless revolution—more like a restoration—of November 1813 took place. Possibly he witnessed the parade of its leaders Count van Limburg Stirum and the young Hogendorps, sporting their Orange cockades. He may have been a spectator at the triumphal entry of the Prince of Orange, who sailed from England and landed on a beach near The Hague. In any case, he admired the Cossack liberators: their commander was billeted in the home of the Groens and the young boy played chess with him. After these events, for the next couple of years Willem attended the local Latin School. Despite the difference in age he developed a close friendship with his teacher, Professor Johannes Kappeyne van de Coppello, a learned classical scholar who expected great things from his gifted student. A half century later, one of Kappeyne’s sons would be a Liberal cabinet minister who almost succeeded in rendering impossible the maintenance of nongovernment schools of which Groen had become such a fervent advocate.
In 1815 Dr. Groen sent his son to Utrecht, to the Hieronymus School. This establishment was many centuries old but had been completely reorganized shortly before. The boys were taught by an excellent staff. Father Groen, who at this time still hoped that his son would follow in his footsteps and take up medicine, saw to it that Willem was enrolled not just in the courses that interested him, such as Greek, Latin and History, but also in the sciences.

His broader education was not neglected either. Papa Groen was very conscious of the importance of sound physical development: walking, fives, golf, horseback-riding. Swimming came in for attention as well, though the occasion for that was somewhat remarkable. On one of his walks outside the city walls the 15-year-old Willem had jumped into the river to save a girl that had fallen in. “It could have cost you your life!” wrote the alarmed father.

The father was also convinced of the usefulness of social contacts. A number of relatives and acquaintances were living in Utrecht and the son was repeatedly encouraged to pay them a visit. Willem obeyed faithfully and did not neglect to report to his father about how the visits had gone. For his part, the father did empathize with the fact that a walk with old Professor Van Geuns must have seemed rather dull to his son with his zest for life.

**Student years in Leyden**

It was a foregone conclusion, of course, that the young Groen van Prinsterer, who finished his secondary schooling in the spring of 1817, would go on to university. That was customary in his circles. But what is more, Willem had always been at the top of his class and had been selected to deliver many a prize oration—at that time the duty and the honour of the best pupil in the school. This was again the case upon his matriculation from the Utrecht school, when Willem delivered a speech to a select audience, in meticulous Latin, about the similarity between Cicero’s politics and his personality.
Which field of study would best suit the aptitude and talents of the young man? At Leyden he enrolled in two faculties: law and letters. His registration dates from May 1817 but his actual attendance did not begin until early 1818, at which time he also rented rooms along the Rapenburg canal.

Groen van Prinsterer would make intensive use of the five years he spent in Leyden. We can gain a fairly good impression of his university years from the entries he made in his journal. Willem Groen devoured many books, and many kinds of books. Naturally, he read the classics and the works in legal studies that were prescribed for his courses. But he read them thoroughly, while also browsing in many books that may have been recommended but were not prescribed. He plowed his way through ancient and modern literature, philosophy, law and history. There was little that did not interest him.

But all work and no play makes Johnny a dull boy. A university student must not just be hitting the books; he has to have a life! Naturally, the debating clubs that Groen joined bore solemn names and had even more solemn aims. The papers that members read to each other and the formal propositions they defended in club meetings sound most solid and grave.

But much of that was also play-acting. And after half a homily by Professor Johannes Henricus van der Palm and an hour of reading Roman pandects Groen was glad to go out for a stroll and look up a friend, enjoy a glass of wine and play a game of chess. On warm summer afternoons he might go for tea at the home of a professor or in a tea-house belonging to a family acquaintance along a canal some distance from the city. There was time for horseback-riding, a short excursion with friends in a brake and a hired coachman, a Sunday walk to some well-known picnic spot on the outskirts of Leyden. Groen and his companions knew how to enjoy themselves. Pleasant in manners, a chap of good breeding and unmistakable intelligence, Groen was popular with his fellow
students as well as with his professors. Relations between professors and students could be quite personal in those days. The universities were very small, having only a hundred or so students. Almost all of them, moreover, came from the same social class and the parents were often acquainted with one another. Groen was on intimate terms with several of his professors, and bonds were created that often lasted long after he graduated. The young theologian and historian Elias Borger, whom Groen admired greatly, died already in 1820, but Groen also adored the theologian Van der Palm, who was all eloquence. Particularly warm was his relation with Cornelis Jacobus van Assen, a professor of law, a touch vain but good-natured, a conservative who for that reason was not quite taken seriously by his stuffy liberal colleagues, yet who therefore developed a keen eye for the shortcomings of those same liberals—and who was able to express his opinions about them in pithy language. Until his death in 1859 Van Assen would be one of Groen’s most faithful correspondents.

The real leader of the Leyden liberals was Joan Melchior Kemper. It was typical of the inquisitive but unassuming and cautious Groen that he got along famously with Kemper as well. The latter was not just anybody. A jurist of Patriot convictions, he had played a significant role in 1813 when the new state of The Netherlands was constituted and launched. Kemper quickly spotted Groen’s abilities and even tried to get him appointed professor before he had properly finished his course of studies. And when Kemper died in 1824 there was talk of making the 23-year-old Groen his successor. Kemper, Borger, Van der Palm—the names indicate the climate of opinion that reigned in Leyden during Groen’s university days: self-consciously Netherlandic, urbane, and Protestant in the sense of a watered-down Calvinism, above all liberal and moderate, reasonably confident in progress and perfectibility.
Self-confidence, concord, reasonableness: these were the key concepts of the time. It was generally believed that the old days—the days of fierce partisan feuds between Orangists and Patriots, between Jacobins and moderates, between libertines and puritans—were a thing of the past. People would rather forget about them altogether. The celebrated Proclamation of 1813—in effect the official Declaration of Restored Independence—may have reassured the public, “The olden days are back,” but it had added: “Former antagonisms are put aside; what we have suffered is forgiven and forgotten!” Partisan slogans must not be allowed to disrupt the newly won unity and concord, all the more important after the forced merger of Holland and Belgium into the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. The generation of the Restoration of 1813, historian Johan Huizinga has quipped, wished above all to lie down and rest under the Orange tree.

**Bilderdijk’s seminar**

In that harmonious chorus of optimistic self-assurance, one strident dissonant was heard. The poet-lawyer Willem Bilderdijk had come to live in Leyden in 1817, to establish himself as a private tutor. His earlier aspiration, to be assigned a university chair, had not been fulfilled. Now he hoped, in the very place where the flower of the nation’s youth was being trained for future leadership of the country, to get a hearing for his ideas anyway. However difficult his circumstances would often be, and however loath the eternal pessimist would have been to admit it to himself, Bilderdijk’s years in Leyden were to be, from a national perspective, the most significant phase of his life.

Bilderdijk’s private seminar was never attended by more than a handful of students. Yet that handful kept the torch burning. Bilderdijk’s lecture series was without rhyme or reason but he dealt chiefly with Dutch history which he took very broadly. Whatever occupied or fascinated the master—and what subject
under the sun did not interest him?—he would discuss at great length, in a colourful mixture in which statements of profound and great wisdom alternated with the most blatant fantasies and the most glittering generalizations. But the students hung on his lips. Every word this man uttered flowed from the mighty spirit of Holland’s only great Romantic. Despite and because of his many idiosyncrasies, shortcomings, and errors of judgment, Bilderdijk was a figure of great stature, someone with a message. Waging a mighty struggle with the spirit of the age that had cast its spell over so many, he lashed out at the mentality of comfortable complacency and cautious moderation. For behind that caution he smelled the fear of dissenting views. Under the cloak of moderate reasonableness he discerned man’s faith in himself and his own potentials. In people’s self-confidence Bilderdijk recognized the mind that had exchanged the depth of human misery and the greatness of human depravity in the eyes of a holy God for the effort at living the virtuous life in reliance on human reason and good will. Bilderdijk, by contrast, knew of sin and unrighteousness, and also of redemption and atonement through Christ’s suffering and death alone.

Groen van Prinsterer, too, attended Bilderdijk’s private seminar for a number of years. Of course, dear Willem, his father wrote in answer to a question from his son, of course, go ahead and attend Mr. Bilderdijk’s lectures; I will gladly pay the fees. It will be important as well as enjoyable for you to get to know and hear a famous man like him, so it would be a pity if he were to pass away and you had missed the opportunity of making his acquaintance.

That’s how things go. An alert student is loath to miss an opportunity to go and hear a famous personality. And Groen’s father saw no harm in that. Bilderdijk might be a controversial figure, he was also Holland’s premier poet. And his critical-
minded son, accompanied by a group of friends, would surely be proof against the seductive powers of the master.

That last calculation of father Groen's was perhaps a bit too optimistic: many fathers afterwards came to rue the day they had given their sons permission to sit at Bilderdijk's feet. Professor David van Lennep had great difficulty weaning his son Jacob from his "black period" of Bilderdijkianism, and Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp, one of the leaders of the Restoration of 1813, was anything but happy about the ideas that his sons Willem and Dirk began to vent in the fields of history and politics after being "brainwashed" by Bilderdijk.

As far as that goes, however, Papa Groen had less reason to complain. His son spent "wonderful hours" listening to the master but was not taken in by the seductive charm of his eloquence. "My esteem for Bilderdijk in many ways is almost unlimited," he would write later, but he added at once that he had always had reservations in regard to the master and many of his ideas. By upbringing and character Willem was not the person to surrender himself holus-bolus to someone like Bilderdijk. He was endowed with too much of an independent spirit and a critical mind. Above all, he was not of Bilderdijk's faith.

All this is not to say that Bilderdijk had no influence on him whatsoever. Bilderdijk set the young Groen to thinking. His lectures triggered a process of doubt about the very things most people of the time considered self-evident. What probably fascinated Groen most about Bilderdijk was his historical insight. Bilderdijk's treatment of Dutch history was one continuous harangue against the prevailing historical consensus. It was a polemic that he waged with the full force of his personality. History for Bilderdijk was not just a hobby or an intellectual game; it was a matter of vital importance. After all, as one of his poems says, "In the past lieth the present / in today that which will be." Sometimes his polemic was coarse; on occasion his attacks on the
eighteenth-century historian Jan Wagenaar were beside the mark: the precise lumber merchant Wagenaar was a much more solid worker than Bilderdijk. But Bilderdijk had style, and he had a vision—a vision which at certain points was superior to the burgher interpretations of Wagenaar, who had voiced the unalloyed anti-Orangist version of history popular among the Regents or ruling classes.

Bilderdijk’s presence in Leyden did not fail to have consequences. A number of his pupils swallowed the words of the master whole. Full of youthful fire, they adopted his battle-cries. And where better to express their new-found insights than in their doctoral dissertations? In direct defiance of the reigning spirit of moderation they assailed the doctrine of popular sovereignty with blazing conviction. They argued vehemently against the old Regent version of Holland’s past: not the oligarchs had of old possessed the sovereignty, but the princes.

During the defence of their theses in public meetings of the university senate, heated debates would flare up. The learned Matthijs Siegenbeek was the antipode to Bilderdijk in everything; they disagreed about the art of poetry, about spelling, about history. Going over the heads of the doctoral candidates, Siegenbeek would direct his attack at the intellectual father of their dissertations—old man Bilderdijk, sitting in the back of the hall, laughing in his sleeve. Beardless youths, declaimed Professor Siegenbeek, ought not to adopt the magic incantations of one man who was disrupting the national peace and concord. Professor Kemper in his turn found it necessary on one occasion to deliver himself of a solemn speech about the value of sober-mindedness and tolerance.

Interventions of that kind availed little. The issues were too real for that. Students from the University of Groningen once threatened to give Dirk van Hogendorp a good thrashing, but Bilderdijk’s shield-bearers could not be deterred: undaunted, they unfurled the banner. They had something to say, and they would
say it. The most sensational instance was the appearance in August, 1823 of a pamphlet with the titillating title *Grievances Against the Spirit of the Age*, authored by Isaac da Costa. Defiantly it asked the reader: “Do you think you are living in an age of liberty, of enlightenment, of progress? Think again. Such blind arrogance! This is an age of slavery, of superstition, of idolatry, of ignorance and darkness.” Da Costa noted regress in every area where people thought they could see wonderful progress. In the area of religion, he held forth, the true biblical doctrine has been exchanged for private opinion and an optimistic view of man. Politically, the proper, organic constitutional law, according to which the prince rules his people like a father, has been exchanged for the foolish doctrine of a social contract. And where is there progress in the arts, in morals, in education? Potboilers seem to be the extent of literary production; urban centres, rife with sin, mark the moral corruption; and education only teaches children pseudo-wisdom and a desire for material things.

Da Costa, a young man of Jewish birth and a recent convert to Christianity, flung his accusations of halfness, conceit, apathy, worldliness into the face of his new co-religionists, without restraint or compromise. If Bilderdijk felt, as he was to write, that his pupil’s prose had been too temperate rather than too vehement, many readers thought otherwise. The home of Da Costa—“the monkey of the great baboon Bilderdijk,” as one newspaper called him—was for a while under police surveillance. Did the authorities expect “the disturber of the peace” to convert his counter-revolutionary doctrine directly into a coup d’état, or did they wish to protect him against attacks on his house?

**A double doctorate**

In that same year 1823, Groen van Prinsterer passed his qualifying examinations, opening the door to earning a doctorate by writing a thesis. He decided to write two, one in each of the faculties he
was enrolled in. Meanwhile, he was a close witness of the mounting debate in the academy. Like everyone else, he attended the defence ceremonies of the Bilderdijkians; in the case of Dirk van Hogendorp he was even invited to be one of the designated opponents. For that matter, Groen had been present at the baptism of Da Costa, his wife Hanna, and their cousin Abraham Capadose, in the Pilgrim's Church of Leyden on October 20, 1822. It was an event, he wrote to his parents, “that I shall not easily forget.” Yet, however much he was an interested spectator of all this, his heart was not yet touched. He could not give himself fully to any of the parties in the debate.

Meanwhile, his own course of studies demanded much of his attention. His plan to top off his well-spent university years with a double doctorate required considerable preparation. A subject for a dissertation in the Faculty of Letters was decided upon rather quickly: a description of the historical figures that are mentioned in the works of Plato. The eminent Professor Bake was to be the supervisor. Finding a suitable topic for the Law Faculty was more difficult. Several advisors had to be consulted. Finally he chose to throw himself into a study of the merits of the Justinian Code, that great summary of Roman law that would be so influential in centuries to follow.

It was typical of Groen's capacity for work and his intellectual powers that he completed both studies in a single year. The public defence was set for December 17, 1823. At ten o'clock in the morning he had to defend the dissertation in law, one hour later the dissertation in letters. Everybody in academic Leyden was present for this unusual event. Willem Groen was a kind and pleasant young man, a member of many student societies, and the scholarly joust was awaited with eager anticipation. Expectations were not disappointed. We have not, commented Professor Van Assen, seen such ready wit and power of expression since Elias Borger (who had been the intellectual prodigy at the beginning of the century).
Groen’s defence, according to another witness, was far above the ordinary in the conciseness and calmness of his rebuttal and in the purity and facility of his Latin. “To speak Latin like Willem Groen” was for a while such a well-known expression that his classmate Jacob van Lennep would later quote it in one of his novels.

In search of a job
With two doctoral degrees, what was the young academic to do next? Certain curators of Leyden University, friends of Groen, wanted to have him succeed the late lamented Kemper. It almost happened. Groen was more or less preparing himself for an inaugural oration and had begun to collect material for lectures, when the Minister of Home Affairs decided that the aspiring professor, clever though he was, knew too little about the discipline he would have to teach. And so the chair went to someone else. Next, Groen was approached about becoming a professor at the Athenaeum in the city of Deventer, but he must have declined, for nothing came of it. But what then? Not that Groen van Prinsterer was unemployed. Immediately upon graduation he had registered as a barrister and set up office in The Hague—wisely under the supervision of an older, experienced colleague. He liked practising law better than he had thought (apparently his expectations had not been very high), but the work did not give him much satisfaction. Fortunately, as he noted himself, not too many clients knocked on his door, leaving him ample time for study.

Father Groen had followed his son’s uncertain steps into civilian life with disappointment. Dr. Groen had always nurtured high expectations with respect to his son. That is why he had so carefully attended to his education. Now was the time to start reaping the fruits. A university chair would have been nice, but there were other possibilities. He would most want his son to choose a career in political administration. He had the ability and the education—
of that father Groen was convinced. First, however, the young intellectual, who looked at the world with a head full of bookish knowledge, would have to get some practical administrative experience. Father Groen checked off his relations. Letters of recommendation were gathered, applications submitted—at the Secretariat of Holland, at the King's Cabinet. The son showed little enthusiasm. A desk job did not appeal to him. He had aspirations in another direction: to become the national historian. That suited his bent, his interests, as well as his training. In December 1826 the King had issued an invitation to "all men of letters in the nation" to submit outlines of a general history of the Netherlands. That work would have to be based on all known as well as unpublished sources and was intended "to cultivate love of country, promote civic virtue, and preserve the national interest." The author of the best outline would be appointed "Historian of the Realm" and be enabled to work out his project.

"I set to work at once," Groen relates in his autobiography. Actually, he was already preoccupied with it, because a few weeks before the King's decree Groen had given a speech about "reasons for making our national history better known." He sent the speech to the King, followed half a year later by his "Essay on the Composition of a General History of the Fatherland." That essay was one of the five that the jury picked as the best among the 44 outlines received. The five authors each received a gold medal and their outlines were published without cost. Yet no "Historian of the Realm" was ever appointed. A position of that kind had been desired by King William in particular in order to have the history promote unity between the northern and southern parts of the kingdom (today's Holland and Belgium). But that unity was increasingly being eroded. The result of the history contest was not announced until 1830, after an interim report in 1828 that made no mention of an appointment.
During the long delay Papa Groen put his foot down and had his son apply for the post of Secretary in the King's Cabinet. There were other applicants and a few tense months followed. Who would get the job? For part of the time Groen went for a holiday to Paris, but his father kept him informed and lobbied his connections in order to procure the position for his son. The son meanwhile tried to forget the approaching calamity by enjoying the various amusements Paris had to offer vacationers from abroad. Warned by his father, he avoided the casino, but he found the opera "magnificent." The stay afforded not only amusement but also several useful contacts. Groen's name was known in academic circles from his published dissertations, so he had easy access to all sorts of people. That is how Victor Cousin, the editor of a prestigious French journal, came to persuade Groen to submit regular contributions for his journal about the latest developments and publications in the Netherlands.

Back from Paris, Groen paid a visit to the palace. The King had said he would like to meet the young man who wanted to be his secretary. Evidently, the meeting went well, for in September 1827 he was appointed Secretary in the King's Cabinet. A steady job at last! But Groen was to experience the next six years with mixed feelings. The King's Cabinet was not a Council of Ministers but rather the central hinge in the King's administrative apparatus. William I was a man of an aristocratic disposition, entrusted with wide powers and surrounded by few subjects of equal caliber. No wonder he ran a highly personal one-man government. He had ministers, but they had no independence or responsibility; they were mere clerks to the King, who hired and fired them at will. Some ministers were able, others not so able men who prepared and carried out the decrees of His Majesty. As for parliament, it hardly represented the people at that time because elections were indirect and few had the vote. Thus parliament, like the ministers, exercised no checks on the government. It was not able to do so,
and it was scarcely interested in doing so. The upper house, for example, was sometimes referred to as “the king’s stable.”

In this autocratic, highly centralized system of government, the King’s Cabinet had an important role to play. The Cabinet received instructions from the King and passed these on to the government departments concerned; and inversely, the proposals, questions and reports from the entire civil service arrived at the Cabinet for submission to the King. Thus the workload of the Cabinet was not insignificant, but its items varied greatly in substance. At times it consisted in no more than the summarizing and copying of all kinds of documents and recommendations—very time-consuming and rather boring. It would cause Groen to sigh that he had “perhaps the most slavish job in the land.” At other times the work was much more interesting and the weightiest state papers passed through Groen’s hands or had to be composed by him when the King required specific advice.

Groen did not find all that much satisfaction in his work and in the long run his health suffered under it (especially after the outbreak of the Belgian revolt the Cabinet was clearly understaffed). Yet his position had an unmistakable impact on his personal development. He learned to know political administration and government policy from the inside, as well as the personalities involved. First of all, of course, King William I—the “Merchant-King,” as he was known, thanks to his sponsorship of economic measures to restore the country’s commercial position in the world. Groen had his reservations with respect to the person and policies of the King, whose personality was not particularly scintillating in any case; if anything, it was dour, reserved and rather prosaic. But Groen was impressed by the King’s enormous capacity for work and his high ideals, and by the scope of his task and the energy he devoted to it.
Courtship and marriage

If the year 1827 and his acceptance of the post in the Cabinet was of great consequence for the life of Groen van Prinsterer, even more important that year was his engagement, followed six months later by his marriage. That summer, a young woman from the northern province of Groningen—her name was Elisabeth van der Hoop—stayed for a few weeks with the Groen family at “Vreugd en Rust.” She was a distant relative and this visit was not the first meeting for either party. At the end of her stay in Voorburg, Willem Groen declared his love to this friend of his sister Mimi. She did not know what to reply and begged for time to think it over. That time turned out favourably for Groen and at the beginning of August 1827 he travelled to “De Bult,” the country estate of the Van der Hoops, just south of the town of Steenwijk.

Betsy (for that was the name she was known by) was born on February 6, 1807, the daughter of Abraham Johan van der Hoop, an attorney who had died the year before, and Arnoldina Thoressink. They were of the same social status as the Groens. Mr. van der Hoop had been an alderman in the city council of Groningen. His daughter had received a very good education. She was to be a good helpmeet for her husband, also intellectually; she would write or copy almost all his letters after 1845, when his hand increasingly bothered him. She was also to look after the administration of their extensive properties. But the gifts of her heart surpassed even those of her head. Next to a sound intellect, Betsy possessed an independent spirit, clear insight, and a lot of tact. As well, she gave a great deal of loving attention to those needy people whom she felt were placed on her path. She knew the Bible text, “Of whom much has been given, much shall be required.” She was a very pious woman who asked herself at every step she took whether that step was according to the will of God. Raised in the Reformed religion, her life of faith was deepened by influences from the Réveil, the religious revival of the early
decades of the nineteenth century that began in Geneva and spread throughout western Europe, including the Low Countries. Her pious faith, joined to her natural modesty, made her averse to the kind of society life that was expected of people like the Groens. Not that she made a demonstration of it—she came where she knew she was obligated to, but stayed away wherever that was possible. In that, she was a stark contrast to Groen’s mother, who enjoyed a busy social life and loved going to parties and balls.

On the 21st of May in the year 1828, in the City Hall of Groningen, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, Secretary in the King’s Cabinet, and Elisabeth Maria Magdalena van der Hoop, of no occupation, declared in a loud voice, in the presence of the clerk of the civil registry and five witnesses [Betsy’s mother, two brothers, an uncle and a cousin], that they take each other to be husband and wife.

Thus reads the marriage certificate. After the wedding the young couple travelled to Brussels, where the King and the Government were stationed that year, and started their home in “a cheerful and darling house.” In 1829 they moved back to The Hague, into a small house on the Haagse Voorhout, which they exchanged in 1832 for one on Plein Square.

**Groen’s spiritual growth**

Humanly speaking, Groen’s marriage was of decisive significance for his further development and for the rest of his life. Allard Pierson put his finger on it when he wrote: “Groen arrived where he arrived on the hand of a woman.” Thanks to her fervent, experiential faith and her strong Reformed convictions, laced with a puritan strain, she was the means by which Groen van Prinsterer too was led to accept Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour. As he wrote in his autobiography:
I had the privilege of receiving a very religious upbringing, in and outside the home. The outcome confined itself, however, to an intellectual conviction and to a desire to live a virtuous life, to earn and gain respectability. . . . After finishing university I participated in the outward forms of religious observances, but without any particular interest, and occupied myself with various studies, while always regarding religion much more as something separate than as a life principle that ought to be united and interwoven with our entire existence.

This testimony of Groen about himself is confirmed by many other facts. In his parental home, the family had attended church regularly, and Dr. Groen had his son take catechism lessons from the then renowned Reverend Isaac Dermout, who was an enthusiastic proponent of the new polity of the Dutch Reformed Church. Willem had made public profession of his faith in the Easter service of 1818, in preparation of which he had read a book by Hieronymous van Alphen, a work that was “exceptionally suitable for acquiring clear and correct notions of the cardinal truths of the Christian Religion.” At university, too, Groen did not lose touch with church or religion. More than once he noted in his journal that he had heard a “splendid sermon.” He was a regular reader of the volumes of sermons by Van der Palm, which he found “very edifying”—naturally, since the young Groen had a good ear for the well-crafted pulpit style of Van der Palm, whose Christianity was as mellifluent as his oratorical talent. On the whole, Groen got along quite comfortably with the spirit of the times. He was intellectually convinced of the correctness of a reasonable, Christian, Protestant faith which, when presented in cultured dress, could also please one’s aesthetic sensibilities and form the indispensable basis—both personally and socially—for a morally anchored life of virtue.
Still, Groen van Prinsterer was a seeker. Perhaps he didn’t realize it all that much himself. The settled opinions in politics, scholarship and religion, however, did not fully give him intellectual and emotional satisfaction.

Groen’s spiritual journey, though very much a highly personal development of course, did take place in a certain context. The twenties and thirties of the nineteenth century were the period in the history of the Netherlands when romanticism vied with classicism and enlightenment for control of men’s minds. Groen’s parental home and the university in Leyden were dominated by an atmosphere of moderate rationalism, drenched in classicism and a belief in progress. That put a stamp on the spiritual life of Groen and his circle and also conditioned his intellectual activities.

But an intelligent and engaged young man like Groen also came into contact with more modern views. Bilderdijk set him to doubt the self-evidence of the rationalist worldview. And there were also new developments in the world of learning. Writers like the German jurist Friedrich Carl von Savigny rebelled against the accepted views of science, which were heavily influenced by natural law, and demanded attention for historical development. Others, like Carl Ludwig von Haller, Joseph de Maistre and Félicité de Lamennais, challenged the doctrines of popular sovereignty and social contract and developed theories in which the divine origin of authority and the monarchs’ claim to absolute power were defended against the notion of the popular will and democracy, fallacies that were based on society’s presumed origin in a voluntary association of people.

If historians had depicted the past as the steady progress of reason in human affairs, as factual evidence for cultural optimism, the Romantics placed huge question marks behind that optimism. They pointed to the seamy sides of human existence; they put powerless, puny man over against the mighty, mysterious forces of nature, as a tiny creature in the hand of an omnipotent God.
Groen's entire upbringing and all of his formal education were designed to shape him into an intellectual who always looked at both sides of the issue. Thus his growth to intellectual-spiritual maturity proceeded very slowly. His very training caused him to weigh things carefully and to keep a tight rein on his thirst for truth.

In political respects Groen was a child of his time—"a conservative liberal or a liberal conservative, depending on the way the wind blew," as he later said of himself. We might say: a right-of-centre liberal or a progressive conservative, as circumstances dictated. His work in the King's Cabinet brought him into daily contact with the world of politics. From close-up he became acquainted with the strength and weaknesses of a personal, absolutistic government. Conservatism and liberalism demanded his attention. His trained mind looked for the principles and backgrounds behind the events of the day. In the face of the manoeuvres of His Majesty's pragmatic approach and the whirl of international relations in which different systems competed for pre-eminence, and in contrast to the writings of liberals in Holland and the actions of ultra-Catholics and radical liberals in Belgium, Groen longed for a Netherlandic approach to politics, one founded on firm principles and rooted in the nation's history. He began to develop a deep interest in the relation between religion and politics; he started to read books on church history in an attempt to find answers to his questions. During many hours of boring debates in the Second Chamber, which he had to attend as part of his job, he would read the works of the great British anti-revolutionary Edmund Burke.

Netherlandic Reflections
The conduct of the Belgian opposition to the King's policies forced Groen to study liberalism. The liberals of the South were more radical, and also more anti-clerical, than the liberals of the North. They declared openly that the people were the rightful sovereign.
Time and again they clashed with the paternalistic rule of the King.

The mounting tension in the United Kingdom reinforced Groen’s desire to have a voice of his own in the affairs of the day. He felt he should try to contribute to a possible solution to the conflict threatening the kingdom through the avenue of journalism. When Anthony van Rappard, a friend from university days and like Groen a civil servant, sounded him out about starting a new journal, Groen immediately reacted positively. October 2, 1829 saw the publication of the first issue of Nederlandsche Gedachten or “Netherlandic Reflections.” It was a pamphlet of 4 pages, with unsigned editorials, mailed free of charge at 12½ cents per issue plus 1½ cents for a newspaper stamp. Its opening editorial stated that to remain silent any longer would not be a sign of patriotism, now that the South was dominated by a very dangerous faction. Liberalism was uniting people of diverse intentions in an increasingly more vehement attack on the Constitutional Monarchy, on Protestantism, and on the character of the Netherlandic people. The paper wished to expose the fanaticism of that faction and counter the falsehood of their principles.

Groen kept up the publication of Nederlandsche Gedachten for almost three years, filling its 122 issues almost single-handedly, for although he had associates the brunt of the work was borne by him. He also bore the financial load, so that the small number of subscribers at last forced him to discontinue the paper.

The basic premises of Nederlandsche Gedachten were the defence of the constitutional monarchy and the maintenance of the historic, Protestant character of the country. Groen was in favour of the United Kingdom. North and South were sufficiently common in language and nationality to develop into a political unit, a unit which to him seemed highly desirable from an international point of view: only a strong Netherlands would be a match for France. Thus when a revolt broke out in Belgium in
August 1830, Groen's condemnation was vehement. Immediately he linked the rebels in Brussels to the revolutionaries who a few months earlier had toppled the king of France and installed a new king of the French. Memories of events during a still earlier revolution in France haunted his mind. Wrote Groen: "The flame of evil, which has once again been fanned from France, is spreading across the adjacent kingdoms with amazing speed. Liberalism, offspring of Jacobin fanaticism, threatens the people of the Netherlands." Groen had only one label for the Belgian revolt: rebellion, and only one remedy: to maintain legitimate authority with all the means at its disposal. How bitterly disappointed he was when he felt obliged to record in his journal that the officials in charge responded but weakly to the rebels and seemed ready to give in to them. Negotiations, concessions, retreat—he roundly condemned them all as reprehensible yielding to the revolutionary mind, which is never satisfied in any case. Not that Groen approved of all the government measures prior to August 1830 or that he had no eye for the justified grievances of the Belgians. But predominant for him was the right of government and the interest of the country. In fact, for the sake of the country he was soon willing to grant independence to the Belgians, who clearly did not want to belong to the Netherlands and who appeared thoroughly infected by the revolutionary germ of liberalism. As early as the issue of September 30, 1830 Groen concluded that the separation was a fact. The power to undo that fact was lacking. Let us resign ourselves to that fact, he wrote, and recognize Belgium's independence before the revolution penetrates to the North. Hopefully Belgium can then fulfill the function of being a retaining wall against French expansionism. Groen now deemed an independent Belgium acceptable after all.

Groen resumed his analysis of the fate of the United Kingdom in 1832. Looking back, he pointed out that the manner in which North and South were unified in 1815 had completely neglected
the differences in national character of both sections. That fundamental error had been aggravated by the fact that the policies of King William had aimed at imposing too northern a character on the country as a whole, in disregard of the distinctive structures of southern society. Only a radical and general separation could now restore justice.

Groen's analyses and assessments show his independent character. Before August 1830 Nederlandsche Gedachten, with its appeal for upholding the constitutional order, looked like a paper in support of the government. During the first months of the revolt, when Groen would not hear of compromise, the paper's criticism of official policy—still of a partial nature only, yet often already quite vehement—cannot have been agreeable to the government. Nor can it have been agreeable when Groen already at an early stage began to call for a complete and definitive separation while the King persisted for many years in a different policy. Although Groen did his best to maintain anonymity he was not entirely successful, at any rate not with the King. Nevertheless, Groen never experienced difficulties from the side of officialdom. On one occasion he believed he had aroused the King's displeasure. He promptly offered his resignation as Secretary of the King's Cabinet—but it was refused.

Taking stock
The editorship of Nederlandsche Gedachten forced Groen to try to account for the political events of his time. He was not yet an anti-revolutionary in 1829. But he was a Netherlandic patriot, constitutionally minded, more a conservative than an avowed liberal—as indicated by his collaboration with Van Rappard. But neither was he an ideological conservative. Groen's close acquaintance with the Belgian Revolt deepened his insight into political principles—a ripening process that was also connected with his faith development.
More and more Groen began to recognize the true nature of liberal thought. An outward sign of this growing insight was a long and increasingly acrimonious exchange between Nederlandsche Gedachten en De Noordster, the paper of the more progressive liberals in the northern Netherlands edited by F. A. van Hall. Groen wondered what might explain the popularity of the liberal ideas. He began to investigate the historical background of liberalism and conservatism.

Was the separation between religious beliefs and political ideals, a separation hitherto considered only natural, really so self-evident, he asked? And religious belief itself—what was its core, its function, its operation? Of course Groen knew about the religious revival movement in his own country and elsewhere which sought to extract Christianity from the rigidity of orthodoxy and its erosion by deism, in order to have faith become a life-principle once again. The Réveil restored the Bible as a book for the home because Bible study, not this or that systematic theology or church polity, was to be the point of departure for a Christian life of genuine piety. It was alongside, sometimes outside, the official church that the friends of the Réveil experienced their warm and intimate, Christ-centered faith, marked by a kind of romantic pietism. They put a great deal of emphasis on personal conversion and witnessing for Christ in word and deed in as wide a circle as possible.

Groen had heard Bilderdijk; he was a friend of his disciples. Especially through his marriage he came to know more and more people who belonged to the Réveil, such as Rev. Isaac Secrétan, Hendrik Jacob Koenen, Willem Messchert, the inspired Willem de Clercq. In Brussels the couple attended the chapel services led by the court chaplain, Jean-Henri Merle d'Aubigné. His messages, calling the sinner to surrender to Christ, touched Groen's heart and gradually prepared him to surrender. “In the last three or four years,” Groen confided in 1831 to his friend Van Rappard,
a thousand things have become clear to me which I had once regarded as unsolvable riddles, and the whole of history is becoming for me one continuous confirmation of the truths revealed to us in Holy Scripture. But the faith by which one becomes a new creation, by which in place of one’s own will and passion the desire to serve God holds sway, . . . that faith I do not have, or in any case have only in such small measure that I am barely conscious of it myself. And yet that faith is absolutely essential. It has to be given us. Daily prayer and Bible reading are the means to acquire it. . . . I continually recognize God’s guidance in the events of my life and am beginning to have more trust in the help of Him who will finish His good work in me.

Half a year later Groen confided to De Clercq: “I wish I could pray so simply and so from the heart as you do.” In the summer of 1832 the Groens regularly attended the church services conducted by Rev. Dirk Molenaar, an orthodox preacher who some years earlier had written *An Address to All My Reformed Coreligionists*, in which he had issued a rousing call for remaining faithful to the historic confessions and as a result of which he had suffered many indignities. “My Willem no longer talks about Molenaar’s delivery,” wrote Betsy to a friend, “but only about his sermons, which he found excellent when I heard much repetition.” She was profoundly thankful for the spiritual change in her husband.

In January 1833, a few days after the death of his mother, Groen van Prinsterer became seriously ill. The heavy workload and inner tensions had undermined his congenitally weak constitution. For many weeks Betsy feared the worst, but on Sunday evening of January the 27th she was able to report to their mutual friend De Clercq: “Yes, truly, great cause for thanks! Everything
is much better than yesterday. For the first time a cheerful face of the doctors.” Mrs. Groen was also thankful for another reason: during his illness Willem Groen had found his peace in complete surrender to his heavenly Father.

In June of that year Groen had recovered well enough that he was able to travel up the Rhine to Switzerland for further convalescence. Toward the end of August Mr. and Mrs. Groen returned home, full of memories of the trip’s experiences, of their meetings with old and new friends, and gladdened by having been allowed to meet people everywhere with whom, it turned out, they shared the love of Christ. The glory of the mountains, the beauty of the Rhine valley, so different from the flat countryside of Holland, had made them more sensible of the greatness of the Creator. For a short time Groen resumed his work at the Cabinet, but on December 7, 1833 Groen received his honourable discharge as Secretary of the King’s Cabinet. The state of his health no longer allowed him to continue the office work, which he had grown to dislike more and more in any case, particularly given his increasing disenchantment with the King’s policy.

The publication of *Nederlandsche Gedachten* had already ceased toward the end of July, 1832. There were few subscribers and it was financially indefensible to continue publication. A new period had begun in the life of Groen. His formative years were over. The months of illness and convalescence had been the closing phase of his spiritual development. The seeker had found the Rock of Ages.
Chapter 2

In the Nursery of History

The letter of 1833 in which the King gave his secretary an honourable discharge contained the notice that Groen van Prinsterer “shall continue to be charged with the supervision of Our Family Archives, in accordance with Our Decree of the 29th of October 1831.”

Royal archivist
With that, Groen’s life entered upon a new phase. Professor Carel Gerretson, the first editor of the volumes of Groen’s correspondence, has given a pointed characterization of this move to the Royal Archives: “Delivered from the prison of the King’s Cabinet, Groen started in the Family Archives of the House of Orange on his pilgrimage to the past in search of the fountainhead of our national strength.”

We recall Groen’s desire to become Historian of the Realm. That desire had not been fulfilled, but when the superintendent of the Royal Archives died the King had appointed Groen in his place. That was in October of 1831, as noted above. Three days later Groen had taken a first look at the collection now entrusted to his care, to come away with the sad conclusion that in relation to what really needed to be done he would be able to spend but little time on it. In December of 1833, this all changed with his discharge from the Cabinet. Day after day he began to spend his mornings amidst the rich collection of historical documents that the House of Orange had amassed in the course of centuries, starting
with the archival pieces from the time of the founder of the dynasty, William of Orange (1533–84), who was also the founder of the Dutch state.

Groen quickly realized that the publication of the most important documents would be a marvellous task, but also one that would require much preparation. He discovered in addition that he would have to look for supplementary material in archives elsewhere in Europe. Thanks to support from the King, who was interested in Groen’s work and who provided an extra monthly stipend, Groen in 1836 went on a research trip for half a year, travelling from archive to archive in Germany and France. Betsy Groen accompanied her husband on the journey. Apart from the official work, they again used the opportunity to visit tourist sites and to meet all sort of people: scholars of various description, politicians and statesmen, German family members of the House of Orange—and especially, of course, friends of the Réveil like César Malan, Henri Grandpierre and Frederic Monod in Paris, and Merle d’Aubigné in Geneva.

In March 1835 the first volume appeared of the Archives ou correspondance inédite de la Maison d’Orange-Nassau. Groen would edit 13 volumes in all, covering the period 1552 to 1688. Each volume of the Archives contained lengthy “Prolégomènes”—introductions in which Groen summarized the contents of the volume. These Introductions alone are important pieces of historiography, all in French, which despite attempts to do so have never been translated or published separately. Each time, Groen pointed to the significance of the documents now made public and called attention to the extent to which they corrected existing historical accounts. He also gave an account of his method of editing, explaining that he was publishing everything he had come across that was in any way of historical significance, omitting only that which he felt did not meet that criterion or was unfit for public
airing. For Groen wanted to go back to the oldest possible sources. That was the newly gained insight of historical science in his day.

**A debate on method**
The publication of the *Archives* also toppled some sacred cows, long-standing opinions and legendary events. On occasion, certain historical figures were knocked from their pedestal and attacked in their putative heroic role because the archives brought to light some less pretty deeds and traits. Not everyone accepted this gratefully. Thus Maurits Cornelis van Hall was so scandalized by what Groen had written about Hendrik van Brederode, one of the members of League of Nobles of 1566, that despite his advanced age he took up the pen and composed a 240-page book entitled *In Defence of Hendrik Count of Brederode, Co-founder of Netherlandic Liberty*. In his younger days Van Hall had been a fiery Patriot, but now he was a respectable, stately and conservative man with resounding titles like Member of the Council of State, Commander in the Order of the Netherlandic Lion, member of the Royal Academy of Science, Letters and the Fine Arts—certainly someone from the intellectual circles in the land. A man, too, who possibly was not without influence: his son, Floris Adriaan van Hall, was the King’s most important minister. Groen had written that Brederode did not deserve the praise which party spirit had wasted on him, neither for his character, which merited little commendation, nor for his morals, which were quite dissolute, nor yet for his abilities, which were rather mediocre. That was a harsh judgment about a man who in the anti-Orangist or Statist version of Dutch history had sometimes been praised to the skies as the great commander of the League of Nobles and the foremost leader in the sixteenth-century revolt against Spain. Groen had arrived at his verdict on the basis of the documents published in the *Archives*, a verdict that was later confirmed from a number of other sources he had studied but which he had decided to omit as
they had little significance for the political history and in some cases suffered from obscene content. Van Hall, however, was of the opinion that Groen had gone much too far. In his view, Groen had not only rendered a biased interpretation of the data about Brederode but had also vilified the man—and all this on the basis of an utterly wrong standpoint, according to Van Hall, an immoral standpoint in fact: Groen had taken Brederode’s intimate private correspondence and exposed it to the view of the general public.

Van Hall’s defence of Brederode, although softly worded, was a vicious attack on Groen’s integrity as a working historian. Imagine, to besmirch and vilify a national hero, as Groen had done, and at the same time to proclaim about such well-known monsters as King Philip II, Cardinal Granvelle and the Duke of Alva that they were not those black demons that popular opinion had always called them! It was Van Hall’s intention to have his attack undermine Groen’s position as royal archivist by making him suspect in the eyes of the King as a poor historian, a bad patriot, and an assailant of national traditions and national unity.

Groen was not slow in his reply. He was always at his best as a polemicist and stylist whenever his deepest convictions were attacked. Despite the courtesy he observed toward his aged and eminent opponent, his Antwoord aan Mr. M. C. van Hall tore the latter’s position to shreds. If Van Hall had read my Archives more closely, if he had been willing to have his misplaced preference for Brederode corrected by the facts, he would not have disgraced himself as badly as he has done—that, in essence, was Groen’s reply to Van Hall. I have not vilified Brederode—the man was no better. It is not the task of the historian to preserve precious traditions but to tell the truth, even if it is unpleasant. To be sure, in doing so the historian ought to observe a measure of delicacy. But he must never go as far as Van Hall demands, namely that private correspondence may only be made public with the consent of the writer. If that rule were really valid we might as well shut
down historical science—in which case Van Hall would not have been able to write his defence of Brederode either!

Fellow historians like Reinier Bakhuizen van den Brink and Robert Fruin—spiritual kin of Van Hall more than of Groen—openly supported Groen in his defence of modern historiography, and if it had not been for his attack on Groen, Van Hall would today be quite forgotten as an historian. So complete was Groen's methodological victory that he garnered the title "father of modern Dutch historiography."

After six volumes of the *Archives* had appeared between 1835 and 1841, volume seven was longer in coming. The reason for that delay must in part be sought in other labours—in 1840, for example, Groen served as a member of parliament, and afterwards much time and attention was taken up by work on a Crown Commission for Education and also by ecclesiastical affairs. But the main reason was that Groen began to realize more and more, as he made headway with publishing the *Archives*, that with a scholarly publication of this kind he would only partially achieve his goal.

**Groen's view of history**

For Groen van Prinsterer, the study of history was a matter of great importance as well as practical usefulness. "In the past lies the present," as Bilderdijk had said, giving voice to a common notion of the time that was also warmly affirmed by Groen. The study of history is a means of getting to know one's own time; it is a school for everyone who wants to become familiar with the processes and structures of human affairs. It also helps one to gain insight into the power of evil and the limits to what man can do. But besides these practical lessons, the study of history in particular had religious value for Groen. History realizes God's plan with the world. He guides earthly events to their appointed end, and along the way He does not withhold trials and hardship from his children. He also punishes those who go their own way
—for those who depart from God can expect griefs and sorrows. History, therefore, is the story of God's guidance of and God's involvement with humankind; it is the confirmation of the promises and threats which Revelation has attached to His covenant with man. To study history, therefore, is for Groen not just a pleasant pastime that can yield many interesting things. It is an essential work for a Christian, who should leave no means unused to learn to know God better. *It stands written! It has come to pass! That is how Groen loved to summarize his Christian-historical worldview. Notice how Groen's aphorism puts Holy Scripture first, as God's indisputable proclamation of the truth. But God also reveals himself in what comes to pass in history, although on that score human knowledge is limited and imperfect, which is why the book of history will always have to be read while constantly testing it against the written Word. What has happened is not good just because it happened. That was the view, basically, of many of Groen's contemporaries, the conservatives of the so-called Historical School. They accepted the existing order as having been realized in the historical process under God's providential rule and therefore as good. Those conservatives forgot about evil and about testing history against fixed norms. Thus they were often uncritical admirers of the status quo and, by the same token, terribly afraid of the continuation of the historical process. The distinctiveness of Groen's position was that he wanted to apply the standards of God's law to the historical process—in which, after all, anti-godly, diabolical forces are active as well.

In this way Groen in principle freed himself from many difficulties and took up a special place over against the conservative worshippers of the status quo as the product of a sacrosanct historical development. Groen would always be different. Neither conservatism nor progressivism appealed to him. While he fought a life-long battle against what passed for progress and renewal, on the other hand he shocked conservatives more than once by his
surprisingly modern standpoints on all sorts of practical questions. That he took distance from a conservatistic wish to preserve everything as is, without change, is all the more striking because that attitude was widespread precisely among his Christian friends. But neither did he fall into the trap which, then and later, amounted to a belief in a progressive evolution of human society. Groen held that those who believed in progress might differ among themselves about the question whether economic developments alone determined the course of history or whether people of good will could exert some influence over it, nevertheless they too arrived at a misreading of historical reality.

Given his view of history, it was inevitable that an engaged historian like Groen should want to share the results of his journey into the past with as many people as possible, precisely for the sake of the present. He wanted to share his findings not just with fellow professionals who were able to read the Archives, but also with ordinary people.

And with schoolchildren. “The reading of many schoolbooks about the history of our country has made me keenly aware of the need for a kind of Handbook or Overview for use by teachers, to which should be added a textbook for children,” Groen wrote in May 1841 to his friend and publisher Bodel Nijenhuis. To compose such a work, he realized, would really require many more years of study; but he would rather have “something reasonable now than something good ten years from now.” What had contributed to his wish for a good, Christian history textbook was his disillusionment with Bilderdijk’s Geschiedenis des Vaderlands, which had been published after his death in eleven volumes, based on the master’s lecture notes. After reading in them Groen had to admit that as an historian he found Bilderdijk very disappointing.

Publishing a handbook
Accordingly, Groen set to work. Before the year 1841 had ended,
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the first instalment of his Handbook of the History of the Fatherland rolled off the press. The next instalments cost him more time, especially the part about the eighteenth century, for which he had to do pioneering work since no general overview of the period existed anywhere. As well, he wanted to pay a good deal of attention to that period in order to show the immediate background of his own time. In 1846 the Handbook was completed, consisting of over 1100 numbered paragraphs in a volume just shy of 1100 pages.

The publication of Groen’s Handbook is an event of great significance. None of his other works has been that influential. It has been reissued many times, most recently in 1978. Generations of schoolteachers have relied on it. For many people it was the book from which they garnered not only their factual knowledge of history but also a vision, an inspiration for their own lives—as was true, for example, of Queen Wilhelmina (1880–1963), who always had a copy of the book within reach.

As he was working on the book Groen hoped of course that it would be well received. But he was also keenly aware that the book would be strongly criticised. His version of history, after all, contradicted many settled opinions. In the Preface of 1846 the author met some of his critics halfway. They should bear in mind, he writes, that the settled opinions of our time will not remain unchanged. They will all have to be revisited, thanks to the flowering of historical science and the opening up of many new sources. Furthermore, Groen points out, his account is the result of years of study and is based in large measure on material that still remains unpublished or has only recently become available. He has included references to other authors but has guarded against burying this handbook under an avalanche of scholarly footnotes. Still, Groen is confident that as more and more sources become available they will bear out that he has not been guilty of hasty
conclusions or superficial judgments. "I declare with confidence that perfect impartiality has been my aim."

That was the determined slogan of nineteenth-century scholars who wanted to know what the past had really been like, who wanted to weigh and measure connections and relationships in a strictly logical manner approaching as it were mathematical certainty. They would record the facts, nothing but the objective facts, derived from sources whose authenticity and worth had been scientifically established. Their aim was to write history as a clinical science, stripped of all bias, emotion, prejudice and superstition. Hence their predilection for editing and publishing historical sources and reconstructing events with the utmost accuracy. The Netherlands produced some great historians in the nineteenth century: There was Robert Fruin, who became the first professor of history in Leyden; then there was Reinier Bakhuizen van den Brink, the later national archivist; and there were also many other archival researchers and writers of learned and readable historical essays. Does this mean that the Preface to the Handbook shows that Groen adhered to the nineteenth-century belief in positivistic objectivity? Does he not state there, after all, that "perfect impartiality" had been his aim? To forestall all misunderstanding, Groen added a couple of paragraphs to that declaration. If by impartiality is understood the skilful setting aside of all parties, he will not subscribe to that. "In the interest of national concord," he writes, "many would like to subject our history to a cleansing that smoothes over every difference of political, at any rate religious, viewpoint and passes on only harmless truths." Groen does not, he writes, want to join in that noble endeavour. Why not? Because he refuses to let his pen tell lies. He will not, for the sake of peace, ascribe to ambition or greed what stemmed from religious motives. He declines to give certain persons a colour and an influence which they did not have. Above all, Groen does not want to obscure the fact that "the rise and flowering of
In the Nursery of History

the Netherlands followed upon the confession of the Gospel, its decline upon the forsaking of the Gospel.” Everywhere, he notes—laying his cards on the table—everywhere I have written as a Protestant Christian. I may justly be told that throughout the book I have placed my sentiments, certainly those in the area of religion, in the foreground.

So, partisan history after all? Precisely for this reason the critics then and later have always called the Handbook subjective, biased and unscholarly. Groen anticipates their criticism. I am not of the opinion, the Preface continues, that denying or disguising one’s principles is a condition or a guarantee of laudable or desirable impartiality. But have no fear: I have not made History over into evidence for my Religious conviction. I have not allowed my account to become one-sided or lacking in nuance, nor have I made connections where there are none. That is not to say, however, that the highest truths that obtain have to be put aside in a scholarly work. It is not permitted mortal man to lift the veil which God has spread over the mysteries of his governance of the world. Yet neither is the Christian permitted to close his eyes to what God does allow him to see: that God’s love and justice are manifest in the course of history and that the fortunes of our nation show that He stands by his promise, “Those that honour Me will I honour.” It is precisely the war for or against the Truth, for or against the Christ, that is the cohesive element in history, which so often seems incoherent and aimless. Surely the Christian historian may not be silent about that? The perfectly objective science that others pursue does not exist, is an impossible fiction. Only he can be impartial who belongs to a party.

Not till later generations would people realize the correctness of Groen van Prinsterer’s standpoint, which was diametrically opposed to the science ideal of the nineteenth century. Of course he was aware that his philosophical position was not a magic formula that an historian can apply in his professional activity
without much difficulty. How is one to know, for example, what is the good and what is the bad in history? And how can one determine what effect this or that had in the long run? The danger is very real to attribute all kinds of events to direct divine intervention and so hide one's ignorance under apparently pious conclusions. How easily events then turn into miracles—a common enough occurrence in older Christian history-writing! Groen had little sympathy for this. “In the history of our country the course of God’s Providence is manifest enough to be able to dispense with such wondrous deeds,” he informed his Révell friend Koenen who had inquired why Groen had omitted any mention in the Handbook of the double ebb-tide of 1672 which presumably had prevented the English from invading the country from the sea. Even with the omission of such matters, Groen’s Handbook could easily be recognized as a Christian history book. Both the plan and especially the vision of the Handbook give it a very distinctive character. Written in Groen’s compact, aphoristic style, and astonishingly rich in detail, it betrays great mastery of historical knowledge as well as literary talent.

It goes without saying that the Handbook also had its shortcomings. One person cannot know everything, nor always judge correctly. After more than a century and a half of ongoing research, certain objections can be raised against it. That has often been done, then and later—which is simply indicative of the significance of the Handbook of the History of the Fatherland.

**Lectures on unbelief and revolution**

Thus Groen’s work in the Royal Archives was producing rich results. A series of source publications and a comprehensive handbook offered substantial contributions to the renewal of Dutch historiography, contributions that were now within reach of those who studied and who taught history. And yet, Groen felt that something was still missing. He became more conscious of this
during the summer of 1845, when he was composing the final instalment of the *Handbook*, the one that had to deal with the period after 1795. It was a difficult task. Describing one's own time always puts restrictions on an historian. That was very true for Groen. After all, he had become more and more convinced that the history of the nineteenth century was governed by the ideas which had been put into practice during the French Revolution. However, an extensive treatment of those ideas, or of the Revolution itself, did not fit the design of the *Handbook*. Yet such a discussion was essential for a proper understanding of contemporary times. Accordingly, Groen decided to devote a separate study to the Revolution, to supplement the *Handbook* as it were, and further clarify it. At the same time this would give him an opportunity to set forth on a scholarly level what had ripened, not least through historical studies, into his full-grown, mature worldview.

To carry out his plan, Groen chose a somewhat unusual method. He invited a number of friends, kindred spirits and other-minded men, to come and listen to him lecture in his library on Saturday evening, November 8, 1845, at his home on the Korte Vijverberg in The Hague. Fifteen of such evening lectures were given by him during the winter of 1845–46. That method had the advantage that he could organize chapter by chapter as the winter progressed and respond to any comments by his audience from which he could profit or to which he could respond the next time they met. This history of its origin explains in part the difficult composition of *Unbelief and Revolution* (this was the title under which the lectures were afterwards published). As well, the select nature of his invited audience gave Groen permission to make things difficult. He could be lavish with his quotations, in several foreign languages, or refer to well-known and lesser known writers and books of the time. He was also free to make allusions to events and affairs that his educated listeners would be familiar with.
Another reason why *Unbelief and Revolution* is not Groen's easiest work lies in the nature of the subject. *Unbelief and Revolution* is at once an historical study and a theoretical, philosophical treatise. The sum of his political views as expounded in *Unbelief and Revolution*—here for the first time to its fullest extent—was referred to by Groen himself as a "Christian-historical worldview." It would be correct to say that *Unbelief and Revolution* is the indispensable key to understanding Groen's thought and action—in state and politics, in the area of learning and scholarship, and in the church.

**An anti-revolutionary worldview**

The principal ideas of Groen's Christian-historical (also called anti-revolutionary) conception can be summarized as follows. There is a direct link between unbelief and Revolution. One might even say that unbelief is the Revolution and the Revolution is unbelief. For by Revolution Groen does not understand events like violent political and social upheavals that are covered in schoolbooks and receive headlines in newspapers. Nor does "Revolution" in Groen's usage refer to the events that took place in France in 1789 and following. That mistake is often made, but for Groen that sort of happening can be at most an attendant phenomenon or an external manifestation of the Revolution. Revolution is for Groen the "inversion of the general spirit and mode of thinking" of people who draw up and carry out their plans while thrusting aside the Word of God. The arrogance of elevating man to be the law and norm of all things arises from unbelief, when people refuse to bow before the laws and commandments of God and disbelieve His promises of blessing and judgment. Revolution is rooted in apostasy, when people revolt against God and turn their backs on Him, spurred on by unbelief.

The revolt against God, however, leads necessarily and irrevocably to a revolt against one's fellow-man. After all, humans
have a natural tendency not only to hate God but also to hate their neighbour, yes even to hate themselves. Whoever refuses to live by the wise precepts that God has given for the life of man, including his everyday life in state and society, will go on to create rules of conduct that are in conflict with the will of the all-wise Creator. And when the resulting Revolutionary ideas gain sufficient adherence and begin to control people, they will want to apply them and live by them. Then Revolutionary thoughts give birth to Revolutionary deeds, and the pressure to continue on the road once taken—the urge to persist in the evil—leads to ever more radical consequences, even "to the most excessive absurdities and the worst atrocities." No moderation, no self-restraint, no reasonableness is to be expected: griefs and sorrows await those who have forsaken God.

Of course there will be people who, alarmed by the mounting violence of the unfolding Revolution, declare the worst atrocities to be exaggerations. They are the conservatives, the people of the golden mean or middle-of-the-road who advocate moderation and reasonableness. However, they fall prey to doubt about what to do and what not to do, defenceless as they are over against the doctrinaires who hold to the same principles but who call for their unrestricted application. Has the course of history not shown this to be the case time after time? The moderates had no adequate rejoinder against the philosophers who in their writings preached Revolutionary notions like liberty and equality, popular sovereignty and government by consent. Accordingly, they had no defence against a revolution that demanded political reform on the basis of these notions, as in France in 1789. And once the Jacobins there demanded a radical implementation of equality and fraternity, the conservative Girondins could register no fundamental objections; they fell under the guillotine, victims of the inconsistency for which they were blamed on the basis of their own theories. And how much violence and terror did Robespierre
subsequently not exercise in the name of liberty and equality? Does not sincere belief—even Revolutionary unbelief—demand a full measure of devotion, utter submission, and a complete application? That is why the consequences of the Revolutionary notions cannot be combated with any success, Groen warned, unless we break away at all points from the influence of those notions. Only the Gospel avails against the Revolution. Only the anti-revolutionary man, the man who thinks within a Christian-historical instead of a Revolutionary framework, can hope to stand his ground.

These are the basic premises that Groen elaborated in his lectures on *Unbelief and Revolution*. At bottom, the revolution in France was not the result of the political and social conditions existing in that country before 1789, even though, to be sure, some abuses had crept in. Nor can that revolution be explained from ideas like royal absolutism that men believed in during the *ancien régime*. Nor yet from the Reformation! Indeed, in the view of many liberal Protestants and conservative Catholics in the nineteenth century, that was precisely the case: the French Revolution was supposed to have been the logical consequence of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Reformation, they reasoned, had also emphasized personal responsibility and liberty; it had broken the supernatural powers of prince and priest. And was the Calvinist form of church government not the triumph of democracy? And the Protestant ideal of the relation between church and state, was it not the forerunner of the separation of Church and State as accomplished during the Revolution? Groen refuted these notions. According to the Reformation, the church is not governed by the people: it is governed by the obedience of all the people to the Word of God. The distinction between temporal and spiritual authority differs essentially from the separation of church and state as propagated by liberalism. Those who support such a separation give the state permission to break away entirely from the authority of divine law. Such a state may even try to lord it over the church!
The latter is actually the case in the Netherlands, Groen reminded his audience, for the new, government-imposed administrative reorganization of 1816 continues to hamper the church, and Christian parents are not free to educate their children in non-government schools.

In the central lectures of his series Groen explains that it is the Revolutionary theories—the modern theories about religion and politics as worked out during the eighteenth century—that are responsible for the Revolutionary eruptions of his time. At the core of that Revolutionary way of thinking is unbelief, the belief that puts man on God's throne and declares human reason sovereign. Reason is made the touchstone of everything else, even of faith. But once the Truth has degenerated into Reasonable Christianity, the only natural consequence can be the rise of deism and atheism, which dismiss God from practice as well as theory. However, what happens to morality, which preserves man and society? Morality degenerates into enlightened self-interest and dissolves when deprived of any basis or norm. Without Christ one lives without hope in the world. Freedom of thought demands freedom of action. Yet everywhere in our society men bump up against hindrances to that liberty, restrictions that were instituted to curb evil. Away with all those bonds and those obstructions, cries the Revolutionist; they are the cause of the evils in society! All kinds of conditions and structures have distorted man, who is by nature good, and have curbed his freedom, harmed his disposition, degraded his behaviour. Away with authority! Away with differences in rank, class, wealth, position! Long live Liberty, Equality, Fraternity! This is the basis on which we will erect a new society. No longer will society be based on divine creation ordinances, but people will associate into a political community on the basis of a social contract. A new kind of state will be set up, one in which popular sovereignty demands the political equality of all citizens and in which the authorities are subject to the will of the people.
Given these theories, Groen argues, one need not be surprised at the practical results. The 18th-century thinker Montesquieu, who believed he had found the recipe for a harmonious form of government without defects by advocating a complete separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers, looks like a respectable man to every respectable liberal. But are Montesquieu's ideas, apart from being much less consistent, that much different from those of Rousseau, who is generally accused of radicalism and of being the spiritual father of totalitarian men of practice? Is not the entire history of the French Revolution and its aftermath, right up to the present, undeniable proof of the thesis that unbelief gives birth to Revolutionary thoughts and that Revolutionary thoughts lead to Revolutionary deeds?

After this philosophical analysis of the nature of the Revolutionary ideology, Groen resumed his historical overview in the last five chapters of Unbelief and Revolution. History would prove that his basic theses were correct, precisely because those theses had proved themselves in history. And so at this point in the lectures the Christian philosopher rejoined the Christian historian.

**A mechanical idealism?**

Many commentators have protested against the natural and necessary link that Groen posited between unbelieving thought and revolutionary action. The link, critics have alleged, is one-sided and more the dogmatic statement of a believer than the explanation of an historian. Groen supposedly adhered to a kind of "mechanical idealism," one that he no doubt had learned from Plato (witness his dissertation!), the Plato who had such a powerful appeal to so many conservative aristocratic intellectuals, causing them to lose sight of social, economic and political realities.

An extensive investigation of Groen's relation to the Greek philosopher, published by Dr. Johan Zwaan in 1972, has clearly shown that Plato's influence on Groen van Prinsterer has always
been grossly overrated. A close reading of Groen’s historical writings, as well as of his introduction to the *Handbook*, shows that Groen certainly appreciated many kinds of causes and effects. He did indeed recognize a necessary connection between unbelief and Revolution, but not as a kind of mechanical idealism but as the nexus that flows from the fact that the God of history is the God of the Covenant with man, Who carries out the promises and threats of that Covenant in the course of history.

Groen had the text of his fifteen Saturday evening lectures printed pretty well unchanged. Originally he had not planned to do this, preferring to revise them carefully and put the finishing touches to them. But developments in the Netherlands and beyond would not allow him, as he put it, to polish and perfect his weapons. It was time to start using them.
Chapter 3

Battling the Spirit of the Age

The fifteen years between 1833 and 1848 were not just spent on historical research and theoretical essays on anti-revolutionary ideas about state and society. Groen also tried to realize his insights through practical activities. Those activities were aimed at three key issues for a Christian politician: the relation between church and state, education, and the church itself.

Once the light of the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ had begun to shine for Groen, he was not ashamed to witness to it. His correspondence and publications are evidence of this. As will be expected, the Greens closely followed church events at home and abroad. There were currents in the Réveil, admittedly, which in an individualistic and introvert fashion distanced themselves from the organized church. Church leaders, however, did not like the awakenings. The Continental Awakening seldom escaped running into conflict with the leadership of the churches. As a result of one such conflict, for example, the adherents of the Réveil in Switzerland ended up outside the official church, and something similar happened in Scotland with the Disruption of 1843 and the formation of the Free Kirk. Yet not everyone had an anti-establishment sentiment. Friends of the Dutch Réveil rejoiced at every sign of spiritual revival, so they paid close attention to the struggle in the Dutch Reformed Church which in 1834 led to a Secession.

Groen and the Secession of 1834

Groen van Prinsterer's first impressions of the actions of Rev. Hendrik de Cock of the northern village of Ulrum were not very
favourable. At least, in January of 1834 he wrote to Willem de Clercq that the booklets published by De Cock—one about the Synod of Dordt and another about the “true Reformed doctrine”—showed “more zeal than ability.” Actually, Groen did not pass this judgment on the basis of his own reading. Half a year later he had made up for this omission but he still did not know what to make of De Cock and the cause he represented. True, he did not hesitate to predict that the recent dismissal of De Cock by the church authorities would undoubtedly have weighty consequences. But he saw no reason for a general secession from the Reformed Church according to the example that threatened to take place in Ulrum: “Separation cannot take place,” he wrote, “on the mere grounds of the defrocking of a minister, even if one is convinced that the defrocking was completely unjust. One does not leave the church because of a wrong decision made by a church board.” Nor did Groen believe that a secession could be justified by the claim that most ministers failed to preach the pure gospel. Must those who remain loyal to the foundations of the Reformed Church abandon the field to those who want to start a new-modish church denomination? If people cannot live together in the same house—Groen’s line of reasoning here clearly reflects his background as a lawyer—then an inquiry must be made to determine to whom the house rightfully belongs: who should leave and who should stay. To secede of one’s own volition is a foolish sacrifice of one’s rights and leaves the adversary an easy master of the field.

Not that Groen condemned each and every secession. On the contrary, he was sincerely convinced that the recent separation in Switzerland, for example, had only been right. But he deemed the situation in the Dutch church to be different. When a couple of months later, in October 1834, the news reached him that the Ulrum congregation had officially seceded, his standpoint remained unchanged: it was a most ill-advised step, one that could have many harmful consequences.
Those harmful consequences were not long in coming, at least not for the Seceders. They were persecuted and oppressed: they were subjected to billeting of troops, disruption of their meetings, fines and prison terms. This policy of persecution was based to a considerable degree on a number of clauses stemming from the Penal Code of Napoleonic days which prohibited meetings of more than 20 persons without a permit. Existing and registered church denominations were exempt from this stipulation, but the sting lay in the terms “existing and registered.” The Seceders, who claimed that they were “returning” to the old Reformed religion and to the old church order and church formularies, refused to register with the authorities as a new church body. It was not they who were forming a new church; that was done by the church polity imposed in 1816, which had created a new denomination—the “Reformed Society,” as the Seceders called it!

**In defence of the Seceders**

Groen closely followed the court proceedings against the Seceders. He personally attended the hearings in The Hague that dealt with the appeal that Rev. Hendrik Pieter Scholte had filed against several convictions. Groen could only agree with the defence attorneys for the Seceders that ecclesiastical assemblies in no way fell within the articles in the Penal Code. Those articles were intended for political gatherings; they did not hold for worship services. If they did, there would be no point to the article in the Constitution that guaranteed freedom of religion. For how could citizens enjoy freedom of religion without freedom of worship?

After ample deliberation Groen decided that he could no longer in good conscience remain silent about the persecution of the Seceders. Being a former secretary of the royal cabinet and the current royal archivist, he had to get over any scruples he may have felt about publicly opposing a government policy. But in March 1837 he submitted a Memorandum to the King in which he
subjected the government measures against the Seceders to a kind of judicial review. He received a confirmation of receipt but after some months had to conclude that evidently it had had no effect and was being held up in the ministry’s office. Thereupon he revised the Memorandum and had it published under the title, *The Measures Against the Seceders Tested Against Constitutional Law*.

The 72-page tract saw two reprints that same year. In it, Groen did not declare himself in favour of the Secession. He still believed it was wrong. Nor had his opinion of De Cock improved and in general he acknowledged many faults and foibles in the conduct of the Seceders. As for their writings, for example in the monthly *De Reformatie*, they “commend themselves neither in content nor in tone.” But, said Groen, if we value justice it must be justice for all, without respect of persons.

Groen then moved on to a discussion of the Seceders’ cause, in three stages. First he exposed the causes of unrest in the Reformed Church, next the manner in which a movement for secession had developed in that situation of unrest, to end by expounding the incorrectness of the prosecutions from a political and especially legal standpoint. The separation of church and state in the French Period, he began, had not produced what was logically expected from it. The government’s enactment in 1816 of a polity for the Reformed Church brought about a wholly new situation, in fact created an entirely new church denomination that was administered by a Synod appointed by the Crown and subject to perpetual supervision by the Government. For all intents and purposes it was the Ministry of Reformed Worship that settled all questions in the church. If, Groen continued, the foundation of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands was thus altered in terms of its governance, it was also altered in terms of its doctrinal stance. By means of a subtle change in wording in the Form of Subscription for office-bearers, the time-honoured confessional standards were
put in jeopardy. In signing the form, ministers now declared in effect that they subscribed to “the doctrine of the Reformed Church” insofar as these agreed with the Word of God, rather than inasmuch as. Each person could now determine on his own what interpretation he would want to give to “the doctrine of the Reformed Church.” The upshot of this change, which in effect legitimated a form of doctrinal freedom, was not long in coming. All sorts of erroneous teachings became current; for example, it allowed the spread of the Groningen School, which believed it had found a “creed for our time” by taking distance from Calvin and Dordt and assimilating faith and science. Yet those who today oppose all these developments, Groen writes, are denounced as obscurantists, hopelessly out of step with the times, ungrateful disturbers of the peace. In this turn of events, the passivity with which people had learned to bow to state authority came home to roost. The very thing which under Napoleon was called the iron-fisted measure of a tyrant—placing everything under the tutelage of the state—was regarded in 1816 as a beneficent act of paternal care by the gentler hand of a repatriated member of the national dynasty of Orange. Men failed to realize that while persons had changed the system remained unchanged. And the universal desire for peace did the rest: “no parties in the land!” had been the slogan.

Meanwhile, the tract continues, a religious revival has arisen which once again cherishes truths long held cheap. People demand the full and unabridged truth of the Bible again. To determine what that is, of course, they look to the Forms of Unity which are recognized by the church itself as expressing its creedal stance. It is the struggle for upholding these Forms that has opened people’s eyes to the power in the church of the Synod and the State—authorities which have turned out, moreover, to sanction the watering down and mutilation of the gospel.
Groen does not want to deny that mistakes have been made in that struggle. As in any quarrel, parties have been guilty of exaggerated statements. But what should not be ignored is that the concerned members have only requested what in fact they have a right to demand: namely, that the church in accordance with its own confessions be a truly evangelical church. The result of their request for restoration has been entirely negative: neither the Synod nor the Government has seen fit to introduce any improvements—thereby in fact creating more room for the evil that has crept in. Some people have now exhausted their patience. There are congregations in which for many years nothing but a so-called gospel has been preached that is stripped of the heart and core of the Biblical message. Are those people supposed to keep hoping that things will improve someday, in some near or distant future? The need of truth for the soul is a need that must be filled daily. The hungry gain little from the prospect that they will get bread in a few weeks perhaps.

Such is the long-standing cause of the Secession, maintains Groen. The events of 1834 involving Rev. de Cock in Ulrum and Rev. Scholte in Genderen merely happened to be the occasion for a separation. The Secession has led to all kinds of mistakes, on both sides. The Seceders may rightly be reproached for having made such an issue out of a secondary question like the singing of hymns instead of only psalms. They can be reproached for exaggerated zeal, for being overly suspicious of many ministers, for much narrow-mindedness and many misguided notions. But the issue is not, Groen emphasizes, whether the actions of this or that individual have been altogether correct. What counts is not how the Secession started, but what its starting point is. And that starting point is abundantly clear: the need, the desire for truth—a justified desire which was not being filled in certain congregations. The Seceders acted; today, in 1837, their right of assembly is being disputed and they are prosecuted. However, their prosecu-
tion must be judged inadequate and ineffective: compulsion only makes people bitter; it does not convince them. Moreover, it is harmful; it stirs up feelings of resentment toward the government that might some day turn into something worse. Above all, it is unlawful. As residents of the Netherlands the Seceders ought to be safe from the billeting of troops in their homes, and as members of the Reformed persuasion they have a right to freedom of worship and to the protection of the law on the same footing as every other religious persuasion in the kingdom.

After all this, the tract continued with legal arguments. These dealt with sections in the Constitution and articles in the Penal Code relative to the prosecution of the Seceders. Groen rested his case with the conclusion that these articles were not applicable here. Therefore Groen requested the Government to grant the Seceders—not as a new sect but as members par excellence of the Reformed persuasion and for that very reason seceders—the protection guaranteed to them by law.

Groen’s friends from the Réveil were on the whole very pleased with his gallant defence of the persecuted Seceders, although one or two of them felt he had written too favourably about them. A number of non-kindred friends praised his dignified tract as well; many outside observers simply had a deep aversion to government coercion in this case and felt embarrassed about the harsh measures taken against those humble folk. Even in Roman Catholic circles a few voices were heard that sided with them.

**Groen and Thorbecke**

Approval here and there could not, of course, compensate for disapproval elsewhere. Many newspapers gave Groen’s publication the silent treatment. But not Groen’s friend from university days, Johan Rudolf Thorbecke, who in 1830 had still been his conservative ally in the Belgian affair but who as a law professor in Leyden was evolving more and more in a direction opposite to
Groen's. Thorbecke read the *Measures Against the Seceders* while on vacation in his beloved province of Gelderland. Still halting between conservatism and liberalism, Thorbecke disagreed completely with Groen. He quickly wrote several articles against the *Measures*, not because he was all that happy with the government's policy but because he thought Groen's standpoint was even worse. He thought he detected in it an encouragement to "civil disobedience against a 'godless' state." He also denied that the Constitution prescribed freedom of worship—freedom of religion, yes, but the state as guardian of the public order surely had the right to take action against the gatherings of such fanatical people as the Seceders. In point of fact, by their refusal to apply for official status as a denomination the Seceders were themselves in contempt of constitutional state authority.

Thorbecke's sharply worded reaction was very painful for Groen. Of course Groen was familiar with the personality of his friend and he knew that their standpoints differed, especially where their deepest convictions were concerned. Thorbecke too, as a professor of law, acknowledged Christianity as "the historic centre and foundation of our discipline"; but his differences with Groen began the moment that principle had to be applied. For Thorbecke, the foundation was not the whole edifice: the Christian faith for him was a strictly private affair and the Bible was not a direct source of knowledge for political, social and scholarly life. Those areas, he held, were governed by their own laws.

Thorbecke himself once admitted to Groen that he did not like writing about religious differences—they tended to cloud personal relationships, he felt. Once his criticism of the *Measures* was published he wrote a very cordial letter to Groen in which he stated that he hoped their personal relationship could be continued on a good footing. Groen hoped the same. Nevertheless their diverging ways, so clearly marked by Thorbecke, did cause their relationship to cool after this. Henceforth their friendship rested on the memory
of former days, and what ties remained were based on recognition and appreciation of each other’s talents.

Holland’s two great parliamentarians of the nineteenth century achieved success in totally different ways. The ideas that were most dear to Groen were rejected by Thorbecke. Their opposition in everyday politics revealed that difference sometimes in a poignant manner. Yet mutual appreciation remained because they recognized each other’s sincerity and throughout life were able to appeal to each other’s loyalty to principle. In 1841, when he received a complimentary copy of the first instalment of the Handbook, Thorbecke wrote Groen: “There are many things that I cannot see with your eyes. In particular, I fear, we will never agree about your method of approach. I am not of your faith, but I wish that everybody did as much for theirs as you do for yours. Our national character would have more vitality.” In 1872, when Thorbecke died and Groen van Prinsterer published their correspondence as a tribute to his great opponent, he affirmed their difference of faith by noting that in his slogan, ‘Against the Revolution the Gospel,’ Thorbecke “never saw anything other, I fear, than an impractical utterance and an absurd riddle.”

A “juridical-confessional” strategy
With the principle of the Secession Groen van Prinsterer heartily agreed: the need to restore the reign of truth in the church. In his Measures he defended the Seceders, but not the Secession; he personally stayed in the Reformed Church. Groen’s character, upbringing and social status created a gulf between him and many Seceders. In a private letter he did not hesitate to refer to Rev. de Cock’s “ill-mannered effronteries.” As a cultured man from aristocratic circles he took offence at the crude language of that pastor from Ulrum who reviled his opponents as “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Groen would often be shocked by what he called the Seceders’ fanaticism and self-righteousness and their lack of love
and trust—including lack of trust and confidence in him, Groen. To be distrusted by them, of all people, was hard to take. As the years went by, Seceders would sometimes level harsh criticism at Groen for his stance on the church question and the Christian public school. Once, when Groen registered his objections to a reader used in a Secessionist primary school, in which children were introduced to the rules of spelling along with the doctrine of predestination, he was accused of being only semi-Calvinist and anti-Secession. Disagreements of this kind did not exactly help bring them closer together. But these things were not the main reason why Groen disapproved of the Secession. In contrast to friction with some, he had cordial relations, for example, with leaders like Hendrik Pieter Scholte, Antonie Brummelkamp and Jan van Andel. And in other cases, too, Groen showed that he appreciated men from among the common people, men whom he trusted and loved and accepted as valuable co-workers and brothers. But unlike the Seceders, he had chosen for what came to be called the “juridical-confessional” model of church reform.

Condemnation of the Secession was widespread among people of the Réveil. Many found even Groen too activist; they chose for the “medical” model. Their pietist individualism encouraged waiting patiently for what might develop in the way of inner reform of the church; they undertook no action beyond their own personal circle. This attitude was also encouraged by an un-Reformed, low view of the importance of the organized church community. To some, even Groen’s publication of the Measures was already too much: a Christian ought to accept suffering as a trial sent by God. Willem de Clercq wondered if the demand for justice—for a genuine application of freedom of religion—by appealing openly to guarantees in the Constitution did not betray the operation of “the leaven of the liberals”? But Groen had no patience with such inactivity. Characteristically, he spent his lifetime calling Christ-believers in his country to take united action.
Sometimes Groen would compare the Dutch Reformed Church to an ailing mother whose recovery may be hoped for and who must therefore not be abandoned in her deplorable state. More often he would use the image of a house that a stranger has forced his way into. Groen wanted to follow the juridical road toward church reform: the stranger has a rightful claim to not one square inch of room in the house of the church—an image with which he sought to convince Christians and non-Christians alike. Is it not self-evident for the Christian, he asked, that the Bible is the foundation of the Christian Church? That was also true of the church of the Reformation in the Low Countries, which in the course of centuries had laid down that the Three Forms of Unity—namely, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt—contained a binding summary of the evangelical faith to which everyone had to submit in the interest of the faith community. If that is the true state of affairs, it is as plain as day that whoever does not hold to the Bible and the Forms has thereby placed himself outside the bounds of the church. Whoever places himself outside the essence and basis of the church can no longer be considered a member of the church. As a logical consequence of his position such a person ought to be consistent and withdraw. There is room in the church only for those who profess the Biblical truth.

**Battling for church reform**

The above train of thought Groen tried to propagate and elaborate in a number of actions he spearheaded during 1842 and 1843. In the year 1841 almost 9,000 members of the Reformed Church had submitted a petition asking Synod to restore the Church "to its old and firm foundations by upholding the Forms of Unity, restoring the old formulation of the Form of Subscription for new ministers, and revising the Church Order and Rules imposed in 1816 in order to bring them into harmony with God's Word and the Church
Order of Dordt.” Synod had declared the petition inadmissible. After all, did it not uphold the old doctrine? The petition was tabled, all the more because the signatories were deemed incompetent to judge. It was against these Synodical decisions that Groen decided in May of 1842 to take action. Together with six friends—like him, well-known and prominent members of the Reformed Church—he wrote an Open Letter to the Synod. The document, which became known as the “Address of the Seven Gentlemen from The Hague,” contained an extensive rebuttal of Synod’s claim that it was upholding the old doctrine.

With many examples the address showed that the doctrine was not being upheld, was at best only tolerated, while the way had been cleared for all sorts of heresies. As a follow-up to the address to the Synod Groen wrote an Address to the Reformed Church in the Netherlands: all the members of the church throughout the land had to know what was at stake. Both Addresses made clear what had moved the petitioners. They were written in a frank and straightforward style. Many good people thought that things were not so bad with the church. The Addresses were meant to wake them up and demonstrate that things were much worse than they had ever suspected. Groen did not hesitate to call the evil by its name: he did not want to spare the great men of the Groningen School merely out of consideration for their respectable personages; at issue were not persons but un-Reformed teachings.

The two Addresses raised a lot of dust. In churches and lecture halls, in numerous articles and broadsides, Groen and his friends were denounced as fanatical disturbers of the peace. The second Address had anticipated this charge by asking: What peace do we disturb? The sweet peace that tolerates a denial of the saving work of the Redeemer? “It is not I that have troubled Israel, but you, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and have followed the Baals.”
The little success and the many reproaches reaped by Groen did not stop him from staying the course. His disappointment did not persuade him to embrace the standpoint of his friend De Clercq, who wrote: “We have tugged at the Church for many years now. She is hardening herself against it. Then let it be church in our homes and in our hearts.” De Clercq was not the only one among Groen’s friends who had declined to sign the Addresses. Their fear of exposing themselves, their passive wait-and-see attitude, their aversion to being involved in all that unrest deeply disappointed Groen. Da Costa even published a brochure in which he openly opposed Groen’s “juridical-confessional” method of working for church reform. His politically astute friend realized at once how damaging Da Costa’s action was: the opposition could now play Da Costa off against him. Groen would not want to deny that there were differences between his juridical-confessional strategy and Da Costa’s medical approach, differences that stemmed in part from their different appreciation of the role and function of the Forms of Unity. But was it really necessary, he complained, that Da Costa publicize those differences precisely at this moment? In the years to follow Groen would be disappointed more often in Da Costa and other spiritual kin. He was very conscious how much needed doing and how little was the strength of those who wanted to work together for restoration in church and society. That is why he always looked for ways to mobilize their combined strength. He used many means to try and organize collaborative efforts, because he was convinced that only by combining forces would public action have any chance of success. Yet time and again, sometimes after a promising start, he would discover that collaboration was foundering on differences of viewpoints—differences about the essence of the church, about the way in which Christians should be engaged, and so on. This is clearly illustrated in the history of the famous “meetings” of the Christian Friends.
The Christian Friends meet
In August 1845, after many letters back and forth, a small group of Christian leaders from across the country met in Amsterdam for mutual consultation. Those in attendance exhibited all shades of the Réveil and of the confessional movement in the Reformed Church; present as well were a number of Seceders. The meetings, which would convene every half year, dealt with various subjects: church reform, schooling and education, poor relief, internal relations (not least the relation between Seceders and non-seceders). Groen’s exertions in behalf of these meetings were greater than the results. The more often they met, the more apparent it became where each of these Christian Friends stood. Whereas some of them—next to Groen, especially Rev. Ottho Gerhard Heldring—called for action in the areas of church and society, others were governed by individualism and acquiescence. While some were not afraid of direct and open confrontation, even in the church, others turned out at bottom to assess the church’s condition differently and to expect healing by other means. Groen was deeply disappointed, for example, in Nicolaas Beets—a man of enormous influence, a great pulpiteer, and a spokesman for orthodoxy. In August 1848 a meeting was called to discuss the condition of the Church. A larger than normal group had been invited: pastors, elders and other prominent church members. Expectations ran high. Beets had been invited to chair the meeting but he refused: he did not want to give support to anything that might “provoke or hasten” a crisis in the church; the meeting might run out of hand, as it had been rumoured among “the masses who are for the truth” that at long last the necessity of secession would be proclaimed. Beets would have no part of it. The meeting was duly held, it was not the last of its kind, but the opinions of the Friends diverged more and more.

The Seceders to a small extent contributed to the eventual demise of the Christian Friends. The well-known Rev. Antonie
Brummelkamp of Arnhem, one of the moderates among the Seceders, vented his frustrations in April 1848 in a long letter to Groen van Prinsterer. Brummelkamp did not disapprove as such of meetings like those of the Christian Friends; he enjoyed attending them “for the opportunity at least of encouraging one another.” But what was beginning to trouble him was the atmosphere that prevailed at the meetings. In the fall of 1847 Groen had invited the Friends not just to talk about the corruption of the Reformed Church but to do “whatsoever the hand finds to do” to remedy the situation. And yet, Brummelkamp complained, nothing was done.

The background of Brummelkamp’s complaint is quickly told. After his unsuccessful Addresses of 1842, Groen had once more entered the public debate about the church question by means of a long series of articles published between Feb. 1847 and Feb. 1848 in the monthly De Vereeniging: Christelijke Stemmen, a journal that may be considered the organ of the Christian Friends. Once completed, the series was published in a volume entitled Het Regt der Hervormde Gezindheid—the rights of those of the Reformed persuasion. The rights of the Reformed people, Groen argued, consisted in the fact that the teachings of the Bible, summarized in the official Confessions, constituted the basis and hallmark of their Church. Reformed believers therefore ought to make use of those rights. They should insist that the Confessions be upheld, albeit not as a shibboleth, in a literalist sense, but as an expression of the undoubted Christian faith which a believer heartily accepts and openly confesses against every description of unbelief. It is the right, it is the duty of those of the Reformed persuasion to uphold that confession—in the church; against the state; in education. Let us then investigate, Groen concluded, whether we cannot make better use of our rights to prevent the denial of the truth in the church, to acquire Christian day-school education, to oppose unbelieving science with Christian scholarship in the universities, to protect the Netherlands against the inroads of Roman Catholicism.
and the victory of the Revolution doctrine. — Fine phrases, wrote Brummelkamp, but they are of no use. Whether I call for secession and you call for action, the Christian Friends just sit still and do nothing. And that is beginning to weigh on me. However—his letter to Groen continued—are you not somewhat to blame yourself for the inactivity you condemn so strongly? Does Dr. Groen, the man of historical thinking, not see that by writing against the Secession and looking for the resurrection of a deceased body he is acting anti-historically? The early Christians were forced to abandon the Jewish synagogues, Protestants had to leave the Church of Rome—is there not a lesson in that? “Granted, such leave-taking should not be done except in the direst necessity, but surely you cannot disagree with me that the case of dire necessity is spelled out in Article 29 of our Belgic Confession.”

This defence by Brummelkamp of the standpoint of the Secession, with its forthright reference to the Reformed confession about “The Marks of the True Church and Wherein it Differs from the False Church,” was nevertheless written in a charitable tone, to a brother in Christ. Both sides knew of each other that they did not share their view of the church. In a long passage in *Het Regt der Hervormde Gezindheid* Groen had set forth his opinion of the Secession one more time. For all his sympathy for the Seceders, he would not deny that they too had disappointed him. They insisted on a literalist reading of the Confessions; they overemphasized the doctrine of predestination; they judged that every true Christian should choose for Secession; they were internally divided. All this saddened him. But there was more. He thoroughly disagreed with them in their appraisal of the situation in the Reformed Church. While they stated that the teachings of the Confessions no longer held there, he, Groen, insisted that by rights the Confessions were, and continued to be, the only basis of the Reformed Church. He did not even scruple to write that, in his opinion, to abandon the church unnecessarily was to commit a sin. Nevertheless, Groen
hoped that some day he and those of the Secession would see eye to eye—and Seceders nurtured the same hope. Thus they did not let go of each other. The fraternal bond, evident in many ways, continued to tug at them. “You were not ashamed of us,” wrote one of them, “and although I hold to a different standpoint, I found in you, amid libel and abuse, a brotherly love that gave off warmth.” These words were addressed to Groen in a letter written by another Secession minister, Rev. Albertus van Raalte, on the eve of his departure for America. The letter is a testimony to the reputation that Groen enjoyed among the lovers of truth throughout the land.

The schools struggle begins
Groen’s reputation among the Christians of the Netherlands was also based to a considerable degree on his efforts on behalf of Christian education. The struggle for Christian day-schools constitutes one of the most important episodes not just in the life of Groen but also in his country’s history during the 19th century.

Much attention was paid in the Netherlands to the field of education. In 1798, Holland was the first country in Europe to appoint a separate Minister of Public Education. The Enlightenment, with its new view of the natural goodness of man, had led to heightened interest in education. New methods of instruction were developed to turn the school into an institution where a young person could learn to live in harmony with himself and with nature. During the French Period the advocates of educational renewal got the chance to reorganize Dutch education in form and substance.

Until 1795, education had been a matter of private initiative and lower levels of government. Public education in the schools of cities, towns and villages was formally subject to supervision by the church. The Church Order of Dordt required that schoolmasters be under the supervision of the local church council. In this way the Dutch Republic, which gave formal recognition only
to the Reformed Church, had a form of Christian public education. The Revolution of 1795, however, introduced the separation of church and state and thus also severed the connection between church and school. In the circumstances of the time this did not mean that the public school was no longer Christian: the Education Act of 1806 spoke explicitly of “instruction in all civic and Christian virtues.” Christianity was still commonly accepted as the basis for personal and public morality; morning exercises in the schools included prayer, and teachers were examined as to their moral and religious views. However, which Christianity was meant? Certainly not that of the Synod of Dordt. If anything, the Revolution in the Netherlands took revenge on the Synod of Dordt of 1618–19. What people wanted was a common Christianity, incorporating only those fundamentals that would not be offensive to anyone. A neutral state could not be expected to ensure that its government-sponsored educational system should side with any one church’s particular creed or confession. Every citizen of the Netherlands should be able to attend the public school; the school was intended to enhance national unity. Thus the intellectual climate which first gave rise to education laws was that of moderate rationalism. The times preferred a “Christianity above sectarian differences”—an attitude that was more in keeping with the Society for the Common Utility than with the Reformed confession. Education was to provide instruction to help people advance in moral and material respects, with gratitude for the greater enlightenment available in modern times. The goal of education was an improved society. Children had to learn to walk the paths of virtue; they had to be educated to become people who, by knowledge and example, would learn to avoid evil and do good. After all, that would ensure them higher hopes of heaven as well as a better society! The public school teacher was allowed to speak of Jesus—that is, of Jesus the friend of man, the Great Example:
to follow him would enable a person of good will to become more and more Godlike.

Predictably, resistance arose on the part of those circles who professed that Christ was not the virtuous model for men of good will but the Saviour of people who know themselves to be conceived and born in sin and inclined toward all evil. They abhorred the national program to provide “instruction in all civic and Christian virtues.” Seceders were the first to move into action and establish their own schools. By law, however, those who wanted to start a school had to obtain local government approval—which was often withheld. Absence of official approval did not prevent Seceders from operating schools on the sly, which in turn contributed to an intensification of court actions against them. Thus began the schools struggle, a struggle for freedom of education, for the Christian character of primary schools.

The schools struggle in nineteenth-century Holland would escalate in scope and intensity as both theological modernism and orthodoxy experienced an awakening and grew in their respective following. The central issues in this intense struggle were of critical importance: What were the rights of parents? The limits of government? The relation between faith and science? The nature of man? The principles of pedagogy? In addition, the struggle became a key issue of public policy, giving birth to political parties and providing them with cohesive force.

As early as 1832 Groen wrote a letter to the Minister in which he pointed out the inherent injustice of the Education Act. He discussed the matter at greater length in his tract of 1837, *Measures Against the Seceders Tested Against Constitutional Law*. There he recalled that the school, like the church, had been brought under state supervision. And because the statesmen of the day proceeded from the incorrect notion that national unity must be sought in national uniformity, the school had become an institution where a “common” Christianity—a general Christianity for all—had to be
taught without reference to Christian doctrines. But a Christianity that has to satisfy Protestants and Catholics and not ruffle Jewish sensibilities cannot be anything, Groen maintained, but a Christianity without content, a kind of religion which for that very reason can never satisfy anybody. Under these rules, the public school was not based on a common, shared faith, but on shared forms of unbelief and indifference.

A second train of thought that Groen found fault with was the notion that, instead of laying religion “at the bottom” of the entire educational process, the public school could be saved by adding an hour or so of “religious instruction” to the curriculum. That would mean that what ought to be the heart and soul of education would be reduced to a separate subject, one that could be entrusted after hours to the clergy of the various denominations. Summarizing the educational issue, Groen wrote: “Freedom of conscience, freedom of worship, freedom of education are indissolubly linked.”

Three years later, in 1840, Groen was elected to the Double Chamber of parliament which met to prepare a revision of the Constitution that had become necessary as a result of the breakup of the United Kingdom with the granting of independence to Belgium. There too Groen raised the schools issue and delivered a powerful plea for freedom of education:

Parents who, with or without adequate grounds, are honestly convinced that the character of the instruction in the existing schools is non-Christian, must not, directly or indirectly, be prevented from providing for their children the kind of education which they believe they can justify before God. That compulsion, to put it bluntly, is intolerable and ought to stop.

In the same breath Groen also indicated the moral ground for freedom of education: children are not the property of the state, but
it is parents who have the obligation to raise them. — Not many members of the Chamber came to his support; far more said that they disagreed with his viewpoint. A conservative climate of opinion was afraid of divisions in the nation and was proud of the common school.

But not only orthodox Protestants, also Roman Catholics objected to the state monopoly in education. They had not forgotten King William's suppressive measures against parish schools and seminaries in Belgium and they now began to agitate for freedom of education in the North. King William II, who wanted badly to start his reign off with symbolic acts of goodwill and with policies that would distinguish him from his father, installed a Committee to investigate the complaints about education. Next to three supporters of the status quo, three opponents were appointed: two Roman Catholics and, to represent orthodox Protestants, Dr. Groen van Prinsterer. The blue-ribbon inquiry had only meagre results. The members were unable to come to any agreement. Groen did not succeed in gaining support for his vision for freedom of education and its solution, the separation of public schools, as a local option, in accordance with religious persuasion. By Royal Decree of January 2, 1842, it was laid down that if a local government refused to approve the establishment of a private school, an appeal could be made to the provincial authorities. This possibility still placed educational freedom at the mercy of arbitrary decisions. By law provincial authorities could now overturn a local decision that went against starting a private Christian school, but they were not obligated to do so in fact. Groen was to find this out personally the very next year. Together with his friends Pieter Elout van Soeterwoude and Dirk van Hogendorp he requested the municipal authorities of The Hague to grant permission to erect a private Christian school. Permission was not granted. The men next lodged an appeal with the provincial authorities. When that had no results, they appealed to the Crown.
It was all to no avail. Not until 1849 were they able to open their school—but that was after the Constitution of 1848 had declared that “the provision of education is free.” To be sure, municipal and provincial authorities were not always so negative as they were in The Hague. Across the land, scores of tiny little schools were founded, by individuals, by associations of parents, by Secession consistories, by Reformed church boards. Groen was consulted for many of these ventures, and to many of the needier ones he gave financial support as well. But the battle had only begun. If anything, opposition to Christian schools and disdain for Christian education only grew worse as the years went by. The struggle for Christian schools would figure among the highest stakes in Groen’s coming career as a politician.
Chapter 4

About a Revolution

In 1815 the nations of Europe heaved a sigh of relief as the representatives of the great Powers agreed to the Settlement of Vienna. After a quarter century of revolution and war, people longed for peace and order. The Revolutionary fever had subsided; the growing influence of Romanticism once more made a conservative-aristocratic lifestyle look very attractive.

The princes, united in a Holy Alliance, ruled their subject children with a firm hand, "as befits Christian fathers," or else left that to their ministers. The Austrian chancellor Metternich from time to time called his colleagues together to solve some international disputes and for the rest saw to it that revolutionary movements did not gain a foothold anywhere. Religious revivals gained wide support; one more time faith acquired a grip on the masses, from high to low.

A ferment of ideas

This conservative idyll, of course, did not remain undisturbed. Much Romantic enthusiasm ran aground on all kinds of everyday realities. Slowly but surely industrialization spread, creating new social classes with new political aspirations. Next to a renewed, and often deficient, reflection on the value of the Christian religion, unbelief continued to corrode the minds. Many people, especially among the ruling and intellectual classes as well as among the new middle class, remained loyal to Rationalism. Deism gained ground, and Higher Criticism of the Bible undermined the faith of many a
university student. The brazen practices of divine-right absolute monarchs, who refused to allow their subjects a voice in government, evoked resistance and fanned the flames of liberalism. Allied with nationalists, liberals instigated an opposition movement which at any moment could rise up and demand its rights. Here and there this was already being tried by radicals who in their efforts for greater justice in social relations attacked the predominant mood which acquiesced in existing class structures.

In 1830 an eruption of liberal and national opposition to the status quo was not very successful. The United Kingdom of the Netherlands was torn apart, to be sure, and in Paris the reactionary Charles X, king of France, was replaced by his grand-nephew Louis Philippe, who was presumed to be more in tune with the spirit of the new age and was named “king of the French.” Louis-Philippe humbly called himself “citizen-king.” But as soon as the moment was ripe he granted his fellow Frenchmen little freedom other than to obey his personal, autocratic regime.

A year of revolutions
The year 1848, it seemed, would bring the great reversal. It looked as if radical liberals and militant nationalists, in a few places also social radicals, would in a single assault overthrow old Europe. Once again it began in France, spread to Italy and across the Habsburg Empire in Central Europe, to mushroom everywhere in Germany. England witnessed the radical campaigns of the Chartist movement. Ominous rumblings were heard in Holland. The days of the great Revolutions of 1789 and 1792 were back!

People could not know in 1848 that within two or three years everything would be over and liberalism, nationalism and socialism would be defeated one last time by the forces of conservatism. As it was, however, this restoration amounted to no more than a Pyrrhic victory, for the olden days and former relations did not really return. After 1848, conservatives realized they needed the
support of the masses and they embarked on a fling with nationalism and the working classes. Liberals realized they could better gain power by means of the ballot box. Even socialists chose for that strategy, though not till after the debacle of the Paris Commune in 1871.

In 1848 things were also stirring in the Netherlands. Inflammatory pamphlets and posters calling for mass demonstrations began to appear in the heart of Amsterdam. Here and there, minor manifestations were held. None of it was very serious, it was concluded afterwards. There was indeed a social problem, but no well-defined working class that could make an issue out of it. Nor were there any rebellious nationalists, unless one had to put that label on Roman Catholics who still had to be content with a kind of second-class citizenship. The group that had the best chance of gaining power was the liberal bourgeoisie. These people enjoyed little if any influence, thanks to the authoritarian power of the King and a franchise that favoured the land-owning nobility. At the same time, these middle classes were not entirely without input: they had a not inconsiderable and growing share in the national sources of economic wealth. They also formed the intellectual leadership. Their self-confidence and their faith in progress, social, economic and moral, helped the Netherlands to overcome its identity crisis after the loss of Belgium and its reduction to a third-rate power. It was the middle classes who gave the Dutch a new faith in their future. Taking as their model the flowering of Dutch culture during the Golden Age of the 17th century, they attacked the mood of smug complacency and lazy lethargy. Not only did they send John Stick-in-the-mud into retirement, they agitated for renewal and modernization—political, social and religious. They judged that the old-time religions on the model of Dordt or Trent had had their day. The old political ideas they wished to replace with new forms of freedom and equality. They desired the removal of obstacles that frustrated the free individual in his per-
sonal development. The day of freedom was at hand! Freedom of religion, of occupation, of expression, of assembly, of education. A franchise which, though not universal, would give the vote to all respectable folk. And, of course, a form of government which through ministerial responsibility to Parliament would place real power in the hands of the people.

A royal coup d'état

Thanks to an extraordinary set of circumstances, Dutch liberals got their way in 1848. What played into their hands was the revolutionary turmoil elsewhere in Europe, the King’s worries about his health and his throne, and the absence of any strong conservative advisers. On his own, the King cut the Gordian knot: twice during his lifetime he had been evicted from the country (in 1795, as the heir apparent, from the Dutch Republic; in 1830, as crown prince, from Belgium); he would avoid a repeat, at whatever price. And that is how the Netherlands got its own liberal revolution—at the king’s initiative, without violence, and with lasting results.

The mere threat of violence, observed Groen van Prinsterer, had been enough to persuade everyone to give in to the revolutionary demands. At bottom, the 1848 revision of the Constitution was a coup d'état, for Groen refused to believe that the political revolution had been desired by the people as a whole. To be sure, there had been manifestations and demonstrations, but to him these proved only “that in any sizable town, including The Hague, it is possible to organize a parade and stage street riots by means of pamphlets, banners, torches, lots of liquor and a little money.” The authorities, judged Groen, had reacted in panic; the radicals made clever use of it and the conservative government caved in, thinking that concessions alone could save the country.

Groen’s analysis was hard-hitting, but historians today almost literally agree with him. Events followed one another quickly. On 13 March 1848, King William II announced that in 24 hours he
had changed from a conservative into a liberal. Whereupon he
appointed a radical committee for drafting a revision of the Con-
stitution. This was the magic charm by which he responded to the
revolution. Thorbecke rewrote the Constitution and well-known
progressives like Donker Curtius, Luzac, and De Kempenaer were
made cabinet ministers. In that company the new minister of
foreign affairs, Count Schimmelpenninck, was rather out of place:
he was more of a liberal in the English sense of the word. His
position among his colleagues was rather shaky and after a few
months he disappeared from the scene.

Stranger than Schimmelpenninck’s presence in the cabinet was
Thorbecke’s absence from it. Thorbecke had been the intellectual
leader of the radical liberals for a long time already. For many
years he had taught classes in the law faculty of Leyden that had
one overriding theme: the Constitution must be revised! In 1840 he
had published a Proposed Revision that incorporated typically
liberal demands. Still more overtly liberal had been his essay of
1844, On Modern Citizenship, in which he referred to universal
suffrage as an expression of the evolution of society which in the
long run was inevitable and just. In that same year 1844 he had
demonstrated his leadership of the liberal phalanx with the sub-
mission in Parliament of the “Proposal of the Nine.” On that
occasion the nine members were outvoted by a large majority who
rejected their proposal for constitutional reform and a census-
based franchise. Now, however, in 1848, Thorbecke was the man
who drafted the Constitution. But when the new ministry had to
formed, Thorbecke was bypassed. Thus he was not allowed to
defend the new constitution in Parliament, nor translate its pro-
visions into concrete legislation. At least, not for the time being.
After a year it became apparent that the country could not do
without him. In 1849, Thorbecke was called back, to become the
head of his first Ministry.
The spirit of the revolution
What was Groen doing in 1848? Naturally, he followed events in France and Europe with great interest. “We are again, it would seem, entering upon dark times,” he noted in February after the first news about the Paris revolution had reached The Hague. “But there is no profit,” he wrote three weeks later to his dejected friend Koenen, “in nursing despondency and grave misgivings about the eventualities of a dim future. We must show that there is peace and hope for the Christian, even as the world is sunk in a mood of despair.” Shortly after, he inquired matter-of-factly of his publisher whether it would not be appropriate to advertise again that there were still copies available of two of his books, *Contribution to a Revision of the Constitution* and *Unbelief and Revolution*.

A reference to *Unbelief and Revolution*, however, was not Groen’s only contribution to combatting the revolution which he had foretold in that book. As the storms of revolution raged — there were riots in the streets of The Hague, even close to his home — Groen sat down and wrote a series of pamphlets under the collective title *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Explanation of the Slogan of the Revolution*. The series of five appeared between April and June of 1848. It was a condensed and popularized version of *Unbelief and Revolution*, a book that was too difficult for the broader public. “Very well,” Groen began, “the revolutionaries promise freedom, equality and brotherhood. Wonderful things! But what does the slogan really entail? Just look at the earlier revolutions that raised the slogan.” With rapid strokes of a razor-sharp scalpel, frequently dipped in irony, Groen analyzed the slogan and its background: man without God, trying to build a better world without the liberating insights of God’s Word. One can be sympathetic, he wrote, to many of the radicals’ demands, if stripped of their revolutionary rhetoric. But can a bad tree bring forth good fruit? Theories born of unbelief surely cannot be the solid principles on which to base a genuine revision of the coun-
try’s public framework. Only in faithful obedience to the Word of God can true freedom be found, including freedom and well-being for state and society.

On November 3, 1848 the new Constitution was proclaimed throughout the land. There was a big celebration in The Hague. Church bells were ringing and special illumination lit up the public squares. Walking past the Palace, passers-by were greeted by a large banner that read: “GOD IS WITH THE NETHERLANDS.” Groen wrote to his publisher in sombre tones, though not without a touch of humour: “As I assess the condition of the country I must say that the whole makes more of an impression on me of a funeral than of a celebration.”

Groen’s low spirits are understandable. Sure, he was thankful that his country in many respects had been spared disaster amid the tumult of the nations. The revision of the Constitution fortunately had been completed without fatal clashes. But of course it was too early to tell whether the country was now out of danger. And if the principles which he believed had spawned the revised Constitution would ever gain the upper hand, then the country in his view was moving further on the path of Revolution and was one step closer to the abyss. That was the appraisal with which Groen opened his nine essays on *Constitutional Revision and National Concord*, written between November 1848 and October 1849. Here he analyzed the background to the events of 1848 and carefully expounded his own viewpoints.

Groen was not opposed to a constitutional revision as such. “I was not unconditionally enamoured of the old situation. I deplored the fact that the revision of 1840 was inadequate and insignificant. I declaimed against every arbitrary tendency or deliberate leaning toward a kind of Revolutionary Autocracy, which would be fatal for King and Nation alike. After the plain meaning of the Constitution had been obscured by bigoted officials and arbitrary judges, I had hoped for a better and more effective guarantee of freedom
of religion and education. Always I pressed for Cabinet unity and Ministerial responsibility, for the possibility of dissolving the lower house, for public sessions of the upper house, and for expanding the nation's voice in electing its representatives." In the language of today: Groen was in favour of constitutional guarantees of civil and political liberties, and a cabinet system of government with popular participation based on a generous franchise.

Those were in fact the great changes achieved by the Constitution of 1848. To prove that he had always been in favour of those changes Groen was able to point to many publications: his popular book of 1848, *Vrijheid, Gelijkheid, Broederschap*, his *Open Letter to Count Schimmelpenninck* about freedom of education, his *Rights of the Reformed Persuasion* of 1847 and *The Measures Against the Seceders* of 1837. Last but not least, he was able to point to his activities at the time of the previous constitutional revision, in 1840, when as an elected representative he had expressed himself unequivocally on all these points and later that year had published his views in his *Contribution to a Revision of the Constitution in a Netherlandic Spirit*. In 1840 he had demanded freedom of the press, freedom of worship, freedom of education, and parliamentary supervision of colonial policy. He had advocated restricting authoritarian royal power by public scrutiny of public finances, by an independent role for the Council of State, by decentralization of administration and recognition of the power of the Provincial Legislatures. He had declared himself to be an opponent of the practice under King William I that the ministers were mere instruments of the King, "senior clerks, agents who carried out every one of the King's orders without having a mind of their own." Ministers ought to be responsible for their own departments. In the place of royal autocracy Groen would even have preferred, if need be, full political responsibility for ministers, expressed in their duty to counter-sign every royal decree and every legislative bill. He had argued in favour of abolishing the
upper house; he saw no need for a body that sought its right of existence in rubber-stamping the will of the King. He had demanded a truly independent posture of the lower house: untrammelled use of its power to initiate bills, to amend and vote on budgets, to debate policy. He had called for an extension of the franchise and for a strengthening of the bond between electors and elected.

**Principle against principle**

Thus, in 1848 much of what Groen had deemed desirable had been achieved. And that filled him with satisfaction. His negative, sombre mood did not pertain to the revision as such. His rejection had more to do with the spirit of the new constitution than with its provisions, even though he did object to some of the latter. The Constitution, Groen argued, has not been revised in an anti-revolutionary spirit in line with national traditions, but rather in accordance with liberal conceptions, and its foundation is not the sovereignty of the monarch but the sovereignty of the people. It does not hark back to Netherlandic and Christian-historical traditions but to those of the Revolution: “The constitution has come to us via Paris and Brussels.” Groen believed that some of the formulations in the revised Constitution cleared the way for dangerous, un-Netherlandic fallacies. He mentioned three points: the reduction in the power of the King; direct elections for members of Parliament; and the make-up of the First Chamber or upper house.

Groen was not opposed to extending the franchise in and of itself. If anything, he wanted greater popular influence, not less. Later, during debates about the level of taxes that would qualify a citizen to vote, he declared that he would always be quite prepared “to stay one guilder below the liberals.” Throughout his life Groen felt that he represented “the people behind the voters.”

As for direct elections, his demurral again pertained to the thinking behind the concept. It was meant to give effect to popular sovereignty. He opposed an extension of the franchise “for the
sake of granting the people sovereign powers to dictate its wishes to the existing authorities.” He opposed the introduction of direct elections “in the interest of installing a form of government in which the King is reduced to a mere figurehead and the higher assembly of the land is transformed into the supreme organ—or the powerless tool!—of a restless majority.” That was Groen’s biggest objection to the constitutional changes: the substitution of popular sovereignty for the sovereignty of the King; replacing the divine right of government with the rights of man and citizen. Groen favoured a “tempered monarchy,” a kind of mixed constitution in which the prince is sovereign but in no way omnipotent—not an autocrat but a monarch limited to his sphere of authority, bound by his responsibility to God, restricted by the rights and liberties of the people. To judge from his proposals of 1840, from his approval of many articles in the Constitution of 1848, and from his battle for the rights of parliament after 1849, Groen’s ideal of a tempered monarchy could in practice agree on many points with the wording of the liberal proposals.

Agree with the wording—not with the spirit. Hence his extensive polemics with liberals like Thorbecke and conservatives like Vreede about the sovereignty of the King. Groen would not give in to a liberal interpretation of it. In that interpretation, direct elections and a broader franchise smacked too much of popular sovereignty.

That kind of democracy would also, he feared, bring loss of quality. Liberty of the people is an abstraction, their equality is a fiction, and their fraternity will result in beer-hall politics and political quackery. “So long as I want to avoid being sloppily dressed,” he wrote in Vrijheid, Gelijkheid, Broederschap, “I would hate to have some scholar or statesman personally take charge of tailoring my coat or cobbling my shoes; and I am equally fearful if artisans, however skilful in their craft, were mandated to run the State.”
The 19th-century aristocrat Groen van Prinsterer could not see it any other way: every occupation needs its skilful practitioners, and so also in governing. Not every Tom, Dick or Harry can be expected to know the craft of statesmanship. Groen did not indicate where exactly he would want to draw the line for eligibility to vote, nor did he come up with an alternative for direct elections. He did not show concretely how he would want to have his anti-revolutionary theory and his Christian-historical interpretation of popular liberties formulated in the articles of the Constitution. Not being very specific was his weak point. But Groen was concerned about deeper issues. He spoke for the divine origin of authority. He did not want to see “the higher powers” of Romans 13 replaced by the notion of popular sovereignty. The powers that be “are God’s ministers to thee for good”—that last phrase is part of the text, even though Groen in the eyes of later generations might have put more emphasis on the latter and less on the former, more at least than he did in his opposition to those who denied the whole text. Groen’s political testimony was in the first place an uphill battle against the spirit of the age. That spirit preached a politics conducted strictly on the horizontal plane, for the sake of founding a society without religious faith, without God, earthly, man-centred, one-dimensional. This was the humanism that Groen targeted, no matter whether decked out as conservative, liberal or socialist. His prophetic voice called for a spiritual change; the practical implementation, however important, came second.

As was to be expected, Groen’s contemporaries noticed his weak point and criticized him for it. They called him a conservative, a reactionary proponent of a Christian state on a Reformed basis, with the exclusion of those of other faiths. It did not cost Groen much effort to refute these allegations; his whole public career was proof that he had “no ambition for the function of Grand Inquisitor” and that the label of conservative did not fit him. More difficult was the request that for once he move from theory
to practice. Why had he not given his own draft constitution? In *Constitutional Revision and National Concord* he had answered that question with the comment that what is important is not so much the forms as the underlying principles. A return to the correct principles was the indispensable condition for a healthy form of government. Here Groen’s writings betray the influence of the Historical Law School. He had not wanted to describe a Utopia, an ideal State, but he had merely proposed what in the given circumstances seemed feasible in order to realize his principles.

**Member of the Second Chamber**

Groen did not shy away from moving from the gallery to the floor of parliament. When the revised Constitution made new elections necessary, he allowed his name to stand in a number of districts. In several he won a seat in the upper house, but after winning a run-off election in District Harderwijk he took his seat in the lower house. It was January 4, 1849.

Groen realized that the work of a parliamentarian might be detrimental to his peace, his studies, and possibly also his health. “On the other hand,” he wrote, “in the crisis that I believe the country is facing, I would not want to withdraw from the opportunity of combatting in the most influential assembly the faulty notions that have brought us to the edge of ruin, and of defending as the sole remedy, to the best of my ability, the principles to which I have devoted my life these twenty years.”

Groen’s membership in the Second Chamber lasted till 1863, with a brief interruption during 1854/55 and a longer, voluntary absence from 1857 to 1862. It would be a long and important period in his life. The liberals who had gained the upper hand in the coup of 1848 had to make good on their promises. Their mandate was to work out the new fundamental law into concrete legislation and to transform all Netherlands into a liberal society. Radical and moderate liberals themselves had their differences of
opinion about the structure and scope of the needed reforms, reforms which moreover would meet strong resistance from the conservatives who had been trumped in 1848. Groen and his handful of anti-revolutionary colleagues would have to determine their position in distinction from all these currents. The battle over the principles and shape of the organic legislation required by the Constitution would not just be a theoretical, almost academic debate, but would be attended by political conflict—political passions even—of vehement intensity, as we shall see in the following chapters. The no-popery movement of April 1853 was not just a conservative plot against Thorbecke but also a conflict between Protestant and Roman Catholic. The schools question was the most striking though not the sole political issue in which the relation between church and state and the quality of the new constitutional freedoms were at stake. Brewing as well was a contest over the administration of the colonies. Constitutional matters relating to the power of the King over his ministers and the prerogatives of the Crown as against the rights of Parliament went hand in hand with the gradual development of political party formation. The Dutch parliamentary system under a constitutional monarchy would evolve only slowly and not without conflicts. And the social and economic transformations that nineteenth-century Holland was undergoing—very slowly at first but very noticeably around 1870—would not fail to have their political repercussions as well.

All these things demanded the attention and participation of the Honourable Member of Parliament Dr. Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer. He was a member who had to cope with a number of difficulties all his own. He had to deal with much misrepresentation and vilification regarding his principles and his concrete political decisions. Inside the house he had only a few fellow anti-revolutionaries; outside the house he ran into much misunderstanding, lethargy and dissension, even among friends and fol-
 Luxembourg. Groen was up against a general distaste for politics and political activism, also among the silent majority of Christians in the land, who were unable to deliver many votes to his party in any case because the right to vote was limited to the well-to-do. Repeatedly Groen would be disappointed—by the voters who dropped him in 1854; by friends who, when it mattered most, opted for solutions other than his own, as in the dramatic conflict with prime minister Van der Bruggen in 1857; by colleagues and supporters who in the end retreated into conservatism at the price of an anti-revolutionary approach. In 1865 a disillusioned Groen refused to sit any longer in parliament, and six years later he broke all ties with his conservative-minded friends.

Despite all these disappointments and setbacks Groen’s parliamentary career was not without results. No one else did as much as he for developing parliamentary traditions; no one else was a champion as he was for the rights, privileges and influence of the Second Chamber of parliament. His perseverance in setting forth the anti-revolutionary principles kept alive a school of thought that would gain a large following in the generations that came after him. The battle for free Christian schools would ultimately triumph, not least through his persistence. His contribution to the battle for the church or—to mention something quite different—for the abolition of slavery sooner or later bore much fruit, although not always in the form he had pursued.

Personal trials were not spared Groen either. He could cope quite well with political strife but felt deeply hurt at being so often misunderstood or misinterpreted. More than once he complained what a chore it was to have to explain his principles for the umpteenth time. Why were people not willing to read what he had written so many times already? The lack of understanding on the part of friends touched Groen deeply and caused him much pain. Then there was the overwhelming amount of work connected with his many activities which took its toll on his health, never very
robust to begin with. "Where did you ever learn the art of making 48 hours out of 24?" Professor Van Assen once asked him. A member of parliament, an author of numerous publications, the editor of the daily *De Nederlander* from 1850 to 1855—it all cost a lot of time and effort.

It also cost a lot of money: *De Nederlander* ran large deficits. But that was never the main problem for Groen; as a man of independent means he never had any real financial worries. At his death, the total value of his estate was approximately 2 million guilders—an enormous amount for that time. Its annual revenue must have grossed tens of thousands of guilders, used in part to finance the Groen household which included a valet, butler, cook, scullery maid, livery man and two gardeners. From his last will and testament we learn that he bequeathed considerable sums to nephews and nieces, to various philanthropic societies, to a few select political associates, to his pastor, to the widow and daughter of Merle d'Aubigné, and to a son and grandson of Isaac da Costa.

But if he was spared financial worries, worries about his health were real, though in those hectic years it was better than ever. Going for long walks in the parkland of his estate "Oud-Wassenaar" did him good, as did horse-riding and sea-bathing, and now and then a summer vacation trip, as in 1855, when Betsy and he visited England and Scotland. Still, there were often long periods during the winter months when he could not risk going out to brave the raw weather. As well, his right hand always caused him much pain when writing; increasingly as the years went by, his wife became the writer or copyist of his letters (which became shorter and more concise as a result). Friends would complain sometimes: they were used to speedier replies from Groen, who had always reacted promptly. Then Groen had to admit that he was a tardy correspondent for whom the writing of personal letters had become a physical challenge and almost an impossibility owing to his crowded agenda as well as the growing number of his
correspondents. For important issues he began to refer more and more frequently to his publications: friends and anyone interested would have to make do with those as a substitute for a personal letter.
Chapter 5

In the Political Arena

Professor Van Assen of Leyden kept up a steady and often witty correspondence with his much admired former student and friend Groen van Prinsterer. In 1848 Van Assen busied himself with passing on to Groen all sorts of news items and gossip about his colleague in the law faculty, Thorbecke. Van Assen, who was turning more conservative all the time, felt a strong personal dislike for his successful younger colleague who was so popular with the students. In December, Groen for once gave him a gentle rap over the knuckles. I don’t agree with you about Thorbecke, he wrote; “it would have been very wrong if he had not been elected to the Second Chamber.” Groen thought it was only right that Thorbecke, “the soul of the present-day movement for constitutional reform,” could now at least participate in the deliberations of the lower house of parliament. But he was not at all pleased about the fact that Thorbecke had been kept out of the Government. On the very first day that they met each other in the lobby of the parliament building, Groen invited Thorbecke to dinner at his house.

The political situation in 1848/49

Politically speaking, Groen had ambivalent feelings about his old friend at this time. The newly appointed Ministry was led by Donker Curtius and De Kempenaer. In view of its origin and principles, Groen felt it was “a Thorbecke Ministry without Thorbecke.” At first Groen to some extent had set his hopes on it, but
it soon disappointed him: it accomplished little. Thus he welcomed the day, some eighteen months later, on which Thorbecke presented his cabinet to the Chamber. There was no doubt in Groen’s mind that under Thorbecke’s leadership, vacillation and inertia would come to an end and make way for energy and resolve. A truly liberal regulation of freedom of assembly, of freedom for private education and the regulation of public education, and much more, could rightly be expected from Thorbecke. Had he not himself said, when asked about his political program: Just watch us!

Soon, however, it became plain to Groen that he could do little else but oppose the new minister. Thorbecke’s slogan “Just watch us” turned out to mean, among other things, that he would rather not talk about the philosophy behind his politics. That was unacceptable to Groen. His supporters in the Chamber were limited to three: Aeneas baron Mackay (the Elder), Willem baron van Lynden, and Johan Frederik baron van Reede van Oudtshoorn. But Groen also hoped for support among many conservatives and conservative liberals who were in favour of preserving the Christian character of the Netherlands. He reckoned that they would take his side once he opened their eyes to the Revolutionary nature of Thorbecke’s liberal policies and set against them anti-revolutionary alternatives that were more in line with Christian principles and national traditions. The need of the hour was a fundamental debate about the foundations of government—exactly what Groen always regarded as the very heart of politics and the indispensable condition for the business of law-making.

**Popular sovereignty or popular liberties?**

For the first while, therefore, Groen paid a great deal of attention to the question of sovereignty. In opposition to a whole series of men—Thorbecke, Professor Vreede from Utrecht, the liberal Jan Heemskerk Bzn who rarely spoke up, and a number of other members of the Chamber—Groen defended the standpoint during the
session of 1849/50 that the House of Orange was the hereditary proprietor of the sovereign power. In this, of course, Groen was not so much interested in honouring history and following a particular constitutional theory as in reining in the doctrine of popular sovereignty which wanted to make the King over into an ornament, a mere figurehead, or at most an agent of the popular will. The political situation of the day called for a fundamental debate about the issue.

Among Thorbecke’s enemies the rumour was widespread that he had his sights set on a republic. That was not true; Thorbecke was in favour of the monarchy, but he also desired a clear demarcation between the role of the Crown (the King and his ministers) and that of the representatives of the people assembled in Parliament. The Crown was to rule; and since the King can do no wrong the ministers would be accountable to Parliament, and of course the actions of the King and the ministers should not contradict each other. What the internal relations of the Crown were to be under this system would remain a palace secret, according to Thorbecke. As a minister, however, Thorbecke had to get along with King William III, who had succeeded his father after his death in 1849. The personalities of the king and his chief minister were polar opposites. They differed widely in their bearing and in their approach to politics. The result was that they clashed repeatedly. Step by step the minister tried to push through his will as well as curtail the areas in which the King could make his own personal decisions.

The way Thorbecke dealt with the King and with political opponents was not always very tactful. Many experienced the inscrutable minister as rigid and reserved, hard and haughty. So often he was far more in command of the facts than his opponents, and at times he did not hide this either—in any case he seldom took the time to sweeten the pill for the other man. For that matter, because his opponents were so divided, his position in Parliament was un-
assailable for the moment: he could give himself plenty of latitude. As a result, people began to spread rumours about his domineering personality and his republican sympathies. Is it any wonder that Groen used the opportunity to force Thorbecke to refute these rumours by declaring himself opposed to popular sovereignty and in favour of Groen's tempered monarchy—and if he refused to do so, to draw many supporters away from him? "More than ever, the struggle over principles is personified in Thorbecke and myself," Groen wrote in March 1850. Groen's stance was necessitated by Thorbecke's measures. The Electoral Law sponsored by his Government brought direct elections, which Groen rejected, as we saw, because of their link to the idea of popular sovereignty. As well, Groen had to register his negative vote against the Provincial Act because it strengthened administrative centralism and weakened the tradition of decentralized government.

Public relief or church diaconate?

Very telling in this connection is Groen's strenuous opposition to a proposed Poor Law. This law would have the government regulate not only the public care for the poor but also "the position of the church boards for poor relief in relation to other philanthropic institutions and civil authorities," because (thus ran the preamble) "it is in the interest of the State that the different philanthropic institutions operate in an orderly fashion in order to achieve the common objective." When it came to socio-economic affairs of this kind, Thorbecke was not an inflexible adherent to the well-known principle of laissez-faire. On the contrary, his bill for poor relief would give the State a predominant position in this field and not allow for private poor relief except under strict government supervision.

Groen's opposition to the bill was pointed and unyielding. His objections were twofold. He opposed the proposed regulation, first of all because he opposed giving too much power to government,
and secondly because he feared for the freedom of the Church. Care for the poor was, if anything, a church matter. By seeking to put diaconal services under state supervision the government was acting “un-liberally,” extending its power over areas that were none of its business. The Church and its activities, including its diaconal services, not only ought to be protected from government intrusion but ought to have its freedom guaranteed by the government. Groen therefore placed himself squarely behind a letter to the government from the consistory of the Secession Church in Arnhem. In that letter the consistory declared in advance that if parliament passed the bill, a bill in which it detected “communistic” influences, it would under no circumstances comply with it. In their defence Groen argued that they were not refusing to obey the law, as a small majority in the Chamber judged, but that they were obeying a higher law, for conscience’ sake, in obedience to what they took to be the Law of God.

If the proposed regulation of poor relief was a big disappointment for Groen, he was even more disappointed by the government’s failure to introduce an education bill. This was for him the most important part of Thorbecke’s mandate. And the road was clear, since freedom of education was guaranteed in the Constitution of 1848. Why was the organization of public education left in limbo? Again and again Groen raised the issue, but to no avail.

In Groen’s estimation, the issue of poor relief was a clear illustration of the gulf between liberal and Christian politics. As far as he was concerned, it would be all right if it caused the downfall of the Thorbecke Ministry. In 1853 it did fall, but not as a result of the debate about the poor bill.

**The no-popery movement of 1853**

The Constitution of 1848 had enshrined freedom of religion. This meant that the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands no longer needed any permission to appoint bishops and restore the
hierarchy which had been banned since the Eighty Years’ War. The war of independence from Catholic Spain (1568–1648) had established the Dutch state with a privileged position for the Reformed Church. In 1853 the Pope in Rome announced that he would reinstate the Catholic hierarchy in the Netherlands. On that occasion he gave a speech in which he lamented “the great calamity and misery that was inflicted on the erstwhile thriving Church in the Low Countries by the Calvinistic heresy.” The pope hoped that by reinstalling an archbishop in Utrecht that once famous see would be resurrected from the grave and restored to the glory that had been its portion under his predecessor, the late Paul IV of blessed memory.

No sooner did the papal plans and the speech become known than a storm of indignation arose. When people were reminded of the “blessed memory” of Pope Paul IV they remembered that he too, in 1559, on the eve of the wars of religion, had introduced a new ecclesiastical organization for the Low Countries. They remembered the Spanish Inquisition, the persecution of the “Calvinistic heresy,” and the great Revolt of their ancestors in support of which they had pledged their lives and fortunes. Imagine, once again an archbishop in the Netherlands—in Utrecht, of all places, the bulwark of the Great Protestant party! Think of it, a successor to Granvelle, the infamous cardinal, in the city of Voetius, the great Reformed theologian of 17th-century fame!

Evidently, tolerance for Roman Catholics was not yet deeply rooted in this traditionally Protestant country. The papal plans awakened every last trace of anti-papist sentiments. In 1853, people were closer to the Eighty Years’ War than they are today. Had that heroic struggle been for naught, they asked? The indignation sought an outlet in “no popery” riots and in a flood of pamphlets and broadsides filled with crude sentiment, accompanied by the cry: “Protestants, wordt wakker [awake]; remember Jan de Bakker!”—alluding to the Protestant martyr who was burned at
the stake in The Hague in 1525. Street-hawkers sold toy paper harlequins: “Here’s a bishop on a string, you can also make him swing!” The council of the Reformed Church of Utrecht launched a campaign for presenting a petition. Surely, the King—descendant of the princes of Orange who had established Dutch liberty and sealed it with their blood—the King would not endorse this outrage to the feelings of all Protestants by the installation of bishops who recognized a foreign prince, the Pope of Rome, as head of the Church? The petition had to be addressed to the King, for one could not expect anything from his ministers. Thorbecke stated in the Chamber that the government had no say over the appointment of bishops: by virtue of the Constitution every church denomination, including the Roman Catholic, was free in its internal arrangements.

Meanwhile party politics had seized upon the issue. The conservatives and the moderate liberals saw their chance to get rid of the haughty Thorbecke.

Groen van Prinsterer did not think all that highly of the men who suddenly wanted to champion the Protestant character of the country over against Rome. But neither did he welcome the restoration of the hierarchy; he believed that the Church of Rome in many ways opposed true Biblical religion. Under the Constitution of 1848, however, the internal organization of a church could not be interfered with. He communicated this opinion to Professor Vreede of Utrecht, one of the leaders of the Great Protestant party in whose eyes Groen’s support would be very valuable. However, Groen saw through the political intent of the no-papery movement and did not want Protestantism to be used as a cloak for the purpose of causing the fall of the Government. In addition, Groen utterly abhorred state interference with purely church affairs, no matter whether it concerned the Reformed Church or any other church. Accordingly, he did his best in the editorial pages of De Nederlander to calm down the agitated tempers.
More than anything Groen longed for a revival of Protestantism in his country. From that point of view he welcomed the no-popery movement. But was it really a sign of a revival of Protestantism? His prime objective on this occasion was to make clear how the Christian-historical school was distinct from both reactionary conservatism and Rome-oriented Ultramontanism. He wanted the Netherlands to uphold its Protestant character as a state, born as it was of the Protestant Reformation. Accordingly, he was not happy with the revival of Ultramontanism. Yet in no way did he want to expel Roman Catholics or restrict their religious liberties. That is why he condemned the Utrecht movement as a revival of the 16th-century ultra-Calvinism of Petrus Dathenus, who had always resisted the toleration policy of William the Silent. Groen did not want to combat the Ultramontane danger by curtailing religion but, rather, by reviving the Church in which the Word of God ruled supreme. In the no-popery movement of April 1853 he also tasted the strength of a Protestantism that was conservative and patriotic but not orthodox and evangelical. Moreover, Groen did not forget that the Roman church also harboured “precious truth, albeit obscured” and that Rome was therefore a potential ally against the Revolution.

On April 15, 1853 the Utrecht petition was submitted to King William III in Amsterdam by a delegation led by the pastor-poet Bernard ter Haar. In his speech Ter Haar predicted fatal discord if the bishops were to come—calamities and woes which threatened the Fatherland and against which he, on behalf of the tens of thousands who had signed the petition, begged and beseeched the Royal Throne for protection. The King answered the delegation that his reign had brought him many sorry moments, but that he had always been “encouraged by the childlike love of his subjects.” And, surveying the group of dignified gentlemen, he added: “This day has only reinforced the bond between the House of Orange and the Netherlands and has made it even more precious to my heart.”
That was a fine response—but a hollow one. The King had not said a word about the heart of the matter; he had not so much as alluded to any action to be taken against the appointment of bishops. Still, the words of His Majesty contained more than one would think upon first hearing them. Precisely by giving this reply the King deviated from the advice of his chief minister. Thorbecke had wanted the King to coolly turn away the delegation with a reference to the constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion for everyone. The King threw this advice to the winds—on purpose. Not because he wanted to accommodate the wish of the delegation, but because he wanted above all to be rid of Thorbecke. The latter’s demand that His Majesty either follow the policy of his ministers or else fire them was answered by His Majesty with a curt and matter-of-fact letter of dismissal. The day before, he had taken the precaution of getting Floris van Hall to assure him that he was willing and able to form a cabinet. With this assurance in his pocket the King deliberately went against Thorbecke. He did not commit a coup, nor did he desire a revision of the constitution in a conservative sense, as many then thought; he just wanted to get rid of Thorbecke.

The Van Hall Ministry, once installed, immediately dissolved the Chamber and called an election. In the ensuing campaign the passions aroused by the no-popery movement were still very strong. Few were able to understand, let alone appreciate, Groen’s distinctive standpoint, which was neither liberal nor conservative. He was not re-elected.

**Liberal attacks**
Contributing to that disappointing outcome, no doubt, were the attacks by the liberals on Groen’s ideas. The liberals resented Groen’s calling them children of the French Revolution. They saw in Groen the intellectual leader who threatened truth, liberty and progress with reactionary attempts to turn back the clock. Was
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that not the very current which by means of the no-popyry move-
ment had already succeeded in causing Thorbecke to stumble?

In the summer of 1853, a history teacher in Leyden, not yet 30
years old, launched a counterattack on Groen. His name was
Robert Fruin but nobody had ever heard of him. The Anti-Revolutionary
Constitutional Law of Groen van Prinsterer Explained
and Evaluated was a clever and cutting piece of work. Had Groen
called the liberals Revolutionaries? What else was he himself but
a confused counter-revolutionary who quoted Bible texts to defend
a medieval type of absolutism and who, furthermore, contradicted
himself and choked on fallacious interpretations of history and
liberalism?

Professor Bake wrote Groen to let him know that in his opinion
“Dr. Fruin has grossly neglected to observe the proper courtesy.”
However, a great number of writers who now entered the fray in
the controversy between Fruin and Groen went much further than
the assailant. Groen was painted a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary.
After Groen’s death Fruin could still sigh: “How was it possible
that a man of such talents had really believed in that anti-revolutionary
system?” Such was the wide gulf between liberals and
believers, between the then triumphant liberalism and historic
Christianity.

It would not be the last time that Fruin condemned Groen’s
political activity. But when Fruin in 1858 published his Tien
Jaren, a classic study of the opening decade of the Eighty Year’s
War, Groen acknowledged: “I am very fond of his historical
essays.” In a personal letter to Fruin, Groen wrote that he would
not want to give the impression that he underrated his qualities as
an historian just because they differed with regard to principles.

End of a five-year struggle
Groen’s absence from parliament did not last long: from June 1854
to September 1855. To his own surprise, a by-election in The
Hague returned him to the Second Chamber. The surprise was all the greater because at the time the anti-revolutionary movement was not doing all that well. This became apparent when *De Nederlander* ceased publication. In 1850 Groen had become co-owner and for all practical purposes chief editor of this newspaper published in Utrecht by the firm of Kemink. He had not wanted to let the opportunity go by of having his own organ which could function as a banner and weather-vane around which to rally his party, even though it would cost him many thousands of guilders. For five long years Groen carried on the work of newspaper editor, but then it had to come to a stop. Attempts at finding someone who could take over the daily task had not been successful and the number of subscribers was down to fewer than four hundred. In a long series of editorials in the final fourteen issues of *De Nederlander* Groen assessed the results of his five-year struggle. He would explain to his readers one last time why the movement for which he stood was not counter-revolutionary, reactionary or stationary, but anti-revolutionary. It is a movement which finds unwavering support in Revelation and History and for that reason must set itself:

Against the keynote of our age;
Against the self-idolization of man that places the origin of truth and justice in human reason and human consent;
Against the doctrine which, by denying the highest truth, turns relations upside down in every domain of law and morality; in short,
Against *The Revolution*.

The series concluded with three suggestions: We must not forget the distinctiveness of the anti-revolutionary position, nor its undeniable right to a place in State and Church, nor yet the pre-eminence of the struggle against unbelief and revolution.
The failure of an education bill

An opportunity to demonstrate the distinctiveness of the anti-revolutionary position was not long in coming. The no-popery movement had brought the Van Hall Ministry, but Groen never expected much from it. Rather quickly he came to blows with minister Van Reenen, who had sent a circular to municipal governments which tended to discourage the granting of permission for establishing private schools. And when the minister tabled a Primary Education Bill, it did not appeal to Groen one whit. The proposal did uphold the constitutional freedom to establish private schools but without any financial compensation. And the public school was to remain a mixed school which at most, by way of rare exception, could be separated along religious lines if local circumstances made that desirable and feasible. To many supporters of public education the local option of separation was already too big a concession. That was the view, for example, of Professor Petrus Hofstede de Groot of Groningen. Not only was he one of the leaders of the Groningen School in church and theology, but as a school inspector he also tried to push his modernist and nationalistic ideas. He wanted a mixed school that would be acceptable to people of all persuasions (except the Jewish religion), and that would provide instruction, independently of all dogmas, in the “Christian and civic virtues” of 1806 notoriety.

There were many supporters of such a school in the Second Chamber and their combined weight produced an amendment to the education bill. When the amendment passed, the local option of separation by religion was gone and what remained was the one public school for all religious persuasions, to be serviceable to “the promotion of religion and morality.”

No decision had been made with respect to the Van Reenen bill when the Van Hall Ministry resigned in 1856. But so much resistance had arisen in the land—as evidenced, for example, in a petition drawn up by Rev. Heldring and signed by more than 150
fellow Reformed pastors, a document in which Groen had also had a hand—that the King looked for ways to restore the peace. He first had an official approach Groen, but for a variety of reasons the invitation to form a cabinet finally went to Justinus Jacob Leonard van der Brugghen. A known anti-revolutionary, Van der Brugghen was to head a cabinet that would have to follow a course with respect to school legislation different from that of the outgoing ministry. Ostensibly, no misunderstanding seemed possible about the tack that Van der Brugghen would follow. He was an attorney from the city of Nymegen and was well-known for his support of private schools and Christian education. He was the founder of the first Christian teacher's college in the country. For a short term he had sat as an anti-revolutionary in the Chamber. Nothing but good was therefore to be expected from him. And yet he would be the one to bring profound disappointment to the supporters of Christian education and to cause Groen to abruptly and demonstratively resign his seat in the Chamber.

**Groen and Van der Brugghen**

Right at the start of his new term in the Second Chamber, Groen wrote a letter to Van der Brugghen: Are there any differences between us? — No, was the forthright answer from Nymegen; no differences, just nuances. I place more emphasis on personal conversion and personal conduct as a Christian in politics. I do not see much point in Christian institutions such as a Christian state.

This letter of October 1855 revealed that Van der Brugghen belonged to what later began to be called the Ethicist School. For him, living the Christian life took precedence over Christian doctrine. Religion was a matter of inner conviction. Van der Brugghen had no use for juridical-confessional action against those who assailed the doctrine of truth in the church. In his view “Christian politics” did not exist: Christianity had no constitutional theory of its own about the best form of government, as little as it had its
own agricultural science, mathematics or history. The Christian faith can only exert a cleansing and purifying influence on all those who work in the human activities of education, business or politics. "Christians in politics will not be able to erect a visible Christian state, but as priests of the truth they can enter the lists against the lie, in order that God their King wield spiritual dominion over the hearts of men."

No Christian politics, no Christian state—and no Christian government school either! When the new Primary Education Bill of the Van der Bruggen Ministry was made public, the major difference with the (amended) bill of Van Reenen was that the public state school was again to instruct "in all Christian and civic virtues." Next to this mixed, common Christian school, the free Christian school—this was essential to Van der Bruggen's line of thinking—would in certain cases be eligible for government subsidy.

According to the majority in the Chamber, however, Van der Bruggen's proposal went much too far. By amendment, the possibility of subsidy was struck. Did the bill now differ at all from the Van Reenen bill? Not really. But Van der Bruggen stood by his bill in the amended form. He did not resign. A minister who had come into office in order to satisfy the opponents of the Van Reenen bill was now defending a bill that was no different. From the point of view of political clarity, this was unpalatable.

Van der Bruggen personally had no difficulty with the way things were turning out. He had never held the view that a government could sponsor instruction in Christian doctrine. That the subsidy clause was scrapped was lamentable but not insurmountable: private schools are better off anyway when they are financially independent, relying only on the parents. Moreover, Van der Bruggen knew that the King wanted him to stay on: another Thorbecke Ministry would be most unpleasant for him and would certainly not settle the political differences.
The tragic conflict
On July 20, 1857 the Second Chamber passed the Primary Education Act with a vote of 47 against 13; all the liberals and all the conservatives voted in favour, only the anti-revolutionaries and half the Catholic members voted against. As soon as the result was announced, Groen got up from his seat and walked out of the Chamber. On his behalf, Baron Van Lynden handed a letter to the Speaker. "With sorrow, but prompted by a sense of duty," Groen van Prinsterer resigned his seat in the Chamber then and there. This was his way of signalling, in a demonstrative and unambiguous manner, what extraordinary weight he attached to the way affairs had been conducted and to the net result it had produced.

Groen was deeply disappointed in Van der Bruggen. He even declined to call him "friend" any longer. And when on the following day Van der Bruggen extended a brotherly hand to him Groen refused it unless Van der Bruggen was willing to confess guilt. The painful conflict of 1857 was never healed. Twenty years later, in the very last months of his life, Groen published a "historical contribution" about the conflict, in which he strictly maintained his condemnation of Van der Bruggen's conduct in the year 1857.

There is something tragic about the conflict of 1857. Prior to accepting the post of minister, Van der Bruggen had driven out to "Oud-Wassenaar" to be assured of the support in parliament by Groen as leader of the anti-revolutionaries. The conversation which then took place had caused confusion in the minds of both men. Van der Bruggen got the impression that Groen agreed in broad outline with his explanation of the course to follow in the coming session. And Groen did not get the impression that Van der Bruggen was pursuing a solution that differed in essential points from his own. Of course Groen was aware that there were differences between his juridical-confessional approach and Van der Bruggen's more "ethically" tinged standpoint. He knew that Van der Bruggen was more in favour of private Christian schools and
less enamoured of the public school. But Groen seemed "willingly blind": he did not *want* to believe that their standpoints with respect to the public school diverged in any significant way. It certainly appears as if the two gentlemen that afternoon at "Oud-Wassenaar" had talked right past each other and, filled with personal feelings of goodwill towards one another, had not been very specific. This may explain why Van der Brugghen’s policy statement right at the opening of the session, followed later by his education bill, meant a very painful confrontation with reality for Groen. His friend now turned out to be in favour of the common Christian public school according to the formula of 1806—the very thing that Groen had gone to war against for many years already! Groen wanted an orthodox Christian school because a "common" Christianity was no Christianity. Groen wanted an orthodox Christian state school (albeit separated, depending on local conditions, into a Catholic and a Reformed school), because the Dutch state, born of the Reformation and established on the Reformed religion, could not do otherwise. To engage in politics as a Christian meant for him, unlike for Van der Brugghen, not just to work from a personal inspiration based on the Bible, but to pursue a Christian politics, a Christian state, a Christian public school. For Groen, politics and government were not neutral, technical areas where Christians too, motivated by their personal beliefs, could be active. Politics, government, education were institutions that ought to fall entirely under the law of God.

When viewed in this light, the conflict between Groen van Prinsterer and Van der Brugghen marked a collision between two very real and fundamentally different conceptions. It was no wonder that Groen, who was always keen on distinguishing clearly and precisely what anti-revolutionary thinking entailed, reacted so strongly and that he underscored his standpoint by resigning his seat. He understood, moreover, that it would be a long time before the distribution of political power, which had seemed so favour-
able in 1856/57, would allow for a renewed discussion of the schools question.

The free school
Still, the events of 1857 remain tragic. Van der Brugghen felt misunderstood and shunned. Even the teacher’s college in Nymegen, for which he had sacrificed so much money, time and effort, was taken away from him: many of its backers made their continued support conditional on Van der Brugghen’s resignation from the board. To save it, he no longer set foot in the school, where he used to be busy, often at the crack of dawn, doing administrative work or preparing lessons. But even more than on account of this personal element, Van der Brugghen’s conflict with Groen remains tragic since the type of school that he favoured—the free, parent-controlled Christian school—was the type of school that would ultimately emerge triumphant from the schools struggle. After 1857 even Groen dropped the idea of public schools separated according to religious persuasion; he now saw this as an unattainable ideal. He too now opted for the private Christian school. The lesson he drew from the enactment of the Education Bill of 1857 was that the state school would continue to bear the stamp of a common Christianity. But a common Christianity is worse than no Christianity and so long as theological modernism continued to permeate the Church, the term “Christian virtues” corresponded to reality even less than in 1806.

Groen did fear, however, that many people would allow themselves to be lulled to sleep by this reference to “Christian virtues.” It would be essential, therefore, to insist on a full implementation of the religious neutrality claimed by the state. Justice and honesty now demanded the removal from the Education Act of the term “Christian virtues.” Having learned from his defeat of 1857, Groen altered his strategy. Although the Christian government school remained his ideal to his dying days, at this juncture Groen
acquiesced in the neutral public school. While continuing to regard this neutrality as evil, but as a necessary evil, he switched to countering the evil by means of an active campaign for starting as many private Christian schools as possible. The private school should be the norm, the public school supplementary. That is what increasingly became Groen's political program for education. To promote private education, Groen devoted his energies to the Association for Christian National Primary Education, an organization that became a reality in 1860 after overcoming a number of difficulties. And in the interest of private education Groen again accepted a seat in the Second Chamber.

For some time already Groen's friends had urged him to return to parliament. "Why do you not run again?" Baron Van Lynden had asked; "if our struggle is ongoing, should our captain (of a few in the Chamber, of thousands outside the Chamber) hesitate to join the battle?" Groen gave in. He would not campaign for a seat, but if elected he would again accept membership in parliament. In September 1862 he was back in the Second Chamber.

This last period in his parliamentary career would not bring the desired result either. Groen did not get many opportunities to raise the education question. Neither the Government nor the Chamber cared to stir up that thorny issue again. Nor did they feel the need to alter the situation. Although Groen broached the subject of education whenever possible, neither the liberals nor the conservatives rose to the bait. When he fell ill in December of 1862 the disappointed Groen had a reason—an excuse really—not to show up in the Chamber for several months. He returned in the spring of 1863. Intimately acquainted with the rules and tactics of the parliamentary game, he participated skillfully and intelligently in the debates. They concerned a host of issues, some of which were subjects in which he was only moderately interested or considered himself a mere amateur, such as economic and fiscal
matters. But he did his duty, always looking for an opportunity to raise the education question.

A test for candidates
The year 1864 was another election year. In the Chamber Groen had repeatedly referred to the fact that he represented the people and spoke on behalf of the nucleus of the nation because he happened to be the mouthpiece of the “core” of the national character. His opponents scornfully shrugged their shoulders at this claim; the “people behind the voters” did not count in their eyes, and those who had the vote hardly supported Groen in any significant numbers. Accordingly, Groen got very busy during the election campaign of 1864. Pamphlet after pamphlet flowed from his pen, expounding his political program and his campaign strategy. The strategy became very specific when he gave this advice: “Vote only for those candidates who from conviction are prepared to safeguard Christian National primary education.” Thus private education was to be the shibboleth, the litmus test that would achieve clarity and unity at the ballot box.

Groen’s action was rather unique for its time. Politics was not organized beyond a few voters’ clubs at the local level, political programs existed no more than did country-wide political parties, and the Chamber hardly had anything resembling organized caucus meetings. Politics was still something like an honour, a tradition and a duty for the upper classes. And here was Groen, launching a nation-wide election program, insisting on an unambiguous statement from candidates as to their position on a particular issue and giving voters explicit advice on how to vote. It was highly unusual. Fruin even spoke of political immorality: how could a member of parliament, once he had pledged to his voters to look after their desire for private schools, declare that he had made no promises to the electorate and that he would deliberate in the house “without instruction or consultation,” as the Constitution required?
Not just liberals like Fruin were taken aback by Groen’s conduct during the election campaign; so were conservatives. Among their ranks, too, the battle-cry for Christians schools could cause internal division, and having independent candidates run for the anti-revolutionaries might tip the balance in favour of the liberals in not a few electoral districts. The editor of the leading conservative newspaper saw trouble ahead. He immediately wrote an open letter to Groen offering co-operation on the basis of a revised position with respect to the schools question. Groen was prepared to co-operate but he insisted on the shibboleth test. And indeed a small number of conservatives now began to talk more favourably about private schools.

The new session of parliament did actually have a debate about education. One conservative spokesmen, Baron Van Zuylen van Nijevelt, stated openly that he would be “a warm supporter of whatever can serve to remove the hindrances to private schools.” To everyone’s surprise, Groen now introduced an entirely new solution to the education question. He proposed a revision of article 194 of the Constitution. That was the article that stipulated that “the government everywhere provides adequate public primary education.” Groen wanted to end the unfair competition between free public education subsidized by the state and Christian schools funded by tuition fees and private donations. At the same time his proposal would put an end to the moral coercion of parents who preferred Christian schooling for their children but could not afford it and so had to send them to the public school. In 1864, however, this proposal did not really stand a chance, so Groen withdrew it before it could come to a vote. A revision of article 194 would not be realized until many years later, in 1917, when a new generation of liberals agreed to it in exchange for support from anti-revolutionaries for an extension of the franchise.
Retirement from parliament

Even as the debate was still ongoing, Groen fell ill again. After his recovery, in April of 1865, he resigned his seat. This time for good. There was little prospect in the foreseeable future of revising the education legislation. Groen van Prinsterer decided that as he approached the age of 65 he could make better use of his remaining energy at other tasks. But his controversial conduct that had polarized the elections of 1864 would prove to be a prelude to a political practice that would later be universally accepted.
Chapter 6

Isolation and Independence

Less than an hour after Groen on July 20, 1857 had demonstratively walked out of the Second Chamber on account of the passing of the Primary Education Act, Baron Mackay looked him up in his study at home. He found his friend busy correcting printer’s proofs. Mackay concluded that Groen, having done his duty, would simply soldier on, his conscience clear. In 1865, Groen’s definitive departure from parliament lacked all that drama, but his conduct was not much different. To be sure, he did take a short vacation, but before leaving he assured friend and foe that they could “count on him for the upcoming campaign,” the elections of 1866.

In the ten years still allotted him, Groen would stay active and could always be counted on to raise his voice in the public square, however much he would begin to feel the burden of advancing years. In fact, it was especially during the period of 1866–71 that Groen and the anti-revolutionary movement underwent momentous developments. For years, Groen had done his utmost to expound his Christian-historical worldview and his anti-revolutionary program. As clearly as possible he had laid out the fundamental principles separating him from both liberalism and conservatism. He was of the opinion that such a principled isolation only made his position stronger. In other words, Groen was a proponent of “ideological polarization” for the sake of political clarity. At the same time, the clear, independent position achieved by this strategy in turn made possible pragmatic alliances for specific issues with
political "adversaries," as Groen used to call them. Groen the man and the politician was no less a strong proponent of co-operation—co-operation especially with all those who professed the name of Christ. This last goal was one of the most enduring traits of Groen's character. He wanted to win associates by giving in on subordinate points, by travelling two miles with people when they asked for only one. He always nurtured the hope that by practising patience and by persisting in explaining his ideas to these half-hearted supporters he would be able to convince them, educate them, and get them to travel with him in the right direction.

**Groen turns more radical**

In the previous chapters we have seen how often Groen was disappointed in his hopes and expectations. Many Christians had a powerful phobia about politics. This became apparent again and again in the second half of the 1860's. Repeatedly, many of Groen's Christian-conservative adherents could not and would not follow him. Within his own circles he experienced clash after clash. Each time again, new groups of former associates left Groen in the lurch. These disappointments accelerated Groen's spiritual development and fostered an internal process of radicalization which finally led him to break with his Christian friends. It happened during the election campaign of 1871. On that occasion Groen advised the voters not to vote for any of the anti-revolutionary incumbents. He was only willing to endorse the candidacy of the trio Keuchenius, Kuyper and Van Otterloo. And that is how the anti-revolutionary party's isolation in terms of fundamental principles at last led to its independence in practical politics.

A number of circumstances can be named to explain Groen's increasing radicalization. Around 1870 the Netherlands was beginning to modernize in a faster tempo. New intellectual-spiritual currents and new social relations were arriving on the scene. The *Réveil* was, if not over, at least long past its prime. Theological
modernism and liberalism had evolved further and become more widespread, as had, for that matter, orthodoxy. Under the growing leadership of Dr. Abraham Kuyper, the orthodox people in the land were gaining in self-confidence and beginning to make a stir. In the liberal camp, meanwhile, fresh ideas were developing: self-styled ‘Young Liberals’ began to support workingmen’s organizations and the socialist movement. The new generation that was stepping forward only hastened this process and intensified it. For Groen personally, age played a role as well. His whole life long he had given his all in the battle for the restoration of the Christian character of the Dutch nation. To that end he had staked his career on the battle for the historic confessions in the Church, for Christian content in the nation’s schools, and for the application of Christian-historical principles in the State. His whole life long he had stood guard by everything that was sacred to him—but the results seemed so meagre; he was forced to rethink his entire position and to change his strategy one more time. He was also beginning to be in a hurry, a hurry that made him more radical. Fresh events, moreover, forced him to be resolute and to consciously strike out on new paths. Once again these events occurred in the areas of church, school and politics.

The colonial question

The general elections of 1866 brought a new anti-revolutionary representative to the Second Chamber: Dr. Levinus Keuchenius. Keuchenius had been secretary-general of the Department of Colonial Affairs and a member of the Council of the Netherlands East Indies. He was a capable man of great integrity, an ardent Christian, whose experience and background made him a promising addition to the anti-revolutionary members in the Chamber, especially now that the colonial question had become an urgent issue to deal with.
For several decades, Dutch rule in Java had compelled natives to grow products for European markets. The drawbacks of this official system of enforced cultivation were becoming more and more apparent. The exploitation of the colony in the interest of the motherland was causing economic stagnation and sorry conditions in Indonesian society. Liberals demanded that the colonies be opened up to private enterprise; their creed, after all, banned the State from economic activity and forbade government from cramping personal freedom, also overseas. Conservatives on the other hand defended the cultivation system as indispensable for peace, order and prosperity.

Groen always acknowledged that he had no expertise in colonial policy. Even though his country was an important colonial power, he seemed to have little interest in the subject. Of course, as a member of parliament he had to put his mind to colonial issues, but clearly his heart was not in it. When it came to Dutch overseas possessions, only the abolition of slavery and the work of Christian missions interested him. And it was solely in the interest of parliamentary government as a check against “royal autocracy” that he strongly defended the right of parliament to scrutinize colonial policy.

As for the economic benefits of a colonial empire, Groen had no settled opinion on the merits of either the liberal or the conservative system. “Under whatever system,” he used to say, “the indispensable condition for true blessing in colony and motherland is: Seek ye first the kingdom of God.” Gradually, however, he began to be more and more critical of the cultivation system. His friends were divided on the question. Most anti-revolutionaries, including Groen initially, opted for the conservative system, stripped of a few conspicuous drawbacks. Some of those drawbacks, for example, were the restrictions placed on gospel missions in the Indies, the subjection of the indigenous Protestant Church to government regulations, and instances of scandalous treatment of the
native population. On those issues Groen was never unclear. Many missionaries and missionary agencies benefited from his advice, assistance and advocacy. In 1844, for example, when missionaries of the Reformed Church of America experienced nothing but obstruction in Batavia, the sending church informed Groen about it, and when their treatment soon improved it may well have been due to Groen’s influence in The Hague. Meanwhile, to other members of Groen’s political circle the evils mentioned above were simply inherent in the system followed in the Indies. They managed gradually to win Groen over to their standpoint. Elout van Soetewoude, son of a former liberal colonial reformer, was of the view that the cultivation system was in need of reform. Isaac Capadose, an anti-revolutionary civil servant in the Department of Colonial Affairs, was convinced that the whole system was wrong. What weighed heaviest with Groen, however, was the opinion of Keuchenius. Keuchenius was in favour of a somewhat modified liberal system, mainly for two reasons: to put an end to the business community’s subservience to politics, and to abolish the “credit balance” policy that guaranteed a net annual profit for the motherland—a policy that he said was born of nothing but Dutch avarice and “Mammon worship.” Here, in Keuchenius, one can detect the notion that The Netherlands first of all had a calling to fulfill with respect to its colonies. Abraham Kuyper would later call this Holland’s “moral obligation,” a concept that he laid at the base of his government’s “ethical policy” for the colonies in 1901. A mark of Groen’s altered view had come nearly forty years earlier, when he stated in the Chamber that “the needs of the Javanese should not yield to the credit balance, but the credit balance should yield to the moral and material well-being of the Javanese.”

The Keuchenius motion
The colonial question was to figure very large in the political struggle of the 1860’s. The conflict came to a head, however, over
another weighty issue: the relation between King, ministers, and parliament—an another phase, in other words, of the contest begun in 1848 over the proper functioning of the constitutional monarchy. It had taken some doing in 1866 to form the cabinet headed by the trio Heemskerk, Van Zuylen van Nijevelt, and Mijer. It was a cabinet composed of conservative liberals like Jan Heemskerk Azn and persons who were more or less known as anti-revolutionaries like Jules count Van Zuylen. A not insignificant place in this company was occupied by the Minister of Colonial Affairs, Pieter Mijer—significant because this cabinet replaced that of the liberal Isaac Fransen van de Putte, the cabinet that had tripped over a new cultivation act for the Indies which had been voted down by the conservatives and a group of liberals. From Mijer, therefore, one could expect a cultivation bill revised along conservative lines.

Whatever happened, not the latter. Mijer’s colonial budget (one that he had taken over, for lack of time, from his immediate predecessor Van der Putte) was passed by the Chamber. Mijer then promptly resigned, was succeeded in the Department by a totally unknown person, Nicolaas Trakranen, and three days later was appointed by royal decree to be the next Governor-General of the Netherlands East Indies.

During the debates in the Second Chamber about this most remarkable and in political respects most questionable course of events, Keuchenius finally tabled a motion, which carried by majority vote. The famous motion read: “The Chamber, disapproving of the conduct of the Cabinet with respect to the resignation of the Minister of Colonial Affairs, P. Mijer, proceeds to the order of the day.”

The Keuchenius motion—one of the most celebrated in Dutch parliamentary history—ushered in a volatile period in Dutch politics. Keuchenius’ motives were clear: he viewed the course of events as evidence of contempt of parliament and “a bait for
political immorality." Above all, he detected in it a failure to appreciate the needs of the East Indies. Intervention had been needed for years and now seemed closer with Mijer as minister, and at this very moment Mijer resigned, to become Governor-General, in which function he was but an administrator who could not be expected to initiate renewal and reform.

That aspect of the motion—disapproval of the government’s colonial policy—was more and more overshadowed, however, by the question whether the motion could pass muster constitutionally. The government did not think so. A Governor-General was appointed by the King—from nominations by the ministers, it is true, but nevertheless by virtue of a royal prerogative. According to Heemskerk and his colleagues, Keuchenius and the majority of the Chamber which had voted for his motion had exceeded their competence by assuming a power that was not theirs. By putting it this way Heemskerk embroiled the King in a political conflict, hiding as it were behind the person of the King in an attempt to withdraw the Cabinet from the scrutiny of parliament in certain—not unimportant—matters of governance. As a result, the relation between parliament and government became the issue in a conflict that was to last for two years. Several times the Second Chamber was dissolved, yet the elections did not give Heemskerk a conservative majority; several times a minister suffered a vote of no-confidence and had to step down because the Chamber refused to comply with the will of the Government. Finally, in 1868, the Cabinet was forced to retire for good. Thus the Keuchenius motion became the occasion for the establishment of full parliamentary government in the Netherlands: no government can withdraw its activities from parliamentary scrutiny, and no government can continue in office without the approval of the majority of the Chamber.

His motion may have made history but Keuchenius himself derived little satisfaction from it. Conservatives of every stripe
turned against him and called him “the red Groenian.” How was it possible that a follower of Groen van Prinsterer, who had always defended Orange and the rights of the Throne, now played into the hands of the liberals! On all sides people withdrew their confidence in Keuchenius. He was able to hold on to his seat in the Chamber only with support from the liberals. About his anti-revolutionary colleagues in the Chamber Keuchenius wrote that they “still have little heart for a Christian colonial policy and have little interest besides in developing one for themselves. . . . They do not know conditions in the Indies; all they can think of are the millions that the cultivation system has yielded for years on end for the benefit of the mother country.”

After some time, Keuchenius, deeply disappointed, resigned his electoral mandate. But he was not reappointed to the Council of the Indies. He was even refused free passage to the Indies. Petty revenge, he called it. He returned to Java, a disillusioned and embittered man, to earn a living for his family as a journalist. Even there he was not left in peace. At the beginning of 1869, a prominent conservative newspaper in The Hague published a letter by Keuchenius to an acquaintance, purportedly showing that during the elections of 1866 he had angled for conservative support by posing as a conservative, only to come out after the elections as the radical of the motion of 1866. Keuchenius’ career in journalism did not fare well either. The products of his pen were too frank, too religious, too progressive for the Europeans in the Indies. As a result he saw himself compelled to start over again from the bottom, as he had twenty-five years earlier, by setting up a legal practice in Batavia. The man who had on many occasions stood in for the Governor now had to immerse himself once again in lawsuits involving petty domestic quarrels, arrears in rental payments, and breaches of contract.
Groen and Keuchenius

Whoever may have abandoned Keuchenius, not Groen. Immediately after the storm broke over the motion, he had come to the aid of his valued friend, whom he, Groen, more than anyone else, had persuaded to enter politics.

Unlike most of his conservative-anti-revolutionary adherents, Groen had no objection to the motion as an expression of indignation at the flagrant breach of proper parliamentary procedure. He did feel, however, that it had been a tactical error on the part of Keuchenius to have the motion come to a vote, because in so doing Keuchenius, who was obviously not supported by a majority that was homogeneous, had put himself at the mercy of the liberals. Groen was shocked by the conservatism that turned out to enjoy so much support among his own political friends. Yet that did not keep him from coming to Keuchenius' defence. He did everything he could, in publications and personal correspondence, to stand by him. The underhanded attack on Keuchenius by the conservatives in January of 1869 was countered by Groen with an uncommonly combative tract entitled *Keuchenius and His Adversaries*. In this tract he upheld Keuchenius' reputation as a man, as a politician, and as an anti-revolutionary. Groen declared himself completely in agreement with what he had read in *A Voice from the East Indies to All and Sundry Including the Netherlands*. This was the tract in which Keuchenius had defended his action and had pronounced his harsh judgment, quoted above, of the anti-revolutionary members of parliament, adding an unambiguous appeal to Groen to emancipate himself from such followers. In Keuchenius' opinion, the Christian-historical school would have no future in the Netherlands unless it refused to be any longer the toy of the conservatives and until it formed its own independent party.

Groen tried unsuccessfully to retain Keuchenius for Dutch politics. But when Keuchenius left the country Groen gave him an interest-free loan of five thousand guilders, to be paid back when-
ever convenient. Groen tried to keep Keuchenius’ interest in the anti-revolutionary cause alive: in the years that followed, letter after letter went to Java—a most pastoral activity that testifies of Groen’s devotion to friends, his knowledge of human nature, and his tact. Tact was certainly needed in relating to the embittered Keuchenius who felt abandoned by his own people and who called his stint as a member of parliament the gloomiest years of his life.

Shortly before departing from the Netherlands, Keuchenius had aired his grievances and bitterness to Groen one last time. The latter answered him very tactfully: “You will never be sorry for having defended in parliament, almost alone, at a most critical time, the Christian interests of our nation, even at the expense of your personal interests.” But Groen also corrected him: now that Keuchenius had fulfilled his task so brilliantly he should not be surprised by the consequences of his conduct or by the way the opposition judged him. “You were usually extremely sharp, all the more painful for your opponents because factually you were usually right.” That is how a man is able to console who has not been without similar experiences.

When the Dutch launched a punitive expedition against the sultanate of Aceh in 1873, Keuchenius called it “a reckless atrocity without basis in law.” Conservatives and liberals alike supported this policy of colonial expansion, but Green endorsed Keuchenius’ anti-imperialist verdict and on his recommendation Kuyper published it in *De Standaard*.

A decade and a half later, in the first Christian cabinet under Aeneas Mackay Jr., it would be Keuchenius who held the portfolio of Colonial Affairs.

**Nationalism as idolatry**

Many people took it ill of Groen that he persisted in supporting Keuchenius. Groen on his part complained repeatedly that his friends paid lip-service to his ideas but failed to follow him. Which
of them, besides Keuchenius, had spoken up in the Chamber on behalf of Groen's proposal to revise the education article in the Constitution? Some of these men who had always passed for anti-revolutionaries, like Jules van Zuylen van Nijevelt and Theo van Lynden van Sandenburg, became ministers in conservative-liberal cabinets. Even foreign policy was to become a cause of alienation between Groen and his traditionalist Christian friends.

In the course of 1867 Groen penned two vehement but highly informed and penetrating brochures in which he condemned the politics of the Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck. For many years Groen had maintained close contacts with confessing Protestant circles in Germany. He had been very much influenced by the Berlin Réveil. The Lutheran scholar of political philosophy, Friedrich Julius Stahl, had for some time enjoyed Groen’s highest respect. The Berlin anti-revolutionaries, however, were not wanting in admiration for the achievements of Bismarck, who was bringing the old dream of German unity closer to realization by means of the “blood and iron” of power politics, as demonstrated in the utter defeat of Austria by Prussia in the Seven Weeks’ War. Groen felt called to address a brochure to his Berlin friends in which he characterized the true nature of Bismarck’s politics as “revolutionary” and as asserting the right of the strongest. When the German friends reacted with shock at this criticism, Groen wrote a second brochure in which he repeated his warning against Bismarck. Were Prussians not guilty of making an idol of their Fatherland? A nationalism of this type, Groen urged, which believes it can ignore God’s commandments in the name of national interests, is anti-Christian.

Many contemporaries were more optimistic in their judgment of the international situation. They were startled when Groen, in discussing the Prussian state, made a reference to the kingdom of the Antichrist. In their opinion, things were not that bad; besides, shouldn’t one be happy that Protestant Prussia had vanquished
Catholic Austria? In the Netherlands, too, there were people who concluded that, looking at the outcome, Bismarck's actions were evidently being blessed. They felt Groen's judgment was too sharp, his warnings intemperate—too progressive, actually.

Groen was becoming impatient. Nothing is being done and I am 68 years old, he sighed in a letter to the Christian Reformed pastor Johannes Hendricus Donner. Shall I live long enough to see the end of the schools struggle? Shall I see any results of my lifelong struggle for the anti-revolutionary principle?

Church reform
The growing alienation between Groen and his aristocratic-conservative political friends also had church troubles as a background. In the struggle for restoring the national church as a genuine Reformed Church there had always been differences between the juridical-confessional Groen and many of his Réveil friends. A new regulation had taken effect in 1867 allowing local congregations to appoint their own elders and deacons and to extend calls to pastors of their own choice. The liberal leadership of the denomination had welcomed this new rule as a way to bring greater "democracy" to church government. The orthodox people used the situation to promote reformation from the bottom up by the "lay" members themselves. Especially the young pastor Dr. Abraham Kuyper urged the orthodox to make use of this opportunity. Groen realized that this procedure could lead to conflicts at the local level between lower and higher church boards. Yet he did not steer clear of the conflicts. The church had to be restored; the modernist usurpation had lasted long enough. Was it not evident week by week that Christ was being denied even from the pulpits? A few liberal pastors themselves drew the logical conclusion and exchanged their toga for a civilian suit, like Conrad Busken Huet and Allard Pierson. Events like that did not fail to affect Groen personally. He was in regular correspondence with Pierson, who
was a son of a Réveil family from Amsterdam, good friends of the Groens. Groen’s letters were frank in discussing their differences and in appealing to Allard to return to the faith he had once professed. Yet Groen could only praise the consistency and honesty of these men who had the courage of their convictions, however much he deplored these convictions. But he had absolutely no sympathy for those modernist preachers who stayed on despite the fact that they had quite abandoned the Christian faith as confessed in the church’s formularies, who administered baptism not in the name of the Triune God but in the name of Humanity, and whose sermons openly consigned the resurrection of the dead, the deity of Christ, and everything that rational minds called incomprehensible to the realm of legend or myth. In 1864 Groen felt compelled to enter the lists against one such clergyman, Dr. J. C. Zaalberg. Rev. Zaalberg, one of the pastors of The Hague, made no secret of his liberal views and so created quite a stir in the church.

Must we—may we—tolerate this? Does the congregation have no rights at all? Does doctrinal freedom have no limits at all? Does the pledge given at ordination have no force at all? Is there not a single form of blasphemy that ought to be checked by the church’s superintendents in deference to the conscience of its members?

Thus wrote Groen in his pamphlet *Is There No Cause?*, which was actually a reply to a pamphlet by J. H. Gunning, Jr. This pastor of The Hague had tried to bring peace to his church by pointing out that apostasy would increase as Christ’s return grew closer and that the only thing asked of every Christian personally was to be found faithful upon His return. It was against this sort of passivity, this kind of irenic prose, that Groen protested. Ideas like those of Zaalberg, he maintained, had no rightful place in the church; they
deserved to be opposed on the basis of church law and the confessions.

No real action was undertaken against Zaalberg, however. In reaction, Groen helped found the Confessional Association. Its purpose, according to its constitution of 1866, was "to expel the Modernists by means of the ecclesiastical courts." If a local consistory were hindered in pursuing this goal by the higher church boards, such a consistory would have to separate itself from the Reformed denomination. In the struggle for church reform Groen was no longer afraid of disruption and separation. That was the external side of the profound difference of opinion between Groen and the ethicist-irenical school. What divided them was the confessions as the standard for the entire life of the church.

The schools issue again
The differences between Groen and the ethicist-irenical school manifested themselves as well in the field of Christian education. After the debacle of 1857, Groen's choice for private Christian schools did not enjoy the undivided support of the ethicists. What they especially opposed were Groen's efforts to have the state school observe a strict neutrality and to remove from the law the stipulation to provide "instruction in all Christian virtues." Nourished by notions of an established national church and the Christian character of the nation, they wished to hold on to the idea, also held earlier by Groen, of a Christian government school. Even though these schools had by now only a minimum of the Christian religion, they preferred those over a maximum of the Christian religion in private schools. Would a government school system that strictly observed religious neutrality not deliver the nation's children over to the untrammelled dominance of unbelief?

On this very question there had been a difference of opinion from the beginning of the Association for Christian National Primary Education. Back in 1860, when the constitution and by-
laws of C.N.P.E. were drawn up. Groen had done his utmost to accommodate the ethicists. The Secessionists had been very unhappy about this because they adhered to the maxim, "The private school the rule, the state school supplementary." Groen might have held that position in practice, but he would not go so far as to accept or prescribe it formally. His accommodating posture with respect to the ethicists, however, was of no avail. In the spring of 1868, Rev. J. J. P. Valeton, Sr. resigned his membership of the school association. He did not agree, he wrote Groen, with a number of things, but what had clinched it for him was the growing leadership in the school association by prominent members of the Confessional Association. Valeton wanted to work spiritually, not organizationally; he acknowledged that he believed less and less in outward activities and was afraid of the politics and polarization that would necessarily result from the action of the Confessional Association. In reply, Groen lectured him that it was precisely this fear of being an ecclesiastical or political party, this individualism of the ethicist-irenical school, that was one of the main reasons why Church and Nation remained at the mercy of the arbitrary dictates of the adversary.

Valeton's resignation was only the prelude to a much more vehement conflict. The ethicists generally shared the objections aired by Valeton against Groen's ecclesiastical and political activity, including especially his support of the radical Kuyper.

And it was Dr. Kuyper who at the 1869 annual meeting of C.N.P.E. delivered an address in which he called for a revision of Article 23 of the Education Act, that is, for scrapping the reference to "Christian virtues." Kuyper differed from Groen about the possibility of a Christian state. In practice he was a proponent of a radical separation of church and state because he regarded the reigning view of the state, the principle of the socialistic state, as something "satanic." That is why he wanted everywhere to limit the power of the state and definitely curtail state influence in
education. In response to Kuyper's speech an acrimonious dispute broke out. Nicolaas Beets made himself the mouthpiece of the ethicist-irenicals in their antipathy toward the Reformed Revival led by Kuyper and Groen. To give vent to his grave concerns, he attended the annual meeting, something he had never done before, and during the discussion period he opened fire. The proposal to scrap the word Christian from the law Beets called "criminal"; and Kuyper's characterization of the modern state as a "satanic institution" he called "demonic."

With that, the two standpoints stood diametrically opposed. What collided here were two divergent appraisals of modern life, two clashing views of the nature of church and state and of the essence of Christian political action.

The difference proved unbridgeable. After a few months Beets and others resigned their membership in C.N.P.E. which in the majority followed the policy of its president Groen van Prinsterer. In the meeting Groen had unambiguously thrown his support behind Kuyper. The conflict with Beets touched Groen deeply. In light of his own past he could understand his opponent so well—yet at the same time he could not offer him anything but the sharpest opposition. Groen was in danger of losing heart. As in 1857 and 1866, he had to go through a painful quarrel between brothers and had to break with people with whom he sympathised and who were a part of his own past.

**Groen's despondency**
Groen was so tired of it all that he informed the Utrecht law professor De Geer van Jutphaas in February of 1870 that he was going to withdraw from public life and stop publishing his *Nederlandsche Gedachten*, a new series that he had just begun. De Geer's response came by return mail. Why was Groen surprised by the conflict with Beets, and with Chantepie, Bronsveld and all those other ethicist ministers? Surely he had known for a long time
that when it came to theology, church and politics they did not side with Groen but were actually as hostile to him as the liberals and the modernists? Acknowledge that opposition, forget about co-operation, and our position will be purer and clearer.

De Geer’s letter was sharp, radical, and without any consideration for “those ethicist friends who are so little ethical.” But he achieved his goal. Groen, still somewhat hesitant, repeating the thought three times as if to persuade himself, affirmed to De Geer: “At bottom I agree with you completely. We have to accept the battle. Less than ever should we shrink from polemics with the ethicist-irenical school.” Groen resumed his former role, girded up his loins, and inquired how plans were shaping up for starting a Christian-historical daily newspaper. The paper was launched two years later, on April 1, 1872, under the name De Standaard. Editor-in-chief was Dr. Kuyper. For all its start-up difficulties, the paper began to make a tremendous contribution to the growth of the anti-revolutionary party. Moreover, the appearance of a trusted daily provided the aging Groen with the opportunity to withdraw from the polemics of the day.

**Groen’s final break with conservative Christians**

The growing alienation between Groen and his Christian friends in the struggle in church, education and politics made him increasingly aware that he was approaching a crucial turning point in his life: an open breach with his Christian friends. Changes in strategy during Groen’s career always had a long prehistory. His whole personality, his habit of turning things over in his mind and weighing the pros and cons, his need to always look at all nuances, precluded quick, decisive choices. His loyalty to earlier standpoints, especially his loyalty to former friends, got him to acknowledge only with the greatest reluctance that he had to follow a different course. But once this decision was made, Groen would be radical in carrying it out and defending it.
Groen was not in the habit of wearing his heart on his sleeve. His loyalty to friends and associates of earlier days, even after differences had become apparent, was great. His appreciation for their qualities remained unabated. And he was glad to underscore any point on which they agreed. “For all our differences,” he wrote in a private letter, “I always respected Gunning, grew to love him, and valued him with gratitude as one of the most outstanding confessors of the Gospel in word and in deed that I have met on my life’s journey.” About Beets he declared that in the struggle for church reform he had been his most formidable opponent; nevertheless, for more than thirty years Beets had been “a powerful and blessed preacher of Christ and Him crucified.” Groen’s contemporaries did not always understand this kind of separation between person and principle. As a result, Groen’s resolute action during the elections of 1871 caught them off guard as not only incomprehensible and needlessly radical but also as totally unexpected.

Despite all the pressure put on him, Groen stood his ground. However difficult it was for him, he broke all political connections with old friends like his nephew Baron van Wassenaer and endorsed only Keuchenius, Kuyper and Van Otterloo as his candidates. None but these three, Groen announced, were true representatives of the anti-revolutionary voice in politics. Anyone who wanted to support that voice, in particular with respect to education, had to cast their ballot for this threesome.

Groen’s tactical turn-about, however significant as a clear display of independence in fundamental principles and practical politics, had been too abrupt and too drastic to be successful in the short run. None of the three was elected.
Chapter 7

Fighting to the End

The election campaign of 1871 was the last in which Groen exerted himself as the factual political leader of his movement. My work is bounded by the walls of my library, he once joked. To be sure, he remained the spiritual leader of the anti-revolutionaries; he continued to stimulate them, advise them, defend them, as he had always done. But he was happy to leave the issues of the day to the guidance and direction of others—especially to Dr. Kuyper. After April 1, 1872, the latter was able, via De Standaard, to address the Dutch public on a daily basis with unrivalled talent.

Abraham Kuyper: leader in his own right

Groen and Kuyper first became acquainted in 1864. At that time Kuyper asked Groen’s mediation as archivist of the royal family for obtaining documents from archives in Berlin which Kuyper needed for his edition of the writings of the Polish reformer John à Lasco.

Very slowly a more intimate relationship developed between the éminence grise of the Christian-historical movement and the brilliant young pastor who, after his conversion to orthodox Calvinism in the quiet village of Beesd, soon began to make his voice heard in broader circles. With great vigour, Kuyper joined the struggle for church reform as this had entered a new phase since 1867. As a minister in Utrecht and then in Amsterdam Kuyper drew large crowds. He continually initiated new activities and quickly gained
a leading position. His organizational and journalistic talents were key assets in this.

Groen followed Kuyper’s development with intense interest. Where necessary, he stimulated and advised him. There were vast differences between the reserved, disciplined, aristocratic man of law Groen van Prinsterer, and the exuberant populist of unbridled energy, the theologian Kuyper. With mounting fascination Groen had to acknowledge that alongside him had arisen a leader of stature for the orthodox people in the land.

Alongside Groen. The differences between their personalities and their conduct were too great to be able to say: under Groen. Kuyper was a leader in his own right. That was fine with Groen. He had never wanted yes-men as followers. He did not deny the differences in vision and strategy. When he disagreed with Kuyper he did not hide it. But outsiders, who never stopped trying to play Groen off against Kuyper, mistook their man. The same was true in the case of insiders who complained to Groen and sought his help whenever they were startled by Kuyper’s tempo or surprised by his radical stance or his tactics. Groen let them know that he no longer concerned himself with the political action of the day and confidently left that to Dr. Kuyper. And Dr. Kuyper, he added, badly needs the trust and support of you, his spiritual kin, against the fierce attacks of others.

Many people took it ill of Groen that he showed such solidarity with Kuyper. They reproached him for letting himself be taken in tow by that demagogue and radical democrat. Quite a number of these people had already begun, after 1866, to bid goodbye to Groen on account of his defence of Keuchenius. And if Groen’s conflict with Beets had only widened the gap, Kuyper’s conduct made it unbridgeable. Christian people with a sense of history had abhorred the Revolution and gladly called themselves friends and followers of Groen. But Kuyper, with his unstoppable energy and his relentless mobilization of the common people, appeared to them
as “vulgar” and “radical”—a kind of Cromwell aiming at a dictatorship of the Reformed “little folk.” In this way the gap widened between the old Réveil and the new Reformed Réveil, and Groen became more and more isolated from his former Christian friends.

A return to historical writings
The fact that Groen could leave it to Kuyper and others to take care of the everyday activities and polemics did not mean that he could now slow down and take it easy. On the contrary, he continued to be sought out for collaboration, support, information, guidance. His correspondence increased rather than decreased.

A new series of Nederlandsche Gedachten, which Groen had started in 1869, demanded much time and energy. His age began to weigh him down. Every winter he suffered from colds and asthma attacks that kept him indoors for weeks on end and further weakened his constitution. Yet the work kept coming in. I am old, weak and tired, he would sigh, and overburdened with work. Still, he did not spare himself. Groen’s output during the last five years of his life is simply astonishing.

Next to his swelling correspondence and the Nederlandsche Gedachten there was the production of fresh historical works. His passion for such work had never died, had at most been temporarily suppressed by other tasks. After his departure from the Chamber in 1857 he had started a new series of Archives which had grown to five volumes. Once he returned to politics he had not found time for the royal archives. There were difficulties in arranging for a successor, possibly due in part to Groen’s personal relation to King William III, which was not as good as to the previous monarchs. A retired army officer finally took over supervision of the archives; a disappointed Groen resigned in 1871. However, Groen the historian kept on publishing. He contributed a number of studies when the 50th anniversary of the restoration of the Kingdom was celebrated in 1863, and again when the Eighty
Years' War was commemorated a few years later. In his *1813 Remembered in the Light of History* and in several other publications he raised his voice against the bombastic revelry full of extravagant nationalistic sentiments and smug self-congratulation. To be sure, Groen felt there were plenty of reasons to be thankful as a nation for the restoration of liberty and unity. But there were also reasons for the nation to humble itself. What had the people of the Netherlands done with the liberty and unity that was restored? They had listened to the slogans of the Revolution more than they had paid heed to the call to “fear God and honour the king.” Prospects for the country and its people looked sombre. Groen therefore closed his occasional essay with a call to repentance. Our nation await only rich promises if we are but conscious of the need “to return to the God whose favour, forfeited a thousand times, may yet be laid away for us.” A third edition of the *Handbook* came out in 1871, in places significantly revised, and supplemented with one of Groen’s commemorative pamphlets covering the last quarter century. That same year Groen had the 1848 brochure *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* reprinted and presented as a gift to every teacher who was a member of the Association for Christian National Primary Education. A wealthy Amsterdam businessman underwrote a fourth printing of the *Handbook* for free distribution to hundreds of schoolteachers.

Groen’s final years were especially a time, as he himself put it, of recapitulation and historical reflection. Sometimes this was triggered by the publication of someone else’s work. A Catholic author protested against the commemoration of the battle of Heiligerlee which had opened the Eighty Years’ War. What was there to celebrate for Catholics? What else could Louis of Nassau, the brother of William the Silent, be in Catholic eyes but a foreign adventurer, a rogue, and a religious hypocrite? Groen’s polemical nature could not let this pass, all the more because the author’s use of the *Archives* was unreliable.
Circumstances also induced Groen to cast his mind over his own lifetime. He had always had a keen sense of the historical significance of his many contacts with a wide variety of people. Whether they were lengthy epistles or only brief memos, he had carefully saved them all, along with his replies and sometimes with a telling notation, in order that posterity might know the true course of historical events. Thus in 1876 he published a collection of letters pertaining to the conflict with Van der Brugghen over the education bill of 1857. Similarly, he published the correspondence with his bosom friend Isaac da Costa, with his old friend and political opponent Thorbecke, and with Johan Adam Wormser, whom he had once called his "privy counsellor" from Amsterdam. All these volumes were frank and honest contributions to the study of recent history. In *Nederlandsche Gedachten* he looked back on his own life. From now on, he wrote on the first page of Volume V, dated April 1873, this series will be devoted to historical materials, largely autobiographical. “For far too long I have been swept along by the issues and debates of the day; after forty years I take my leave, although for the time being I remain in service to do work that is more suited to my advancing years.” And then followed an overview, in instalments, of a lifetime of struggles that Groen had waged.

**A controversial beheading**
From March 1874 to September 1875 he interrupted the publication of *Nederlandsche Gedachten*. Other work had to be given priority. A new book had come out by John Lothrop Motley, an American diplomat and historian who was very much interested in Dutch history. Motley was a liberal who through his studies had come to admire the Dutch struggle for freedom and independence from Spain. In Motley’s eyes, the Dutch Revolt had been a grandiose event and Dutch liberty and tolerance was a glorious legacy and an inspiring example for all mankind. After first publishing
The Rise of the Dutch Republic he followed it up in 1874 with a study entitled The Life and Death of John of Barnevelt. It was an extremely well written book that carries the reader along in the tangle of events of the Twelve Years’ Truce between Spain and the Republic during 1609–1621, including the story of the controversy in church and theology over the doctrine of election. Motley had little sympathy for the strict Calvinists and even less for their protector, Maurice of Orange, in whom he saw nothing but a power-hungry prince who condoned, if not contrived, Barnevelt’s execution. By contrast, Barnevelt, the political leader who had opposed Prince Maurice, was Motley’s hero, the champion of toleration and civil liberty who paid for his life of service to the country on the scaffold.

Although there had been a few contacts earlier between Motley the historian and Groen the royal archivist, the latter only learned of Motley’s work through a review of it in a French periodical. After reading it Groen sighed to his publisher Kemink that it would be “well-nigh impossible” for him to remain silent. In view of his age and multiple preoccupations he at first thought that he would not be able to find the time to write a full-length review. Perhaps he could confine himself to a reprint, with an explanatory foreword, of large portions of his Introduction to the volume in the Archives that covered the period in question. A careful reading of Motley’s book, however, made Groen realize that this plan would not do. It was quite apparent that Motley had used the Archives very poorly. Nor had he utilized such pertinent articles as those that had been published over the years by Robert Fruin.

There was no longer any hesitation in Groen’s mind: Motley deserved a full-length refutation. His book not only misrepresented the characters of Maurice and Barnevelt, but it also drew a caricature of the controversy over the doctrine of election. Groen concluded that for all its fine literary qualities, Motley’s account rested on a biased, partisan reading of the primary and secondary sources
and so gave a completely false picture of a period in Dutch history fraught with controversy. In a letter to one of his friends Groen formulated his most succinct and most scathing opinion of Motley's book: “More poetry than history.”

And so Groen set to work. Fruin gave him permission to quote lengthy passages from his works. From a wide variety of sources Groen dragged up all sorts of citations and strung them together to form a masterful refutation of Motley's book. It took him months of hard work, as he admitted himself, months in which he “lived more in the seventeenth century than in our own.” When at last he was finished, he confided to a friend that “the exertion has been quite taxing at my old age and I feel very tired.” Midway February 1875 Maurice et Barnevelt rolled off the press. It was written in French in order to vindicate the memory of Maurice and the vital principle of the Dutch Republic before an international tribunal. The book does not make for an easy read: it is a fat volume of direct quotations, texts and archival documents, judiciously grouped into a whole to present the careful reader with the historical truth. Fruin called it “a collection of exhibits in a lawsuit” from which anyone who wants to form a judgment in the case can draw his own unmistakable conclusions.

A Christian-historical testament

In the fall of 1875 Groen resumed his publication of Nederlandse Gedachten. The December issue contained a contribution formulated as only Groen could, referring to it as “my Christian-historical Testament, as the end of life draws near”:

With the publican’s prayer: O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.
With the wisdom of the Heidelberg Catechism: my only comfort in life and death.
With the shout of joy: I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

With the battle-cry of the Reformation: Put on the whole armour of God, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. *Verbum Dei manet in aeternum:* The Word of God endures forever.

With the motto: Not a statesman! A confessor of the gospel.

The issue dated April 29, 1876 contained an announcement at the bottom of the last page stating that the author was seriously ill. All that work had exhausted his weak constitution.

**Groen's death**

For many years Groen had complained about his physical weakness and his aging, about being overly tired and overloaded with work that seemed never to come to an end. Every winter, sometimes even into spring, he was ill or in poor health, and for weeks on end he dared not go outside. And yet he had persevered—“with eyes fixed Above, and with grave concerns about church and nation,” and sustained “by the inestimable help of my beloved and faithful spouse.” The illness that confined him to bed toward the end of April did not appear serious at first. His wife told about it later—how he had asked her to read from the Bible and recite the Apostle’s Creed, and how he had repeated after her in a weak voice. Then his condition had worsened. In a state of near-delirium he seemed to be repeating whole passages from historical authors he had once read. But later he became calmer. With folded hands he confessed: “Christ alone.”

The end came on May 19, 1876. Mrs. Groen formulated the sober text of the mourning-card: “Passed away today, my beloved husband GUILLAUME GROEN VAN PRINSTERER, with unwavering faith in his Lord and Saviour, to Whom he had dedicated his life.”

Four days later he was buried in “Ter Navolging,” the cemetery.
once founded by his father. At the request of the deceased, the
interment was held in a sober, traditional style. The pallbearers
wore orange on black. Speakers from every level of society
expressed their gratitude at the graveside: the old friend, Elout van
Soeterwoude; Rev. Gunning, who led the funeral and who called
this childless man the father of a great family. Groen’s nephews,
Baron van Wassenaer van Catwyck and Thomassen à Thuessink
van der Hoop; Donald Mackay, soon to be the 11th Earl Reay, son
of Groen’s friend, who applied a verse from the *Aeneid* to the
deceased: “The world revolved, he stayed the course”; also Antony
Brummelkamp Jr., the son of Groen’s closest Secession friend,
who spoke of the debt his denomination owed the departed ever
since the year 1837. Various pastors spoke, as did Mr. A. Meijer
from Rotterdam, who introduced himself as “but a simple school-
teacher” but a schoolteacher who had experienced the schools
struggle from the beginning! It would also be the teachers’ asso-
ciation of the private Christian schools which some eight years
later was allowed to place a large memorial tablet in the wall of
“Ter Navolging.” The grave-stone itself was a sober testimony,
just as Groen’s life had been a sober testimony: next to names and
dates it bore only a reference to Revelation 7: 9–17.

Mrs. Groen survived her husband by some three years. Their
marriage had been a very good one; we know from some of the
things they themselves have said, and from what others have said
who knew them, that their relationship had been very intimate and
their appreciation for each other had run deep. Betsy Groen felt a
profound loss, but she knew everything was alright, and she
believed in a speedy reunion. As she waited for the Lord to call her
home too, she took care to settle Groen’s affairs, look after the
inheritance, and make arrangements for the preservation of his
books, papers and letters, which were donated to the National
Library of the Netherlands. She passed away on March 14, 1879.
Assessments of Groen van Prinsterer and his life's work by contemporaries and later generations have varied from boundless admiration to thorough vilification. Leaving both extremes for what they are, we still have a number of characterizations that repay a closer examination. They concern both his person and his Christian-historical worldview.

An impractical idealist?
Groen van Prinsterer is said to have been an impractical ivory-tower scholar whose aristocratic life-style elevated him far above the needs of the times and removed him far from the common man. He propagated a conservative system of thought and was essentially a man of the past who by his opposition to the liberal principles was in danger of becoming an anachronism in his own day.

That is at bottom how many assess the man, even if couched in words of praise about Groen’s great dedication to his ideals, his enormous productive energy, his intelligence, and his winsome personality. Now, judging situations and certainly judging people tends to be very subjective, which is all but impossible to overcome. We would like to review a couple of facts that appear important for a more balanced assessment.

Admittedly, while Groen’s critical insight and prophetic vision cannot fail to impress those who study his life and career, they are also irritated by his intellectualistic approach, his one-sided emphasis on principles and starting-points, and his almost patho-
logical inability to be specific. It is indeed maddening to see him, after forty years of political leadership, write very calmly: Do not look to me for contributions to an anti-revolutionary program for fiscal, colonial and administrative affairs; for that you will have to consult other people.

And yet, when we read Groen’s books and correspondence we judge less negatively about his relation to practical affairs. Among parliamentary historians friend and foe acknowledge his great skill and talent as a parliamentarian. His leadership of the anti-revolutionary party can scarcely be written off as impractical—provided that nineteenth-century circumstances are taken into account, to which much was foreign that today is normal. Election programs and election promises were novelties that Groen introduced when almost no-one wanted them. He was also an able political tactician, although it cannot be denied that he often made decisions at moments when others were insufficiently prepared for them. For that matter, his leadership bore a peculiar character. Groen did not have a political organization at his disposal. To be sure, he did try to compensate for that lack, for example, with the meetings of the Christian Friends, the Association for Christian National Primary Education, and the Confessional Association in the Reformed Church, and with a never-ending flow of publications—but these all remained band-aid remedies. His contacts with even the most prominent representatives of his movement rarely went beyond the strictly personal level. Groen’s leadership was therefore based on respect for his person and on the personal attachment of his friends and followers. Leading a somewhat reclusive life, and always very busy, Groen was not the man who through easy socializing would try to bind all sorts of people to his person and his positions. Does that mean that he was far removed from the common run of people? This complaint does not seem entirely unjust; and yet it should not be exaggerated. In Groen’s day, politics was the domain of the elite—and not just on account of the limited fran-
chise then in force. This factor must certainly be taken into account when assessing Groen’s record as a politician. Groen may well have been more in touch with “the masses” than his fellow parliamentarians; he was not entirely wrong when he claimed to speak for “the people behind the voters.” “Let the liberals extend the franchise,” wrote a defiant J. van Beest van Andel, a grain dealer from Maastricht who was a prominent member of the local Secession church and also functioned at times as Groen’s political agent; “especially in the countryside the middle and artisan classes are anti-revolutionary.” Precisely in those plain and homely circles Groen found a hearing for his political struggles.

Nor should one lose sight of the fact that Groen had to try and reach the people via publications. He never went on a speaking tour in order to gain a wide popular following. His arenas were the Second Chamber and his private study. He got through to the people by means of open letters To the Voters in which he explained his principle and his program, in a time when it was not common for the working classes to subscribe to a newspaper. Groen reacted to developments in newspaper editorials, broadsides and brochures, and afterwards he held himself accountable to the voters by publishing his Parlementaire Adviezen, a selection of his speeches in the Second Chamber—not exactly reading material for the common man calculated to reach the tens of thousands. Groen himself knew that he lacked the talent of writing simple prose for the general reader. That is exactly why he stimulated other writers, like Coenraad Mulder, an instructor in the Secession seminary in Kampen, and especially Abraham Kuyper. This does not mean, however, that there was no bond between Groen and “ordinary” people. To be sure, Groen was a dignified man of gentle birth, but not too dignified on Sundays to slide into the pew next to the “ordinary” churchgoer. He was as much at ease with carpenters and schoolteachers as with kings and ministers. Those people also showed their appreciation for him.
High society and common people

In the summer of 1867 Groen paid a visit to the northern provinces. He was met at the train station of Leeuwarden, the provincial capital of Friesland, by a small crowd of people. An observer wrote to Mrs. Groen: “I think Mr. Groen will have experienced in Leeuwarden that the hearts of the common people beat warmly for him. There were no courtly ceremonies, as the big world is in the habit of offering. No, there was a natural and unadorned cordiality which can also be shown without fancy words, in a warm handshake and a tear of joy, as I noticed more than once.”

What a glaring contrast, also in the eyes of the Groens themselves, with all kinds of official gatherings! Their social position obliged them to be present from time to time at certain receptions and formal occasions. These they did not enjoy very much, especially not Mrs. Groen, with her Reformed-puritan bent: in general she felt that such occasions were “time lost.” Groen himself wrote to De Clercq in 1829: “I need not tell you that to spend many hours in the noisy and boring circles of society is not my idea of a good time; nay, I fear that at those Hague teas my face may at times have borne a sign of boredom which you at least will not have failed to notice. My dear wife loves those réunions as little as I do and we avoid them as much as possible.” A few years later Groen confided: “I was terribly bored at those long dinners.”

What Willem and Betsy did enjoy was meeting good friends and acquaintances. During their stay in Paris in 1836, while Groen and his hired copyists spent many working days in the archives, they had intensive contact after hours with circles belonging to the French Réveil. It contributed greatly to getting Mrs. Groen reconciled to her stay in that city—her detestation of the capital city of the Revolution was very great. “At times I can’t believe I am in Paris, in that city and among those people against which I have had such strong prejudices since childhood, prejudices that only grew with the years, so that I left home reluctantly and would
never have come here of my own free will. I was never able to understand, or abide, how people from our country could go to Paris for pleasure.” In France, and on their way back through Germany, Groen sat in the visitors’ gallery during sessions of popular assemblies; he also paid visits to all kinds of scholars, statesmen and princes to talk about subjects of common interest. In part those were, of course, normal tourist activities; sometimes they resulted in a correspondence that would last for years. Naturally, during their stay in Paris they visited the sights and toured the surroundings. The grounds around the palace of Versailles, laid out in classicistic style, elicited from Groen the comparison to “a beautiful women laced in a corset and dressed in a broad, stiff gown.” Apparently he found both very artificial. A visit to the celebrated Panthéon, where France’s famous sons are buried, gave him occasion to record the following wry reflection: “As we walked through the underground tunnels a number of names were pointed out to us, of many of whom it may justly be said that it is good they are buried here otherwise posterity would not know they were great men.” Similar humorous samples occur more often. When Van Assen once went on and on about his preference for English over German, Groen replied mockingly that he was not so sure English was healthier for the soul than German.

A persistent admonisher
Such sober rebukes were not absent from Groen’s contacts with friends. Sometimes they bore a more serious character. On one occasion he reminded King William I of the need to observe the Lord’s Day when the latter had announced that he would leave for a journey on Sunday. Groen for the rest maintained good relations with some members of the royal family. Whenever a new publication of his came off the press he would send a copy to Princess Louise, who was married to the king of Sweden, and to Prince Frederik, with whom he even exchanged thoughts about
political topics from time to time. Groen felt most free to speak his mind in personal conversations or correspondence, if necessary to bring differences of opinion to the fore. Then he could be forthright, without jeopardizing personal relationships and mutual respect. He rather disliked large gatherings exactly for this reason. Thus in 1861 he declined a nomination to the Royal Academy of Sciences. He let Koenen know that interacting with the leading spokesmen of those of other minds “is not always pleasant when one is subject to that kind of exposure.” One sometimes has to be a witness in such company, and Groen had discovered about himself “that in gatherings of that kind my witness at times is either held back or is paralyzed by the nature of the meeting.”

Groen did not lack candour when communicating man-to-man. A letter to an acquaintance who had defected to Roman Catholicism ended with the words: “wishing you God’s blessing, with sadness and sympathy.” When Professor Bake, a haughty liberal critic before 1848 but since then milder and more conservative, had become an old man, Groen appealed to him urgently “to surrender completely to Christ at the eleventh hour.” In his own family Groen was not always followed either. His father worried about the spiritual development of his son. His brother-in-law Amshoff was an out-and-out adherent of the Groningen School of theology; after Groen had read the sermon Amshoff had delivered on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of his ordination, he asked his wife to write the brother-in-law that the sermon “has been received with thanks. I dare not say much more about it. It is comely (lief), but alas, Christianly speaking, it is tasteless (laf). It lacks the salt of the gospel.” Groen once described his attitude toward relations of this kind as follows: “When we differ on fundamental principles we necessarily grow apart; but avoiding one another’s company for that reason is going too far!”

Groen could be critical not only of outsiders but also of supporters. A fine example of this is his relation with the Secession
Prof. Brummelkamp whom he once referred to with great appreciation as “my opponent, but even more my comrade-in-arms.”

Sermons and preaching styles could come in for remarks that went home: “If only we could be spared for once those long drawn-out homilies.” About the conduct of orthodox Christians he once remarked: “In our country, orthodoxy dresses itself too often in unattractive forms and betrays want of Christian wisdom.” Groen did not spare them his criticism, but neither did he allow that to keep him from defending those same orthodox people when in his opinion they were being misrepresented. He did this, for example, in the French-language tract of 1861 that dealt with The Anti-Revolutionary and Confessional Party in the Reformed Church of the Netherlands.

A faithful brother
Groen’s well-known self-characterization, “Not a statesman, but a confessor of the gospel,” is the key to his public life. In the arena of politics and in the world of learning Groen was above all a confessor of Christ. He was an ecumenical Christian. He enjoyed going to church. How often does his correspondence not mention that the sermon that Sunday had been “most edifying.” He was involved in the ordinary activities of the local congregation. For many years he served as an elder in the Walloon church (the French-language branch of the national church). He performed his obligations as a member with great care. When the illness that would be his last had already begun to sap his energy he still wanted to go to church that Sunday morning because a vote would be taken about church affairs that he was concerned about. Groen was a churchman in the fullest sense of the word. But he was no narrow-minded sectarian. He looked for what united, not what divided, preferring to emphasize confessional unity on central issues and allowing for a variety of views on peripheral matters. He longed for the unity of the Body of Christ but knew of its
brokenness in practice, a brokenness that needed to be overcome through spiritual oneness. He would go and hear Secession preachers as readily as Reformed ministers: after all, both belonged to the "Reformed persuasion" which to him constituted a single unit. We know that he was once denied communion in a Secession church. He could not agree with such an attitude, but he did not complain about it nor bear the Seceders a grudge or turn his back on them: he never stopped visiting their worship services and continued to give generous sums for their churches and schools.

The Seceders did not spare Groen their criticism in regard to church and school. For instance, Groen's Association for Christian National Primary Education had its counterpart in their Association for Reformed Elementary Education. Nevertheless, they remained grateful to Groen and recognized him as a brother in the faith. The question has sometimes been raised whether Groen would have gone along with the separation from the national church that took place ten years after his death, the so-called Doleantie. One can only speculate. Some people are convinced he would have joined. To be sure, it cannot be denied that by endorsing Kuyper's activity after 1868 Groen embarked on a course that would lead to the breach of 1886. Yet Groen himself acknowledged that he was uncertain where developments would lead in the future. One reason why some people keep raising the question is to justify their own choice of denomination, in total disregard of the changed situation. In any event, Groen's aim was vital: it was to restore the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.

Throughout, Groen was respectful of and grateful for sincere convictions held by people with whom he otherwise differed profoundly. Typical is a musing that he wrote down after visiting a hospital for the poor that was run by Catholic nuns. He could only praise their sacrificial show of love. "Is it from love of Christ, or to earn salvation? Neither the one nor the other can be discounted, especially not the first. While the Roman church persists in many
errors, there is many a happy inconsistency in their practical application. The tree is known by its fruits.”

**Stewards and benefactors**
The Groens lived simply. To relieve their household staff on Sundays they took sandwiches with them which they ate between services in the consistory room of the village church. Every day Mrs. Groen led in devotions with the maids. Groen surrendered his manorial rights in the village of Ursem in 1850, after having given the villagers a considerable reduction in monetary dues eight years earlier. Mrs. Groen especially felt weighed down by the duty to be good stewards of the properties entrusted to them. When they had moved into the splendid house on the Korte Vijverberg, inherited from Groen’s father, she sighed, “May my heart not grow attached to it.”

The Groens spent much time and money on charity. Mrs. Groen led a sewing circle for girls from the lower classes; she maintained a school for pauper children; and every year on her birthday a new cottage was opened where a poor working-class family could come and live. Husband and wife gave liberally to all in need.

Elout van Soeterwoude once recalled how gratitude would fill the hearts and eyes of the neighbourhood poor as they passed the home of the Groens. If ever there should be a bread riot, they had assured Elout, the house of Groen will be spared. So numerous were the requests for financial assistance during the last years of Groen’s life that he had to cut back. Countless churches, school associations and philanthropic institutions appealed to his purse. Da Costa, and later his widow, were supported financially by Groen and by a number of others, but Groen was also willing to make a contribution toward paying off the debts of the liberal historian Bakhuizen van den Brink. Groen subscribed for three thousand guilders toward the start-up capital for Kuyper’s paper *De*
Evaluation

Was Groen van Prinsterer a conservative?
Was Groen, a man who accepted smallpox vaccination and regularly enjoyed recreation on the beaches of Scheveningen—was this man a conservative? Was he a traditionalist, history-minded to a fault, a static thinker? Did he favour a type of feudal society with aristocratic values? Was he a representative of organological thought? Was he an intolerant champion of a long outdated theocratic Calvinism? Did he hold to an unscholarly bias, nurture old-fashioned prejudices? Was he an impractical, ivory-tower scholar with his head in the clouds, living in a Romantic dream world populated by heroes from the past, like the princes of Orange and the Calvinists? — Many have depicted Groen as more or less representing this brand of ideological conservatism. The evidence is supposed to be found in his writings.

Now it is true that Groen often cites with approval—certainly in a book like Unbelief and Revolution—authors like Burke, Haller, Lamennais, and others. He enjoyed invoking defenders of things like the value of history, organic growth and development, and so on.

Nevertheless, we question the custom of some people to lump Groen van Prinsterer with the conservatives. We do not now mean ‘conservative’ in the hollowed-out sense resulting from sloppy speech, which applies the label to anything from a personal preference for established ways to a reactionary stance in public affairs that can at most accept gradual reform but resists drastic change.

In general, Groen is also called a conservative on account especially of certain views in his earlier writings. This reading of him ignores Groen’s conduct in practice and the evolution of his standpoints over the years. Granted, it is not difficult to draw from, say Unbelief and Revolution, a number of very conservative terms and
concepts of Restoration vintage. Groen never officially retracted these. On the contrary, he always declared proudly that throughout his life (after his conversion) he had consistently held the same views. In broad outline that is correct. But in an understandable desire to remain true to himself Groen was neglecting nuances and shifts that are of such crucial importance for making a balanced assessment. In the years 1846/47 Groen was suffused with a good deal of Romanticism; in later years much less of that is present and the number of his citations from Romantic-conservative authors declined. For that matter, Groen always referred to himself as an anti-revolutionary because he judged counter-revolutionary to be too static, too conservative. The key for Groen was not the question of preservation or renewal, but whether the preservation or the renewal would contribute to the advancement of the gospel. In this way he tried to wrestle free from the conservative/progressive dilemma. Indeed, what a serious misrepresentation of reality it would be to characterize Groen’s life-long struggle in church and state as a defence of the status quo!

It is true, however, that where unimportant or unclear matters were concerned, Groen, owing to his background and upbringing, sided more often with the forces of conservation than with the voices for change. In an earlier chapter we pointed out that in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* he seemed to favour a society divided along social classes. A shoemaker could not in his eyes be a good lawmaker. That is certainly an unmistakable expression of Groen’s 19th-century conservatism. But in contrast to that theory there was his practice. He never opposed broadening the franchise, extending public education, promoting social and economic welfare at home and in the colonies. On the contrary, one cannot forget his indomitable battle for the abolition of slavery, for prison reform, for all kinds of Christian social action. Reverend Heldring was one of his warmest supporters for a reason!
In his political philosophy Groen was a conservative. He looked upon democracy as demoncracy: popular rule easily becomes demonic rule. Caught up in a fierce battle with liberalism which bore popular sovereignty in its banner, he rejected everything that might at all resemble it. In this, his penchant for abstract, strictly logical argument played him tricks. But that is a long way from advocating state absolutism! Groen did not foresee how participatory government, with responsibilities for the common man, would invigorate a nation. But all this did not prevent him from taking his place among the founders of the Dutch system of responsible government and among the champions of the rights of parliament.

This last point was clearly demonstrated by his stance with respect to the Keuchenius motion. One can also think of his practical stance toward the liberal constitution of 1848. For the longest time, conservatives of every stripe brooded on undoing their defeat of 1848 and recovering their lost influence. Liberals meanwhile, both moderate and progressive, carefully guarded their victory of 1848. Both sides closely watched what Groen would do. Groen decided that he should try and contribute positively to the new constitutional arrangements by helping to develop them in harmony with Christian principles and national traditions. Thus, though he objected to the spirit of 1848 he accepted the factual situation. For example, during the heated debates in 1856 over public education, the King sought Groen’s advice about revising the constitution in a more conservative spirit. Groen replied that the Crown must avoid appearing to be reactionary; the current system, though open to improvements here and there, should not be overhauled again. He further advised that any thoughts of curtailing the press and restricting the franchise should be forthwith abandoned.

**Groen’s break with the conservatives**

Of the greatest importance in Groen’s life is his break with the conservatives of his day. The foregoing chapters have indicated
how this break had become inevitable, given certain unmistakable developments in Groen's thinking and especially in his conduct. His concrete stance in numerous factual situations is an important factor—as yet examined too little—for drawing a complete picture of Groen's personality and determining his full historical significance, which cannot be characterized simply as conservative. He neither wanted to be a conservative nor ever became one. Groen van Prinsterer should be evaluated in light of both his words and his deeds, in the context of his own time and place. What holds for all historical figures also holds for Groen: he thought and acted in an era that is past, and under circumstances which no longer exist. The world of thought and action has thoroughly altered in the past century. The Netherlands, which occupies a different place in a different world than 150 years ago, is today a democracy in which everyone has the right to vote and in which the distribution of power, knowledge and property has increased to a degree unimaginable to a man from the nineteenth century. Orthodox Protestants have regained their place in the public square, the situation in the church has altered completely, the liberals of old have vanished, the changes in intellectual and religious life are as great and numerous as the transformations in society and the economy.

**Confessor of the gospel and therefore a statesman**

But are the central themes of Groen's message and the goals of his public career, wrapped up in all those old issues and antiquated problems, also old and antiquated? Groen was a statesman who in a time of increasing dechristianization confronted the people of his country with the gospel. He offered a penetrating critique of society and pointed to the destructive consequences of secularism and a me-first attitude, of views of man and society that proceed from bad starting-points and therefore can have only bad outcomes.
He also pointed a way out of the misery that self-reliant mankind easily brings down upon itself: Turn to faith and accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which holds out salvation for individuals and communities. This faith, Groen van Prinsterer confessed, has been given for an “inestimable blessing” both for the life that now is and for the life that is to come.

THE END
For Further Reading

The literature on which this biography is based is vast. Publications by Groen van Prinsterer himself number over 150. Publications about Groen are even more numerous. Almost all of them, however, are in the Dutch language. We shall first enumerate the chief works consulted for this book, and then list some useful titles in English and French.

**Primary sources**

The present biography is based extensively, next to Groen’s own writings, on the volumes of his published correspondence. The correspondence not only reflects the many fields in which he was active and the many people he was in contact with, but it also provides much insight into the mind and character of the man. Groen’s correspondence has been published in six large volumes of *Briefwisseling* in the Great Series of the *Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën* (National Historical Publications), as follows:

*Briefwisseling I: 1808–1833* Edited by C. Gerretson.  
Pp. xxxii, 912. The Hague, 1925.


These four hefty tomes have been supplemented by two more volumes of correspondence:

*Briefwisseling V: 1827–1869*. Edited by J. L. van Essen.  
Groen van Prinsterer

*Briefwisseling VI*: 1869–1876. Edited by J. L. van Essen.  

All told, these volumes amount to nearly 6,000 pages.

Seeded into Vols. V and VI are the letters (now critically edited) that passed between G. Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper and were brought out by Kok, Kampen as a “pre-publication” in a separate volume on the centennial of Kuyper’s birth in 1937. That single volume is now obsolete, at least for scholarly purposes.

In addition to his correspondence, Groen’s literary remains have been published as well:


These volumes contain copiously annotated editions of previously unpublished essays, memos, drafts, etc., some of which are in French. Available on the Internet: [http://www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/BrievenEnBescheidenG.GroenVanPrinsterer1821-1876](http://www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/BrievenEnBescheidenG.GroenVanPrinsterer1821-1876)

**Secondary sources**

The original Dutch edition of this book contained a Bibliographic Essay and a List of Works Cited covering sixteen pages. With few exceptions, the items listed there are written in Dutch and their titles will not be reproduced here.

Indicative of scholars’ interest in Groen as an historical figure, 14 doctoral dissertations have thus far been devoted to aspects of Groen van Prinsterer’s life and thought. In chronological order they are:

1860: D. Koorders, about constitutional law according to Groen  
1905: M. P. Th. à Th. van der Hoop van Slochteren, about Groen on church and state  
1907: F. J. Fokkema, on Groen’s platonizing philosophy
For Further Reading

1925: C. Tazelaar, about Groen's formative years
1931: J. A. H. J. S. Bruins Slot, about Groen's response to the no-po-
per movement of 1853
1933: G. M. den Hartogh, about Groen's conduct during the election
campaign of 1871
1940: H. Smitskamp, on Groen van Prinsterer as historian
1943: I. A. Diepenhorst (at 21–61), on Groen and the theory of the
Christian state
1948: J. D. Dengerink (at 69–95), on Groen and the development of the
doctrine of sphere-sovereignty
1949: G. J. Laman, on Groen as a member of parliament, 1862–65
1951: J. L. P. Brants, on Groen's spiritual growth up to his conversion
1973: J. Zwaan, on Groen van Prinsterer as a classicist
1989: A. J. van Dijk, on Groen's lectures on Unbelief and Revolution
1993: J. W. Kirpenstein, about Groen on church and state

English-language publications about Groen van Prinsterer
Essen, J. L. van. “Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer and His Conception
Essen, J. L. van, and Morton, H. Donald. Guillaume Groen van Prin-
sterer: Selected Studies. Jordan Station, ON: Wedge, 1990. This
collection contains the title mentioned immediately above, plus
three other essays on Groen's struggle for Christian education as
well as a special essay on Groen's prose style.
Hospers, Sr., G. H. “Groen van Prinsterer and His Book.” Evangelical
Quarterly 7 (1935): 267–86.
Klapwijk, Jacob. “Calvin and Neo-Calvinism on Non-Christian Phi-
Langley, McKendree R. “Pioneers of Christian Politics I.” Vanguard
———. What Does It Mean to Be a Christian in the World?” The
———. “The Legacy of Groen van Prinsterer.” Reformed Perspective

*Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 April 1867, pp. 4ff. discusses the implications for Europe's international relations of the first of Groen's pamphlets of 1867, *La Prusse et les Pays-Bas*.


Summaries in dissertations: found in the studies listed above by Brants, Dengerink, Kirpestein and Zwaan.


**Publications by Groen in French**


*La Prusse et les Pays-Bas; à mes amis de Berlin*. Amsterdam, 1867.

*L'Empire prussien et l'Apocalypse; à mes amis de Berlin*. Amsterdam, 1867.
For Further Reading

Le parti anti-révolutionnaire et confessionnel dans l’Église Reformée des Pays-Bas. Étude d’histoire contemporaine. Amsterdam, 1860.

La Hollande et l’influence de Calvin. Amsterdam, 1864.


Maurice et Barneveld. Étude historique. Utrecht, 1875.

Publications about Groen in French


Van Dyke, Harry. “Conférences de Groen van Prinsterer sur l’Incrédulité et la Révolution (Résumé).” In Groen van Prinsterer’s Lectures (see above), 277–84.