

Abstract

This paper explores the interrelationship between literary journalism and colonialism with a specific case study of the Antwerp newspaper *'De Nieuwe Gazet'*. It has already been made apparent that literary journalism (or narrative journalism) played an important role in colonial propaganda by fostering a colonial consciousness (Griffiths, 2017; McDonald, 2023). Journalists not only described 'what' they observed, but also 'how' they observed it. As a genre it transcends the boundaries between fiction and realism, giving it an important toolbox for representations of the 'colonial other' or propagating colonial ideas (Spurr, 1993). Literary journalism, with its complex layers of meaning, was interwoven with ideological constructs of imperialism and colonialism. However, like colonialism, it went through transformations in style and content over time.

Therefore, we will look at the professional activities of three rather forgotten journalists from the Belgian newspaper *'De Nieuwe Gazet'*: Antoon Moortgat (1862-1927), Willy De Schutter (1906-1999) and Roger van de Velde (1925-1970). These three journalists drew on the traditions of literary journalism and its techniques. More importantly, they shared similar self-identifications as journalists and definitions of their trade. In addition to their journalistic activities, all three were engaged in various other literary projects such as writing books and plays. The newspaper *'De Nieuwe Gazet'* had a liberal signature and was published in Antwerp from 1897 until 2022. Its strong rootedness in this important port city -the maritime gateway to Congo- is a significant factor in contextualising the journalistic discourse. The three journalists we will be focussing on worked in different time periods, from 1897 to 1965. This allows us to mirror the evolution of journalistic culture to different moments in colonial history. For instance, Moortgat was one of the first Belgian journalists, who went to the Congo Free State. He attended the opening of the railway Matadi-Leopoldville in 1898. His travelogue dominated the front page for almost a month. De Schutter mainly published articles during the Belgian colonial period in the late 1950s, producing an extensive travelogue of King Baudouin's first trip to the colony in 1955 and an account of the 1958 Brussels World's Fair. Lastly, Van de Velde wrote several articles during the period of decolonisation, leading to Congo's independence. In the aftermath, he published several articles that highlighted the causes that led to Congo's independence.

By focusing on these three journalists, we get a picture of literary journalism in three broadly defined phases: a first phase of 'discovery' and 'civilisation mission' as a function of Leopold II's private state. A second phase of upholding the colonial discourse in function of the honour of the Belgian State, even if the first cracks are visible. A final third phase marked by chaotic decolonisation and a search for causes. We draw on both archival sources and newspaper articles to chart journalistic practice and culture. In doing so, this study not only sheds light on the content and style of journalistic discourse, but also on professional ideology and ideal.

Biography

Nathan Lauwers (1992) studied History at the Free University of Brussels. He obtained a PhD from the UGent (2022) with a doctoral dissertation on the interrelationships between migration and development in a historical perspective. Nathan is active as a historical researcher at Liberas (Ghent) -the centre for the history of free thought and action- and affiliated with the Secular Studies Association Brussels (VUB). His publications include an intellectual biography of the progressive liberal Georges Lorand (<https://www.aspeditions.be/en/book/georgeslorand18601918/16441>).