

# Archival Review: Tresoar, Frisian Historical and Literary Centre

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JELLE KROL

In 1997, the land west of the River Lauwers in the Netherlands, formerly referred to by its Dutch name 'Friesland' was officially changed to 'Fryslân'. Tresoar is Fryslân's historical and literary centre. Sited on one of the three *terpen*, the man-made mounds on which Leeuwarden, Fryslân's capital, was built, Tresoar is at the foot of the *Oldehove*, the city's iconic leaning tower. It is housed in two late twentieth-century buildings connected by an overhead bridge. Founded in 2002, it is one of the few institutes in the Netherlands which is an official public body, as it has its basis in an act of law.<sup>1</sup> It is a library, an archive, and a literary museum but, while it stimulates research, it is not a research institute.



Tresoar is an amalgamation of three institutes which had functioned separately up to 2002, i.e. the State Archives in Fryslân, Fryslân's Provincial Library, and the Frisian Literary Museum and

Documentation Centre. Tresoar's logo hints at this triple amalgamation, with the E in Tresoar reversed, so that it resembles a 3. The name itself means 'treasure' as well as 'a chest in which treasures are kept'.

The Frisian poet Jan Cornelis Pieters Salverda (1783-1836) uses this uncommon word with reference to the Frisian language in one of his poems:



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Ja, Frieslân's teal iz 't djoer  
tresoor,

Waems schatten, mej  
ondoafbre gloar,

Europa's wijz' ijnn' eagen  
blierje;

Yes, Fryslân's language is the  
precious treasure,

The jewels of which radiate  
joyfully with inextinguishable  
glory,

In the eyes of Europe's wise men;<sup>2</sup>

These few lines epitomise the pride and glory of early nineteenth-century Frisian Romantic national consciousness, which provided the basis for the emergence of the Provincial (1839) and State (1886) Archives and the Provincial Library (founded in 1844 and open to the public in 1852). The Frisian Literary Museum and Documentation Centre was founded much later, in 1959, as the Frisian counterpart of the Dutch Literary Museum and Documentation Centre in The Hague (established in 1954), which collected, documented, and exhibited manuscripts and artefacts written in Dutch, but not in Frisian.

The awareness of Frisian nationality, already reflected in the seventeenth century in the works of Fryslân's most honoured poet, Gysbert Japicx (1603-1666), rapidly gained ground during the nineteenth century. Soon after the University of Franeker, Fryslân's sole university and the second oldest of the Netherlands (established 1584), had been closed by Napoleon in 1811, the *Friesch Genootschap van Geschied-, Oudheid- en Taalkunde* (The Frisian Historical, Archaeological and Philological Society) was founded. From its inception, in 1827, its medium was Dutch rather than Frisian, and its nineteenth-century balloted membership consisted mainly of learned men belonging to Fryslân's high society.

After the State Athenaeum – the watered-down version of the Franeker University – also closed in Franeker in 1843, a few young men from varying walks of life propagated the use of Frisian and they established the *Selskip foar Fryske Tael en Skriftekennisse* (The Society for Frisian Language and Literature) in 1844. This society soon became popular among the Frisian-speaking middle classes. Both in Fryslân and beyond its borders, local branches of this were founded, each having its own study group, theatrical society and/or choir.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, organisations and institutions in the Netherlands' society as a whole were segmented according to neutral and religious principles. This was reflected in how all those who advocated the use of Frisian became organised.

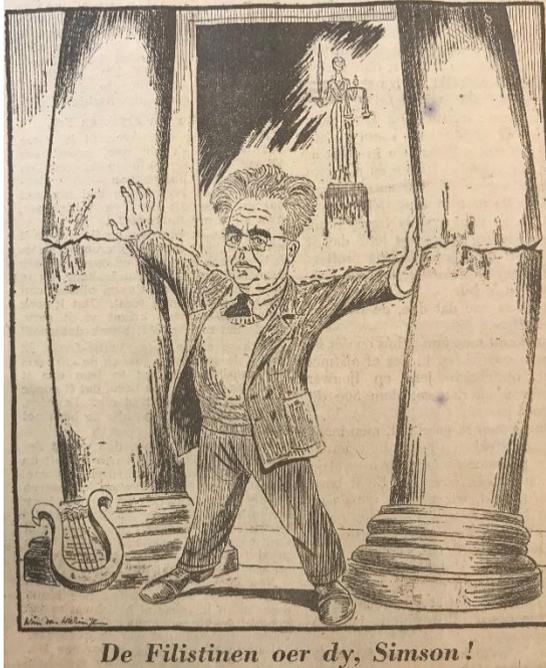
In 1908, the Protestants, who objected to frivolous Frisian plays and dancing after the staging of plays in public houses, founded the *Kristlik Frysk Selskip* (Christian Frisian Departure). They perceived the diversity of languages as a gift of God. In 1917 the Roman Catholics followed the Protestant example by creating a new organisation for themselves, the *Roomsk Frysk Boun* (Roman Catholic League), which stimulated, among other things, the translation of missals.

More radical in its ideas was the *Jongfryske Mienskip* (Young Frisian Fellowship), established in 1915. Its leader, Douwe Kalma (1896-1953) propagated revolutionary ideas, among them a more autonomous Fryslân.

The first part of the twentieth century can be seen as the heyday of these Frisian movement organisations, the archives of which are kept at Tresoar. They often contain several thousands of items of interest for the study of the Frisian national movement. The descriptions of the bulk of the items can readily be reached by consulting Tresoar's website:

<https://www.tresoar.nl/Pages/Zoeken-in-de-collecties.aspx> or websites in which Tresoar participates, such as [www.archieven.nl](http://www.archieven.nl) and [www.worldcat.org](http://www.worldcat.org).

### Fedde Schurer makket romte!



After the Second World War the Frisian movement organisations vied less with one another and cooperated more or less reluctantly in the *Ried fan de Fryske Beweging* (The Council of the Frisian Movement). Moreover, the central government in The Hague and the provincial government in Leeuwarden had already made some concessions before the war. In 1937, for example, changes in the 1920 Dutch Primary Education Act permitted the teaching of ‘a regional language’ during Dutch

lessons and in 1938 the *Fryske Akademy* (Frisian Academy), a research institute dealing mainly with Frisian history, language and culture, received a provincial subsidy.

Attitudes towards Frisian language and culture gradually changed in the post-Second World War years, especially after *Kneppelfreed*, when Dutch central government and the Provincial States of Fryslân developed policies which promoted the use of Frisian. *Kneppelfreed* (literally ‘Baton Friday’, after the batons that were used by the police) took place on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1951. On this day two journalists, one of whom was the famous Frisian poet Fedde Schurer (1898-1968), had to appear in court in the Frisian capital. Both of them had written articles defending the use of Frisian in court and had denounced the attitude of the officer of justice, who was unwilling to understand Frisian. Their denunciations were regarded as slanderous and they were both found guilty.



After the trial, a riot broke out in the market-place in front of the Hall of Justice, during which the police used excessive force against the people who supported the pro-Frisian points of view of the two journalists. As a result of this riot more rights were granted to Frisian in the fields of justice and education during the 1950s, and Frisian became known as the Netherlands' second state language. Consequently, the riot is seen as a milestone in the emancipation of Frisian in the Netherlands.



In the citation from J. C. P. Salverda's poem, quoted above, the poet refers to the eyes of Europe, being directed towards the Frisian language. Frisian speakers, especially those interested in the language itself, have always been

aware that during the Middle Ages Frisian used to be spoken in a far wider area, broadly the North Sea coastal region between the present-day Danish and Belgian borders. Apart from the modern province of Fryslân with approximately 350,000 speakers of Frisian, two other Frieslands can be found in Germany, in Ostfriesland and Nordfriesland where people generally consider themselves to be Frisians.

However, the Frisian language has survived in Germany in only a few pockets of land. In Saterland, an East-Frisian region that used to be

enclosed by bogs and marshes, Saterland Frisian is spoken by around 1,000 people. In the North-Frisian coastal strip southwest of the Danish-German border, varying North -Frisian dialects are being used by roughly 8,000 – 10,000 speakers.

The *Fryske Rie* (Frisian Council), established in 1956, promotes the organisation of cross-border exchanges and meetings in the fields of economics, education, (local) government, media, and agriculture. The contacts between West, East and North Frisians, stimulated by the various Frisian cultural societies ever since the nineteenth century, are reflected in the archives, letters and books collected by Tresoar.

To house the ever-growing archives (35,000 metres) and the increasing number of books (approximately 600,000) Tresoar opened a new depot and repository centre in 2016. This so-called *Kolleksjesintrum Fryslân* (Collections Centre Fryslân) represents a unique form of cooperation in Fryslân (<http://www.kolleksjesintrum.nl/>). It provides room for collections kept not only by Tresoar, but also by four other institutes: the *Frysk Lânboumuseum* (Frisian Agricultural Museum), the *Fries Museum* (Frisian Museum), *Natuurmuseum Fryslân* (Museum of Natural History in Fryslân), and the *Fries Scheepvaart Museum* (Frisian Maritime Museum).

Between 2014 and 2019 four million scans were made to put the Frisian archives on the digital map. Tresoar coordinated the initiative, which included scans of material kept by other Frisian institutes and museums. These are now readily accessible through the websites of the Tresoar and the various participating institutes and museums.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0013738/2002-08-29>

<sup>2</sup> J. C. P. Salverda, 'De Fries'ne teal', *Ijtljcke Friesche Rymckes*, Snits: Smallenburg, 1824, p. 43.