

The Belgian Archives and the Van de Weyer Papers

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THE HISTORIAN of midnineteenth-century Europe has recently been afforded an opportunity to explore and utilize fresh archival materials in Belgium.¹ The Archives Générales du Royaume has made available to serious and interested scholars the complete writings and correspondence of Jean Sylvain Van de Weyer. This collection gives the analyst a chance to review the voluminous information imparted to and by a Belgian diplomat and ranging over the 40 middle years of the last century. The diverse events and personages involved in this large group of papers make it a rich source of historical data.

The *papiers* of Van de Weyer have a distinctive importance not only as a major achievement of archival arrangement but also as the initial step in the expansion of the Belgian Archives beyond its documentation, already known, on the Middle Ages and on Central Africa. These two facets should be noted by professional archivists of the United States, for they mark more than the mere emergence of a new manuscript group. They illustrate the workmanship and skill of modern Belgian archivists and demonstrate their essential contributions to an area of historical research new in the institution.

The 294 numbered dossiers of the Van de Weyer collection concern a principal figure in the early years of the Belgian state, that turbulent era from 1830 to 1876.² Since most historians focusing on the limited historical study of Belgium are fully aware

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²C. K. Webster, *The Foreign Policy of Palmerston, 1830-41* (London, G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1951. 2 vols.), evaluates the role of Van de Weyer in broad European context. Th. Juste, *Sylvain Van de Weyer—Ministre d'État* (Bruxelles, Académie Royale, 1871), is primarily a eulogy of Van de Weyer but projects a reasonably truthful portrait of him in Belgian history.

of this collection, it is to the historians of that epoch in general that this notice is aimed. Surprisingly few have used these papers,³ perhaps because they have not been well publicized or because their reorganization and availability have been so recent. There is no doubt that an awareness of these papers and the general contents would greatly aid in reconstructing history. Any comprehension of the collection's total value requires a full understanding of Van de Weyer's background and career, particularly as a diplomatic representative to the Court of St. James.

Van de Weyer was born in Louvain in January 1802, the son of a prosperous bourgeois couple. By the time he was 21 he had received his Doctor of Laws degree from Louvain University. His dissertation was a philosophical essay attacking Benthamite extremism, although he was then and continued to be a moderate liberal in tune with progressive movements. Once his studies were completed, Van de Weyer began a law career, but he changed that for work as librarian and journalist. In 1827 he became professor of the history of philosophy at the Arts and Letters Museum in Brussels.

His public career, which was to last until his death in 1874, began in 1830 with the Belgian revolt against the Dutch rule of William I. Having been a leader in the dissent against the regime of the United Netherlands (particularly on the issue of the freedom of the press), Van de Weyer immediately took a major part in the new state's politics and diplomacy. He served in the provisional government and was that group's president of the Diplomatic Committee. Like Benjamin Franklin, Van de Weyer had a deep interest in diplomatic affairs that would take him out of his nation's domestic affairs in its infant years. Like Franklin's also, Van de Weyer's eclectic interests, charm, and intelligence were to give him access to a world of dynamic change, viewed from its very center, in London. The Belgian diplomat started his career in Paris but was reassigned to London, when the fate of Belgium was put in the hands of the major powers, meeting in that city, as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary. Except for 18 months in 1845-46, when he returned to Belgium to head a new ministry, Van de Weyer served in London as the Belgian Ambassador until 1868. After he retired he lived on in London, acting in an informal capacity for the King of the Belgians.⁴

³ One noteworthy exception is Brison Gooch, "Belgium and the Prospective Sale of Cuba in 1837," in *Hispanic-American Historical Review*, 39:413-427 (Aug. 1959).

⁴ This biographical sketch is based on materials in the Bibliothèque Royale in Brussels and a recent biography by Carlo Bronne.

The first ten years of Van de Weyer's public career centered on the London Conference that negotiated the Belgian separation from the Netherlands. Van de Weyer was directly involved in all the debates of the five Great Powers of Europe (Great Britain, France, Austria, Russia, and Prussia) and the two belligerents, Belgium and Holland.⁵ The period after Belgium gained her independence and perpetual neutrality by the treaty of 1839 saw an alteration in Van de Weyer's role in European affairs. His moderation, sagacity, and discrimination made him one of the first choices as international arbiter in an era when peaceful means settled many differences.

This vantage point permitted Van de Weyer to be a prominent commentator on a Europe in flux. With his extensive personal and diplomatic connections, Van de Weyer was as exact a source as could be found in Victorian London. His marriage to the daughter of Joshua Bates, director of the Baring Brothers Bank, and his profound friendship with Lord Palmerston were only two of the factors making Van de Weyer a permanent and knowledgeable part of the London scene and the British diplomatic world. His manners, taste, and *savoir-faire* brought him into the vital center of the intellectual, diplomatic, and financial communities. His home became the meeting place of writers, artists, and scientists; and his two sons and four daughters were brought up, were educated, and married among the still powerful aristocratic intelligentsia.⁶

The historical importance of the Van de Weyer papers is reflected in their observations and reporting of European happenings, political and cultural. Van de Weyer's contact with the most influential people of a British-dominated world—and his intense desire to record his doings and the events that occurred around him—produced a prodigious amount of truly telling correspondence. Much of his letter writing was so thought-provoking that it even stimulated correspondents known for brevity or opacity. The depth and scope of these exchanges are a major factor in their overall value.

The manuscripts in the collection have been subdivided and arranged by the Archives Générales into ten sections, each organized to present a portion of Van de Weyer's life through his writ-

⁵ Fl. de Lanney, *Histoire Diplomatique de l'Indépendance Belge* (Bruxelles, Librairie Albert Dewitt, 1930).

⁶ These extra-diplomatic activities are further described in Webster, *Palmerston*, p. 74, 110.

ings and other associated materials. A glance at each of these segments in Van de Weyer's career yields a general impression of the collection's unique usefulness. After a small section of biographical materials prepared by several Belgian historians, the early productions of the philosopher and journalist are combined into the first section. They are followed by the political and diplomatic papers, which range from early revolutionary tracts of 1830 to documents on the 1867 Luxembourg crisis. This second section contains documents, minutes, and notes on the London Conference of 1831-39; Van de Weyer's correspondence with the British Foreign Office; and his correspondence with the Foreign Ministry in Brussels. The third and fourth sections are devoted to Van de Weyer's special missions to Spain and Portugal, in 1842-51 and 1841-44 respectively. These missions are exhaustively documented, affording materials relative to two major arbitration decisions by Van de Weyer. The period when Van de Weyer was Belgian Minister of Interior (1845-46) takes up the fifth distinct section, in which the reader can trace the ending of the political alliance between Belgian Catholics and Liberals.

The strictly political writings and publications (many under the pseudonym "Fan") comprise the sixth group of dossiers, which are followed by philosophical essays and nonpolitical works. The brochures, books, articles, and numerous pamphlets attest to Van de Weyer's diversity of interests and at the same time broaden the overall value of the collection. This group of documents would be especially valuable to the social or literary historian, for it contains copious examples of Victorian thinking. The seventh section comprises a miscellany. It is still relatively uncommon to include in a historical manuscript collection peripheral documents pertaining to the central figure. This practice is not unprecedented in the Belgian Archives, however, for the medieval family archives there contain every bit of related data regardless of their source, form, or import. The inclusion of newspaper clippings that Van de Weyer saved and of calling cards he received shows the extent of this distinctive part of the papers.

The eighth section of the papers, the private correspondence of Van de Weyer, is the most valuable section of this unparalleled manuscript collection. This group of letters to and from Van de Weyer comprises in reality a minute but enlightening history of Europe from 1830 to 1860. It is made up of 180 bulky dossiers and over 800 letters, numerous notes, and minutes. The writers

include Queen Victoria, Prince Talleyrand, Louis Philippe, Lord Aberdeen, Robert Peel, William Gladstone, William I of the Netherlands, Charles Rogier, and 150 other European figures.

The last two sections of the papers are the exchanges between Van de Weyer and Lord Palmerston and between the Ambassador and his King, Leopold I of Belgium. Specialists in British history from the ministry of Grey to the political evolution of Gladstone and Disraeli should consult these papers. In particular, the intimate amity and professional good will between Palmerston and Van de Weyer is admirably reflected in more than 120 letters dating from 1831 to 1849. They offer rare illustrations of British political power and influence and of the part that Palmerston played in Great Britain's world prestige and position. There is little doubt that the young Van de Weyer was intensely affected and even swayed by the Palmerstonian political and diplomatic orientation.⁷ Since both men were strong advocates of attaining European peace and stability through diplomacy, this exchange should be consulted by anyone who contemplates a historical work centering on the maintenance of the European balance of power in the nineteenth century. Any further work on Palmerston should use these papers deposited in Brussels, for Van de Weyer frequently stated the British point of view more cogently than did Palmerston himself.

The lengthy correspondence between Van de Weyer and King Leopold, which begins in 1831 and terminates in 1863, fills 23 thick volumes containing 580 letters. The subjects of these letters, most of which are dated between 1830 and 1850, are seldom limited to Belgian affairs. Because of the Belgian King's early enterprises throughout the world in the form of colonial and commercial undertakings, Van de Weyer was often called upon to play mediator with the equally venturesome British.⁸ Since at this time Britain and Belgium advanced rapidly toward industrialization and competed actively for markets and resources, the papers take on increased significance.

The Leopold-Van de Weyer letters document the struggle of the new and small industrial state; they brilliantly describe the

⁷ It would be excessive to call Van de Weyer a "tool" of Palmerston as some have suggested. The influence of the British Foreign Minister on the young Van de Weyer is discussed in A. de Ridder, *Histoire Diplomatique de Traité de 1839* (Bruxelles, Vromant et Cie., 1920).

⁸ Cf. J. Fabri, *Les Belges au Guatemala (1840-45)* (Bruxelles, Académie Royale des Sciences Coloniales, 1955).

discord that often beset continental domestic and foreign politics and the harmony that occasionally prevailed.⁹ The commercial and diplomatic conduct of the large ambitious states and the hopeful small states is exceedingly well depicted in this interchange between the Belgian King and his minister. Policy-making processes are well revealed by this group of papers, which supplement the King's correspondence with his niece Victoria.

Van de Weyer himself carried on the greater part of his correspondence in the years before 1860. In 1854 bad health decreased the quantity of correspondence. Two notable exceptions, however, are evident. The involvement of Van de Weyer in the Crimean affair, during which he led a special mission to Paris to negotiate peace, and the role he played in the Anglo-French and Anglo-Belgian commercial treaties of 1860 mark his last participation in international diplomacy.

The background of these papers and their accessibility is a modern illustration of excellent teamwork, professional skill, and thoroughness on the part of the Belgian archivists and researchers. Twenty years' effort to obtain the papers from the descendants of Van de Weyer in England finally culminated successfully in 1953 through the work of the former Archiviste Général, M. Tihon. The various pieces arrived in Brussels, however, in a completely disorganized state, and the Belgians realized that their value would be limited unless the papers were virtually reconstructed. A systematic arrangement was the first step. Teams of trained archivists under the direction of M. Tihon began to sift through the almost absolute disorder. The absence of many dates and in some cases the poor condition of the pieces made the painstaking archival task slow and difficult. The assignment of two full-time, experienced workers, especially well suited to the job because of their past research in this historical period, was a major step in this monumental task. When, early in the project, M. Tihon was forced to give other matters his attention Mlles. Donnay de Casteau and Lejour continued the inventory and classification. At the end of five years, this highly complex work of document organization and preservation was finished. An excellent inventory by Mlle.

⁹ M. K. Chase, *Négociations de la République du Texas en Europe (1837-1845)* (Paris, Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1932), and J. W. Schmitz, *Texas Statecraft, 1836-1845* (San Antonio, Naylor Company, 1941), are two studies on intra-European diplomacy concerned with the Texas Republic. Neither writer was able to utilize the papers of Van de Weyer except some of his diplomatic correspondence available at the Belgian Foreign Ministry Archives.

Van Meerbeeck gives the researcher a usable and accurate guide to the collection.¹⁰

Several points must be made to forewarn the scholar interested in the Van de Weyer papers. The breakdown of the correspondence is simply by the writers and recipients of the various pieces. The researcher must scan each document unless he knows from past experience where and when he can find the sections specifically relative to his work. This lack of a general subject-matter index is not too detrimental, however, because the chronological organization of each series of correspondence is complete and exact.

Another point to be constantly kept in mind when using the papers or contemplating their use is the possibility of their duplicating other existing manuscripts. The writer has noted some copies in the dossiers of the Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, and he has been able to discover copies in the private papers of Palmerston. There is no question, however, that most of the private correspondence in the Archives Générales is not duplicated elsewhere. In any case, most private papers are at least supplemented by the Van de Weyer papers.

The most critical factor affecting the use of the papers is their condition. The location of these documents was for over 80 years highly detrimental to their physical state. About half the documents were in some way partially damaged by water, moisture, or light. Luckily only about a quarter of the private correspondence is in less than fair condition. The smaller the item, the more deteriorated it is likely to be. Fortunately again, Van de Weyer wrote long, multipaged letters and usually received extensive replies. The Belgians have chosen to preserve these papers by treating them with the Barrow laminator. This fairly expensive yet indispensable procedure has made the future of the papers secure.

The Archives of Belgium has always been internationally famous as a major depository of medieval documents. Lately, its materials on the modern colonial phase of European history and particularly on the history of the Congo have attracted worldwide attention. With the availability of the *papiers* of Sylvain Van de Weyer Belgium now boasts a trio of private manuscript groups covering most of the nineteenth century. The papers of Charles Rogier and those of M. J. W. Frère-Orban deal more exclusively with the domestic history of the Kingdom, but they also span the last 70 years of the century with observations and comments on

¹⁰ L. Van Meerbeeck, comp., *Inventaire des Papiers de Sylvain Van de Weyer* (Bruxelles, Archives Générales du Royaume, 1960).

European affairs.¹¹ In arranging and inventorying these three collections the Belgian Archives has made a contribution to all researchers who depend on the work of professional archivists.

¹¹ R. Boumans, comp., *Inventaire des Papiers de Charles Rogier* (Bruxelles, Archives Générales du Royaume, 1958), and *Inventaire des Papiers de M. J. W. Frère-Orban* (Bruxelles, Archives Générales du Royaume, 1958). Rogier's public life extended from 1830 to 1868 and Frère-Orban's from 1847 to 1894. From the international point of view, the Rogier papers are primarily strong in Belgian relations with Great Britain and the Vatican. The Frère-Orban manuscripts include some valuable colonial papers pertaining to the early years of the Congo Free State.

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