

> **Subject and central question**

After World War II, Anne Wadman (1919-1997) became one of the most famous writers in Frisian literature. Within this minority literature, he was (and is) particularly well known for his elaborate, often-harsh reviews of regional novels, which, according to him, painted a false, idealized picture of life in the rural province of Friesland. In an attempt to raise the level of Frisian literature, Wadman not only wrote reviews, but also novels, which – at the time – were thought of as experimental (because of the form) and negative (because of the content). Without any doubt, Wadman's biggest success as a writer came in 1963. In the summer of that year, he wrote a novel called *De smearlappen* (*The bastards*). It provoked a scandal in Friesland and Holland and became a best seller. No-one however was more surprised at this sudden success than Wadman himself. A few months earlier, he had announced he would stop writing because he considered his writing career a complete failure.

Between 1946 and 1994 Wadman's publications include over a thousand reviews, twenty novels (of which seven both in Dutch and Frisian), a book of short stories, two books of poetry, an anthology of Frisian poetry, a biography of a nineteenth century Frisian writer, three books of literary reviews, six plays (he translated four more) and five books on the Dutch writer Simon Vestdijk. Although he never stopped writing, even after 1963 Wadman often was very cynical about his qualities as a writer.

Why did someone who created such an immense body of work and who was generally seen as one of the most important Frisian writers, recurrently feel he had failed as a writer? That is the central question I have tried to answer in this book. I argue that the answer to the question is to be found in the first part of his writing career, the years between 1935, when he first dreamed of being a famous Frisian writer, and 1963, the year in which he would rather not have been a writer at all than a writer who only played a role in Frisian literature. The convictions Anne Wadman held about Frisian literature in general and his own work in particular, not only derived from his character, but also from the specific literary circumstances he had placed himself in. In the first years after World War II, by working as an editor for two prestigious literary journals, the Frisian *De Tsjerne* (*The Churn*) and the Dutch *Podium* (*Stage*), Anne Wadman

was one of few writers who published both in Frisian and Dutch. For various reasons however, at an early stage in his writing career, he chose to focus on writing in Frisian, a choice he regretted wholeheartedly later on in life. Although he did alter the face of Frisian literature and gave it a more 'European' outlook, he was not satisfied with the new literary situation.

> **Relevance of the central question**

This book deals with the first half of Wadman's writing career, the years 1935-1963. I have focused in particular on the period 1945-1963, which is often considered of crucial importance in the history of Frisian literature. According to literary historians, Frisian literature in these years became 'autonomous' – that is to say, independent of the Frisian nationalist movement as well as independent of its dominant Dutch counterpart.

Wadman occupied a central position in the literary circles of his time, so to gain insight in his writing career is to gain insight in the development of Frisian literature alongside Dutch literature. Furthermore, precisely because he was not satisfied with himself or with the development of Frisian literature, his 'failing' writing career sheds light on a few topics that are crucial for understanding the position of writers in a minority language. Although – partly thanks to Anne Wadman – Frisian literature set itself free from the Frisian nationalist movement and from the Dutch literary field, writers and readers were still highly influenced by the bilingual context in which they lived and worked. To gain insight in the difficulties Anne Wadman encountered, in this book a lot of attention is paid to the question how he was influenced by the slowly changing relationship between Frisian and Dutch literature and by the equally changing relationship between Frisian literature and the Frisian nationalist movement.

> **Frisian literature and the Frisian nationalist movement**

Until World War II, most Frisian writers (including Anne Wadman himself) were 'recruited' by the Frisian nationalist movement. As was characteristic for Dutch society as a whole at that time, this movement, which had its origins in the nineteenth century, was composed of four 'pillars': liberals, Protestants, Catholics, and socialists. Each group had its own organizations and journals. What bound the different groups together was their wish to enforce the use of the Frisian language in the public domain, by persuading the Dutch government to grant the Frisian language equal rights to Dutch. Writers for a long time played a crucial role in this movement. Not only was their work considered proof of the richness of the Frisian language, literature was also a powerful tool for

creating archetypal images of Friesland and 'Frisianness'. Following the tradition of German *Heimatliteratur*, popular writers in the pre-war period portrayed life in the country as morally superior to urban life. In the literary journals of the late thirties, it was not uncommon to think of the Frisian people in terms of 'Germanic races' and 'ties of the blood', terms that after World War II have become very contaminated.

World War II forced the Frisian nationalist movement to work together and to alter its attitude towards Holland. How much had changed, became clear in 1946 when a new literary journal, *De Tsjerne*, was launched, based on the conviction that writers should no longer by default have to support the nationalist movement. Of course, until a new generation of writers came forward in the fifties, most writers still remained very active in the nationalist movement.

From the fifties onwards, a lot of the demands of the Frisian nationalist movement were met, when, as a result of a protest meeting in 1951, a set of rules was implemented safeguarding the position of the Frisian language. These developments, in the long term, also proved to have an impact on Frisian literature.

> **Research method**

In defining the research method for my analysis of how the writing career of Anne Wadman took shape and evolved, I borrowed tools from the so-called 'institutional literary theory' developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. It bases its ideas on the assumption that the value of literature is not an internal quality of the work in question, but instead the result of ongoing negotiations between various 'actors' (writers, readers, literary critics, publishers, teachers) and 'institutions' (publishing houses, literary criticism, literary education). The literary field consists of all people and institutions that write, distribute and value literature. In order to gain a reputation in the literary field, participants not only put their work forward, but also their literary ideas and contacts.

Anne Wadman initially planned his literary career carefully. He chose literary patrons (like the Frisian writer Fedde Schurer and the more scholarly essayist Fokke Sierksma) whom he believed could be useful. Over time, quite often preceded by conflicts initiated by Wadman, these mentors were changed for new ones. In order to understand the writing career of Anne Wadman, one must look at his work, but also, if not more, at the way he presented his work and himself.

By reading his letters, diaries and work (especially his critiques), I studied what beliefs Anne Wadman held concerning (Frisian and Dutch) literature, how and why his ideas changed over time, who his friends and rivals were, what it was that united or divided them and which positions they took

in the literary field at the time. In doing so, I interpreted biographical data from the perspective of the literary field. In a minority literature, there are comparatively more positions that can be taken (e.g. by being an editor of a journal, a judge for a literary prize, a member of an advising committee, etcetera) than there are people to fulfil those positions. As a consequence, people often hold multiple positions at the same time, and a small group of people sets the rules.

> **Summary of the chapters**

The first steps Wadman took on the literary stage were a result of him becoming aware of 'the Frisian question'. On a summer camp of the Social Democratic Frisian Society (Sosiaal Demokratysk Frysk Ferbân, a left wing movement that believed the Frisian language would be a useful tool in winning people over for the Socialist Party) Anne Wadman became acquainted with the liberal vicar André Roelof Scholten (1909-1944), who was to become his first literary mentor. Scholten would have a big influence on the young Anne Wadman. He advised him not only on literary, but also on 'ethical' matters.

At the age of sixteen, Wadman joined the Federation for Frisian-nationalist Youth (Boun for Frysknasjonale Jongerein). He learnt to write in Frisian (the Frisian language was not taught at school, even though it was the native language for most of the children) and published his first articles in the nationalistic newsletter of the Federation. After a quarrel, he left the organisation and published Dutch and Frisian articles in *Het Schoolblad*, a magazine for schools throughout the whole of the province of Friesland. He experienced how quickly one could gain a reputation in the Frisian literary circles of the late thirties, which to a large extent were the same as those of the Frisian nationalist movement.

From 1938 onwards, the initial fame of Anne Wadman rose quickly because of the publication of his poetry in the monthly family magazine, *It Heitelân (the Fatherland)*. From early on, Anne Wadman was seen as a 'renewer'. Although his work received praise, Anne Wadman himself wasn't sure he deserved it. Was he really a poet, or did he just wish he were? Even though he was proud of his first publications, he also wondered if his work really had its own, distinctive voice. For inspiration he read Dutch poets such as Greshoff and Van Hattum, whose work he preferred above the work of Frisian poets.

The year 1939 (chapter 2) was a time of transition in more than one respect. In September 1939, Wadman moved to Amsterdam to study Dutch at the university. In Amsterdam, after meeting the charismatic poet Fedde Schurer (1898-1968) and fellow-student Gerrit Borgers (1917-1987), he ended his literary friendship with Scholten. He now developed an

ambivalent attitude towards Friesland that would resurface in almost all his later work. Friesland was in his eyes a problem, not only in an abstract but also in a concrete sense: in Friesland he encountered rejection just as often as acceptance. Gerrit Borgers and his girlfriend Annie van Poelgeest proved to be friends the like of which he had never had before: open hearted and sympathetic toward, and interested in, his writing activities. Borgers got him interested in one of Holland's most influential literary critics of the nineteen thirties, Menno ter Braak (1902-1940). Together they attended one of his lectures, but it was the end of World War II, which soon after broke out, before Wadman would read his work. Wadman spent most of the wartime passively waiting in the isolated little village of Langweer where he had grown up. From here he built up and maintained an extensive literary network. He sought support from and became close friends with, amongst others, the Frisian writers Douwe Tamminga (1909-2001) and Fedde Schurer. He also corresponded with Gerrit Borgers and Annie van Poelgeest, who visited him on several occasions in Friesland. Borgers and he exchanged ideas about his reputation in Friesland and the consequences of writing in a 'provincial' literature. After his 'kandidaatsexamen' in 1943 (roughly equivalent to the Bachelor Exam) Wadman wanted to continue his studies with the first professor of Frisian, Jelle Brouwer (1900-1981), in Groningen. He therefore had to decide whether or not to sign the 'loyaliteitsverklaring' – a document by which students declared their acceptance of the German occupation. Wadman was among the few Dutch students who signed. Rather than continuing with his studies, however, he found a job distributing ration vouchers. Wadman was well aware that the fact that he signed the document could cost him his reputation. Later, his passive and rather opportunistic attitude in the war would become a burden on his shoulders. After signing the document, Wadman finished his first novel and read the essays of Menno ter Braak. Ter Braak's ridicule of the well-known writer who cultivates their poetic persona and who is ashamed of his first work, put everything Wadman had achieved up till now in a new light. From 1945 onwards (chapter 3), following Ter Braak, Wadman presented himself as someone who cultivated his shortcomings, who both loved and hated Friesland and who struggled with being an author. Despite this negative attitude towards his own work and towards Friesland, between 1945 and 1948 Wadman very rapidly became a well-known writer and a feared critic. He was asked to write for several newspapers (for example for the first Frisian newspaper *Frysk en Frij – Frisian and Free*) and he published his first two books of poetry in a series devoted to young Frisian poets. In his desire to finally see his work in print, he kept in touch with eight or nine publishers at a time.

In this period, Fokke Sierksma (1917-1977), chief editor of the literary journal *Podium*, pushed himself forward as a new mentor and patron. He admired Wadman as a writer and encouraged him to go against Fedde Schurer, whose moral, Christian view of literature differed significantly from both his and Wadmans's. Together with Fedde Schurer however, Wadman was very much involved in the Frisian literary journal *De Tsjerne* (1946-1968), which wanted to break the ties between literature and the Frisian nationalist movement. It was not in Wadman's interests to choose between *Podium* and *De Tsjerne*. Rather than having to choose, he wanted to serve as a mediator between Frisian and Dutch literature.

In September 1946 (chapter 4), Wadman moved back to Amsterdam to finish his studies. He lived together with his younger sister till the end of November 1947. For the last nine months, Gerrit and Annie Borgers joined them. The four of them moved into a run-down former shop in the Looiersdwarstraat, which quickly became known as 'the Podium-building', because it served as the base from which many activities for the literary journal *Podium* were undertaken. Living together in a house that afforded little privacy did not turn out to be a big success. In November, the four parted and Wadman moved back to Friesland.

Convinced he didn't meet the required level in *Podium*, back in Friesland (chapter 5) Wadman took on board most of the editorial work for *De Tsjerne*. In an effort to push Frisian literature to a higher level, he sought contact with other minority literatures, such as Breton in France.

In November 1948, his first novel, *Fioele en Faem* (*Violin and girlfriend*), the book he wrote in 1943, was finally published. The novel, which Wadman claimed only deserved to be published because it was an interesting literary experiment, received very critical reviews. Disapproval however was voiced mainly on moral, not on literary grounds. The rejection of Wadman's novel did, not however, have any effect on his flourishing career as a critic, a reputation he had gained from his literary reviews in *Podium* and *De Tsjerne*.

Proof of his recognition as a talented, young critic also came in the form of an assignment from the ministry of Education, Art and Sciences to make a compilation of the best Frisian poetry since 1880. This anthology, which was at the time interpreted as a sign that the Dutch government was taking an interest in Frisian literature, came out in 1949 under the title *Frieslands Dichters* (*Poets of Friesland*). Wadman's critical remarks regarding the marginal position of Frisian literature in Europe did not however provoke any discussion. In less than four years time he had become an established writer in Friesland. In 1952, he won the most prestigious literary prize in Friesland, the 'Gysbert Japickxpriis', for his reviews in *De Tsjerne*. At the age of thirty-two, Wadman would be one of the youngest

writers ever to win this prize. In 1952, Wadman had achieved pretty much everything there was to achieve in Frisian literature. A few months later, he left the editorial board of the *Tsjerne* after an ostensibly literary quarrel, – although really personal differences also played a part in this turn of events.

With more time on his hands (chapter 6), Wadman now focused on an academic career. After his dissertation (a biography of a Frisian writer for which he was awarded ‘cum laude’) an academic career would have seemed logical. But disappointments awaited Wadman. He did not become a professor at university, nor the first director of a museum for Frisian literature. The years after 1953 were years of isolation, frustrations, ‘failures’ and reflections on his imagined shortcomings. Happy periods – between 1954 and 1962 his three children were born – alternated with conflicts and remorse about missed chances. Wadman’s failing academic career shows striking parallels with his literary career. In neither case could he break away from Friesland. Choosing for Friesland however in both cases lead to important restrictions. Increasingly, the Dutch and the Frisian literary field proved to be two separate domains, between which there was hardly any contact. Finally, both in his literary and his academic career, Wadman, with his self-critical views and his immense uncertainty, was his own worst enemy.

After he left *De Tsjerne*, Wadman soon found himself very isolated from other writers, although as a critic he still played an important role in the literary field. The few writers he admired (for instance the poets Hessel Miedema and Marten Brouwer, the essayist Lolle Nauta and – later – the novelist Klaas de Wit) also thought highly of him, but Wadman did not join this new literary generation. The base on which he operated, became very small.

Looking back, in 1959, on the development of Frisian literature since 1945, it pleased Wadman that, apart from the kind of literature and poetry in which Frisian identity was (re)created – literature that according to him often lacked literary qualities – there was also now room for literature that did not *necessarily* deal with ‘Frisian’ topics. According to Wadman, this ‘broadening’ of the subject, however, proved to be no guarantee for literary quality. He was also disappointed to see that most readers still preferred regional novels. In a bilingual context, the expectations readers and critics held of Frisian literature differed from those of Dutch literature. For ‘modern’ novels, work that wasn’t thematically bound to Friesland, there was only a very small reading public. Frisian literature, whether it was ‘emancipated’ or not, in Wadman’s opinion still couldn’t compete with its bigger counterpart. According to him, put in a Dutch context, most Frisian writers would only with great difficulties get

their work published. The best Frisian writers were at the same level as mediocre Dutch writers.

In the spring of 1961, Wadman started his own literary journal, *De Teannewâdder* (*The 'toe-treader'*). In it, he looked back on his literary career and made plans for the future. The journal marks a transition in his writing career, namely from being a Frisian writer to being a Frisian writer against his will. Before he started his one-man journal and after quitting the editorial board of *Podium*, Wadman had never questioned his choice for the Frisian literary field. After *De Teannewâdder* this changed. The journal was the manifestation of the isolated position in which Wadman as a Frisian writer had ended up. In the spring of 1963, disappointed by the reactions to his one-man journal and to his latest novel, Wadman announced he was giving up his writing career altogether. He was convinced he had only lasted so long thanks to the Frisian literary situation, in which average writers could pass for great writers. From a later perspective, it seems very ironic that his biggest success as a writer really was just around the corner.