

A. G. van Hamel and R. I. Best: best friends?

NIKE STAM

This article discusses various aspects of the correspondence between Anton Gerard van Hamel and Richard Irvine Best (17 January 1872 - 25 September 1959), director of the National Library of Ireland and renowned celticist. The letters paint a unique picture not only of Van Hamel's strong friendship with Best and his wife Edith Best-Oldham, but also of his thoughts on the field and the world around him. This picture is much more multifaceted than the one presented in earlier references to this correspondence. A few scholars have, in fact, previously attempted to use the letters Van Hamel wrote to Best to define his character. Interestingly, however, their interpretations are quite different: for instance, Seán Ó Lúing writes in his book *Celtic studies in Europe* that Van Hamel's letters reveal that he had a 'sunny and sympathetic nature',¹ while Pól Ó Dochertaigh, in his biography of Julius Pokorny (1887-1970), writes that Van Hamel was 'unbelievable and inappropriately smug' and that he was more 'Deutsch' than 'Dutch'.² Whatever this means, it was obviously not meant as a compliment! This goes to show that two different scholars can paint a very different picture of Van Hamel, based on the same sources.

In view of the centenary of Celtic in Utrecht, which we owe to Van Hamel's dedication to the chair of Celtic and the field of Celtic studies, it is high time for us to immerse ourselves in this correspondence, and see if we can find out more about Van Hamel's character and his friendship with Best. Do the letters reveal more about how they met each other, and how they expressed their friendship? Can we learn more about what Van Hamel thought of his colleagues, of the field of Celtic studies, and of the world in general?

The corpus

Before we can turn to these questions, we will need a description of the corpus: Van Hamel's letters to Best are held in the National Library of Ireland (NLI) in four different folders (NLI MS 11004 (7) I-IV), containing approximately 90 letters in total. Approximately, because it would seem that some of these letters have been misfiled and were not written by Van Hamel. The correspondence covers a period of 32 years, beginning



► Fig. 1. Impression of folder MS 11004 7 iii, Dublin, National Library of Ireland.

in February 1908 and ending in March 1940, some two months before the German invasion of the Netherlands. The material ranges from short scribbles on postcards to long letters running to several pages.³

The start

The very first letter in the collection straight away tells us how Van Hamel and Best got in touch: in that letter from February 1908, we see Van Hamel taking what is known as the 'cold approach' – being a very polite but determined student, he would like to hear from Best whether there are any opportunities for foreign students to learn Irish in Ireland:⁴

Dear Sir, I hope you kindly will forgive my boldness of addressing this letter to you; I shall be very much obliged to you, if you will have the goodness to answer my request or to pass this letter to anyone who would give me informations. I am a student of Teutonic languages and I should like to acquire also some knowledge of Celtic languages of or and [sic] literature. I did some Welsh, but my Irish, especially Old-Irish, is very insufficient. It is so difficult to study everything from books and in this country we have no

¹ Ó Lúing 2000, 32.

² Ó Dochertaigh 2003, 107, 151. See also his lemma on Ainm.ie: <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=289> (accessed on 16-1-2023).

³ For the contents of the individual folders, see Appendix 1 at the end of this article.

⁴ This letter is unfortunately not dated by year, but in the next letter in May Van Hamel tells Best that he is 'only 21', which means he is writing in May 1908, just before his 22nd birthday in July of that year (see Schneiders 2013).

Celtic teachers. Is there an Old-Irish summerclass in the School for Irish Learning, that a foreigner might follow, or, if there is not, do you know another way to supply this lack? Perhaps I could find next summer the opportunity to spend a few weeks in your country on this purpose. You will oblige me very much indeed by showing me the right way to get on, and I am most thankful to you for any trouble you kindly take on my behalf. Yours faithfully, A. G. van Hamel.⁵

While we do not have Best's reply, we can infer from Van Hamel's second letter dated to May that year that it must have been in the affirmative, given that Van Hamel writes that he has decided to attend professor Osborn Bergin's summer school.⁶ At the time, Bergin (1873-1950) was a professor at the School of Irish Learning, which had been founded in 1903 by Kuno Meyer (1858-1919).⁷

Van Hamel goes on to write that he will try to spend August in Ireland to study 'the spoken tongue'. Regarding his stay in Dublin, Van Hamel seeks additional help from Best with a problem that remains as relevant and urgent today as it was in 1908: 'As you kindly offered your help to me in your last letter, I take the liberty to ask you, whether you can give me any informations, what would be the best way to live in Dublin. I am only 21 and I do not want to spend large sums on high class hotels or boarding houses.'⁸ Van Hamel feels that he may have been a bit rash in putting such a request to such a renowned scholar, as he concludes his letter stating that 'I am sure I ought to apologise to you for my boldness, but I trust you will not take it amiss'.⁹ Van Hamel's assumption seems to have been correct, for a letter dating probably to August of that year reveals that Van Hamel received a very warm welcome at the home of Best and his wife and that he was very grateful for it:

A Chara,
As you probably do not know how hospitable your house has been to me last two days, it is *ceart* for me to tell you I can't tell you, because it was so overwhelming; as to the first part of my visit to Dublin, you know all about it. All I can do is to say: Thanks for everything, AG. van Hamel¹⁰

A lifelong friendship

It seems that this summer of 1908 formed the foundation on which the longstanding friendship between

Van Hamel and Best was built.¹¹ The vast differences that separated them at the time of these first letters, such as their difference in age (14 years) and status (Van Hamel was still a student, while Best was already assistant director of the NLI), gradually fade away over the course of their correspondence as their professional friendship develops.

This friendship manifests itself, for example, in Van Hamel's quips to Best about not writing back soon or often enough. In January 1912, for example, Van Hamel writes to Best after no letters had been exchanged for three years (as far as we can tell from the archives): 'I really was afraid you were forgetting me altogether'.¹² He explains how important Best's friendship is to him, referring to a gift he had received from him, which he regarded as 'a proof of your undiminished friendship towards me [...]'.¹³ Many similar exclamations and witticisms follow in later letters, as in the 1919 letter in which Van Hamel exclaims 'This was a quick response! You might try to imitate me!';¹⁴ in 1921, he floridly describes how Best usually begins his letters:

Did you ever start a letter without this gorgeous display of excuses of this unfortunate neglect of your correspondence, which, in the meantime, I have learned to appreciate as one of your prominent qualities [...]?¹⁵

By the end of the letter, however, he seems to worry that this opening might be misinterpreted by Best, as he concludes with 'I am struck with terror because I opened this letter with what might seem a praise of your long periods of scribal inertia. But that is altogether wrong! I regard it as a cursed sin, that should be given up altogether!'.¹⁶

Another important aspect of the friendship between Best and Van Hamel that emerges from the letters is the help Best regularly provides when Van Hamel needs to write or publish something in English. References to Best proofreading texts by Van Hamel begin in 1914, when Van Hamel sends him the first draft of an article. On both 5, 14 and 30 January, he writes to Best about it. It is clear from the last letter that Van Hamel had been somewhat overwhelmed by the amount of corrections and improvements Best had sent, and that he was concerned that this might cause the cost of printing to spiral out of control:

⁵ VH to R. I. Best (26-2-[1908]), NLI.

⁶ See also his entry on Ainm.ie: <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=122> (accessed on 16-1-2023).

⁷ Ó Lúing 2000, 29-30, and Ainm.ie: <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=164> (accessed on 16-1-2023).

⁸ VH to R. I. Best (27-5-1908), NLI.

⁹ VH to R. I. Best (27-5-1908), NLI.

¹⁰ VH to R. I. Best (27-8-1908), NLI. The letters in italics reflect Van Hamel's use of *seanchló* (the modern insular typeface).

¹¹ Celticist Eleanor Hull participated in the 1909 summer school, see Riggs 2015, 24, who also discusses her correspondence with Best.

¹² VH to R. I. Best (8-1-1912), NLI.

¹³ VH to R. I. Best (8-1-1912), NLI.

¹⁴ VH to R. I. Best (3-3-1919), NLI.

¹⁵ VH to R. I. Best (23-4-1921), NLI.

¹⁶ VH to R. I. Best (23-4-1921), NLI.

My dear Best, I find no words fit to express my thankfulness for your excellent lessons in English. Now the printer tells me that I must not continue in this way, as these hosts of corrections make the printing too expensive [...]. I must beg you, but though I do it reluctantly, that you should no longer affect to polish over my poor prattle with your refined eloquence [...]. No doubt it will be a tremendous effort for you to let pass so many violations of your mother tongue. Ever yours A.G. van Hamel.¹⁷

Best continues to proofread Van Hamel's texts throughout his career, and Van Hamel continues to work on improving his English. In a letter from 1919, for instance, we read that thanks to 'daily conversations with passing officers and soldiers',¹⁸ his English has probably gotten better, but that Best will surely still be able to find something to improve upon:

I am afraid it [Van Hamel's English] will not be able to pass your censorship unchanged. But you know I am a grateful disciple, and you have plein pouvoir.¹⁹

In 1932, Van Hamel again thanks Best profusely for the time he puts into helping out a friend:

My dear Best, when I received the proofs of my Introduction the other day, I saw how much you have been doing for me in giving my wretched English a decent aspect. [...] What would have become of it all if you had not interfered? But at the same time I fully realise the trouble I gave you. All I can say is this: I have been in your debt for so many years, and if the debt has increased, it is only the natural consequence of your usual readiness to give your friends the benefit of your own accomplishments.²⁰

Another important feature of their friendship was the exchange of books, often sent as presents, such as, for example, the celebrated edition of *Lebor na hUidre* by Best and Bergin:

Dear Best, I hear you saying: how dare you? Yes, my dear friend, there is your wonderful edition of *Lebor na hUidhre* lying before me, and I know it but too well: I never wrote you a word about it and you must have taken me for the most ungrateful of human beings and perhaps even for a brute – unless you know me better (as, after all, I think I may assume).²¹

Books were also sent to Van Hamel so that he could forward them to other celticists on the continent – a most vital role, especially during the First World War, of which Van Hamel says: 'I am very proud of my position as a neutral post-officer among the British & Continental Celtists'.²² Best, in turn, was able to inquire for Van Hamel whether books he had ordered in Ireland would ever be delivered:

My dear Best, Would you enable me to become the most grateful of human beings? I always order my Irish books from the Irish Bookshop, 45 Dawson Street, and they always send them at once. [...] Would you be so obliging as to inquire? [...] No end of thanks!²³

The strong bond between Van Hamel and Best thus comes to the fore in a number of things, such as the exchange of favours and gifts, and Van Hamel's witty reproaches to Best for his extended periods of silence.

Edith Best-Oldham

Van Hamel's letters reveal that he did not only maintain a warm friendship with Best himself, but also with Best's wife, Edith Best-Oldham (1865–1950). She was a professional musician and someone of some standing in the Gaelic League.²⁴ Van Hamel always ends his letters with his best wishes to Best and his wife. In itself, this might understandably be taken for mere courtesy, but in his letters Van Hamel also frequently recalls the music they made together during his stay at Ballyferrier (in 1908) – Van Hamel was a fine musician himself and enjoyed playing the violin. In 1912, for instance, he writes 'nor will ever pass into nothingness your wife's excellent Brahms-playing'; 'please tell Mrs. Best I can play all Brahms' and Beethoven's sonatas and concerto's, so I hope next time I come to Baile Átha Cliath we will have a grand time'.²⁵ In other letters, he tells them what pieces of music he is studying and that he finds solace in playing the violin, especially in the wake of Kuno Meyer's death ('Give my best regards to your wife. Tell her I have become a famous fiddler! It keeps me up in days of affliction').²⁶ He also tells Best that his wife might find it interesting to learn that he has bought a splendid violin once owned by the alto player of the Bohemian Quartet. He made this investment because of 'the frailty of all paper values'.²⁷ This was in 1932, during the global economic crisis.

¹⁷ VH to R. I. Best (30-1-1914), NLI.

¹⁸ VH to R. I. Best (03-3-1919), NLI.

¹⁹ VH to R. I. Best (03-3-1919), NLI.

²⁰ VH to R. I. Best (02-7-1932), NLI.

²¹ VH to R. I. Best (19-12-1929), NLI. This signed copy (Best and Bergin 1929) is now UBU, Van Hamel 250, containing a brief note by Bergin and Best to Van Hamel, see Uit het Broek 2020.

²² VH to R. I. Best (09-9-1914), NLI.

²³ VH to R. I. Best (15-11-1924), NLI.

²⁴ For more on this, see, for example, her entry in the *Dictionary of Irish biography*: <https://www.dib.ie/biography/best-edith-a0633> (accessed on 30-6-2022).

²⁵ VH to R. I. Best (08-1-1912), NLI.

²⁶ VH to R. I. Best (11-11-1919), NLI.

²⁷ VH to R. I. Best (17-5-1932), NLI.



▲ Fig. 2. Photograph of a number of celticists in front of the School of Irish Learning, 1913. From left to right, starting with the top row, top left: J. H. Loyd (Seosamh Laoide, 1865-1939), Maud Joynt (c. 1868-1940), Eleanor Knott (1886-1975), R. I. Best; bottom row: A. G. van Hamel, Annie Power (1889-1963), Holger Pedersen (1867-1953), William O'Brien (1881-1968) and Tadhg Ó Donnchadha (1874-1949). Permission to print from the National Library of Ireland (MS 49,860/8), see <https://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlso00647830> (accessed on 26-3-2023).³¹

There also seem to be a number of signs that Van Hamel kept a separate correspondence with Edith Best. For example, in 1920, when it was announced that Best would become professor at the NLI, Van Hamel wrote: 'I was but too glad when I heard from your wife that at last you will be granted an honour, which you have deserved already for years'.²⁸ In 1931, he seems to have missed a visit by Best to the Netherlands, but was reassured by Edith Best: 'It was a very great disappointment to me to miss your visit in Holland. But I was glad to hear from your wife that you will come back together'.²⁹ Although there are no letters from Van Hamel in the personal archives of Edith Oldham-Best, Richard Best's collection does contain a postcard addressed to Edith Best, written in Dublin by Van Hamel when the couple was away in August 1930:

Dear Mrs. Best, Many thanks for your card. I am afraid you are having very boisterous weather, it is even usually cold at Dublin to-day. But this matters little if the sea-air has the much desired effect upon your husband's health. It will be good for yourself, too. [...] Fortunately I have got on very well with my Irish texts, I hope to finish copying the last Nennius-recension to-morrow, and shall have time to do something else still. My visit to Eóin Mac Néill had very satisfactory results; he seems willing to take the Nennius for the Manuscripts Commission. Dublin is full of Celtic scholars now. The young American couple, whose name I forget, is charming; I gave her my programme for the Congress. Then there is Dr. Hull with whom I had corresponded a good deal. I am also seeing much of Mr. Weenink and Mrs. Van Stockum. Thus nothing fails me except you and sunshine; fortunately, I have the very pleasant recollections of the week before you went away. I must be leaving on the 22nd. With my best regards to you both, AGvanHamel.³⁰

It is striking to see Van Hamel discussing Dublin Celtic studies with Edith Best as if with a true insider. While the letter would probably also have been read by Richard Best, it still seems to indicate that Edith Best was very much involved in her husband's affairs and was well informed of their particulars.

Although Edith Best's archive contains no written letters from Van Hamel, it does contain something else: a photograph depicting Van Hamel standing alongside a number of other celticists at the School of Irish Learning in 1913. Curiously, this photograph features a pram in the edge of the frame, which seems to have caused the endeared look on Van Hamel's face.

²⁸ VH to R. I. Best (06-6-1920), NLI. The letter is very enjoyable overall and cites a nickname for Best as Kuno Meyer's 'infixed pronoun, now an analytic personal pronoun of a most independent and distinguished position among Celtic scholars'.

²⁹ VH to R. I. Best (20-4-1931), NLI.

³⁰ VH to R. I. Best (13-8-1930), NLI. The individuals mentioned in this letter are the following: Eóin Mac Néill (1867-1945), <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=452> (accessed on 26-3-2023); Vernam Hull (1895-1976), <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=627> (accessed on 26-3-2023); I. R. A. W. Weenink (see Gerritsen 2019, 109-110); Hilda van Stockum appears to be related to Van Hamel on his uncle Antonius Gerardus van Hamel's side, who was married to Clara Maria van Stockum. Her brother Abraham van Stockum (1864-1953) was Hilda's father.

³¹ J. H. Loyd: <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=25> (accessed on 16-1-2023). Maud Joynt: <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=261> (accessed on 16-1-2023); Eleanor Knott: <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=146> (accessed on 16-1-2023); Annie Power: <https://www.dib.ie/biography/power-ann-nancy-wyse-a7459> (accessed on 16-1-2023); Holger Pedersen: <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=671> (accessed on 16-1-2023).

The fact that we cannot find any letters by Van Hamel in her archives does not necessarily mean that they are all gone. Ó Lúing, for example, found a brief card from Van Hamel to Mrs. Best in Kuno Meyer's archives in the NLI,³² so further investigations of the archives of these celticists will certainly be worthwhile.

Van Hamel and his fellow celticists (m/f)

Van Hamel's letters tell us much about his fond friendship with Best, but, of course, the letters also deal with a great many other things. For instance, we learn about Van Hamel's thoughts on Celtic studies in general and, in particular, on his colleagues within the field.³³ Alongside Van Hamel's many famous male colleagues, such as Rudolf Thurneysen (1857-1940),³⁴ Kuno Meyer, and Osborn Bergin, we also encounter female colleagues and students of his who have been somewhat neglected in the historiography of the period. Academia was not altogether welcoming to women at the time when these letters were written (between 1908-1940). That said, there are several references to and endorsements of female scholars and students in Van Hamel's letters. Alice Stopford Green (1847-1929), a prominent Irish historian and nationalist, is twice mentioned briefly in his letters.³⁵ Two female students, a Miss Stassen and an unnamed student, are praised by Van Hamel as 'one of our most brilliant students' and 'a very nice young woman' respectively:

May I introduce you to my pupil Miss Stassen. She is coming to Ireland to continue her Irish studies and to prepare a thesis. She has been a long time in West-Cork and speaks some Irish; at the same time she is able to read early Irish texts. [...] She is a good linguist and was one of our most brilliant students.³⁶

Dear Best, A young lady, student of the University of Amsterdam, is writing a dissertation on the Anglo-Irish Drama, especially W.B. Yeats. I advised her to go to Dublin next summer, to work in the Library; She might join the Summer Course at the same time. [...] She would be very glad, if she could get acquainted with a young lady at Dublin, with whom she could correspond occasionally, in order to get information on points about which she cannot ascertain over here (small periodicals etc.) She is a very nice young woman, and I am sure she would not be indiscreet, and do anything she could in return.³⁷

This unnamed student must be Rebecca Pauline Christine Brugsma (1889-1968), whose dissertation *The beginnings of the Irish revival* appeared in 1933;³⁸ Miss Stassen remains as yet unknown.³⁹ Dr. Caroline Henriette de Jonge (1886-1972), one of the first female museum directors in the Netherlands, is mentioned because she would like to collaborate on an exhibition of early Christian art at the Centraal Museum Utrecht.⁴⁰ Irish celticist Eleanor Knott is also mentioned because she proofread parts of Van Hamel's work.⁴¹ While he was not unreservedly enthusiastic about her many corrections and additions, he had to admit that some of them had been helpful after all.⁴² It is also worth mentioning that Maartje Draak features twice in his letters: first when Van Hamel informs Best that she will visit Dublin in January 1938,⁴³ and then when he wrote to Best that he was happy that the visit had gone so well and that Best had appreciated her so much:

It was a great pleasure to me that you liked Miss Draak. I seldom had such a promising pupil, but even

32 Ó Lúing 1991, 195, referring to NLI, MS 11.002. The correspondence deals with Kuno Meyer's health, after he had been involved in a serious accident in America.

33 In particular, Van Hamel's close engagement with Kuno Meyer and his family emerges from the letters and really merits an article of its own. Van Hamel's letters offer a detailed account of Meyer's radicalisation as a German nationalist and the strain this put on their friendship and the relations between Meyer and other celticists. For instance, Van Hamel writes that Holger Pedersen refused to continue working with Kuno Meyer and that he was surprised by this impassioned statement from an otherwise gentle scholar, 'who used to rehearse his lectures in the Blackrock tram!' – VH to R. I. Best (09-9-1914), NLI.

34 See Ainm.ie: <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=476> (accessed on 16-1-2023).

35 For more on this, see her entry in the Dictionary of Irish biography: <https://www.dib.ie/biography/green-alice-sophia-amelia-stopford-a3602> (accessed on 30-6-2022). VH to R. I. Best (07-10-1914), NLI (about her cook in Berlin, with whom she was no longer able to get in touch) and VH to R. I. Best (27-8-1919), NLI (referring to a visit of hers to Dublin).

36 VH to R. I. Best (20-4-1931), NLI.

37 VH to R. I. Best (24-10-1926), NLI.

38 See also Theo D'haen 2013, 76. In her dissertation, she mentions Van Hamel: <https://www.delpher.nl/nl/boeken/view?coll=boeken&identifier=MMKB05:000033922:00009> (accessed on 14-1-2023).

39 Miss Stassen is also mentioned in VH's letters to A. M. E. Draak (23-11-1940, 8-12-1940 and 17-4-1942), UBU, Archief Draak, C 4. See also note 54 below. Many thanks to Bart Jaski for supplying these references.

40 VH to R. I. Best (28-10-1938), NLI: 'P.S. Before long you will have the visit of Miss Dr. De Jonge, who asked me for an introduction to you. She is assistant-director of the Municipal Museum in Utrecht. She is coming to see Dr. Mahr about the possibility of having a loan of certain objects for an exhibition of early Christian art she is preparing here'. See also her entry in the *Vrouwenlexicon* ('Women's lexicon'): <http://resources.huylgens.knaw.nl/vrouwenlexicon/lemmata/data/Jonge> (accessed on 14-1-2023).

41 More on her work may be found in the forthcoming publication *Essays in memory of Eleanor Knott*, ed. Christina Cleary, Chantal Kobel and Micheál Hoyne, as well as in Mac Cárthaigh 2005.

42 VH to R. I. Best (04-9-1921), NLI: 'The three copies of Thurneysen's book arrived only last week, and I forwarded them at once to the addresses you gave me, so it is not my fault that Bergin, Miss Knott and the School had to defer satisfying their appetites for so many months'; VH to R. I. Best (01-3-1940), NLI: 'Here then at last are the corrected proofs of my edition, which has greatly profited from Miss Knott's criticism. I add a note to Miss Knott together with a list, where she will find a reply to each of her suggestions. From it she will see that in most instances I feel bound to admit that she was right, whereas in a smaller number of cases, to my mind, the change suggested would not mean an improvement'. See also Eleanor Knott's entry in the *Dictionary of Irish biography*: <https://www.dib.ie/biography/knott-philippa-marie-eleanor-a4599> (accessed on 1-6-2022) and Ranke de Vries' contribution in this volume.

43 VH to R. I. Best (26-12-1937), NLI, see also Ranke de Vries' contribution in this volume and, of course, Gerritsen 2019.

I myself was surprised when I saw what she had been doing during her stay in Dublin. She is becoming a great worker and will no doubt do something useful in the field of Irish studies. At the same time she is so nice and womanly.⁴⁴

Van Hamel's world

Apart from Van Hamel's reflections on his friendship with Best, the field of Celtic studies and his (female) colleagues and students, his letters also reveal how deeply concerned Van Hamel was about political developments and give us a glimpse of daily life in troubled times. During the First World War, for example, we read about the arrival of Belgian refugees in the Netherlands and about Germans being sent to the Netherlands to spread 'the truth' about the war in trams.⁴⁵ It is especially poignant to read how, in October 1914, Van Hamel already believed that 'a decision at the front must be approaching', and that while working as a university lecturer in Bonn, he taught mainly women and a few men who had been sent back injured from the front.⁴⁶ The labels, found on many envelopes, indicating that the letters had been checked by censors, are also a grim reminder of the hard times.



▲ Fig. 3. Envelope of a letter from Van Hamel to R. I. Best, 29 May 1915, with label indicating that the letter was opened by British (wartime) censors. Dublin, National Library, Ms. MS11004 7 ii.

In December 1918, Van Hamel writes that 'The dragon is dead and will never be revived',⁴⁷ but there is little time to savour this, for the 'Irish Question' now occupies the frontpages. As a result, interest in Celtic studies rises, especially, he writes, among Roman Catholics.⁴⁸ The 1920s and 1930s were also, of course, a period of great poverty in Europe, and Van Hamel often refers to this, as well as to the, in his view, frightening growth of fascism. In December 1937, he writes the following to Best:

It is as you say, for us, who are of the 'older generation', little is left to hope for in a world that is running fast towards perdition. The principles we used to believe in were not built on granite but on drifting sand.⁴⁹

With this letter, written in 1937, we are nearing the end of the correspondence between Best and Van Hamel. For it was crudely interrupted by the German invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940. Van Hamel's final letter to Best dates from two months before this event. In it, Van Hamel writes that he would like to say more about the political situation, but that he will not risk endangering the letter:

There is a strong temptation to write things of a more general character, but I must not endanger the fate of this message by yielding to it. I must write a long letter to you some day under separate cover, and I am sure I shall do it. In the meantime I hope both you and your wife are doing splendidly. Yours as always, AGvanHamel.⁵⁰

He had already expressed his concerns about the political situation in Europe in December 1938, when he wrote:

I see 1939 approaching with a heavy heart. Fate is marching on, and for soldiertrodden Europe there seems to be but one solution. Let us all be prepared and remember the great good we have had in friendship and *caínchomrac*.⁵¹

In these final letters, Van Hamel's concerns about the fate of Europe are almost tangible, and these worries likely fuelled the often melancholy reflections and fond recollections of his friendship with Best which he brings up in his writings. Take, for example, this letter from October 1938, in which he thanks Best for his help in proofreading his edition of the *Immrama*:

⁴⁴ VH to R. I. Best (28-10-1938), NLI. Part of this quote is also found in Gerritsen's biography of Draak, Gerritsen 2019, 113. See also her entry in the *Vrouwenlexicon* ('Women's lexicon'): <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/vrouwenlexicon/lemmata/data/draak> (accessed on 1-6-2022). See also VH's letters to A. M. E. Draak (15-1-1937 and 19-3-1938), UBU, Archief Draak, C 4.

⁴⁵ VH to R. I. Best ([26]-8-1914), NLI, and VH to R. I. Best (26-11-1914), NLI.

⁴⁶ VH to R. I. Best (09-4-1915), NLI: 'My audience will consist of 60 ladies and 6 gentlemen, the latter number being rapidly increasing by one-legged or blind wretches turning up'. Van Hamel's short-lived professorship in Bonn and his escape from German conscription reads almost like an adventure novel; for more on this see Bart Jaski's contribution in this volume: "That mad ambition of mine": A. G. van Hamel in Bonn during the First World War'.

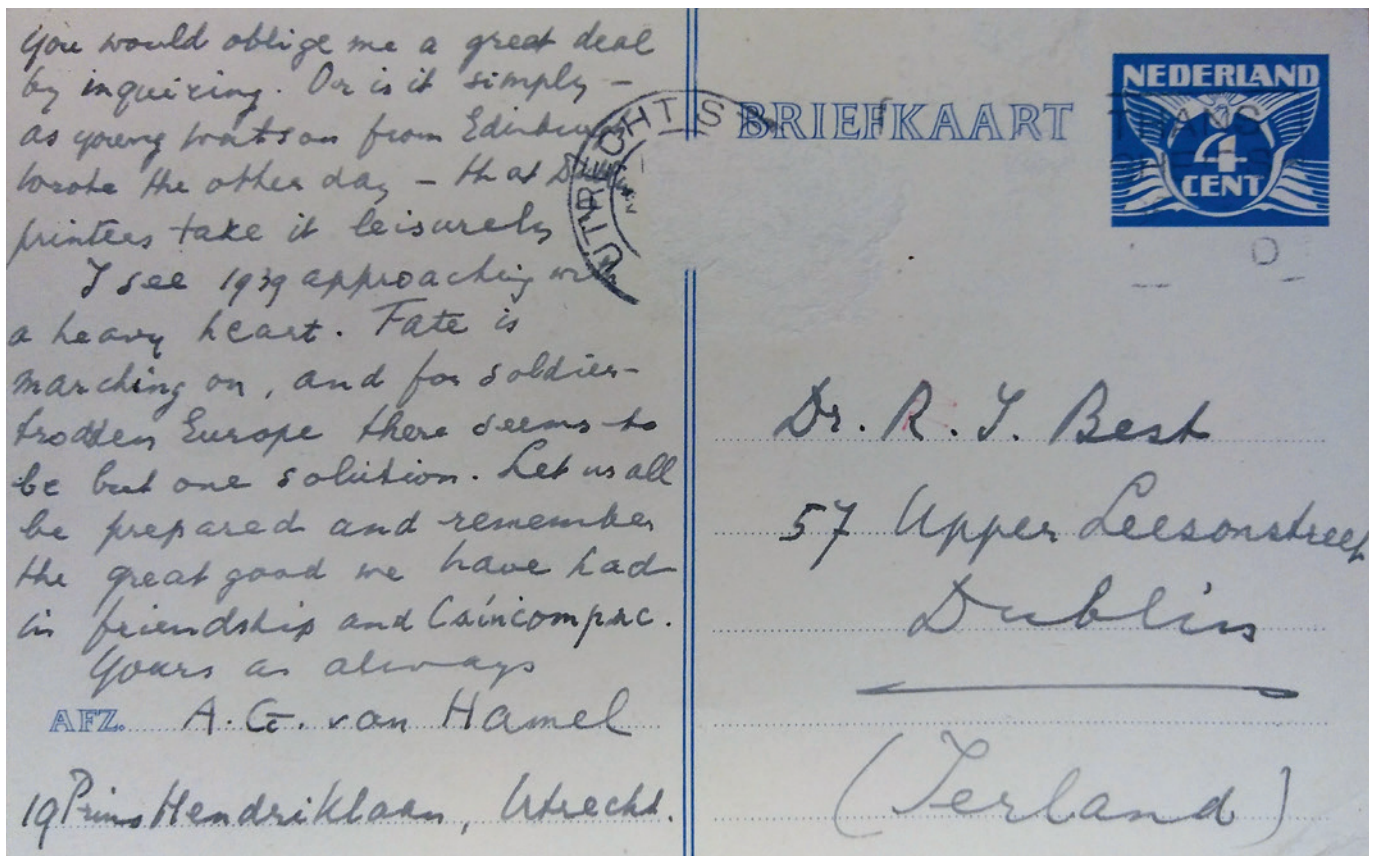
⁴⁷ VH to R. I. Best (31-12-1918), NLI.

⁴⁸ VH to R. I. Best (23-4-1921 and 15-2-1924), NLI.

⁴⁹ VH to R. I. Best (26-12-1937), NLI.

⁵⁰ VH to R. I. Best (01-3-1940), NLI.

⁵¹ VH to R. I. Best (29-12-1938), NLI. See eDIL s.v. *caínchomrac* or dil.ie/7795 (accessed on 26-3-2023), the Irish word for 'peace'.



▲ Fig. 4. Van Hamel writes the Irish word *caínchomrac* in the old script (*seanchló*). Dublin, National Library, Ms. MS11004 7 iv.

What you have done once more to make the book valuable I hardly can say. Nor need I say it, you know my feelings well enough. In my life I have had but a very few friends like you, and what I have regretted most is that meetings have always been so rare. This regret is getting stronger ~~withiñ~~ now that we are older and know less of the duration of our common future on this globe.⁵²

Here we can see Van Hamel describing his friendship with Best as one of the most singular friendships of his life, in spite of the fact that the two were rarely able to meet. It is a great pity that we only ever get to see one side of their friendship in these letters – we only have Van Hamel’s letters, carefully preserved by Best in his archives.

⁵² VH to R. I. Best (28-10-1938), NLI. See also his letter one year previously, VH to R. I. Best (26-12-1937): ‘I usually refrain from realising these appalling possibilities and content myself with thinking of what is still good and noble around us. We still have our dear friends, who share our reminiscence of a better past, and nobody can forbid us to hope everything for their good. What I hope for you is a bright year in your home, in the company of your dear wife, and success and satisfaction in completing the great work that has required so much of your exertions these last years. And all this with ‘old age’ not resting too heavily upon you, – as there is every reason to believe it does. Some leisure, besides, and – to bring in myself – that we may have an opportunity to shake hands once again and to exchange words of friendship and mutual interest’.

⁵³ For more on this, see (in Dutch): <https://www.uu.nl/nieuws/collectie-draak-geschenken-aan-de-universiteitsbibliotheek-utrecht> (accessed on 15-6-2022).

⁵⁴ The collection also contains a letter from Eleanor Knott to Van Hamel that she sent along with her ‘notes and suggestions’ for Van Hamel’s edition of *Imram curaig Mail Dúin*; for more on this, see Ranke de Vries’ contribution in this volume. It also contains a letter to miss Stassen, who was already mentioned by Van Hamel in his letter to Best (20-4-1931), VH to Stassen (12-4-1931), UBU, Archief van Hamel, G 3L (gifted to Maartje Draak by Doris Edel in 1981).

too, contains postcards (e.g. postcards depicting Irish manuscripts from the NLI) and letters, and these letters are again labelled as having been ‘opened by the censor’, though now they are censors of a different war and a different country.

The tone of the letters is similar to Van Hamel’s: they include practical questions and comments on books to be published, and news relating to their field of studies is shared (such as the establishment of the School of Celtic Studies at DIAS!):

We are all excited about the new Institute or Scoil Leighean Cheiltigh, the Bill for which is shortly to be read for the second time in the Dáil. [...] There are to be “senior Professors”, a governing Board & a Director. Who? But more of this later on, when the Instituid [sic] Ard-Leighinn, which comprises a School of Theoretical Physics, has taken shape.⁵⁵

There are also somewhat depressing reflections on the state of Europe:

With the continent in such a state of unrest, and war clouds continually appearing on the horizons, it is not easy to settle down to serious study. Our Teutonic cousins are fantastically intolerant of criticism & seem to expend their energy on solemn warnings, to which Italy also provides a vociferous accompaniment. A plague on both their dictators!⁵⁶

Let no one deceive himself that this war will usher in a golden age of peace & justice. So long as men trade there will be war. Trade is the cause of every war – the acquisition of wealth, which means dominion [...] When it is realized that “war” does not pay, it will cease. But my dear Van Hamel, that day is far off.⁵⁷

Another interesting reminiscence of Best is that of the 1916 Easter Rising in the same letter:

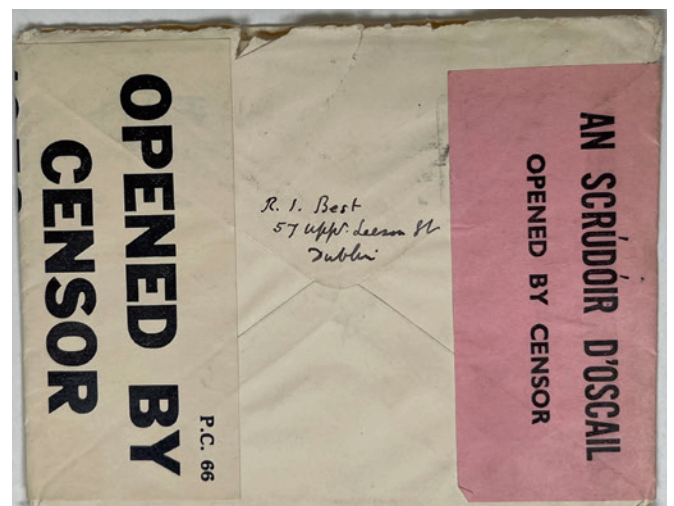
Easter is passing over without incident of any sort. It does not seem 24 years since I sat in this room working quietly at LU [*Lebor na hUidre*], on that memorable Easter Monday, unaware that the sounds of firing nearby were to change the history of this country. How time is flying! What seems to me a thing of yesterday is a life-time ago to the stalwarts of today: those who are walking in procession today, to visit the graves of those who gave their lives pro patria then – some of them personally known to me. It must ever be so.⁵⁸

And there are, of course, references to their friendship:

My dear Van Hamel, It was a real pleasure to get your letter, so friendly and evocative of those good old days that are now memories with which the wisest of us, at least, sweeten their declining years. We are both rejoiced at the prospect of seeing you this summer, in fact within a few weeks. So I will reserve all news until you are here in person.⁵⁹

My dear Van Hamel, dear & kind friend. As the solemn festival approaches, one’s thoughts go out to absent friends, & ours have been much with you of late.⁶⁰

Regrettably, we catch only a glimpse of Best’s feelings, thoughts and musings on his friendship with Van Hamel, but little though it is, it is more than we thought we had! The last letter Best wrote to Van Hamel, a postcard dated April 1940, appears to have gone unanswered.⁶¹ Best sent it along with the final proofs of Van Hamel’s edition of the *Immrama*, which would eventually be published in 1941. The archives fail to reveal whether Van Hamel was able to communicate with Best about this publication after May 1940. Just when international communications were opening up again, after the liberation of the Netherlands, Van Hamel would pass away unexpectedly in November 1945. He left behind a brokenhearted Maartje Draak, who wrote to Seamus Delargy that she had become ‘fatherless’ and had lost a teacher and mentor.⁶²



▲ Fig. 5. A letter from R. I. Best to Van Hamel (25 March 1940), also opened by a censor (scrúdóir). Utrecht, University Library, Archief Van Hamel, G 3A.

55 R. I. Best to VH (25-3-1940), UBU, Archief Van Hamel, G 3A.

56 R. I. Best to VH (19-12-1938), UBU, Archief Van Hamel, G 3A.

57 R. I. Best to VH (25-3-1940), UBU, Archief Van Hamel, G 3A.

58 R. I. Best to VH (25-3-1940), UBU, Archief Van Hamel, G 3A.

59 R. I. Best to VH (15-6-1936), UBU, Archief Van Hamel, G 3A.

60 R. I. Best to VH (19-12-1938), UBU, Archief Van Hamel, G 3A.

61 For this letter, see Ranke de Vries’ contribution in this volume.

62 Gerritsen 2019, 136; see Draak 1947 for her in memoriam of Van Hamel.

Judging from the letters Van Hamel wrote to his good friend Best, we can say that Van Hamel was both a teacher and mentor who could be much more troubled than the 'sunny and sympathetic' person Ó Lúing perceived him to be, as well as someone who was much warmer and more compassionate than the 'inappropriately smug', 'Deutsche' Van Hamel that Ó Dochertaigh extracted from the letters. Like any of us, Van Hamel was a multifaceted

and multi-layered individual, someone who stood at the centre of his field of studies and thought deeply about the world, and he deserves to be studied in that way. It is therefore fitting that we can now, as we celebrate the centenary of Celtic in Utrecht, meet him in his letters: as a friend, violinist, scholar, mentor, and individual.



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Appendix 1 – Contents of the Van Hamel - Best folders in the NLI

MS11004 7 i

- 1909-01-08
- 1912-01-08
- 1912-04-26
- 1913-03-17
- 1913-06-10
- 1913-07-20
- 1914-01-05
- 1914-03-05
- 1914-07-17
- 1914-08-26
- 1914-09-07
- 1914-09-25
- 1914-10-07
- 1914-11-26

MS11004 7 ii

- 1908-08-27
- 1915-01-05
- 1915-04-09
- 1915-05-29
- 1915-06-05
- 1915-07-10
- 1915-08-18
- 1915-10-19
- 1915-12-21
- 1916-02-18
- 1916-04-07
- 1916-06-18
- 1916-10-25
- 1917-04-02
- 1918-01-30
- 1918-12-31
- 1919-03-03
- 1919-08-27
- 1919-10-18
- 1919-11-11
- 1919-12-23

MS 11004 7 iii

- 1920-06-06
- 1920-07-04
- 1920-08-09
- 1920-09-10
- 1920-09-22
- 1920-10-17
- 1920-11-24
- 1921-04-23
- 1921-08-05
- 1921-09-04
- 1921-12-09
- 1922-05-20
- 1923-12-20
- 1924-01-27
- 1924-02-15
- 1924-06-26
- 1924-07-12
- 1924-11-15
- 1925-10-02
- 1926-06-25
- 1926-07-12
- 1926-08-12
- 1926-09-03
- 1926-10-29
- 1927-06-09
- 1928-07-27

MS 11004 7 iv

- 1908-02-26
- 1908-05-24
- 1913-08-22
- 1913-09-05
- 1913-10-02
- 1913-12-19
- 1914-01-09
- 1914-01-30
- 1914-09-09
- 1914-10-24
- 1914-11-20
- 1914-12-08
- 1915-10-19
- 1915-12-21
- 1920-07-24
- 1929-12-19
- 1930-06-20
- 1930-07-06
- 1930-07-19
- 1930-08-13
- 1931-04-09
- 1931-04-20
- 1931-07-08
- 1931-11-23
- 1932-05-17
- 1932-05-21
- 1932-07-02
- 1936-12-24
- 1937-12-26
- 1938-10-28
- 1938-12-29
- 1940-03-01
- NO YEAR-08-02