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BLONDEEL VAN CUELEBROECK (Edouard)

Blondeel Van Cuelebroeck, Edouard (Ghent, 14 December 1809 – Madrid, 13 September 1872), diplomat.

Blondeel is the natural child of Marie Blondeel, who was a tailor in Torhout. He is adopted by a Ghent trader, Van Cuelebroeck, whose eminent-sounding name he adds to his surname.

Blondeel starts working as a clerk with a local bailiff while contributing to the hyper-patriotic journal *Méphistophélès*. Supported by the Foreign Office ministerGeneral Goblet, heenters the department as second clerk at the central administration on 30 October 1832. In 1834 he marries the daughter of his landlady, the widow of Ignace Lefebvre, alderman and counselor at the Brussels *Cour d'Appel*. Mrs. Lefebvre is on good terms withInterior minister de Muelenaere and mgr. Capacini, the former papal nuncio to the Dutch king WilliamI, who was previously a tenant of Lefebvre. These connections via his mother-in-law lead to Blondeel's nomination, on 4 December 1835, assecretary to the legation in Rome. He earns respect and appreciation at the Vatican where he renews his ties with Capacini. However, because ofpersonal problems between Blondeel and the Belgian minister in Rome, Vilain XIII, the Foreign Office arranges another posting for Blondeel.

This happens just as Leopold Inominates him, on 30 September 1837 – secretly at first – as consul in Alexandria.The King wants Blondeel to negotiate the property transfer of Candia (Crete). This plan, however,never comes to fruition because it proves impossible to establish a dialogue between the Sultan and the Egyptian Vice-Roy, both of whom have claims on the sovereignty of the island. Nevertheless, on 30 June 1838 Blondeel is promoted to consul-general in Alexandria.He immediately begins to develop a project for the commercial exploration, first of Egypt, and then of Abyssinia, where he wants to create a permanent Belgian trading settlement. From September 1840 to October 1842 Blondeel, with the support of the King,undertakes an expedition into the hitherto almost unknown territories of Abyssinia, the land of the Blue Nile. Due to the King's support for this expedition, the Foreign Office is forced to collaborate, though they do so somewhatreluctantly. This adventure fulfillsBlondeel's lifelong aspiration of discovering the source of the Nile. By the standards of the day, this expedition is truly impressive, covering the lands of Choa, Tigré, Godjam and the capital at Gondar. Moreover, Blondeel plays a key role in the establishment of a Catholic mission in Khartoum, in the Sudan. Though believed to have died on his travels, Blondeel returns unexpectedly to Belgium, bringing treaties for the transfer of Abyssinian territory, with the view of establishing a trading colony.In September 1844 he presents a report in Brussels in which he argues for the establishment of a colony in the bay of Anfilla (Eritrea). The report has a wider significance as it consists not only of economical and military, but also of social and cultural intelligence concerning the lands he traversed and the people he met.However, as a result of the problems with the Belgian settlement of Santo Tomas in Guatemala, the Nothomb cabinet hesitates and, in the end, nothing ever comes of the expansion in Abyssinia. In October 1844, the project is shelvedand Blondeel, who has already been replaced in Alexandria, is reintegrated in the diplomatic corps.The Abyssinia project is, however, not completely forgotten: for decades to come it will remain a fixed point in Belgian thinking about expansion.

Ironically, on 1 April 1845 Blondeel is nominated consul-general and chargé d'affaires in Mexico, with jurisdiction over the Santo Tomas settlement. His main task is to report on the activities of the *Compagnie Belge de Colonisation*, which had acquired the lands for the settlement of a 'phalanstère' community – a self-sustaining cooperative community, sometimes called a *phalanx* – ofaround a thousand compatriots. Secret directives from the King to Blondeel stress the importance of cooperating with the local powers in order to transform the settlement in an autonomous neutral state that will become, in time, a Belgian colony. Blondeel's report confirms the King's project, albeit with a number of necessary adaptations, but the government refuses to ratify the arrangement. At the end of 1847Blondeel, suffering from fevers caused by his stay in Central America,returns to Belgium.

Upon his recovery, he is sent on a secret mission to revolutionary Frankfurt in the summer of 1848. When he returns, he is nominated,on 31 October 1848, as chargé d'affairesat the Sublime Porte in Constantinople (Istanbul). From 1850 onwards, the Greek government in Athens is added to his brief. Blondeel's period in Constantinople is long and eventful. In 1850-1851 Foreign Affairs minister d'Hoffschmidt orders him to negotiate the restoration, with Belgian financing, of the graves of Godfrey of Bouillon and Baldwin of Jerusalem in the church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. He fails in this attempt but tries again to re-open the

case during the Duke of Brabant's first voyage to the Levant in 1855. Gradually Blondeel becomes a member of the informal network dedicated to commercial or colonial expansions surrounding the Duke of Brabant. In December 1853 he is promoted to resident minister in Constantinople and Athens. During the Crimean War, as a result of a feud with the Ottoman minister in Brussels, chevalier de Kerckhove, who was Blondeel's predecessor as Belgian chargé d'affaires in Constantinople, Blondeel is accused of discrediting the allies' cause before Sultan Abdülmecid. Blondeel survives these accusations but is slandered again when, from October 1856 to March 1857, he undertakes a voyage in the Danube principalities Walachia and Moldavia; a voyage ordered by Foreign Office minister Vilain XIIII in order to prospect consular posts. Blondeel is accused of propagating the cause of the Count of Flanders, the King's youngest son, as a candidate for the throne of the unified principalities. The Foreign Office threatens to recall him and send him to Rio de Janeiro, but Blondeel is protected by Leopold I. Eventually he receives his passport from the Porte in mid-June 1857. He is able to settle the differences with the Ottomans during an informal visit to the Sultan in June 1858. In fact, Blondeel has excellent relations with the members of the Ottoman court – with the exception of the powerful vizier and Foreign Office minister Rechid Pacha – so Belgian-Ottoman relations are never really in serious danger.

In December 1857, Blondeel becomes resident minister in Washington and, in February 1859, ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary minister. In preparation for this posting, Blondeel makes a preliminary voyage, first touring the provincial chambers of commerce in Belgium (1859), then the southern parts of the United States (1860) to explore the possibilities of direct trade. Meanwhile, Blondeel's wife falls ill. He tries, at the end of 1862, to return to Belgium but the Foreign Office convinces him to stay and continue his explorations. During a leave, in October 1863, he is received by the Duke of Brabant, who is anxious to hear of Blondeel's various colonial projects. After the formation of the Mexican Empire, led by Maximilian of Austria and Charlotte, daughter of Leopold I, Blondeel is sent to Mexico to congratulate the couple. He is nominated ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary minister in January 1865, after which he accompanies the empress on a voyage to Yucatan. Later, he receives an invitation, which he declines, from the Mexican conservatives to head the Mexican Foreign Office. Blondeel learns, in May 1865, that his wife has died. He leaves Mexico in the spring of 1866 with the feeling that the situation there is rapidly degenerating. Blondeel's absence during the tragic sort reserved for Emperor Maximilian, who is executed in June 1867, causes a scandal in Belgium. As a consequence, his nomination as ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary minister in Madrid is revoked in May 1867 and he is temporarily inactive until his nomination is reconfirmed on 30 April 1868.

On 7 October 1871 Blondeel marries again in London. His new wife is Ellen Willing, the daughter of the merchant-trader Richard Willing of Philadelphia. Blondeel dies in Madrid from heart failure on 13 September 1872, less than a year after his marriage. He was the first Belgian colonial diplomat of stature. Although he was supposed to be an ultramontane zealot, in reality Blondeel was a religious moderate and a follower of de Montalembert, who had cross-cultural and interreligious friendships. Above all, he was a prolific and very intelligent political reporter.

Dr. Jan Anckaer
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Library Federal Parliament

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Langue
Undefined

Tomaison:
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