

Travelling the Dutch East Indies

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES
AND LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS

Edited by
Doris Jedamski & Rick Honings



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Historical Perspectives and Literary Representations

DORIS JEDAMSKI & RICK HONINGS (EDS.)



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Table of contents

Acknowledgements	7
Introduction	9
DORIS JEDAMSKI & RICK HONINGS	

Part I Historical Perspectives

Preparing the 'First Voyage' to 'the East'. Investment, Ships, and Information in Amsterdam, 1592-1595	27
ERIK ODEGARD	
Floating Cuisine. Food on Board of Dutch Ocean Liners Heading to the Indies, 1871-1964	57
GEKE BURGER	
Up in the Sky. Civil Air Transport in the Dutch East Indies and Colonial Society, 1928-1942	85
MARC DIERIKX	

Part II Literary Representations

Thrilling Fiction, Travel Guides and Spaces of Identity. Sea Voyages between the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies in Novels and Short Stories, 1850-1940	111
COEN VAN 'T VEER	
Indigenous Eyes. Javanese Colonial Travel Texts as Autoethnographic Expressions: The Case of Purwalelana and Suparta	138
RICK HONINGS	

The Art of Travel Along the Post Road. Impressions of Nineteenth-Century Journeys Across the Island of Java	169
JUDITH E. BOSNAK	
‘An Evocation of Our Colonies for the Western Eye’. Louis Couperus’ Aestheticising Gaze from the Car	201
NICK TOMBERGE	
Notes on the Contributors	228

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Introduction

DORIS JEDAMSKI & RICK HONINGS

In 1789, Johann Anton Neubronner (1763-1815), the German grandfather of the renowned Indologist Herman Neubronner van der Tuuk (1824-1894), left Europe for a journey into the unknown. The letters he sent home from the various ports along the way (since 2020 kept in the Special Collections of Leiden University Libraries) vividly portray the adventurous and life-threatening nature of a journey to the Dutch East Indies at that time. Neubronner's writing affords the reader significant insight into life on board the ship. For example, he reports with a degree of sarcasm how the ship almost went up in smoke because a bottle of acid, clandestinely smuggled on board by the ship's doctor, got too close to 230 barrels of gunpowder that were kept in the storage room. Neubronner also notes, somewhat matter-of-factly, how a baby was born to a young mother whose father had taken his family sailing towards a colonial career in the Indies. The woman in question had managed to hide her pregnancy from everyone on board, including her own parents. Furthermore, Neubronner depicts the more profane aspects of the journey:

On board I got food that was almost better than what I had in Amsterdam. [...] On Sundays it is salted beef, which had been in salted water for 24 hours, no bouillon allowed, butter is added to the soup. On Mondays it's barley with raisins or prunes. On Tuesdays delicious smoked bacon with sauerkraut [...]. Wednesday barley with dried fish, Thursday again salted fish with peas, Friday rice or barley with peas, Saturday it's again barley with raisins or prunes [...] On 'meat days' there is also wine, and, by the way, every day 4x a small glass of Chinese brandy.¹

In 1594, the first Dutch ships sailed to the East Indies, arriving on the coast of Java the following year. Less than a decade later, in 1602, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC, Dutch East India Company) was founded. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century, almost five thousand ships were sent to Asia and the Dutch East Indies, attracting a growing number of travellers, with trade as one of the major incentives. In addition to Dutch missionary ambitions, progress and technological innovations not only fed the growing hunger for expansion, but also stirred an appetite for adventure. The hope for a life in welfare is mirrored in the growing numbers of passengers travelling 'East' in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.²



Batavia, by Jacob Keyser 1730. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 36D285.

Many publications, whether stated explicitly or not, spring from conferences and conference panels – as is the case with this book. *Travelling the Dutch East Indies* covers diverse aspects of travels to and within the former colony in ‘the East’. The deciding spark in this case flew from the International Convention of Asian Scholars (ICAS), which was held in Leiden from 15 to 19 July 2019. Doris Jedamski, curator of South and Southeast Asian Manuscripts and Printed Works at Leiden University Libraries, organised the panel ‘Travel and Transport in the Dutch East Indies’. Whilst the papers were as diverse as one could possibly imagine, they nonetheless presented a patchwork-impression of the manifold side-shows of travel culture that are hardly ever discussed. Only a few months later, travelling suddenly became impossible as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, emphasising how much travel has become part of our daily lives.

Travel and travel records are not a novelty in scholarly research. Throughout almost all major disciplines within the Humanities, one can find contributions related to, or being significant for, the study of travel culture and history. Indeed, a search of the online catalogue of Leiden University Libraries using the keyword ‘travel’ returns more than four million hits: articles, edited volumes, and books, mostly in English, although encompassing many other languages, most of them published over the last two decades. Omitting publications that discuss how ideas or diseases travel,

there remains an impressive number of publications which, of course, raises the question: Why add yet another to them?

The aim of this volume is to bridge the gap between conventional travel studies and less conventional approaches and, in doing so, to take a fresh look at the Asian collection at Leiden University Libraries. However, this volume will not, as is so often the case, concentrate on one aspect of travel – a particular genre or material sort, a specific traveller or group of travellers, or on a certain period. There are two primary themes in this volume. The first is the basic structure of travel itself: All journeys start with some form of preparation, followed by the boarding of the vessel – the ship, plane, train, or carriage – and, most importantly, the time spent on board. This time spent between *here* and *there*, the line between *from* and *to*, is a space in which familiar rules and norms either change or seem temporarily suspended altogether. The second theme is the literary representation of travel. How did European and non-European travellers write about their trips to and in the Indies? This brings this book into the field of international travel writing studies.

The travel route from the Netherlands to the Dutch East Indies was not a deliberately chosen focus of study, but rather grew from current research in the Netherlands. And whilst the period covered may be circumscribed with the term ‘colonial’, this is not a book on colonialism. Rather, it is a book on travel culture and travel literature, which has been shaped heavily by the colonial situation of the period – one that undoubtedly would have been entirely different if the world order and power constellation had been different. Hence, the perspective of this book is fundamentally Western in nature, thus inevitably carrying with it the cultural baggage that none of its contributors could possibly leave behind.

Acknowledging the above, it is crucial to also investigate the reverse perspective, to look at indigenous travel culture – within the Malay Archipelago itself, as well as that to the Netherlands and Europe. The latter form of travel writing was rare, but it did exist. Unfortunately, few indigenous travellers kept a diary or wrote home on a regular basis. If they did, and if their records even survived the profoundly paper-unfriendly climate and paper-eating creatures, such records have yet to surface in any great number. Notwithstanding their scarcity, some rare examples of indigenous travel records are discussed in this book – albeit by Western scholars with an inevitably Western perspective. There is nothing wrong with a Western perspective; indeed, there is no other perspective that Western scholars could possibly assume. It is merely to acknowledge that even if one might pretend to put oneself in the shoes of the other, that shoe will never truly fit. Rather, this volume provides a patchwork of Western glimpses and ideas that hopefully will stimulate others, also non-Western scholars. To date, travel culture studies have not attracted much attention in Indonesia, despite the fact that travel and transport play such a crucial role in everyday life as well as in many narrative



'Promenade sur la Place de Waterloo a Batavia', by A.J. Bik 1842. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 47B27.

traditions. The travel culture of the Malay Archipelago – whether real or imagined – differed profoundly from the Western one, and probably still does. Comparative studies in this field have the potential to fill this gap. This is why, in 2020 in Leiden, the Vidi project *Voicing the Colony: Travelers in the Dutch East Indies, 1800-1945* began. Funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), the project analyses both Dutch and Indonesian travel perspectives. Three scholars involved with the project – Judith E. Bosnak, Rick Honings, and Nick Tomberge – each contributed a chapter to this book.

Just like the contributors to this volume, the authors of the letters, travel reports, diaries, and other sources under scrutiny here could not rid themselves from their cultural baggage. However, the 'Western perspective' is certainly not homogenous, and has been subject to profound change over the centuries. The source material used is manifold: travel journals give insight into the feelings and perception of travellers during their journeys; photographs and picture cards are prominent media via which to capture and share impressions gathered during a journey; archival documents convey a sphere of historical factuality; travel literature allows a broader public

to participate in the – real or fictitious – experience of a journey; and ephemeral items, such as illustrations to a story, can provide fleeting yet touching glimpses of the travel experience of an individual or a group.

Anticipation, expectation, retrospective interpretation – one must look at travel from all sides and will inevitably see something different every time. The missionary leaving to spread the word of God, the young woman leaving to marry a glove on board the ship, the young man leaving home to find adventure or wealth, work and sometimes even death in the colonial world – each travelled with different expectations, hopes, and anxieties. This journey towards an uncertain future was for some forced, whilst for others the journey was an end in itself. Some left their home forever to find a new one on the other side of the world, whilst others left with the firm intention to return to their European home at some point.

Initially, it was predominantly men who travelled to the Indies. For many male Dutch travellers, the journey marked the beginning (or indeed, the end) of their leave from colonial duty granted every so many years. When a change in colonial policy in the nineteenth century led to a strong disapproval of mixed marriages, there arose a growing demand for European Dutch women from the homeland, even though they remained somewhat scarce. Add this to this the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, making travel faster and less dangerous, and the growing emancipation of Western societies, and it is clear that the number of women travelling to the Indies – and not only as brides-to-be – increased. In the twentieth century, tourism started to blossom and became a major motivation for those wishing to travel to Asia.



Europeans in front of a car, presumably on Java, circa 1910. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 153118.

Depending on the distance to be covered and of course period, modes of transport ranged from mule, horse, carriage, and ship to, more recently, train, car, bus, (motor)cycle, and aircraft. The historical and technical development of the various modes of transport and the infrastructure needed to cover large distances had a significant impact on travel culture in all regions of the world. The speed of travel not only determines the actual travel experience, but also makes destinations that used to be out of reach accessible, not only to the privileged few, but ultimately to large numbers of travellers. However, compared to the mass tourism of the post-World War II era, twentieth-century pre-war travel often still carried with it an air of exclusivity and extravagance. This, of course, does not extend to the fourth-class steerage passengers of the large ocean liners – those fleeing poverty or prosecution. Generally speaking, throughout all the developments in the various forms of transport, travel safety remained unquestioned. Indeed, a pervasive, almost unconditional trust was placed in modern technology, notwithstanding the fact that planes did crash, and ships occasionally sank.

Historical Perspectives

The contributions to this volume are divided into two thematic parts. In the first part, ‘Historical Perspectives’, three historians analyse different aspects of travelling to the Dutch East Indies. Erik Odegard, who focuses on the ‘First Voyage’ from the Netherlands to ‘the East’ (1592-1595), emphasises the financial aspects of the preparations of the journey, but also highlights the relevance of ‘intelligence’. Looking with envy at the Portuguese who had successfully built their shipping route to Asia and watching them returning rich from their voyages over the oceans, the Dutch were determined to grab a ‘piece of the pie’. Yet their aim was not (yet) to conquer or to colonise, but rather to profit from trade. Hence, they made plans to travel to Asia with Sunda as their primary destination. There were, however, two major problems: they had no ships that could make the journey, and they had no clue how to get there. Odegard describes how Amsterdam merchants organised themselves into the ‘Compagnie van Verre’ (Company of Distant Lands) – the first of four predecessors to the VOC – to tackle these problems, amongst others by way of intensive fund raising and espionage. In 1595, following at least three years of preparation, four ships with 249 men on board left Texel bound to Asia. Despite being firmly convinced that they were well prepared, only 89 men were to return alive. On the basis of historic documents, Odegard reveals that the commercial, political, and military information gathered by the Dutch was, to a large degree, based on badly outdated sources. Nonetheless, those disastrous first Dutch voyages to the Indies inspired others to embark on the same journey.

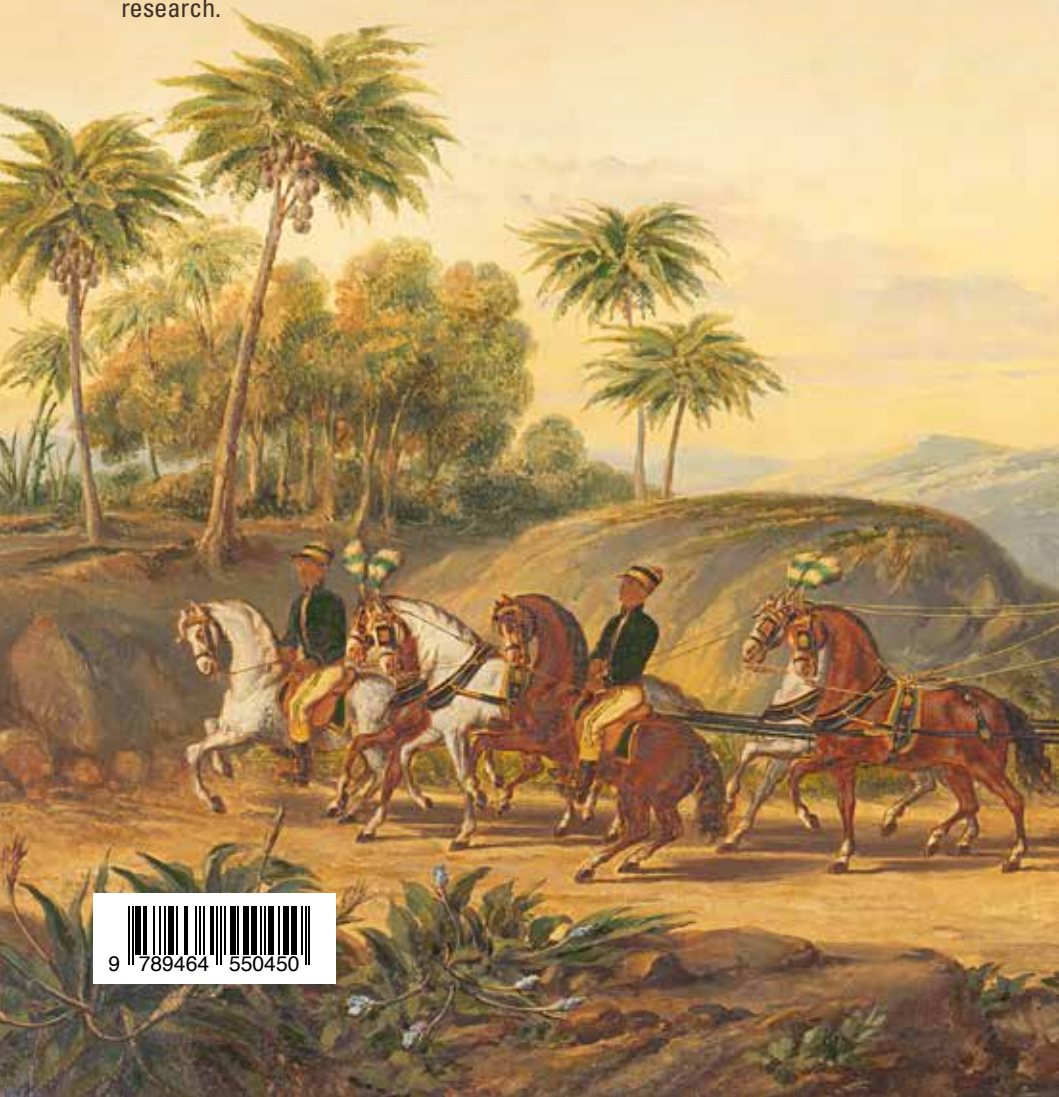
The second chapter, ‘Floating Cuisine’, authored by Geke Burger, explores the food culture on board the ship by taking a close look into the



Dinner, presumably on board of the MS *Constantijn Huygens* in the Dutch East Indies, circa 1925. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 60126.

galley and restaurants of the Dutch ships commuting between Europe and the Dutch East Indies. Whether by sailing vessels, steamers, or, eventually, by ocean liners, travellers shared one thing in common: they spent weeks on board and they all needed food and drink. Burger sheds light on the supply of food – its storage, preparation, presentation, and actual serving. She investigates the food-related infrastructure on the ship, but also the challenges and changes that passengers and their eating habits underwent throughout the centuries. Twentieth-century shipping companies realised that meals on board meant much more than the simple response to hunger. Burger consults a vast variety of printed material, ephemeral materials such as menu cards, price lists, programmes, and deck plans, as well as rare contemporary publications on this aspect of travel. The latter were intended to prepare the passengers for the journey, but they also served to shape expectations before leaving harbour. Burger paints a fascinating picture of the de-

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