

Paul van der Velde, *A lifelong passion; P.J. Veth (1814-1895) and the Dutch East Indies*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2006, xvi + 356 pp. [Verhandelingen 234.] ISBN 9067182648. Price: EUR 35.00 (paperback).

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This volume is the English translation of Van der Velde's biography of Dutch scholar P.J. Veth, *Een Indische liefde; P.J. Veth (1814-1895) en de inburgering van Nederlands-Indië* (2000). The translator, Beverley Jackson, has beautifully rendered the Dutch original, even showing Byronian poetical prowess in her re-creation of Veth's early poems in the Romantic tradition. Van der Velde paints a convincing picture of Veth as a scholar of an encyclopaedic grasp, who, far from being a mere scholarly recluse, played a significant role in both the academic world and Dutch society. Veth's active participation in his era has enabled his biographer to focus on 'the ideological roots of Dutch imperialism and cultural nationalism, the influence of scholarship on colonial politics, and the activities and impact of the colonial lobby' (p. xiii). But before arriving at Veth's major claim to fame, as the founding father of various disciplines that evolved from the study of the Dutch East Indies (anthropology, ethnology and geography), Van der Velde tells the colourful story of Veth's childhood in Dordrecht, his position between Romanticism and Enlightenment, and his path to public life. The protégé of the well-known Rationalist Jacob Geel, Veth's academic career was characterized by thirst for knowledge rather than Romantic endeavour: he never set foot on the Indonesian islands he described. It would have pleased Geel to read that students like Veth have been more influential than the fashionable student-authors of that era (p. 16).

At some point, Van der Velde calls Veth an 'enlightened Romantic' (p. 101). Veth defended academic freedom against the claims of theology (p. 90); nevertheless, he remained a devout believer throughout his life, and as an editor of the influential journal *De Gids* he refused articles he considered atheist (p. 97). Apart from a passing predilection for incorporation of the Netherlands into the German Federation, he espoused the liberal cause, especially in colonial policies. This entailed the abolition of the Cultivation System and the shift toward the imperialist phase of the colonial adventure. He had lofty expectations of the impact Western civilization could have upon indigenous people, if priority were given to education. His *mission civilisatrice* was of a liberal nature: while strongly believing in the superiority of Western civilization, he opposed both slavery and missionary work (pp. 132, 162). Holding Islam in low esteem, he thought that 'in our struggle with Aceh we

represent civilization and humanity against barbarity and cruelty' (p. 192). A staunch defender of imperialism, Veth pleaded for an end to the strategy of non-interference which had dominated Dutch colonial philosophy up to 1870 (p. 195). In his typical nineteenth-century optimism, he believed that the colonized peoples, once educated, would blend into a Greater Netherlands identity. History proved him wrong.

Van der Velde defends Veth against accusations of superficiality, and rightly emphasizes his pioneering and inspirational role as well as his vivid style of writing. Veth is still known nowadays for his groundbreaking review of Multatuli's novel *Max Havelaar*. Van der Velde's biography would have profited from a more probing comparison of the views of Veth and Douwes Dekker. The latter strongly opposed both imperialism and the abolition of the Cultivation System, especially in his pamphlets about so-called 'Free Labour'. Van der Velde tells us that Douwes Dekker's novel *Max Havelaar* was 'a godsend to the liberals in their struggle against the Cultivation System' (p. 141). Which may be so, but the author could have commented on this liberal misinterpretation.

Overall, this is a well-researched and well-written biography as well as a portrait of an important era in scientific and geographical exploration. It is with a nice light touch that Van der Velde provides psychological insight into Veth's relationship with his first and second spouses and with his sons. Regrettably, some paragraphs of the translation have been lost in the transition from page 101 to page 103 (page 102 being filled up by a picture). I conclude with a few corrections: in the caption on page 8, 'Dordtse Tekengenootschap' is italicized and the name of this art society (*Pictura*) is omitted. The correct reference is given in Van der Velde's footnote 13 on page 47. On page 170, the word 'or' after *Journal of the Dutch East Indies* is redundant. On page 229, an s is missing in the word 'Genootschap'. The Dordrecht public cemetery (caption on page 280, and footnote 67 on page 284) is called 'Essenhof', not 'Essehof'. Dordrecht, finally, is not located at the confluence of the Merwe, Rotte and Oude Maas, but at the confluence of (Beneden) Merwede, Noord and Oude Maas (p. 284).

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