

Paul van der Velde. *A Lifelong Passion—P. J. Veth (1814–1895) and the Dutch East Indies*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2006. 450 pages.

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“Wie niet verbaasd staat over de kennis van Prof. Veth heeft geen verstand van kennis.” Since 1995 those words are carved on the façade of one of Leiden University’s most prominent premises, the P. J. Veth building, a meeting place for students and scholars who are interested in areas outside of Europe and beyond. “Anyone who is not astonished at Professor Veth’s knowledge, knows nothing about knowledge.”

The sentence was written by Eduard Douwes Dekker, alias Multatuli. He wrote it in the time he was still on good terms with Professor Veth. Veth was one of the first scholars who had the courage and the conscience to speak out in favor of *Max Havelaar*, Multatuli’s 1856 firecracker novel about the situation on the island of Java that made Dutch readers realize there was a colony out there and that many things were wrong in the colony. If anything, the inscription shows a delicate balance between irony and hyperbole, the trademark of Multatuli’s style; it could serve as the perfect illustration of why Douwes Dekker has had such a following among Dutch writers and readers until this very day and is still considered Holland’s greatest nineteenth-century author. Professor Veth, the object of Multatuli’s admiration, had a different style of writing; his pen was a blunt and simple one, evoking a transparency that suggested to contemporary readers factual knowledge rather than ambivalent opinions. Perhaps because of this very transparency, Veth’s writings have become disregarded, while the knowledge and the information they convey have continued to echo through the ever-growing corpus of writings on the Dutch Indies and Indonesia. Only on rare occasions does his name come up in Leiden these days; Professor Veth is recalled as the man who never lived and worked in the Indies—and hence his work cannot be taken seriously. And yet, in his days he told his readers in detail what they could expect to find on the island of Mentawai, in Makassar, and along the road between Djogjakarta and Solo, and they firmly believed him. Pieter Johannes Veth (1814–1895) deserves to be regarded as one of the founding fathers of Indonesian studies in the Netherlands.

Veth’s writings consist of many thousands of printed pages and hundreds of letters and notes, produced over a period of some sixty years. He was one of those amazingly creative nineteenth-century writers who (yet another ironic hyperbole) wrote faster than contemporaries could read. Veth’s written words are covered by the dust of time, and nowadays no self-respecting Dutch student of Indonesia would think it necessary to dig them up, let alone quote from them. A similar fate of neglect befell Veth’s voice, allegedly a thin and shrill one, which he used to speak out in public meetings and academic gatherings with great effect and authority. Just like his pen, his voice dealt with issues and questions that were central in intellectual, political, and economic discussions in nineteenth-century Holland—and in a number of cases, Veth’s pen and voice helped to create those issues. Not in the least thanks to his performances as much as Douwes Dekker’s, the successive governments in The Hague were forced to reformulate their policy in the colony, to be increasingly based on the recognition of “the community of knowledge and interest”—as the explanatory memorandum accompanying the amendment to the constitution of 1848 would have it. Veth, a liberal

who tried to combine ideas of free trade and freedom of the press with notions of Christian-inspired responsibility for God's creation and of human striving for the general well-being of mankind, was to follow the implementation of this constant reformulation from an academic distance, publicly criticizing Dutch policies, administrators, and politicians whenever necessary. His morally inspired scholarship was to serve Dutch activities in the fast-expanding colony; witness a remarkable statement he made as early as 1847: "It is there (the Dutch Indies) if anywhere that a rich harvest can be expected from the alliance of Christianity and science for the ennoblement and happiness of humanity, where millions of people, under the influence of a mild religion, have stagnated in semi-civilization for centuries, and millions have sunk to the depths of coarseness and ignorance."

Thanks to an impressive and ever-expanding library and a lively correspondence with a constantly shifting group of administrators, scholars, missionaries, and educators, Veth was well-informed about the often horrendous circumstances in which the indigenous peoples of the Archipelago found themselves. Things in the Dutch Indies should be changed, he argued loudly and clearly. Holland, civilized and superior, should expand its authority over the islands. Holland had the moral obligation not only of protecting the local people from suppression and corruption, but also of giving free rein to private business and its endeavors of developing the islands for the benefit of everyone involved.

The Indies' local population should be elevated, in short, under the benevolent guardianship of an enlightened (and Christian) Dutch-led administration, and in Veth's opinion this elevation should be based on a solid knowledge of the land. His passionate quest of knowledge of the Indies led him on a long scholarly career involving academic institutions in Breda, Franeker, Amsterdam and, finally, Leiden, in an aura of respect, fame, depressions, and wealth. His knowledge was of an encyclopedic and fragmentary character, typical of the great nineteenth-century European students of Southeast Asia (such as Crawford and Logan before him). Knowledge should inform people in Holland about the colony as much as assist the Dutch administration and army in the Indies in their civilizing and elevating work. Veth's writings offered concrete and material information about nature, tribal life, life style, religions, and languages; his main interests were geography, natural history, languages, and ethnography—and, of course, education.

But then, information and knowledge are never presented without a framework of preconceptions, and Veth's work is no exception to this rule. His notions of empiricism, Christianity, and nationalism are elegantly and almost imperceptibly absorbed in his work: in his voluminous books about the islands of Borneo, Java, and Sumatra, as well as in his contributions to a Dutch Indies encyclopedia; in his successful efforts to establish scholarly societies, such as the Indisch Genootschap and het Koninklijk Nederlands Aardrijkskundig Genootschap; in his numerous publications about language, nature, buildings, rituals, education, and politics; in his work as an editor for some of the trend-setting journals in Holland, *De Gids* and *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indie* among them; in his propaganda for scientific expeditions in the colony and the 1883 World Exhibition in Amsterdam; in his pleas for an active intervention in Atjeh and other regions of the Indies where, he knew, the local population was suppressed by their rulers; and, at the end of his life, in his

dreams of a “Greater Holland,” in which not only Insulinde but also South Africa were to have a place.

Van der Velde’s fascinating *A Lifelong Passion* tries to offer a comprehensive picture of Veth the man, Veth the armchair scholar, and Veth the public intellectual. It does not always succeed in combining these three personae, if only because an encyclopedic scholar is, by definition, beyond comprehension. Bringing this founding father of Indonesian studies in the Netherlands into the limelight at last, the book is a fine example of the attention present-day Dutch scholars of Indonesia have been giving to the nineteenth century, in what seems like a revisionist attempt at coming to terms with the beginnings of the colonial enterprise. Its original Dutch version, *Een Indische Liefde*, should make its modern readers realize how much they owe to this man who spent the main part of his intellectual energy on the Indies, without ever setting foot on colonial ground. Its English version (which may lack the contagious lightness of the original) should make its readers, tried and tested in discussions of Orientalism and post-colonialism, aware of the prominent role P. J. Veth played during his long and rich—yet painful—life in the intellectual and scholarly conversations of the Netherlands, a tiny country with a vast colonial empire and a history of embarrassing riches.

A Lifelong Passion offers summaries of Veth’s major publications and concise descriptions of the public discussions in Holland in which Veth played his part with fervor. It offers, above all, a clear picture of how nineteenth-century Dutch intellectuals such as Veth operated for the sake of scholarship and knowledge—and the outstanding feature of these operations are the networks, created and sustained by correspondence, conversations, public meetings, and polemics. Networks in the relatively small and narrow-minded academia. Networks in the murky plays of national and colonial politics. Networks in the religious world. Networks in the ever-expanding domain of writers and intellectuals. *A Lifelong Passion* offers intriguing glimpses not only into the life of Professor Veth, but also into life in nineteenth-century Netherlands—the role of Protestantism, the function of scholarship, the importance of the Indies, the political struggles between conservatives and liberals, and the emergence of modernity. And the book suggests that Pieter Johannes Veth—a scholar with an astonishing production, a public intellectual who addressed the issues of the day, and an often depressed man—was the perfect embodiment of nineteenth-century Dutch conscience and intellect. The Dutch Indies, green and distant, were his passion.