

Ravensteijn, Wim and Jan Kop, (eds.) 2008. *For Profit and Prosperity: The contribution made by Dutch engineers to Public Works in Indonesia, 1800 – 2000*. Leiden, Zaltbommel: KITLV Press/Aprilis Publishers. 568 pages, ISBN 978 90 5994 221 9

Moon, Suzanne. 2007. *Technology and ethical Idealism: A history of development in the Netherlands East Indies, (Studies in Overseas History/9)*. Leiden: CNWS Publications. 186 pages ISBN 978 90 5789 156 4

# Two journeys to the centre of the colonial project

JOOST COTE

The two volumes under consideration here take the moral problematic of the link between technology and development within a colonial context as their central theme. Their titles signal the diverse ways in which they have approached their task. Ravensteijn and Kop establish their parameters in terms of 'profit and prosperity'; Suzanne Moon contrasts 'technology and ethical idealism'. Both signal in their introduction their intention to engage positively with the question of colonial modernity although their conclusions are significantly different. Immediately evident are the different historiographical traditions which these volumes represent. The voluminous multi-authored tome edited by Ravensteijn and Kop has all the hallmarks of the diligent and detailed harvesting of the colonial archive, for which contemporary Dutch colonial historiography is noted. Moon's slim, single-handed argument is reflective of the anglophone, more specifically the Cornell, school of scholarship, and is shaped by contemporary postcolonial discourse almost completely absent from the former.

## Aid for the Anglophone historian?

Wim Ravensteijn and Jan Kop provide the anglophone historian with an extensive and much needed overview of the history of technological innovation introduced by Dutch colonial engineers in the Dutch East Indies colony. Both internationally recognised scholars well established in their fields, they have gathered a team of historians specialising in various fields of history of technology. The volume includes essays on the main elements of public works - road, rail, bridge and harbour construction and aspects of water reticulation, including irrigation works, drinking water and sanitation; and also five essays broadly dealing with the legacy of colonial technology for the post-colonial state, including one Indonesian scholar not included in notes on authors and editors. Suzanne Moon's volume, on the other hand, focuses on a single aspect of what is generally perceived as a marginal, but she argues, crucial, aspect of technological intervention: small-scale agricultural development projects. Apart from their coverage, what distinguishes these publications is the significantly different stance that each takes in dealing with the colonial archive - if not the colonial project - which raises broader questions about the writing of (Dutch) colonial history in general.

The Ravensteijn and Kop volume, a weighty, suitably illustrated, 560-page hard back, is a translation of a previously published Dutch language volume entitled *Bouwen in de archipel: burgerlijke openbare werken in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië, 1800 - 2000* that appeared in 2004. It is as much a celebration of the legacy of the colonial Indies Public Works Department as of the Delft University of Technology which produced most of its leading engineers. As it moves across to an international readership however this characteristic feature takes on a new meaning. The transition of the title from what originally translates as 'Building in the archipelago: civil public works in the Netherlands Indies and Indonesia' into the English challenges (or ignores) established contemporary postcolonial perspectives. Any reader of Rudolf Mzárék's *Engineers of Happy Land* (2002) - of which the 'global reader' will be immediately reminded - will be struck by the self-congratulatory tone of this summation of Dutch colonial achievement, this 'lasting testimony to the work done in this field in Indonesia' (p. 43). This is despite Ravensteijn's concern to distance his volume from a related late-colonial classic, *Daar werd wat groots verricht* (literally: Something grand was created over there) also discussed by Frans Hüsken in an epilogue that sits rather self-critically at the end of this volume. That achievement is summarised in Ravensteijn's introduction and more conveniently restated in a later essay<sup>1</sup>:

*Dutch East Indies state formation took place between 1800 and 1950 and civil engineering works were dominant in the technology involved. Dutch engineers in public service constructed 67,000 kilometers of roads, 7,500 kilometers of railways, many large bridges, modern irrigation systems covering 1.4 million hectares of rice fields, several international harbours and 140 public drinking water systems in the archipelago.<sup>2</sup>*

Indonesians, not Dutch engineers, were of course the ones who did the constructing, but that aside, herein essentially lies a well-worn argument about the physical foundations of the post-colonial Indonesian state relevant - according to the title - until 2000. This may be argued and Hüsken, who provides the volume's Afterword, appears to dispute this. The crucial

issue, though, hinges on one's views about the role of historiography. For Ravensteijn doing history is 'placing oneself in the position of Indonesia as it was in the time of the Dutch East Indies ... and by assessing and sensing the developments of that time in their true historical perspective' (p. 43). Mrázek claims to do the same but comes to a significantly different sense of that colonial past.

## 'Pernickety' intervention results in small-scale change

Suzanne Moon also attempts to 'understand history as it was'. Her slim volume also excavates the Dutch colonial (and Indonesian) archive and Moon comes to this writing with the support of an appropriate range of technological institutions. Her examination is motivated, as she makes clear in the introduction, not by a concern to document the work of the colonial engineers *per se*, but by a concern to understand the colonial origins of Indonesian and to a certain extent, international developmentalist thinking. Like Ravensteijn and Kop, Moon finds literal, not simply analogical, connections between colonial and Indonesian (and even international) approaches to 'developmentalism' although discussion of this in detail necessarily lies beyond the scope of both books.

Moon's focus is very specific: she concentrates on those technologies that were designed to make 'small scale change' rather than on the 'roads and bridges' technology one usually associates with technologies, or indeed 'progress'. In this, perhaps unintentionally, she identifies the truer character of Dutch colonialism. Moon suggests it was the small scale technology - what might be characterised as the 'pernickety-ness' of Dutch intervention - rather than the more robust 'transformative projects' that provides the key to understanding the impact of Dutch colonialism and its legacy.

Central to Moon's argument is an identification of what we all know as the 'ethical policy', that much debated, rhetorical, practical and legislative cocktail that lies at the heart of late Dutch colonial practice. Drawing heavily on the writing of the pre-war English historian, JS Furnivall, who in turn was largely informed by the Dutch colonial 'revisionists' of his day, Moon draws attention to its long gestation in religious, philanthropic and humanitarian thought - rather than its short term political, pragmatic and self-interested birth - and against this 'policy' - actually a discourse - measures 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial policy. Like Ravensteijn, Moon finds support here in the influential writing of the Dutch scholar, JAA van Doorn, who, it may be noted, found that anglophone historians 'sometimes revealed themselves insufficiently conscious of the problematical aspects of an Indocentric perspective'.<sup>3</sup>

Characteristic of Moon's approach to the history of colonial technologies is a concern to examine contemporary debates about their use. Her empirical focus here is the aims and practice of the colonial Department of Agricultural Science and its 'discontents' - specifically the opposition from the colonial sugar lobby but also from within its own ranks. This obviously gives the lie to a view of history that suggests a unilinear or predetermined interpretation. Given its nature, the activities of this colonial department and its field officers had the potential to have a far greater impact on more Javanese lives than any other of the colonial technological innovations. But it was also a technology with which, as Moon points out, Javanese farmers were specifically involved and of whose agency therefore, colonial directors and field specialists had to take cognisance.

In the final two chapters, following standard historiographical periodisation Moon examines the legacy of the ethical ideal in the 'post-ethical' period. Recognising this break in the on-going, changing, and always equivocal colonial 'native policy' leads her into a useful discussion of the much discussed JH Boeke thesis. Under the influence of the economic depression and the growing conservatism of pre-war Europe, the radicalisation of the Indonesian Independence movement, and growing disillusionment with the hubris of the 'idealists', a belief in a bipolar colonial order gained dominance. This maintained the inevitability of a dual economy and society - which in one version was expressed as a respect for tradition, and in the other, as the impossibility of assimilation.

Focusing on its human impact provides Moon with a way to reconsider, in a highly nuanced way, the layers of meaning within the discourse on development. But Moon manages, at the same time, to provide 'the facts'. Focusing more specifically on the technologies themselves, on the other hand, as each of the descriptive chapters in the larger volume do, pro-



vides one with a more robust factual account. While not without some recognition of their impact on Indonesian society, as a whole each of the descriptive chapters in the larger volume reflect the positivist orientation of Ravensteijn's introduction. This is perhaps hardly surprising given that Ravensteijn authors or co-authors five of the fifteen contributions, including the two introductory and one of the three concluding 'considerations'. There is too much in the larger volume to do justice to any particular chapter, and each will need to be considered in their specific field. Suffice here to briefly comment that each chapter provides an excellent factual overview of a specific field of technological endeavour by individual authors already well represented in their field. Marie-Louise ter Horn-van Nispen writes on road building, Augustus Veenendaal on rail and tram networks, Michael Bakker, on bridges, Arjan Veering, on port construction, Maurits Ertzen with Wim Ravensteijn on irrigation works, Pauline van Roosmalen on town planning, Jan Kop on sanitation, drinking water and flood control projects. Five of the authors are listed as staff members of the Delft University of Technology. Not given a biographical note is the only Indonesian contributor, Harry Patmadjaja, representing, it appears, a team of Indonesian scholars from the Institut Teknologi, Bandung and Petra Christian University whose chapter provides a welcome Indonesian assessment of this legacy of colonial engineering

Questions of orientation aside, the Ravensteijn and Kop volume provides the anglophone reader - and not least the interested Indonesian reader for whom the Dutch colonial archive remains closed - an important addition to their knowledge of Dutch colonial technologies. Excavating the colonial archive as these various expert authors have done requires both the linguistic skills to trawl the vast files of the colonial bureaucracies, and specialist knowledge. Before 'interpretation', it could be argued, we need the facts. Quite correctly Ravensteijn suggests one needs to thoroughly understand the work and intentions of these engineers before assessing their legacy. All too often the postcolonialist historian is criticised for ignoring the facts - not least by historians who, in this case, may find in Ravensteijn and Kop a welcome antithesis to Mrázek's 'Happyland'. Except of course that 'the facts' are themselves often no more than ideological constructs.

## Joost Cote

is a senior lecturer in history at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia and specialises in colonial Indonesian history. jcote@deakin.edu.au

## Notes

- 1 Ravensteijn, Wim. 2007. 'Between Globalisation and Localisation The case of Dutch civil engineering in Indonesia 1800 - 1950', *Comparative Technology and Society*, 5 (1).
- 2 *ibid*, p. 32: abstract. The detail is substantially repeated on the opening page of the present volume.
- 3 van Doorn, JAA. 1994. *De laatste eeuw van Indië: Ontwikkeling en ondergang van een koloniaal project*, Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.