Two journeys to the centre of the colonial project

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 projects. It is the detailed broadening 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 broadly dealing with the legacy of colonial technology.

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Aid for the Anglophone historian?

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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, and perhaps unintentionally, she identifies the true character of Dutch colonial technology. Moon suggests it was the small scale technology ‘what might be characterised as the ‘pemricky-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 appreciation of what we all know as the ‘ethical policy’, that much debated, rhetorical, practical and legislative cocktail that lies at the heart of Dutch colonial practice. Drawing heavily on the writing of the pre-war English historian, JF Furnival, 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 discussion – measures 20th 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 the Anglophone historians sometimes revealed themselves insufficiently conscious of the problematical aspects of an indonesiastic perspective.

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 humanist thought – rather than its short term political, pragmatic and self-interested birth – and against this ‘policy’ – actually a discussion – measures 20th 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 the Anglophone historians sometimes revealed themselves insufficiently conscious of the problematical aspects of an indonesiastic perspective.

In the final two chapters, following standard historiographical periodisation Moon examines the legacy of the ethical policy 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 ‘idealisit’, a belief in a bipolar colonial order gained dominance. This maintained the inevitability of a dual system and society which in one version was expressed as a respect for tradition, and in the other, as the impossibility of assimilation.

Focus on its human impact provides Moon with a way to reconsider, more concretely than anything else, the work and intentions of these engineers before assessing their legacy. 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 discussion - measures 20th 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 the Anglophone historians sometimes revealed themselves insufficiently conscious of the problematical aspects of an indonesiastic perspective.

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. Encouraging the colonial archive as these various expert authors have done requires both the linguistic skills to trawl the vast files of the colonial bureaucrats, 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 postcolonial 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’ themselves often more than no ideology constructs.