

Literature

'A Dutch Political Novel'

Max Havelaar in English

The British public's very first acquaintance with Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* dates back to 1867. A long contribution about *Max Havelaar* entitled 'A Dutch Political Novel' appeared in *The North British Review* in the context of 'the great question of the day in the Netherlands – the government of the Dutch colonies'. The article offered the reader acerbic quotes about the Dutch colonial administration in Java, ending with Multatuli's furious appeal to King William III.

Although the reviewer agreed with him on many points, the end was, in his eyes, Multatuli's 'greatest mistake', because in a constitutional monarchy it was, of course, impossible for the king to reply. The critic also censured the style of the Saïdjah story, which may have been appropriate for 'poetical fiction' but was absolutely not suited to a serious discussion of the accusations *Max Havelaar* contained. Multatuli had no-one but himself to blame, then, that with his 'sensational romance' and 'talented writing' he was now generally looked upon as a gifted writer rather than as a reformer of the Dutch East Indies.

The first complete English translation by Baron Alphonse van Nahuys followed in 1868. Within a century there were another two: Willem Siebenhaar's in 1927 and Roy Edwards's in 1967. The first time *Max Havelaar* was translated mainly as a colonial document, the second time as satire, and finally as the classic work of the Dutch literary canon.

Nahuys was primarily concerned with the colonial facts and the irrefutable indictment that forms the core of the book. He moved to London specifically to acquire a good mastery of the English language for it. Not unusually for those days he adapted Multatuli's text, making it shorter and more pointed, for the benefit of English readers and their reading pleasure.

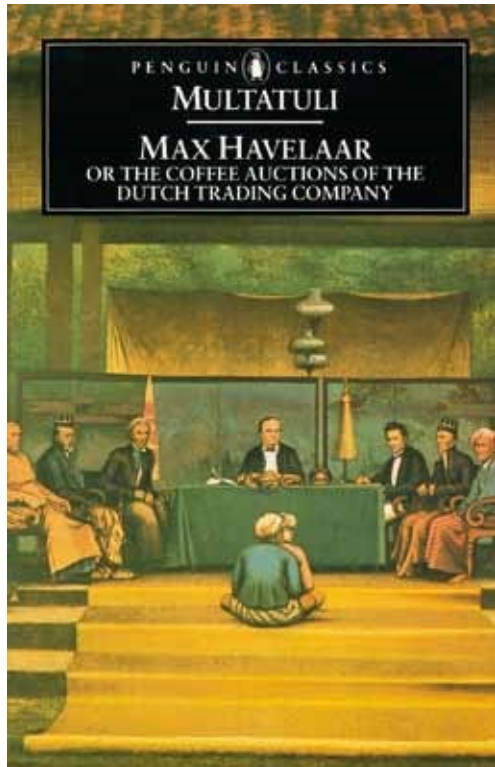
In his foreword Nahuys referred explicitly to the American writer Harriet Beecher Stowe and her famous antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Multatuli himself had also mentioned her name in his novel in 1860, immediately after Saïdjah's story. Remember, though, that slavery had barely or not

been abolished in the Dutch Empire – only in 1859 in the Dutch East Indies and, finally, in 1863 in Suriname. On this point then Multatuli took a highly topical position against the exploitation that marked the Dutch Kingdom as a conservative Christian, anti-liberal, slave-owning power, in contrast to the British Empire (which had already abolished the slave trade in 1807 and slavery in 1833).

Nahuys's translation continued to make waves for a long time. In 1921 it was reprinted for the edification of the British proletariat as a serial in *The Worker's Dreadnought*, under the editorship of Sylvia Pankhurst. And in 1926 'The Story of Saïdjah' was included in the anthology *Great Short Stories of the World*, which has been reprinted many times since then. It was an appropriate selection because, beyond the sentimental setting, what Multatuli did here was revolutionary. He was the first writer to put an ordinary Javanese village boy centre stage, with his own name, his feelings, ideas, experiences, reflections, dreams and desires – a person, just like you and me, who at the end discovers his great love, Adinda, abused and murdered by Dutch soldiers who had come to bring law and order to the Lampung District. A shocking story in which Multatuli completely wiped the floor with the image of the Netherlands as a civilised and enlightened model coloniser.

In total we know of ten British reviews from 1868. The verdict of the *Westminster Review* on 1 April 1868 was definitely positive: 'It is difficult to say whether *Max Havelaar* is more interesting as a novel or powerful as a political pamphlet. From either point of view it is of rare and first-rate excellence'. And, according to the progressive *Contemporary Review* of the same date, Multatuli's criticism of the Dutch Trading Company (of which the Dutch King was the largest shareholder) showed how misguided the praises of the British colonial expert, John William Bailey Money, concerning the efficient exploitation of Java by the Dutch government, in his much-read work *Java, or How to Manage a Colony* (1861), really were.

In contrast, in 1869 the well-known British naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace, who had just spent eight years travelling around the Dutch East Indies, after strongly recommending Money's 'exceptional and in-



teresting' book in his *The Malay Archipelago*, was critical of the *Max Havelaar*: 'a very tedious and long-winded story, full of rambling digression'; 'exaggerated', 'neither dates, figures nor details are ever given, it is impossible to verify or answer them.'

Via Wallace's book, though, Nahuy's translation did have an important literary impact, influencing the writer Joseph Conrad in particular. *The Malay Archipelago* was one of his favourite books and he is supposed to have read *Max Havelaar* in the Raffles library in Singapore.

The translator of the second English *Max Havelaar*, Willem Siebenhaar, was an idealistic and anti-imperialist Dutch anarchist, who left for Australia in 1891 because of his political ideas. In Perth, in 1922, he met the writer D.H. Lawrence, who vigorously encouraged him to finish his *Max Havelaar* translation, which was finally published in 1927 by Knopf in New York.

The third English translation, by Roy Edwards, is currently the most widespread. In 1982 it was included in Eric Montague Beekman's *Library of the Indies* and, with an introduction by Reinder P. Meijer, in the prestigious *Penguin Classics* in 1987. The Beekman edition

has been reprinted by Periplus in Singapore since 1993 and can now also be read on Google Books.

Edwards's translation was very faithful to the text and, in comparison to Nahuy's, he made it much more direct, with his lively everyday style and regular appeals to the reader.

Multatuli raised the theme of exploitation by showing the price the Javanese had to pay for what in the Netherlands was an ordinary consumer good – a cup of coffee. His novel put the conflict between Dutch ethical ideals and Dutch East Indian colonial practices on the table in no uncertain terms, and the question has come up regularly in international discussion ever since.

What is interesting in this context is to see how and with what literary analogies the translators have tried, in their important role as intercultural intermediaries, to position Multatuli for English readers. Whereas Nahuy, in 1868, emphasised Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery motif, in his foreword a century later Edwards pointed to Multatuli's genius and the vitality which, as a writer, he has in common with that other great nineteenth century autodidact, Vincent van Gogh. Nowadays the (post)colonial view of *Max Havelaar* dominates, but historically we find that it was for his humour that he was praised.

Not for nothing is *Max Havelaar* counted, even now, 151 years after it was published, as the greatest and most important work of all the literature written in Dutch. But in the wider context? Is *Max Havelaar* in translation capable of transcending its form as the text of a novel to become a figure of universal eloquence?

The answer to that comes from Anthony Wild in his *Coffee: a dark history* (2004), and it very clearly lies beyond literature: 'the name *Max Havelaar* has become the call to action of the global Fair Trade movement'. Seen from the critical postcolonial perspective it is a political novel that has put the dark underside of globalisation on the agenda in a way no other has.

So, even now, Multatuli and his *Max Havelaar* continue to inspire the worldwide struggle for humanity and justice.

Reinier Salverda

Translated by Lindsay Edwards