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Max Havelaar

Published by

Slings, Hubert and Frits van Oostrom.

A Key to Dutch History: The Cultural Canon of the Netherlands.

Amsterdam University Press, 2007.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76693>.



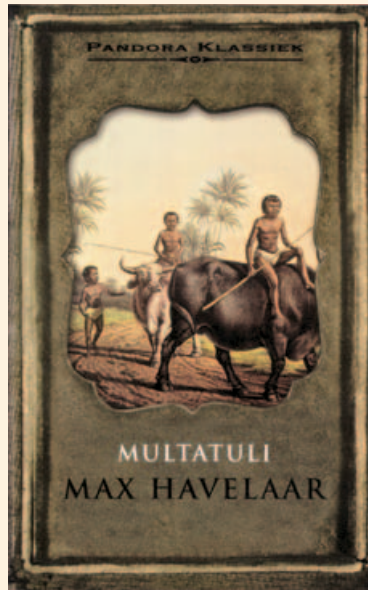
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1860

Max Havelaar Scandal in the East Indies

In 1859 Eduard Douwes Dekker, a disappointed civil servant in the Dutch East Indies, wrote a book under the pseudonym "Multatuli". This book was entitled "Max Havelaar or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company". It was a condemnation of the abuses of the Dutch colonial administration in the Dutch East Indies.

The book is a frame story with various interwoven storylines. It begins with the tale of Batavus Droogstoppel, a coffee broker and textbook example of a petty bourgeois, unimaginative, miserly man who symbolises how the Netherlands was profiting from its colonies in the East Indies. On a certain day, a former classmate (Sjaalman) visits Droogstoppel and asks him to publish a manuscript.

What follows – interrupted by Droogstoppel's commentary – is the tale

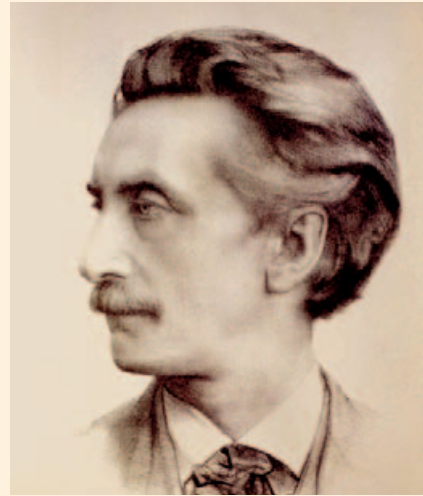
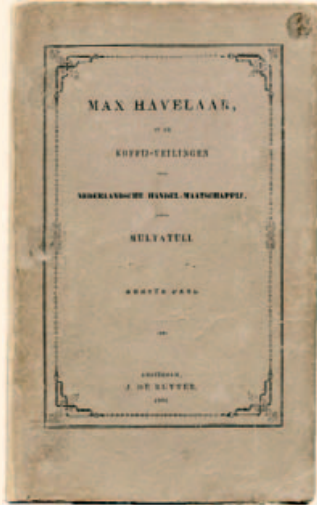
of the manuscript that relates in broad lines the actual experiences of Multatuli (alias Max Havelaar) as assistant-resident in the Dutch East Indies. (This is largely history as experienced by the writer Eduard Douwes Dekker himself as a civil servant.) Assistant-resident Havelaar takes up the cause of the oppressed islanders, the Javanese, but his Dutch superiors and local profiteers who do business with the Dutch work against him.

A number of native stories are woven into the book, for example, the story of Saidjah and Adinda. Between the lines of this moving love story lies a bitter indictment of the exploitation and cruelties to which the native Javanese were subjected. At the end of the book, Multatuli addresses a passionate plea directly to King William III, who, as head of state, was ultimately responsible for the abuses and corruption

of the administration in the Dutch East Indies.

Initially, the book received a lot of criticism, but it quickly created a storm and was reprinted many times. It is still in

print today and has been translated into over 140 languages. In 1999, the Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer referred to the book in *The New York Times* as “The Book That Killed Colonialism”.



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Sub-topics

Primary education sector

The lives of the Dutch in the Dutch East Indies
The life story of Multatuli (including “*Woutertje Pieterse*”, with its wonderful classroom scenes)
The cultivation of rice in Indonesia

Secondary education sector

The rise and fall of the “cultivation system” (or “culture system”)
The character of Batavus Droogstoppel as a typical Dutchman
Adat law
A rhetorical analysis of Max Havelaar’s speech to the indigenous chiefs of Lebak
The Netherlands as coloniser compared to England and France

Past and Present

What is the Max Havelaar Foundation attempting to achieve? Is the choice of this name justified?
Folk stories from different cultures (further to the story of Saidjah and Adinda)

In the Treasure Chest

A copy of “Max Havelaar”
Rice, sugar and tea from Indonesia

References

Places to Go

Amsterdam: Multatuli Museum
Amsterdam: Tropenmuseum

Books for young people

Multatuli, *Saidjah en Adinda* (Ad Jonker edition)
Multatuli, *Woutertje Pieterse*

Background literature

D. van der Meulen, *Multatuli: Leven en werk van Eduard Douwes Dekker*, Amsterdam 2002
Hella S. Haasse, *Bij de les: Schoolplaten van Nederlands-Indië*, Amsterdam/Antwerpen 2004

Websites

www.multatuli-museum.nl/multatuli/index.html
(featuring the article by Pramoedya in *The New York Times*)
www.iisg.nl/bwsa/bios/douwes-dekker.html