

'Wie es eigentlich gewesen'

A correction on the interview with Prof. M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs by Prof.
W.P.Coolhaas.

I have read your interview with Prof. Meilink-Roelofs in Itineraio 2 with pleasure and interest. But in view of the historian's duty, viz., to correct myths, I feel I must call your attention to a part of the interview which I think needs correction. Mrs. Meilink ascribes a role to me there which is in her eyes better, but in fact quite different from the one which I performed.

On pages 21 and 22 one reads: '(Coolhaas) was severely criticized by the then director of the archives in the Hague, Mr. D.H.P.Graswinkel, who reproached him that he had not shipped the complete archives from Jakarta to Holland before the transfer of sovereignty! An impossible task which Coolhaas rightly refused to carry out'. The further comments on Graswinckel's attitude do not matter here, as Mrs. Meilink must clearly be mistaken.

Graswinckel has never reproached me for anything, but he knew that I reproached him for something! The events, which are all over 25 years ago, are quite clear in my memory, although I cannot be certain about all the details in the following. It is quite understandable that Mrs. Meilink, who had nothing to do with the matter, is somewhat confused after such a long time.

As archivist of the Dutch East Indies I was (and I still am) convinced that the Batavian archives could be regarded both as belonging to the Netherlands, and as the rightful property of the nascent republic. On the one hand, they are the remnants of the Dutch administration, and as such a main source for a part of Dutch history. On the other hand, they deal with the history of the Indonesian Archipel, and many (particularly of the later) documents are of great importance to the Indonesian government itself.

On principle, I have always found the Indonesian claims stronger. But the practical situation of 1948/'49 was quite a different matter. The republican politicians did not appear to have the slightest interest in documents from the Dutch period, and the - very few - Indonesian historians were no more interested. Chances for reasonable care of the documents seemed slight. There was even a considerable risk that the papers would be simply destroyed, as had happened in several places outside Batavia and, in it, to those of the former High Court of Justice.

The secretary of the Governor-General (*Algemene Secretaris*) under whose higher authority the Indonesian archives stood, had instructed me to carry out all archival matters on my own, as he was too busy with more urgent matters. Therefore, I discussed my impressions with

some Indonesian intellectuals, board members of the Royal Batavian Society for the Arts and Sciences (to which I belonged), particularly its chairman, Professor Pangéran Hoesein Djajadiningrat. They agreed that the archives were not safe in Batavia.

I then wrote to Graswinckel, the highest-ranking archivist in the Netherlands at that time, asking him to inform our delegates at the Round Table Conference, that, and why, it was desirable for the Indonesian archives (as well as some other items of great cultural importance which I will not enter upon here) to remain in our possession and be transferred to the Netherlands. No objections were to be expected from the Indonesian delegates who were almost exclusively interested in political matters. Graswinckel's answer was completely negative. He considered the archives to be safe at Batavia, and thought that they would be properly kept with the assistance of Dutch specialists, that the Dutch-Indonesian Union would allow for such arrangements, and that Dutch historians would always have access to the archives. I do not distinctly remember if lack of space at the State Archives in The Hague also contributed to this decision.

Not being a fighter, I - albeit grudgingly - complied with the verdict of the highest authority in Dutch archival matters. It soon turned out, however, that I had not been much mistaken. After the transfer of power, the Indonesian archives came under the competence of the Ministry of Education, which, it soon appeared, found that the beautiful Record Office building could serve much better purposes than the storage of all those old documents. These might as well be kept in some old ware-house. Other ministries, too, had an eye on the building and did not seem about to be fussy in the execution of their plans. Officially, I was not informed about any of these.

Fortunately, help was at hand, and from an unexpected side. Mohammed Hatta, then vice-president of the Republic, came to visit the archives and insisted that I should warn him immediately if I heard anything about these plans with certainty, so that he could intervene and keep the archives in place. 'Paatje' Sneller, he said, referring to the Rotterdam Professor of Economic History, 'made me work in the archives as a student and realize their importance. Moreover, if I hadn't learned to work there, I wouldn't be what I now am!'

A few days before the transfer of sovereignty, I quite unexpectedly received a message from the office in The Hague, requesting me still to try to ship the archives to the Netherlands. I have a strong hunch about the background of that peculiar instruction, so late and so sudden, but I do not feel I should express my suspicion here. In any case, it has nothing to do with Graswinckel and a possible change in his opinions. I replied that I was not prepared to carry out this removal unless I received written orders from the highest representative of the parting Dutch authorities. It is, of course, one thing to send the archives to the Netherlands upon an

agreement at the Round Table conference, and quite another to practically smuggle them off at the last moment. As I expected, I did not receive the orders and never heard from the office about it again.



INTERVIEW

With Philip D.Curtin

African history as a specialised field of study is relatively new; African studies centres throughout the world have all come into existence since the mid-century. It so happens that our corresponding editor, Philip Curtin, is one of the pioneers and most respected members of the profession. When Femme Gaastra, of our resident staff in Leiden was in Madison last August, he interviewed Curtin there, who was attending the same conference as he (see p...). He brought with him a list of questions we had proposed jointly in Holland, and he employed those which time permitted and which fitted into the flow of conversation. Before commencing with the text, we should remind readers who still associate Curtin with Wisconsin where he taught for many years, that he is now a member of the history department at Johns Hopkins, Baltimore.

- E: To begin with, may I ask you what reasons led you to study Africa?
 C: I became interested in non-Western history generally, and this interest came from being around in the Second World War in places like the Solomon Islands and other parts of the non-European world I had known little or nothing about from my previous education. When the time came after the war to resume my education, I went to graduate school, initially in European history.