

# Representing Distant Victims

The Emergence of an Ethical Movement in Dutch Colonial Politics,  
1840-1880<sup>1</sup>

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This article attempts to add to our understanding of the relations between the Netherlands and its colonies in the little researched period of 1840-1880 when this relation became politicised. This was a direct result of a new notion of citizenship that developed after the 1848 constitution was implemented: many believed that citizens had now become accountable for government policies, that is, as far as they were acquainted with the effects these had abroad. Colonial issues were among the first for which citizens developed new protest forms and demanded that public opinion should be taken more seriously by the government. This means that not only what happened in the colonies influenced the shape and structure of Dutch politics in an important formative stage, but also that sentiments usually connected to the introduction of the Ethical Policy can be traced back much earlier than is often assumed.

Over the course of Dutch colonial history popular awareness at home of the colonies abroad has taken different forms. Following British historiography, the term ‘colonial citizenship’ is often used to refer to this awareness. However, the concept of Dutch colonial citizenship has not been fully developed as yet, if only because it has not been explored for most of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> It is hard to say if the concept of colonial citizenship can be applied to the mid-nineteenth century at all – we do not know just how prominent the colonies were in the development of national identity. A thorough study of ‘Empire at home’, assessing the importance of colonial activities (including missionary work) for the development of Dutch national identity is well overdue and would be more than welcome. Authors like Martin

Bossenbroek and Marieke Bloembergen who have analysed the construction and functioning of the colonies at home, have focussed mainly on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historians have almost invariably linked imperial awareness to the rise of Modern Imperialism, thereby discarding the importance of the colonies in the Netherlands before 1870.<sup>3</sup> An important exception is Susan Legêne's book on Dutch imperial culture, but as it concentrates on the first half of the nineteenth century, from 1815 to 1848, it does not treat the decades between the consolidation of the Dutch empire and the rise of Modern Imperialism.<sup>4</sup>

Bossenbroek, Bloembergen, Legêne and other historians have demonstrated that Dutch nation building and Dutch national identity were in important, yet varying ways shaped by imperialism. For instance, in the first half of the twentieth century, according to Waaldijk and Legêne, colonial citizenship was mainly culturally shaped. The political tensions that came with the rise of nationalism in the Dutch East Indies were ignored in favour of a general sense of moral responsibility that can be linked to the Ethical Policy of the times. The Ethical Policy facilitated a 'depoliticised self-image of

- 1 The author would like to thank all those who have helped shape this article with their advice, most notably Marieke Bloembergen, Remco Raben and the anonymous reviewers for their thorough criticism on earlier drafts, and Minte Kamphuis for valuable assistance in finding illustrations.
- 2 See for example Berteke Waaldijk and Susan Legêne, 'Ethische politiek in Nederland. Cultureel burgerschap tussen overheersing, opvoeding en afscheid', in: Marieke Bloembergen and Remco Raben (eds.), *Het koloniale beschavingsoffensief. Wegen naar het nieuwe Indië 1890-1950* (Leiden 2009) 187-216; Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial State: Essays on Gender and Modernity in the Netherlands Indies 1900-1942* (Amsterdam 2000); Susan Legêne, *Spiegelreflex. Culturele sporen van de koloniale ervaring* (Amsterdam 2010); Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (eds.), *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge 2006), especially Keith McClelland and Sonya Rose, 'Citizenship and Empire, 1867-1928', 275-297.

- 3 Even though he mentions examples of colonial awareness in the 1850s and 1860s, in a recent analysis Vincent Kuitenbrouwer follows this chronology: Vincent Kuitenbrouwer, 'Songs of an Imperial Underdog: Imperialism and Popular Culture in the Netherlands, 1870-1960', in: J.M. MacKenzie (ed.), *European Empires and the People: Popular responses to imperialism in France, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Italy* (Manchester 2011) 90-123, 91, 94-95; Martin Bossenbroek, *Holland op zijn breedst. Indië en Zuid-Afrika in de Nederlandse cultuur omstreeks 1900* (Amsterdam 1996); Marieke Bloembergen, *Colonial Spectacles: The Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies at the World Exhibitions, 1880-1931* (Singapore 2006).
- 4 Susan Legêne, *De bagage van Blomhoff en Van Breugel. Japan, Java, Tripoli en Suriname in de negentiende-eeuwse Nederlandse cultuur van het imperialisme* (Amsterdam 1998).

a colonial nation'.<sup>5</sup> To contribute to our understanding of colonial awareness in the little studied period between 1840 and 1880, this article will explore the way the inhabitants of the Netherlands understood their citizenship to be embedded within the Dutch Empire. We will see that during these four decades Dutch citizens increasingly interpreted colonial citizenship in terms of political responsibility. In contrast to the de-politicisation of the first half of the twentieth century, the period between 1840 and 1880 was rather one of politicisation of colonial citizenship. What is more, moral indignation over colonial issues shaped Dutch political life in an important formative stage. This article aims to answer the question how perceived colonial injustices impacted on the formation of civil society and political life in the Netherlands in these decades.

It is no coincidence that in this period political debates increasingly concerned colonial matters: because of the new constitution of 1848, this was a time in which the role of the people in the political process was reinvented.<sup>6</sup> Particularly colonial injustice and suffering produced by slavery and by the Cultivation System (the Dutch government system of forced deliveries of agricultural commodities by the Javanese peasants) proved capable of igniting a sense of responsibility towards colonial subjects and consequently demanding political change to alleviate the suffering. Put simply, representations of colonial suffering and the process of democratisation were mutually reinforcing.

Even as colonial humanitarianism in the Netherlands exerted significant influence on both the political agenda and on political culture, it is difficult to assess its precise outreach among the Dutch people at large. We know that the social movements protesting against slavery and the cultivation system did not gather mass support around the mid-nineteenth century. It was a matter of the support of hundreds or thousands, rather than of hundreds of thousands of individuals. In the Netherlands religious matters were far more capable of mobilising the masses, such as the *Aprilbeweging* of 1853. It could well have been that religion and social position were more important

5 Waaldijk and Legêne, 'Ethische politiek in Nederland', 188, 211; also Maria Grever and Berteke Waaldijk, *Feministische Openbaarheid. De Nationale Tentoonstelling van Vrouwenarbeid in 1898* (Amsterdam 1998) 162-202, 260-270. At the 1898 National Women's Exhibition there was serious interest in colonial issues. Especially the moral and ethno-cultural aspects of Empire received attention, while the politically charged Achin war was intentionally excluded from colonial debate (264-265).

6 For a more elaborate treatment of the role of protest movements in the development of modern politics see Maartje Janse, *De Afschaffers. Publieke opinie, organisatie en politiek in Nederland, 1840-1880* (Amsterdam 2007). This article is partly based on case studies discussed in more detail there.

constituents of personal and national identity than were the colonies. Even in the well researched case of British history, in which Empire seems to have been much more central to the development of national identity than in the Dutch situation, doubts have recently been raised by Bernard Porter as to whether the Empire was really as important as has been suggested.<sup>7</sup>

If we were to ask nineteenth-century citizens to describe the relation of the Netherlands to the colonies, their answers probably would consist of different, partly overlapping, elements. The colonies were first and foremost places of trade, places where fortunes could be made. In 1842, liberal trader and author E.J. Potgieter, in an allegory of the rise and threatened fall of the Netherlands, presented colonial trade as the nation's way out of trouble and the East Indies as a paradise where hard work guaranteed abundant wealth and a bright future.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, for most citizens in the first half of the century, colonial citizenship would have been predominantly shaped by religious ideology. For most people, the Dutch colonies were places where missionaries went to bring the gospel, and from whence they reported back to account for the ample funding from the Missionary Society. That the Society for a long time was the largest voluntary association in the Netherlands testifies to the fact that financial support for the missionary project was generally seen as self-evident.<sup>9</sup> For many people missionary efforts legitimised expansion of the colonial project.

However around mid-century, to some critical members of the public, missionary efforts were seen as insufficient, or even hypocritical in the light of the injustices colonial rule produced. From the 1840s onward, religious and moral sentiments with regard to the colonies were increasingly translated into political statements. Slavery was the main area of concern. In a scathing introduction to his *De negerlaven in de kolonie Suriname* [The negro slaves in the Dutch colonies, 1842] Marten Douwes Teenstra argued that the efforts of

7 Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford 2004); cf. John MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester 1984); Andrew Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back?: The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow 2004); Hall and Rose, *At Home with the Empire*. For the heated debate that followed upon Porter's book see among others Bernard Porter, 'Further Thoughts on Imperial Absent-Mindedness', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36:1 (2008) 101-117;

John MacKenzie, 'Comfort and Conviction: A Response to Bernard Porter', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36:4 (2008) 659-668; Bernard Porter, 'Popular Imperialism: Broadening the Context', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39:5 (2011) 833-845.

8 E.J. Potgieter, 'Jan, Jannetje en hun jongste kind', *De Gids* 6:2 (1842) 22-46, 42-43.

9 Annemieke Kolle, 'Van eensgezindheid naar reveil. Verenigingen met een maatschappelijk doel tussen 1820-1850', *Documentatieblad Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis* 28 (December 2005) nr. 63, 30-48.

the ‘hypocritical reptiles’ of the missionary societies only produced ‘parrot Christians’. He called on the public to cease their support for missionary societies until slavery was abolished.<sup>10</sup>

His readers were shocked by Teenstra’s claims. However, criticisms such as this ushered in an increasingly politicised phase in the relationship between a significant part of the Dutch metropolitan public and the colonies. From the 1840s onwards, through representations of life in the colonies, especially images of cruelty and suffering, small but important protest movements emerged, contesting the nature of colonial rule. They demanded political reform, rather than conversion, justice, rather than charity. Ultimately, the politicisation of Dutch citizens’ relation to the colonies had a great impact on Dutch political culture at large. In this transformation of moral and religious sentiments into political positions, colonial citizenship took on a political form. What is more, here we can distinctly discern the emergence of an ethical movement, almost half a century before current historiography dates it.

### Colonial information

Between colonies and metropolis there was a spatial divide that could be bridged by information. A great concern of both government and critics of the colonial regime around mid-century was to gain and spread knowledge about the colonies. The importance placed on colonial knowledge can be explained from its contested nature. Catherine Hall described this as the ‘war of representation’: imperialism consisted of different concurrent imperial projects that were not necessarily convergent, and indeed were often in conflict with each other – for instance commercial exploitation, colonial rule and projects with a missionary or philanthropic goal. Taking the latter projects seriously helps to unravel the complexity of the imperial enterprise and to understand that colonial philanthropy both challenged and legitimised the imperial project as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

Colonial criticism emerged on the waves of increasing information flows and coincided with the rise of public opinion. Knowledge of the colonies was increasingly understood to be a prerequisite for successful government. Based on this idea the learned society Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde [Royal Institute for Linguistics and Anthropology] was founded in 1851 and special education was developed for colonial officials in several

10 Marten Douwes Teenstra, *De negerslaven in de kolonie Suriname* (Dordrecht 1842) ix-xvi.

11 Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867* (Oxford 2002) 107; David Lambert and Alan

Lester, ‘Geographies of Colonial Philanthropy’, *Progress in Human Geography* 28:3 (2004) 320-341; Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London 2001).

Dutch cities in the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>12</sup> Liberals, whose political ideas gained prominence from the 1840s on, also believed that government action as well as public opinion should be ‘well informed’, that is to say, based on as much factual evidence as possible.<sup>13</sup> ‘Research leads to truth’, was the axiom used at the foundation in 1854 of the *Indisch Genootschap* [Indies Society], a society of gentlemen with colonial experience and knowledge who discussed many colonial issues and published on them on a regular basis. An important source for colonial information was the *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indië* [Journal for the Dutch Indies]. Originally published in the Dutch East-Indies from 1838 onwards, it was reintroduced in 1849 by liberal MP Van Hoëvell in the Netherlands. The aim of this periodical was to support a liberal colonial policy through the spread of knowledge on colonial matters.<sup>14</sup>

Both factual information and emotionally charged literary representations of the suffering in the colonies created new connections in the colonial experience of Dutch citizens. However, in analysing the functioning of the colonies at home, most of the central metaphors used in the ‘New Imperial History’ approach that this special issue is examining, are insufficiently able to grasp the complexity of the relationship between Dutch citizens and colonial subjects. The metaphor of an imperial web, connecting multiple sites, people, institutions and ideas allows historians to investigate how, when and why threads or connections were constructed, who participated in this extension of the existing web and what happened after people, ideas and institutions were connected.<sup>15</sup> The problem here is that the connectedness to the colonial subjects that many Dutch citizens experienced was rather one-sided. Most efforts to raise awareness of colonial injustice forged an imaginary bond to those suffering from it. If we want to uphold the metaphor of the colonial web, most connections of Dutch citizens to the colonial project should be added on with dotted lines, to distinguish them from more tangible connections. At the same time, we must realise that to many Dutch citizens the relation they had to the colonies felt very real and was infused with emotions. To understand this type of intense one-sided relationship, we must investigate the different types of colonial knowledge.

12 Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, *Het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde in historisch verband, 1851-2001* (Leiden 2001); Cees Fasseur, *De indologen. Ambtenaren voor de Oost, 1825-1950* (Amsterdam 1993).

13 See among others T.J. Boschloo, *De productiemaatschappij. Liberalisme, economische wetenschap en het vraagstuk der armoede in Nederland 1800-1875* (Hilversum 1989).

14 For a more extensive treatment of mid-century colonial journals, see Janny de Jong, *Van batig slot naar ereschuld. De discussie over de financiële verhouding tussen Nederland en Indië en de hervorming van de Nederlandse koloniale politiek 1860-1900* (Groningen 1989).

15 For more on the web metaphor, as used by Tony Ballantyne in his transnational conceptual history, see Lambert and Lester, ‘Geographies of Colonial Philanthropy’, 326-327 and Lester, *Imperial Networks*.

Generally speaking, there were two types of knowledge, according to contemporary observers. Factual information, scientific classifications and statistics became increasingly central to people's worldview. Then there was the 'knowledge of the heart'. This was based on eighteenth-century ideas that everyone was endowed with a 'moral organ', an intuitive knowledge of right and wrong. Especially women were thought capable of acquiring this type of moral knowledge. Emotions function as a moral guide, distinguishing right from wrong.<sup>16</sup> Based on this idea, reformers started confronting the public at large with techniques aimed at producing emotions. One of these was a narrative technique in which the distance to the colonies was overcome by making the reader an eyewitness to instances of suffering. This type of story had been developed from the second half of the eighteenth century within the literary genre of Sentimentalism and developed into a broader genre of 'humanitarian narratives'.

### Sentimentalism: Colonial horrors disclosed

The development of the genre of Sentimentalism is intimately connected to the rise of the novel. According to Lynn Hunt, this new and very popular literary genre had a profound impact on people's worldview. She even claims that the acceptance of the idea of human rights can be partly explained from new ways in which people had identified with other people's suffering through novels.<sup>17</sup> Sympathy – the ability to identify with the suffering other – was the core concept of the rhetorical strategies of sentimental literature. Sympathy had the power to raise awareness of suffering and to direct opposition to it. The late eighteenth-century British campaign for the abolition of the slave trade was the first major political issue in which sympathy with the plight of others was deliberately, intensively and effectively put to use. Brychcan Carey has demonstrated that during the British campaign against the slave trade, sentimental rhetoric can be found not just in novels, poems and letters, but also in parliamentary speeches, sermons and legal texts, thereby broadening

16 Dorothee Sturkenboom, *Spectators van hartstocht. Sekse en emotionele cultuur in de achttiende eeuw* (Hilversum 1998); on women and moral knowledge: Amanda Kluveld, *Reis door de hel der onschuldigen. De expressieve politiek van de Nederlandse anti-vivisectionisten, 1890-1940* (Amsterdam 2000) 52-58 and Marjan Schwegman, 'Battle for the Public Sphere: Gender, Culture and Politics in the Netherlands',

in: Douwe Fokkema and Frans Grijzenhout (eds.), *Accounting for the Past, 1650-2000* (Assen, Basingstoke, New York 2004) 153-162, 160-162. See also Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics and Class in the 19th-Century United States* (New Haven, London 1990) 11-35, 13.

17 Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, London 2007).

the relevance of the sentimental rhetoric beyond the borders of literary criticism.<sup>18</sup>

As Carey argues, sentimental rhetoric tends to focus on the emotional or physical response of victims and particularly the sufferings of the body are emphasised.<sup>19</sup> Signal words are body, flesh, blood, the heart, sighing, blushing, palpitations, fainting and death, but both culmination and goal of the rhetoric is the shedding of tears. Tears were considered the outward sign of true sensibility and, because they are external, served as a form of communication. Ideally, in a sentimental narrative the victim sheds the first tears, secondly the narrators' eyes brim over when telling the tale of hardship, and finally the reader is expected or even explicitly invited to join them in weeping over the victim's misery. These tears bridge distance in time, space and social standing – relevant divides in the case of metropolitan reformers and colonial subjects. United by their tears, the victim, narrator and reader share the deeply felt conviction that this suffering must end. Right at this point, Carey notes, practical solutions to end the misery are suggested and recommended. The flood of tears is instrumental in persuading the audience that reform is essential.<sup>20</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Sentimentalism as a literary technique became unacceptable to the guardians of high culture. Nevertheless, the sentimental fashion did not die in 1800. It continued in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in popular drama and fiction, becoming the typical style of cheap novels for a broad reading audience.<sup>21</sup> European and American reformers also continued to use the sentimental rhetorical strategies to mobilise protesters in what is often referred to as 'humanitarian narratives'. These narratives can be either factual – government reports, legal accounts, medical reports – or fictional, such as novels.<sup>22</sup> They can convey both factual knowledge and the 'knowledge of the heart'. Thomas Laqueur, in his analysis of the mode of operation of humanitarian narratives, stresses that the mobilising effect of these narratives lies in the fact that in the text the cause-and-effect of suffering is minutely examined, and the fact that the suffering could have been prevented is firmly established. Because the reader now

18 Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment and Slavery, 1760-1807* (Basingstoke, New York 2005).

19 Carey, *British Abolitionism*, 19-20.

20 *Ibid.*, 2, 18-20, 56, 132-141, 151, 169.

21 Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London 1986) 147.

22 Thomas W. Laqueur, 'Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative', in: Lynn Hunt (ed.),

*The New Cultural History* (Berkeley etc. 1989)

176-204; Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D.

Brown (eds.), *Humanitarianism and Suffering:*

*The Mobilization of Empathy* (New York 2009);

María Carla Sánchez, *Reforming the World: Social*

*Activism and the Problem of Fiction in Nineteenth-*

*Century America* (Iowa City 2008) 105-112; Glenn

Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in*

*Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel

Hill 2001).

possesses the knowledge of how the suffering can be stopped, intervention becomes a moral imperative.<sup>23</sup> In other words, humanitarian narratives instruct readers how to become the victim's rescuers.

In the case of Dutch antislavery it was especially the translation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which aroused the public and made the word sympathy fashionable, as one critic put it. The book instantly revived the sleepy antislavery movement.<sup>24</sup> While most studies of nineteenth century humanitarian narratives focus on British and American texts, the Dutch reform movements also produced numerous examples of this genre. Apart from the publications of the organisations battling slavery and the Cultivation System, some influential mid-century colonial humanitarian narratives which impacted on the perspective of the Dutch public on the issue of slavery in the West were *De slavernij in Suriname, of dezelfde gruwelen der slavernij, die in de 'Negerhut' geschetst zijn, bestaan ook in onze West-Indische koloniën!* [The slavery in Suriname, or: the horrors depicted in Uncle Tom's Cabin, exist in our West Indian Colonies too!, 1853] by Julien Wolbers, W.R. van Hoëvell's *Slaven en vrijen onder de Nederlandse wet* [Slave and Free under the Dutch Law, 1854] (thought of as the Dutch *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and Teenstra's *De neger-slaven in de kolonie Suriname* mentioned earlier. For the East Indies, the most important equivalent was Multatuli's *Max Havelaar of de koffij-veilingen der Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij* (1860), most notably the moving sentimental parable of Saïdjah and Adinda.<sup>25</sup>

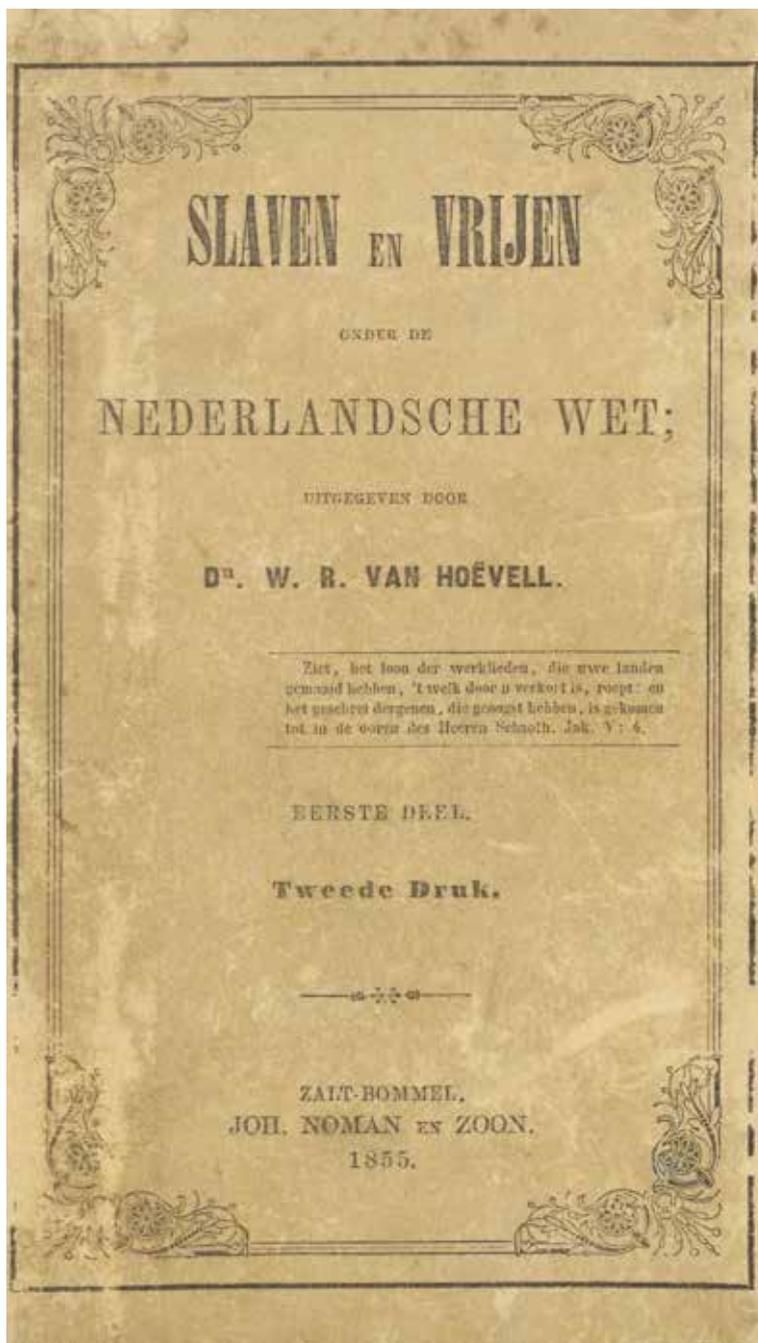
These books indeed incited protest against colonial policies but at the same time were highly contested. In the reception of these works we see the 'war of representation' in full effect. West Indian planters accused the reformers of exaggeration and lack of knowledge of the colonial reality. The reformers in turn simply dismissed most accounts of non-indigenous colonial experiences as being unreliable due to the corrupting influence of being subject to the fundamentally unjust colonial relations.<sup>26</sup> Still, they themselves had to rely on eyewitness reports from the colonies.

23 Laqueur, 'Bodies, Details', 176-180.

24 *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen* (1856) 151; Janse, *De Afschaffers*, 91-92; see also Hanneke Hoekstra, 'Melodramatische politiek. De negerhut van oom Tom als inzet van gelijkheid en mededogen', in: Maria Grever et al. (eds.), *Grenzeloze gelijkheid. Historische vertogen over cultuurverschil* (Amsterdam 2011) 113-128.

25 On the sentimental parable see Carey, *British Abolitionism*, 39-40.

26 Julien Wolbers, *De slavernij in Suriname, of Dezelve gruwelen der slavernij, die in de 'Negerhut' geschetst zijn, bestaan ook in onze West-Indische koloniën!* (Amsterdam 1853) 3-4. See also the reception of the *Max Havelaar*, Nop Maas, "'Dat boek is meer dan een boek – het is een mensch". Reacties op Max Havelaar in 1860', in: idem, *Multatuli voor iedereen (maar niemand voor Multatuli)* (Nijmegen 2000) 7-49.



Cover of the second print run of W.R. van Hoëvell's *Slaven en vrijen onder de Nederlandse wet* [Slave and Free under the Dutch Law].

Special Collection, University Library, Leiden University.

## Voluntary associations as hubs in colonial networks

The most prominent Dutch organisations for colonial reform were those advocating the abolishment of slavery (several voluntary associations, active between 1840 and 1863) and protesting the Cultivation System (one voluntary association, active between 1866 and 1877). All put a remarkable emphasis on diffusing colonial knowledge as a necessary prerequisite for colonial protest and colonial reform.

The first abolitionist wave of the late eighteenth century was mainly in the form of protests on paper – at that time no antislavery organisations were established, while at the same time in Great-Britain a hitherto unknown wave of public protest swept the nation.<sup>27</sup> It was only in 1841 that a Dutch antislavery society was first established at the instigation of British antislavery advocates of the British and Foreign Antislavery Society (BFAS), founded 1839. The Dutch government, which was unable to forbid the new antislavery societies in the Netherlands on a legal basis, did forbid them to ever publish or be active in the colonies, and also implored the antislavery advocates to discontinue their activities in order to give the government the opportunity to investigate the possibility of abolishing slavery.<sup>28</sup>

By 1844, a group of Utrecht liberals were unhappy that no action had been evinced by the government and, knowing that the government was critical of a straightforward antislavery society, they established a ‘publishers’ association’.<sup>29</sup> The organisation was semi-public: membership could only be gained by invitation. Members were all seen as contributing members and expected to send any colonial information to the editors of the aptly named journal *Bijdragen aan de kennis der Nederlandsche en vreemde koloniën, bijzonder betrekkelijk de vrijlating der slaven*. [Contributions to the knowledge of the Dutch and foreign colonies, especially with regards to the emancipation of slaves]. The Society became a nodal point, disseminating a wide range of facts about the colonies, but also bringing together some 150 leaders of opinion (Protestant ministers, Professors, MPs, editors of the liberal journal *De Gids*, among others).

The driving force behind the organisation, Jan Ackersdijck, Professor of Political Economy, was convinced that good government had to be based on statistics (‘statistics’ here broadly interpreted, roughly the equivalent of systematic information). A free flow of information back and forth between colonies and metropolis was deemed an absolute necessity. This went against the political reality: King Willem II still considered colonial rule to be his royal

27 Angelie Sens, *Mensaa, heiden, slaaf. Nederlandse visies op de wereld rond 1800* (The Hague 2001) 100-128.

28 See for an extensive treatment of the early years of Dutch antislavery Janse, *De Afschaffers*, 51-71.

29 The following paragraphs are based on *Ibid.*, 73-127.

prerogative and colonial matters were hardly ever discussed in Parliament. As a result the calls for *koloniale openbaarheid*, transparency in colonial matters, were considered close to revolutionary. When the revolutionary moment did arrive, in 1848, the *Bijdragen* stopped. The publishers, like many other liberals, did not know what to demand from government, paralysed as they were by the seemingly impossible solution to the question of abolition. Liberal axioms such as the slave's right to freedom and the right of the slave owner not to be dispossessed by the state without compensation were in juxtaposition, and since the country was still facing a financial crisis, it was unclear where the money for reparation payments was to be found. Between 1848 and 1853 the Dutch antislavery movement led a dormant existence.

The *Nederlandsche Maatschappij ter Bevordering van de Afschaffing der Slavernij* [Dutch Society for the Promotion of the Abolition of Slavery or NMBAS] became active in the immediate aftermath of the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1853. In its journal it also published much information about the physical conditions of life in the colonies, with more emphasis than the *Bijdragen* on emotional accounts of hardship. The NMBAS, as well as affiliated organisations such as the *Dames-Comité te Amsterdam ter bevordering van de Evangelie-verkondiging en de Afschaffing der Slavernij in Suriname* [Amsterdam Ladies' Committee for the Promotion of Missionary Work and the Abolition of Slavery in Suriname] and several youth organisations, longed to help colonial subjects. They supported missionary activities, mainly through the Moravian Brothers in Suriname. Plans for a free-labour plantation were not realised, but fundraising for the manumission of selected groups of slaves was successful and highly popular among the Dutch pro-abolition public.

The slaves who qualified for financial support in the form of a loan in order to buy their freedom had to be Christians and well behaved. They were monitored after their manumission, probably by missionaries, who testified that 'Suzanna Elizabeth shows that one can remain a faithful domestic servant, even when no longer a slave'. Another story tells of

an old man, weak, sickly and exhausted by his life-long slave labour. Oh! Who knows how often he has longingly looked forward to the ever-anticipated message from The Netherlands: slavery is abolished!

Of him and other former slaves the Dutch reformers were told that 'apart from one exception, they behave well, quiet, productive, and orderly'.<sup>30</sup>

30 These reports and more in *Tijdschrift NMBAS* (1855-1856) 182-185; *Jaarboekje Christelijke Weldadigheid* 3 (1861) 279-282.

These stories fulfilled an important role in the political debate on the viability of abolition, being presented as proof that abolition would not destroy social hierarchy or productivity, and that former slaves would act responsibly instead of rebelling. These reports, reminiscent of those monitoring the progress of former prostitutes<sup>31</sup>, created a more intimate connection to colonial subjects for the Dutch public.

However, in order to mobilise the Dutch public to protest against slavery, stories of abuse and suffering were most effective. Particularly female antislavery activism was inspired by the stories of the suffering of slaves. The women of the Rotterdam Ladies' Anti-Slavery Committee declared that they were touched by 'the suffering of our own fellow human beings, [...] who have the same bodies we have, sensitive to pain, and whose souls are no less susceptible to sadness and grief than ours'.<sup>32</sup> In 1841-1842 they drew up an all-female petition, which was the first to have ever been organised in the Netherlands. In it they referred to the 'cry from Suriname' as the prime mover of their actions.<sup>33</sup> 128 Rotterdam women attached their signatures to it.

In 1855 733 Amsterdam women signed a similar antislavery petition. It stated:

Because of everything that has lately been uncovered about the situation of the slaves in our colonies, especially in the West Indies – and in which Christian family is the fate of these unfortunates not discussed? – the feelings of the signatories have been shocked to such an extent that they could no longer suppress their desire to address Your Majesty directly, with the urgent plea to end this situation shortly.<sup>34</sup>

There is more evidence that, at least in the late 1850s, in evangelical circles in Amsterdam, antislavery had become an issue discussed by the whole family. Children organised fundraisers to free slave children (perhaps inspired by the special children's edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*); women organised fundraisers to free their 'sisters, now still slaves', through arranging raffles and bazaars. The prizes, they hoped, would serve as 'a lasting memory, what is more, as silent yet visible advocates of the slaves cry out to their owners: "Help the slaves!"'.<sup>35</sup>

31 See for example: *De Vereeniging: Christelijke stemmen* 8 (1854) 62-64; see also Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan, *The Rise of Caring Power: Elisabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam 1999).

32 Pamflet Rotterdam Ladies Anti-Slavery Committee nr. 3 (1842) 11.

33 Petition in Riemer Reinsma, *Een merkwaardige episode uit de geschiedenis van de slavenemancipatie* (The Hague 1963) 80-81.

34 Petition in *Maandblad NMBAS* (1854-1855) 54-56.

35 *Tijdschrift NMBAS* (1856-1857) 55-58.



▲  
Narratives such as Elise van Calcar's children's book *Uit verre landen en van nabij. Verhalen voor de jeugd* [From lands far away and nearby. Stories for the young] familiarised a larger public with the colonies. Special Collections, National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague.

Stories or objects representing the suffering of slaves were capable of instilling in a metropolitan public a sense of connectedness to the colonies. As stated above, this did not usually lead to real connections, although these were sometimes sought after. The board members and other agents of colonial protest organisations in the Netherlands maintained correspondence with their contacts abroad. Missionaries, colonial officials, family members who lived in the East or West Indies were often go-betweens between colony and metropolis. They interacted with local elites, participated in local philanthropic networks and played central roles in the colonial web. Within these circles new ideas on educating and developing the indigenous people originated.<sup>36</sup>

The history of the *Maatschappij tot Nut van den Javaan* [Society for the Benefit of the Javanese] offers insight into the imagined ties to the Javanese, as well as to some attempts to integrate into this colonial philanthropic network and really impact on life in the East Indies. The *Maatschappij* was founded in 1866 by former Colonial Medical Chief Willem Bosch to protest against the Cultivation System.<sup>37</sup>

Not surprisingly perhaps, its publications combined stories of suffering Javanese, ‘stretching out their hands’ to be rescued by benevolent Dutch as well as factual knowledge about the East-Indies (Bosch wrote a ‘Necessary look at the history of Java’ in instalments). Here too, members pressed for action ‘for the practical good of the Javanese’, believing that education of the Javanese would help stop their exploitation: ‘If the Javanese learns to think, the system of exploitation will cease to exist’.<sup>38</sup> However, the Education Commission of the society experienced problems coordinating their efforts with colonial counterparts – the imagined colonies were always at one’s disposal, but the real colonies were far away. The Dutch colonial experts who made up the committee, men like East Indies specialist P.J. Veth, chose to consult experts in the colonies about every decision they faced, because they felt they lacked insight into the Javanese ‘character’.<sup>39</sup>

When the government supervisor of indigenous schools took too long to answer their questions – whether to produce an atlas or three wall maps, what images were suitable for educational purposes, what books should be translated? – reform minded and eccentric tea planter Karel Holle offered his

36 For some instances of these type of networks see Tom van den Berghe, *Karel Frederik Holle, theepplanter in Indië 1829-1896* (Amsterdam 1998); Mikihiro Moriyama, *Sundanese Print Culture and Modernity in 19th Century West Java* (Singapore 2005).

37 For more on this organisation see Janse, *De Afschaffers*, 173-210 and idem, “‘Waarheid voor

Nederland, regtvaardigheid voor Java”. De geschiedenis van de Maatschappij tot Nut van den Javaan 1866-1877’, *Utrechtse Historische Cahiers* 20:3-4 (1999).

38 *Nederland en Java* 16 (1873).

39 More on the Education Committee in Janse, “‘Waarheid voor Nederland’”, 66-71.

help. But when the 3,600 copies of the print that he had suggested arrived in the East Indies – depicting the royal family complete with crown, constitution and sceptre – so that he could add Javanese captions as he promised, it was not to his liking. Another print of ‘Dutch animals’ he similarly rejected. He never even responded to the suggestion of a side-by-side image of a Dutch and Javanese farm, in order to instil in the Javanese ‘the notion of the imperfection of their tools’. The Education Committee was indignant when it turned out that he had passed off their idea to publish *Robinson Crusoe* in a Javanese-Dutch edition as his own.<sup>40</sup> A final ambitious plan to open a model school for native education (on a ‘low, really low’ level - ‘civic schools [...] there must be like good infant schools here’<sup>41</sup>) failed due to lack of funding. After eight years of trying to reach out to educate the Javanese, nothing much had been accomplished.

Nevertheless *de Maatschappij tot Nut van den Javaan* was an important voluntary association because of its influence on Dutch public opinion regarding the Cultivation System, as well as the new conception of politics it introduced. Critics ridiculed the lecture tours of itinerant agents for including even the remotest and smallest villages of the country, noting sarcastically that they went to ‘Meppel, Oldenzaal and Beesterzwaag and other places, which have lively communications with the Indies, in order to unveil the secrets of the desa administration’.<sup>42</sup> Apologists of the *Maatschappij* on the other hand valued the newly established connections between remote Dutch villages and the East Indies much more positively, not in the least as a sign of democratisation:

Every winter numerous local branches hold meetings in cities and villages where before hardly, if ever, the name of Java was uttered, let alone an exchange of ideas took place on the needs of the Dutch-Indies Empire. In popular presentations, the speakers clarify the questions of the Indies for a broad public, usually followed by informal discussion, in which each citizen learns, as it were, to form a healthy opinion on issues and situations that he used to think belonged to the domain of the specialists.<sup>43</sup>

40 *Berigten der Maatschappij tot Nut van den Javaan* (1870) nr. 10, 230-232; *Berigten der Maatschappij tot Nut van den Javaan* (1871) nr. 9, 264-266; also see Van den Berge, Karel Frederik Holle.

41 *Nederland en Java* 16 (1873).

42 *Dagblad van Zuid-Holland en 's-Gravenhage* 7 April 1869.

43 ‘Koffie en Suiker. Eene afdeelings-vergadering van de Maatschappij tot Nut van den Javaan’, *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 3rd series, 5:2 (1871) 35-50, 35.

Many of the metropolitan critics of the colonial regime had witnessed colonial suffering themselves. Outspoken advocates for colonial reforms like Marten Douwes Teenstra, Anna Bergendahl, Wolter Baron van Hoëvell, Willem Bosch as well as Eduard Douwes Dekker (Multatuli) had lived and worked in the colonies. As a young girl Bergendahl had lived in Brazil where she witnessed slavery; Teenstra served in Suriname and the East Indies as civil servant and government inspector, and grew indignant at the unjust treatment of slaves. Douwes Dekker and Bosch both held high government positions in the East Indies, but became frustrated with the unwillingness of the Dutch government to really help the Javanese in times of epidemic disease and famine. Van Hoëvell worked as a Protestant minister in Batavia where in 1848 he was banned for his involvement in a meeting set up to discuss the revolutionary developments in Europe, freedom of the press, educational policies and the abolition of the culture system and slavery.<sup>44</sup> Back in the Netherlands these old colonial hands felt obliged to testify what injustices they had witnessed and to call for action.

Knowing their biographies, it is not hard to understand how they became ‘personally involved in this drama’, as Bosch put it.<sup>45</sup> It is much more intriguing that many colonial reformers were far less likely candidates to become wrapped up in it. A short exploration of Julien Wolbers’ connections to the colonies once more stresses the interaction of colonial knowledge, emotion, personal ambitions and pressure groups for colonial reform and politics.<sup>46</sup>

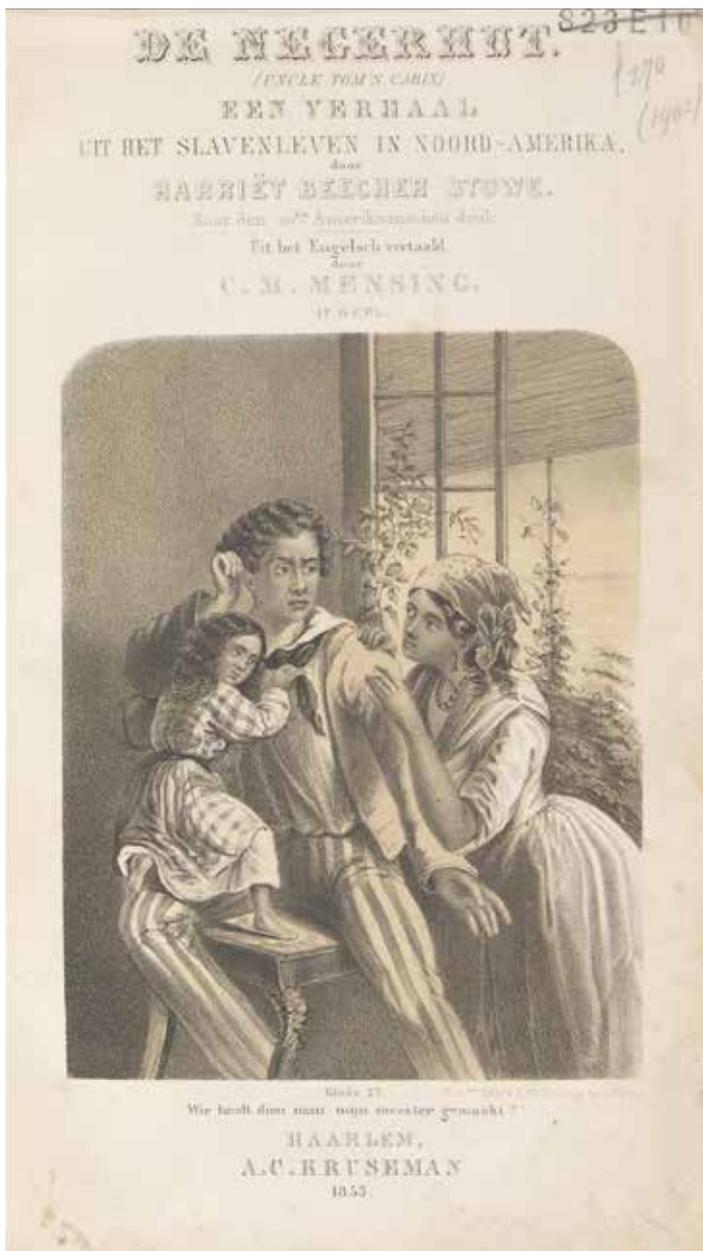
Julien Wolbers (1819-1889) was born in Heemstede as the son of a house painter and decorator.<sup>47</sup> He followed in his father’s footsteps and had his own painting business. His family was influential in local politics and he played an active role in local associational life. Almost accidentally Wolbers came into contact with the leading elite of the evangelical revival

44 Some of their encounters with colonial suffering can be found in Teenstra, *De neger-slaven in de kolonie Suriname*; Anna Bergendahl in *Jaarboekje Christelijke Weldadigheid* 1 (1859) 268; Willem Bosch, *Open brief aan het Nederlandsche volk* (Arnhem 1866); Paul van ’t Veer, *Geen blad voor de mond. Vijf radicalen uit de negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam 1958) 101-144.

45 Willem Bosch, ‘Ik wil barmhartigheid en niet offerande’. *Eene wekstem aan Nederland tot regtvaardigheid en pligtsbetrachting jegens de Javanen. Voorgedragen te Arnhem* (Arnhem 1866)

46 See for similar cases Maartje Janse, ‘De balanceerkunst van het afschaffen. Maatschappijhervorming beschouwd vanuit de ambities en de respectabiliteit van de negentiende-eeuwse afschaffer’, *De Negentiende Eeuw* 29:1 (2005) 28-44.

47 Biographical information based on Riemer Reinsma, ‘Julien Wolbers (1819-1889). De man in de schaduw’, *Antirevolutionaire Staatskunde* 33:1 (1963) 7-29; see also Hans Krol, *Heemsteedse gemeentepolitiek in de jaren tussen omstreeks 1750 en 1900* (Heemstede 1989) 69-88.



- ▲ Cover of the Dutch 1853 translation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was an important stimulus for the Dutch antislavery movement.  
National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague.

movement known as the *Réveil*. In the network of this small scale, somewhat aristocratic movement, the small town Heemstede functioned as a ‘cog wheel that propelled bigger wheels’, as this was the place where many prominent *Réveil* figures had their summerhouses. The central figure was minister of the Reformed Church Nicolaas Beets, who since his arrival in Heemstede was a major influence on Wolbers, to the point that when Beets moved to Utrecht, Wolbers sold his business and followed him there.

It was probably Beets who introduced Wolbers to colonial issues. Wolbers became active in the local branch of the *Comité De Christen-Werkman* [Committee the Christian Labourer] that Beets had started in 1847. Here the connection was made: in prayer services for the missionary efforts, Beets read out letters of missionaries on the situation in the colonies<sup>48</sup>, but it was the translation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that aroused Wolbers’ indignation over the injustices of slavery. In one of his first publications, entitled *Slavery in Suriname, or the Same Horrors of Slavery depicted in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, exist in our West-Indian Colonies!* he tried to channel the public outrage as a result of Beecher-Stowe’s novel into support for the Dutch Society for the Promotion of the Abolition of Slavery, which was resurrected after the book’s success.

Within the circles of the *Réveil*, Wolbers had a relatively humble background, but what he lacked in social standing, he made up in zeal and commitment. Colonial issues, more specifically the question of slavery, gave him an opportunity to express his fervour and build local, national and international networks. He made the Heemstede auxiliary of the NMBAS one of the largest in the country, he supported young men’s antislavery organisations, and he seems to have been the driving force behind a national petition movement against slavery by Christian youth organisations.<sup>49</sup> Wolbers started a correspondence with several colonial missionaries in Jamaica and British Guyana, asking them about the effects of British abolition there.<sup>50</sup> He also wrote several letters to the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. These correspondences stretched his language skills: ‘though I can good read the English but not good express me in that language’, he concluded his first letter to the BFASS.<sup>51</sup> Still, for the cause of the suffering humanity he successfully crossed several social and national boundaries.

48 ‘Beets, Nicolaas (1814-1903)’, *Biografisch lexicon voor de geschiedenis van het Nederlands protestantisme* III, 32; Reinsma, ‘Julien Wolbers’, 9 (Reinsma here mistakenly identifies the organisation as the *Rotterdamsche Zendingsvereniging* [Rotterdam Missionary Society]); cf. Ivo Sicking, ‘In het belang van het kind. Nederlandse kinderemigratie naar Zuid-

Afrika in de jaren 1856-1860’, *Utrechtse Historische Cahiers* 16:1 (1995) 34.

49 Janse, *De Afschaffers*, 113-114.

50 Rhodes House, Oxford, Anti-Slavery Society Papers, MSS Brit. Emp. s. 22. G. 104, Julien Wolbers to L.A. Chamerovzow, 8 March 1855 and 31 March 1855.

51 Wolbers to Chamerovzow, 8 March 1855.

A more personal acquaintance with the colonies was forged when Wolbers and his wife Albertina Stoffels, their marriage having remained childless, took care of a 'negro boy' ('negerknaap') named Henry Adams for several years. Henry seems to have come from Demerara to be trained as a missionary in the Missionary School of Hermanus Willem Witteveen in Ermelo. 'I did it gladly, because I regarded him as sent to me by the Lord', Wolbers wrote to Groen van Prinsterer, one of the main figures of the Réveil movement and the Chairman of the NMBAS.<sup>52</sup>

This personal contact between Dutch antislavery activists and people from the colonies seems exceptional, however Anna Bergendahl reported similar instances. She was thrilled that 'a slave, working for his freedom' had sent a gift for the anti-slavery bazaar she organised with her Amsterdam Ladies Anti-slavery Committee.<sup>53</sup> The gratitude of slaves and former slaves as reported by her informants in the colonies upon receiving clothes or freedom from the Ladies Committee she welcomed as a personal validation for her activities.<sup>54</sup> Even more emotional was the moment she was visited in her Amsterdam home by a former slave whose wife and children had recently been bought free by her Committee. Because he had been hired as a travelling servant for someone who briefly visited Holland from Suriname he was able to express his gratitude to the Amsterdam ladies personally. Bergendahl was amazed upon meeting him. She wrote that his appearance was civil, he proved to be a talented tailor. The moment he showed her his family's manumission document was charged with intense emotions.<sup>55</sup> This personal encounter reinforced Bergendahl's determination to fight slavery.

Keen on mobilising others for their cause, Wolbers and other activists developed into prolific writers on colonial issues. Wolbers' publications consist of both factual and fictional humanitarian narratives. First of all, *Slavery in Suriname* gave a series of eyewitness accounts of the torture and treatment of slaves. The detailed accounts – 'Every lash took a strip of skin away, which either stuck to the whip or fell onto the stones, quivering' – complemented by the detailed physical responses of the onlookers (blushing, crying, hair on the back of their necks raised, cold to the bone) are typical of the report-type of humanitarian narratives.<sup>56</sup> However, Wolbers felt fiction would be able to accomplish more, which is why in 1854, inspired by Beecher-Stowe, he rewrote

52 Nationaal Archief (NL-HaNA), The Hague, Archief Groen van Prinsterer, Julien Wolbers to Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, 4 January 1861; Reinsma, 'Julien Wolbers', 11.

53 *Tijdschrift NMBAS* (1856-1857) 103-104.

54 *Jaarboekje Christelijke Weldadigheid* 3 (1861) 279-283.

55 *Jaarboekje Christelijke Weldadigheid* 1 (1859) 258-260.

56 Wolbers, *Slavernij in Suriname*, 16-17.

*Slavery in Suriname* into a short novel.<sup>57</sup> Neither version reached the levels of success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Van Hoëvell's *Van Slaven en Vrijen*. Wolbers became more famous for the *History of Suriname* he worked on for years – the first one based on scrutiny of Dutch and British archival sources.

### Extending responsibility

A self-taught historian, Wolbers felt insecure about his research. However, he deemed it absolutely necessary to bring the facts of colonial government to the eyes of the public. Here we arrive at the core of the relation between constitutional reform and colonial reform. Wolbers' impetus to disseminate colonial knowledge was propelled by the emergence of representative government. After the 1848 constitution, Wolbers believed Dutch citizens to be responsible for government action – insofar as they were acquainted with the actions of government.<sup>58</sup> Almost all colonial reformers shared this idea. That knowledge produced responsibility they knew from the workings of humanitarian narratives. Disseminating information extended this responsibility. By spreading stories of suffering, colonial reformers actively stimulated feelings of responsibility and guilt in the Dutch public in order to prompt them into action.

To give some examples, chairman of the *Maatschappij* Willem Bosch stressed that under the current form of government every member of the Dutch public was responsible and accountable for government action. Hence, Bosch blamed the Dutch people because the suffering of the Javanese 'was always carried out in your name and with your approval!'.<sup>59</sup> Anna Bergendahl reminded her readers about

thousands of unhappy slaves in *Suriname*, which, even though they live far away from us, work always for *The Netherlands* and its inhabitants, and do this at the expense of their *freedom, their sweat and blood* and of *all social and domestic rights*.<sup>60</sup>

When, after the abolition of slavery in 1863, Wolbers became active in the *Maatschappij tot Nut van den Javaan*, he wrote a brochure titled 'Java must be ruled equitably', in which he put it thus:

57 Idem, *De Surinaamsche negerslaaf, verhaal van een bezoek op eenige plantages in Suriname* (Amsterdam 1854); Reinsma, 'Julien Wolbers', 15.

58 Reinsma, 'Julien Wolbers', 20-21.

59 Bosch, *Ik wil barmhartigheid*, 6, 32.

60 *Jaarboekje Christelijke Weldadigheid* 1 (1859) 265 (italics in source).

When the situation of Java gains more familiarity, and the desire to treat the inlander justly and fairly becomes more vigorous, government and parliament will be supported by the nation wherever it wishes to apply good and just principles.<sup>61</sup>

The indignation that colonial injustice evoked inspired calls for a greater role in politics for public opinion – including the opinion of disenfranchised groups such as women. The question arises whether these calls for a democratisation of political life are specifically tied to colonial issues. Of course, there were many more issues in which the public spoke out and called for political intervention, such as harsh working conditions and the social problem of alcohol abuse. Yet it seems that for several reasons colonial suffering was more effective in mobilising protest. First of all, colonial policy had long been a royal prerogative, and therefore it was portrayed as a relic of the ancien regime, out of tune with the modern call for transparency, publicity and democracy.

Secondly, more than those suffering injustice at home, people considered victims of colonial injustices completely unable to fend for themselves. Their perceived helplessness, as it was represented in sentimental narratives of their suffering, triggered the urge to defend them. It is no coincidence that the first single-issue organisation, as well as the first all-women petition, was on behalf of slaves. When representations of suffering slaves entered their homes, women sometimes stepped out of the domestic sphere and crossed the boundaries of what was considered suitable gender behaviour. The women who organised all-women antislavery petitions denied that theirs was a political protest, they simply claimed to have transgressed their female sphere to answer the heartfelt cry and represent the slave women because they had no one else to speak for them.<sup>62</sup>

A third reason has to do with the physical distance between Dutch citizens and colonial subjects. Because slaves and Javanese lived far away and had to be represented in narratives they became idealised victims. Without doubting the sincerity of colonial reformers, rescuing distant victims was not unlike taking on a heroic role in a tale of good against evil – it retained an element of fantasy and fiction. Most people in Europe rarely encountered people with dark complexions, as Linda Colley points out, and

61 Julien Wolbers, *Java moet rechtvaardig bestuurd worden* (1867), cited in Reinsma, 'Julien Wolbers', 19.

62 Janse, *De Afschaffers*, 109-110.

although anti-slavery propaganda relayed a great many anecdotes of suffering blacks, it was not concerned with realism [...] Slaves, in short, did not threaten, at least as far as the British at home were concerned. Bestowing freedom upon them seemed therefore purely an act of humanity and will, an achievement that would be to Great Britain's economic detriment, perhaps, but would have few other domestic consequences.<sup>63</sup>

Freeing the slaves and rescuing the Javanese similarly contributed to the self-image of the Netherlands as a civilized, Christian nation.

A brief comparison to another important nineteenth-century issue proves the point of the specificity of colonial issues. In the 1840s, around the same time that concerns for the slaves developed and the first antislavery organisations were established, alcohol abuse became a growing concern, and the first Dutch Temperance Societies were founded. Here too, humanitarian narratives were used to indicate the cause of suffering. The abused wife and children of the drunkard were considered the main victims of alcohol, while in these humanitarian narratives the drunkard himself was painted as the villain. As he was responsible for his behaviour, the solution suggested was that he should decide of his own free will to stop drinking. Put differently, while the drunkard still had agency, slaves and Javanese inaccurately were denied any agency, as powerless victims of colonial injustices. Even though this idea was partly grounded in reality (colonial abuses were based on a much greater power differences), it was enhanced by the literary representations of their suffering and the fact that for most members of the Dutch public they never became real people. Temperance advocates struggled with the frustration they felt toward the drunkards they could run into on every street corner. They had difficulties regarding them as victims of their own behaviour since the concept of addiction (in Dutch *verslaving*, lit. 'being enslaved') was unknown until the late nineteenth century. Because of the perceived powerlessness of colonial subjects, more than any other objects of care or concern, metropolitan citizens went out of their way to politically represent their interests.

The colonial issues impacted on the development of Dutch political culture at large. The public indignation over the cruelty and exploitation that defined both slavery and the Cultivation System and the political protests that ensued contributed to democratisation of the political process and changed what was considered good politics. For most of the nineteenth century the task of government and politicians was narrowly defined as guarding public order and managing state finances. Moral arguments and appeals to end the suffering and abuse overseas at first were not considered relevant to governing.

63 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, London 1992) 355.



▲  
Willem Bosch, founder of the *Maatschappij tot Nut van den Javaan*, shortly before his death in 1874.  
Photograph courtesy of the Bosch Family.

The sympathy for the plight of the slave and the Javanese was set in sharp contrast to the focus on financial exploitation of the government. A liberal observer in 1867 applauded the establishment of the *Maatschappij tot Nut van den Javaan* as a way to awaken national conscience. He reflected on the change in public opinion in the past decades.

Twenty-five years ago [...] we would have been indifferent to a Society for the Benefit of the Javanese. The Javanese did not affect us. We considered them slaves who should be happy to work for us, their lords and masters. We never thought of education and guidance of these coloured outcasts. As long as the horn of plenty of the colonial surplus kept flowing, the masters were satisfied, and we with them. The opaque glass building of the Ministry of the Colonies was only opened to the initiated and we did not care about what went on inside. Fortunately this situation has changed, fortunately public interest [lit: 'openbaarheid'] has broken the opaque glass; the veils have been ripped away and the Dutch people, through their representation, have gained a part in the administration of the Indies.<sup>64</sup>

The spreading of colonial knowledge (both factual and moral), even to remote Dutch villages, had moved people to express their concerns with the well-being of colonial subjects. In doing so, they challenged the notion that they were not in a position to judge colonial affairs – previously this had been a matter of just the King and a few colonial specialists. Colonial reformers like Willem Bosch even turned this idea around and suggested that politicians were so corrupted by their love of money that they were the ones who were no longer able to judge colonial affairs. In colonial matters politicians needed the public to tell them right from wrong. Willem Bosch even explicitly developed the idea of a 'moral politics' replacing the current 'calculating politics'.<sup>65</sup>

Because reform movements in their propaganda had assigned a central role to the knowledge of the heart, women could play an important role in these movements and explore new ways to express their views in political matters. However, it would be an oversimplification to state that these reform movements prompted the political emancipation of women. In reality, whenever in the mid-nineteenth century a movement developed from mere expressions of moral indignation to sustained demands for political reform, in other words: when a reform movement politicised, women were excluded from it, or chose not to participate. For most of the nineteenth century the general opinion among men and women remained that it was not appropriate

64 Arnold Ising, 'De Maatschappij tot Nut van den Javaan', *De Nederlandsche Spectator* 9-3-1867, 78-79, 79.

65 Janse, *De Afschaffers*, 205-207.

for women to participate in politics.<sup>66</sup> In both the United States and the United Kingdom women's earliest explicit claims that they had a right to petition, to speak in public or to vote were directly linked to their participation in colonial projects and their advocacy for suffering indigenous people.<sup>67</sup> In the Netherlands the same case can be made for the twentieth century<sup>68</sup>, but in the nineteenth century it was rather domestic moral and social reform, for instance the struggle against prostitution, that linked women's role as mothers of the nation to demands for suffrage rights.<sup>69</sup>

Because the sentimental narratives generally denied colonial subjects agency, their perceived helplessness stimulated men and women to speak out against the excesses of imperial rule. However, at the same time this 'helplessness' functioned as a crucial legitimisation for the continuation of imperial rule. In addition, in some ways this caricature of colonial victimhood was detrimental to the development of a Dutch women's rights movement. In the mid-nineteenth century Dutch women identifying with and speaking up for their 'sisters' in the West Indies, placed the predicament of the female slaves in opposition to their own relative 'freedom': the slave advocates stressed their happiness that they themselves were free to marry and raise their own children and could even speak out in political matters, as opposed to slave women. As a result they felt less provoked to protest the injustices women faced in the Netherlands.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

In the period between 1840 and 1880, the sense of connectedness of Dutch citizens to the colonial project increased. Texts, individuals and voluntary associations could all function as links in the chains between individual Dutch citizens and the colonies. Textual representations of the colonies were often meant to incite action on behalf of the Dutch public and stop

66 *Ibid.*, 93-94, 202, 305.

67 See for example McClelland and Rose, 'Citizenship and Empire'; Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity* (Chapel Hill 2003); Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Brewer Stewart (eds.), *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation* (New Haven, CT 2007); Mary Hershberger, 'Mobilizing Women, Anticipating Abolition: The Struggle against Indian Removal in the 1830s', *The Journal of American History* 86:1 (June 1999) 15-40.

68 Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial State*, 39.

69 Hanneke Hoekstra, *Het hart van de natie. Morele verontwaardiging en politieke verandering in Nederland 1870-1919* (Amsterdam 2005); Van Drenth and De Haan, *Rise of Caring Power*.

70 Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns 1780-1870* (London, New York 1992) 98-103; Janse, *De Afschaffers*, 112-113.

the suffering. The action in turn would increase the connections between colonies and metropolis – although most connections were one-sided. Much as photography was to do, certain literary techniques ‘bridged the imaginative distance between “here” and “there”, transforming the economic and political networks of empire into webs of moral responsibility’.<sup>71</sup>

The rise of moral activism in the decades of the mid-nineteenth century demonstrates that sentiments usually connected to the introduction of the Ethical Policy can be traced back much earlier than is often assumed. The ethical approach to colonial rule, understood as the moral responsibilities of the Dutch state towards the interests of the Indonesian population became the official government policy in 1901. Elsbeth Locher-Scholten has connected the public support for a more ethical policy to the growing importance attached to public opinion, which in turn was produced by the extension of the franchise in the 1880s.<sup>72</sup> While it is true that particularly wooing new voters increased politicians’ eagerness to avow their attachment to moral arguments, this is by no means the beginning of the Ethical Movement.

As became clear, moral arguments in colonial issues go back to the increased importance of public opinion since the implementation of the 1848 constitution, and in some respects even to the 1840 abdication of King Willem I. Public opinion was given more space in the new political practices and at the same time citizens claimed more space for their opinions.<sup>73</sup> Especially the injustice witnessed in the colonial issues of slavery and the Cultivation System proved strong incentives for citizens to speak up and demand a policy change. Activists like Van Hoëvell, Wolbers, Teenstra, Bergendahl and Bosch (rather than Abraham Kuyper, who Locher-Scholten considers a trailblazer<sup>74</sup>), were early representatives of the popular Ethical Movement that preceded the official colonial policy by almost half a century.

The early Ethical Movement did not take the form of a massive protest movement. Still, colonial suffering gathered an impressive amount of public protest for an age in which mass politics had not yet fully developed. The impact of the protest movements that developed between 1840 and 1880 was not so much the direct result of the number of supporters as of the structural contribution they made to the transformation of Dutch politics. New protest

71 Lambert and Lester, ‘Geographies of Colonial Philanthropy’, 331.

72 De Jong, *Batig Slot*, 190; Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Ethiek in fragmenten. Vijf studies over koloniaal denken en doen van Nederlanders in de Indonesische Archipel 1877-1942* (Utrecht 1981) 178-180. Another early example of moral protests against the Cultivation system is Robert Fruin, ‘Nederlands rechten en verplichtingen ten opzichte van Java’,

published in 1865 in *De Gids* and reprinted in Remieg Aerts and Theo Duequesnoy (eds.), *Een erteschuld. Essays uit De Gids over ons koloniaal verleden* (Amsterdam 1993).

73 Maartje Janse, ‘Op de grens tussen staat en civil society. Samenwerking tussen hervormers en politici, 1840-1880’, *De Negentiende Eeuw* 35:4 (2011) 169-187.

74 Locher-Scholten, *Ethiek in fragmenten*, 182-184.

forms were pioneered, such as British inspired pressure groups and the first all-women petition. Despite their scale, they could influence politics, since particularly in the period between 1840 and 1880 the Dutch government was relatively open to hearing from citizens and took their criticism quite seriously.<sup>75</sup> Above all, the rise of the Ethical Movement was important because it fostered a new conception of politics, one in which moral arguments could trump financial arguments, and in which ordinary citizens' judgment and sentiments could no longer be neglected.

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