

An extremely difficult position

When Rachmaninov's late Romantic third symphony was premiered in London in 1936, the *Daily Telegraph* critic Richard Capell maintained that, while the composer still gave parties on the grand old scale, no gorgeous guests turned up. Though remote from the subject of Pieter Drooglever's book, the remark came to mind when I received it. Here was a book on a scale that has become rare, made possible only by adding financial subsidy to authorial devotion. But – as Capell failed to recognize in respect of the symphony, now part of the repertoire – some gorgeous guests do turn up.

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Pieter Drooglever, 2009. Translated by Theresa Stanton, Maria van Yperon and Margolijn de Jager.

An Act of Free Choice: Decolonization and the Right to Self-Determination in West Papua.

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IN PARTICULAR THEY COME from the Dutch archives.

Dr Drooglever's book, started in 2000 and first published in Dutch in 2005, went hand in hand with his work on the documentation of Netherlands-Indonesia relations between 1950 and 1963. He has used other sources as well, and undertaken a number of interviews. But the book is particularly strong on the making of Dutch policy. This Drooglever begins with the very earliest contacts and carries up to the making of the 1962 agreement and the so-called act of free choice in 1969 that gives the book its title. The focus, however, is on the period after Indonesia secured its independence in 1949. Some of the story is familiar, but nowhere else can one find a fuller or more credible account. It seems on the whole to support the largely accepted conclusion that domestic politics was a dominant factor in what the Dutch did, not only, as Arend Lijphart pointed out, in respect of the initial decision not to transfer West New Guinea along with the rest of Netherlands India when they accepted Indonesia's independence in 1949, but also during most of the subsequent decades when Willem Drees sought to hold his coalition with the Catholic Party together. Self-determination became an avowed objective, and it was with the greatest difficulty that the de Quay government shifted towards 'internationalisation' and then more or less unavoidably towards acceptance of the Bunker plan in 1962.

Less is said about other powers. We do not learn much about the making of Indonesian policy, though we are given accounts of what the Indonesians did in public, at home, at the UN, in New Guinea, and what they said to diplomats and statesmen in other countries. The archives are, of course, not open to view, and like others Drooglever has to rely on what is in the public domain. Whether those archives would yield material that would make it easier to adopt a more positive view of Indonesian policy and practice we cannot know. Did the Indonesians, for example, feel genuinely concerned about the weakness of their frontier to the southeast of the archipelago, as, after all, their Dutch predecessors had? In general, it seems that the Papuans were again the playthings of domestic politics.

Giving a full account of the policies of other powers whose archives are open might have extended the book to Mahlerian lengths. But it is important to recognize that US policy

was decisive. The Americans at the outset took what they considered a neutral view in the dispute that developed between the Dutch and the Indonesians. Arguably, it was that indeed that allowed the dispute to continue. When their stance changed, the parties had to settle. But the motives for the change do not seem very persuasive, at least in our post-Cold War times. It certainly failed to win the Sukarno regime over to a more moderate approach to the region, as Kennedy's perhaps rather naïve advisers hoped, for the regime soon pursued its confrontation of Malaysia. There again the US was unwilling to check it, despite pressure from the British. It was only with the overthrow of the regime and the decimation of the PKI that the US cause was won. Even then, the US was far from willing to interpose in the cause of the Timorese when Suharto's regime behaved much as Sukarno's had.

More may also be said about the Australians, whose policy can, however, be plotted from a number of unpublished theses, such as P. Phelp's 'Australia, International Diplomacy and the West New Guinea Dispute, 1949-62' (Ph.D. thesis, Sydney University, 1996). Initially, they encouraged the Dutch to stay, while trying to prompt the US to support them. Yet when the Indonesians armed themselves – initially to put down the provincial rebellions but clearly with implications for the Dutch in New Guinea – the Australians made it quite clear that they would accept any agreement the Indonesians peacefully negotiated with the Dutch. In a rare slip, Drooglever gives two different dates for Subandrio's persuasive visit to Canberra: it was in 1959, as on p. 377, not in 1960, as on p. 342. (Other false notes: the Pacific war opens in 1942 (p. 55); Nichols becomes Nicholson (p. 333); and Harriman's first name is misspelled (p. 405). Australia indeed wanted good relations with its large neighbour. But it did not – and does not – always find it easy to settle on consistent terms to secure them.

One issue was indeed the future of East New Guinea, TPNG as it then was. There the Australians wished to proceed rather more slowly with political advance than the Dutch in the West. They limited the collaboration between the two regimes, and presented an obstacle to the notion of a Melanesian federation. That notion appears on a number of occasions in the present book. It was in fact discussed more than once by the British, who were also considering how to dispose of their dependencies in the Western Pacific in a responsible manner.

The British do not feature in this book. The Dutch version was being published, it seems, at about the same time I was finalizing my work *Britain and the West New Guinea Dispute* (Mellen, 2008). That fills in something of the gap. The British played quite an active diplomatic role, their policies affected by their desire to keep on good terms with the Dutch, their

allies in Europe; with the Indonesians, neighbours of theirs in Southeast Asia in whose country they had substantial investments; with the Australians, leading members of the Commonwealth; and with the Americans, the ultimate source of their security. In the early 1950s they pursued a policy of 'cold storage', though never quite as rigidly as the Dutch or the Australians. In the late 1950s they began to fear that the growing crisis would lead to open conflict in Southeast Asia, which would undermine their own increasingly fragile position. But they no longer made the significant decisions, though arguably their suggestions contributed to the Bunker plan.

John Saltford's book *The United Nations and the Indonesian Takeover of West Papua, 1962-1969* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2002) gives an account of the UN role. Drooglever's chapters do nothing to make it seem more creditable. His superiors seemed to have terminated any disposition Ortiz Sanz had to challenge the proceedings of the Indonesians, civilian and military, outrageous as they surely were. As a British official put it, the Javanese were 'born imperialists', and their conduct after 1969 was of a piece with their conduct before.

The Papuans, coverage of whom is another strong point of the book, emerge with some credit, unlike, one has to say, most, if not all, the other parties. Would they have been better off if the transfer had taken place in 1950?, Drooglever asks in his concluding paragraphs. He answers, 'they undoubtedly found themselves in an extremely difficult position in 1963, but Papuan society was better able to defend itself than it would have been without the extended Dutch rule' (p. 764). Other arguments could be made, and we could also speculate about the course of Indonesian politics in that event. Might-have-beens, however, are less important than constructive endeavours, though they must take account of what the author calls 'historical responsibility'. Of some of those endeavours Esther Heidbüchel gives an account in her *The West Papua Conflict in Indonesia: Actors, Issues and Approaches* (Wettenberg, 2007), reviewed in this Newsletter in 2008.

Portuguese Timor's experience since the Second World War both echoes and contrasts with that of West New Guinea. A decisive difference lay in the role of the UN. But decisive, too, was the fact that it had never been part of Netherlands India 'from Sabang to Merauke'. Post-colonial frontiers have largely followed colonial precedents. Perhaps the alternatives were worse. But the Papuans deserve a better deal, as this book, gently but powerfully, makes clear.

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