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## Gerard Termorshuizen and Coen van 't Veer, *Een groots en meeslepend leven; Dominique Berretty – Indisch persmagnaat*

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Three years after his biography of Herman Salomonson, Gerard Termorshuizen (°1935) adds another biography to his impressive list of publications, this one co-authored by Coen van 't Veer (°1968). This new biography is devoted to one of the most controversial and enigmatic figures of twentieth century Dutch colonial history: Dominique Berretty (1891-1934). After his death, at the age of 43, in a plane crash in the Syrian desert, obituaries emphasized the complexity of this personality, whose public life showed ruthless ambition, whereas his private life had romantic overtones. Ideologically, Berretty positioned himself on the right wing of colonial politics. Repeatedly, the two biographers point out that Berretty supported conservative colonial attitudes through thick and thin. He rejected the striving of Indonesian nationalists for autonomy or independence, although, in 1916, he also emphasized the need to educate the Indonesian people, believing that education would ultimately be to the advantage of the colonial ruler: “the native should be raised in love for the flag, for which we Dutch people are willing to fight”. According to the biographers, this is “a statement which shows little political insight” (p. 56). It is, however, a statement in accordance with the so-called *associatiegedachte*, ‘concept of association’ – between natives and Europeans - fostered by Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936) in the early twentieth century but widely rejected by the nineteen twenties.

Dominique Berretty was born in Yogyakarta, the son of Léon Berretty and his Javanese concubine. He was one of many Indo-Europeans fighting to make a success of life, at a time when the Dutch East Indies were going through a rapid process of modernization. Within a matter of years, he managed to climb from the position of a post office clerk to that of a journalist, and later again to that of a newspaper editor. The crowning achievement of his career was the establishment, in 1917, of the Algemeen Nieuws- en Telegraaf Agentschap, a press agency which became known as Aneta. In 1919, Berretty purchased the Reuters agency in Batavia, as well as the Amsterdam based Nederlands Indisch Pers Agentschap (NIPA). Due to these purchases, Aneta secured a monopoly in the processing of news telegrams. The colonial newspapers had

no other choice but to subscribe to Aneta's news telegrams, and pay the hefty fees Berretty demanded for this service.

By the end of the nineteen twenties, Berretty had become one of the richest men in the colony. A self-made man, he showed little sympathy for those Eurasians who felt disadvantaged and discriminated against. He stated in his weekly *De Reflector*: "On the whole, I am not an advocate of the delirious ramblings about white and brown, about *totok* and *mestizo*, about those born "here" as opposed to those born "there". This magazine has never joined in this foolish milk and cocoa theorizing" (p. 59). "Everyone," he wrote later, "white or brown, secures the place he wishes for, either through schooling, or through self study, one person by working diligently, the other by virtue of his talent" (p. 133).

In December 1918 there was a falling-out between him and his fellow Eurasian editors of *De Reflector* which caused him to pull out of the magazine. It is illustrative of Berretty's character that he then staged an all-out effort to exclude *De Reflector* from the market, not only by means of vicious verbal attacks but also by establishing other rival magazines. One of these was the tabloid *De Zweep* (The Whip), which he himself founded on 2 January 1922. Berretty launched an American style advertising campaign to plant the name of his magazine in the hearts and minds of the reading public, which revelled in the swipes he took at his enemies. As a result, *De Reflector* lost most of its readership and was discontinued at the end of 1922.

In April 1924 Berretty founded Aneta Radio, after having obtained government permission to receive and transmit radiotelegraphic news telegrams from foreign radio stations. In 1928, his press agency acquired the rights to supply the world press with news about the Dutch East Indies, through the services of Aneta's Holland branch in The Hague, established in 1919. The colonial government would pay Aneta an annual sum of maximum 3,500 guilders for that service.

And so it goes on: Berretty was, as it were, the Rupert Murdoch of the Dutch East Indies, siding with colonial authorities and barons of business, choosing partners who promised to be loyal, while pushing aside feeble opponents. He was a great negotiator, a smooth talker and a generous host, who mesmerized people with his charm, generosity and stylish appearance. But in the long run cracks appeared in Berretty's edifice. An official investigation into Aneta's practices was launched prompted by the revelations of a rival journalist, H.C. Zentgraaff, resulting in a final report which was very critical of Aneta's wheeling and dealing over the years. Berretty suffered a nervous breakdown.

Shortly after the investigation, in the autumn of 1932, Berretty commissioned the construction of an estate on the hillside of the road from Bandung going up to Lembang, with a monumental villa on its terrain: Villa Isola - now the site of the well-known Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia. This huge project exhausted his financial resources. It seems to me that Berretty's self-assertion and ambition, which had all along been the driving force of his entrepreneurship and journalism, had developed into a megalomania which obscured his once

acute sense of reality. To enable the construction of his prestigious estate he borrowed huge sums of money from Aneta's operating capital. The extent of his debt didn't become apparent until after his death in the airplane crash of 20 December 1934, on his return flight from Holland to the Dutch East Indies.

An admirer of technical progress and modernity, of aviation and fancy racing cars, this restless soul died the way he had lived. He left behind four children from three different spouses, as well as the Portugal born companion of his final four years. None of his five official marriages lasted longer than four years, a demonstration, perhaps, of his restlessness, his romantic pursuit of happiness, his - as his biographers put it - longing for perfection, and his essential solitude in a non-perfect world.

This well-written biography offers the reader a wealth of details about the late colonial state. It is also a story of a Wild West mentality of the times, of colonial prejudice, and of blindness to the emerging Indonesian nationalist movement. Proper attention is also given to Berretty's journalistic talent, especially in his travel accounts. Termorshuizen and Van 't Veer tend to emphasize his positive sides more than I am inclined to do, but all along they maintain a solid critical perspective.