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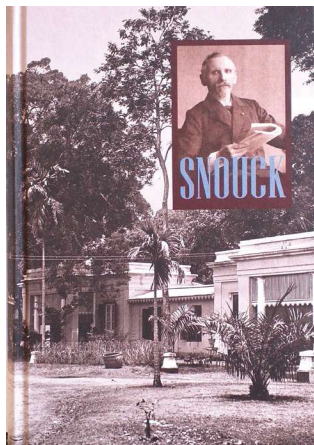
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Book review

Wim van den Doel, *SNOUCK; Het volkomen geleerdenleven van Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje*. Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2021 + 624 pp. ISBN 978 90 446 35621. Price: EUR 49.99 (hardcover).



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Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (b. Oosterhout 1857-d. Leiden 1936) was an Islamologist and Advisor to the Netherlands East Indies Colonial Government and later a professor at Leiden University. He is famous as an outstanding scholar of Islam and much more. His reputation is also contested because of his prominent role in the Aceh War and his many recommendations to the colonial government. In short, he is both lauded and vilified but usually by different people.

So, who or what was he?

Van den Doel has written a hefty book in Dutch about Snouck Hurgronje, his relationship with his family (both in Indonesia and in Holland), friends, scholarly colleagues, and many other people. The book deals with his views on colonialism, the role of the indigenous people in the colony, scholarly and diplomatic matters, and much more. Containing no fewer than 622 pages in total (including index, bibliography, and photographic credits), 551 pages of text is a huge undertaking for one person only. It is a vast volume filled with astonishing details and ideas.

Van den Doel has based himself on previous books and articles on Snouck Hurgronje like those of P.S. van Koningsveld (who heartily disliked Snouck) but most of his information comes from surviving letters Snouck wrote to and received from a large number of people in many parts the world. There is a certain danger of basing oneself on letters for a biography as there is no way to ascertain whether what was written in the letters was indeed what did happen or was even true. It becomes clear only as late as pages 534-535 that parts of

Snouck Hurgronje's correspondence were destroyed by his wife and daughter, for instance, the correspondence with Dr Hazeu, "because of the privacy of the people discussed in them and the delicate relations between the Netherlands and Indonesia" (p. 534). Also letters which should not fall into the hands of the German occupiers during World War II were destroyed. Other correspondence was destroyed after the war or returned to the senders. This being said, Van den Doel has read lots and lots of letters and he quotes liberally from them in the book. Because many of Snouck Hurgronje's correspondents were scholars, it stands to reason that the overriding themes of the correspondence are of a detached and scholarly nature and do not necessarily shed light on who Snouck Hurgronje the man actually was. Of course, Snouck had good friends with whom he corresponded, also about private matters.

Not many letters are quoted from family members or intimate friends from the student fraternity to which he belonged when he studied in Leiden and with whom he remained friends all his life. I have the impression that it is quite hard to get a picture of the man behind the carefully created public figure he was and was made to be. This might also be, I presume, because correspondence between Snouck Hurgronje enemies and critics still exists, in which the correspondents vent the frustrations aroused when Snouck crossed their paths in unpleasant ways. That he was a tender-hearted person becomes clear in what Van den Doel writes about Snouck's relationships with his mother and sisters as well as with his wives and children, but little use seems to have been made of the correspondence Snouck had with his Indonesian wife and children. Perhaps these letters have simply not survived or were among the papers his wife and daughter destroyed. That he also had another side to his character becomes clear from the way he treated his students and anyone who got in his way or dared to disagree with him: he set out to destroy them in such a way that they suffered from his treatment, sometimes till their deaths. He was remarkably stern with his students and he did not allow any mistakes, even the slightest. In short, Van den Doel touches on the character of the person Snouck Hurgronje and shows his various sides, but most of the book deals with Snouck in relation to things outside himself. The picture which emerges is that of a scholar who accepted colonialism as a matter of course but was also a modern person who understood that the Indonesian people should be freed from colonialism and take their lives and futures into their own hands. Therefore, he was not against the modern nationalist movement which strove to attain independence. Indeed, he was in favour of accepting it and working with it to attain independence.

Snouck's place in scholarship in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe is, of course, dealt with in detail in the book but I sometimes wonder if the point of departure was one more of admiration than of distance. The upshot is that little attention has been paid to the criticism which must have also been raised by his scholarly ideas and oeuvre. In some cases, this makes me wonder if admiration is not the enemy of common sense. The fact that Snouck was seen as a keen observer of the many facets of life of the peoples he studied

(in Mecca, Aceh, West Java, and elsewhere) might be taken for granted but, after having spent only so many weeks in a certain spot, he can hardly have delved into the peculiarities of these people sufficiently to lead to a really proper understanding. Let's face it, anthropologists usually spent years in far-off places after which they still had only scratched the surface of what is there to see and understand. Snouck, for instance, had no problem writing a whole book on the Gayo region in Aceh, a place he never visited. Van den Doel could have added some more critical notes about Snouck's scholarship and the way he worked.

The book is extremely interesting for the picture it paints of the situation in the Netherlands East Indies and the way the colonizers dealt with the indigenous people and how they tried to come to terms with Islam. It shows that policy makers and politicians in the Indies resemble present-day politicians in the Netherlands to a remarkable extent. Also, the position of universities and what they should teach has not changed much over the years. It seems that then, as now, scholarship also had to be practical and relevant to society at large, whatever that meant or means.

The book ends with an index on personal names. It is a great pity that no subject index has been added as this makes it impossible to retrace what one has read about a certain issue by referring to an index. The fact that no introduction has been provided in which Van den Doel states what he set out to do and what sources he has used and their peculiarities is also a pity, as is the lack of acknowledgements. Writing this kind of book must have meant having had help, suggestions, criticism, et cetera from other people but this is totally unacknowledged. Furthermore, Indonesian words are not explained. The book contains 112 photographic illustrations but the captions are devoid of any information about how old the photographs are, which means that, for the uninitiated, no clue has been provided about whether the information on the photograph is still valid. A map of Indonesia referring to the credit for the illustrations also fails to offer the information one might want to have. As it stands, for one unacquainted with Indonesia, it is now almost impossible to know where he was. It is a pity that Van den Doel tends to remain in the background. It would have been interesting to learn more about his opinions of Snouck Hurgronje as a person and how he reacted to the events and opinions of his time.

This having been said, this book puts Snouck Hurgronje in his time in the colonial period and in his international scholarly context. It is also a very important book for understanding Indonesia later after it had gained Independence. The book is currently being translated into Indonesian, which is very useful because it puts Snouck as scholar on Islam in a much wider context. All Snouck Hurgronje's publications were published in Indonesian translation in the 1990s by the Indonesian-Netherlands Cooperation in Islamic Studies project of Leiden University.