

IN MEMORIAM PIET CREUTZBERG 1904 - 1984

Middleman in "the Indonesian Circle" and economic historian of Indonesia

On the 24th of August 1984, Piet Creutzberg, *guru* of a fair proportion of the present generation of Dutch and other economic historians of Indonesia, died after a fatal operation. On the 29th of August a small band of mourners attended his cremation in Amsterdam: three generations and three circles of family members, friends and those who are proud to call themselves his pupils, though Creutzberg had never given a lecture course.¹

Piet Creutzberg was born in 1904 in the colonial garrison and hill town of Bogor. His father, a *totok* (white immigrant) jurist from the University of Utrecht, was a fast and steady climber in the administrative hierarchy and became head of the Department of Education and Religion (1916-22) and vice-president of the Council of the Indies (1924-29). Creutzberg concluded his formative years with a study of law at Leiden University, where he participated in the course given by professor C. van Vollenhoven on Indonesian *adat* (=customary) law and probably attended the lectures by J. van Gelderen on tropical-colonial political economy in November and December 1926. After his return to Java, he rose from assistant at the Central Statistical Office through a promotion to "graduated civil servant" with the division of general economic affairs of the Department, to staff-member *ter beschikking* (on disposal) as a trouble-shooter and special adviser. He made his *début* with the basics of economy and statistics through his involvement in the Census of 1930, the first (and, regrettably, in many respects the last) modern and complete population count of Indonesia. Partly as an offshoot of his reports for the published volumes of this census, but also as by-products of his work as a policy assistant, he published articles on the preliminary results of the census, the Chinese population in the Netherlands Indies, and the nutrition of the population of Java, all in the mildly reformist journal *Koloniale Studiën*.

At an age when nowadays most people experience their so-called mid-life crisis Creutzberg, like practically all fellow Europeans in Indonesia who were detained as internees and P.O.W.'s, spent several years in Japanese internment camps in Java. Happily he and his family survived. Thereafter Creutzberg remained employed as adviser to do reconstruction work in a war economy. With several hundred other Dutch specialists he was even retained for some time after the transfer of sovereignty, but he had to leave his post when relations soon became strained again over New Guinea. Like so many Dutch 'expatriates' (and their children) he then preferred to set up a new life outside the Netherlands. In the early 1950's he settled in Australia. He then succeeded in establishing a flourishing business of growing alpenes and perennials near Melbourne. In the mid-1960's he had to leave once more, due to a combination of cardiac weakness and diabetes. This second "early retirement," this time to the moderate climate of the Netherlands, was again perceived by him as a challenge to which he had to find his own, unique response. After dabbling for a short time in mycology in the wooded environment of his new home he reverted to an uncompleted past, a reconstruction of the late colonial economy of Indonesia. He became a daily commuter to the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in Amsterdam or the State Archives (ARA) in The Hague. Het began by producing a number of working papers on various aspects of the colonial Indonesian economy and was then commissioned to compile the source publication *Het ekonomisch beleid in Nederlandsch-Indië* (3 vols in 4)² which provides a lasting insight into the trial and error of theory and practice of colonial development a few decades before the take-off into growth of "development science."

Thereafter, based in the Tropical Institute in Amsterdam, he planned a series of 14-16 volumes of annotated statistics entitled *Changing Economy in Indonesia*. With amazing regularity the first six instalments of *Changing Economy* saw the light in six consecutive years, 1975-1980. They were christened, respectively, *Indonesia's Export Crops 1816-1940*; *Public Finance 1816-1939*; *Expenditure on Fixed Assets*; *Rice Prices*; *National Income*; and *Money and Banking 1816-1940*.³

Each volume contains extensive introductions on the relevance and mechanics of the subject, methods of compilation, reliability of figures presented and sources available, and commentaries. Naturally, the resulting treatises (not to mention the statistical tables themselves) do not make easy reading, in particular for those uninitiated into the field of economic history, the less so because the translation of the contemporary and often peculiar terminology of the sources (and sometimes Creutzberg's own rather archaic language), to which modern concepts had to be added, proved to be a hard job. In some cases Creutzberg hit upon rather unexpected sources of information in an early stage of his research. Thus vol 3, *Expenditure on Fixed Assets*, is based for a good deal on compensation claims submitted to the Dutch government by firms nationalized by Indonesia. Looking at another kind of negative balance we may say in reverse that Creutzberg himself considered his work on *Changing Economy* as an intellectual *ereschuld* (debt of honour) to developing Indonesia and those who had helped prepare its development before the war.

The year 1979 saw the final and supreme recognition of Creutzberg's achievements. On the occasion of his 75th birthday the national and international community of those who had enjoyed his advice, support and inspiration (a group who averaged about 35 years of age presented him with a *Festschrift* containing 20 essays in Dutch and English on modern social and economic history of Indonesia.⁴ Its title *Between People and Statistics* attempted to reflect Creutzberg's human interest and scholarly work. At the gathering in the Tropical Institute, he was also given a medal by the *Nederlandse Maatschappij voor Nijverheid en Handel* (Netherlands Society for Industry and Trade), a symbolic honour that was far greater to him than any "royal" medal could have been. Then in May of 1980 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by his *alma mater*, the University of Leiden.

Creutzberg: the man and his paradoxes

Creutzberg loved paradoxes almost as much as Marxists love dialectics. Some are more genuine than others, but he

displayed them also in his attitude to scholarly work. He looked like a prototype of the classic individual researcher working as a mole through piles of documents, glad as a child to run on a "hit;" yet he always shared his finds with others and stressed the importance of "teamwork" and exchange of information, transactions he would describe as "doing business." He acted like a pioneer in his field, but he was only too aware to be indebted to precursors and those innumerable scholars and clerks, down to the *desa* level, responsible for making up the sources he depended upon. He distinguished between colonial policy and practice, though sometimes he would claim, somewhat apologetically, that "in his own time" - the semi-modernity of the experimental policy-makers of the 1930's - both had coincided to a large degree. He was, to say the least, not very charmed by models and theory, yet himself steeped in what amounted to a belief in the "groundswells" of (Indonesian) history, the historical "structural" continuities that impose limits to the "make-ability" of society. He accepted the restrictions given by time, regional and even ethnic categories, yet arguing that those restrictions would not only present barriers to development, but also embodied indicators of the potential of innovation and change. Somehow he believed in the free forces of society (an almost classical optimistic "liberalism"), but colonial tradition, 20th-century economic theory - e.g. the (pre-)Keynesian approach - and a desire to remedy social and economic wrongs made him allow for a fair modicum of state intervention when things went wrong (e.g. when he "depression threw the spanner in the wheels"). He wished to stick to the facts and sources, and - almost to too large an extent - he did so, yet knowing that facts and figures are not there for their own sake, that they must be presented, interpreted and analysed; as a middleman, a wholesale dealer in facts and figures, he laid the groundwork which others were and are to use. He was constantly constructing aggregates, while realizing that they are made up from many conflicting or diverging individual data. He had a preference for "hard" economic data, but was acutely aware that cultural values do matter (e.g. the Confucian work ethic, the Javanese tradition of princely exploitation of economic re-

sources). In short he was himself both modest and ambitious, or - to borrow the Gandhian expression - a man of "plain living and high thinking" - a sturdy perennial. A team of three fulltime researchers now continues his work on *Changing Economy*. But the broader community of Indonesianists, expansion historians and development economists will profit for years to come from the vast services Creutzberg has already rendered to them.

Gerard J. Telkamp

NOTES

1. For a more detailed and eloquent biographical sketch and evaluation of Creutzberg's scholarly achievements, see Ivo Schöffer, "Piet Creutzberg: from ethical economics to economic history," pp. 11-18 in *Between People and Statistics*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1979. For several details in this obituary I am indebted to members of the *Changing Economy* team at the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam.
2. P. Creutzberg (ed.), *Het Economisch Beleid in Nederlandsch-Indië. Capita Selecta*, Groningen, Tjeenk Willink 1972-1975, introductions.
3. *Changing Economy in Indonesia. A Selection of Statistical Source Material from the Early 19th Century up to 1940*. Initiated by W.M.F. Mansvelt, re-edited and continued by P. Creutzberg. The Hague, Nijhoff, 1975-. For a review of the first volumes, see William O'Malley, "Returning the tables," in: *Itinerario*, 3 (1979)2, pp. 84-88.
4. Francien van Anrooij, Dirk H.A. Kolff, Jan T.M. van Laanen and Gerard J. Telkamp (eds), *Between People and Statistics. Essays on Modern Indonesian History. Presented to P. Creutzberg*, Nijhoff, The Hague, 1979. See also its Preface.