

Pieter Albert Bik and His Writings

Introduction: Tourism and Colonialism

In the April of 1816, the sailing ship *Nassau* embarked on a journey from the Netherlands to Java, then newly reacquired under the Dutch flag after the disruptions of the Napoleonic wars. On board were not only a contingent of soon-to-be colonial officials but also their families, including a certain Pieter Albert Bik, at the age of seventeen following his father and older brother who had staked their hope for a better life on the colonies. Pieter Albert, unlike his father, travelled without promise of a position waiting for him, but ended up having a long and successful, if unremarkable, career in the service of the colonial administration. The introduction of steam ships being still some way off, his first passage to the East was both perilous and uncomfortable, but the advance of the technology that was to greatly facilitate Bik's return to his fatherland some three decades later was already becoming increasingly evident in the world around him: that same year, 1816, saw the appearance of the first steamboat on the river Rhine, a hotspot for a new kind of culture of travel within Europe, attracting visitors in large numbers both domestically and from farther afield, especially from Britain.¹ It was one of the beginnings of the now omnipresent phenomenon of tourism, one that Bik was to experience more fully on his later returns to Europe, and record in diaries that became a part of the manuscript published here. On his return from Asia in 1847 not only could he make the journey on a luxurious steamship, he also notes at several locations the then-ongoing construction works laying railway tracks across the face of continental Europe, and he himself got his first taste of train travel on that same journey while visiting Versailles from Paris. Bik got to witness first-hand the changes then taking place in European travel.

Yet the Indies where he made his career were also changing. The re-establishment of Dutch rule was not merely a return to an earlier status quo, as the era of the great trading companies was now squarely in the past and the nineteenth century was to witness a brand of aggressive imperialism and intrusive colonisation quite unlike

¹ H.J. Tümmers, *Rheinromantik: Romantik und Reisen am Rhein* (Köln: Greven Verlag, 1968), 66–67.

those of earlier times, perhaps most infamously exemplified on the Asian scene by the Opium War between Britain and China in 1839–42. That this phase of imperialism overseas coincided with the emergence of mass tourism in Europe is not entirely coincidental, considering that the same technologies—especially steam power in its many forms—expanded the horizons not only of the projection of power but also of leisurely travel. Another connection between the two phenomena is readily apparent in the manuscript left behind by Pieter Albert Bik: in many cases, the very same people were at the forefront of both. It was the same middle class demographic that provided both the manpower necessary for the colonial machinery and the profit margins of the growing tourist industry. Thus, when Bik devotes part of his brief stay in Europe in 1836–8 to a tour of the Rhine, it comes as no surprise to him or his reader that everywhere he meets familiar faces from the other side of the world. Somewhat more surprising is the observation that, in terms of style and tone, there is little that separates Bik’s tourist account of the Rhine—characterised by repetition and banality—from his later journeys on Java and in Japan. The possibility arises that Bik was, in intent if not in form, a global tourist at a time when such terms are not normally applied.

“Tourism” is admittedly a term that, today as well as in earlier times, calls to mind largely frivolous and derogatory connotations. It might therefore seem dissonant, even disrespectful, to bring up such an apparently light-hearted topic within the field of colonial history, where weightier and darker issues such as the many varieties of exploitation and domination usually hold sway—this, incidentally, may partially explain why references to it remain rare in the literature. As is often the case, however, a new perspective can bring new insights into the most thoroughly rehearsed problems: the phenomenon of tourism here should therefore be understood as a fresh, as of yet little acknowledged opening into the world of colonialism. It is by no means a haphazard choice of approach, but on the contrary eminently justified: travel accounts are one of the most readily available primary sources from the colonies, and if, as Bik’s experience suggests, the phenomenon of tourism in Europe was a not uncommon aspect of colonial officials’ experience of travel, it is only natural to question whether that experience also affected, either as a counterpoint or as a model, the way those individuals conceptualised travel outside Europe. Using Bik’s manuscript as a case study, it can therefore be asked: to what extent and in what ways are Bik’s accounts of his travels in Europe different, in terms of style and tone, from those describing his Asian journeys? More specifically, did the model and personal experience of European tourism shape Bik’s accounts of his travels in the east? And finally, moving beyond the individual by way of a comparison with contemporary published works, is it possible to identify more widely a “touristic” attitude towards the colonies and other Asian locations in Dutch travel accounts from the mid-nineteenth century? The analysis is here limited to travel writing by Europeans, although further research on other

traditions and possible cross-cultural influences would no doubt provide interesting additional insights.

There is currently an unfortunate gap in the literature on European travel writing, largely as a consequence of institutional and disciplinary boundaries in academia. Research on intra-European travel writing falls, understandably, within the purview of European cultural and literary history, while travel accounts from the wider world, especially those that do not penetrate into the mainstream cultural consciousness of the homeland, are of interest mainly to global and colonial (or post-colonial) historians. This has resulted in an unfortunate division in the historiography, where European travellers often fall into one of two separate historical narratives depending on whether their destinations were within or outside Europe. Not only is the difference institutional rather than based on reality, it also has the unfortunate side effect of reinforcing, by default, a dichotomy of Europe (or, through the inclusion of America, “the West”) and the rest of the world. Rather than merely assuming such a dichotomy, it is more interesting to examine to what extent Pieter Albert Bik saw Europe and Asia as separate worlds. Tourism, being by nature superficial and routinised, has the potential to eliminate differences—as experienced by the tourist—between disparate locations and is therefore of particular interest for this line of questioning. Bik’s manuscript provides wonderful material in its variety of journeys: in Europe, both in Bik’s homeland, the Netherlands, and outside it; in Asia, on Dutch-controlled Java as well as in forcefully sovereign Tokugawa Japan. These various configurations provide interesting material for how Bik conceptualised notions of domestic and exotic, familiar and “other.”

Another contribution that the framework of tourism can bring to the existing historiography is to describe, in cultural and experiential terms, a shift in the material reality of the encounter between Europeans and local populations in Asia over the nineteenth century. Technological developments (steamships and railways) and feats of engineering (e.g. the *Grote Postweg* or ‘Great Post Road’ on Java) made movement faster, more comfortable and also more routine and predictable for the colonisers, while the concurrent expansion of colonial structures and the more assertive imperial stance vis-à-vis the local powers led to the presence of Europeans in more locations and on lower levels than before. Scientific projects produced a corpus of knowledge ranging from botany to anthropology to establish and support symbolic as well as concrete rule. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Asian sphere had become, for Europeans, a largely mapped-out, familiar and thoroughly-travelled setting. In travel, the subjective parallel of this wider change is the shift from explorers and adventurers to leisurely tourists. Hardships, excitement and uncertainty were slowly replaced by comfort, routine and predictability. It would be presumptuous to label Pieter Albert Bik the first global tourist, and in any case it would be an inappropriately glamorous title for a man who led such an unremarkable career. He did, however,

live through the early moments of the new colonial experience that lent itself to a touristic attitude towards travel, as his manuscript attests.

Finally, applying the conceptual framework of tourism has the benefit of highlighting the private and personal sides of the colonial experience. This counteracts a heavy emphasis in the literature on the scientific and universalising aspects of colonial travel writing. Partly because of Edward Said's weighty legacy, partly because of the overwhelming availability of materials, European scientific—or scientifically oriented—accounts from the wider world have gained the lion's share of historians' attention, from Alexander Humboldt's life's work in the Americas to the more modest encyclopaedic works on British India and Java respectively by James Mill and Stamford Raffles. A focus on knowledge production, traced from Michel Foucault's famous discussion of the relationship between knowledge and power, fits in well with colonial and post-colonial history's problematic of power and domination, but it should not be forgotten that the scientifically educated or encyclopaedically minded formed a minority—although a highly visible one—within European colonial societies. Men like Bik, of modest education and intellectual strivings, were certainly more numerous, yet their perspective risks falling through the gaps because of the lack of published materials by and about them. In this formulation, a touristic attitude is also one defined by a lack of knowledge, and a lack of an impulse to learn and classify, as opposed to the encyclopaedic impulse of the Enlightenment tradition. This, naturally, is not to suggest that one is superior or preferable to the other, nor indeed to slight the great number of analyses made in the Saidian-Foucauldian vein: tourism, with its homogenising instinct, is potentially just as imperialist as universalising science, but it may be so in a *different* way.

The rest of this chapter is devoted to setting the scene for a more informed reading of Pieter Albert Bik's manuscript. Separate sections introduce the reader to the life of the author; to the nature and provenance of the manuscript itself; and finally to the historical context which is briefly sketched. Of the two chapters that follow, chapter two provides an overview of changes in travel and travel writing in Europe and colonial contexts, developing further the idea of tourism as one possible link between the two; chapter three contextualises Bik's travels as recounted in his manuscript by comparing them with other contemporary travel writing covering the same locations. These chapters suggest some possible readings and develop certain themes present in Bik's manuscript but naturally can do only partial justice to the wealth of material on its hundreds of pages, covering decades and half the world. The rest is for the reader to discover.