A. Teeuw

In memoriam Roelof Roolvink (27 August 1918 - 21 July 1994)

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In Memoriam Roelof Roolvink (27 August 1918 - 21 July 1994)*

Roolvink was born on 27 August 1918 in Lioessens, near Dokkum, Friesland. All his life he took pride in his Frisian identity; he missed no opportunity to use the Frisian language, and until the end of his life remained a subscriber to a Frisian daily. After a year's secondary education at a Mulo (Junior High School) in Dokkum, he switched to the Gereformeerd Gymnasium (Protestant Reformed Grammar School) in Leeuwarden, from which he graduated in 1938.

Stimulated by his contacts with the Protestant missionary and anthropologist F.W. Kamma, Roolvink in 1938 enrolled at Leiden University as a student of Indonesische Taal- en Letterkunde (Indonesian languages and literature) in the Faculty of Arts. The following year he was granted a stipend by the Ministry of Colonial Affairs as *candidaat-ambtenaar Indische letteren* (which put him under an obligation to do a stint of colonial service as government linguist after graduation). In November 1940 the university was closed down by the occupying forces as punishment for its resistance to the measures taken against Jewish professors. In the summer of 1941, however, students were given the opportunity to sit for examinations. Thus Roolvink was able to pass his *candidaatsexamen* (B.A.) that year. After that he was required by the Ministry to continue his studies at Utrecht University. Students and universities were caught up more and more in conflicts with the occupying power, however. Roolvink was even taken hostage, together with several hundred other Dutch students, and spent some six weeks in a concentration camp in Vught. After this experience Roolvink retired to Friesland and stayed underground until the end of the war.

After the liberation of the Netherlands, Roolvink returned to Utrecht, where he took his *doctoraal examen* (M.A.) on 5 April 1946, with as major subject Malay language, and as minor subjects comparative Indonesian linguistics and the Batak language. On 22 October 1948 he obtained his Ph.D. degree on the basis of a thesis on prepositions in classical and modern Malay, with Professor J. Gonda as supervisor. Roolvink's thesis is a careful descriptive and comparative study of the use and function of

* I am grateful to my colleagues, E.M. Uhlenbeck and J.J. Ras, for their critical comments on an earlier draft of this obituary. Mrs. Gordijn-Roolvink and Mr. Pieter Roolvink helped me with some factual information, while the latter also made available the photograph reproduced herewith.

Roelof Roolvink †

prepositions in older and contemporary Malay, based on an analysis of data from a variety of written sources. A modern reader may perhaps wonder at the absence of an explicit theoretical linguistic framework in this study. It should be remembered, however, that at the time linguistics was practically non-existent in Dutch academic curricula. Moreover, this book was written under heavy pressure of time in connection with the conditions of his Ministry stipend.

After completing his academic studies, Roolvink was sent to Indonesia. He left The Netherlands in December 1948 and upon arrival in Jakarta was appointed government linguist (*taalambtenaar*) by the colonial administration. In March 1949 he was posted to Medan as *taalambtenaar* for Sumatra, more or less as a successor to Dr. P. Voorhoeve. There Roolvink was able to continue his studies of Malay language and literature as well as of Batak, also after the independence of the Republic of Indonesia in December 1949, when, like many other Dutch civil servants in the East Indies, he was taken into Indonesian government service.

The situation in North Sumatra at the time was not very conducive to academic studies, particularly field work. Only occasionally was it possible for Roolvink to spend longer periods of time in the field. For him personally the most important 'result' of his visits to the Batak area was his acquaintance with Bep (officially Margaretha Elizabeth) Fransen, a Dutch missionary doctor working in the Karo Batak area. They married in December 1949, in the mountain village of Kabanjahe. In September 1950 the Roolvinks left Medan for Jakarta.

His Sumatran period resulted in a few publications: an annotated edition of some Kubu texts which he had received from Voorhoeve (1950), Notes on the Malay of Deli, introducing a few texts in that dialect (1953), and an interesting paper in which he drew the attention of the scholarly world to the Malay *roman picisan*, or dime novels, as published by a number of private publishers in Sumatra (1950). He also became involved as editor in the publication of the Karo Batak Dictionary of the missionary J.H. Neumann, who had passed away early in 1949. This work appeared in 1951.

In Jakarta, Roolvink first was affiliated to the Instituut voor Taal- en Cultuuronderzoek (ITCO, Institute for Linguistic and Anthropological Research of the Universitas Indonesia). He moreover became Keeper of Manuscripts at the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences. In October 1951 he was appointed lecturer of Classical Malay literature at the University of Indonesia, with Toba Batak being added to his teaching assignment a year later. In the period 1951-1954 he also was a lecturer in Islamic History and the Institutions of Islam for an advanced course in history organized by the Ministry of Education. In 1954 Roolvink and his wife returned to The Netherlands.

Roolvink's main contribution to Malay scholarship during his period in Jakarta was the publication, jointly with R.A. Datoek Besar, of an edition (1953) of the Hikayat Abdullah, the well-known autobiographical text of

the 19th-century Malay author *munshi* ('language teacher', of Raffles among others) Abdullah. He further published a study on the Malay *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* (1954). He also was the first to translate modern Indonesian stories, namely by Asrul Sani and Pramoedya Ananta Toer, into Dutch. These translations were published in the Dutch cultural magazine *Oriëntatie* (issues 19, 26 and 40), which appeared in Jakarta at the time. During this period he moreover published a number of popularizing articles on Islam and Malay literature in the Reformed Church monthly *De Zaaier*.

After his return to The Netherlands, Roolvink joined the editorial staff of the publishing house Djambatan, the Jakartan branch of which had published his *Hikayat Abdullah*. This was an Indonesian-Dutch joint venture set up as a 'bridge' by the well-known Dutch journalist H.M. van Randwijk, one of the prominent Dutch resistance fighters Roolvink had met during the war. Kees de Koning, director of Djambatan in Indonesia, later became another of his close friends. The principal tangible result of this period with Djambatan was the *Historical Atlas of the Muslim Peoples*, which Roolvink edited in close cooperation with Muslim scholars from Baghdad, Cairo and Karachi. For some time he also was a member of the Editorial Committee for 'Selected Studies on Indonesia by Dutch Scholars', which were published by the Royal Institute of the Tropics. In 1958 he published a well-considered analysis of the then hotly debated New Guinea issue, in which he argued for the necessity of a reorientation.

In 1959 Roolvink assumed a new, heavy responsibility when he accepted an appointment as Head of the Department of Malay Studies of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, as successor to the well-known Malay Pandit Dr. Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad. The decision that the University of Malaya should move from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur had been taken after Malaya (later Malaysia) had gained its independence in 1957. The implementation of this decision still entailed all kinds of problems in the first years of Roolvink's tenure of office. More fundamental were the issues which Roolvink faced when endeavouring to revise the curriculum within the Department, however. There was a clear difference of opinion about the role the Department should play. Roolvink felt that Malay Studies at university level should include Sanskrit and Arabic, as well as a grounding in Dutch and a study of cognate languages, preferably Javanese – in short, the traditional Leiden curriculum for Indonesian studies! He expounded this academic credo in his inaugural lecture on 'Malay Studies' (*Pengajian Melayu*, 1962). In the opinion of the Malay world, conversely, the Department should be first and foremost a focus and symbol of Malay identity in a multiracial society, and an institution for training prospective civil servants, for whom a B.A. degree in Malay studies should offer the guarantee of a well-paid, prestigious job. The students moreover expected the Department to become a creative centre of modern Malay literature, whereas Roolvink maintained that the focus should be on the scholarly study of classical Malay literature. Roolvink was not a man to settle for

easy compromises, and his position as a Western expatriate in a newly independent country was vulnerable. Press campaigns instigated by students and obstruction by staff and authorities made his work extremely difficult. In 1963, at the end of his term of office, he returned to The Netherlands, a wiser and sadder man. Later, however, he was invited to become external examiner, first in his former department, and then with the Malay Department of the newly established National University of Malaysia (*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*).

After his return to the Netherlands he settled down in Voorschoten, a village near Leiden, where he was to live for the remainder of his life. In September 1963 he became a staff member at the University Library in Leiden, where in March 1964 he was appointed Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts, a function which he enjoyed greatly. For personal reasons, however, he accepted an appointment as *wetenschappelijk hoofdmedewerker* (senior lecturer) in Classical Malay literature and the Batak language in the Department of Indonesian Studies at Leiden University as of September 1968. In 1974 he became Reader (*lector*) and in January 1980, when the function of *lector* was abolished at Dutch universities, a full professor. In 1983 he reached the age of compulsory retirement.

Roolvink's list of publications is relatively short. Most are minor studies on specific subjects, usually particular Malay textual problems or Malay manuscripts, Batak, or Islamic issues – his three main fields of interest throughout his life. For these the reader is referred to the bibliography at the end of this article. Some publications should be mentioned specifically here, however. In 1965 Roolvink published a study on 'the passive-active *per-/ber-* // *per-/memper-* correspondence in Malay', which is an all-too-rare contribution to the historical grammar of the Malay language, based on careful documentation from a large number of Malay texts. In 1967 his most important publication in the field of Malay philology saw the light, namely a fundamental study of the manuscript tradition of the *Sejarah Melayu*. On the basis of a detailed analysis and comparison of all the available manuscripts, 28 in all, Roolvink reconstructed a textual history which has become generally accepted. Actually, this study was carried out in preparation of a new, long overdue critical edition of this most important Malay text. Mention should further be made of his excellent survey of Indonesian literatures, in particular with reference to aspects that bear on Islam, which he wrote for the new edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1971). His Leiden inaugural lecture, on '*Bahasa Jawi*, De Taal van Sumatra' (1975), gives a clear description of the importance, since time immemorial, of the Malay language as the vehicle of a culture that embraced more than just the native speakers of Malay, and not in the last place as the language of Islam in Indonesia, alongside Arabic.

All his life Roolvink put service to others in their work before his own scholarly interests. He assumed a number of often time-consuming functions as editor of journals and books: in Jakarta he was editor of

Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, which had been established as the journal of the Batavian Society in 1863. In Kuala Lumpur (1962-1963) he was acting editor of the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. From 1967 to 1973 he was editor of the journal in which this obituary is now being published. As Honorary Secretary and Treasurer of the 'De Goeje Fund' he also bore responsibility for the publications of this Foundation. He was co-editor of the *Festschrift* for Sir Richard Winstedt, *Malayan and Indonesian Studies* (1964). His involvement in Neumann's dictionary has already been mentioned. A great deal of time was further spent on two other publications in the field of Batak with which he was involved: the English translation of Van der Tuuk's *Grammar of Toba Batak* (1971), of which he was co-editor, and more especially the new edition of Joh. Warneck's *Toba-Batak-Deutsches Wörterbuch* (1977), of which he was editor. He also devoted much time and attention to the supervision of two Ph.D. students from abroad: Manusama, who published the thesis *Hikayat Tanah Hitu* (1977), and Liaw Yock Fang, who edited the *Undang-Undang Melaka* (1976). He was consulted about Malay and Batak literature and manuscripts by colleagues and students from all over the world, and kept up an extensive international correspondence. In particular, he was always accessible as an unofficial kind of 'father confessor' to students in his own Department.

Roolvink did not shun administrative and organizational duties; he served for many years on the Board of the Oostersch Instituut (Oriental Institute), as well as on that of the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde. And although he had a strong aversion to the academic bureaucracy and to so-called democracy of the kind that developed in Dutch academia after the 1968 'revolution', he grudgingly accepted functions as member of the University Council (*Universiteitsraad*, 1973-1975) and the Executive Committee of the Faculty of Arts (*Faculteitsraad*, 1981-1982), primarily out of loyalty to those of his colleagues in the Department of Indonesian Studies whose time was wholly taken up by other commitments.

Roolvink fitted the stereotype of a Frisian. He was an individualist who fiercely resisted any intrusion on his privacy. This led to a bitter conflict with the librarian of the University Library, for example, when the latter insisted that all mail arriving at the library, including personally addressed letters to staff members, should be opened and registered by the secretarial department. This was unacceptable to Roolvink, for whom this was such a fundamental issue that he was prepared to risk losing his job over it, much though he liked his work with the Oriental manuscript department. He also respected and defended the right to privacy of others. He had a deep-rooted sense of justice, and was a formidable opponent for whoever offended this. His individualism did not lead him to shy away from warm personal contacts, however. He was a kind and helpful man, and when he felt at home in a particular company he could be extremely sociable. His

quiet wisdom, ironical humour and sense of relativity made him popular with students and colleagues alike.

Roolvink never sought the limelight but preferred to keep in the background. And although he regularly published scholarly work, as was expected of him, he never claimed time for his own research or publications at the expense of other people. In fact, he lacked the academic ambition that was needed for rounding off the major, demanding project of preparing a new scholarly edition of the *Sejarah Melayu*.

The last years of his life were not particularly happy. In May 1975 his wife died after a long illness. Roolvink himself had nursed her at home with touching care and devotion throughout her illness, refusing all outside help. After this severe blow, a second misfortune befell him in 1978 when he was injured in a nasty fall and had to be hospitalized for a long period, after which he remained handicapped. This was one factor responsible for a gradual alienation from the academic world, although it is doubtful if he regretted this loss of contact with academia. As he grew older, other things came to matter more to him: good talks with a limited number of close friends, and the companionship of his son and Argentinian-born daughter-in-law, who lived nearby. He even learnt Spanish in order to be able to communicate directly with the latter.

Roolvink had become estranged at an early stage from the Reformed Church to which his family belonged. But, as in the case of many of his Dutch contemporaries from the same Calvinistic background, problems of faith and religion continued to occupy him. At one of our last meetings he told me that he had just read a book by the modernist Reformed minister Kuitert and confided: 'If books and preachers like that had been available when I was young, I would have remained *gereformeerd*'. His lifelong interest in Islam and Arabic literature (he always claimed he read Arabic texts at least one hour every day) also was more than professional. Islam and its literature continued to fascinate him to his last day. When I visited him in hospital two days before his death, he knew that he had come to 'the end of the road', as he called it. Before I left, he read me a quatrain from his only bedside reading, a German translation of the *Rubâiyyât* by the Persian poet Omar Khayyâm, 'the tent maker', as he added with his typical, mildly ironic grin. It seems fitting to conclude his obituary with this poem, therefore.

'Der bin ich nicht, daß ich vorm Tode könnte beben;
Viel eher als vorm Tod bangt es mir noch vorm Leben.
Gott hat das Leben mir geliehn auf kurze Zeit,
Wenn Er's zurückverlangt, bin ich's bereit zu geben.'¹

¹ The quotation is from *Die Sinnsprüche Omars des Zeltmachers, Rubaiyat-i-Omar-i-Khajjam*, aus dem Persischen übertragen von Friedrich Rosen, IV, Vermehrte Auflage, Stuttgart und Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, p. 59.