John Coast

Recruit to Revolution. Adventure and Politics during the Indonesian Struggle for Independence. Edited by Laura Noszlopy with a foreword by Adrian Vickers.

Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2015, xxvi + 336 pp. ISBN 9788776941164. Price: GBP 14.99 (paperback).

Originally published in 1952, the memoirs of John Coast are deservedly being republished, this time with an introduction by Laura Noszlopy, which provides background information about the author's improbable life. At an early age John Coast (1916–1989) sought 'something exciting and useful to do' (p. xxvi), an aspiration he certainly fulfilled. It led him to military service in Singapore, imprisonment during WW II in Burma, inspired him to volunteer in the service of the Republic during the Indonesian revolution, and then to his eventual career as a music and theatre impresario. In this last capacity he toured in the early 1950s with a group of Balinese dancers through England and the United States, and he later worked with famous artists like Luciano Pavarotti and Bob Dylan.

During his wartime imprisonment along the Burma railroad, he witnessed dance performances by Indonesian prisoners and was from then on drawn to Javanese and Balinese music and dance. After the war, he managed to obtain a job at the British embassy in Bangkok where he came into contact with Indonesians working for the young Republic. He then decided to quit his job in order to support the Indonesian Republic. He was, again, stationed in Bangkok where he was now assigned to break the Dutch naval blockade, and to supply Java with much needed medical and technical supplies and weapons. In this capacity Coast became closely involved with efforts to establish a fragile air link between Bangkok and Yogyakarta that consisted of a few chartered airplanes, which were primarily financed through opium smuggle from the Republic to Singapore. Coast gives an interesting account of the people and their activities involved in the Bangkok connection.

Later he moved to Yogyakarta, where he assisted prime minister Mohammad Hatta and Haji Agus Salim in translating documents for diplomatic purposes. He clearly sympathises with Syahrir and Agus Salim and admires Hatta, but fails to provide deeper insights in the inner workings of the Republican leadership. Apparently he was not an insider. Apart from telling observations of shortages and poverty in Yogyakarta in 1948 due to the Dutch blockade and a few reports of meetings with key political figures (a picnic with Sukarno, an interview with Amir Sjarifuddin shortly before the communist uprising, a portrait of Merle Cochran), Coast restricts himself to a broad outline of major political developments. This was no doubt very informative in 1952 but does not add much to our knowledge today.

More interesting are his observations during the Round Table Conference from August–November 1949 in the Hague, which tends to be ignored in histories of the Revolution. His lucid sketch of the depressing atmosphere in post-war Holland in autumn 1949 is great, and so are his portraits of the main actors on the Indonesian and Dutch side. The frustrating efforts of the Dutch to delay the negotiations and the efforts of Coasts' hero, Mohammad Hatta, to achieve a solution before violence might erupt again in Java, is still a valuable contribution to the historiography of the Revolution. Sukarno's finest hour came when he arrived in Jakarta on 28 December 1949 where he was welcomed by a cheering crowd of a million people. But Hatta's moment of glory was on 2 November 1949 in The Hague when, close to total exhaustion and almost singlehandedly, he concluded an agreement with the Dutch that finally opened the door to independence.

Henk Schulte Nordholt

KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies
Schultenordholt@kitlv.nl