The Art of Printing in the Dutch East Indies

Laurens Janszoon Coster as Colonial Hero

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Abstract

In the Netherlands, and elsewhere, too, Laurens Janszoon Coster of Haarlem, and not Gutenberg, was long thought to have been the inventor of the art of printing. The myth—for that is what it was—was only definitively repudiated at the end of the nineteenth century, though some continued to believe in Coster until their dying breath. The Coster myth was deployed to give the history of the Netherlands status and international prestige. This article concerns the extent to which Coster's supposed invention was known in the Dutch East Indies—today's Indonesia, a Dutch colony at that time—and what its significance was there. After all, heroes, national symbols and traditions, whether invented or not, are the building blocks of cultural nationalism. Is this also true for Laurens Janszoon Coster in his colonial context?

Keywords

colonial history – publishing – Indonesia – Dutch East Indies – invention of printing

After darkness had fallen in Batavia, from a distance dancing lights approached and music could be heard. It was 24 August 1823; a festive procession was on its way to the Government Printing House in Batavia in honour of the 'Dutch inventor' of printing. A life-size depiction of Laurens Janszoon Coster, painted on a large canvas, was drawn through the city by apprentices at the printing house, 'clad entirely in Far Eastern attire'. Laurens Janszoon Coster had never before been celebrated with such festivities in the colony; some of those present were probably unaware of Laurens Janszoon Coster's story; and many of them had probably never set foot in the Netherlands. People had no idea how

the day was celebrated in the Netherlands, but the printers and their friends and families did not want the day to pass unmarked, even in remote Indonesia.¹

Batavia, where this celebration took place, is now Jakarta. The control of the VOC—or Dutch East India Company—ended there in 1798.² It was followed by a brief period (1811–1816) of British rule under Thomas Stamford Raffles. Authority was restored to the Netherlands from Britain in 1816. Besides 4.5 million Javanese, about 16,000 Europeans lived on Java in these years, most of them Dutch.³ There was, then, a very small European minority—mostly Dutch—who could consider themselves an ‘imagined community’, both among themselves and in relation to the mother country. The Indonesian archipelago, with its many islands, large and small, was a patchwork of principalities, many of which were forcibly absorbed into the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the following hundred years. The Dutch went to the ‘East’ not so much to settle as to make a profit and return to Europe after twenty years or so. Indonesia was after all, a colony, there to be exploited. What was Laurens Janszoon Coster doing there?

Coster as ‘inventor of the art of printing’

The name Laurens Janszoon Coster (sometimes spelled as Koster) probably does not mean much to anyone outside the Netherlands—it might not be very well known in the Netherlands, either. Except, of course, in his place of birth, Haarlem, where a large statue of Coster adorns the central square. In 1823, things were different. Laurens Janszoon Coster had been confidently regarded for centuries as the inventor of printing. It was not the German Johannes Gutenberg, nor the Italian Panfilo Castaldi, nor the Fleming Dirk Martens of Aalst, nor the Frenchman Nicolas Jenson, but this simple man from Haarlem who invented printing years before Gutenberg. According to the legend, Coster dropped a letter cut from wood on the sand and its imprint gave him the idea that the same could be done on paper. There are several statues in Haarlem of this man who is now thought never to have existed, let alone to have invented the art of printing. There is now no doubt whatsoever that Gutenberg was the first in Europe to employ the art of printing—hundreds of years, though, after

1 *Beknopt verhaal van het vierde eeuwgetijde na de vinding der boekdrukkunst, gevierd door de gezamenlijke gëmployjeerden der Bataviasche Lands-drukkerij* (Batavia 1825).

2 The charter granted in 1602 expired on 31 December 1800.

3 Figures from 1810. Ulbe Bosma, *Indiëgangers. Verhalen van Nederlanders die naar Indië trokken*. (Amsterdam 2010), p. 50.

FIGURE 1 Portrait of Laurens Jansz. Coster by Pieter Saenredam 1630
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printing with movable type was practiced in China and Korea. The technique only reached the Low Countries after Gutenberg's invention, by way of printers such as Dirk Martens of Aalst and Johan van Westfalen who had learned about the new method not in Mainz or Strasbourg but in Venice, and had subsequently returned to the Low Countries.⁴ Where, then, does the story about Coster come from?

The earliest mention of 'Holland' preceding Mainz appears in a text by the printer Ulrich Zell, who wrote about the rise of printing in 1499:

While the art as now practiced was invented in Mainz, the earliest predecessor was invented in Holland and used for the printing of Donati, which were printed there even earlier.⁵

Donati were elementary textbooks, provided with a grammar. The name Laurens Janszoon Coster was only attached to this vague reference in the second half of the sixteenth century. Interestingly, this happened in a book entitled *Batavia*—the same name the Dutch would give to what would become the capital of the Indonesian archipelago, in 1619. Jakarta was renamed Batavia in the colonial period. It refers to the Batavi, a West Germanic tribe that once lived in the Betuwe and who rebelled against the Romans under Julius Civilis. The seventeenth-century Dutch considered themselves to be descendents of the heroic Batavi. The primary object of the book *Batavia*, published in 1588, was to provide a historical context for the rebellious provinces that, together, formed the Dutch Republic. The intention was to create a unity, a 'nation', among the provinces, with its own, glorious history. Midway through the book, the invention of printing comes up, with, as an indisputable fact, that it was Laurens Janszoon Coster of Haarlem who had applied himself to the early Donati. Here we find, for the first time, the story that he cut letters from wood and thus came up with the idea of printing with movable type. One of his servants supposedly took the invention to Mainz, without permission—stole it, in other words—where, under Gutenberg's supervision, this 'thief' perfected the procedure. The source of these additions? Oral tradition from the elders of Haarlem, according to the book *Batavia*.⁶ Zell's 'Donati' were traced and identified centuries later. They do exist; studies of the watermarks in the paper have established they are

4 L. Hellinga-Querido and C. de Wolf, *Laurens Janszoon Coster was zijn naam* (Haarlem 1988).

5 Zell's account was written by an anonymous chronicle writer *Die Cronica vander hilliger Stat van Coellen* 1499. Cited here from Hellinga & De Wolff, op. cit. (n. 4), p. 28.

6 Hellinga & De Wolff, op. cit. (n. 4), p. 42.

younger than Gutenberg's printings. The first books printed in the Netherlands with movable type date from 1466 to 1479.

As the centuries passed, the legend received more and more supporting 'evidence', such as a portrait of the hero, and engravings depicting his workshop, produced (and conceived) in the seventeenth century. Archival evidence had already established that two Costers had lived in Haarlem, but it now became clear which was the 'real' one. In the eighteenth century, 'Costerians', like Johannes Enschedé and Gerard Meerman, studied the 'true' Haarlem inventor, and they exchanged information with each other and published articles on the story.⁷ In 1808, at the request of Louis Napoleon, king of the Netherlands at the time, the *Koninklijke Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen*, or Royal Holland Society of Sciences and Humanities, in Haarlem organised a competition on Coster, with the ultimate proof of his invention as the central issue. The question the society wanted an answer to was:

Can Haarlem be disputed on any grounds, that printing with movable type, was invented there before 1440 by Laurens Koster, and was this art not brought from there to Mainz and improved there with letters, cast in tin, replacing the wooden letters?

The winner was Jacob Koning, with his 'Concerning the origin, the invention, improvement and perfection of the art of printing'. The text was printed in 1816, and was also translated into French.⁸ In Koning's book the myth was upheld.

The Celebrations in the Colony

Those travelling to Batavia at the time would probably have been familiar with the studies concerning Coster. Koning's book was, in fact, mentioned at the tribute to Coster in Batavia in 1823, and they toasted him: 'honour and recognition to J. Koning, who has defended Coster's honour so gloriously', according to a report on the festivities.⁹ Surrounding the celebrations of Coster's four hundredth anniversary, the nationalistic myth intensified in the Netherlands, as it did when a new bronze statue was installed at the *Grote Markt* in Haarlem in

⁷ Hellinga & De Wolff, op. cit. (n. 4), p. 84.

⁸ *Verhandeling over den oorsprong, de uitvinding, verbetering en volmaking der boekdrukkunst* (Haarlem 1816); and *Dissertation sur l'origine, l'invention et le perfectionnement de l'imprimerie / par Jacques Koning ; trad. du hollandois* (Amsterdam 1819).

⁹ *Beknopt verhaal*, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 40.

FIGURE 2 Illumination for the celebration of Coster's birthday in Batavia, in *Beknopt verhaal van het vierde eeuwgetijde na de vinding der boekdrukkunst, gevierd door de gezamenlijke geëmploijeerden der Bataviasche Lands-drukkerij*. Batavia Landsdrukkerij 1825. The text in the middle says in Dutch: 'The art of printing, now four hundred years old, sowed by Koster from the cortex of a beech tree in Haarlem's Forest, now looks upon its father, this image here, on the canvas and shouts out in joy: this manly face is dedicated to immortality as long as the world will turn.'

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1856. Questions were already being raised about Coster in the early nineteenth century, but the first serious step in the demolition of the myth was taken in 1869. This happened in a series of articles by Antonius van der Linde in the periodical *Nederlandsche Spectator*, in which facts and reasoning unavoidably knocked the hero from his pedestal.

Things had, however, not yet reached that point in 1823. That Coster should have been honoured in that year is not surprising; that this happened in remote Batavia, however, is interesting. A serious effort was put into the commemoration in the colony: 'However remote the Dutch East Indies might be from the world of letters, they could not forget there this man who contributed so much to the spread of literature and general civilization'.¹⁰

The procession with torches and the portrait of Coster headed for the Government Printing House, where the celebration was to begin. An eighteen-man orchestra played the national anthem, in anticipation of a visit from a dignitary, because the governor general, Godert van der Capellen, had been invited. Following his arrival, typesetter P. van der Meer delivered a glowing speech, in which he considered the blessings of the printing press:

That it may soon bring civilisation to this region [...] that the printing press may also be the means by which the false religion of Muhammad can be unmasked and the inhabitants of these countries can be added to the community of Jesus; that the art of COSTER [...] may reform the still dark and uncivilised part of the inhabitants of these countries ...

The attack on their religion is unlikely to have affected the Muslims present. Although the majority of the population were followers of Islam, they spoke no Dutch. The report of the evening does not explicitly say whether there were Indonesian employees at the celebration, but it is likely that there were; 'All employees and their ladies' were, after all, invited. We know from annual reports as well that several Indonesian employees worked there.¹¹ The report on the Coster celebration is part of the commemorative book printed after the celebrations. The lyrics of the songs sung by those in attendance, in both Dutch and Malay, are included in the book.¹²

¹⁰ *Gedenkschriften wegens het vierde eeuwgetijde van de uitvinding der boekdrukkunst door Lourens Janszoon Koster; van stadswege gevierd te Haarlem den 10 en 11 julij 1823* (Haarlem 1824), p. 459.

¹¹ Regulations from 1809, at the back of *Landsdrukkerij. Verslag over 1911* (Batavia 1912), appendix C.

¹² *Beknopt verhaal*, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 54.

FIGURE 3 Song of praise for Coster, in Malay, in Arabic and Latin script. *Beknopt verhaal van het vierde eeuwgetijde na de vinding der boekdrukkunst, gevierd door de gezamenlijke geëmploijeerden der Bataviasche Lands-drukkerij*. Batavia Landsdrukkerij 1825

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Now, two hundred years later, this small book rests in the university library in Amsterdam and represents, with its mere 60 pages, a silent witness to what was happening in the young book business in the Dutch East Indies. Paternalism, missionary zeal, nationalism, praise of technology. The hybrid atmosphere is striking as well—including Eastern attire, and songs of the fatherland in Malay.

The Art of Printing in the 'Dutch East Indies' Colony

The commemorative rhetoric in the report gives the impression that the colony was a wasteland, with respect to printing. Was there no printing press in the

region yet? No, in fact there was not, with the exception of the governmental press at the Government Printing House. From the mid-seventeenth century, the VOC had its printing presses in Batavia. In 1809, these were consolidated into one, the Government Printing House.¹³ In 1823, there were also a few missionaries who had the use of basic printing presses, such as Joseph Kam on Amboina and A. Mattern in Tomohon.¹⁴ There was, however, not a commercial printing house, let alone one in Indonesian hands. In the celebrations of 1823, the art of printing was, then, presented as a *Dutch* invention that would bring light to what was considered to be a dark, undeveloped culture at the time. The 'undeveloped culture' was not as undeveloped as it perhaps seemed. There was a centuries-old oral culture and a manuscript tradition in the archipelago. These were not paper manuscripts. Paper was not available in the region, partly on account of dampness and vermin, like the infamous white ants (termites). Palm leaves were available. They could not, however, be used for printing with a printing press.¹⁵ After these 'lontar' leaves had been processed, symbols could be engraved on them using knives. Rubbing the engravings with a colouring agent rendered them easily legible. Although there are lontar palm leaves in the form of a scroll, it was customary to bind a number of leaves with a cord through a perforation. Manuscripts could be read aloud to others, and traces have been found of lending libraries where such manuscripts, many of them literary classics, could be borrowed.¹⁶ They were borrowed, among other reasons, in order to be copied, for further dispersal or for personal use.

At the same time, in the mid-nineteenth century, only a fraction of the archipelago's total of 20 million inhabitants were literate, and there were hundreds of languages; a written form had been developed for only a few of them. For many languages, a 'reading culture' was, then, an anomaly. This changed during the course of the nineteenth century and the printing press was a stimulating factor in this change. For some languages, a writing system did not exist; for others, it did, but they lacked a dictionary. Linguists, often commissioned by missionaries, compiled dictionaries.¹⁷ They could be printed if and when the type was available, although the people who spoke the language still had to be

13 J.A. van der Chijs, *Nota over de Landsdrukkerij te Batavia 1667-1899. Samengesteld uit de Nederlandsch-Indische bibliografie van Mr J.A. van der Chijs en uit de Verslagen der Landsdrukkerij* (Batavia 1899).

14 *Overzicht van de zendingen, zendingposten, zendelingen, onderwijzers en scholen, door het Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap opgericht, onderhouden of bestuurd* (s.n., c. 1840).

15 H. Voorn, *Het papier in voormalig Nederlands Oost-Indië. Een historisch bibliografische studie*. (Leiden 1978).

16 D. van der Meij, *Indonesian Manuscripts from the Islands of Java, Madura, Bali and Lombok*. (Leiden/Boston 2017), p. 108.

17 W. van der Molen and B. Arps, *Woord en schrift in de Oost, De betekenis van zending en misie voor de studie van taal en literatuur in Zuidoost-Azië* [Semaian 19] (Leiden 1999).

taught how to read it. Dutch type-founders produced Javanese type, as well as Sudanese and Batak, and many other kinds of type. Lithography was a solution for languages with their own written form that lacked movable type. This was the case for the Jawi, the Arabic letter form in which Malay texts were originally printed. Lithography is in fact the reproduction of a manuscript. The text is written on a prepared stone in mirror image and prints can then be made. In the case of the so-called autographic lithography, it was not even necessary to write in mirror image.¹⁸ Most lithographic printing houses were located in Singapore, with some on Java, too, but what was printed in Singapore found its way to Java as well.¹⁹

The Dutch colonial government did much harm in Indonesia but the printing press was on the whole not a bad thing. The printing press was, it is true, an ally of the governmental bureaucracy, which tried to document as much as possible and intimidated the population with ordinances and posters. The printing press, however, contributed to the introduction of Malay, which later became Bahasa Indonesia or Indonesian. By means of this common language, education on a large scale was possible, translations could be made available, national news media could be introduced and a sense of community and national consciousness among the Indonesians could develop further. This was, for that matter, an important side effect of the printing press in Europe in the nineteenth century, and of the wider distribution of printed works and of literacy: nation building. A standard variety of Dutch, with standardised spelling, was developed in the Netherlands too, and regional varieties were reduced to dialects. Books and other printed matter were the workhorses of 'cultural nationalism' in the Netherlands. Institutions like printing houses, libraries and reading societies, and the educational system contributed to this process.

In the nineteenth century, paradoxically enough, it was precisely the colonies that contributed increasingly to a national [Dutch] identity. Little Netherlands had, after all, a distant but huge hinterland. In the Dutch East Indies, the colonial government tried to develop a national consciousness, by means of education, among other things.²⁰ Not of Indonesia—that name was never used—but of the Dutch East Indies. This was done with textbooks in Malay. The colony was a melting pot, but one thing was clear: the ruling class—a handful of administrators—spoke Dutch, and the others did not.

18 H.C.M. Marres-Schretlen and R. Meijer, 'Ontstaan en opkomst van de lithografie in Nederland', in: *Lithografie in Nederland. De boekenwereld* 15 (1998-1999), pp. 8-34.

19 I. Proudfoot, 'The Print Threshold in Malaysia', Working Paper 88, The Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University (Clayton 1994), p. 27-8.

20 C.A. Drieënhuizen, *Koloniale collecties, Nederlands aanzien. De Europese elite van Nederlands-Indië belicht door haar verzamelingen, 1811-1957* (Amsterdam 2012), pp. 27-8.

The masses were supposed to communicate in Malay, but still be part of the Netherlands. There was, then, a question of a community that did not actually exist, an 'imagined community', which was also at the same time, biased—only perceived from the perspective of the Netherlands.²¹

Starting in 1848, there were 'government schools', where children were taught Malay—even if only a very small percentage of the children went to school.²² Initially, the reading matter was based on the Bible, translated by missionaries. Textbooks from Holland were literally translated. They had content incomprehensible to Indonesian children, like 'snow' and 'apples'. Textbooks better adapted to the local context did not appear until the 1860s, in Malay and printed by the Government Printing House. Elsewhere in the colony, too, printing houses sprung up like mushrooms from the ground. These included large firms, such as Kolff and Van Dorp, with their own printing presses, and numerous small businesses, some existing only a few years but nevertheless contributing to the spread of printing across a large area. The sector was growing.²³

Bookshops appeared, binderies, libraries, reading societies and, after 1900, type-foundries and paper factories, producing very many local newspapers and periodicals. A first draft inventory of the book trade between 1816 and 1920 in the Dutch East Indies reveals no fewer than 330 names of booksellers, printing houses, and binderies. After 1900, there was an increase in the number of businesses run by Indonesians and Chinese. A lot happened in a century in the Indonesian archipelago, including in the book sector.²⁴

Coster as Hero in the Dutch East Indies

Did the inhabitants of the archipelago hear any more about Laurens Janszoon Coster after 1823, and if so, in what context? No studies of Coster in the colony have been published, and there are in fact hardly any studies on printing in the Dutch East Indies.²⁵

21 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983).

22 K. Groeneboer, *Gateway to the West. The Dutch Language in Colonial Indonesia 1600-1950: A History of Language Policy* (Amsterdam 1999).

23 L. Kuitert, 'Le livre dans les Indes Néerlandaises. Un marché nouveau pour les Pays Bas', in: M. Lyons and J.-Y. Mollier, *Histoire et civilisation du livre. Revue internationale VIII. Pour une histoire transnationale du livre* (Genève 2012), pp. 119-31.

24 See L. Kuitert (forthcoming), *Met een drukpers de oceaan over. Koloniale boekcultuur in Nederlands-Indië 1816-1920* (Amsterdam 2020).

25 K. Smith-Diehl comes closest with her book *Printers and printing in the East Indies to 1850. I. Batavia*. (New Rochelle 1990), although it is largely concerned with the VOC period and

Coster's presence in the colony can be traced in two ways. One is to locate advertisements and references in newspapers and other sources of news. Another is to look more closely at Coster's presence in history books circulating in the colony. To begin with the latter: many Dutch people today know Coster from the stories told in primary school. This is in any case true for me. An investigation into Coster in textbooks has not yet been carried out, not for children in the colony either. Would children in schools in the colony also have been made aware of him?

Education in history was a complex business in the colony. At schools attended by the indigenous people (as I said, a very small percentage of them), history was not taught. The focus was especially on language and arithmetic, and some geography. The indigenous elite was taught history, but only of its own region. Starting in 1918, history was taught in the so-called 'Hollands-Indische' or 'Holland-Indonesian' schools, where instruction was in Dutch, although 'History' was later abandoned. Klooster's research shows history was simply not a subject, in order to prevent unrest.²⁶ History would show Indonesia had its own history, in which the Dutch did not play a part, and this could damage colonial authority, which was not all that secure in any case. There is no point, then, in looking for Malay textbooks on the history of the Netherlands. History was on the curriculum of schools for European children in the colony, where it always concerned the 'history of the fatherland'. At all types of schools, teachers used reading material, some of which had a historical dimension, and which were intended for practicing reading, with gaining knowledge about other subjects as an added benefit.

What books were used? A number of research methods can be followed, the fruits of which can be found in the Appendix to this article. The title of only one history book indicates it was intended for children in Indonesia (no. 1). It dates from 1930 and in it, Coster is identified as the inventor of printing. Other textbooks can be found in a catalogue of educational matter published by the government, comprising recommended textbooks. There are only a few catalogues of this kind that include history books, because, as has been said, history was not generally taught. The five books listed in the 1905 catalogue were

does not address the missionaries. There are bibliographies, such as J.A. van der Chijs's, *Proeve eener Ned. Indische Bibliographie (1659-1870)* (Batavia's Gravenhage 1875), jubilee books and focused studies of, among others, newspapers. See also op. cit. (n. 24).

26 H.A.J. Klooster, 'Het geschiedenisonderwijs in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië', in: *Kleio*, 9 (1987), pp. 20-3.

FIGURE 4 Spread from the book by G. van Sandwijk and W.A. Elberts *Geschiedenis van ons vaderland, van de komst der Batavieren hier te lande tot op onzen tijd* (1865) with on the upper right side an image of Coster in the forest of Haarlem

investigated for content on Coster.²⁷ One book has not survived and another treats a different period, which leaves three (nos. 2, 3, 4).

No conclusion could be drawn from three books, one of which mentions Coster and two of which do not. Private schools, however, were not required to use books from the catalogue of educational matter. And there were many different types of schools. The search was therefore expanded to include other catalogues, and textbooks on the history of the fatherland advertised in local newspapers and periodicals in the colony. This yielded another 11 books (5-16); the references for each title can be found in the Appendix. In seven of them, Coster is mentioned as the inventor, and in three Coster and Gutenberg are both mentioned, without one or the other clearly being favoured.

27 *Catalogus van leermiddelen ten behoeve der openbare lagere scholen in Nederlandsch-Indië gearresteerd bij besluit van den directeur van onderwijs, eeredienst en nijverheid van 30 dec. 1896 no 13729, later aangevuld en gewijzigd* (Batavia 1905).

The catalogue of the school library of the Willem II Gymnasium in Batavia is another interesting source. It was a school for the children of the (mostly Dutch) administrators. Concerning the history of the late Middle Ages and early modern period, the catalogue lists, among others, the *Chronologisch overzicht* (or 'chronological survey') by E. Epkema (1870), which has the entry 'type-casting invented by Schöffner' for 1452. The same is true for Weber's *Handboek der algemeene geschiedenis: nieuwe geschiedenis* (Handbook of general history: new history). No Coster in this school, then. No Gutenberg either, however. His business partner Schöffner is credited here with the invention.

This survey of textbooks, which, given the research method, is probably incomplete, shows that Coster did appear in a majority of textbooks, at least those for primary schools. The Coster legend was evidently kept alive through education until well into the 20th century. Whether the same is true of the world outside the four walls of the classroom can be ascertained from reports in the local newspapers.²⁸

Coster continued to be a hero after 1823 according to a survey of newspaper articles. Funds were collected in the colony for the statue in far away Haarlem that was ceremoniously unveiled in 1856. In Surabaya, the local assistant resident Frederik Nicolaas Nieuwenhuijzen was active in this effort.²⁹ Replicas of this statue were for sale in the colony, as was a commemorative medal, all to be inquired after at the bookseller Lange & Co. in Batavia.³⁰ Several ships seem to have been named after the inventor, including a freighter that suffered severe damage at the Cape of Good Hope in 1857, costing the lives of three sailors. The baby of a Koster couple who named him Laurens Janszoon was also born to misfortune; he was committed to the earth after seven weeks, according to a newspaper in 1872.³¹ A 'genuine bronze statue' of Coster appeared at an auction, where it was given special notice, indicating it was considered to be of value.³² Interested parties, of course, followed the discussion about the role of the 'inventor' from Haarlem, especially after Van der Linden had published his critical articles. It is known that the *Nederlandsche Spectator*, in which the articles were published, was read in the colony, because advertisements by the bookseller Van Dorp, in Batavia, offered the periodical.³³ The newspapers in the colony maintained a nearly unshakeable belief in the man from Haarlem.

28 Via www.Delpher.nl. Unfortunately these are Dutch-language colonial newspapers only. Malay or Javanese newspapers from the colonial period have not (yet) been digitised.

29 *De Oostpost*, 06-04-1853.

30 *Javabode*, 11-07-1857.

31 *Bataviaasch handelsblad*, 28-08-1872.

32 *Javabode*, 22-05-1858.

33 *Javabode*, 28-06-1856.

Boekhandel LANGE & Co.

In commissie ontvangen :

HET STANDBEELD VAN LOURENS KOSTER
in Brons.

Gedenkpenning voor idem.

HET DRUKPERS-REGLEMENT
voor Nederlandsch Indie, aan de ervaring
van een halve eeuw getoetst. (1963)

Boekhandel Lange & Co.

Van de pers gekomen :

EERSTE LEESOEFENINGEN
voor de Nederlandsch Indische Scholen, door
J. M. B. Marin Gouaj.
Prijs f 0 25.

Deze eerste leesoefeningen zullen door tweede, derde en vierde stukjes worden gevolgd, terwijl daarna tot den afdruk van verschillende leesboeken wordt overgegaan.

Ter perse van denzelfden :

Eerste Rekenboek met onbenoemde getallen.
Eerste Rekenboek met benoemde getallen.
(1971)

FIGURE 5 Newspaper advertisement, concerning a statue and a medal of Coster, for sale at Lange & Co, booksellers in Batavia. *Javabode* July 8th 1857

Uit: "Hoe men het A B C begeerde en leerde" — Het Spectrum, Utrecht, Brussel

500 jaar geleden

was dit boekje") een wereldwonder — waarop niemand lette. De maker vond het eigenlijk ook niet meer dan een aardig knutselwerkje. Toch was het een proefstuk van een der grootste uitvinders van alle tijden en van alle landen: een proefstuk van de Nederlander Laurens Janszoon Coster, uitvinder van de boekdrukkunst

HEDEN

wordt hier ter stede de tentoonstelling "Het Nederlandse Boek" geopend — een schatkamer gevuld door de Nederlandse Uitgevers, die zich hun 500-jarige reputatie ten volle waardig tonen.

Tentoonstelling
HET NEDERLANDSE BOEK

In het gebouw
WELFARE BIBLIOTHEEK
 BODJONG 100 SEMARANG.
 Officiele opening door de **Regent van Semarang,**
R. M. T. S. TJONDRONEGO RO
HEDEN AVOND 8 UUR
UITSLUITEND VOOR GENODIGDEN.

FIGURE 6 Newspaper advertisement for the travelling exhibition from 1948 on the island of Java, showing an image of the book Coster was believed to have printed 500 years ago. *De locomotief* December 16th 1948

FIGURE 7 Detail from *Grafisch Tijdschrift* May 1918. This was a journal for printing & typography published in the Dutch East Indies in Malay and in Dutch. It served an educational purpose. The cover shows a picture of Coster

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NUMMER 4

TWEDE JAARGANG

MEI 1918

Grafisch Tijdschrift

HOLLANDSCH-MALEISCH VAKBLAD VOOR DE TYPOGRAFIE
ONDER REDACTIE VAN S. TERWEY EN A. EMMINK, MET ANDERER MEDEWERKING

REDACTIE
G. KOLFF & Co. - WELTEVREDEN
TELEFOONNUMMER 26

UITGEGEVEN DOOR DE FEDERATIE
VAN BOEKDRUKKERS-PATROONS TE
BATAVIA

ADMINISTRATIE
ALBRECHT & Co. - WELTEVREDEN
TELEFOONNUMMER 2520

IETS UIT DE GESCHIEDENIS VAN HET BOEK

Van de geschiedenis van het boek is ons zeer veel bekend, en het is een zeer interessante geschiedenis, die ons voert vanaf de eerste perkamenten rollen tot het behoorlijk gedrukte en ingenaaide boekje, dat thans voor eenige centen verkrijgbaar is.

COSTER.

De oude Egyptenaren schreven hun boeken op papier, dat zij maakten uit het merg van de *papyrus*-plant. Vandaar de naam papier.

De beschreven vellen werden aan één zijde aan elkaar geplakt, opgerold en in kokers bewaard. Soms ook werden de *papyrus*-vellen tezamen gebonden op de wijze van onze boeken.

De Grieken en Romeinen hadden veel geschreven boeken, en de boekhandel was

bij die oude volken reeds goed ontwikkeld.

Om veel exemplaren te krijgen werd een boek voorgelezen aan een aantal geleerde slaven, soms wel honderd, die het gehoorde opschreven. Zoo waren de werken der Grieksche en Romeinsche schrijvers in duizenden exemplaren verspreid. Soms gebruikte men in plaats van papier perkament, vooral sedert de 17de eeuw, en omdat perkament duur was, werden reeds beschreven vellen met puimsteen afgeschuurd om opnieuw te kunnen worden gebruikt.

Omtrent den prijs van de boeken bij de Romeinen, lezen wij, dat een bundel gedichten, die tegenwoordig 14 bladzijden zou beslaan, verkocht werd voor een waarde van f 0.45. Een ander boek, in tegenwoordigen druk $\pm$ 2 vel beslaande en geheel met purper beschreven, kostte iets meer dan f 2.—.

Na den ondergang van het Romeinsche rijk, omstreeks het jaar 500, verdween in Europa de wetenschap en de boekhandel bijna geheel. Later schreven en verkochten de Arabieren veel boeken, in hoofdzaak in de plaatsen Bagdad en Caïro. Nog later ontstond in Europa (Parijs, Rome, enz.) weer vraag naar boeken.

Veel boeken werden geschreven in de kloosters. Aan de monniken danken wij het, dat veel boeken uit de oudheid zoo voor ons bewaard gebleven zijn. De beginletters van een hoofdstuk werden dikwijls fijn geteekend, gekleurd en verguld. Ook aan titelblad en band werd veel zorg besteed.

De Chineezers schijnen al vroeg boeken gehad te hebben, waarvan de letterteekens met een penseel werden geschreven.

Op Java gebruikte men vroeger recht-

[57]

FIGURE 8 Editorial article in *Grafisch Tijdschrift* May 1918, concerning the history of the book depicting Coster

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The reports about Van der Linde and his critical research on Coster were copied from newspapers in the Netherlands and sometimes elsewhere. The *Sumatra Courant*, for example, approvingly cited the *Saturday Review* when it reported 'that Dr Van der Linde has been banned not only from Haarlem but also from the Netherlands because he has attempted to demonstrate that Laurens Janszoon Koster died four years before the year 1441, when he, it has been claimed, invented printing'.³⁴ Van der Linde was, for that matter, by no means banned, and received support as well as criticism in the Netherlands.³⁵ In the colony, too, there were voices of those who no longer believed the Coster myth.³⁶ Those voices were, however, a minority.

And so, Coster was celebrated. He appeared in plays and a pantomime.³⁷ In 1892 and 1893, at a club in Surabaya, an operetta in three acts was performed entitled: 'The invention of printing, freely adapted from the Medieval', with, as characters, the mayor of Haarlem, Laurens Janszoon Koster, the Gutenberg couple, a policeman and two soldiers. Unfortunately, the gist of the operetta cannot be recovered, but it was in any case humorous.³⁸ When the firm De Vries & Fabritius began to operate their high speed printing presses, they christened the ingenious machines with the name of the hero from Haarlem: 'Begin your labour, then, Laurens Janszoon Koster! on this day of dedication. Set yourself in motion, turn, rotate and press to the flourishing, as I hope, of our new enterprise.'³⁹ The director of the Government Printing House in 1864-1877, A.F.G. de Pinéda, was very interested in Coster. This is evident in the auction catalogue of his library.⁴⁰ In addition to Koning's 1816 book, he owned Van der Linde's collected anti-Coster pieces. At the time of the auction, his library contained as many as 32 titles concerning the invention of printing.

34 *Sumatra-courant*, 06-10-1877.

35 From, among others, an Englishman called J.H. Hessels, who published *Haarlem. The birth-place of printing, not Mentz* (London 1887). It was jubilantly reported by the *Bataviaasch handelsblad*, 24-11-1887. A Frenchman who supported Coster also received mention in the Indonesian press.

36 But 'Een mensch laat zich niet gaarne het geloof ontnemen, waarbij hij is groot gebracht.' [A person does not easily give up the belief with which he was raised.], the *Javabode*, 17-01-1894 says about it.

37 *Soerabaijasch handelsblad*, 22-07-1880; *Soerabaijasch handelsblad*, 27-12-1899.

38 *Bataviaasch nieuwsblad*, 06-03-1893.

39 Address by the director, cited *De Preanger-bode*, 05-04-1897.

40 *Catalogus eener fraaie verzameling boeken, plaatwerken, enz., gedeeltelijk uitmakende de bibliotheek van A.F.G. De Pineda, oud-directeur van de Landsdrukkerij te Batavia, waarvan de verkooping zal plaats hebben op Woensdag den 27 November 1878* (Rotterdam 1878).

Legitimisation

It might seem strange that the Coster myth received so much support in the colony, especially considering the great distance between the colony and the Netherlands. It can, however, be explained. The support for the man from Haarlem—in the Netherlands, too, by the way—depended first of all on the nationalistic sentiment permeating nineteenth-century society in the Netherlands. For the Dutch people in the colony, this was enhanced with the idea that the ‘fatherland’ set the standard, so whatever happened there, overseas, influenced the colony. It was true of holidays, like ‘Sinterklaas’, or St Nicholas, and of national heroes, like the Batavi heroes or the Sea Beggars.⁴¹ And of Coster. For the Dutch colonial society, then, the idea of an inventor of printing seemed in some sense to apply to them. Weren’t they ‘inventors’ of printing themselves? Printing had, after all, been established in the colony by the Dutch colonists, and had taken root there. The myth of the invention of printing was part of the process of the legitimisation of the presence of the Dutch in the archipelago, which was after all illegitimate. The link between colonial authority and the power of the printing press was stressed by the influential Batavian Society: ‘Just as the Netherlands was blessed to be the shining star of European civilisation and science by its most important of all inventions, that of printing, so, and we can take pride in this, it was also the Netherlands who was the first to bring the fruits of European science to countries outside of Europe.’⁴²

There was something increasingly forced about the celebrations of Coster in the colony; not only because the rest of the world had in the meantime come to accept, on scientific grounds, that Gutenberg deserved the honour, but because the hegemony of the Netherlands in the Indonesian archipelago was widely contested following World War II. The colonial administration refused to budge, however, despite an intense struggle with the Indonesian population. In 1948, when the Dutch colonial authority ought long before to have departed, a travelling exhibition was organised, entitled ‘The Dutch Book’. It was organized by the Society of Indian Booksellers (*Vereniging van Indische*

41 As is apparent in dozens of references to these terms in Dutch-Indonesian newspapers via Delpher.

42 P. Bleeker in 1853, cited in H. Groot, *Van Batavia naar Weltevreden. Het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen, 1778-1867* (Leiden 2009), p. 2, (Bleeker was the society’s librarian). The Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen was established in 1778. The legitimisation is also found in M. D. Teenstra, *Beknopte beschrijving van de Nederlandsche overzeesche bezittingen voor beschaafde lezers uit alle standen* (Groningen 1850), who elaborates on Coster on p. 250.

FIGURE 9 Mas Badjing, *Dunia Buku*. Djakarta etc. Penerbitan dan Balai Buku Indonesia. Undated [Jakarta, 1950]. Illustrated by Toby Vos
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FIGURE 10 Chapter in *Dunia Buku* concerning the invention of the art of printing, showing Coster in the Haarlem forest (right), as well as his portrait and Gutenberg's on the left

Boekhandelaren). In the advertisement for the exhibition in Semarang, this boastful text accompanied an image of the Donati: 'a wonder of the world [...] one of the greatest inventors of all time and of any country: a masterpiece by the Dutchman Laurens Janszoon Coster, inventor of printing.'⁴³

Even a year later, the periodical *De Locomotief* still dedicated a few columns to Coster as 'the inventor of printing':

Although the inventor of printing will have realised the enormous importance of his discovery, he cannot have imagined his work would have such an influence on the history of mankind.⁴⁴

In 1945, Sukarno declared the independence of the Indonesian republic, which was only acknowledged by the Netherlands in 1949 following a bloody struggle; and in 1957, all Dutch companies were required to leave the country. What remained, was nationalised. In that crucial year 1957, *Het Nieuwsblad voor Sumatra* ('the Newspaper for Sumatra') still managed to publish a detailed account of the art of printing, which, while it mentioned Gutenberg, did not deny Coster's important role.⁴⁵ His role was even confirmed in the Indonesian language, Bahasa Indonesia, in an Indonesian children's book about the world of the book from 1950, *Dunia Buku*. It was published by a publishing house in Jakarta with Dutch roots—although the name was Indonesian. The book contains a portrait of Coster.⁴⁶ These were all last attempts to keep authority in the archipelago. The Indonesians, however, were not deceived. Anyone who opens the Indonesian Wikipedia page about the invention of printing today will see Gutenberg's name there but certainly not Coster's.⁴⁷

43 Advertisement in *De nieuwsgier*, 24-09-1948.

44 *De locomotief*, 15-01-1949.

45 *Het nieuwsblad voor Sumatra*, 15-02-1957.

46 M. Badjing, *Dunia Buku*. Djakarta etc. Penerbitan dan Balai Buku Indonesia. Undated [Jakarta 1950]. Illustrated by Toby Vos. The text reads in translation: 'At that time two people printed books, they were Gutenberg from Mainz (Germany) and L.J. Coster from Haarlem (The Netherlands) One day in 1440 Coster by accident came across an idea to print when letter A made of leather fell down on sand. He found the print A on the sand. Then he tried to make letters from hard wood.' With many thanks to Mikihiro Moriyama for his translation. Many thanks as well to Rickey Tax for drawing my attention to this book.

47 Wikipedia: <https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Percetakan>, last seen 27 January 2020.

Acknowledgment

This article has been translated by Kate Eaton

Appendix

History books used in the Dutch East Indies, or sold, in any case, followed by information about the appearance, or not, of Laurens Janszoon Coster. The edition that was available, was used by me. A number of textbooks have not been preserved in public collections.

1. P. Lok and W. Schmidt, *Leerboekje voor de Hollandsche geschiedenis ten dienste van het christelijk onderwijs in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Versluys, Amsterdam 1930). *Laurens Janszoon Koster of Haarlem probably invented the printing press, around 1450. This made it possible for the citizenry to develop more, p. 14-15.
2. B.A. Erhatz and J.M.H. Bosman, *Ons verleden : de geschiedenis des vaderlands in schetsen en tafereelen*, 4th edition (Van Nooten & zn, Schoonhoven 1877). *Neither Coster nor Gutenberg are mentioned; invention of the printing press is mentioned, p. 35.
3. T. Pluim, *Vaderlandse geschiedenis voor het lager onderwijs met tal van vragen en opgaven tot verwerking der leerstof*, 7th edition (P. Noordhoff, Groningen 1908). *Coster mentioned as 'probably the inventor', p. 42.
4. T. Pluim, *Kleine vaderlandsche geschiedenis voor de lagere school, met tal van vragen tot verwerking der leerstof*, 4th edition (P. Noordhoff, Groningen 1903, first 1893). *Neither Coster nor Gutenberg are mentioned, printing press is mentioned, p. 18.
5. L. Mulders, *Handleiding tot de kennis der vaderlandsche geschiedenis, Volume 1*. (Arnhem 1865).⁴⁸ *It says in a footnote, that the question about Gutenberg or Costers was being discussed. Mulder, however, does not draw any conclusions.
6. G. van Sandwijk and W.A. Elberts *Geschiedenis van ons vaderland, van de komst der Batavieren hier te lande tot op onzen tijd: een lees- en prentenboek voor de jeugd*, (D. Noothoven van Goor, Leiden 1865).⁴⁹ *Coster is here unequivocally identified as the inventor, 'that in the year 1423 in Haarlem Laurens Jansz. Koster invented the printing press.' It also has an illustration of him in this book (unpaginated).
7. L.E. Lentings, *Handboek voor de geschiedenis des vaderlands* (W.J. Thieme & Co. en J.A. Willemsen, Zutphen 1864).⁵⁰ *Coster is unequivocally identified as the

⁴⁸ E.g. *Javabode*, 23-07-1887.

⁴⁹ E.g. *De locomotief*, 21-11-1874.

⁵⁰ E.g. *De locomotief*, 19-01-1882.

- inventor of the printing press here (p. 135-6) 'who by this means, has earned undying fame'.
8. L. Mulder, *Eerste onderricht in de vaderlandsche geschiedenis* (Thieme, Arnhem 1868).⁵¹ *'[...] but most remarkable of all was the invention of the printing press in the year 1423 by Laurens Janszoon Koster in Haarlem.' p. 23.
 9. H.M. Labberté, *Schetsen uit het huiselijk en maatschappelijk leven van ons voorgelacht, een leesboek. Eerste stukje* (Van Goor zonen, Gouda undated)⁵² *Neither printing press nor Coster here.
 10. C.F. van Duyl, *Overzicht der beschavingsgeschiedenis van het Nederlandsche volk*. (Groningen, J.B. Wolters 1887)⁵³ *Author unable to make up his mind. Coster was in fact first but it now appears Gutenberg was also earlier, or possibly not? p. 164.
 11. J.N. van Heesteren, *Onze geschiedenis in vragen en antwoorden* (Noordhoff, Groningen 1896).⁵⁴ *The question addressed here is what the influence of the Burgundian administration was on the countries it controlled. One of the answers is the invention of the printing press. Coster is not mentioned, but the association with Burgundy makes it likely that it belongs to the Netherlands, p. 59.
 12. J. M. Vos, *Van oude tijden tot heden: geschiedenis van ons vaderland, Volume 1* (P. Noordhoff, Groningen 1918).⁵⁵ *'the invention of the printing press must have been of incalculable significance for the advancement of civilisation, whether at home or abroad.' p. 55.
 13. P.J. Blok, *Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche volk. Volume 1*, 3rd revised edition (A.W. Sijthoff, Leiden 1923).⁵⁶ *Against the facts that support considering Mainz as the place where the printing press was invented, weigh the claims Haarlem can advance, whether or not with its Laurens Coster, according to the history of the technique itself,' p. 636.
 14. M.G. de Boer, *Beknopt leerboek der algemeene geschiedenis*, 18th edition (Noordhoff, Groningen/Batavia).⁵⁷ *Printing press mentioned, but without names, p. 98.
 15. E. Rijpma and M.V. Roelofs, *Werkboekje bij ontwikkelingsgang der Historie. Van de oudste tijden tot omstreeks 1815*, 3rd edition (Noordhoff, Groningen/Batavia).⁵⁸ *No Coster.

⁵¹ E.g. *Javabode*, 24-02-1875.

⁵² *Javabode*, 11-07-1887.

⁵³ *De locomotief*, 06-07-1895.

⁵⁴ Noordhoff opened a branch in Batavia.

⁵⁵ *Bataviaasch nieuwsblad*, 15-06-1907.

⁵⁶ *De Preanger-bode*, 19-06-1915.

⁵⁷ Noordhoff opened a branch in Batavia.

⁵⁸ Noordhoff opened a branch in Batavia.