The book part II: The Peltenburg era

Selenka

After De Stoppelaar had passed away Corneille Peltenburg became the sole director of Brill and he was much more businesslike than his friend. He immediately put the pressure back on Dubois, in particular by pointing out that a new situation was about to develop now Selenka was going to dig in Trinil. We make a small step back in time to introduce this new face: Margarethe Leonore Selenka. She was an extraordinary person in many respects. Born in 1860 she divorced her first husband to whom she married in 1886 to marry again in 1893 with Emil Selenka, who was the widower of her sister. Under his influence she studied paleontology, anthropology and zoology, and worked as his assistant and was an active participator on several scientific trips through the East-Indies that her husband had organized. When he fell ill and had to return to Germany, she successfully took over his leadership of the expedition in Borneo and stayed there several months to study orangutans. Back in Germany she became involved in women’s rights activism and women’s pacifism movements and she was in fact the first women to launch an international peace protest in 1899, with a petition at the peace-court in The Hague.

Now Emil Selenka, who had been professor of Zoology for some time in Leiden, and she herself were fascinated by Dubois’ results in Indonesia and decided to launch an expedition to Trinil and continue the work on the spot where Dubois had finished, to settle the scientific disputes that had arisen around *Pithecanthropus* by gathering more material and more information on the age of the strata. Emil exchanged letters with Dubois and they were in a fairly good spirit. In one letter Emil even asks Dubois to act as a “postillion d’amour” for a “friend” of his who met this nice lady in Celebes, who was now living only three houses away from Dubois in The Hague… So there is very little doubt that they were on good foot and probably met each other whilst the Selenkas visited The Hague on one of her peace missions. Regretfully Emil Selenka died in 1902, and never came to go to Trinil. Margarethe however did not let this misfortune withhold her from her aspirations. She decided to continue the plans, in honour of her husband, and to lead the expedition herself, even if it
meant paying for it herself. She managed to pull this off, the expedition took place in 1907-08, in spite of someone opposing her in any way he could: Eugène Dubois.

Dubois did not take the plans too seriously at first, and exchanged friendly letters with Margarethe, but when it actually looked like it was going to happen, he rallied people like Hubrecht, the famous comparative anatomist, (and also befriended to Emil) to persuade her not to go. Hubrecht understood very well why Dubois was opposed to anyone digging in “his” pit, not only would they have a chance of finding something even more nice, but moreover, they might write it up before Dubois would have, and thereby gaining priority on material on which Dubois was the first to find anything. For that was where it was going to hurt the most, the book that had to be finished and until now never had. At the publishers house the Selenka-expedition also did not pass unnoticed, De Stoppelaar already briefly mentions the threat shortly before he dies and his successor Peltenburg fully puts the argument into words: you will lose priority so finish up! Dubois starts fighting the expedition any which way he can, and writes official letters to the minister of Colonial affairs. How can it be that Germans are allowed to dig in our colonies? How can a woman be allowed to head the expedition? This woman in particular, without any proper qualifications? But the government is not at all opposed to the idea of Selenka digging at Trinil. They may well have realized that this could be THE incentive to get Dubois to finally start writing. They in fact support her with everything except money, even Dubois’ assistants Kriele and de Winter are put at her disposal, as are his original maps. An election half way these skirmishes results in a new minister at the department of Colonial affairs and new letters of Dubois, but the new minister answers his lengthy letters with the shortest of replies: having read your letters I see no reason to change the policy of my predecessor. Meanwhile Margarethe Selenka keeps exchanging friendly letters with Dubois and remarks that she has followed the elections in the Netherlands with interest. She is not so sure yet whether to be pleased or not with the new minister, but, she remarks, he is a liberal, and liberals are in general good for science.