CHAPTER III

Indiërs

Some Indo-Europeans welcomed the awakening of Asian in general and Indonesian nationalism in particular. Most illustrious among those who tried to break out of the narrow confines of race was Ernest François Eugène Douwes Dekker, Nes to his friends, a second cousin of the Dutch author Multatuli, born in 1879 in Pasuruan in East Java of a Dutch father (a broker) and a mother of German-Javanese descent. The movement he begun was probably the most radical of all in the Netherlands Indies in the years before the Great War. His contemporary and friend D.M.G. Koch (1960:118) described Douwes Dekker as

a remarkable man with an acute, lively mind, a strong desire for action tinged with romanticism, impressed with the intuitive certitude that what was true and good should be possible in the end [...] a man who felt himself an Indies D’Artagnan, called upon to fight against the sorrows of and wrongdoing against the poor and oppressed, born into a family where the tradition of Multatuli was vividly alive.

Van Kol, a socialist and not a friend, called him ‘an agitator, but not an organizer by a long chalk’. After his schooldays – he went to the Hogere Burgerschool (HBS, Dutch secondary school) – Douwes Dekker had wanted to go to Holland to study engineering, but lack of money frustrated this ambition. Instead he found employment in the plantation industry. His strong sense of justice and the manner in which he vented his anger with the way the Indonesians were treated did not make him a model employee. His job on a sugar estate, his second (his first had been on a coffee plantation) he lost, according to his own account, after he had told the second-in-charge that he would throw him into the pulp machine (De Jong 1979:35). A misfit in colonial society Douwes Dekker did what other like-minded people also did and became a journalist.

Douwes Dekker was to become the main thorn in the side of colonial government. He was a great source of concern to Batavia not just because he

1 Handelingen 1913-14, I:47.
turned the political movement of the Indo-Europeans in a radical direction, but especially because of his efforts to reach out to the Indonesian population. A movement confined to disgruntled Indo-Europeans was nothing new and the colonial administration could cope and rest easy with that. A campaign that transgressed the boundaries of this community and inspired Indonesians to speak out was potentially much more dangerous to law and order and was less easy to contain. For a time, Douwes Dekker’s influence on the ‘native movement’ preoccupied the minds of the highest authorities in Batavia and in the other cities, especially in Java, where he and his associates pursued their activities. His ideas struck a favourable chord, and, what was more, Douwes Dekker indubitably possessed personal magnetism. Many Indonesians, young and old alike, found Douwes Dekker a pleasant person, who inspired feelings of sympathy and even affection. He was also a good orator. Koch (1960:122) compared him to Soekarno when he recounts Douwes Dekker’s power to capture an audience: ‘He dominated a mass, which was relatively not large, but which he mesmerized’. Governor General Idenburg was similarly impressed. In August 1913, he wrote that ‘from the person of Douwes Dekker emanates a significant influence especially on the younger, better-educated Native [...] by his personal appearance he exercises a kind of fascination on them from which they are unable to extricate themselves’.

Douwes Dekker had been in contact with the Indonesian nationalist movement right from its inception. He was well acquainted with the students of the STOVIA among whom the movement took concrete shape. Douwes Dekker’s house was nearby and STOVIA students frequently visited him to discuss social and political issues (Nagazumi 1989:56). One of them, Soewardi Soerjaningrat, who was to become a close comrade-in-arms, later recollected that Douwes Dekker’s home became a club-house as well as a reading-room and library for STOVIA students (Setiabuddhi 1950:39). From close by and as a personal friend of some of the Indonesians involved, Douwes Dekker witnessed the founding of Boedi Oetomo (Noble Endeavour) in 1908, generally acknowledged as the first modern Indonesian organization and the starting point of the ‘national awakening’ (in this ignoring earlier Chinese initiatives).

There was talk that Douwes Dekker was to become the first editor-in-chief of a magazine to be published by Boedi Oetomo, but nothing came out of this, nor did he reach a position of any prominence within the organization (Nagazumi 1989:125-6). The discrepancy was too great. His ideas were too radical and those of the majority of the Boedi Oetomo members too moderate. As he wrote at the end of 1912, Boedi Oetomo degenerated, the idealism

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2 Rinkes to Idenburg, 16-1-1913 (*Bescheiden ‘Indische Partij’* 1913).
3 Idenburg to De Waal Malefijt, 25-8-1913, NA, Kol. Openbaar, Vb. 25-9-1913 56.