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The Netherlands’ first involvement with Indonesia dates from the last decade of the sixteenth century, only slightly later than the beginning of the academic study of eastern languages. In contrast to what one might expect, the Arabists at the universities showed little interest in the languages, cultures and religions of the Islamic areas of the ‘East Indies’. In academic practice ‘East’ meant above all the ‘Middle East’. In his book De indologen the historian Cees Fasseur gives the introduction of East Indian banknotes in 1814 as an example. They needed a legend in Malay but there was not a single Dutch academic who could provide a translation. What knowledge there was in Holland came from sailors, preachers and, very occasionally, a scholar not connected with a university such as the German biologist Georg Eberhard Rumpf (Rumphius, 1627–1702) who entered the service of the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie) and did extensive research into the plants, fish and crustaceans of Ambon. The preacher from Dordrecht François Valentijn (1666–1727), who visited the East Indies twice, published his magnificent Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën between 1724 and 1726. It would remain the most important source of information on the area until the nineteenth century.

Not until 1836 was a chair founded at the Royal Military Academy in Breda for the language, geography and ethnography of the East Indies. The first professor was the self-taught Philippus Pieter Roorda van Eysinga (1796–1856), a former officer who had fought at Waterloo and had gone to the East Indies together with his father. After various devious manoeuvres a training course for East Indian civil servants was set up in 1842, not at a university but in Delft at the Royal academy for the education of civil engineers, the predecessor of the Technical University of Delft. The aspirant civil servants received a professional training in practical matters such as the knowledge of Javanese and Malay, East Indian geography and ethnography, and ‘native law’ (in other words a smattering of Islamic law and local law of custom).

The first ‘true’ academic who took an intensive interest in Javanese was Taco Roorda (1801–1874). He had started off as an Arabist and Hebraist under the Leiden professor H.A. Hamaker. In 1842 he was appointed professor of Javanese at the civil servants’ training college in Delft, a position which he exchanged in 1864 for a post at the rival professional training course in Leiden. Without ever having visited Java he published a grammar of Javanese in 1855. Another Arabist who changed subjects was Pieter Johannes Veth (1814–1895). After studying under Hamaker and Weijers he became the first professor of eastern languages at the Athenaeum in Franeker (1841) and shortly afterwards, in 1843, in Amsterdam. His original interest in Islam emerges from the inaugural address he delivered in Amsterdam with the broad title ‘On the Islamic religion and its history, the study of which should on no account be neglected by Christian theologians.’ In 1864 he went over to the Leiden training college where he taught the geography and ethnography of the Dutch East Indies. In 1877 he moved from the East Indian training college to Leiden University, where a chair in the geography and ethnography of the East Indian archipelago had just been established. There he remained until his retirement in 1885. Veth was also active politically: he ‘launched’ Multatuli’s Max Havelaar with a glowing review in De Gids in 1860 and argued for the end of the ruthless exploitation of the colonies and the introduction of a system geared to the ‘elevation’ of the natives, ‘Ethical