

JOHAN SPLINTER STAVORINUS' *Voyages to the East Indies*, PATRIOT IN AN AGE OF REASON

Cornelia N. Moore
University of Hawaii

The ships of the "lofty East India Company" did not only carry spices and bullion. Before and behind the masts they carried people as well, people who had tales to tell when they returned to the Dutch towns from whence they came. In the spirit of the age most of these tales were clothed in the language of the official report. It can be debated whether these logs and travel narratives should truly be called literature. In as much as they reflect a view of the East Indies, sometimes enchanted, often critical, they deserve our attention here. Whenever published, they catered to a wide reading public and purported to provide useful information as well as reading pleasure. Johan Stavorinus' two travel narratives: *Reize van Zeeland over Kaap de Goede Hoop naar Batavia, Bantam enz. gedaan in de jaaren 1768 tot 1771*, (hereafter referred to as *Reize I*)¹ and *Reize van Zeeland over de Kaap de Goede Hoop en Batavia, naar Samarang, Macasser, Amboina, Suratte, enz. gedaan in de jaaren 1774-1778*, (hereafter referred to as *Reize II*)² are a case in point.

In 1768, Johan Splinter Stavorinus (1739-88) had attained the rank of postcaptain in the Dutch navy.³ However, since the United Republic of the Netherlands had been at peace for a long time, a career in the navy offered little excitement and only a slight possibility of advancement. As the Dutch publisher put it, Stavorinus wanted to use his time better than spending it on shore like many a navy captain in peace time. He, therefore, requested permission to undertake a voyage to the East Indies as captain in the service of the East India Company (*Reize I*). Between 1768 and 1778, he undertook several voyages, visiting most of the Dutch trading posts in South Africa and Asia,

maintaining detailed logs on his travels by sea and by land. Upon his return he was promoted to rear admiral in the Dutch navy, and lived in the town of Middelburg, never publishing the accounts of his travels for which he had so carefully gathered all the information.

One wonders why Stavorinus went through the trouble of preparing his extensive travel narratives if he had no intention of publishing them. Within the framework of the captain's log, there are detailed descriptions not only of his ocean voyages but also of excursions and social occasions while on shore. Moreover, the travel narrative is supplemented by full-length chapters called "Observations," which contain the history, the geography, the population and social conditions of the various places along his route. *Reize I* includes such observations on the Cape of Good Hope, Bengal, Java, and Batavia; *Reize II* does the same for Celebes, the Moluccas and various regions of what is now the India-Pakistani peninsula. From the almost photographic depictions of cities and countryside, of officials and royalty one infers that Stavorinus must have made copious notes after each social occasion, tourist outing, or business meeting. This also means that, from the outset of his travels, he must have planned the extensive travel narrative that went far beyond the required log of a captain.

His sometimes pedantic relating of facts and figures creates the impression that he gathered sources whenever possible, investigated on his own, asked many questions and usually got the answers. His logs show indignation when he received misinformation (II:428) and apologies when he could not find out more (II:401).⁴ One can picture him during his sea-

voyages working on the materials that he had obtained while on shore. Even if a fair amount of editing and inserts could have been accomplished after the safe return to Middelburg, these were not narratives that could have been written as an afterthought.

Why then did Stavorinus not see to it that his accounts were published? One reason might have been that his criticisms if not of the presence, then of the practices of the East India Company made his accounts somewhat controversial. However, his accounts presented nothing that was not yet known in the Netherlands about the Company. Throughout the eighteenth century there had been official reports about the advantages and disadvantages of the Company's policies. Especially in the last decades of the eighteenth century, there had been no lack of plans to restructure the Company, although little had been done to correct the very abuses which Stavorinus outlined. However, even if we find his critical comments rather mild, they were controversial enough for the eventual publisher to mention them in the foreword to *Reize I*, and they may have been too risky for a highly ranked official in the Dutch Navy, who had his career to consider. In any case, the manuscripts had been available to a circle of family and friends and that is how the publisher Honkoop happened upon them after Stavorinus' death. His publishing house had published other travel narratives and he decided that Stavorinus' observations were worthy of a larger audience.

In his foreword, Honkoop gave a lengthy explanation why and for whom he was publishing a work which the author himself had only intended "for his own recollection and for the pleasure (*genoegen*) of family and friends" (Foreword *Reize I*). Should one be allowed, the publisher asked, to publish manuscripts without the permission of the author, and thus expose his name and reputation to the reproach of "meddling people" (Foreword *Reize I*), who may disapprove of the candid remarks about the "shortcomings," which

had crept into "this source of prosperity of our commonwealth?" (Foreword *Reize II*) To answer his own question, the publisher provided the traditional answer of "prodesse et delectare," to enlighten and delight. As he stated, in addition to the useful information to be gathered from reading Stavorinus' account, there was a great deal of reading pleasure to be derived from the travel narrative. He related his own pleasure while reading it, and the decision not to keep this pleasure to himself. This argument of delectability does reveal the intended reading public, not only the official but also the educated reader, who would read these lengthy volumes in his leisure time for interest and edification. It was for this reader that the work was published in a handy format, not the heavy foliosize format usually reserved for scholarly treatises. According to the publisher, there was a risk in doing so, "because anything not printed in folio is not held in high esteem nowadays" (*Reize I*), but that risk was worth taking in order to produce a more readable work.

He also spelled out who, in his opinion, would find the work most useful: "The information contained therein should be informative and useful to those who travel to the East Indies and to their families who will either accompany them or who will stay behind and would like to follow the travel routes from home" (*Reize I*). The publisher vouched that the descriptions were clear and that the total picture was presented, blemishes and all. However, never mind the purported reading pleasure and information, it is unlikely that a common sailor would have enjoyed much of what is offered on those pages. To be sure, the travel details read like a Baedeker and would have been useful to any India-farer. Nevertheless, these volumes are encyclopedic works which, in their aim to be complete, go into lengthy discussions of flora and fauna, towns and rivers, politics and religions, peace treaties and trade concerns. It is more likely, therefore, that Stavorinus' book appealed to

the educated reader, either in the higher ranks of the Dutch merchant marine (that is, of similar rank to the author himself,) or to those who were financially or politically associated with the East India trade.

Reize I met with an immediate positive response, and two years later *Reize II* was published. Obviously the publisher expected the second work to meet with the same response, although politically things had changed. Shortly after the publication of the first volume, the French had exported their revolution to their Northern neighbors. French troops had entered Holland in 1795, the last Dutch stadholder had gone into exile, and the "Batavian Republic" had been established. After the publication of *Reize II*, the political landscape in casu the East Indies and the East India Company changed even more. The May 1798 constitution of the new Republic decreed that the East India Company was to be dissolved as of December 31, 1799 and that all its obligations were to be taken over by the state. However, there was every expectation in the Low Countries that they would continue to play a role in the Indies.

Internationally, the two *Reizen* received instant attention. They were almost immediately translated into English, French and German.⁵ The English translator/editor Samuel Hull Wilcocke was himself an expert on the Indies. According to the foreword of the English edition, he had intended to publish his own account, but when he came upon the published works of Stavorinus, he decided to translate these instead and supplement them whenever necessary. He complains about the many "faulty" passages of the Dutch edition, caused by the Dutch editor's unfamiliarity with the subject, but these inaccuracies amount to little more than misreadings, and wrongly deciphered figures and numbers. The English translator Wilcocke did not contradict most facts and observations but rather added extensive footnotes in which he

offered a running reaction to Dutch practices in the East. As such he provides an interesting English insight, be it as nationalistically opinionated as the Dutch original. Even a harmless comment on the lay-out of the city of Portsmouth evokes a reaction (I:7). He too assumed that the work would find eager interested readers.

In writing down his travels, Johan Splinter Stavorinus showed that he wore many hats. The ones most in evidence are that of seafarer, traveller-tourist, and educated popular scientist. Whatever hat he happened to be wearing, his descriptions are colored by a sense of Dutch eighteenth-century aesthetics, industriousness, and justice, and most of all by a direct judgment as to the "pleasantness" of the experiences.

Stavorinus was a *seafarer*. This is evident not only from the detailed recordings of longitudes and latitudes, winds and hurricanes, from the complaints about inaccurate charts (II:430), or the delight at finally being able to see the inside of a Chinese junk (II:286). It is also visible in his expressed concern for his sailors, e.g., the plea for longer lay-overs on the Cape of Good Hope, so that sailors might get a chance to recuperate from the long journey. A detailed account is provided of the hygiene that was carried out on his ships, with assurances as to the beneficial impact on the casualty rate. These portions are particularly touching. It shows that Stavorinus never became callous about the life of his men, and how the closely confined society on the ship reacted to the health and sicknesses of its members with a hope-against-hope compassion. His sense of humor is evident as well. After the ship's doctor fell ill after tirelessly tending to the many patients, the resulting lack of medical care did not appear to result in more casualties. In fact the number of casualties decreased, which made the captain wonder whether his ship really needed a doctor at all (II:7).

Being a captain also placed Stavorinus in an outsider's position when on shore.

He shared the commercial interests of the Company but nevertheless remained a visitor in the many places that his ship took him. This gave him the possibility to judge a society of which he was not a part but whose interests he shared. It also provided him with the leisure time to visit places. Judging by the dates of arrival and departure, the lay-overs in various foreign harbors were usually from two to three months. Although some of that time must have been taken up by the business of loading and unloading, there was plenty of time left to become acquainted with local circumstances.

Stavorinus was an enthusiastic *traveller*, accepting invitations to visit out-of-the-way places, rewarding such invitations with gracious compliments in his narrative (I:57). On more than one occasion he calls himself curious (e.g., I:86) and his curiosity provides him with enough justification to investigate things. He describes in detail a visit to a Javanese palace (I:73f), a Chinese temple outside of Semarang (II:143), and a Portuguese fort (I:72) and voices his regrets when the loading of a ship deprives him of the pleasure of taking a journey inland (I:165).

As a *popular scientist*, he endeavored to produce works that would teach and enlighten their readers and accurately reflect the situation in the Indies. Thus, in true eighteenth-century fashion, the works are a curious mixture of facts and fancies. They delight in presenting evidence of Stavorinus' attempts at verification of detail. While in Surat he visited the garden of Begum Saheb. "I went over the whole of it, with [Jean de Thevenot's] description in my hand" (II:468-9), he writes.⁶ Of Fort Diamond we read: "I counted 65 pieces of canon" (I:62). One can just picture the captain going around, counting the available pieces of artillery. This attempt at accuracy makes him pay great attention to minutiae and thus the narrative is at its best when relating things Stavorinus actually saw, places he visited,

people he met, voyages he took. *Reize I*, for instance, contains an account of a visit to the palace, with elaborate descriptions of what everyone wore, ate, drank, chewed and smoked with a sense of breathless wonderment and an eye for detail (I:173f).

It is obvious that Stavorinus assumed that the use of secondary sources would enhance the scientific aspect of his narrative; both *Reizen* indicate that he checked these sources whenever possible and incorporated lengthy excerpts of otherwise inaccessible materials. For his account of Celebes, he used "a manuscript [which] has fallen into my hands, which Mr Blok, formerly governor of Macasser, composed" (II:191). For his quotations from the works of the famous botanist Rumphius, he used a handwritten copy in the Secretary's office in Amboyna (II:357).⁷ From his copious quoting of François Valentijn,⁸ we infer that he must have used the copy of Valentijn's *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* in the library in Batavia. By his own admission, after leaving that city, he no longer had access to the work (II:191). However, in spite of his expressed attempts at verification, he often shows a naive gullibility toward his sources. He is particularly enthralled with the history of local dynasties and explains in great detail who overthrew whom and why, and who killed whom in the often byzantine palace intrigues and dynastic manipulations. As rationale for relating such history in detail, he offers that it had its repercussions in the politics of the various places in the East Indies, which in turn affected Dutch trade, but his enthusiasm at the many dynastic tidbits is evident. Even more surprising, given his somewhat pedantic attempts at verifying his sources, are the incredible tales he repeats on the authority of "people with the utmost credibility" (I:243), for instance about the purported sexual deviations of the Chinese (I:243) or the "lustful revenge" wreaked upon an unfaithful lover in Amboyna (I:552).

Whether relating actual experiences or secondary background information, this eighteenth-century traveller/captain/scientist held up everything to his measure of aesthetics, industriousness, fairness, and most of all his criteria of "pleasantness."

His sense of aesthetics makes him appreciate the beauty of the islands. Even the gamelan, an acquired taste to many foreigners of that era, rates as a "not disagreeable harmony." He lauds the various architectural monuments which he encounters. The Chinese temple outside Semarang has a "splendid appearance" (II:143). While on Java, he visits a "temple with such beautiful sculpture of imagery and foliage that the art and ingenuity of the Javanese of those times excites our admiration" (II:149). The beauty of the islands' people is also commented upon and he certainly does not call the islanders "ugly" as Nicolaas de Graaf had done almost a century earlier.⁹ Of the Amboynese Stavorinus writes: "both men and women have regular features, and among the latter there are very many who are pretty. . . . Neither the thick lips, nor the depressed noses, which according to our ideas of beauty deform the 'human face divine' in other hot countries are seen here; but on the contrary, and especially among females, perfectly symmetrical countenances are the general characteristics of the inhabitants" (II: 362). A similar passage describes the Bouginese (II:183). That these handsome people are also supposedly "lustful" or "ardently addicted to sensual pleasures of love" (II:183, I:271) is not necessarily judged as negative.

Immediately following these remarks, are comments that show the judgment of the industrious Dutchman: The handsome Amboynese, for instance, are "effeminate and indolent" (II:362). "Indolent" and "lazy" are words often used by the energetic Dutchman (e.g., I:241).

His sense of fairness and justice made him disapprove of the inhumane treatment of individual subjects, although he was

much more hesitant to condemn the system that caused it. Thus there are comments on the inhumane treatment of slaves, but not a condemnation of the institution of slavery (II:181).¹⁰ Neither did he reproach the entire judicial system, but rather the barbaric sentences imposed on its trespassers (I:288). It did not escape his attention, that the punishment inflicted upon islanders and Dutch citizens of lower rank was far more severe than that meted out to persons of higher rank: "It is a lamentable circumstance and as worthy of abhorrence as it is notorious that the greatest and most shameful crimes of persons of high rank or of favourites remain unnoticed and unpunished" (II:385). His sense of fairness is equally offended by the hierarchical structure the Dutch have created in the Indies. "How is it possible that freeborn Hollanders should bow themselves so low, beneath the ignominious yoke" (I:279), he exclaims. This same sense of fairness in human interaction gives rise to some of the few passages in which he lauds the English.

This spirit of freedom and ease [among the English in Calcutta] is diametrically opposite to the stiff and obnoxious formality, which takes place at Batavia, in the company of the governor general and the counsellors of India. Indeed an Englishman could never brook the insupportable arrogance, with which the Dutch East-India Company's servants are treated by their superiors, as well at Batavia, as at the out-factories (I,146).

Most of all, his experiences are measured against his perception of "pleasant." He appreciates a "most pleasant scenery," (I:269) the joy of meeting a fellow navy-man, a "most polite and friendly man" (II:157), a nice evening get-together in the governor's pavilion in Semarang (II:148). His touristic diversions are also part of this pleasure seeking. He also comments, when a situation or a place does not live up to his expectations: "I found little pleasure or

sociability there," he says of Amboyna and then blames the late governor, "whose distrustful temper made him look upon all social meetings with jealousy" (II:392). It appears that the statement in the foreword (*Reize I*) that Stavorinus went to the Indies to thwart off a boring life on Dutch shores, should be taken to mean just what it says. From all accounts, including his own, Stavorinus had a grand time!

His "Observations" on Batavia do not show the same delighted curiosity as do his "Accounts" of the Moluccas. One misses the curiosity and excitement at learning new things. Batavia had been the topic of many discussions and much of what had been written had been negative, especially as far as the excessive hierarchy was concerned that governed all social interactions. Stavorinus' reactions to Batavia coincided with those who had gone there before him, and he was obviously familiar with the available literature.¹¹ In comparing his account with that of Nicolaas de Graaf who, like Stavorinus, was critical of much that he saw, several similarities and differences are evident. According to de Graaf's preamble, he set out to present a picture that was "unfeigned" and "unflattering." Hence his presentation aimed to be controversial and his comments are often derisive. Not so Stavorinus, whose self-proclaimed honesty and fairness made him look for reasons and solutions. A case in point is the portrayal of the women in Batavia, of whom both authors are highly critical (I:318). In looking for reasons for the purportedly ill-mannered behavior of Batavian womanhood, Stavorinus cites a lack of appropriate education, whereas the Graaf blames the nature of women and states that many women (*vrouwlyuden*) are by nature inclined to opulence and vanity." (21)

And he is diplomatic. Polite references to the hospitality of this or that official abound. He seldom blames a particular person but prefers to criticize circumstances. Even his criticism is

cloaked in positive tones: A case in point are the compliments he heaps upon the clergyman de Graaf in Macassar, who is described as pleasant and instructive, friendly and amiable, never dogmatical, and not meddling in affairs "that did not become him." Stavorinus then gives his reasons for the elaborate praise: "I have given a more ample sketch of this worthy man's character, as it is very rare that such ministers of the gospel are met with in India" (II:188). Elsewhere he gives the advice that such ministers be sent (I: 306).

Above this all looms the employer, the East India Company, whose policies and practices not only determined Stavorinus' commission, but also put an indelible mark upon life in the entire archipelago at that time. Stavorinus' narrative shows the degree in which the Company had meddled in local politics. He takes a matter of fact approach, while acknowledging at the same time that such meddling was hardly in the best interest of the local population (e.g., I:219). Also evident from Stavorinus' account is the decay that had set in. Fortifications were no longer maintained (II:143), buildings were in disrepair, the English had attained an edge in many of the trade routes. Most telling, however, are Stavorinus' reactions to the way the Company had affected the lives of the people. He comments on the badly paid and shabbily dressed soldiers, on the corruption on the one hand and the ineffective and unfair company policies on the other (I:372). He offers solutions, suggestions. And, although he sees much room for improvement, he obviously feels that there is a Dutch future in the far-away archipelago.

The question remains: is this literature as the title of this special issue of *CJNS* suggests? In final analysis, such a question begs a judgment as to quality. Those who make these judgments may find Stavorinus' work lacking in literary quality. His prose is often dry; pages and pages of figures and dates abound. However, Stavorinus' style is facile and

clear, and he achieves his best passages when he is either enthusiastic or appalled at what he experiences. And he is a true member of the literary guild that wrote about the far-away East Indies: an India-farer who wrote about his own experiences. For the eighteenth century, those were in most cases the officials of the East India Company. It is the figure of the author, rather than the quality of the account that he wrote, that makes his work part of the literature about the Indies.

NOTES

¹*Reize van Zeeland over Kaap de Goede Hoop naar Batavia, Bantam enz. gedaan in de jaaren 1768 tot 1771 door den Heer J.S. Stavorinus, Schout bij nacht bij de Admiraliteit van Zeeland.* Leiden: A + J. Honkoop, 1793.

²*Reize van Zeeland over de Kaap de Goede Hoop en Batavia, naar Samarang, Macasser, Amboina, Suratte, enz. gedaan in de jaaren 1774-1778.* 2 vols. 1797 Leiden: A + J. Honkoop, 1797.

³Johan Splinter Stavorinus' (1739-1988) account of his travels and his reactions to the East Indies are cited in most of the literature about the East Indies, e.g., by Frederik de Haan, *Oud Batavia Gedenkboek* (Batavia: G. Kolff & Co, 1921). However, the works themselves have not been dealt with extensively. For further information read Rob Nieuwenhuys, *Oost-Indische Spiegel* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1972); pp. 41-43.

⁴All page references and quotations in this article refer to the English translation. See below FN 5.

⁵French editions: *Voyage par le Cap de Bonne-Espérance à Batavia, à Bantam et au Bengale, en 1768, 69 et 71 par J. Stavorinus. . . Tr. du hollandois par H.J. Jansen* (Paris: H.J. Jansen, 1798), *Voyage par le Cap de Bonne-Espérance et Batavia, à Semarang, à Macassar, à Amboine, et à Suiate, en 1774, 75, 76, 77, et 78*, 2 vols (Paris: Jansen, 1799, 2nd ed. 1805). German editions: *Reise nach dem Vorgebürge der Guten Hoffnung, Java und Bengalen in den Jahren 1768 bis 1771. Aus den Holländischen frey übersetzt und mit Anmerkungen begleitet von Professor [August Ferdinand] Lueder. . .* (Berlin, Haude und Speuer, 1796). *Beiträge zur nähern Kenntniss einiger ostindischen Besitzungen der vereinigten Niederlande, nach dem Holländischen des Stavorinus. . . von dem Herausgeber* (Rostock: K.C. Stiller, 1796). English edition: *Voyages to the*

East-Indies by the late John Splinter Stavorinus, Esq. . . Transl. Samuel Hull Wilcocke. 3 vols (London: C.G. and J. Robinson, 1798, Rpt. Dawsons of Pall Mall 1969). This is a translation of *Reize I* (vol. I) as well as *Reize II* (vol. II and III).

⁶Jean de Thevenot (1633-1667), *Relation d'un voyage av Levant. . .* (Paris: Thomas Jolly, 1665). Dutch translation: *Gedenkwaardige en zeer naauwkeurige reizen. . .* Amsterdam: Jan Bouman, 1681-1682.

⁷Georg Everard Rumphius (1627-1702).

Stavorinus also adds that Rumphius' work had been banned in Batavia. That does not keep him from quoting him substantially, but it might have kept him from publishing his own accounts.

⁸François Valentijn (1666-1721), *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, 5 vols (Dordrecht: J. van Braam, 1724-26).

⁹Nicolaas de Graaf (1639-1687) in: Warnsinck. J.C.M. [ed], *Reisen van Nicolaus de Graaff gedaan naar alle gewesten des Werelds Beginnende 1639 tot 1678 inclus* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1930). As an appendix: Nicolaas de Graaff, *Oost-Indise Spiegel* (Hoorn: Feyken Rijk, 1701, 2nd ed. 1704).

¹⁰The English translator does condemn slavery (II:181).

¹¹See Frederick de Haan, *Oud Batavia, Gedenkboek* (Batavia: Kolff, 1922); I: 2.