

# A shot in the volcano

## A humorous travelogue about Java by Dé-Lilah (1896)

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### ABSTRACT

In 1899 Dé-Lilah, pseudonym of Lucy van Renesse-Johnston (1862-1906), published a travel story in two parts, *Mevrouw Klausine Klobben op Java* (Mrs Klausine Klobben on Java). It was an account of an early tourist trip she had made in 1896. According to Van Renesse, she undertook her journey to do environmental research on Java as well as ethnographic research on the native and European inhabitants of the island. But that was just a pretext for a woman who travelled alone to climb volcanoes, visit shrines and talk to the various inhabitants of Java. She was able to do so because as a Eurasian woman, in addition to Dutch, she spoke fluent Malay. But contrary to her claims, it was never her intention to write a scientific travelogue. From the very beginning, she wanted to write a humorous travel story along the lines of the popular German author Julius Stinde (1841-1905). By taking his work as an example, she wrote a satirical story about travel on Java, at a time when tourism had hardly begun in the Netherlands East Indies.

### KEYWORDS

Dé-Lilah, Java, women's travel writing, tourism, Julius Stinde.

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## INTRODUCTION

The year is 1896 when Lucy van Renesse-Johnston (1862-1906), a resident of Medan, embarks on a journey across Java. Three years later she publishes the story of that journey. Running to nearly 500 pages, the work is entitled *Mevrouw Klausine Klobben op Java* (1899, Mrs. Klausine Klobben on Java) (Figure 1). In several respects it is a special, perhaps unique travel story. Lucy van Renesse was probably the first Dutch woman to travel alone, unchaperoned, through the Netherlands East Indies. She did have a predecessor in Ida Pfeiffer (1797-1858), but Pfeiffer, an Austrian, was a world traveller who wrote in German.<sup>1</sup> It is also notable that Van Renesse's was a tourist trip, at a time when tourism in Java had yet to flourish, not becoming popular until around 1900.

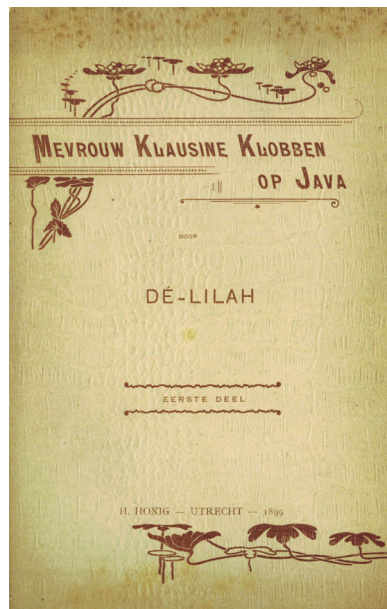


Figure 1. Bookcover *Mevrouw Klausine Klobben op Java*. (Private collection.)

Moreover, Van Renesse was a Eurasian who knew the country well. Born and raised in Java from mixed parentage, she had ties both to the western colonial population, and the eastern colonised. She also spoke Malay – the predecessor of Indonesian and the *lingua franca* of the East Indian archipelago – which opened doors for her that often remained closed to other travellers. Together, these aspects already imbue her travelogue with some remarkable qualities, but, as additional feature of interest, she chooses not to describe her experiences in a straightforward manner, as is common in tourist travel narratives (Mikko Toivanen 2017: 43), but rather to do so in a form that she has derived from a foreign example.

<sup>1</sup> See Rick Honings' article on Ida Pfeiffer's journey to the Netherlands East Indies in this issue of *Wacana*.

The choice of this form is related to her desire to write a humorous travelogue, whilst still retaining a character that is “the narrative of an actual journey told by the person or persons who undertook it” (Alasdair Pettinger and Tim Youngs 2020: 4). Notwithstanding the fact that some reviewers suggest the contrary (“Een reizigster in... fantasieën” 1990; I. Groneman 1900a, 1900b, 1900c; “Hoe men boeken schrijft” 1900), and accepting that not everything she writes is equally reliable, it is not a fantasy journey, even though her chosen format does leave room for invented elements. In this article, following a brief overview of her life and the characterisation of her as a female travel writer, I will focus on the way in which she shaped the story of her journey.

### DÉ-LILAH

When she made her journey, Lucy van Renesse was practically unknown as an author. It was only a year later, under the pseudonym Dé-Lilah, that she was to make her debut with a novel. In April 1896 she had only published one story in serial form under this pseudonym in the *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* (Delila 1896). However, the fact that she travelled alone through Java as a woman was sufficient reason for *Het Nieuw Bataviaasch Handelsblad* to devote attention to it. “Mrs Van Renesse of Medan is currently on a physical [*natuurkundige*] journey across Java”, so the report begins. The qualification “a physical journey” is remarkable. *Het Nieuw Bataviaasch Handelsblad* must have heard the term from Van Renesse, because the I-narrator in the travelogue repeatedly uses the same phrase when people ask her why, as a woman, she has embarked on this difficult, adventurous journey. However, it is certainly not a scientific or physical journey, in the sense that Van Renesse was a traveller with an evident interest in gathering and disseminating scientific information (Angela Byrne 2020: 17).

The fact that Van Renesse had contact with the newspaper is also demonstrated by the fact that the editors of *Het Nieuw Bataviaasch Handelsblad* knew about her travel plans. This message was taken up by the *Deli Courant*, a newspaper published in Medan, where both she and her husband were well-known figures (“*Onze Nieuwtjes*” 1896). A month later, the Batavia correspondent of this newspaper had spoken to a friend of hers, who was keen to add that Van Renesse, writing under the pseudonym Dé-Lilah, “is a new literary star and that the purpose of the trip was to gather information for the writing of *A humorous description of ‘Java’*” (“*Bataviasche Brieven*” 1896; Dé-Lilah 1899/2: 171-172).

In order to achieve this humorous effect, Dé-Lilah uses a complicated narratological structure. Klausine (Sientje) Klobben, the wife of a tobacco planter in Deli, is sent to Java by her doctor for health reasons and is advised to spend at least two months in the mountains of the Preanger region to regain her strength. However, her stay is extended by several months because in addition to the Preanger, she travels through a large part of Java, keeping a diary along the way. Upon her return she allows others to read her text and

they all insist that she must publish it. She tries to rework it into a story, but she does not succeed. Sientje is simply not a writer. An acquaintance advises her to give the diary to an established writer, someone like Maurits, the pseudonym of P.A. Daum (1850-1898), who was very successful with his novels about the Netherlands East Indies. Sientje follows this advice, although she does not give her diary to Maurits, since she does not know him personally, but to “the new East Indies writer” Dé-Lilah. She has met her in Soekaboemi. Dé-Lilah is willing to turn the diary into a story, in which Sientje Klobben is the narrator. Occasionally Dé-Lilah comments on what Sientje has written in a footnote.<sup>2</sup>

Both author and narrator are therefore alter egos of Lucy van Renesse, neither of whom coincides with the historical person. Nevertheless, what Klausine (Sientje) Klobben tells about herself in this story is usually read as a reliable sketch of Van Renesse’s life (compare Praamstra 2022). However, this is not the case.

#### A EURASIAN GIRL

Lucy Johnston was born on 6 April 1862 in Grisee (Gresik), a suburb of Soerabaja.<sup>3</sup> Her mother’s name is unknown; she was a *njai* (maid) with whom her father lived without being married to her; she was an indigenous or Indo-European woman. Her father was John Johnston, a European of English or Scottish descent. He was trained as a mechanical engineer. When Lucy was two years old, Johnston and his family moved to Pasoeroean, where he opened the “Constructie Winkel Bromo” (Construction Shop Bromo). His business was repairing and selling machines used in the sugar industry. However, their stay in Pasoeroean was short-lived because, in May 1867, Johnston married a Dutch woman and almost immediately afterwards sold his business and moved with his family to Cheribon. This could be the point, as would have been customary at the time, at which he sent his *njai* – Lucy’s mother – back to the *kampong* (Indonesian village).

Sadly, Johnston’s first marriage ended tragically when, only five years later, his wife died. However, at the end of 1873, Johnston married for the second time, moving again with his family, this time to Soerabaja. Lucy, by then 11 years old, went six months later to Holland for her education, where she would spend three years, from the age of 12 to 15. She gained a good knowledge of French, German, and English.

It is not known what Lucy did following her return to Soerabaja. Her name does not reappear until, at the age of 19, on 2 July 1881, she marries Ernest Jean Baptist van Renesse – a man one year her senior. Van Renesse had recently arrived in the Netherlands East Indies from the Netherlands, finding employment on a tobacco plantation in Deli. Together they had three children; an illegitimate son of Ernest was also taken into the family.

<sup>2</sup> See in particular the “Introduction” to the work, signed by Klausine Klobben (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 1-3).

<sup>3</sup> The following is based on Praamstra (2022). The reconstruction of her life described in this article is based in particular on consulting digitalised newspaper articles, Almanacs, Name Lists, and Address Books of the Netherlands East Indies and genealogical websites.

However, Ernest's career in tobacco did not go well, and towards the end of 1885, he moved the family to Medan, where he started a hotel. From the beginning, Ernest left the management of the hotel to his wife, whilst he devoted himself to auctions and the sale of all kinds of goods – from carriages and horses to mineral water. The hotel was in good hands and Lucy did everything to uphold its reputation. Her efforts proved successful, and the Deli hotel became popular with guests on a tight budget, gaining a reputation for affordable clean accommodation.

Both Lucy and Ernest worked hard to provide a good future for their children. When they reached secondary school age, they were each sent to the Netherlands, to a boarding house in Utrecht. Finally, in 1895, with only one child at home, Lucy had time to write. She may have written earlier, but this year marks a turning point in her life. Now 33 years old, she entered the spotlight as an author. In 1896 and 1897, under the pseudonym Delila, she published three serial stories in the *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, which were later collected with nine others in *Een Indisch dozijntje* (1898, *An East Indies Dozen*). Following this success, Lucy embarked on a trip to gather ingredients for new stories. From February to July 1896, she travelled for five months across Java. This was to be the beginning of a life of writing and travelling.

#### WRITING AND TRAVELLING

Whilst Dé-Lilah (as she spelled her pseudonym from 1897 onwards) was spreading her wings, her husband's business was less successful.<sup>4</sup> Initially, he had been doing well, but after the opening of yet another hotel in Medan, his income declined, and he faced increasing competition as an auctioneer. In order to meet the costs of his household and the education of his children, he started a shipping and trading office in 1894 in Belawan, the harbour of Medan. The office was responsible for receiving and sending crates and parcels to and from Europe and elsewhere.

The extra income was much needed, not least as Lucy was becoming rather less concerned with the hotel. From March to April 1897, Dé-Lilah was again on a trip, this time to the *overburen* (neighbours across), as she called the inhabitants of what is now known as Malaysia and Singapore. She was to write a travel story about these too, again starring the character Klausine Klobben, albeit this time to remain unpublished. In 1898 she brought her last and youngest child to Utrecht, to the same boarding house as her other children. In Utrecht, she was reunited with her children and also met her publisher, H. Honig.

In 1897, her first novel, *Gecompromitteerd* (Compromised), was released by a publisher in Arnhem. Although the book enjoyed modest success, receiving generally favourable reviews, Dé-Lilah was not content with the publisher, and her subsequent books were published by Honig. In rapid succession she published the collection of short stories *Een Indisch dozijntje* (1898), the novel

<sup>4</sup> The following is based on Praamstra (2022).



*Hans Tongka's carrière* (1898, Hans Tongka's career), the travel story *Mevrouw Klausine Klobben op Java* (1899), and the novels *B.B. Kongsie* (1900) and *Madame Caprice* (1901). Her novels and stories, most of which were set in Deli, caused quite a stir. Dé-Lilah had a keen eye for the darker sides of colonial society. She was one of the first to write about the mistreatment of Javanese and Chinese so-called "coolies" (a term now considered deeply offensive) and the sexual exploitation of women on the Deli tobacco plantations. She also exposed the abuse of power and the corruption of the Dutch administration in the Indies.

Staying with her children in Utrecht De-Lilah received the message that Ernest had died unexpectedly in a hospital in Medan on 11 January 1899 after a short illness. She hurried back to Medan, where she proceeded swiftly. Ten days after her return, she had the inventory of the hotel auctioned off. As the final settlement did not take place until June, she had to stay in the area for the time being. She used that interval for a trip to Lake Toba, about which she wrote a ten-episode serial for *De Sumatra Post*.

After the death of her husband, Dé-Lilah had to support herself. She had some money from selling the inventory of the hotel and she also received an honorarium for her work published in Utrecht, but it was not much: it amounted to no more than 100 guilders for each title (and 50 for the collection of short stories). She therefore jumped at every chance to write feuilletons for newspapers and magazines. In August 1899 she published a short serial in the *Deli Courant* about an elephant hunt at Sumatra.

At the end of August, Dé-Lilah boarded the boat to Swatow (Shantou), arriving a week later. It was the beginning of a two-month journey to and through China from which she returned on 17 November 1899. She had spent most of her time in Hong Kong, but also made trips to Macao and Canton (Guangzhou). An extensive account of her trip appeared in the *Deli Courant* in 1900. She also wrote feuilletons for *De Indische Courant* during this time.

On 16 December 1899 she finally left Deli and travelled via Java to Japan where, from June 1900, she submitted articles to *De Echo*, *Weekblad voor Dames in Indië* (*A Weekly for Ladies in the Indies*), a new magazine that had been in print from 1 October 1899. From these articles, it is possible to ascertain that, after spending a short time in Yokohama, she moved to Tokyo in October 1900. Here she lived in a large house, with nine rooms, some of which she rented out. In addition, she had started a language institute on the ground floor. She taught Japanese children – boys and girls – German, English, French, and Dutch. Most of her pupils chose German and English, there was also some interest in French, however, for Dutch she had only three pupils alongside which there were also two for Malay.

Japan also inspired her to write novellas, one of which she published in *De Echo*. However, she kept most of them in her portfolio and sent them, together with a Japanese novel, to her publisher in Utrecht. He put the novellas aside, but published the novel, which included a photograph of Dé-Lilah in a Japanese kimono; until recently, it was the only photograph of her that has been preserved (Figure 2). The novel, *Madame Caprice* (1901), set mostly in

Japan, was not a success. The few reviews it did receive were scathing, after which Honig refrained from publishing any other work by Dé-Lilah.

Although Dé-Lilah was unable to find a new publisher, this did not mark the end of her writing career and she continued to publish regularly in daily and weekly magazines. Until 1902 she collaborated with *De Echo*; from 1902 to 1905 she wrote "Letters from Japan" for the *Soerabaja Courant*; and after 1905 she wrote for the *Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*. Dé-Lilah continued to live in Japan until 1906, first in Tokyo, later in Osaka, and finally in Kobe. During these years she criss-crossed Japan from north to south, from Hokkaido to Nagasaki – from which she also visited Shanghai. It was not until July 1906 that she went back to the Indies, to visit family, staying until the end of August when she boarded the boat in Batavia, this time for Singapore.



Figure 2. Dé-Lilah dressed in a Japanese kimono, 1900. (Private collection.)

Whether Dé-Lilah travelled back to Japan from Singapore is uncertain. It is very likely that she fell ill in Singapore, for she died there on 18 November 1906, aged 44. Her death prompted some newspapers to reminisce about her. She had not had an easy life and was remembered as a woman of wit, who did not shy away from adventure and had travelled to places that struck fear even into the hearts of men.

#### *MEVROUW KLAUSINE KLOBBEN OP JAVA*

When Lucy van Renesse began her journey through Java, the necessary infrastructure for such a trip had only just been realised. According to Mikko Toivanen, who has published on early tourism in the Netherlands East Indies, the necessary conditions for a tourist trip included "regularity and comfort

of transport and accommodation” (Toivanen 2017: 5, 19-25, 33-37). The need for regular transport was met by steamships that followed fixed, timetabled routes throughout the East Indies archipelago. In early February, Lucy van Renesse left on a four-day voyage from Medan to Batavia aboard a steamship of the KPM, Koninklijke Pakketvaart Maatschappij (Royal Parcel Shipping Company). From there, she continued her journey by train – a relatively new development at the time. The construction of railways on Java had started in 1867, but it would take until 1895 before a (more or less) complete railway network was established. Only then was the West Java railway connected to the railways in Central and East Java, making it possible to travel by train from Batavia to Soerabaja (Evelien Pieterse 2017: 11-19; J.F. van Bemmelen and G.B. Hooijer 1896: 49). Hence, Lucy was quite the trailblazer to make use of it in 1896. Indeed, almost her entire trip was by rail, although she used other forms of transport along the way.

The condition of “regularity and comfort of accommodation” was also being met on Java in 1896. Perhaps in some places the accommodation was still rather basic, but there were hotels and guesthouses, and in places where these were lacking private travellers could make use of a *passangrahan* – a government-run accommodation intended for civil servants in transit. Of course, one could also stay with friends and acquaintances, as Lucy often did.

A typical feature of tourism is that one travels, as it were, in the footsteps of one’s predecessors (Maria Lindgren Leavenworth 2020: 86). In Europe, where the above-mentioned conditions for tourist travel had been realised much earlier, travel guides, of which the Baedeker is perhaps the best known, appeared from the mid-1830s onwards. This marked a turning point, from travel reserved for a small elite, to that for a much broader middle class – the birth of mass tourism. Tourists knew in advance what they wanted to see – cities and people, rivers, mountains, waterfalls, and other sights – as well as when they could leave and would arrive, and where they could eat and sleep along the way. In the Netherlands East Indies, and especially in Java, such tourism emerged around 1900 (Toivanen 2017: 69-71). The first travel guide for the Netherlands East Indies dates from 1896; earlier there were two guides for West Java and a German *Handbuch für Reisende on Java* (Fedor Schulze 1890, 1894; M. Buys 1891; Van Bemmelen and Hooijer 1896). However, it would appear that Lucy did not consult any such guides. She only makes occasional reference to the work of Isaäc Groneman (1832-1912), a physician with a great knowledge of Javanese culture and antiquity, about which he published several books. He had travelled through Java in the 1860s (Dé-Lilah 1899/2, 57, 78, 84; see Groneman 1874).

Yet perhaps it would be better to write that it is not Lucy van Renesse, but rather Klausine Klobben who refers to Groneman. From newspaper notices, we know that “Mrs van Renesse” travelled from Medan to Batavia on 9 February 1896, returning to Medan on 1 July that same year (*Java-Bode*, 29 February and 30 June 1896). From other reports (mentioned above) we know that she travelled to the Preanger, where she climbed, or at least planned to



climb, several volcanoes. However, for details of her journey, we have to rely on the words of her alter ego, Sientje Klobben, in her travelogue.

From Tandjoeng Priok, the main port of Batavia, Sientje takes the train to "Station Kota", the main railway station in the old city, and from there travels by carriage to Koningsplein, where she stays with a friend and her family. Together they attend a dance evening at the Concordia Club and a stage performance at the Zoo and Botanic Garden. In addition, they are guests at a wedding, also visiting the usual tourist attractions such as the Museum of the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences, the European Cemetery at Tanah Abang, the Willems Church, and the Governor-General's Residence. Finally, they go shopping and eat pastries. They experience most of these attractions from touring in a carriage – a classic case of sightseeing. Almost all the tourist attractions that Sientje Klobben describes are listed in the 1896 *Travel Guide to the Dutch East Indies* (Van Bemmelen and Hooijer 1896: 20-26); however, as she was staying with her friend, she did not require a guidebook.

After a three-week stay in Batavia, she takes an early train to Buitenzorg. Again, she stays with acquaintances who take her to the famous Botanical Garden and the Palace of the Governor-General, amongst other places. According to the 1896 guidebook, these are sights not to be missed (Van Bemmelen and Hooijer 1896: 28-36). In her travelogue, a pattern is already emerging that is to become characteristic of the later course of the story. Sientje usually travels by train, and on the way, she enjoys the panoramic views. When she arrives at her destination, she either stays with acquaintances or takes lodgings in a guesthouse or modest hotel. In places where there is no such accommodation, she spends the night as the guest of Indonesian government officials or in a *passangrahan*.

When journeying to places not yet accessible by rail, she travels by carriage. If she travels into the mountains – for example, on her way to a volcano or crater lake – she rides on horseback or in a litter. In this way she travelled for five months across Java, from Batavia via Buitenzorg, Soekaboemi, Bandoeng, and Tjilatjap to Djokjakarta and Solo, from there to Semarang, and then via Madioen and Modjokerto to Soerabaja. From all these locations, she made excursions: to waterfalls, stalactite caves, lakes, seaside resorts, and Javanese antiquities, such as the Boroboeddhoer and the Prambanan. All of the places she visited were, and remain to this day, popular tourist destinations.

The volcanoes she climbed, such as the Tangkoeban Prahoe, the Papandajan, the Merapi, and the Bromo, are modern-day attractions as well. However, in 1896, judging by Sientje Klobben's description, it was a daring undertaking for women. Every time she says she plans to climb a volcano, she is discouraged, yet perseveres. When asked why, she invariably replies that she is doing it for the sake of science. She gave the same answer when asked in a hotel or boarding house what prompted her to travel alone through Java. The fact that in 1896 this is not without risk is reiterated again and again and Sientje Klobben is regularly very scared.

## SURROUNDED BY DANGERS

In her study of female colonial travel writers, Sara Mills concludes that they are “caught between the conflicting demands of the discourse of femininity and that of imperialism” (Mills 1991: 21). At that time, at least in Western society, women were considered the “weaker sex” and were subordinate to men; however, when travelling through the colonies, they were seen as the rulers (Mills 1991: 19-23). According to Mills, the interaction between these clashing power structures largely determines the style and content of their travel stories. One of the most striking features is that women are more likely than men to express feelings of anxiety (Mills 1991: 101-103, 149-151). The main character in De-Lilah’s travel story corresponds in every way to Mills’ image. Sientje Klobben is not afraid to share her fears with the reader; indeed, sometimes she even seems to exaggerate them.

Sientje is frightened from the start. On the boat from Deli to Batavia, she is plagued by a nightmare: “I dreamt that a large crocodile was looking through the cuckoo window (skylight). I was half awake, and dared not breathe” (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 14). Travelling through Java by train with two young female travelling companions, she is afraid that they will be violated by four (European) men who are sitting with them in the train carriage.

A shiver went through my body at the thought that we would soon have to go through the tunnel, and that the three of us would be alone with four such vagabonds. For there, in the pitch dark, they could do what they liked with us. [...] I already saw the girls being grabbed and kissed, and I perhaps, God help me, in the arms of that ugly man. Wasn’t it infuriating? (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 100-101).



Figure 3. Train on a railway bridge in the Preanger Regency Mountains, circa 1900. (Leiden University Libraries, Digital Collections KITLV 19310.)

She sends one of the girls out to fetch the train conductor, who makes them move from second to first class just before the train enters the tunnel (Figure 3). Here they are safe. However, they do have to pay an additional fee (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 100-101).

For most of the journey, Sientje travels by train, but there are also places that can only be reached by carriage. At one point she travels from the station in Tjiandjoer to the mountain village of Patjet near Tjibodas. Whilst enjoying the view on the mountain road to Patjet, they reach the top. Then, after a sharp bend, it goes downhill.

Suddenly, we turned a sharp corner, and the vehicle with its three horses flew *ventre à terre* [belly on the ground] down the steepness and holed further and further down. I barely managed to hold back a cry of anguish, I clung desperately to the iron bars and I could hardly breathe for fear. (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 105).

Sientje is scared of almost everything and everyone, but the greatest fright is caused by the natives, especially if they are influenced by Islam. Her fear of Islam corresponds to the image of this religion in the Netherlands East Indies around 1900. As a result of the rise of Pan-Islamism that spread from Turkey over the Islamic world, the Dutch government considered Islam a serious danger. The movement's aim to unite all Muslims, not only religiously but also politically, posed a threat to the colonial order (H.T.M. van Vliet 1997: 155-156). According to Sientje, the Preanger was crawling with fanatical believers who harboured an "ingrained hatred of all that was European" (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 130). It chills her to the bone when a landlady warns her against visiting "Godok" (*Makam Godog*), an Islamic shrine near Garoet.

In these times, when one can see that the hajis hate the Europeans and have devoted followers among the lesser men, I believe it is not advisable to defy them in this respect and to seek out the places where infidels are actually not allowed (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 189).

Yet, however frightened Sientje is, she will not listen and, disguised as an Arab woman, she goes there anyway (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 223-227).

Her behaviour here is typical. Even though she is terrified – which she often is – she does not let it stop her from her intended travel plans. Having arrived in Bandoeng, she wants to climb the Tangkoeban Prahoe (Figure 4). When she tells the owner of the hotel where she is staying about this, he advises her against it: "It is much too daring for a woman, believe me. A woman alone has never done it before, and would you like to be the first?" When Sientje asks about the dangers of the trip, it turns out to be mainly the indigenous people. The hotel owner: "You don't know what can happen to you at an altitude of 6,000 feet, and with a handful of natives you don't even know." Furthermore, in Lembang, where she has to spend the night before starting the actual climb, a rebellion is imminent. However, Sientje remains undeterred. She borrows a revolver from the hotel owner, who is impressed by her heroic behaviour: "I must say I respect you, you are quite a daring woman" (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 136).



Figure 4. The Tangkoeban Prahoe near Bandoeng, circa 1920. (Leiden University Libraries, Digital Collections KITLV 49458.)

#### THE ASCENT OF THE TANGKOEBAN PRAHOE

In Lembang Sientje stays with the *Loerah* (village chief) on the advice of the hotel owner's wife. There is also a *passangrahan*, but that is "not recommended for a woman alone" (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 140). She is warmly received by the *Loerah*, although she does not sleep at night: she constantly hears scary noises, and all night long, she clutches her revolver tightly in her hand. At half past four she has had enough of it. She gets up to start the climb. The *Loerah* has arranged for eight local porters and a *tandoe* (sedan chair) for her, together with a native policeman who will oversee proceedings.

From her sedan chair, she enjoys the beautiful views, but fear is never far away. The higher they get, the more dangerous the path up the mountain becomes. At times, it is "colossally steep and slippery" and she hangs lopsidedly in her *tandoe*. More than once, she fears that the litter bearers will lose their balance and let her fall. After five hours of climbing, they finally reach the top of the volcano. Sientje gets out of her sedan chair and sees two craters in the volcano: the *Kawa Oepas*, a small lake with boiling mud, and the *Kawa Ratoe*, a greenish boiling and bubbling lake. Supported by two "coolies" and preceded by the policeman, Sientje descends carefully to the crater of boiling mud. She is aware that this could mean the end of her life: "If an eruption were to occur, I thought to myself, then Sientje Klobben would be hopelessly lost, and that would be a pity for the poor thing." Yet, simultaneously, she enjoys it: "This was something else than standing on top of the Drachenfels or the Brocken (two popular tourist mountains in Germany). Here, at least, there was danger involved, which made such a trip twice as interesting" (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 149).



She does not stay down for long and, clambering on all fours and helped by the policeman, she climbs back up to the top, where she falls to the ground, exhausted. When she has recovered, and the litter bearers are getting ready for the retreat, Sientje looks one last time at the green lake – the *Kawa Ratoe* – below. She feels like throwing a stone down, but the policeman warns her not to do so. The people venerate the crater and offer sacrifices to “her” – *ratoe* means queen – from time to time. If she were to throw a stone in it, “the *ratoe* would certainly get angry”. She, therefore, refrains from doing so, but when she is already standing with one leg in the sedan chair, she remembers that someone had told her that “it gives such a beautiful sound, when one fires a gun into the crater because this sound is reflected by the echoes”.

Driven by curiosity, without asking myself what I was doing, I crawled out the *tandoe* again, picked up my revolver, emptied it of its holster, and rushed back to the edge of the crater, where I let myself down a little along the stumps without anyone’s help. Then I fired the pistol into the depths, only to sink to my knees in mortal terror, for it was a deafening roar; the sound was echoed a thousandfold, it was as if hundreds of Acehnese were approaching and as if the whole Artillery, Infantry, and Cavalry were chasing them. I had not imagined it like that, my heart was hammering and my temples were pounding. I had fallen to my knees, completely buried in the ashes, and did not notice until later that I had clung desperately to a few bushes, and that my revolver had fallen down beside me. (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 152-153).

When she has recovered from the shock, she walks back to the sedan chair, but to her dismay, the coolies and the policeman have fled. Now she does not know what to do. She wonders how she will get back to Lembang. Sientje knows that on foot, she will never make it: she will succumb to fear and fatigue on the way. Tormented by a headache, abandoned by everyone, she sees no other way out than to lie down in her *tandoe* and wait for what is to come. Fortunately, it does not take long because after 15 minutes, the policeman and the litter bearers come back. They are furious and yell at her in Sundanese, a language she does not understand. Fortunately, one of them speaks reasonable Malay and he tells her that “it was very bad of me to shoot into the crater, that the anger and revenge of the ‘*ratoe*’ would certainly come, [...] and that the inhabitants of Lembang would soon be startled by an eruption” (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 154). They are only prepared to take her back to Lembang for an extra payment.

The mood on the return journey is sombre. Everyone is angry with her and in Lembang, the first thing they do is inform the *Loerah* (village chief). He too reacts indignantly. At last Sientje realises that she has done something awful and, ashamed, she leaves the same day for Bandoeng, where she arrives late in the evening. There she shares her adventures with the hotel owner and his wife, who admire her as a heroine. This makes her feel good and Sientje sleeps well. Nonetheless, to be on the safe side, from this moment on, she always carries a revolver with her on her journey (compare Dé-Lilah 1899/2: 81, 151-153).



This reckless act will haunt her for the rest of the trip. Has she disturbed the peace of the *ratoe*? Will there be another eruption of the Tangkoeban Prahoe because of her – the last having occurred in 1846? When she learns two weeks later in Garoet that the Tangkoeban Prahoe has become more active, she is shocked. Is it her fault? When she tells the story to the other guests in the boarding house, she is teased about it (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 189-190). She cannot shake off the thought that she is to blame for the impending disaster. A few months later, she is staying with acquaintances in Djokjakarta. Talking about the Merapi – another volcano that Sientje wants to climb – her host asks if she has heard that the Tangkoeban Prahoe has erupted. Had she noticed anything about it during her visit? Yes, she answers gruffly: “I predicted it” (Dé-Lilah 1899/2: 57). Yet regarding anything further, she remains silent; she would rather not be reminded of it.

There is a pattern to Sientje’s adventures. She is often afraid and does not hesitate to let the reader share in her fears, yet she never allows these dangers and threats to deter her. Indeed, she actively defies them and purposefully seeks them out. Sometimes, as with the Tangkoeban Prahoe, she even provokes them. The great emphasis she places on danger and difficulty and the way she manages to defy or overcome them give her a heroic status – one typical of a female traveller at that time (see Mills 1991: 140-142).

Although this emphasis on dangers is not exceptional in female travel stories, the palpable pleasure with which Sientje repeatedly elaborates on the fears and the dangers to which she is exposed is notable – dangers that, as shown above, she sometimes brings upon herself. There is also an element of exaggeration that does not always sound credible. Did it really happen? There was an eruption of the Tangkoeban Prahoe on 22 May 1896 and, according to the time indications in her travelogue, Sientje was staying in Djokjakarta at the time (*Java-Bode*, 26 May 1896; *De Locomotief*, 29 May 1896). Did she really fire a shot into the crater? It could well be that this story is part of her attempt to tell a humorous travelogue. Not only this incident but also other elements in her story betray the influence of a humorous German travel story that was extremely popular in the nineteenth century. This book, as we will now see, served as a model for Dé-Lilah.

#### WILHELMINE BUCHHOLZ IN ITALY

In 1883, *Buchholzens in Italien: Reise-Abenteuer von Wilhelmine Buchholz herausgegeben von Julius Stinde* was published (Figure 5). Two years earlier, the German writer Julius Stinde (1841-1905) had made a journey to Italy. He turned his experiences into a humorous story, in which he himself acts as the editor of the diary that Wilhelmine Buchholz had kept on her journey through Italy. Wilhelmine had met him in Naples. Stinde was already a well-known author at the time, and Wilhelmine had asked him if he would help her to transform her notes into a travelogue. He agreed, and hence a humorous and sometimes satirical story about tourist trips to Italy was created, with Wilhelmine Buchholz as the narrator. As we have seen above, Dé-Lilah

meticulously replicated this structure. Klausine Klobben made the same request to Dé-Lilah, whom she had met in Soekaboemi. Yet again, Klausine is the narrator, whilst Dé-Lilah, like Stinde, occasionally comments on what is written in footnotes.<sup>5</sup>

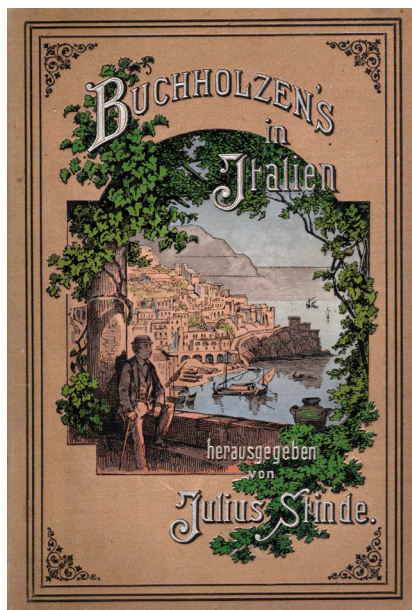


Figure 5. Bookcover *Buchholzens in Italien*. (Private collection.)

Wilhelmine Buchholz travelled with her husband and brother-in-law. They took the train from their home in Berlin to the south of Italy, where her husband hoped to recover from his rheumatism. A change of climate, the doctor had said, would do him good. The Buchholzens travelled as a group of three, but other passengers regularly kept them company. Almost always, the men played cards whilst Wilhelmine enjoyed the view from the train.

The main character, Wilhelmine Buchholz, is a chauvinist Berliner: nothing beats Berlin. She compares all the cities and sights in Italy with what Berlin has to offer. For Klausine Klobben, Soerabaja – the place where she grew up – is the most beautiful place on Java. Not even Batavia can match that. “She is far behind Soerabaja”, is the first thing Sientje exclaims when she sets foot in Batavia, “Let me tell you, despite all those high officials and councils of the Indies” (Dé-Lilah 1899/1: 20).

Both Wilhelmine and Sientje embark on a tourist trip and thus, as noted above, travel in the footsteps of predecessors. The Buchholzens view Italy with

<sup>5</sup> Two editions of *Buchholzens in Italien* can be consulted on the internet. An edition from 1893 is available at Googlebooks and an edition from 1939 at Projekt Gutenberg. Googlebooks also offers the Dutch translation by the Dutch author Gerard Keller, *De Familie Buchholz in Italië, reisavonturen van Wilhelmina Buchholz* (Second editon. Utrecht: J.G. Broese, 1886). This translation is used here.

the *Baedeker* in their hand – “the recipe book for travellers”, as they call it. It is also regularly mocked. When Wilhelmine tries to look at paintings in a dark church in which she can hardly see anything because of the lack of light, she sighs: “Behind the names of these paintings, there is an asterisk in Baedeker, so they are therefore very beautiful” (J. Stinde 1886: 25, 27).

At such moments, Stinde offers a satirical take on the mass tourism that had developed in Europe since the mid-1830s (Pettinger 2020: 139). In the East Indies, this tourism was still in its infancy, but Sientje also followed a route that others had followed before her. She regularly wrote about earlier tourists and now and then put her name in the “visitors’ book” of a tourist attraction.<sup>6</sup> Actually, she follows in the footsteps of her predecessors in two ways: both in form and content, her story is an imitation.

The character Klausine Klobben seems to have been created after the image of Wilhelmine Buchholz. Wilhelmine is a petit bourgeois housewife – “an orderly woman”, in her own words (Stinde 1886: 13) – with a loud mouth. She quarrels easily, is “catty”, but also easily offended; she cannot stand criticism. She admits that her education leaves much to be desired: she does not know the difference between “antiquity and the Renaissance” and “has not the faintest idea of architecture” (Stinde 1886: 3). However, this does not stop her from making bold judgements about what she sees.

Standing in front of Leonardo da Vinci’s “Last Supper” in Milan, she feels betrayed: the mural is, in her opinion, “totally spoiled and [needs] urgent restoration” (Stinde 1886: 39). She is also annoyed by the naked statues from Antiquity, even though in the prudish nineteenth century the noble parts were still covered with a piece of cloth (Stinde 1886: 92). She is unimpressed with the art treasures of Italy, but she finds the nature overwhelmingly beautiful. This does not apply to the Italians themselves, whom she believes to be swindlers and bandits, and who often frighten her. Although she is outspoken in her judgements and does not hesitate to proclaim them loudly, she is often insecure and afraid. Yet, in addition to all these less positive traits, she has a kind heart and is supportive and persistent.

All these features also apply to Sientje Klobben: she too is cattish, quick to anger and often resentful, and like Wilhelmine, Sientje does not mince her words. Both of them often behave with blunt directness. Indeed, the two women are so much alike that Dé-Lilah could have easily called her protagonist Wilhelmine. Both protagonists write letters home as a diversion to their story – Sientje to her husband in Deli, Wilhelmine to her children in Berlin – and both receive replies along the way. Furthermore, they regularly use an alcoholic “pick-me-up”: Wilhelmine usually takes a sip of cognac, and Sientje sticks to beer.

However, there is one significant difference between them: Sientje is Eurasian. She claims to have been born in Probolinggo, the child of a European father and a Eurasian mother – her grandmother was Javanese. She is about

<sup>6</sup> For tourists, see Dé-Lilah (1899/1: 136, 165, 167, 213, 1899/2: 223). For visitors’ books, see Dé-Lilah (1899/1: 180, 187, 217, 1899/2: 67, 86, 107).

45 years old, has been married for 25 years, and is the mother of five children – three sons and two daughters. She lives in Deli, on a tobacco plantation. Java is not nearly as strange to her as Italy is to the Buchholzens. Friends and acquaintances live everywhere and besides Dutch she also speaks Malay, which enables her to communicate well with the indigenous population. Conversely, Wilhelmine does not speak a word of Italian. In a certain sense Sientje travels across Java as a tourist in her own country and, especially when she arrives in Soerabaja, her journey is more like a trip down memory lane than a journey through a foreign land. Nevertheless, Sientje's journey is a lot more adventurous. Whereas tourist trips to Italy were relatively common around 1880, this is far from being the practice in the East Indies in 1896. Unlike Wilhelmine, Sientje travelled as a lone woman and – under the pretext that she was a scientific traveller – sometimes through hostile territory and, amongst others, climbing volcanoes.

On one occasion, Wilhelmine also headed into danger when she made a trip from Naples to the volcano Vesuvius. After a long and difficult journey, the Buchholzens reached the top of the volcano and looked down into the crater, “into a wild, rocky abyss, from which white vapours rose” (Stinde 1886: 129). From time to time they heard violent bangs followed by stones being thrown upwards. They did not stay long, not least as the suffocating smell of sulphur was unbearable. However, just as they were about to begin their descent, Wilhelmine called out: “Gentlemen, just a moment more. Here is a deck of cards that I have sworn to send to where it belongs ... in hell?” (Stinde 1886: 131). The eternal playing of cards by the men had annoyed her all along the journey. She had taken the pack of cards from one of them and flung it into the smoking abyss. However, she had not foreseen what would happen next:

At the same moment, there was such a loud crackling sound in the interior of the crater that the ground trembled beneath our feet and a rain of rather large stones fell on us. I started to run and hurried down, thinking that the crater was going to split apart again and the glowing lava was going to engulf me. (Stinde 1886: 131).

The story ends well and a while later they are at a safe distance and Vesuvius remains calm during the descent. They escaped with little more than a fright.

This incident from Stinde's book is replicated in the gunshot that Sientje fired into the crater of Tangkoeban Prahoe. Because Sientje's story relies so heavily on the example of Wilhelmine Buchholz, it is doubtful whether this actually happened. Dé-Lilah may very well have made it up to enhance her travel story with a bit more spectacle and humour. Since she wrote her book after the Tangkoeban Prahoe erupted, she may have been inspired to include this episode by what she had read from Stinde. The numerous and striking intertextual similarities between Dé-Lilah's and Stinde's work make Sientje an unreliable narrator who should not be taken at her word.

## RECEPTION

The success of *Buchholzens in Italien* was enormous. Between 1884 and 1900, no fewer than seven sequels to this book about the Buchholz family appeared, with a total circulation of several million copies (W.CL-KLL 1991: 1030-1031). It was also translated into a number of languages, including Dutch. If Dé-Lilah had counted on this kind of success, she must have been very disappointed. Although it became her most-reviewed book in the Netherlands East Indies, in the Netherlands it went unnoticed. She must have been shocked by the reactions. The East Indies writer J.E. Jasper summarised the general verdict:

After her *Klausine Klobben on Java*, the great "Delilah" has been attacked from all sides; the critics have hit her sensitively, and she has been thrown off the stage with such force that she still feels it, that she no longer dares to show her knowledge of the East Indies [...] I am really pleased about that! (Jasper 1900).

Whilst most critics recognised her attempt to imitate Stinde, they found her to be not at all witty and sometimes even downright rude. She was very much resented for describing in the second part of her book the household of Dr Isaac Groneman, whom she had visited in Djokjakarta. She portrayed him as an overly amorous old man who was surrounded by a harem of local beauties. Groneman was furious. He admitted that Mrs van Renesse had visited him, but this description was entirely based on her imagination. It was slander. He returned to the subject several times in letters to the newspaper and also managed to find witnesses who confirmed his version. The affair also led to new articles being written in which other "flaws" in Dé-Lilah's story were pointed out (Groneman 1900a, 1900b, 1900c; "Een reizigster in... fantasieën" 1900; "Dr. Groneman" 1900; "Hoe men boeken schrijft" 1900; Eds. [De] S[umatra] P[ost] 1900).

A second point of criticism was that her style left much to be desired. It reminded the critics of the language "of civilised but illiterate Eurasians". The reviewer of the *Deli Courant* wrote that this was the result of the inadequate school education in the colony (W.M. 1900). The fact that the reviewers knew that Lucy van Renesse, a Eurasian woman, was hiding behind the pseudonym Dé-Lilah may have played a part in this criticism, which was generally shared. There is a racist undertone to it. According to *De Sumatra Post*, the book "smelled of the *kampong*" and Sientje Klobben was closer to the servants in the outbuildings than to the educated Europeans in the East Indies (Mata 1900).

Dé-Lilah let the criticism about Groneman pass. After all, her book was not meant to be an accurate account of what she had experienced; she wanted to write a humorous travel story, in which case, you were allowed to use your imagination. That people did not understand or appreciate her humour was something else. However, she did protest against the accusation that her bad taste stemmed from a poor upbringing. In the *Soerabaijasch Handelsblad*, the newspaper's editor, M. van Geuns, had remarked: "What strange taste the writer has." By "strange" he meant vulgar. By way of explanation, he added: "However, Dé-lilah's strange taste is more than a coincidence: it has become



so in the environment in which she has been placed, in connection with her upbringing. A cultural-historical phenomenon" (Van Geuns 1900). She did not tolerate this: "As far as my upbringing is concerned, this 'thanks to my guardians' was such that it should have refined my taste rather than making it 'strange' or corrupting it. Your assertions are therefore misplaced" (Dé-Lilah 1900).

The negative reviews must have given the publisher some second thoughts. It explains why the sequel to this travelogue, *Klausine Klobben bij de overburen*, which she had sent him, was never published. Fortunately, the manuscript was saved, so it may yet be published after 120 years.<sup>7</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Despite all the criticism – and sometimes rightly so, as Dé-Lilah fails to live up to her example – Klausine Klobben on Java is an extraordinary travel story. It is the account of an early tourist trip, made at a time when it was dangerous for a woman alone to travel across Java and climb volcanoes. The protagonist is a typical example of a female hero: she was often afraid, but did not let that stop her from doing what she intended. It was no less courageous to admit that she was Eurasian. This was a sensitive issue in the colony, as the reviews also indicate. It earned her the reproach that she was too close to the indigenous population and no longer fully complied with the European standards and values of the coloniser. Finally, this travel story is exceptional because by following Stinde's example, she managed to write a more or less satirical story about tourist travel on Java, at a time when tourism had hardly begun in the Netherlands East Indies, if at all.

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