

# Station to Station

Review >  
Southeast Asia

The twin volumes on railway stations in Java and Sumatra by Michiel van Ballegoijen de Jong are the work of a successful dilettante. Only a lover of trains and railways could have stubbornly collected so much information. The scientific importance is limited, but railway lovers will revel in these books.

By Freek Colombijn

Michiel van Ballegoijen de Jong has carried out painstaking research in Dutch and Indonesian archives to collect data on the building history of the railways on Java and Sumatra in colonial times. Van Ballegoijen de Jong has made several trips to Indonesia where he followed old train tracks, also of lines that are no longer in use. Judging by the description of his fieldwork, many people have been very helpful. For example, engine drivers slowed down at small, deserted stations to allow the author to jump off the train, or they even briefly halted so that he could take photographs. The author is surely a persuasive talker; both volumes were produced with the

help of a dozen commercial sponsors. The eight years between the publication of the Java and Sumatra volume show how much work has gone into these books.

Both books begin with a lavishly illustrated introduction, followed by a description of the various lines and accompanying illustrations. 'I have tried to give as much a comprehensive picture as possible', he writes in the Java volume (p. 10). Indeed, he presents countless photographs from the stations in colonial times or taken by himself in the 1990s. Often a colonial and a recent photo are paired to show the changes, or lack of them. Most photographs are of the stations, but there are also photos of timetables, construction details, and nameplates. Pho-

tos of architectural drawings show discoloration and creases. The accompanying text is kept to the minimum. The material is conveniently arranged, railway by railway.

The book on Sumatra has a broader outline than the Java book. Attention is also paid to the scenic and spectacular bridges. Some illustrations show trains, conspicuously lacking in the Java book. There is also more focus on the wider environment. This becomes clear from the reproduction of colonial city plans and photographs of important buildings in the main places, also when they are not directly related to the railway. This makes the Sumatra book more varied than its Javanese twin.

The texts give basically a diachronic and anecdotal account of the devel-



opment of the network, railway by railway. What is lacking is a thorough analysis of the financing of the railways, the political and financial interests of private companies and local governments to have a railway constructed, the tension between state and private companies, the rivalry between railway and other means of transport, and the role of railways in subjugating and integrating the archipelago. Again, this makes the books more interesting for lovers of railways than for historians with a colonial interest. ◀

- Van Ballegoijen de Jong, Michiel, *Spoorwegstations op Java*, Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw (1993) 240 pp., ISBN 90-6707-318-0.
- Van Ballegoijen de Jong, Michiel, *Stations en spoorbruggen op Sumatra 1876-1941*, Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw (2001) 416 pp., ISBN 90-6707-512-4.

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