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Jef Last's *Zuiderzee*: The Price of Progress

Jef Last was born in the Hague in 1898, the son of a ship's captain. He attended Leiden University and studied Chinese, but while there he joined the socialist party, and his father promptly cut off his allowance. As a result he took a variety of jobs during the 1920s, and in his choices we can see his future interests. His solidarity with the workers no doubt led him to protest at conditions in a textile mill where he worked, because there was a strike and he was fired. He was also a sailor in the merchant marine, and in later years he worked for the seamen's union called the International Transport Federation. Once in New York he was a travelling salesman for a photographic portrait studio called Rembrandt Studios, some of whose customers thought they were sitting for Rembrandt; one of Last's later activities was as head of the cinematographic department of the NVV labour union. He also taught school, and after 1945 he did so again, on Bali. While in New York he continued his studies, at Columbia, and these finally led, in 1960, to a doctorate from the University of Hamburg on the modern Chinese novelist Lu Hsün, who had interested him all his life. This achievement meant that the government, which had once imprisoned him and taken away his citizenship, now sent him letters calling him *Weledelzeergeleerde Heer*. He was also duly honoured for his work in the Resistance as editor of a clandestine newspaper.

Indeed, his chief occupation was always that of journalist and writer. As one might expect of a good journalist on the political Left, he exposed injustice, and some of his exposés were in fictional form. For example, his years-long investigation into the Reichstag fire trial - he personally knew van der Lubbe, the scapegoat - resulted in a novel called *Kruisgang der jeugd*, the background of which is the widespread despair among young Germans during the Depression. Similarly a visit to Urk in the early 1930s to document the effects on its population of the end of their fishery, led to the novel *Zuiderzee*, published in 1934[1].

The events of this novel extend from the great storm of 1916 which finally leads the government to close off the *Zuiderzee*, through the long hard struggle to connect Wieringen to Holland, the closure of the Wieringermeer and the creation of the Northwest Polder in 1930, and the completion of the Afsluitdijk in 1932, to an undated (and presumably imaginary) record-breaking storm and flood which the great dyke successfully withstands. We see the lives, through this long period, of many people, but principally of the two fishermen Toen and Auke; Toen's sister Sistke and her second husband Wibren Sibesma, a Friesian peasant; his sister Boukje, and another in-law, the engineer Brolsma, who is in charge of the dyke-building. None of them end their days happily. Toen falls through the ice and drowns; Boukje drowns herself; Sibesma loses his farm; Brolsma marries a rich shrew from the Hague to advance his career, knowing that Boukje loved him and he rejected her; Auke is left all alone with memories of his good friend Toen and of Boukje whom he was engaged to but neglected.

These human tragedies, however, take second place much of the time to the epic struggle to build the dyke, and to the ruinous effects of the Depression and the destruction of the fishery. The benefits of the whole exercise seem far outweighed by the disastrous results. To be sure, the whole conception of reclaiming land, especially on such a scale, captures the imagination. It is a peaceful way of gaining land, compared with war - we shall see Last develop a striking parallel to drive this point home - but more than that, it is a creation by man which rivals God's. (God created the world, says the proverb, but the Dutch created Holland). The chapter describing the pumping out of the Wieringermeer repeatedly refers to the account of the Creation as told in Genesis. After the polder is pumped out, we read: "And the earth was without form, and void." (170; Gen. 1:2). Further on we read: "Man responded to the man's call ["the man" is Cornelis Lely, who spent his life trying to get the government to adopt his plan to close and drain the *Zuiderzee*], man came and divided the water from

the water." (171; Gen. 1:6). And later we read:

> And man said, let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind; and it was so. (172; Gen. 1:11)

And one last quotation from Genesis which no doubt justifies any arrogance implied by the previous ones: God Himself said:

> Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (173; Gen. 1:29)

But we may suspect that God did not incur massive delays and cost overruns; nor did He cut corners with the result that parts of His work had to be done over, at further costs, as happens to locks and seawalls in the case of the human creation. Nor did he submit test boring samples not taken from the site they were represented to be from, with the result that the engineers thought there was good subsoil in a place where there was only sand. Untold millions are made dishonestly on this project. The contractor pays fl1.40 per ton of sand delivered to one site, then reports to the government that he paid fl2.40. Above all, the employees work long hours in inhuman conditions, the 1,100 men sleep in crude barracks designed to hold 100, with no food save what can be brought to the site in cans, and no facilities to do anything except work and sleep. The foremen demand bribes to sign the men on, without their overtime pay, and send them on night shifts so as to sleep with their wives. And at the end the men are laid off for good.

Another image Last evokes, despite his insistence that this is a peaceful undertaking, is that of trench warfare. There are, he tells us, two major battles in the history of the building of the dyke, but they aren't exciting, so you won't learn about them in history class. (182) And indeed his powerful descriptions of the mud and the constant assaults of the sea are very reminiscent of accounts of the first world war. But one may think that the sea is not the only enemy.

It is not only the Depression that causes the misery seen in this novel: it is man's inhumanity to man. Peasants cannot pay the rent demanded by the landowner, so they are sold up; the peasants, spurred on by the communists, refuse to buy the foreclosed-on property, so the police ride into the crowd at the auction and split a few heads. Be it said that Sibesma's landlord, the folklorist and poet Count Minnema, loses his property too, between his tenants defaulting on the rent and the stock market crash, and he ends up as local secretary of a fascist party. The various interest groups being driven to the wall become politically polarized.

The most pathetic victims of events, however, are the fishermen, and none more so than the fishermen of Urk, for as we shall see, it is not in their bones to revolt. The Depression is bad enough for them, but in addition, ever since 1916, the government has set about putting them out of business. At first they are promised a reasonable indemnity, but in 1925 Prime Minister Colijn sharply reduces the amount and restricts it to those who were registered as fishermen in 1918. By 1932 there aren't many of those left, and they alone, once the dyke is closed, receive permits to fish, and then only in defined areas. The next step is to forbid fishing for eels, the only creatures still alive in the Ijsselmeer's water, which has unexpectedly gotten saltier instead of fresher. It is probably not a coincidence that one character, quite early in the novel, mentions the millions of people starving in Russia, as a result of the government taking away the peasants' land.

And it is this deliberate policy which kills a way of life, and which specifically kills some of the novel's characters. For if life on the farm had not become intolerable, Boukje would not have become the maid of Brolsma, who she loves but who rejects her; and Toen and Auke would not have been skating home from Kampen on their way back from an unsuccessful attempt to find work in Amsterdam - indeed, there would have been no ice, for a freeze-up was impossible before the dyke was built.

Last's novel contains a lot of facts and figures. There are those who disapprove of putting such things in novels, but the facts related here, the whole vast project, is itself dramatic, epic, cries out to be in a novel. Everything depends on the skill with which the facts and figures are introduced, and to my mind Last's skill is considerable. A good place to examine any such novel on this point is Chapter 2, because it is a standard procedure for such a work to have an opening chapter or section which is purely fictitious and wins the reader's suspension of disbelief, only to bury him or her under an avalanche of facts in the next one. Last is a better journalist and writer than that.

His Chapter 2, as one might expect, gives the background to the decision to reclaim the *Zuiderzee*, but he does not baldly open with that; he frames the chapter in a fight between two gangs of Urk children playing at war (it is 1916). From here we move to a cabinet meeting; the statistics on the expected economic advan-

tages of the reclamation are put in the mouths of ministers. The history of Lely's forty-year struggle to commit successive governments to the project is introduced in a perhaps less satisfactory manner: he takes pen in hand to sign the draft bill, but pauses to recollect how long he has worked for this moment. From there we return to Urk and the boys playing at Allies and Germans. This is a springboard for more facts and figures, but here we see Last's skill at bringing certain facts home to his readers:

"Go on, Auke! hit him! come on, Hindenburg, come on, General Joffre!" Even the schoolboys of Urk know the names of the two champions under whose command 4,000 km of trenches have been dug, from the Swiss Alps to the North Sea. Fifteen times the length of the dyke from Wieringen to Piaam. The total length of the arms and legs amputated during the world war is ten times that of the proposed dyke. The hulls of the ships torpedoed and blown up could have built it three times over, with some to spare. That's why all the kids of Urk know the name of Hindenburg and Joffre but have never heard of Lely.

And above all, Last points out, millions of men died in the recovery of Alsace from Germany, but the reclamation of all this land from the sea will not cost a single life. Later in the novel, of course, he will describe the price paid, but here his enthusiasm for such peaceful undertakings is evident. One remembers that he also wrote a life of the seventeenth century reclamation engineer who took the name of Leeghwater. Yet he also sings a hymn of praise to the old way of life that this bold project will destroy:

They believe less in the reality of Lely and his projects than in the reality of the witch who lights the St. Elmo's fire on the masts and bowsprits, by way of warning. The young people know that the herring is followed by the anchovy and the anchovy by the eel, just as after marbles come hoops and after hoops come tops. For them, plaice and smelt are realities. The people of Harderwijk and Lemmer believe in smelt and plaice and rayfish, and in their vocation to bring these fish to the surface with nets and trawls. They believe in the barges of Lemster, the skiffs of Stavoren, in luggers and cutters, as their ancestors believed in the inexhaustible abundance of the sea, in divine grace, in their inherited sailing skills and the effectiveness of their strong arms.

How could they believe in the effectiveness of a thin pencil line drawn across a map somewhere by an engineer? Of course they can't!

Clearly at the end of Chapter 2, we are out of the statistics and back to human reality. But there will be more of the former, for the picture Last has to present to us is highly complicated. In every chapter, he has to give us background, and to this end he does two things. Firstly, he introduces characters who represent different aspects of the whole, who are related to each other, but whom we follow into different spheres. For example, Brolsma meets the privileged people of The Hague who profit from misery, such as an unscrupulous contractor who threatens to reveal the gross cost overruns of the project if he is not given a piece of the action.

Secondly, the characters so introduced get into discussions, often quite heated. Thus, the history of all the projects to reclaim the *Zuiderzee* in past centuries are reviewed in the course of an argument between Brolsma and Minnema, who is a friend of his but is so ignorant as to prefer to Lely's plan certain older and more wild-eyed proposals that he has read about. Likewise the question of whether the fishermen will benefit from the dyke or not is argued out between Brolsma and the father of the chief character, Toen. You will be free of the fear of flooding, says Brolsma. Perhaps and perhaps not, replies Toen's father, but the *Zuiderzee* has fearsome squalls and it would be fatal if you were driven onto the dyke, and if Urk ceases to be an island how can you take shelter in its lee? Always Last is concerned to present both - indeed, all - sides of all the arguments, like the clearsighted person and scrupulous journalist that he is.

It will be apparent that the sea itself, so to speak, has two sides to it. It destroys, but it also provides a livelihood, not just for the fishing families, but also for boatbuilders, ships' chandlers and sailmakers, middlemen and fishmongers. This double role is evoked in the opening pages. Little Toen is watching a storm. (The book is about storms, and they form its structure). Here, then, are the opening lines of the novel:

The black waves, crested with foam, beat furiously on the steep shore of the island.
Foam, spray, rain [...]
Above the sea spreads the grey curtain of a slashing rain-squall. Fiercely attacking the hill, the wind hurls flecks of foam mingled with sand and rolls them to Toen's feet [..]
Now there is nothing but a distress of wind and water. (5-6)

But Toen enjoys this. He doesn't care that other places around the sea are flooded, with loss of life. Rather his attention is drawn to the sail of Douwe's cutter, which is out in the storm. '"That man is a real devil [...] The day his foresail tore loose from its edging, off Terschelling, and he couldn't tack any more, he ran

straight before the wind all the way to Norway."'

And that name makes Toen dream, for Norway was the home of the Vikings: '"Kings of the sea, father says, who follow the coasts to rob and slaughter. When one of those kings dies, they build his catafalque on his ship, and send it out to sea with the hull on fire and all sails set. Pagan, they say! Pagans like that are worth more than so-called Christian schoolmasters!"' (Toen has just been thrown out of school). Note, in the previous quotation, the use of the present tense: an ancient past is still present in this old place.

The older generation, of course, know more about the destructiveness of the sea, and they do not reject the Christian faith; on the contrary it is their great support. Toen's sister Sistke, in her grief - her first husband has just drowned before her eyes, ironically on his farm, by falling into a flooded ditch - says she wishes the damn sea would dry up. (More irony: the government has just tabled legislation to accomplish this, but nobody on Urk knows that yet). Her words shock everyone; what would happen to us all, she is asked, if the sea no longer existed? Her oldest brother would still be alive, she replies. (His boat hit a mine). And before this terrible paradox, only one word of consolation exists, and miserable consolers are they who must use it: the Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord. Likewise the local opinion of the peasants who refused to leave their flooded land till they had to be rescued from their roofs, is: '"To delay like that, to cling to earthly possessions, is impious. It's tempting God!"'

But this same quietism lets them go like lambs to the slaughter when the fishery is destroyed. We are told early on that it will be. Brolsma and Minnema's discussion concerns not only the various reclamation projects devised over the centuries, but also the question of preservation versus progress. Minnema foresees the destruction of a way of life unchanged since the 17th century, and is saddened. Brolsma recalls how much of the heritage is lost all the time by natural causes, for example, in the flooding on Marken:

> All the heritage was washed away too, all the tradition: the smoothing irons, the linen chests, the old pictures, the wedding clogs with buckle and buttons! I bet you those new houses there look as stupid as those on the Nieuwstraat on Urk. Main sewage and toilets! And the old one-holers squatting down at the foot of the dyke looked great!

Even the boat on which they are having their discussion, a lovely sailing cutter, is about to be changed into a noisy monster. It is getting an engine, which will prove unsatisfactory, and which not even a thousand guilders' worth of repairs will get to work properly. This seems an apt symbol of the future in store for the people of Urk. The fisherfolk do not take kindly to doing something else for a living. Toen's sister Sistke, as I have said, marries a peasant, and when he dies she marries another one. The unremitting toil from dawn to dark rapidly turns the prettiest, most exciting girl, the most tireless dancer on Urk, into a joyless puritanical person obsessed with falling prices. The peasant's sister Boukje, a sort of unpaid hired hand, dreams only of getting out. As for Toen and Auke, they try their hand at all manner of jobs, and at the end of the day one is unemployed and the other is dead. A traditional way of life has gone. Moreover, 1,100 men worked to build the dyke, then there was no more work; its completion gave them no cause to celebrate. Another 1,100 families were to colonize the Wieringermeer, but it was found that with modern equipment 300 people could do the job. None of them were the peasants who had lost their land to foreclosures and were hired as foremen for the polderization process: pumping, earth moving, fertilizer spreading - all done with huge machines and not many men. Capitalism breeds unemployment and takes away human dignity, and uses the government and the police to this end. A high price to pay, even for such a magnificent vision as the reclamation of the *Zuiderzee*. Last understands the view that the creation of the Ijsselmeer is a superb achievement, but he also sees very clearly the suffering that, combined with the Depression and the usual dishonesty and inhumanity of capitalism, it brings in its train. The interest of his novel lies in precisely this irreducible complexity of all human activity.

NOTES

1 / *Zuiderzee* was first published in 1934 (Amsterdam: Querido). The German translation, by Harry Wilde, appeared in 1936 (Paris: Éditions du Carrefour), and the French translation, by Eckman, in 1938 (Paris: Gallimard). This latter version is the only one now available. The English quotations in this article were translated by me from the French.