

Jan Jacob Slauerhoff

by Arie Pos

Jan Jacob Slauerhoff (1898-1936) is one of the most important writers of twentieth-century Dutch literature and his poetry and prose continue to fascinate large numbers of readers. Born in Leeuwarden, the provincial capital of Friesland in the cold north of the Netherlands, he was asthmatic from an early age and could only breathe more freely during summer holidays on the island of Vlieland. He studied medicine at Amsterdam University from 1916 to 1923, and published his first poems in student magazines and literary reviews. After making sea trips to France and Portugal he decided to become a ship's doctor. His first collection of poetry, *Archipel*, was published at the end of November 1923 and a week after he took his Hippocratic Oath.

In early 1924 he was on his way to the Dutch East Indies (modern Indonesia) to start a floating doctor's life in the Far East. However, shortly before his arrival in Batavia (modern Jakarta) he suffered a lung haemorrhage, later diagnosed as a first sign of tuberculosis. He returned to the Netherlands to recover and worked for short periods as a locum before returning to Batavia, where he signed a contract with the Java-China-Japan Line in September 1925. For two years he served as a doctor on the 'coolie boats' that transported Chinese plantation workers to and from Java and took other passengers and freight to Hong Kong and the ports on China's south and east coasts.

From 1928 to 1931 Slauerhoff worked on the luxurious Royal Holland Lloyd ocean liners, sailing from their home port of Amsterdam to South America. He often recuperated from illness in Holland, and during one of his sick leaves he met the dancer Darja Collin, whom he married in September 1930. Darja gave birth to a still-born son in April 1932, a tragic event which affected Slauerhoff deeply and destabilised their marriage. Half a year later he started the first of five voyages to Africa as a doctor for the Holland West Africa Line.

In 1934 he set up a private medical practice in Tangier but after half a year he gave it up and went back to Holland where his divorce from Darja Collin was granted. He returned to sea and travelled to South America and then to Africa. In Mozambique he contracted a severe form of malaria which, in combination with his tuberculosis, proved fatal. After a year of vain hopes of recovery in convalescent homes in Italy, Switzerland and Holland, Slauerhoff died in Hilversum on 5 October 1936 at the age of 38.

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