

A NEW HISTORY OF ROTTERDAM ZOO

BY A.C. VAN BRUGGEN

This year has seen the publication, under the title 'Something grand and extraordinary: 150 years Rotterdam Zoo', of a magnificent treatise covering the period 1857–2007.¹ The introduction shows this to be 'eight books in one cover'. These are the following: (1) A 21st century zoological garden, by the director, T. Dorresteyn; (2) A zoo is made by people, by E. van Vliet (board, directors, staff, buildings); (3) What did it look like, by M. Hanning (1857–1940, plans and buildings); (4) Plants in the zoo, by W. van den Broek and J. van Dam (Rotterdam Zoo has always had an outstanding collection of exotic plants, nowadays housing the national *Bromelia* and *Primula* collections); (5) A baroque new zoological garden, by R. van Herk (1939, architecture and building the new zoo); (6) The renaissance of Blijdorp, by A. Gerritsen (the new masterplan and its execution); (7) The animal collection, by L. Noordermeer; (8) History, by F. Hazewinkel (the complete history, with a somewhat limited and selective 'time line').

I have a vague recollection of the old Rotterdam Zoo, perhaps dating back to 1938; I only distinctly remember the famous sea lion enclosure and generally a magnificent and rich collection. The new Rotterdam Zoo was one of the very few zoological gardens designed and built as a whole by a single architect. I have visited the new location frequently since shortly after the war. At that time the architecture was quite prominent, even overbearing here and there, mainly because of the scarcity of greenery, and the place looked a bit stark. Today, over half a century later, trees and shrubs have matured, more have been planted, and most of the architecture has disappeared behind a green cloak.

The book traces the history from the modest beginnings of a little hobby garden of some railway employees to the zoological gardens in the centre of town. The institution, under the guidance of and supported by the local élite, flourished, but eventually its exclusivity proved to be a burden and the general public was allowed unlimited access. In the 1930s the garden was in a financial crisis and was forced to part with its much-coveted plot in the middle of Rotterdam. Financial support from a local foundation (Stichting Volkskracht) made the new zoo in Blijdorp, a western suburb, possible. The zoo was designed and built in great detail by the architect Sybold van Ravesteyn, not always with the approval of the director, Dr K. Kuiper, who, incidentally, rather wanted to create a zoo on the basis of Hagenbeckian principles. The intervention of the Second World War destroyed what was left of the old zoo (already closed to the public) during the tenacious defence of the city against the German invaders in May 1940, followed

by the disastrous bombing of the centre of Rotterdam. Many animals were killed, most of the dangerous ones early in the battle by order of the Dutch military authorities. This hastened the process of moving to Blijdorp.

Rotterdam Zoo recruited two of its most prominent directors, A.A. van Bemmelen and Dr J. Büttikofer, from the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie (National Museum of Natural History, Leiden). Later another director, Dr A.C.V. van Bemmel, was employed in Leiden as a museum specialist after his resignation from the zoo. Dr Agatha Gijzen (1904–1985, author of a Ph.D. thesis on the history of the Leiden museum), the first academically trained full-time zoologist at Antwerp Zoo, learned the tricks of the trade shortly before and during the Second World War in Rotterdam from the then director Dr Kuiper. Sadly, she is not mentioned in the Rotterdam book. Unfortunately there is no proper list of directors, so in Table 1 I list what I have gleaned from this book and other sources.

For me as a zoologist the chapter by Noordermeer on the animals is the most interesting. The collections in the old gardens were comprehensive (although there was no proper aquarium), but in the 1930s there appears to have been no accommodation for large mammals such as hippopotamus, giraffe and rhinoceros – animals obviously sorely missed by the public. At long last a black rhinoceros (1931–1943) was acquired; this animal was housed in makeshift accommodation. Notwithstanding the poor quarters, there were always elephants (since 1867), frequently more than one. Among the early elephants the African savanna elephant was repeatedly and successfully represented (e.g. 1873–1903). The first real elephant house was that on the new location in 1940. Today there is a plethora of large animals, all in the context of breeding programmes. I have selected some major events from this chapter which are listed below (Table 2).

Initially science did not play as prominent a part in Rotterdam as it did in Amsterdam. There was no university in Rotterdam until long after the Second World War, and it still does not have a science faculty. Nevertheless some research was done and published, mainly by various directors, throughout the zoo's history. The elephant louse (*Haematomyzus elephantis*) was discovered and described by board member Dr E. Piaget in 1869 (*Tijdschr. Ent.* 12: 249–254) from a young elephant at the zoo (there is no mention of which species is involved here). The year is wrongly quoted as 1873 on p. 302 in the book's 'time line' (see also p. 224). Dr Kuiper wrote about a black Malayan tapir (*Proc. Zool. Soc. London*, 1926: 425–426, with photos); this form from the Palembang area of Sumatra had a normal juvenile pelage turning completely black when maturing. This is not mentioned in the book under review. When writing about a couple of striped juveniles of 'babirusa' on p. 242, Noordermeer states that (translated from the Dutch) 'the "babirusa" battalion of riflemen in [northern] Celebes [Sulawesi] presented its [departing] commander with two babirusa, to be brought up in Blijdorp Zoo. It appears that these were not babirusa but two common, still very young, wild boar.' Indeed, juvenile babirusa are not striped as is usual among many members of the pig tribe. However, Noordermeer's statement that they were ordinary wild boar is incorrect – these piglets appear to have been one of the rarest species ever exhibited in Rotterdam Zoo! When growing up they were found to represent the Celebes pig (*Sus celebensis*), as shown in a well-illustrated paper by Appelman, later the zoo's director (*Zool. Garten N.F.* 21: 152–156, 1955; see also Mohr, 1960, *Wilde Schweine*: 50–55). This threatened species is nowadays perhaps only to be seen (if at all) in an Indonesian zoo. A new chapter was opened when the zoologist Dr L.E.M. de Boer (no portrait; nowadays director of Apenheul,

¹ *Iets Grootsch & Buitengewoons. 150 Jaar Rotterdamse Diergaarde* edited by A. Gerritsen. Published by Diergaarde Blijdorp/Rotterdam Zoo as No. 166 of the Historische Reeks of the Historisch Genootschap Roterdamum, 2007. 304 pp., numerous illustrations in colour and b/w, 28 × 21 cm (A4), hardback. ISBN 978-90-75111-03-3. €29.50 (= c. £20.00) [also DVD for €7.50, or book plus DVD €35.00].

Apeldoorn) was the first scientist to be in charge of a research section (1976–1988). He played a major role in the crucial late 1970s and early 1980s, and particularly influenced the development of a master plan. The implementation of this plan eventually led to the complete renaissance of the zoo.



Kali, the black rhinoceros (1931–1943), was initially housed in makeshift quarters in the old zoo, before being moved to the new location. His travelling keeper, Nassar, returned to Tanganyika. (Photo: early 1930s)

The various phases at Blijdorp are well covered by chapters 5, 6 and 8. Van Ravesteyn's architecture consisted of a major complex, various major and some smaller buildings and ponds in (mostly white) concrete, and a number of wooden stables for ungulates – from a zootechnical point of view these barns were eminently suitable for their occupants, and indeed most are still used for their original purpose. The transformation from what is called a 'baroque zoo', where Van Ravesteyn's architecture was paramount and overbearing, into a park where the animals are mostly housed under seemingly natural conditions in a biogeographical context, is probably the most significant development in the whole history of the zoo. This process was also fostered by acquisition of a substantial extension beyond the railway on the western side of the zoo.

All the book's chapters are sound and comprehensive – the editor has done a great job in trying to prevent repetition. Only the last chapter on the history gives a number of sources. Illustration is copious and magnificent and consists of old lithographs, old and modern photos, and documents. The historic pictures and photos are particularly interesting. However, the only portraits of directors shown are those of Martin and Büttikofer; Kuiper is featured in various photographs. A proper portrait of the present director, Dorresteyn, the dynamic

Table 1. Directors of Rotterdam Zoo (compiled from Van Zwieten, 1982, *125 Jaar Diergaarde 1857–Mei–1982*, and the book under discussion).

1857–1866	P.H. Martin
1867–1897	A.A. van Bemmelen
1897–1924	Dr J. Büttikofer
1924–1942	Dr K. Kuiper (interrupted by the Second World War)
1942–1945	H.J. Oosterhuis (appointed by the German occupation authorities)
1945–1947	Dr K. Kuiper (returned after the war)
1947	Dr D. Tollenaar (<i>ad interim</i> for about six months)
1947–1957	F. Siewertsz van Reesema
1957–1961	F.J. Appelman
1961–1969	Dr. A.C.V. van Bemmel (joint director with M.C. Bloemers)
1962–1969	M.C. Bloemers
1969–1970	F. Siewertsz van Reesema (<i>ad interim</i>)
1970–1988	D. van Dam
1988 to present	A.M. Dorresteyn



Hatching ostriches with two keepers and the director, Dr K. Kuiper (on the left). (Photo: 1930s)

has expertly led the splendid renaissance of the zoo, is sorely missed. On p. 107 (top) there is an early picture of a carnivore house dated at c. 1860; this rang a bell with me, and indeed it appears to be a drawing of the early carnivore house in Amsterdam (c. 1855)! Unfortunately there is no index. Although the book is wholly in Dutch, it is well worth its price for non-Dutch speakers because of the copious and beautiful illustrations depicting all aspects of 150 years of Rotterdam

Zoo. This is a valuable contribution to zoo history in the Netherlands – in fact, so far it is the best modern book available on the history of any of the Dutch zoological gardens.

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Table 2. Some important animal events at Rotterdam Zoo, 1857–2007, extracted from the chapter by L. Noordermeer. [This shows that at both locations animal management was and is of a very high standard.]

1868 – First lowland anoa birth in the zoo world. This birth has been followed by many more (e.g. 1877, 1878, 1889, 1902) throughout the past 150 years. Rotterdam Zoo has always been quite successful with these miniature buffalo.

1872 – First great white pelican breeding in the zoo world, followed by more in 1878 and 1899.

1880 – Breeding of European hares, an event repeated in 1880, 1881, 1883 and 1893–1895. Breeding hares in zoological gardens is difficult indeed, and in the 19th century this certainly was a great achievement.

1895 – A Spix's macaw sold to an animal dealer in London for £5. Nowadays this species is on the verge of extinction!

1906 – A female Sumatran serow (*Capricornis sumatraensis*) arrived, who lived until 1909. (Another was imported in 1914.) A pelican obtained from Amsterdam Zoo in 1859 died, having reached a longevity of 50 years. Two tuataras (*Sphenodon punctatus*) died (arrival not mentioned).

1930 – The gorilla Alfred was housed for a few months in Rotterdam before departing to Bristol, where he became a star attraction until 1948. However, the first gorilla (price £75) had already arrived in 1900; unfortunately it died after a short time.

1940 – The new zoo is opened to the public.

1951 – First orang-utan birth in Rotterdam.

1960 – First Congo peacock breeding in the zoo world. First okapi birth in Rotterdam, the start of a successful breeding programme which continues today. First birth of a rhino in the Netherlands (a black rhinoceros – still the only one of this species born in Holland).

1968 – First breeding of dhole (*Cuon alpinus*) in the zoo world outside Asia.

1980 – First gorilla birth in Rotterdam, the beginning of a successful breeding programme which still continues.

1984 – First Indian elephant birth in Rotterdam, the beginning of another successful and continuing breeding programme.

1991 – First breeding of arowana (*Osteoglossum bicirrhosum*) in the zoo world (a juvenile discovered in the tank's outlet!). In the late 1960s this species was first bred in captivity by Tex Maupin, an American amateur.

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