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Maarten Prak. *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Golden Age.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xii + 317 pp. $84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-84352-2; $27.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-60460-4.

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A Comprehensive History of the Dutch "Golden Age"

In 1941, Johan Huizinga published *Dutch Civilization in the Seventeenth Century*, a book of essays on the so-called Golden Age of the Netherlands. Huizinga found it amazing that the newly founded Dutch Republic was so highly developed at cultural and economic levels. Indeed, the Republic could boast of cultural geniuses such as Rembrandt and Vermeer, philosophers such as Spinoza, scientists such as Van Leeuwenhoek, a booming economy, and successful trade organizations such as the Dutch East India Company (VOC). For Huizinga, the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic proved "the exception in early modern Europe." Long before Huizinga, however, Dutch historians investigated the seventeenth century with great delight. During the last decades, the Golden Age has also drawn the attention of scholars outside the Dutch academic world. Maarten Prak has thus performed an amazing feat by synthesizing such extensive literature into a highly accessible study. This book first appeared in Dutch; the current English translation includes both an additional chapter on science and philosophy, and an updated list of sources.

Prak's main objective is to grasp seventeenth-century Dutch history as a product of its past and not as a precursor of modern times (as some economic and social historians have done). He contextualises seventeenth-century Dutch society within early modern Europe, creating a vivacious synthesis through the very accurate description of the lives of various individuals, whether as famous as Spinoza or as unknown as the poor doomed Hermann Verbeeck.

The Dutch Republic, Prak argues, had "A Turbulent Beginning" (the title of chapter 1) in its revolt against Spain. Instead of mingling the origins of this revolt into the debate, however, he focuses on the financial and geographical advantages of the "Northern" provinces, and especially of Holland, during the battle with Spain. He first discusses how the Dutch revolt gave birth to "An Independent State" (chapter 2), which, from 1609-1650, struggled with internal conflicts over religious orthodoxy and peace negotiations with Spain. Subsequently, from 1650-1713, this consolidated independent state assumed the role of "A World Power" (chapter 3). The Republic could only survive, he argues, because of its "Armed Forces" (chapter 4) and its significance as a "Financial Might" (chapter 5). In these chapters the author carefully applies Geoffrey Parker's thesis of the military revolution to the Dutch armed forces, both on land and sea. He also draws attention to the role of Maurits of Nassau in the development of new warfare tactics, and to the importance of fortifications to protect the core area of the Dutch Republic. This impressive war machinery, he argues, was supported by a well-functioning financial system. The taxes were collected on the local level by private individuals, and while the absence of an over-reaching control created possibilities for corruption, the small scale of tax collection inspired investors with faith and confidence to lend their money to the state.

The second part of the study deals with the Dutch economy and society during the Golden Age. Prak argues that the Dutch Republic overcame its natural liabilities in the seventeenth century by investing in the grain trade, although this process did not take place in every part of the Dutch territory. The import of basic goods freed resources for investment in shipping and in the textile industry. The Dutch trade system, he argues, was also a "Market Economy" (chapter 6), in which different sectors were interlocked, and the Republic engaged in a "Worldwide Trading Network" (chapter 7) by means of the Dutch West India Company and the East India Company. Yet the author does not qualify the Dutch economy as "modern," even though its development created a high level of wealth in many Western European countries (although still less than the growth later triggered by the Industrial Revolution). These economic developments also strengthened and enriched the Dutch middle classes, specifically the merchants and entrepreneurs

(chapter 8). It was from this group that the town regents were recruited. Many Dutch nobles were left to promote themselves as merely cultural leaders, although in more eastern provinces they still played a prominent political role comparable to other European countries. Unfortunately, as Prak points out, the Golden Age was also a period of increasing social inequality. He describes the concrete situations of the working class and the poor, of whom much less is known, and he gives a lot of attention to the network of institutions designed to care (and sometimes repress) this group.

The third part of Prak's work unravels the politics and governance of local communities, paying attention to issues of citizenship and to urban institutions such as guilds and civic militias. He argues here that not only the increasing economic inequality, but also differences over religious opinion and between social networks inspired riots and civil disturbance (chapters 9 and 10). In the end, he states, the frictions within and between the cities, the provincial states, and the States-General made the political structure of the Dutch Republic into something of a "Dissonant Chorus" (chapter 11).

The fourth and last part of the book, "An Urban Society," loosely gathers other important topics on the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Of these the most charged is that of toleration in Dutch society (chapter 13). Here the author clearly explains the reasons for and the limits of the religious pluralism of the Low Countries. In the following chapter (chapter 14), he addresses how the urban landscape and trade also influenced the development of quite remarkable scientific and philosophic developments, and how the absence of a tradition of scientific research helped the flourishing of different disciplines. In a chapter on Dutch painting (chapter 15), he tells of the bitter fortune of Vermeer, struggling to survive in his time and only "discovered" after his death. The story of this individual painter is also contrasted with the Dutch painting industry as a whole. He then discusses how "The Urban Landscape" (chapter 16) was a definite and remarkable characteristic of the Dutch Republic. Finally, in his conclusion, Prak argues that the Golden Age ended slowly, even if the state bankruptcy of 1715 symbolically marked the fact that the Dutch Republic had now become a "normal" state.

Maarten Prak gives a remarkable overview of this indubitably fascinating period. His book can serve both as an introduction for the less informed reader and a complementary study for the highly specialized scholar. On the other hand, the book's character as a synthesis leaves little room for question or debate, although the study does handle problematic topics with a certain ease. Given this consideration, the book presents a noteworthy comprehensive history of the Golden Age, rather than the "innovative" study promised by the Cambridge editors.

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