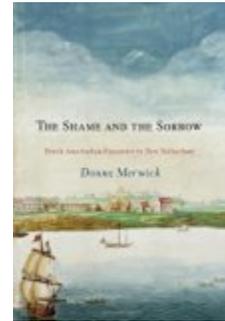


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Donna Merwick. *The Shame and the Sorrow: Dutch Amerindian Encounters in New Netherland*. Early American Studies Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. Maps. ix + 332 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3928-7.

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New Netherland's Heart of Darkness

Reading Donna Merwick's study of Dutch and Amerindian encounters in New Netherland, one is reminded of Joseph Conrad's portrayal of the colonizers' psychological descent from civilized norms in the nineteenth-century Belgian Congo: "Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery close in around." As Conrad's enigmatic narrator, Marlow, had it, "there is no initiation into such mysteries and to live in the midst of the incomprehensible is detestable. It has a fascination that goes to work on men, imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerlessness, disgust, the surrender, the hate." [1] As a nation of mariners and "along-shore people" (p. 8), the Dutch eschewed the march inland. Drawing upon the experience and success of its East Indian namesake and guided by a distinctive view of its venture, the West India Company sought no more than stopping places for what it hoped would prove a lucrative colonial commerce with native peoples. It was never part of the Company's plan, initially at least, to acquire territory, settle colonists, and take on the burdens of civil administration.

In this respect Dutch aims differed fundamentally from the ambitions of their more populous English neighbors in New England. The Company and its settlers were timid in their dealings with the Indians, eager to befriend and establish trade, and equally keen to acknowledge native sovereignty, thereby establishing their own title to lands bought from original native possessors. New Netherland was an enterprise to be abandoned when the

riches ran out; Fort Amsterdam, constructed on the lower reaches of Manhattan, faced outwards to repel invaders from the sea. Yet this noninterventionist vision was tragically compromised by pressure of circumstances and unintended consequences resulting from shifts in policy. In her provocative and moving book Merwick describes how the Dutch underwent an experience akin to Conrad's degradation of the human spirit, culminating with the shame and sorrow of European Amerindian conflicts of the 1640s and 1650s.

The change in Dutch fortunes began with the introduction of patroonships intended to embolden the Company's increasingly presumptuous territorial claim. The scheme granted large tracts of land and manorial rights to shareholders who agreed to purchase their allocations from the Indian owners and thereafter to settle and administer immigrant communities. The patroons' claim to their lands jostled with and on occasion impinged upon other titles claimed by Indian and English residents. The province became a place of "multiple sovereignties" (p. 70), a patchwork of claims overseen by the West India Company administration and not dissimilar to the pattern of decentralized and centralized authorities of the United Provinces. However, the patroons also brought private colonists who quit their official employment as farm laborers and artisans for the more profitable fur and tobacco trade and the opportunity to secure land of their own. These free traders, or *colonies*, became a disruptive influence, provoking local disagreements and undermining and ultimately terminating the Company's monopoly

of trade. In the early 1640s the Amsterdam shareholders freed up provincial trade for European newcomers while endeavoring to secure the Company's own position by supporting the Mahicans against their Mohawk enemies. Consequently, the Dutch were drawn deeper and deeper into the tangled politics of European-Amerindian relations and the struggle for regional hegemony. When a series of killings and clashes inflamed white-Indian relations, the Company's Director General, Willem Kieft, turned to recently arrived English puritans for assistance.

While the "alongshore" Dutch had been relaxed about proximity to the Indians and were happy to tolerate cultural difference, the English colonial *raison d'être* demanded the erasure of native communities. In John Underhill, who arrived fresh from committing atrocities in the Pequot War (1637), Merwick finds the nemesis to repay Dutch hubris. Following an indiscriminate and murderous assault on the Indian settlement at Pavonia, the Dutch, with puritan support, engaged in a conflict against almost the entire native population of the lower Hudson Valley, leading to two years of sporadic and murderous assaults that drove settlers from their farms and almost wiped out the colony.

Was Kieft's War a tragedy? Clearly it was for the brutalized native peoples whose communities, already decimated by Old World pathogens, had become ensnared in webs of dependency on European goods and armed force. But Merwick's primary concern is with the Dutch and how a fundamentally decent and honorable people were undone by unintended consequences and misfortunes, rather than as a result of any inherent badness or wickedness. Dutch participation in the war against the Indians violated deeply held ideals and beliefs, prompting much introspection and blame-laying that is taken up in the second half of the book. In a provocative reading of Kieft's War, which has curiously escaped the attention lavished on the Pequots and King Philip, Merwick pushes towards a recasting of New Netherland's chronology which has so often turned on the arrival and career of Peter Stuyvesant. In this telling, the terror of Kieft's War provoked widespread criticism of the Company's administration and its failure to adequately secure what had been a growing colonial population. But more than that, the conduct of the war offered critics a grotesque dramatization of the constitutional and moral failings that made the Company an inappropriate and potentially tyrannical administrative authority. In these terms, Merwick reconsiders the outpouring of remonstrances and pamphlets—drawing fascinating contrasts between events in New Netherland and the Europe of the Thirty Years War—as

the settlers propagandized on behalf of their effort to secure local administrative and commercial privileges in the late 1640s and early 1650s. It is this legacy and the settler lobbies that Kieft's War spawned that Stuyvesant had to deal with until the end of Company rule in 1664. In this sense, Merwick makes a persuasive case for Kieft's War as the defining event in the colony's history.

Fans of Merwick's earlier work will find much to savor in her latest. She teases out the import interpretive import of the sparsest of sources: an auctioneer's bill of sale that describes New World timber secured "with the permission of the natives" demonstrates the Company's concern to establish the legitimacy of its trade; a printed, rather than handwritten, permit authorizing a voyage to the colony, indicates the regularizing and systemizing of trade. Her writing style—occasionally allusive, sometimes arch—is not for everyone. In this work, she strikes a balance between the traditional structure of *Possessing Albany* and the narrative vignettes of *Death of a Notary*, using the former to carry the argument and the latter to capture the antagonisms and suspense that exploded into Kieft's War.

As recent scholarly controversies indicate, the records concerning the character of men like Kieft are almost as indeterminate as the landscape they inhabited. Just as Marlow comes to know Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Merwick has to rely on official correspondence, second-hand accounts, and backstabbing gossip by critics and antagonists. The result is a compelling reconsideration of the colony's history, set in the wider context of the history of the United Provinces and their global trading interests. Her reading of the propagandist pamphlet *Breedden-Raedt* in the context of the literature of mid-seventeenth-century European warfare is just one example of the many original views of well-known material that forces readers to think outside the comfortable chronological and spatial boundaries of early American history.

On a more critical note, and for all its passion and originality, *The Shame and the Sorrow* continues the theme of Merwick's earlier work and joins other recent studies in offering a "Dutch" view of the colony's history. This historiographical trend—which began with an admirable scholarly determination to revise an earlier, anglocentric view of the colony's history—may now be risking overcompensation and a batavianized reading that loses sight of New Netherland's English and non-Dutch residents. As Merwick is well aware, the meaning of "Dutch" is extraordinarily difficult to pin down

in the context of the mid-seventeenth century and her use of the term as a general identification contrasts with her precision concerning the settlers' geographic origins and cultural backgrounds in other parts of the text. The Amerindians identified in the title do not feature greatly in the text and readers will continue to rely on specialist studies by scholars such as Neal Salisbury and Daniel Richter. Merwick's thesis occasionally seems a little hard on the free settlers and Company's critics, whose only discernible motive in the aftermath of Kieft's War is to pursue their own material interests and avoid psychic responsibility for the savagery of the hostilities. Yet many of the documents, including *Breedden-Raedt*, arguably betray idealistic and principled pursuits that were in evidence even during the war (in the papers issued by the

Twelve and the Eight Men) and which continue to figure as New Amsterdam settles down in the late 1650s. Finally, one could argue that the appearance of the English as a kind of *deus ex machina* leads them to shoulder an unreasonable amount of the guilt for the bloodletting of Kieft's War. The massacre that contributed to ending the hostilities, at least in Connecticut, is certainly attributable to Underhill. But the Pavonia attack was a Dutch affair. There was, I submit, more than enough shame to go round.

Note

[1]. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902; Penguin Classics, 1985), 31.

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