

# H-Net Reviews

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**Willie F. Page.** *The Dutch Triangle: The Netherlands and the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1621-1664.* New York: Garland Publishing, 1997. xxxv + 262 pp. \$66.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8153-2881-0.

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Willie F. Page, professor of African American Studies at Brooklyn College, has revised his 1975 Ph.D. dissertation to produce a text for undergraduate and graduate students of African and African-American history interested in Atlantic Dutch slavery. To accomplish this goal, he has considered up-to-date secondary sources, condensed his original research text, and included several chapters on African and European history. The result is an informative, convenient-sized book with a medium readability, and few typos.

A special characteristic of the book *The Dutch Triangle* is the author's sensitivity toward the African plight. One of his stated goals was to "shed some light on the Dutch slavery ... from the African perspective" (p. xv). In the chapters dealing with African history, which he took largely from secondary sources, Dr. Page admits that Africans cooperated with Europeans in the slave trade and that some slaves transported to America were already of the slave class. He is diligent, however, to point out that most slaves were simply hostages of the trade, and that very few were slaves before. He further asserts that a set of political and military circumstances that the Portuguese, the Dutch, and other Europeans imposed on the West Africans forced many African kingdoms to cooperate with the slave trade. Stronger nations had driven many coastal kingdoms from the interior before the arrival of the Europeans. Yet with the coming of European tools and weaponry as payment for African slaves, these coastal kingdoms found themselves in power positions and began slave-raiding expeditions against their former enemies. European slave traders used these rivalries to increase tensions among the African kingdoms for their own mercenary purposes. By fomenting war between kingdoms and by introducing superior arms to those cooperating with the trade, the Europeans obligated many unwilling kingdoms to collaborate with them or face enslavement themselves—raid or be raided.

Dr. Page agrees with James Walvin that slavery was wholly an economic institution. Its fundamental intent was to supply inexpensive labor wherever it was practiced. Yet he tries to furnish a view not overly concerned with economics. He does not answer the question about why the Africans were chosen for this opprobrious task, but vividly portrays the slaves' suffering of inhumane abuses and their constant struggle for freedom. From the beginning, the author tries to refute the idea of "Africans as willing participants in their enslavement" (p. xv). No wonder, then, his book is full of examples of Africans that instead of learning to "like" their captivity, adapted to survive and sought their own self-interest in countless forms.

Predictably enough, the most powerful chapters of the book are those written from archival and primary sources. Dr. Page is among the few authorities on the Atlantic Dutch slave trade. After 1621, the WIC (West India Company) operated the Atlantic Dutch trade and on its activities the author focuses his attention. Throughout the book the attentive reader will become aware that one of the author's dominant intentions is to demonstrate that the Dutch were not as benign with the African slaves as historians have portrayed them. In describing the dealings of the Dutch in Brazil, he consistently attempts to interpret the motivations of the Dutch within an international context. Pressed by their wars for independence against Spain and by their lack of natural resources at home, the Dutch sought to grab not only the African slave trade from the Portuguese, but also their most promising colony, Brazil. Exploiting Portugal's weakness within the Spanish empire, the Dutch acquired the Portuguese Atlantic slave trade and their American plantations. This allowed them to control most of the international sugar trade and large amounts of African hostages.

In covering the Dutch in Curacao, part of the

ABC islands (Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao), Dr. Page is more meticulous and interesting. In 1634, after noting Spanish lack of steady settlement, the Dutch sized up this island to be a strategic point for their slave trade and for the production of salt. The settlers, however, continually lacked sufficient food and other supplies. To aggravate the situation, they lived in a constant state of war against the Spanish Main. Ten years after the capturing of the island, the company was still not profiting from its possession as it had originally hoped. Curiously, the bothersome situation in which they lived impelled the Dutch to develop a cooperative relationship with the natives of Aruba. The Aruba natives helped the Dutch in cattle raids against the Spanish in return for protection against the Caribs. Later, the Dutch transported them to Curacao to protect them from Spanish retaliation. Though it was a constant struggle to feed the population, particularly the slaves, the island benefited the company in an important aspect. With the capturing of Elmina and other Portuguese “factories” in West Africa, Curacao became the main Dutch slave trading entrepot in the Western hemisphere. After arriving at Curacao from their (up to twenty-six weeks long) transatlantic voyages, slave traders transported the African hostages to other American colonies.

One of the most attractive features in Dr. Page’s handling of the Dutch in Curacao and the Caribbean is his use of invaluable rich and fresh historical documents. Through their reading, history students will grasp a glimpse of the settlers and slaves’ daily lives, and above all, according to the author’s intentions, the struggles of the Africans and the callousness of the Dutch traders. Correspondence, ship journals and company documents bear witness to the Africans’ poor health, their many deaths, and their relentless efforts to escape. As if these evidences were not enough, the author leads the reader to two documents from the *Curacao Papers* that reveal the Dutch insensitivity to the human tragedy, which they were indeed advancing. According to these papers, Dutch traders treated African children as if they were adults without reference to their parents or family. The journal of the ship *St. Jan* offers further information on the lack of Dutch compassion. The ship left West Africa on August 17 with 219 African men, women and children aboard. When its ill-fated journey ended on November 25, at least 110 of these individuals were dead (p. 134). When there was not enough water (for not having a cooper) or provisions, the Dutch

preferred to throw away part of their human cargo than to unload them temporarily or set them free.

Sections of the chapter dealing with the Dutch experience in New Netherland (New York from 1609-1664) would be appealing even to the lukewarm student. This chapter is full of interesting stories and revealing details. The author, for example, took the time to point out that Henry Hudson’s navigation of *De Groote Riviere*, aside from being credited with the first European exploration of the Hudson region, is also noted for the fact that Hudson introduced the Indians along the river to the consumption of brandy (p. 137). Dr. Page also tells the reader that the story of Jan Rodrigues, a mulatto from Santo Domingo, “shows that Dutch ships had Blacks among their crews prior [to] 1619” (p. 138). Rodrigues’ story is also provocative because he might be the first Black to defend North American Indians against European aggression. I personally find intriguing how the French-Dutch rivalry did not stop the Dutch from going the extra mile in occasionally rescuing French Jesuit missionaries from the Mohawks.

The student interested in European colonialism may find two stimulating topics in the chapter about New Netherland. These topics are the Dutch relations with North American Indians and the political and personal affairs of Dutch leaders that sometimes dictated their colonial policies. Dr. Page provides clear evidence that there was no privileged treatment from the Dutch toward the Indians for any other reason than temporary convenience. They considered the natives as subhuman. According to Dr. Page, historians have been wrong about the Dutch in describing them as pragmatic. The Dutch dealings with the North American Indians are probably the best example of the contrary. Dr. Page finds no pragmatism in the massacre of Raritans who offered no life-threatening situation to the Dutch, but left them with fewer allies. At the heart of their reaction toward the natives was a pervasive disposition that “the attitudes of the Dutch traders toward the Indians were generally shaped in disrespect and contempt” (p. 173).

Despite that the Dutch sometimes seemed better trade bargainers, they were not superior to other European colonizers. They bought land from the Indians primarily due to their precarious situation within the boundaries of English claimed territory. Their lack of religious enforcement was strongly related to the fact that New Netherlanders included Jews, Lutherans, Quakers, English, French, German,

Swedish and even Croatians with at least eighteen languages spoken in the colony (p. 147). None of New Netherland's Director-generals were praiseworthy. Dr. Page describes the one with the most flamboyant tenureship, Willem Kieft, as "both paranoid and superstitious." In 1643 his disconcerting management provoked the worst Indian attack, in which Native Americans killed the renown religious leader Anne Hutchinson. He also alienated many settlers and traders, and on December 10, 1644 he found himself recalled to defend his administration.

The last chapter, "Africans in New Netherland," is by far the best part of the book. In it, Dr. Page is exhaustive and passionate. No document from the New York Historical Manuscripts and other relevant sources appears to have been neglected in his search for the bits and pieces that could help in forming a complete picture of the African plight in the New Netherlands. Dr. Page made it his priority to investigate the predicaments of Africans in New Netherland from the first through the last group to arrive: why they were brought, the treatment they received, and how they survived. He purposely tries to explain from the slaves' point of view what has been considered as Dutch acts of benevolence.

Dr. Page obviously had contemporary affairs in mind when writing this book. He states that in New Netherland European indentured servitude gave way to African slavery for economic convenience. In 1638, the price tag for an African male was around \$27, while the salary of a European laborer was about seventy cents per day. The business-minded Dutch would naturally prefer to invest a 40-day salary in an African for a lifetime of uncompensated labor. To Dr. Page, our modern contention regarding reverse discrimination and affirmative action recalls the rivalry that these circumstances produced between the African and European laborers. Backed by stories and other evidences, he also tries to explain away the relatively high number of manumissions and African servants in New Netherland. Some reasons were 1) Dominie Johannes Megapolinesis' request that some slaves be freed pendent on their long service to the Company, 2) the surplus of slaves, which allowed the Dutch to replace Africans easily, and 3) the heavy conditions they placed on those freed. In order to avoid the responsibility of providing food and clothing to African children, the company (WIC) gave them to settlers as indentured servants with the proviso that the settlers provide them with food and clothing (p. 203). Furthermore, the Dutch "did not

hesitate to free their slaves after they were no longer capable of productive labor." So, it was largely business sagacity that produced most of the manumission and indentured African servants.

The reader may find Dr. Page's most vigorous criticism toward the Dutch slave trade in their handling of African children. The "most abominable aspect of the slave trade," he writes, "was fueled by the idea that Africans, even children, were better off Christianized under a system of European slavery than left in Africa amid tribal wars, famines and paganism" (p. 218). In the middle of the last chapter, Dr. Page discusses passionately the controversy concerning manumitted parents whose children were still in bondage and how they continued being slaves despite the outcry of some colonists. He also tells the story of Manuel Congo, a ten-year-old African slave who was inhumanely castigated for just being the victim of a sex crime.

One of the most interesting aspects of this chapter is how the author describes the work of African slaves and their survival tactics. Slaves cleared the streets of animal carcasses, and worked as farm laborers, longshoremen and boat crewmen (p. 217). Interestingly, in spite of the standard criticism against slaves, New Netherland Africans received praises for creditable jobs. Religion became a source of relief from work and pain. The festival *Pinkster* (The Pentacost) is a curious syncretist activity that persists today. The seventh Sunday after Easter appears to coincide not only with the blooming of azaleas in the Hudson Valley, but also with a similar celebration in West Africa. African slaves did not take long to add their own spirit to the festivities that became an important part of their lives.

Dr. Willie F. Page comes across as well versed on Dutch slave trade documents, and from his experience with the subject he has shared information relevant to the comprehension of the Dutch treatment of Africans in their American colonies. He achieved his goal of providing a conscientious coverage of the Dutch Atlantic slave trade in a book organized fairly well. Regardless of his use of large amounts of citations, his book is not plagued by irrelevant and sometimes burdensome statistical reports that may render the reading of a scholarly book totally unpalatable. The author's use of satisfactory amounts of endnotes assures that students will easily find the references they need.

One might quarrel a little with the text, however.

In some areas, particularly those that try to condense large amount of information, the prose does not flow smoothly. Despite appropriate explanations of some cited sources, some primary sources are not convincingly woven into the text. Additionally, the book does not provide adequate background information for some historical personalities mentioned in the text. Unseasoned readers might also find it difficult to keep track of the book's chronologies. On page 137, for example, the author jumps from one date to another without sufficiently warning the reader. Another example of the book's chronological difficulties is found on page 143 when for the first time the author states the year in which the WIC was chartered, but only after having dealt extensively with its African and American endeavors.

The declared intention of the author was to create a text for undergraduate and graduate students. Nevertheless, the book should not be mistaken with a *text book*. It is actually a well-researched monograph that might be effectively employ with other books in undergraduates as well as graduates classes. Though the basis fundamental research work of the book is based on a 1975 Ph.D. dissertation, this monograph considers up-to-date issues in the scholarly world. Some current works Dr. Page cited in his notes are Johannes Menne Postma, (Cambridge, 1990), and Jonathan I. Israel, (Oxford, 1982, 1992).[1]

Although this book overall deserves high marks for its treatment of the Dutch Atlantic slave trade, I personally have two concerns with the way in which the author has approached the subject. The first one pertains with what I consider a disproportional mention of Jews (mostly Sephardic Jews) in relation to the Dutch slave trade (there is even a section titled "Jews of Curacao"). Admittedly, Dr. Page did not mention directly that the Jews were responsible for barbaric atrocities against the Africans. He devoted the Jews' section mostly to document their settlement in the island of Curacao. Dr. Page mentions the well-known Joseph Nunes (David Nassy) and how he extracted a good deal from the WIC government. He also evidences the widely recognized Dutch relative religious tolerance toward the Jews (without social intercourse), and how the Jews were more sober than Dutchmen. Yet his reference toward their participation in the slave trade appears to be a little awkward and questionable. Dr. Page asserts that the number of Jews among the Dutch was partially responsible for the Dutch expulsion from Brazil. To him, one of the two main reasons why the Portuguese felt compelled

to expel the Dutch from Brazil was the "fervent hatred held by the Portuguese Catholic planters toward the Sephardic Jews" (p. 105). Dr. Page also writes that "most of the losses in the [Brazilian] territories were incurred by Jews as they comprised the major portion of the Dutch population and had the largest financial investment in the colony by far" (p. 106). He likewise fails to pass judgement on the rampant prejudice appearing in the quotations and stories about the Jew Jan Dyllan he referenced (as he did profusely with Dutch prejudice against Africans). Additionally, the section on the Sephardic Jews appears not to have a conclusion, and therefore, no practical rationale for its inclusion. Many of his comments about Jews are refutable and awkward because during the Dutch control over Brazil the Jews operated less than 6 percent of the plantations. Moreover, as Seymour Drescher remarked in the journal *Immigrants and Minorities* (July 1993), Jews' investment share in the Dutch West India Company at this peak period "amounted to only 0.5 percent of the company's capital." To Dr. Page's disproportional reference to Jews I should also mention that in January 1997, the American Historical Association released a declaration that "condemns as false any statement alleging that Jews played a disproportionate role in the exploitation of slave labor or in the Atlantic slave trade." Given what David Brion Davis called "the very marginal place of Jews in the history of the overall system" (*New York Review of Books*, December 22, 1994), it is inauspicious that Dr. Page saw fit to dedicate part of his not-so-big book to their role in the Dutch slave trade. Even among the Dutch, Davis wrote (referring to Dutch historians Pieter Emmer and Johannes Postma) that "Jews had a very limited and subordinate roles even at the height of the Dutch slave trade in the 17th century."

The second and last problem I have with the book is related to the intention of the author to portray accurately the "African perspective." I should admit that the introduction of the book is very promising on this regard, and as I have already suggested, the book successfully explains from the perspective of the African slave what has been considered Dutch acts of goodness. Yet in the overall perspective the book does not diverge markedly from most works on the slave trade. This could have been amended by placing the African at the center stage or by producing a truly and systematic comparative study on "European vs. African perspectives." Europeans, particularly the Dutch in this book, are still positioned in the spot-

light and converted into Evil-Heros. Evil, because of all the barbarity, selfishness and lack of compassion they had toward the suffering African hostages (and the American Indians). Heros, because they could have been any other citizens of the world (Immanuel Wallerstein, 1996), but the Europeans managed to control the trade and still attract the main attention of this book.

At any rate, I shall include this book in the reading list for any undergraduate class dealing with colonial African American history and slave trade. It would surely be of great benefit for students to access the uniqueness of Dr. Page's research (emphasis on Dutch treatment of Africans). Furthermore, the students would also profit from a discussion about the participation of Jews in slavery and the options in framing a history of the Transatlantic slave trade.

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[1]. Other current secondary sources that probably would have enhanced the book are Guillermo Cespedes del Castillo, *La Exploracion del Atlantico* (Madrid, 1992); Bailey Diffie and George Winius, *The Foundation of the Portuguese Empire* (Minneapolis, 1977); Robin Law, *The Horse in African History* (Oxford, 1980); Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (New York, 1985); Oliver Rink, *Holland on the Hudson* (New York, 1986); Leslie B. Rout, *The African experience in Spanish America* (Cambridge, 1976); John Thornton, *Africa and the Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (New York, 1992); Marisa Vega Blanco *El Trefico de Esclavos* (Seville, 1984); and H. Watjen, *Das Hollandische Kolonial Reich in Barilien* (Berlin, 1921)

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