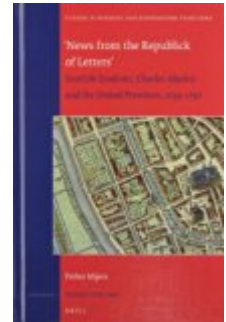


Esther Mijers. *"News from the Republic of Letters": Scottish Students, Charles Mackie and the United Provinces, 1650-1750.* Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions Series. Boston: Leiden, 2012. 223 pp. \$144.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-21068-4.



Reviewed by Alasdair Raffe

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Commissioned by Siobhan M. Talbott (Keele University)

Early modern Scotland had strong commercial, military and cultural links with the Netherlands. These connections dated back to medieval times, but were of particular importance in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In this period, as Esther Mijers shows, the Netherlands served as a vital point of contact between Scotland and the intellectual culture of the rest of Europe.

Mijers's book offers a wide-ranging and often fascinating analysis of Scotland's contacts with Dutch intellectual life. She focuses on two themes in particular: the attendance of Scottish students at Dutch universities, and the transformative effects within Scotland of the country's interactions with the Netherlands. In the final substantial chapter, Mijers presents a detailed case study of Charles Mackie, whose career exemplifies her arguments. A Scot, he was successively a student at Groningen University, the tutor of a Scottish nobleman at Leiden, and the first professor of universal history at Edinburgh University. Mackie maintained an extensive correspondence with

Dutch scholars, and helped Scots to import books from the United Provinces.

Mijers's introduction and first chapter situate her discussion of the Scottish students in the context of historical literature about migration and the early modern Scottish economy. Scotland was a "particularly outward-looking country," Mijers argues (p. 2). In chapter 1, she quantifies the Scottish presence at the four main universities: Leiden, Franeker, Groningen and Utrecht. Across the century from 1650 to 1750, there were at least 1,500 Scottish students at these institutions. The great majority went in the years 1680–1730, in which period Leiden was by far the most popular university. This was partly because of Leiden's reputation in law and medicine, though Mijers makes clear the great variety of reasons that Scots had for choosing a Dutch education. In the Restoration period, numbers were boosted by the arrival from Scotland of several hundred Presbyterian exiles.

Chapter two begins by emphasizing how dependent the students were on an “infrastructure” of Scottish merchants in the Netherlands, men such as Andrew Russell who provided visitors from Scotland with transport, finance, advice and contacts. The chapter then introduces the Dutch universities, and surveys their curricula in philosophy, law, medicine and divinity. Much of the evidence on which Mijers draws is fragmentary, and as a result her account here is sometimes rather vague. She lists numerous texts used by Scottish students and their teachers, and though we often do not know to what use these books were put, she might have done more to summarise their principal arguments. Nevertheless, Mijers conveys well the broad cultural impact of a Dutch education, examining the students’ travels in the Netherlands and beyond, and their purchases of books and luxury goods.

In chapter three, Mijers turns to the domestic consequences of Scotland’s Dutch links. She examines the well-known reform at Edinburgh University in 1708, which replaced the system of “regenting,” in which academics taught the full philosophy curriculum, with specialized professorial teaching. Previous studies have acknowledged that this change was inspired by the Dutch universities, but Mijers provides a fuller picture of Dutch influences on the reconfiguration of Scottish university education. Emulating Dutch examples, philosophy professors became more innovative, and the teaching of law and medicine expanded. Dutch-educated scholars were preferred for academic appointments, and they brought with them pedagogical practices and textbooks acquired in the Netherlands. At the same time, the book trade between the two countries burgeoned, as collectors and agents in the Netherlands sent the latest publications to their contacts in Scotland.

Mijers draws on a large number of letters passing news to and fro across the North Sea; her discussion is correspondingly rich in empirical

detail. She convincingly demonstrates the importance of Scotland’s Dutch connections, but I suspect that readers will have reservations about her characterization of the links as ‘very one-sided’ (p. 10). While emphasizing the effects of the Netherlands on Scotland, Mijers occasionally obscures the reciprocal contribution of Scots to Dutch intellectual life. She several times refers to Herman Boerhaave, teacher at Leiden of many Scottish physicians. She briefly mentions that the Scot Archibald Pitcairne held a medical chair at Leiden in 1692–3, but incorrectly suggests that he did not teach, and thus fails to enquire what impact his lectures might have had on Boerhaave, then a student at Leiden. In much of the book, moreover, Mijers’s analysis presupposes that the United Provinces were a fountain of progress. Eminent Dutchmen produced “new” ideas; these were lapped up by Scottish students; a Dutch-educated intellectual elite brought much-needed reforms to Scotland. This narrative rather simplifies the appeals of Dutch scholarship. Many Scots admired the Dutch universities for what was traditional, rather than innovative, in their curricula, especially in theology and the classics. As Mijers suggests, the enlightened history of Edinburgh University’s mid eighteenth-century principal William Robertson was in some ways a reaction against the old-fashioned Dutch-style scholarship of his teacher Charles Mackie.

Mijers’s discussion of intellectual change is a little unbalanced, then. Nevertheless, she presents important evidence of Scottish participation in the Republic of Letters, the pan-European exchange of intellectual news and information. Though there have been numerous studies of the cultural context of the Scottish Enlightenment, few scholars have looked in detail at Scots’ learned correspondence before the mid eighteenth century. As a guide to the sources, an analysis of the questions and a stimulant of future research, Mijers’s book is much to be welcomed.

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