



Wim Klooster. *The Dutch Moment: War, Trade, and Settlement in the Seventeenth-Century Atlantic World.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016. 432 pp. Ill. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-5045-7.

Reviewed by Bram Hoonhout (Leiden University)

Published on H-Slavery (June, 2017)

Commissioned by David M. Prior (University of New Mexico)

With *The Dutch Moment*, Wim Klooster has written a masterful book about the Dutch presence in the seventeenth-century Atlantic world. This “Dutch Moment” took place between the 1620s (with the first invasion of Brazil) and the 1670s (when the West India Company collapsed and New Netherland was definitively lost). The Dutch imperial moment was gone by then, and from attackers the Dutch became defenders. In between, Klooster argues, the Atlantic underwent a “Great Transformation,” from an Iberian-dominated space to a battleground in the Second Hundred Years’ War between France and Britain.

Klooster sets out with several historiographic aims. First, to provide an overarching narrative of the Dutch in the Atlantic, transcending previous works that focused on individual colonies. Additionally, the book challenges the classic view of the Dutch as middlemen: in their quest for empire, the Dutch did not only connect, but also destroyed. Finally, while New Netherland is the colony that comes most often to mind (even in today’s Dutch society) as an example of Dutch colonization, Klooster brings the much larger colony of Dutch Brazil back into the picture. This is a timely change, as Dutch Brazil is a topic of increasing interest—see for example, Michiel van Groesen, *Amsterdam’s Atlantic: Print Culture and the Making of Dutch Brazil* (2016).

To accomplish these goals, *The Dutch Moment* relies on an extensive body of secondary sources in multiple languages, as well as on new archival material. Throughout the book, Klooster addresses various aspects of the Dutch imperial moment, including military expeditions, public debates in the metropolis, and the role of religion. The first four chapters are dedicated to empire building; the following three discuss trade, migration, and interactions with the non-Dutch.

In the first part, Klooster places Dutch expansion in the light of the Dutch War of Independence (1568-1648) with Spain. After a contextual chapter, the author shows how the West India Company (WIC) was established in 1621 to take the war into the Atlantic realm. While successful in privateering, the WIC had bigger aims. In its Grand Design, it aimed to take over large parts of the Spanish-Portuguese empire, including Brazil, Luanda, São Tomé, Elmina, and Tobago. Additionally, there was a failed expedition to Chile in 1643, and the Dutch even thought they could take the mines of Potosí—disrupting the Spanish silver supply would greatly harm the enemy’s war effort. Yet, as becomes apparent throughout the book, the Grand Design was hopelessly optimistic. Instead of being left unguarded, as the Dutch presumed, there were twenty thousand armed men at Potosí. Similarly, the Dutch believed the Amerindians would be nat-

ural allies against the Spanish, for they suffered under the same “Spanish yoke” as they did. While such alliances were important at times, they were not always natural: once the Dutch mentioned they were interested in gold and silver as well, Amerindians in Chile quickly understood the Dutch were hardly any different from the Spanish.

Perhaps the most important contributions can be found in chapters 3 and 4, on imperial decline and the role of sailors and soldiers. The WIC quickly ran out of money and became dependent on subsidies from the States-General, yet the states were unwilling to come up with the money they had promised earlier. Meanwhile, as the war continued and sugar plantations were destroyed, the WIC could not count on the revenues it had anticipated. While the WIC had thus succeeded in conquest, it failed in the upkeep of its empire. In great detail, Klooster demonstrates the massive scale of the military conflict. Additionally, he underscores the miserable situation of the soldiers and sailors in the war. Ill-paid, subject to corporal punishment, and sometimes eating rats, cats, and dogs to survive, it comes as no surprise that these men often deserted, refused to fight, or welcomed surrender. Klooster argues convincingly that the neglect of these foot soldiers of empire contributed to the Dutch decline. Furthermore, he shows that their situation, while different, had similarities with that of the enslaved, thereby contributing to current debates on the continuum between freedom and unfreedom (such as Jared Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston*, 2016).

While the slave trade is not at the core of this book, in chapter 5 (“Interimperial Trade”), Klooster points to the overlooked issue that by the mid-seventeenth century the Dutch were the largest slave traders in the Atlantic. In the same chapter, Klooster makes several other contributions to historiographical debates. Siding with John McCusker and Russell Menard, he states that the Dutch were not instrumental in bringing the sugar revolution

to Barbados. However, the opposite was true for the French Caribbean, where Dutchmen supplied captives, credit, draft animals, and know-how, until they were shut out by French mercantilist measures.

The final chapter looks at the social and cultural aspects of the Dutch empire. As the Dutch Republic offered enough opportunities, few were willing to migrate and risk their lives overseas. Hence, the Dutch empire relied to a large extent on foreigners, including German soldiers, Amerindian allies, and Portuguese Sephardic colonists. The Dutch thus had to deal with a diverse population in their empire. Religious toleration proved a way of coping with the situation, but was explicitly not an invitation to foster pluralism. The Dutch were happy to accommodate the Jewish presence in Brazil, but were ambivalent about (Portuguese) Catholics. The latter did not enjoy full religious freedom, which gave rise to tensions: while the Dutch still thought they were generous, the Catholics sometimes felt they were persecuted. These tensions may have contributed to the revolt that erupted in 1645 and led to the loss of the colony.

Klooster’s study thus contributes at various levels to different historiographies. He strips imperial expansion of its glorious pretext, showing how violence, suffering, and bloodshed were at the core of empire building. Similarly, in a few strokes, he also takes Johan Maurits—the governor of Dutch Brazil revered for his patronage of the arts—from his pedestal, pointing to his military flaws and reckless spending that dragged the highly indebted Company further down.

Nevertheless, there are some minor points of critique. The book would have gained in strength by more explicit comparisons with other empires. Presently, these are sometimes hidden in the chapters. For instance, Klooster mentions that their desire for gold and silver made the Dutch more similar to the Spanish than to the English and French. Furthermore, unlike others, the English in particular, the Dutch hardly sent criminals

to their colonies. Thus, although the book discusses connections with other empires at length (especially in chapter 5), a comparative concluding chapter might have made the significance of the Dutch Moment clearer in relation to other empires—the book does not conclude by addressing the “Great Transformation” mentioned in the introduction.

However, the book is already substantial, including 134 pages of endnotes. And while one is sometimes overwhelmed by the number of names and anecdotes, they also include many gems. For example, when the governor of Suriname admitted several Roman Catholic priests, the States of Zeeland protested and demanded they be transported back to the Netherlands. The governor was not amused by this interference. Thus, as the men had died in the meantime, he had their bodies excavated and sent to Zeeland. Detailed stories like these, combined with the broad Atlantic developments, makes *The Dutch Moment* a highly recommended book, which should lend itself well to classroom use.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-slavery>

Citation: Bram Hoonhout. Review of Klooster, Wim. *The Dutch Moment: War, Trade, and Settlement in the Seventeenth-Century Atlantic World*. H-Slavery, H-Net Reviews. June, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49903>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.