

The Dutch Moment: War, Trade, and Settlement in the Seventeenth-Century Atlantic World. By Wim Klooster (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016). Pp. 432. Cloth, \$35.00.

For many years, Dutch explorations and exploitations in Southeast Asia have caught the imagination of scholars. The Dutch East India Company (VOC), armed with a *carte blanche* to wage war and conduct diplomacy on behalf of the Dutch Estates General, left ample records for historians to reconstruct encounters between the company, its officials, and local rulers. These interactions allowed the Dutch to establish a commercial empire of significant consequence in the region. The presence of the Dutch in the Americas, in contrast, seemed an empire that never was. Dutch settlement in Surinam, together with a few islands in the Caribbean, remained small in comparison to Iberian, English and French possessions. Moreover, the brief and ineffective colonization of Northwest Brazil contributes to the idea of failed empire in the Americas. Only Dutch complicity in the Atlantic slave trade has garnered significant scholarly attention.

Wim Klooster's *The Dutch Moment* is a welcome contribution to the fields of Dutch and Atlantic history. The book is the first comprehensive study of the rise and fall of the Dutch Empire in the Atlantic between the 1620s and 1670s. It brings together valuable studies on the West India Company, Dutch relations with African and Native American peoples, the Republic's activities in West Africa, and its settlements in the Americas. However, *The Dutch Moment* is more than a compilation of research on Dutch colonization practices. Klooster explores themes of war, diplomacy, and finance through the lens of social history, focusing on the experiences of those who constituted Dutch empire. His work resembles Alison Games's *Web of Empire*, which explored the lives of Englishmen exploring, traveling, and sharing experiences with their countrymen to build an English empire worldwide. But unlike Games, Klooster contends that Dutch empire building was not an isolated event that simply connected the metropole with its colonies. Rather, the making and disintegration of the Dutch empire in the Atlantic was "interimperial, multinational, and multiracial."¹ This complexity demonstrates that the lives of northern and southern Europeans as well as Amerindian and African peoples in the Atlantic were intertwined and interdependent.

In the early modern world, conflicts in Europe often extended to competing claims and animosity overseas. Klooster draws a connection between the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish Crown and Dutch expansion into the Atlantic, where anti-Spanish sentiments formed a strong motive in undermining Habsburg interests. In the Americas, Klooster emphasizes, Northeast Brazil (which was part of the Iberian Union between 1580 and 1640) formed the largest yet underestimated European conflict in the Americas. He dedicates the first four chapters to this enterprise, reflecting upon the dimensions of the Dutch Republic's imperial ambitions and its impact on shaping the Atlantic world. The West India Company (established in 1621) formulated a "Grand Design." The plan entailed the conquest of the profitable sugar plantations of Brazil as well as forts in West Africa that facilitated the transportation of enslaved peoples. In addition, Dutch privateers were tasked with intercepting the Spanish silver fleet on its way from Peru to the Iberian Peninsula in 1628. These actions, the Dutch believed, would undermine the

¹ Wim Klooster, *The Dutch Moment, War, Trade, and Settlement in the Seventeenth-Century Atlantic World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 2016), 6.

sources of the Spanish war machine and ensure the autonomy of the self-proclaimed United Provinces.

By 1642, the “Grand Design” seemed to be accomplished. In West Africa, the Dutch had seized Luanda and the port of Benguela in Angola, São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea, and fort Axim in present-day Ghana. In the Americas, the Dutch controlled the captaincy of Maranhão in northern Brazil. In addition, they had seized the islands of Curaçao and St. Eustatius and established the colony of New Netherland in northern America. The support of other Europeans and native peoples in supplanting Spain in the Americas, Klooster postulates, was critical. He distinguishes four groups pivotal to the Grand Design: soldiers and sailors (chapter 4), traders (chapter 5), foreign migrants (chapter 6) and non-whites (chapter 7). His command of multiple language sources – Dutch, German, English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Polish – allows Klooster to emphasize how non-Dutch people characterized the Dutch Atlantic as uniquely multinational and multiracial. Native peoples, like the Munsees and Iroquois in North America, often allied with the Republic. While the Dutch conducted marital and political alliances in America and Africa, however, they also enslaved native people in order to meet labor demands in St. Eustatius and Surinam. Similarly complex relations existed with African peoples. Since Dutch settlers were so few in number, Africans became soldiers and artisans in Dutch holdings from Africa to New Amsterdam. When the Dutch sugar industry took off after 1635, however, this dynamic drastically changed, and slaves were funneled into the plantation structure. Other non-Dutch individuals and groups also served the Republic during its quest for expansion. Sephardic Jews owned plantations in Surinam, Polish noblemen commanded the Dutch navy in Brazil, and men from Germany and England predominantly served the Dutch army.

The experiences of these foreign actors also reveal how the Dutch settlements crumbled. Low wages (if any), diseases, shortage of equipment, poor living conditions, and maltreatment explain why many soldiers and sailors stopped fighting, deserted, or surrendered when the Portuguese fleet arrived to take back Pernambuco in 1654. The soldiers serving the WIC, in fact, viewed the Portuguese’s landing as “the time of their redemption.”² The WIC also failed to promote migration, a necessary ingredient of successful colonization. Hardly any Dutch people migrated to the Americas. With high employment rates and rising wages back in the Dutch Republic, they showed no eagerness to depart for an unknown world. As a result, the majority of settlers in Dutch America were foreign Europeans.

The Dutch, as Klooster emphasizes, preferred to trade, positioning themselves, unlike any other empire, as dominant inter-imperial merchants. Offering lines of credits, a supply of varied and affordable goods, and a willingness to take risks at their own expense, Dutch merchants became sought-after commercial intermediaries. Until the Navigation Act of 1651 and the French ban on Dutch trade, they served the English and the French Caribbean and even enabled the French to establish a profitable sugar industry. Indeed, the WIC dominated the trade in enslaved Africans, serving the Spanish colonies for many decades after the late 1650s. The monopoly of the WIC, however, convinced many Dutch merchants to work for themselves or foreign Crowns. The loss of revenue eventually hampered the WIC from defending its

² Klooster, *The Dutch Moment*, 144.

territories adequately. The bankruptcy of the WIC (due to its great expenses) in 1674, combined with the loss of Brazil in 1654, Cape Coast Castle in 1664, New Netherland in 1674, and the policies of competing European empires banning Dutch trade ensured that “the Dutch moment had passed.”³

Klooster sketches a raw picture of leaky ships, overzealous company directors, starving soldiers, and enslaved people that fueled the Dutch empire, exposing the reality and limitations of human endeavors. Rich in detail and devoid of jargon, his narrative underscores how people from different ethnic, religious, national, and social-economic backgrounds connected and interacted in an empire “planned quite deliberately” but failing in the end.⁴ The multi-perspective approach to empire makes *The Dutch Moment* a critical asset in the studies of empire, Atlantic, and Dutch history.

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³ Klooster, *The Dutch Moment*, 263.

⁴ Klooster, *The Dutch Moment*, 3.