

Book Review

– *Amsterdam’s Atlantic: Print Culture and the making of Dutch Brazil*, by Michiel van Groesen, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017

In the early 1970’s Charles Boxer, a leading Anglophone historian of Dutch Brazil, called for a moratorium on historical studies on that period. He believed that the basic elements of the story had already been told, and most of the important sources had already been studied. A series of important books in the last four decades have proved him mistaken, and Michiel van Groesen’s volume, as much as any of them, has driven this point home. Based on an analysis of the news coverage and of other forms of print media in Amsterdam, Van Groesen’s book focuses on the impact of the Dutch occupation of northeastern Brazil on the Netherlands. This is an innovative and fresh cultural history of a brief but important aspect of Atlantic history that brings together politics, print culture, and the history of readership.

Portugal’s sugar colony of Brazil, where Dutch shipping had played a key role in its early success, became a principal target in the Netherland’s struggle against Hapsburg Spain after the union of the two Iberian monarchies in 1580. The actions of the Dutch West India Company to carry out the war in the Atlantic, its early successes in the 1620s and 1630s, and its failures in the 1640s and 1650s provoked great interest and great controversy, as well as an insatiable appetite for news and analysis that a growing community of journalists, map-makers, visitors, political hacks, and ambitious memorialists tried to supply.

Van Groesen’s book tells this story well. As Amsterdam grew rapidly in the sixteenth-century, so too did its fascination with the exotica and economic potentialities of Brazil. The seizure of Salvador da Bahia, Brazil’s capital in 1624, and the heroics of Admiral Piet Heyn were broadly celebrated in elaborate news maps, published sermons, and news reports. However the joy was short-lived when a joint Spanish-Portuguese armada took the city back the following year, setting in motion recriminations and criticisms that played out in the popular press. Van Groesen demonstrates how the ‘spin-doctors’ for the West India Company used the popular print media to prepare the ground for its return to Brazil in 1630 and for the successful establishment of a sugar colony in Pernambuco and its surrounding areas. The news of these successes was

widely popular, and patriotic Hollanders hanged images and maps of the Dutch triumphs in Brazil on the walls of their boardrooms and bordellos.

As van Groesen demonstrates in his chapter entitled 'Frictions', the colony was not without its costs and disputes. Free traders objected to the heavy handed restrictions of the West India Company, and shareholders in its stock lost confidence in its operations over time as profits went to private traders. The issue of slavery brought criticism too and led to further adventures and sometimes losses on the African coast in order to supply the Brazilian colony. The policy of religious toleration, extended to Catholics and Jews in order to make the colony profitable, generated discord from strict Calvinist ministers and led to complaints from the commercial rivals of the Sephardi communities in Amsterdam and Recife, that for the first time in the 1640s had actually assumed a role in public political debate because of the Brazilian colony. All of this became worse after 1645 when the local Portuguese planters, many heavily indebted to the West India Company, rose in revolt. As plantations were burned, forts were lost, and the sugar trade declined, the 'blame game' flourished in pamphlets, fly sheets, and 'praatjes' (fictional conversations between characters that represented typical groups in Dutch society); Portuguese perfidy, poor Dutch leadership, military incompetence, or simply the West India Company itself, were portrayed as culprits for the colony's decline and ultimate loss. But as the author makes clear, the fact that the Portuguese eventually paid an indemnity for retaking their former colony, and that Amsterdam merchants regained their ability to trade with Portugal and its possessions, demonstrated that the interests of Amsterdam had trumped those of the Zeeland chamber of the WIC which had been invested in retaining the colony.

The fall of Dutch Brazil left a residue in the Dutch Atlantic: unpaid and unhappy troops that filtered back to the Netherlands along with a scattering of Native American Tapuya converts and ex-pats, Sephardi immigrants to New Amsterdam, Surinam, and places like Barbados and Martinique, and Dutch capital in search of a new Brazil. But it also left a romanticized memory of 'Verzuimd Brazil' (Neglected Brazil), a heritage of nostalgia for what might have been. And here, van Groesen gives the reader one of his best chapters, as he reexamines the "enlightened" rule of the governor of Brazil (1637-44), Count Maurits of Nassau, with his court of artists, scientists, authors, and architects. Van Groesen shows how much of Nassau's reputation and image was the result of a public relations campaign in which authors like Barlaeus and de Laet or artists like Frans Post were used to polish the image and enhance the luster of Nassau's rule in Brazil in order to further his ambitions.

In all, this is an original contribution that brings together the tremendous Dutch achievements in publishing and print culture with the history of its short-lived colony in Brazil. The book effectively presents evidence why Dutch Brazil should not be neglected by anyone interested in the history of the early modern Atlantic world in general, and should become required reading for

graduate students and scholars interested in the Dutch overseas experience or in the history of colonial Brazil.

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