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Review of Merwick's "The Shame and the Sorrow: Dutch-Amerindian Encounters in New Netherland"

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Book Review

Donna Merwick. *The Shame and the Sorrow: Dutch-Amerindian Encounters in New Netherland*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

THE SHAME AND the Sorrow represents the latest effort by a scholar well-known to readers of *de Halve Maen*. Her previous publications include *Possessing Albany* and *The Death of a Notary*. In her latest volume, Donna Merwick explores, as the subtitle indicates, Dutch-Amerindian encounters in New Netherland. The Dutch, she argues, “wanted the peaceful encounters” implied by the famous 1664 New Amsterdam townscape gracing the cover of this volume, but they “betrayed the quiet occupancy this picture offers,” also betraying “themselves . . . and the indigenous people” [p. 3]. This volume is a collection of “reflections under the words ‘the shame and the sorrow.’” This book remains true to Merwick’s style, exploring events through the cultural lens of the seventeenth-century Dutch. While her approach is fascinating and her prose engaging, the volume remains ultimately unsatisfying.

Merwick’s argument centers on the concept that New Netherland was founded by Dutch merchants and traders, or “alongshore people,” as she calls them, whose intention was not territorial control, domination over native people, or any real extension of sovereignty into America. Here she enlists the cultural analysis for which she is known, detailing the ways the Dutch generally and the traders particularly reflected the value of remaining on the “peripheries.” Anecdotes, literature, and artwork—representing a broad knowledge of the seventeenth-century Dutch world—all aid her in painting a picture of Dutch culture in that period. She further employs comparative analysis, arguing that the experience of the East India Company presaged such alongshore tendencies elsewhere in the world and provided a model for New Netherland endeavors. In fact, she frequently turns to East Indian comparisons and examples to help us understand the encounters of the Dutch and Native Americans. She strongly argues that the West India Company’s focus in New

Netherland was always on trade and never on settlement.

Much of this argument seems compelling. Certainly, her rhetorical style and use of cultural examples lend strength to her case. But questions remain in each line of argument. Can it be so broadly stated that the Dutch were “alongshore” people? This reviewer is highly sympathetic to broad claims about cultural outlook and practices, but in this case, such claims seem overdrawn. The Netherlands at the time was clearly a land of shifting population and emerging values. Surely, the nation as a whole consisted of more villages and people than communities like Hoorn with its maritime orientation. And while much more effort should be made to understand Dutch colonization in the context of the Dutch overseas empire, the conclusions Merwick draws so heavily from her comparison with the East India Company are unconvincing in the absence of more direct and substantial evidence from the West India Company context. This leads to the third difficulty with her line of reasoning—the claim that WIC efforts in New Netherland were preeminently trade-oriented. She acknowledges the disagreements among shareholders concerning the direction needed in New Netherland. Other scholars speak in terms of factions and argue that the settlement faction, with the backing of the States General, very successfully affected the shape of colonial efforts in New Netherland.

Part of Merwick’s effort here is to explore new ways of writing history, in her approach to the evidence and the construction of a viable argument as well as in her prose. In the latter case, her style is readable and, as stated, engaging. She effectively enlists a wide array of metaphors from maritime themes, literature, theater, and art to communicate her ideas. As for her approach to historical narrative, this is more difficult to assess. She herself uses the metaphor of an art gallery to describe her engagement with this history—each chapter representing sketches or paintings for viewing [p. 3]. If, indeed, her work is to be compared with the work of painters, it could easily be categorized as “impressionist,” as one can imagine Merwick her-

self would heartily agree. She refers to “reading” history rather than “writing” history, no doubt to indicate the subjective nature of the historian’s task. But while this impressionist approach is interesting, and even compelling at times, it is unsettling as well. The narrative, if one can refer to it as such, meanders; there is an almost vague quality about the book. Readers looking for clear narration of events, traditional explanations of causation, and concrete analysis will be frustrated and disappointed.

To say that Merwick’s approach is impressionist is not to say that it is not grounded in evidence. Indeed, it is clear that she is widely read in secondary sources, sources contemporary to the time, and even current literature, some of this in Dutch. She is to be commended as well for the attention she pays to various seventeenth-century authors and their biases. Indeed, part of her impressions relate to an exploration of these personalities and their writings and the interplay of their lives, goals, attitudes, and words. David de Vries, Peter Stuyvesant, Adriaen vander Donck, and Cornelis Melijn, among others, receive her attention. On the other hand, she relies heavily on the less-than-trustworthy nineteenth-century translations of Dutch records found in *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of New York* instead of the far more reliable translations in *New York Historical Manuscripts* and *New Netherland Documents*. As well, her reading of many of the sources does not seem to take into account the insights of recent Dutch scholars, such as Jaap Jacobs and Willem Frijhoff, furthering many of the traditional interpretations and stereotypes established in the nineteenth-century literature.

Although *The Shame and the Sorrow* is broadly aimed at exploring the relations of the Dutch and Native Americans, Merwick’s focus actually excludes much that her subtitle would imply should be included. The book, in fact, is singularly focused upon certain aspects of this history and virtually not at all on others. In the first place, the book centers, as the image on the cover indicates, on Manhattan Island. Certainly, other locales come

into consideration, but these all stand, ironically, at the peripheries of her study, while events and developments in these areas should certainly be seen as significant to the story of Dutch-Indian encounters. The South (Delaware) River, the Fresh (Connecticut) River, the upper Hudson, and Long Island Sound—these are all marginalized, as are the peoples of these places. To be sure, she mentions the Mohawks and the Mahicans, the Algonquian speakers of New England, and the Lenape of Delaware Bay, but there is no special focus on these peoples. This weakens the book not just in the limited scope presented but in the failure to understand the Dutch in the breadth of their interaction with all native people. There is no disgrace in focusing on one region or tribal group, but some disappointment results from the limited analysis available in a book purported to be of greater breadth

and significance.

And this exclusion of various elements emerges in so many ways. Merwick speaks of the Dutch, for example, but she does not really define who is included in that term. She places much stock in the “alongshore” character of Dutch colonists, yet many who came to New Netherland were not Dutch. She focuses much upon the West India Company, but certainly a crucial decade of contact occurred in New Netherland before the West India Company was involved, while, after the region came under its charter, others also had a profound influence on affairs in the colonies—private investors, the States General, interlopers, the city of Amsterdam, and even the Dutch Reformed Classis of Amsterdam. Her exclusion of elements important to this story even extends to the native people themselves. Not only does she little attend to the Indians outside Manhattan Island and

its environs, her coverage of the native people who are discussed is spare. She relies very little on ethnohistorical analysis, and we learn not so much about the native people and what they thought and why they acted as they did but about the Dutch themselves. Who the Dutch were, how they acted, and what they thought—these are generally the concerns of this author.

A book broadly surveying Dutch-Amerindian encounters this is not. It is, instead, a collection of “impressions” drawn by the author as she considers the outcome of Dutch contact with the Munsee people of Manhattan Island and the surrounding region. At times insightful, and often a pleasure to read, *The Shame and the Sorrow* ultimately reveals less than one might hope.

— Paul Otto
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