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## Review of Brink's "Invading Paradise: Esopus Settlers at War with Natives"

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# Book Review

Andrew Brink, *Invading Paradise: Esopus Settlers at War with Natives, 1659, 1663* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2003).

**I**NVADING PARADISE CONSIDERS the Esopus War and the role of Dutch settlers in it. Andrew Brink, whose ancestor Lambert Huybertsen Brinck experienced the Esopus War first hand (in 1663 his wife and three of his children were taken captive by Native Americans and later released), brings together important details about the lives of several Esopus settlers and offers an interesting, but not altogether convincing, analysis into the causes and outcomes of the war.

Recognizing that the Esopus War (hostilities that occurred in 1659-1660 and in 1663-1664) was a significant event in the history of Wiltwijck (Kingston) and Nieuwe Dorp (Hurley) and that there appeared to be no collective memory of the event or oral tradition passed down by the survivors, Brink sets out to write this book as "an exercise in recovering lost memory" [p. 29]. He does so by focusing on the lives of the various settlers of the Esopus region—both those who served as officials, such as *schout* or *schepens*, and those who represented the "surprising variety of Europeans who remade their lives" there. He does so hoping to gain insight into the character and motivations of the settlers who, he later argues in the book, could have prevented the Esopus War.

Brink focuses much of his attention on these various settlers, dedicating one of twelve chapters to each of the individuals or married couples he has chosen to investigate, constructing detailed summaries of their experiences in New Netherland. In these biographies he seeks to understand who they were and why they behaved as they did. He considers both the personal and collective character of these men and women. While he infers different personality types in each individual, he summarizes the group in terms of its "possessive individualism," arguing that the European settlers in the Esopus region were driven by a desire to advance themselves and their families through acquisition of land, wealth, and social status.

In the last chapter of the book, he considers the causes of the war, the culpability of the European settlers, and the role played by disease, alcohol abuse, and psychological disorders in disrupting Indian society, causing the war, and burying the memory of the conflict. Here he particularly brings to bear his psychological expertise in examining the causes and results of the Esopus War. For example, he identifies Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a legacy of the war affecting the European settlers of the region.

Brink's book, then, provides an analysis of the Esopus War growing out of the intersection of history, psychology, and genealogy. The book is well documented, providing many details about each of the families involved (he relies heavily, but not exclusively, on David M. Riker's *Genealogical and Biographical Directory to Persons in New Netherland*). He demonstrates what can be learned through careful research about these founders of the Dutch settlements in New Netherland. He reveals much about the lives and intentions of these people and shows their connections with one another through marriage, trade, and law, both in the Esopus region and throughout the colony. In fact, the strongest aspect of the book is the life stories he has brought together here (although much more could likely be discovered about the colonists if research were to be conducted in Dutch-language sources in the Netherlands).

As a broader analysis of the Esopus War, however, the book does not succeed as well as it might. There are several reasons for this. From an organizational standpoint, the book does not help readers unfamiliar with the Esopus War, since the basic outline of events does not come until the last chapter of the book. Instead, each biographical chapter makes reference to the first or second phase of the war, often in redundant fashion, without fully surveying the course of the war.

While the research in the biographical section appears exhaustive, it is noticeably limited when considering the scope of the book as a whole. Brink has done important reading in local histories and scholarly studies relating to the Esopus region and New Netherland, but he has

not read widely in ethnohistory, anthropology, and frontier studies. It is true he has read some important works in these fields, but his research is thin, and his analysis of the motivations and actions of the native peoples demonstrates this. For example, when he notes the claim by colonists that the Esopus people invited Europeans to settle near them, he seems not to appreciate that Indians could find it in their own interest to extend such an invitation—in this case, being likely to have ready access to European trade goods.

Limited research leads to another weakness: an over-reliance on assertions about motivations and identity. Writing about people and events in the absence of an abundant historical record always forces historians to make claims which they can rest only on limited evidence. But in this case, especially with regard to analysis of the causes and the outcomes of the war, the author has made claims which may stretch the credulity of many readers. On the other hand, the questions Brink asks of the sources are questions which are always difficult to answer across the ages and through limited written records. In his attempt to explore personality type and psychological patterns, Brink is taking an adventuresome step and asking intriguing questions. It is not clear to this reader, however, how convincing his answers are.

While one of his strengths is the genealogical approach of the work, it is notable that he does not approach native people with the same kind of detailed research. This may be the most significant weakness of the book. Throughout the work, and despite the occasional denial by the author, the native people are presented in romanticized form. Their "paradise" is invaded. The book is about (individual) "European Settlers at War with" (a monolithic group) of "Natives." The Indian people appear very much as noble savages to whom little individual agency or action is attributed. They act as a group, not as subgroups or individuals. Their motivations are seemingly innocent and naïve. This is not to say that the Esopus people should be understood as wild savages bent on the destruction of the Europeans. But as Europeans and Indians interacted, both as individuals and in

groups, myriad motivations shaped and directed them, often in reaction to one another. The Europeans' own "possessive individualism" may have been a guiding force for them, but to what degree did their worldview and attitude change in response to living among the Indians? And what was the worldview of the Esopus people? How did interaction with Dutch settlers shape their own attitudes, opinions, and actions? Even if the author

does not intend to tell an exhaustive story of the Esopus War, he may not be doing justice to his own story about the Dutch settlers "at War with Natives" if he can only understand the European settlers in terms of responding to a monolithic, unbending, and unchanging group of native people.

*Invading Paradise* offers an intriguing look at the psychological dimensions of the encounter between Native Americans

and a group of Europeans highly motivated for personal success in the frontier. It tells us as much about these various settlers' personal lives as is revealed in the published, English-language records available in North America. And it explores, if not always convincingly, the causes and outcomes of the Esopus War.

– Paul Otto  
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