

Fall 1995

Review of Dunn's "The Mohicans and Their Land, 1609-1730"

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Recommended Citation

Originally published in *de Halve Maen* 68, no. 3 (Fall 1995), 65-66. Posted with permission of The Holland Society of New York.
<http://www.hollandsociety.org/de-halve-maen-journal/>

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Book Reviews

Allison Blakely, **Blacks in the Dutch World: The Evolution of Racial Imagery in a Modern Society** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

This highly readable and sobering work is one volume in a series on "Blacks in the Diaspora." Allison Blakely, Professor of European and Comparative History at Howard University, takes the reader on an odyssey through the Dutch maritime empire. Though the study is centered on the Netherlands, it encompasses the historical Dutch presence in West and South Africa, the East Indies, Brazil, New Netherland, Surinam, and the Netherlands Antilles. The chronological scope of the work is impressive and extends from the fifteenth century through the late twentieth.

This book is not a history of peoples or civilizations. It is a carefully crafted study in the power of visual imagery and its impact on changing perceptions of race and color in the Dutch-dominated world in the post-fifteenth century. In this sense, it advances our understanding of the nature and dynamic of color prejudice in the modern era.

Through narrative and illustrations, the author builds a convincing argument that the psychology of racial bias intensified in modern times and that it coincided with the domination of the West over the rest of the world. Blakely suggests that Dutch involvement in the African and Atlantic slave trades "made the single greatest impact on the subsequent image of blacks in Dutch culture." He is careful to mention, however, the importance of early travel literature and geographical texts. It is astonishing that so many of the most popular books on Africa before the nineteenth century were written and illustrated by people with only a secondhand knowledge of Africa. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century drawings of the African cities of Benin and Loango were executed by artists who had never visited the continent and who conjured them up in their Eurocentric imaginations.

The author sets up categories of imagery which include the visual arts, folklore, music, literature, and religious traditions and shows how each influenced, and mutually reinforced, popular notions about blacks in Dutch culture. By meticulously examining original and secondary materials, Blakely reveals the rich variety of resources for the expression of attitudes toward race and color. He notes that images of blacks in the Dutch Netherlands appeared "Long before there was a significant physical appearance." But from the start, the depictions were both positive and negative.

Blakely convincingly argues that while the Dutch always expressed a certain ambivalence about blacks, the negative images predominated and actually hardened with the advance of modernization and the growth of mass literacy. Thus, even though interracial contact increased over time and the black presence in the Netherlands grew steadily in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the negative stereotypes became more pervasive and more deeply entrenched in society.

This study is well organized and attempts to be comprehensive and balanced. But it is here that the work falls short. In the first chapter, for example, Blakely offers a fine historical

survey of the origins of the slave trade and the nature of Dutch involvement. He reveals that Sephardic Jews played an important role in the Atlantic slave and sugar trades, and in Brazilian slavery, as financiers, agents, and merchants. He adds that until the nineteenth century "Jews comprised at least a third of the European population of the slave colony of Suriname." It is surprising, then, that Jews and Judaism are almost completely neglected in chapter five, "Blacks and Dutch Religious Traditions." Having been so actively involved with Africans in the diaspora, did they not have any influence on shaping images of blacks? In any case, the author intimates that Christian missionaries, even those of African birth such as the eighteenth-century theologian, Capitein, tended to cast Africans and their culture in a negative light.

In tracing the thematic and chronological evolution of racial imagery, Blakey detects a persistent Dutch preference for the exotic and bizarre. He notes that it was ironic that the same scientific outlook which inspired the Enlightenment and decried human bondage encouraged theories which sought to dehumanize a large part of humankind.

Blacks in the Dutch World should be read alongside *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (1992) by Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague. They are both important books, and they raise crucial and disturbing questions about stereotyping as an instrument of racial prejudice. Pieterse's book covers only the last two centuries, but it goes beyond the Netherlands to compare the imagery of Europe and America through a breathtakingly wide range of intriguing images. Both scholars seem to conclude that the images of blacks in Western culture continue to be predominantly negative and racially biased. Distressingly, both authors do not leave the reader with much optimism that we will witness the progressive elimination of these negative icons.

These are the kind of books that should be read not only by scholars of race relations and authors of school texts but by producers of popular films and artists in advertising. They suggest that little progress has been made over the centuries to portray peoples of African descent in a fair and balanced way.

—Richard W. Hull
New York University

Shirley W. Dunn, **The Mohicans and Their Land, 1609-1730** (Fleischmanns, N.Y.: Purple Mountain Press, 1994).

Valuable animal furs attracted many Dutch and other European colonists to New Netherland, especially in the colony's earliest years. Those who came to profit from peltries did not harvest the skins themselves, but rather traded for them with the native peoples whom they found there. These peoples, members of the Mohawks, Mahicans, and Munsees, had lived in New Netherland centuries before it received

that name. After the Dutch arrived, however, they became trade partners and neighbors. In *The Mohicans and Their Land, 1609-1730*, Shirley Dunn tells the story of the Mohican people (Dunn prefers to use the popular spelling of the term Mahicans), beginning with their encounter of Henry Hudson, moving through the period of Dutch trade and settlement, and ending after sixty-five years of contact with the English. Throughout, she focuses upon their history as it is recorded in land transactions and oral histories.

Dunn's interest in this topic began as she investigated the history of the old farms and houses of the River Road south of Rensselaer, New York. Tracing ownership of these houses back to their origins, Dunn realized the wealth of information about the former Indian residents to be gleaned from the original deeds signed by the Mohicans when they sold land parcels to the Dutch and English. Exploiting this resource, she offers readers several insights into Mohican territory, culture, leadership, and relations with the Europeans based on these records. As a resource, she also includes appendices to her work — a collection of Mohican land deeds and a guide to Mohican individuals whose names appear in the records. Other sources Dunn utilized include maps and Mohican oral accounts which she uses to help interpret the data found in the deeds and patents.

According to Dunn, the Mohicans became one of the Dutch settlers' most important indigenous neighbors. Not only did they provide the Dutch with one of their earliest major sources of furs, they also provided the Dutch with valuable arable land. Such land transfers to the Dutch accompanied the shift in New Netherland's economy from the fur trade to agriculture, a transformation which strengthened the colonial settlement. In addition, the Mohicans remained friendly neighbors who assisted the Dutch in their relations with other Indians and remained peaceful at crucial moments in the history of European-Native American relations in New Netherland. The Dutch, and later the English, could generally trust and rely upon the Mohicans. These then formed a buffer around European settlements when other hostile tribes threatened their security. Dunn so equates the Mohicans' importance to Europeans with their original ownership of valuable land that she claims Mohicans "retained their status in the eyes of the law" until "the eighteenth century prior to the Revolution" [p. 163].

Readers of *de Halve Maen* will find this a valuable book if they are interested in the indigenous people who inhabited New Netherland, Dutch-Indian relations, or the history of the upper Hudson during the seventeenth century. In particular, her chapter "Living with the Dutch and English" offers several interesting insights into Native American affairs in New Netherland. She points out, for example, the importance the Mohicans played in helping the Dutch get started in the fur trade by offering furs themselves and by establishing trade relationships between the Dutch and other Indians tribes who also had access to furs. She also demonstrates the unique and ambiguous treatment the Dutch courts gave to the Mohicans. Recognizing the need to maintain good relations with the people who provided them with fur and land, the courts often showed Mohican defendants leniency.

Dunn's work also demonstrates how well known sources such as maps, patents, and land deeds can be used in creative ways to effectively develop a better understanding of the past. Because a discussion of the evidence forms a significant

portion of this work, those looking for a narrative of the Mohicans' history during this time may be disappointed to find that story subordinated to the analysis and explanation of data. Nevertheless, *The Mohicans and Their Land* offers the reader plentiful information as well as new insights into the Mohicans' early history and Indian relations in the seventeenth century. Dunn firmly establishes their existence, location, and role in the history of the seventeenth-century Hudson Valley. A generous people whose boundaries lay astride an important watercourse for trade and commerce, the Mohicans became participants of the relations and interactions that formed the early American frontier in New York.

—Paul Otto
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