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Review of Meuwese's " Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade: Dutch-Indigenous Alliances in the Atlantic World, 1595-1674"

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Book Review

Mark Meuwese. *Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade: Dutch-Indigenous Alliances in the Atlantic World, 1595-1674*. Atlantic World: Europe, Africa, and the Americas, 1500-1830, edited by Benjamin Schmidt and Wim Klooster, vol. 23 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

DUTCH-NATIVE RELATIONS have received much attention in recent years, enhancing our understanding of this aspect of New Netherland history. It's easy, however, to maintain a rather parochial view of New Netherland's history, forgetting that the Dutch had much colonial experience elsewhere in the seventeenth century. This parochialism is challenged by Mark Meuwese's *Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade*, which explores Dutch-native alliances in North America as well as the Gold Coast of West Africa, West Central Africa (Angola and the Kingdom of Kongo), and Brazil—"the core of the Dutch Atlantic empire from the 1590s until the collapse of the first West India Company in 1674" (p. ix). He argues that West India Company officials and indigenous peoples sought mutually beneficial alliances, that the Dutch often respected native traditions and indigenous polities, and that both European and indigenous peoples were often dependent upon these alliances. Furthermore, "without the cooperation and support of the indigenous peoples . . . the Dutch would not have been able to establish an influential Atlantic empire" (p. 4). Meuwese's account offers a fine overview of the Dutch West India Company's emergence and history, a detailed narrative of native affairs in each of these four regions, and an insightful comparison of them. In the end, readers will find themselves better informed of Dutch-native interaction throughout the Atlantic and challenged to reconsider Dutch-Indian affairs in New Netherland in light of this Atlantic context.

As Meuwese so ably shows, the Dutch Atlantic World was created out of the Dutch struggle against Spanish tyranny, the expansion of Dutch maritime activity, and the creation of the West India Company to accomplish both. The first chapter lays out the origins of the West India Company (WIC) and the company's

opportunistic efforts to attack the Iberian empire at its weakest points—Portuguese outposts and colonies in Africa and South America where they engaged in the lucrative slave trade and sugar production—as well as its colonization stratagem in North America. The next chapter outlines the first efforts at Dutch-indigenous alliances in the Gold Coast, the Kongo and Angola, Brazil, and New Netherland. The following four chapters take each of these areas in turn, going into extensive detail on the building and maintaining (sometimes successfully, other times less so) of alliances in each. The final chapter engages in a comparative analysis of the colonial efforts in these four areas.

Meuwese aims to reinvigorate the study of Dutch-indigenous relations, an area that has languished because of language barriers and "because of the misinformed idea that the Dutch did not establish extensive relations with non-European peoples in comparison with other European colonial powers." But as Meuwese demonstrates, such cross-cultural encounters in the Dutch Atlantic World "were multifaceted" (p. ix). In Brazil, for example, the Dutch allied with the *Brasilianen*, native people who had lived in Catholic mission villages before the Portuguese were displaced. While Dutch efforts to ally with the *Brasilianen* were generally successful, the Dutch found that those with close ties to the Portuguese were more likely to resist Dutch colonization rather than welcome it. Furthermore, while Dutch alliance building included efforts at civilizing the *Brasilianen*, the South American natives were more interested in the advantages of acquiring European material goods than in European cultural practices. In the Kongo and Angola, WIC officials contended with "independent and hierarchical states" (p. 191) who greatly outnumbered Dutch colonial officials and traders. Dutch efforts to build alliances with these kingdoms with the goal of tapping into the African slave trade meant that they had to recognize that the balance of power was controlled by the indigenous people. In New Netherland, by contrast, while the Dutch ostensibly recognized native sovereignty, in practice, the situation varied between three distinct zones

of contact—the Lower Hudson Valley, the Upper Hudson Valley, and the Delaware Valley. Differences among the peoples whom the Dutch encountered, the ongoing availability of furs, and Dutch focus on trade or settlement all led to different outcomes in Dutch-native alliance building in North America. On the Gold Coast, the Dutch successfully established trade agreements with a number of African groups but could never insure an exclusive partnership since these peoples were also willing to trade with Danes, Swedes, French, and English.

According to Meuwese, the comparison of these four regions reveals several unique characteristics of Dutch colonization and interaction with indigenous peoples and he argues that features of the New Netherland experience were consistent with other parts of the Dutch Atlantic World. In the first place, the Dutch generally offered better and more diverse trade goods than the Portuguese and other Europeans, giving them a distinct advantage over these competitors. Meuwese points out that the infamous gun trade in New Netherland fits this pattern: "individual Dutch traders and . . . Company traders sold first-rate muskets and gunpowder to the Mohawks and other Five Nations members in considerable quantities" (p. 321). Dutch colonization always took place in the context of anti-Iberian strategies. While there was no Iberian presence in New Netherland and thus no direct effort to displace it, the author points out that nonetheless "the Dutch strategy of courting indigenous allies was . . . morally constructed" (p. 322) and that they sought to treat Native Americans with a degree of respect and recognition for their sovereignty that the Spanish and Portuguese failed to do elsewhere. Third, there was "the absence of a strong missionary impulse comparable to that of the Catholic powers" (p. 323). Thus the failure to significantly promote missions in New Netherland was consistent with WIC policy elsewhere, which didn't eschew missionary activity, but "put a stop" to such activities "whenever a missionary program interfered with commercial or geo-political objectives" (p. 324). Dutch colonization also was uniquely shaped by decentralization "and a willingness to

make compromises” (p. 324). Thus frontier negotiators such as Arent van Curler or Peter Stuyvesant and his pragmatic approach to Indian affairs were repeated elsewhere in the Dutch Atlantic World. Finally, European settlement was not a regular feature Dutch colonization. True, New Netherland was a settlement colony, especially in the Lower Hudson Valley, but the author emphasizes that this was only one of three zones of Dutch-native interaction, and that affairs on the Upper Hudson were more consistent with Dutch-indigenous relations elsewhere in WIC colonies.

Despite these compelling comparisons, one wonders if more should be made of the differences between these colonial interactions. Surely the lack of a foreign presence in New Netherland before the arrival of the Dutch created a very different context for European-native affairs there. Just in the area of missions one might argue that the Dutch concern to evangelize was less dramatic without a

Catholic presence to worry about. In fact, near the end of the period under study here, when Catholic evangelistic efforts were bearing fruit among the Iroquois, Dutch Protestant ministers acted with greater urgency to proselytize native people than they had earlier. And the fact that New Netherland was a settlement colony is not easily contained in Meuwese’s framework emphasizing three distinct regions of Dutch-native contact. While settlement was less intensive and expansive on the Upper Hudson than the Lower Hudson, it nonetheless was taking place, and continued to grow over time. Did this not have an effect on relations with the Iroquois? At the very least, the role of private traders must have been more significant in New Netherland than the other Dutch Atlantic colonies, and it is well known that private trade led to several points of chronic, if low-grade, conflict between the Dutch and the native inhabitants.

Such concerns may be asking too much of a book that it is broad and synthetic. Its purpose isn’t to engage in a detailed, heavily nuanced study of Dutch-indigenous relations in all these areas, but to bring together all the recent and classic scholarship on this topic and present it in a comparative framework to stimulate new thinking and further investigations, to “encourage . . . further research on a rich topic” (p. ix) and to demonstrate that “an Atlantic approach to the study of European-native relations reveals interesting commonalities in the patterns of intercultural relations in the Atlantic that remain otherwise obscured by geographically limited studies” (p. 14). Even if later studies, inspired by the call of this one, produce more complexly textured treatments of Dutch-indigenous relations, Mark Meuwese has accomplished his task.

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