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Review of Schmidt's "Innocence Abroad: The Dutch Imagination and the New World, 1570-1670"

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Innocence Abroad: The Dutch Imagination and the New World, 1570–1670.

By BENJAMIN SCHMIDT. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. xxix, 450 pp. Cloth, \$64.95.

The emergence of the Dutch nation-state in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries would alone mark the period as instrumental for understanding the history and character of the Dutch nation, but two interrelated developments left indelible marks on the Dutch republic during the same period: their revolt against Spain, which gave them nation-state status, and their expansion overseas. In their birth as a nation, their struggles with European rivals, and their transoceanic commercial and colonial activities, the Netherlands were no different than England, Spain, Portugal, and France, and each nation repeated similar patterns during the period. But as Benjamin Schmidt so ably demonstrates, the Dutch shaped their own identity by looking to America, and the idea of America, to provide a context for national endeavors throughout the century under consideration.

Identifying the contrasting motifs of “innocence” and “tyranny,” Schmidt argues that “the Dutch construction of America” provided explanatory power for a whole range of challenges and developments within the Dutch republic: “[T]he defense of revolt, the urgency of expansion, the perils of consumption, the ills of colonialism, [and] the sanctity of history” (p. 313). The author shows how the idea of America developed in the Dutch mind-set long before they acquired firsthand experience with the New World and how the Dutch quickly justified their resistance against Spain by pointing to Spanish tyranny in America as well as in the Netherlands. The Dutch then identified with their fellow victims, the indigenous people of the New World. As they gained experience with America and Americans in the seventeenth century, they modified their application of New World imagery to account for growing materialist goals and apparent colonial failures in the American continents, but throughout, they continued to define much of their experience in terms of “America.”

Schmidt masterfully paints a picture of the Dutch mind-set by drawing on Dutch artwork, sermons, literature, travel narratives, broadsides, and tracts. From the beginnings of the Dutch Revolt until the aftermath of the Eighty Years’ War, he details a change from the incorporation into political debates of imagery that juxtaposed the innocence of the New World against the tyranny of Spain to a later understanding of America and Americans that resulted from firsthand experience. The Dutch looked to the Americas to give their actions meaning throughout, whether it was to justify war against Spain, overseas expansion, or economic growth. Schmidt’s Dutch-language ability enables him to open a world closed to so many English-speaking scholars yet vital to those who study the early modern period, European exploration, and the Atlantic world. His engaging and persuasive prose deftly captures and reveals the Dutch worldview of the seventeenth century.

Considering the prominence of the Dutch nation in the transatlantic exploits of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, too few books exist to uncover the world of the Dutch in their “golden age” and their role in creating the Atlantic world into which other nations later entered. Schmidt’s volume goes a long way to help us understand Dutch values, concerns, and beliefs and sheds light on the purposes to which Europeans put their new knowledge of the Americas.

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