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Review of Marley's "Pirates and Engineers: Dutch and Flemish Adventurers in New Spain (1607-1697)"

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New Netherland, Brazil, Curaçao — these are the places in which one expects to find Netherlanders in the seventeenth-century New World. As Spanish maritime historian, David F. Marley, has discovered, however, citizens of the United Provinces and Flanders also made their way to the Spanish dominions in Mexico and the Caribbean.

Against the backdrop of the Dutch revolt and the imperial rivalry in the Americas between Spain and her many European competitors, Marley narrates several vignettes in which Dutch and Flemish sailors, pirates, castaways, craftsmen, and engineers played a role. Although the scarcity of sources leaves many of the stories with inconclusive endings, the narratives offer an interesting glimpse into the Spanish maritime world and the relations between Catholic Spain and the Protestant Netherlands.

Basing his accounts on data found in the Mexican National Archives, Marley tells the story of men who led lives in precarious situations, caught between two worlds where their loyalty and faith was often suspect. Adrian Boot, for example, came to Mexico City in 1614 as an engineer. Despite the fact that Boot was a devout Catholic and had served the Spanish faithfully for over two decades, he fell into disfavor. His major objective, to keep Mexico City’s Valley of Ahuacac free of floods, was almost impossible to accomplish (the valley’s flooding problem was not solved until the late nineteenth-century), and his Dutch background placed him in an awkward position when Dutch naval attacks against the Spanish intensified. Thus Boot’s apparent failures and birthplace combined to condemn him when the new Viceroy, Don Lope Díez de Armentáriz, came to New Spain in 1635 and sought a scapegoat for the colony’s problems. Boot was arrested and probably died a natural death in prison.

In 1648 Spain signed the Treaty of Münster which secured the independence of the Netherlands and which protected Dutch travelers from Catholic proselytizing. As Marley points out, colonial officials and church leaders, no less than the Spanish government itself, had to adjust to these new changes. The arrival of twenty-two Dutch and French castaways in Mexico City in 1655 offered the first test in relations between the two groups under the new rules. Of these, twelve were “Lutheran and Calvinist heretics” [page 46], and one of these was apparently dying. When offered the opportunity to make confession before he died, he and his companions refused the priest’s offer and attempted to defend their beliefs. The Inquisitors considered it necessary to make a decision regarding these men but were constrained by the Treaty of Münster and its clear restrictions on attempts to convert. Furthermore, it was the state who held the prisoners, and any action the Inquisitors took had to be done with the full cooperation of the secular authorities. In the meantime, the church and state clashed over another local matter, and the Inquisitors chose not to complicate matters further with regard to the Dutch castaways. Thus they instructed the priest attending the Dutch sailors to involve himself with them only in the case of in articulo mortis.

Pirates found themselves in a particularly difficult situation because their livelihood was affected by the vagaries of international law and diplomacy in an age when alliances between nations were constantly shifting. In the case of Jan Erasmus Reyning and Jelles de Lecat, Marley demonstrates that the distinctions between legitimate warfare and piracy were vague and difficult to maintain. Reyning and his first mate, De Lecat, were out of a job when the nation of their employ, England, renewed peace with Spain and withdrew all privateering commissions. The two then embarked on a series of occupations, first pretending that they were unaware of the change in diplomatic relations and continuing their freebooting existence, then offering their services to the Spanish Lieutenant-Governor of Campeche who needed help in controlling illegal English trade out of the Laguna de Términos. Finally they began privateering for the United Provinces, their fatherland, when war broke out between England and the Netherlands.

Pirates and Engineers offers engaging reading and, despite its short length, insight into the world of the Spanish overseas empire. For while these stories provide only brief glimpses into the lives of a few historically insignificant men, they nevertheless present several important themes in Spanish colonial history — the tense relations between church and state, the corruption of government officials, and the zealotry of the Catholic church. And although readers unfamiliar with the history and geography of New Spain may find themselves confused regarding the people and places around which these stories revolve, they will nevertheless be informed and, in fact, entertained as many of the tales conjure up romantic images of privateering and swashbuckling adventure.

— Paul Otto