

# Visions of Dutch Empire

## Introduction

Do we need a long-term intellectual history of the Dutch empire? And if so, what should it be about? With these questions in mind, René Koekkoek, Anne-Isabelle Richard, and Arthur Weststeijn, organised the conference ‘Visions of Empire in Dutch History’, at Leiden University, 29 and 30 September 2016. In the present postcolonial Netherlands, critical reflection on colonial heritage is gaining momentum and new questions are being raised about the impact of colonial mentalities on Dutch national culture. But how to define and research these mentalities? Emphasising the merely pragmatic and mercantile character of Dutch empire-building, earlier generations of historians tended to write off this question. This approach seems no longer satisfactory. While ideologies of empire may never have been clearly articulated in the Netherlands, those involved in the Dutch overseas enterprise would have held visions of what the ‘Dutch empire’ was and should be.

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The editors of *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* have asked the organisers and contributors to the roundtable held on the first day of the conference to put their reflections in writing. The forum opens with the position paper of Koekkoek, Richard, and Weststeijn, who explicitly call for a long-term history of intellectual and political thought about empire. Dutch historiography, they argue, should connect with the histories of the British and other empires. They prefer the term visions, which includes a variety of sources and practices that address political thought and look beyond the explicit intellectual exposés on empire. For example, they find such visions in legal texts, including those of Grotius, which contain expressions of sovereignty and legitimacy of the Dutch empire.

Andrew Fitzmaurice, a leading expert in the history of political thought in the British empire, elaborates on this legal turn in his essay. More specifically, he takes us deeper into the current debate about sovereignty and empire. In so doing, Fitzmaurice problematises the current tendency to extract ideology from ‘jurispractice’, because this approach ignores the ‘high’ intellectual debates that fed into this legal culture. Fitzmaurice regards the call to study the ideological underpinnings of Dutch empire and colonialism as an opportunity to overcome this pitfall. Present-day scholars should not

simply aim at ‘catching up’ with the New Imperial historiographies in Britain. Instead of focusing exclusively on either ‘jurispractise’ or legal canon, they should set a new standard by focusing on the interplay between the two.

Susan Legêne also endorses this call for a new historiographical turn, but she is critical of some of the premises on which that call has been based. Like Fitzmaurice, she argues that modern scholarship on ‘Dutch’ empire should involve more than catching up with other historiographies of empire and adding a Dutch perspective to the predominantly British debates. Legêne contends that historians should also redirect their questions and seek to understand visions of empire as a global phenomenon, with global legacies. Legêne’s critical approach expresses concerns about a proposed turn to empire that seems to foster a genre of history writing that, through its choice of sources, its periodization and a persistent reliance on Dutch-oriented historiography, will reinforce colonial representations of the past.

The present forum, then, is neither conclusive nor prescriptive. It opens a range of approaches and reflects on their possibilities and pitfalls. In any case, its contributors amply demonstrate that the times of ignorance and rejection regarding Dutch imperial ideology – and the supposedly economic character of Dutch colonialism – are definitively over.

On behalf of the editors,

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