



Dikes and Dunes

On Dutch History and Dutchness

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This essay considers one of the more striking qualities of the historiography of the Netherlands: its attitude vis-à-vis outsiders. On the one hand, there is a comparative bent in the scholarship and an interest in seeing the Dutch in the world; in this sense, it is an admirably outward-looking historiography. On the other hand, there is a tendency to underscore the exceptional Dutchness of Dutch history, which encourages analyses to turn inward. Comparativism thus vies with a provincialism, which can devolve into parochialism. Recent Dutch historiography, moreover, has shown a marked ambivalence toward the work of outsiders, namely non-Dutch historians. This reflects a basic tension in the literature between a scholarly posture of cosmopolitanism and a deep-rooted tendency toward exceptionalism; it suggests the paradox of Dutch distinctiveness. This essay raises questions about the permeability of Dutch historiography. Do the dikes and dunes of Dutch historical practice hold in or hold out the currents of scholarship? And, further, do they function to keep outsiders at bay?

In dit essay komt een van de opvallende eigenschappen van de historiografie van Nederland aan de orde: de houding van Nederlandse historici op het gebied van Nederlandse geschiedenis ten opzichte van buitenstaanders. Aan de ene kant is er binnen de historiografie van Nederland sprake van een toename van vergelijkende studies en belangstelling voor de positie van Nederlanders in de wereld; wat dit betreft is de blik van de historiografie van Nederland op bewonderenswaardige wijze naar buiten gericht. Aan de andere kant kun je stellen dat deze historici ertoe neigen Nederlandse geschiedenis als uitzonderlijk te beschouwen, waarmee ze hun blik juist weer naar binnen richten. Op deze wijze moet een comparatieve houding wedijveren met provincialisme, wat tot bekrompenheid kan leiden.

Bovendien wordt de meest recente Nederlandse historiografie gekenmerkt door een opmerkelijke ambivalente houding ten opzichte van het werk van buitenstaanders, dat wil zeggen, van niet-Nederlandse historici. Deze houding weerspiegelt een fundamentele spanning in de literatuur tussen een wetenschappelijke, kosmopolitische houding en een diepgewortelde neiging tot exceptionalisme; dit kan betekenen dat er sprake is van een paradox van een typisch Nederlandse houding. Dit essay stelt de toegankelijkheid van de Nederlandse historiografie ter discussie. Zorgen de dijken en duinen van de Nederlandse geschiedschrijving ervoor dat de nieuwe ontwikkelingen op het gebied van de wetenschap worden omarmd, of sluiten ze die juist buiten? Of is hun functie buitenstaanders op een afstand te houden?

Why do you do Dutch history? It is a question I get asked all the time, with a light, mildly probing emphasis placed on the pronoun *you*, a bit more on the proper noun *Dutch*. It comes up in casual, social contexts not infrequently, yet it recurs more persistently in professional meetings, in collegial gatherings, and, peering back retrospectively, in job interviews. It is a question that also follows me along my scholarly itineraries, such that I have answered it often in the United States, from the time I began to pursue history as a professional career, and even more so (paradoxically?) in the Netherlands, which I visit regularly to do research. Yet it is less of an issue, I have noticed, elsewhere in Europe where I have done scholarly work, and almost never in Asia, to which I have traveled of late for my current research project. It is a question that makes some sense, I will admit, yet I find it mildly annoying nonetheless: Why *not* Dutch history, I am tempted to reply? Rather than challenging my interlocutor, however, I typically go for a more polite, patient, professorial explication of the importance of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic in broadly European political terms, of the centrality of the early modern Netherlands from an economic perspective, of the utter vitality, vibrancy, and sheer appeal of Dutch Golden Age culture to a historian interested in visual studies, print culture, material arts, the history of collecting, the history of the book, the history of science, the history of Europe's engagement with the expanding world, and so on. An embarrassment of riches, eh?

Allow me to redirect the question and recalibrate its emphasis in order to highlight the very strangeness of its premise: Why do *you* (dear reader) do Dutch history? And why, furthermore, would it be surprising for a non-Dutch-born historian (without Dutch heritage, I might also note; I field this follow-up question often, as well) to be interested in the history of the early modern Low Countries, whose distinctive politics, economic development, and cultural innovations are so obviously central to the course of European, not to mention colonial-cum-global, history? And please indulge this mildly discourteous follow-up: Why would the engagement of a non-Dutch scholar with the history of the Netherlands elicit skepticism in the first place – why *not* Dutch history?

I pose these questions – and reflect on my own experience as a historian of early modern Europe with an interest in the culture of the Netherlands – after the discomfiting experience of joining the International Advisory Board of the *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* (hereafter *BMGN*) and, in that capacity, also adjudicating their newly established Low Countries History Award. Joining the board, I hasten to add, was not discomfiting in the least, and serving as juror was, in fact, a distinct pleasure. Joining the board meant working with a wonderful group of scholars, and my duties as juror afforded an excellent opportunity to delve into the *BMGN* and thus the state of the art: to read through several years' worth of scholarly articles and review essays on Low Countries history and to immerse myself afresh in the historiography of the field in which I began my career. Yet this exercise also brought into sharp relief some of the distinguishing features and recurring patterns of that scholarship and, in this way, some of the ingrained tendencies and stubborn, perhaps less productive characteristics of the field. And one in particular stood out: the seeming ambivalence of Low Countries historiography for scholarship that does not come from the Low Countries. As a scholar who happens not to be from the Low Countries, this was, if not quite discomfiting, certainly – as the kids say – awkward.

In the spirit of 'awkward', let me offer a preemptive, strategic apology: Forgive me for casting a critical eye on Low Countries historiography, not least for its engagement (or lack thereof) with scholars who happen *not* to be from the Low Countries – a rubric under which I happen to fall. Forgive, that is to say, the blithe chutzpah of an outsider opining on the state of the field and its relationship precisely with the outside – with outsiders looking in, yet also and more generally with the outside, that is, non-Netherlandish historical world. For my reading of the *BMGN* revealed not only an ambivalence vis-à-vis the scholarship of foreigners – *allochtonen*, the Greek-derived word deployed in contemporary Dutch politics, seems a bit too sharp, even if technically correct – yet also a paradoxical attitude toward non-Dutch histories. On the one hand, there is a markedly comparative approach taken by a not insignificant number of authors contributing to the *BMGN*; there is, more broadly, an admirably comparative bent in Dutch historiography (a point explored more systematically in a special issue of the *BMGN* from several years ago, which was expressly dedicated to this theme).¹ It is, in this sense, a notably outward looking, one might even say cosmopolitan, historiography. On the other hand, however, there is a tendency to underscore the exceptional Dutchness of Dutch history, which encourages analyses to turn inward. Comparativism, in other words, vies with a provincialism, which sometimes can devolve into

1 Klaas van Berkel and Leonie de Goei (eds.), *The International Relevance of Dutch History*, Special Issue of *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende*

de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden/Low Countries Historical Review 125:2,3 (2010).

parochialism. The dikes and the dunes of the Low Countries, one comes to understand, are designed also to keep outsiders at bay. The experience of reading through the *BMGN* for the Low Countries History Award, in all cases, raises questions about the boundaries and the permeability of Dutch historiography – what does and does not breach the metaphoric dikes and dunes of Dutch historical practice, why this might be so, and to what effect.

This essay takes up these broad questions, albeit with a limited scope of investigation. It considers the state of Dutch history and of Dutch historiography on the basis of this exercise of adjudication – a comprehensive reading of three years of the *BMGN* for the prize committee, plus a quick glance back over a reasonable range of earlier issues – as well as my own, admittedly limited (and certainly biased) experience of the field. I will attempt this quixotic venture in three steps. First, a brief report from the field: a few general takeaways from the experience of thoroughly reading through several years of the *BMGN* – a journal review, thus. Second, using this scholarly literature as my point of departure, I will offer a few reflections on the state of Dutch historiography – an undeniably quixotic, no less presumptuous, attempt by an outsider to assess Dutch historiography’s uneasy relationship to outsiders. Finally, I will draw attention to what might be described as the paradox of Dutch distinctiveness, by which I mean the positioning of Dutch history and Dutch historiography vis-à-vis other, wider streams of scholarship. What I have in mind here is a basic tension in the literature – in the practice of Dutch history – between comparativism and parochialism, between a scholarly posture of cosmopolitanism and a deep-rooted tendency toward exceptionalism. The latter, to be sure, is a veritable fixture in the landscape of historiography – think *Sonderweg* – and is common to historical narratives recounted in European and non-European contexts alike. It brings to mind some of the critical issues raised by the ethno-historian Greg Denning as developed in his classic history of the Marquesas Islands, *Islands and Beaches*.² Denning dealt in that book (and several others) with the fashioning of historical narratives and the role of outsiders in its composition, and his work serves as a thought-provoking invitation to consider similar questions in regard to another watery (if less warm) society: What role do outsiders play in Dutch historical practice? Do the dikes and dunes of Dutch historiography hold in or hold out the currents of non-Dutch scholarship? And what strategies might be considered for engaging with outsiders (‘crossing’ in Denning’s critical vocabulary) and breaching those defensive structures?

The Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden/Low Countries Historical Review is meant to be ‘the leading academic journal for

2 Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas, 1774-1880* (Carlton, Victoria 1980).

the history of the Netherlands, Belgium and their global presence' (as its website pronounces), and it most certainly lives up to its reputation. It is widely recognized as the go-to journal for the latest and finest research on the Netherlands – the Low Countries, broadly defined, thus Belgium along with the Netherlands, yet the language of research does tilt toward Dutch – and it has richly deserved this reputation already for several years, if not decades.³ Under its current editorial leadership, likewise the previous editorial team, the journal has produced innovative scholarship at an extraordinarily high level. Over the past decade or so, the *BMGN* has published some of the finest practitioners in the field of Low Countries history; featured inventive work from up-and-coming scholars; highlighted some of the newest trends of historical scholarship and methodologies; brought to its readers' attention fresh archives and unplowed terrains of research; and so on. The journal offers much to appreciate and much that is commendable, indeed much that is exceptional – it is often on the leading edge of research in the field. It publishes, in general, a notably high standard of scholarship by circulating innovative and imaginative research, drawn from interesting and often underdeveloped archives, touching on important and wide-reaching topics. The reader engages with the latest on colonial history and the history of race; on gender history and the history of sexuality; on religious practices and the history of emotions; and – *de rigueur* these days – on digital humanities. The *BMGN* furnishes, in short, a richly rewarding experience: a master class in Dutch history and several seminar's worth of Dutch historiography.

More particularly and especially impressive in the volumes that have appeared in the three-year period under review, the *BMGN* makes a point of engaging with new methodologies, with an inspiring span of historical topics, and – a point I wish to highlight – with international scholarly currents. Taking these volumes collectively, one is struck, first, by the wide-ranging set of new subfields tackled by the journal, its contributors, and its ambitious editors, above all in the excellent 'theme issues', the latter exploring (from 2013 to 2015) the New Imperial History; the history of identity and emotions; 'De Vrouw' [The Woman] (a topic not so much new as timely in its revisionism); and the history of data (which offers a nice riff on the pervasive attention paid to digital humanities). A second notable quality would be the

3 The *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review* has a rich and intricate history. The journal goes back nearly one hundred and fifty years to the *Bijdragen en Mededelingen van het Historisch Genootschap*, which was founded in 1877 (yet based itself on the reconstitution of an earlier publication, the *Kroniek van het Historisch Genootschap*); and to the merger in 1969 of the *BMGN* with the equally estimable *Bijdragen voor de*

Geschiedenis der Nederlanden. The current *BMGN*, in all events, serves as the flagship publication of the Royal Netherlands Historical Society/Koninklijk Nederlands Historisch Genootschap (KNGG), the latter established in 1845 and considered the oldest and largest historical society in The Netherlands. See the informative website: <http://www.bmgn-ichr.nl/>.

welcome presence in the *BMGN* of work from early-career scholars – a pleasing number of articles published by recent Ph.D.'s and post-docs – which delivers the newest and most innovative research emerging from the field. This is wholly laudable. This scholarship is broadly accessible, moreover, in the very literal sense that the *BMGN* is an APC-free/Open Access journal, thus available at a perfect price point: gratis (my third point). This is vital in an age when scholars are utterly dependent on their ability to access the latest research wherever they are, in whatever time zone they happen to be, and at no charge. It is, needless to say, critical from the perspective of academic libraries, in this age of often unconscionable pricing by certain mercenary publishers: kudos to the Koninklijk Nederlands Historisch Genootschap (as the sponsor and financial backer of the *BMGN*) for their forward thinking, liberal, and generous policy. Fourth, in its hard-copy form the *BMGN* demonstrates excellent production values – incomparably better than the quality of the print version of an equivalent American serial. The journal charmingly retains footnotes in their old-fashioned dwelling at the foot of the page; boasts the first-rate layout and graphic features that savvy readers associate with modern Dutch design; prints its hard-copy product on more than reasonable stock paper; boasts superb quality (and an ample quantity of) reproductions, many in color; and, last but not least – a luxury almost unheard of in journal-publishing outside of the Netherlands – pulls this all together with old-school sewn-in bindings. The *BMGN* puts out an unusually handsome product.

All of this fills up considerable space on the positive side of the ledger. Moving gingerly over to the proverbial 'room for improvement' side of things, one discerns not so much egregious shortcomings or anything plainly 'wrong' or offensive. Rather, there are what might be deemed sins of omission – call them absences – which become evident to the serial reader of the journal who plows through stacks of volumes spanning several years. Most of these come under the rubric of scope and perspective: what is covered and what is not, where the lines of research lead and where they do not, and who is contributing to the discussions of Low Countries history and who is not. To begin with the very basic issue of coverage, while the *BMGN* publishes excellent work in the subfields of political, social, and economic history, there is a relative dearth of articles in other subfields that, from an Anglo-American scholarly perspective, represent the latest trends in the increasingly cross-disciplinary field of history. There is less than one might expect on cultural history, visual history (somewhat surprising given the rich visual sources for Low Countries history) and material history. This last may be among the most exciting and important methodologies being developed in the past several years and also a natural, in many ways, for Low Country history. It is an approach that links the generic field of history to the best work being done in book history and textual studies; art history and visual studies; the new, material history of science; and so on. (And there is, in fact, much good work going on in the Netherlands in these areas – Dutch scholars have been on the

vanguard of the history of the book and the material history of science – which makes this lacuna all the more noticeable).⁴

Another absence comes camouflaged as a presence. While the *BMGN* features a rich selection of essays that take a comparative approach, most of these take this approach only so far: they stop, it often seems, at the borders of the Low Countries. The admirably comparative tendency of the journal should be lauded. It is particularly evident in the aforementioned special-theme issues, which tackle topics that are not only current, but also wide-ranging in terms of their scope: an issue on the New Imperial History, which links the colonial history of the Low Countries with British and French work in that field; an issue on the History of Emotions, which engages in a timely manner with the scholarship and public humanities program presently being carried out by the massive Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions; and an issue on the firmly-established, and by now globally-oriented, field of Women's History (the above-noted issue bearing the title 'De Vrouw' [The Woman], thus clarifying its concern with women's, not gender, history). This is a trend of late in Dutch historiography, and the *BMGN* – which published an issue just a few years earlier (2010) more directly on 'The International Relevance of Dutch History' – deserves credit for encouraging a global (or at least a European or perhaps Western) approach. Yet even as many of these issues and *BMGN* contributors set their work in a plainly comparative framework, the essays themselves tend to remain bound by Dutch archives and Dutch arguments. If the scholarly trends invoked are international, the concrete answers delivered are Dutch. These articles tend to make arguments, furthermore, about the distinctiveness of the Dutch case – a perennial exception to the broader rules. This would be an example of the comparative drifting toward the parochial.

Finally and perhaps most strikingly, the non-Dutch reader cannot help but notice that the contributors to *BMGN* are remarkably, overwhelmingly, all-but-exclusively scholars *from* the Low Countries. This is more incongruent – more counterintuitive – than might, at first blush, seem the case. While it may seem natural for a history journal covering a particular region to feature scholars from that same region, the opposite also makes sense for the history

4 For recent examples of such work, see the websites for ARTECHNE-Technique in the Arts, 1500-1950, a research projects supported by a European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Grant [<http://artechne.wp.hum.uu.nl/>]; the program in Book Studies based at the University of Amsterdam, which takes advantage of the UvA's incomparable collection of early modern Dutch books [<https://www.uva.nl/en/disciplines/>

book-studies] and the Global Knowledge Society project, which operates under the auspices of the Descartes Centre for the History and Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities (Utrecht University), the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (Berlin) and the Huygens ING (Amsterdam) [<https://globalknowledgesociety.wordpress.com/>].

of the Netherlands; there are indubitably many historians, some of them quite critical to the historiography of the Low Countries, who do *not* come from the Low Countries – are not born, trained, or working in the Netherlands or Belgium. That they do not appear on the pages of the *BMGN* is an irony – or, better, a paradox – that deserves explanation. In the meantime, suffice it to point out the conspicuous absence in the pages of the *BMGN* of contributions from non-Netherlandish scholars. In fact, *all but one* of the articles published over the period 2013 to 2015 were authored by Dutch or Belgian scholars. (And Dutch-Belgian/non-Dutch-Belgian scholars are defined for the purposes of this review not only on the basis of a scholar's nationality, but also her/his professional affiliation and academic training, the latter taken into account chiefly when authors are unaffiliated, so-called independent scholars).

It may seem plodding to offer data on this point, yet the numbers are quite dramatic and therefore worth rehearsing. Over the three-year run of the *BMGN* that was considered for the inaugural Low Countries History Award, forty out of forty-one research articles were by Low Countries authors, which comes to an astounding ninety-eight percent. When review articles and thematic forums are taken into account – these submissions are mostly, and almost by definition, engaged with topics of broad-reaching, theoretical, and presumably international interest – the numbers barely budge: ninety-seven percent of this larger group of essays (sixty-four out of sixty-six) are by Low Countries scholars, which only draws more attention to this gaping lacuna. Again, this may be a less self-evident state of affairs than one would presume. A quick glance at other 'national' history journals – at other, similarly prestigious, longstanding, highly visible journals that publish the best scholarship in history, yet in other national contexts – only underscores the distinctiveness of the *BMGN*'s pattern. The *American Historical Review* (*AHR*) for example, is downright cosmopolitan in its authorship. In a recent issue that happens to be sitting on my desk at the moment, three of the four articles are written by non-American authors, the outlier being the Presidential Address (the cover to this issue also boasts a global perspective: a Dutch portrait of a Batavian scene with a Javanese landscape/harbor view in the background).⁵ A more cliometrical investigation of the three years corresponding to the *BMGN* years surveyed – *AHR* research articles published from 2013 to 2015, not including presidential addresses, special forums, and roundtables – produces a fairly stark contrast. About half of these *AHR* articles are authored or co-authored by non-American scholars.⁶ A dip further into back issues

5 *American Historical Review* 121:1 (February 2016). The cover painting is by Albert Cuyp, 'VOC Senior Merchant' [likely Jakob Martensen] (c. 1640-c. 1660), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

6 This tabulation comes to 23 out of 46. I included scholars working at non-US institutions (and

assumed most if not all of them were not Americans) as well as non-Americans working at US institutions – an inexact science, I confess, yet convincing all the same. (By comparison, the scholars contributing to the *BMGN* were all – with the one noted exception – taken to be 'Dutch'

quickly yields contributions by Finns, Canadians, Israelis, Mexicans, Russians, Britons, Chinese – all of which leads to the ineluctable conclusion that their product is simply more global than the *BMGN*'s. Not fair! the skeptical reader might protest, since the *AHR* covers more than just American history. Fine. A quick scan of the *English Historical Review* (*EHR*), which is dedicated by tradition to the history of England, the United Kingdom, and the British Empire – an almost identical charge to that of the *BMGN*, albeit with a *Britannia* remit – reveals, likewise, scads of essays by non-British scholars, a category that comprised not only Canadian, Australian, American, and Irish scholars – the colonials, if you will – but also historians from Italy, Japan, and even (gasp!) Germany.⁷

In short, the *BMGN* has a proclivity to publish articles almost exclusively from Low Countries scholars. Or, to put this otherwise, it has a marked proclivity *not* to publish the work of non-Dutch or non-Belgian historians. And this underscores a paradox, if not quite a problem: Although the field of Dutch and Flemish history attracts excellent researchers working outside of the Low Countries – just over the border in Germany, certainly, yet also otherwise in Europe as well as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia (the latter is the source, *inter alia*, of the single article from the period 2013 to 2015 *not* written by a Dutch author), and the United States – the *BMGN* rarely features the work of these scholars. Once again: ‘awkward’.

There are several ways to query and complicate these data – it is, after all, but a three-year sample of the journal – yet there is also a simple if perhaps unsettling takeaway, which identifies a seeming skepticism conveyed in the pages of the *BMGN* of the value of scholarly work by outsiders looking in. The pattern of publication highlights a seeming institutional, or perhaps even intellectual, unease with the ability of non-Dutch historians to do Dutch history. Furthermore – and this is an admittedly qualitative more than quantitative judgment, borne out by reading the *BMGN* articles themselves and reacting to their argumentation, structure, and thematics – there is a palpable ambivalence in some of the work published in the *BMGN* about the place of ‘the Dutch’ in broader historiographies and of the very idea of a distinct *Dutchness*. On the one hand, several of the articles in the *BMGN* often wished to adopt a comparative approach, holding Low Countries history in close proximity to that of non-Low Countries cases. Yet, on the other hand, these articles often fell back on the traditional argument that the Dutch are distinct; that there is a *Sonderweg*, if you will, for the history of the Netherlands (a conceit that, paradoxically, can sometimes be found in and even derive from the work of outsiders looking in). This happens to be the premise of a special issue of the

based on their place of employment and/or their names; in some instances, I double-checked websites for place of education, etc.).

7 For these journals I looked back only a couple of years or so – generally scanning through the issues for 2016 and 2015.

BMGN from a few years before, which explicitly considers ‘the international relevance of the Dutch history’.⁸

A few quick qualifications, in the interest of evenhandedness. First, the *BMGN* and its authors are certainly not a parochial bunch in terms of the readership they are trying to reach. The majority of the essays from the 2013 to 2015 run (about two thirds of them) are published in English, an admirable publication model, which attests precisely to the ambitions of the journal to target and speak to an international audience. The *BMGN* is unusually cosmopolitan in that regard. Second, the journal’s editors (as opposed to its contributing authors) can hardly be accused of narrow-mindedness, either, in terms of the topics they typically tackle or in terms of their thematic purview. The special issues in the years under assessment, as well as the review articles and topical forums, explored absolutely critical and broadly pitched subject matter, highlighting subfields that surely speak to a wide audience. Some of these have already been broached – on colonialism, the history of emotions, the history of gender and sexuality. To these can be added several more big-picture theme issues: on memory and war; on the history of consumption; on the lately revived debate on the Enlightenment; on digital history; and so on. All of these are topics of wide-ranging interest and far-reaching application. Yet all or very nearly all – here a caveat to the qualification – are approached by the journal from the narrow perch of the Low Countries.

And here one should note the obvious, namely that Dutch and Belgian history are not at all parochial fields of study. On the contrary, the fields have attracted an eminent cast of non-Low Country scholars, particularly over the past several decades: lofty figures in the academy (and, in some cases, mildly outside of the academy) who have contributed immensely to the history of the Netherlands, most especially to the subfield that is arguably at the historiographical core of the field, the history of the Dutch Golden Age. Geoffrey Parker, Simon Schama, Svetlana Alpers, Jonathan Israel, and Lisa Jardine are only a few of the names that could be cited in this regard. All have published widely, going back at least to the 1980s, on Dutch and Flemish history, and all are well known in the Netherlands for the agenda-setting scholarship they have produced. All have established strong reputations *outside* of the Low Countries, as well, for books that have attracted and cultivated a broadly international audience for Dutch history. All have contributed to a field that, by dint of their considerable labors, has become anything *but* parochial. Yet all of these scholars have had a relatively rough

8 Klaas van Berkel and Leonie de Goei, ‘The International Relevance of Dutch History’, *BMGN-LCHR* 125:2-3 (2010) 3-6. See especially the essay of Willem Frijhoff, ‘The Relevance of Dutch History, or: Much in Little? Reflections on the Practice of

History in the Netherlands,’ *BMGN-LCHR* 125:2-3 (2010) 7-44. Frijhoff engages with several of the themes raised in this essay, albeit from a Dutch perspective.

reception in the Netherlands, where their work has not always been well regarded and where their scholarship has often been criticized harshly by the local guardians of Low Countries history, also in the pages of the *BMGN*.⁹ This highlights, once again, the striking paradox of Dutch historiography: its tendency toward insularity – its island mentality, if you will – matched by its concomitant attraction of and attentiveness to outside scholarship. It suggests an ambivalence, if not a full-on skepticism, regarding non-Low Countries historians who, nonetheless, continue to make outstanding contributions to Low Countries history.

The final quarter of the previous century, in retrospect, turned out to be a fairly good one for Dutch historical scholarship. It saw the publication of several, now classic works by non-Dutch scholars on the early modern Netherlands, in particular – Parker on the Dutch Revolt, Alpers on Dutch visual culture, Schama on the Dutch burgher *mentalité*, Israel on Dutch intellectual history, Jan de Vries on Dutch economic history, etc.¹⁰ This scholarly productivity and its very prominence, in turn, stimulated and encouraged a new generation of historians of the Low Countries, some of them trained by the giants of the previous generation, others simply inspired by their excellent work, which enticed them to go to graduate school and do Low Countries history (and art history, I should add). This recent cadre of scholars has likewise approached the history of the Low Countries as quasi-outsiders – at least in terms of their country of origin – and likewise engaged with, and made important contributions to, the history of the Low Countries. This would be my own cohort of scholars, and it is here that my own – admittedly biased and certainly subjective – experience speaks to some of these issues.

I first came to Holland for a year of research in the 1990s, when the aforementioned scholars were publishing and provoking fierce debate on the

9 The case that stands out may be that of Schama, who comes up in exactly one article in the *BMGN* (based on an online search): an unkind, utterly dismissive review of *The Embarrassment of Riches*. Parker appears in three reviews, one mostly positive, the other harshly negative, and a third – even as it notes the previous, negative review – piling on. Israel comes up frequently in the pages of the *BMGN* yet only once for review (a rather critical one); while Alpers and Jardine do not even merit mention.

10 Geoffrey Parker, *The Dutch Revolt* (Ithaca, NY 1977); Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago

1983); Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York 1987); Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall, 1477-1806* (Oxford 1995); Jan de Vries and A.M. van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy from 1500 to 1815* (Cambridge 1997). The work of De Vries – of Dutch heritage, yet raised and educated in the United States – has been well received in the Netherlands, although this may have more to do with his subfield (economic history) than his Dutch background.

history of the Netherlands, above all *in* the Netherlands – yet not always in the most supportive ways. As a young graduate student in early modern European history, working on a Dutch topic, I naturally introduced myself to various, sometimes prominent, Dutch historians, with whom I invariably had to engage in the game of academic geography and undergo the rites of scholarly placement. That would be when your interlocutor (typically a scholar senior to you) identifies you and places you in an academic milieu by linking you to a university and a mentor, thus gauging your academic capital. ‘Where are you from?’ I would summarily be asked upon meeting a senior Dutch scholar. ‘The us,’ replied the younger me, tepidly. ‘What university?’ ‘Umm, Harvard?’ Here a bit of a silence, as they processed, pondered, and then pounced: ‘So you must work with Simon Schama!’ To this I sheepishly submitted, after which I unfailingly got two forms of reactions: The first was merely mildly dismissive: ‘His books sell in airports!’ I would shrug and smile weakly, thinking naively to myself: I hope *my* books will one day sell in airports. The second reaction was sharper and more labor intensive, as such-and-such eminent Dutch scholar would proceed to reel off the mistakes he/she had identified (or imagined) in the *Embarrassment of Riches*, a richly embarrassing monologue that I would endure in silence, wondering what it was exactly I had fallen into. Thus my introduction to the sharp-toothed sharks and dangerous shoals that surrounded the island of Dutch historiography.

The metaphors invoked here – sharks, shoals, islands – have been purposefully oceanic. They are meant to allude to and subtly introduce the work of the late Greg Denning and his innovative *Islands and Beaches* (1980), in which the acclaimed Australian ethno-historian analyzed how the indigenous Marquesans – Te Enata – dealt with the outside world. Denning’s is a watery work, yet highly relevant to other societies, each insular in its own way. In Denning’s critical vocabulary, *islands* are cultural worlds made by a society – in his masterful case study, the world made by the indigenous inhabitants of the Marquesas in the South Pacific – while *beaches* are the cultural boundaries that societies construct around themselves, boundaries that may or may not be crossed. Beaches are, of course, readily traversable in a literal sense – outsiders can drop anchor, wade ashore, if they like – yet they can be impenetrable in a metaphoric sense. Islanders can keep outsiders at bay through the cultural work of boundary-making: through social systems, ingrained traditions, geo-political constructs, aesthetic preferences, and so on. This allows the islanders to erect a sense of distinctiveness and to render outsiders *not*.¹¹ In the watery

11 See Denning, *Islands and Beaches*, as well as idem, *Beach Crossings: Voyaging Across Times, Cultures and Self* (Carlton, Victoria 2004).

world of the Low Countries, outsiders have been held at bay, in various ways, since the days of Claudius Civilis, whose magnificent one eye – in Rembrandt’s monumental rendition of the ancient Batavian warrior – casts a foreboding and forbidding gaze on all trespassers who might challenge his clansmen.¹² In terms of the stalwart guardians of Dutch history, it is not hard to imagine how this atavistic ferocity may have been passed down. Islands and beaches, no less dikes and dunes, can serve as physical boundaries, fending off a threatening invader. Yet they can also fortress cultural and intellectual worlds, keeping at a distance the sort of outsider insight that can often prove productive.¹³

Invited or not, outsiders make their way in. The manifest warning signs, professional and metaphorical, did not discourage me from ultimately entering the field, along with several other *buitenlanders* (foreigners) of my graduate cohort. And from that introductory year of research – my rough initiation into the rites of Dutch historiography notwithstanding – derived my first scholarly book, which took a crack at both Dutch history and Dutch historical distinctiveness.¹⁴ *Innocence Abroad* tries to make a contribution to early modern political and cultural history by analyzing how the Dutch conceptualized the New World in the period of their own gestation as an independent state. It identified what had been, to that point, an unremarked yet fundamental Dutch preoccupation with so-called Spanish tyranny in America – a ubiquitous trope in the pamphlets of the rebels, sprinkled liberally across Dutch letters, otherwise, of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The image of Habsburg marauders in the Americas proved immensely useful to the propagandists of the rebel party. By adopting this rhetorical turn and by thinking in this geo-strategic manner, the anti-Habsburg faction in the Netherlands was able to rouse opposition to the Spanish enemy, which was depicted as a fiendish *conquistador*, both at home and abroad. Meanwhile, this rhetoric also laid the groundwork for future colonial ventures in the Habsburg-colonized West, which Dutch pamphleteers advertised, at least initially, as a mission to save the ‘innocent’

12 Rembrandt van Rijn, ‘The Conspiracy of the Batavians under Claudius Civilis’ (1661-1662), Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Sweden (yet recently on loan to the Rijksmuseum, thus close to its intended home in the new Amsterdam Town Hall [now the Royal Palace Amsterdam]).

13 Fortress Holland is a metaphor familiar to historians of the early modern Netherlands, albeit with some tweaking. The allegorical figure of the Maiden of Holland sitting inside her wattle

fence, staff in hand, to fend off foreign attackers, was an icon of the Dutch Revolt, reproduced in print and on coin, from the late sixteenth century through the end of the seventeenth century (there is a design by the engraver Philips Galle going back to 1563, along with a more widely circulated woodcut dating from 1573).

14 *Innocence Abroad: The Dutch Imagination and the New World, 1570-1670* (Cambridge 2001).

Indians from their Spanish tormentors (the latter understood to have equally tormented the ‘innocent’ Dutch).

Looking back at that work retrospectively and through the lens of Dutch historiography, I can now admit: The aim of that book was, to a considerable degree, to highlight the *distinctiveness* of this peculiarly Dutch rhetoric and the rather idiosyncratic path the Netherlands took to their own Western expansion. In this regard, it presented a parochial proposition: *the Dutch are different*. Yet the arguments, to be fair, were set in the context of other European histories and other cultural geographies. *Innocence Abroad* endeavored to show, as well, how other early modern states defined themselves vis-à-vis Spain and engaged an imagined New World. That Dutch-focused study, furthermore, was followed by another that centered on the English courtier Sir Walter Raleigh and his best-selling *Discovery of Guiana*.¹⁵ The aim was to demonstrate how this prototypical Elizabethan and New World adventurer drew from some of the same rhetorical springs as the Dutch rebels. Hispanophobia, it turns out, was a broader-than-Dutch motif; the Netherlands’ rhetorical stream flowed into a deeper early modern river.

The inflow and outflow of Dutch currents into the wider tributaries of early modern European culture – of Dutch-propagated rhetoric, of Dutch-made texts and images, of Dutch-designed products, especially those related to early modern Europe’s engagement with the world – are critical to the arguments of *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe’s Early Modern World*, a book that encompasses Dutch history, as well.¹⁶ Once again, however, the Dutch are situated in a broader, international orbit. *Inventing Exoticism* endeavors to link Holland-made representations of the exotic world to a larger, explicitly European sensibility. It posits that Dutch makers of various forms of exotic geography – of books, maps, prints, paintings, and material arts that engage with the non-European world – did their best to wipe their fingerprints off of these sources and present them as generically ‘European’. While these materials may have been characteristically Dutch in their production, in other words, they were expressly European in their consumption. *Inventing Exoticism* demonstrates *inter alia* the Dutch role in the invention of ‘Europe’, showing the tight links between the culture of the Dutch Republic and that of early modern Europe. It challenges precisely the insular conception of the Netherlands, or at least the Holland slice of it, which, even while dotted by protective dikes and dunes facing the North Sea, embraced the European culture that otherwise surrounded it.

Dutchness versus Europeanness? The two are not mutually exclusive, of course, nor is the question of insularity unique to the historiography of the Low Countries. It is a larger issue, all but endemic to the field of history.

15 *The Discovery of Guiana by Sir Walter Raleigh*, (ed. and intro). (Boston and New York 2008).

16 *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe’s Early Modern World* (Philadelphia 2015).



Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Conspiracy of the Batavians under Claudius Civilis* (1661-1662).

The Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Sweden (on loan to the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam).

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Perhaps the matter is one of emphasis and where our research leads us. While historians habitually seek to identify the ‘distinctions’ of their subject matter – that is our stock and trade, after all: finding things in the past that are different and therefore interesting and worthy of explication – we are well served by situating these distinctions in broader contexts: to look for outliers, along with patterns; to seek the exceptional, yet also the trend lines. The Marquesas Islands turned out to be, as Dening beautifully demonstrated, fascinating and fecund terrain for historical field work. Yet they also shared much, as Dening further explained, with other Polynesian islands – and, in numerous ways, with other watery landscapes, cool and overcast no less than warm and sunny. Dutch history is certainly distinctive – which history is ever not? – yet it behooves us to bear in mind the ways it resembles other histories and the ways its distinctiveness pertains to broader patterns. To frame these distinctions within these larger patterns, moreover, sometimes requires an outside perspective, and it is here that Dutch historiography might benefit from the use of a wider-angle lens and the adoption of a multi-perspectival viewfinder (to shift my metaphors).

It is not hard to find other parallel cases of historiographical distinctiveness, and perhaps the easiest one raises the chutzpah factor acknowledged at the start of this essay – a presumptuous American hectoring the Dutch historical profession, in the pages of its premiere journal, on Dutch history, specifically Dutch historiographical claims of distinctiveness. To chutzpah let me add irony: American history and its historiographical traditions have long postulated its own particularity, namely the much touted quality of ‘American exceptionalism’. It is a conceit that goes back all the way to Alexis de Tocqueville (perhaps even John Winthrop), and it is a thesis that has been argued vigorously over the years, recently by the likes of Samuel Huntington and his neoconservative allies.¹⁷ Certainly, Americans can display an almost unrivalled parochialism. We, too, imagine that we follow a Sonderweg – as do, I hasten to add, plentiful other adherents, supporters, and practitioners of national history. Sonderwege, it is worth pointing out, crisscross the historiographical landscape. They are constructed not by ‘history’ per se, so much as by historians. And even while they offer reliable angles of inquiry – steady lines among the rising and falling trends in the field – we historians do not need to follow them, if we choose not to.

Likewise, we do not need to man the dunes and breach the dikes in defense of distinctiveness, if we choose not to. The lions of early modern Dutch historiography of the past few decades – the clutch of outsiders who dared to compose fresh, sweeping syntheses of Dutch history; who risked

17 Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique* (Paris 1835); and cf. Samuel Huntington,

The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York 1996).

contributing what ‘insiders’ found to be dangerously mistake-riddled narratives; who trained (or otherwise inspired) a new generation of scholars captivated by the Low Countries – came not only from beyond the dunes and dikes of Holland. They were also Europeanists by training who, having worked in the general field of early modern European history (or early modern art history), cast their scholarly attention on the Netherlands for the richness of its archives, the vitality of its culture, and the dramatic material of its political past. There is a difference, easy to detect by the trained eye, between historians who do Dutch history and historians whose work happens to embrace the history of the Dutch. The former train rigorously as Low Countries specialists, the latter as early modernists (for my field) with a focus on the Low Countries. The former master Dutch archives with admirable diligence, while the latter introduce different perspectives from other archives and other methodologies. The former focus on the distinctive narrative of the Low Countries – its *Sonderweg* – while the latter tend to set this story in a wider, European (and, increasingly, global) context.

I would like to think that both approaches are valuable and are mutually valued by both sets of practitioners. My purpose in this review of the *BMGN* and this brief, admittedly narrow assessment of Dutch historiography is not so much to critique Dutch history-writing, which I greatly admire; but to encourage a more seamless and happy blend of these approaches – of the history of the Netherlands with that of Europe – which makes, after all, good historical (if not necessarily historiographical) sense. It might be further proposed that, while inherently interesting and often to the point, arguments for historical distinctiveness do not necessarily preclude a comparative bent or boundary-breaking methodology. All of which is to say: the dikes and dunes do not need defending – at least not from marauding, academic *buitenlanders*.

It is an opportune moment for broaching the matter of boundaries and their permeability. By way of conclusion, it might be worth noting the significance of our own historical moment, when the idea of ‘Europe’ as a cohesive unit and the historic place of the Netherlands within an interconnected Europe are once again on the docket; when grumbling Euro-skeptics challenge the very notion of the Dutch in the world. While this is hardly the proper forum to sermonize on contemporary Dutch politics (*chutspah* amplified), it may be worth pointing out in this regard that Dutch history, from the perspective of a non-Dutch historian of the Netherlands, seems integrally, critically, and productively linked to the wider history of Europe. To imagine otherwise is to narrow the possibilities of understanding and to reduce the richness of the Dutch past. The *BMGN* (it merits repeating) is an excellently edited, beautifully produced, and indubitably rewarding journal. It has, as it stands, much to offer, and it would be churlish to propose otherwise. But that was the trap laid for me, and I have fallen into it. I might suggest, accordingly, that narrating the history of the Low Countries as part of a more far-reaching narrative of European history – that integrating into

Dutch historiography the broadest possible perspectives of the past, including as many possible voices from within and without the Low Countries – will not only enhance the *BMGN* and the quality of Dutch history. It will also present a story of the Dutch in the world that more closely reflects the reality of the Dutch in the world. It is, after all, this reality – the cosmopolitan nature of the Dutch past and the Dutch present, historiographical parochialism notwithstanding – that has induced us *buitenlanders* to stroll the beaches and climb the dunes of the Low Countries. There is absolutely no need to worry.

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