

Introduction

The Great Transformation

In the half-century spanning the 1620s through the 1670s, the Atlantic world underwent a profound transformation. Although by 1620 the Iberians were still largely alone in occupying American lands, establishing bridgeheads in Africa, conducting transatlantic trade, and warring or coexisting with indigenous people, they were joined in the following decades by the English, French, and Dutch. While Mexico, Peru, and Brazil had been the foci of Spanish and Portuguese activity in the New World, the newcomers created thriving settlements in the Lesser Antilles and North America. And if making bullion had been the economic rationale for the American empire of Spain (although not for that of Portugal), the production of cash crops became the foundation of many colonies set up by the northern Europeans. As slavery began to underpin the new colonies, Africa was drawn further into the Atlantic world. The Dutch were instrumental in this Great Transformation, and not simply because they established colonies and trading posts of their own. If anything, the Dutch produced little in the way of plantation crops themselves during the middle decades of the century. They were, however, ubiquitous as merchants, selling manufactures and slaves, buying produce, and extending loans across imperial boundaries. The Dutch were so involved in all the other Atlantic empires that Dutch activities provoked the introduction of the English Navigation Acts and Portuguese transatlantic fleet system and contributed to the takeoff of the

sugar economies in the French Caribbean, the start of the Swedish and Danish trade in captive Africans, and the Jewish diaspora in the Caribbean and North America. The Dutch contributions to the development of the Atlantic world indicate that its history cannot be fully understood by focusing on empires alone. Each colonial realm was entangled in various ways with other empires. Interimperial trade was fundamental to many American provinces, while cultural influence also tied neighboring colonies together, as did wars and border disputes.

The Dutch arrival in Africa and the Americas also had a huge impact on various Amerindian and African polities. Dutch supplies of firearms, for example, enabled the Iroquois to defeat their enemies in the 1640s and 1650s. Likewise, the Dutch demand for wampum—the shell beads they sold to North American natives, who used them for diplomatic ends, cherished them as prestigious possessions, and assigned great spiritual significance to them—led to an exponential growth in its output by native manufacturers. This productive revolution was one aspect of the transition from subsistence-based to market-based Amerindian economies. In southwestern Africa, Dutch actions were no less consequential. Their occupation of the port of Luanda helped alter political conditions on the ground and shift the area in which Africans were captured who would end up on European slave ships.¹

This book is about the Dutch Moment in Atlantic history—the middle decades of the seventeenth century, when the Dutch left their mark on the wider Atlantic world like never before or afterward. The Great Transformation that occurred was probably bound to happen, but it would have been delayed and colored differently without the Dutch. Although some U.S. historians acknowledge the important role played by the Dutch in the Atlantic world, they frequently either underplay or exaggerate Dutch contributions for lack of knowledge. Dutch scholars of the Atlantic world, by contrast, have traditionally been outshadowed as students of overseas history by colleagues working on the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, VOC). In addition, their predilection has been to deal with one colony at a time, thus largely ignoring the Atlantic context. Consequently, no work is available that discusses the manifold pursuits that characterized the Dutch Atlantic world. It is this void that I plan to fill in *The Dutch Moment*.

In the hands of historians, the Atlantic Dutch often fall between the cracks, rendered invisible by the attention paid to the other imperial powers. Their only role of note is that of interlopers, of outsiders residing offshore. I hope to right this wrong, not merely by adding another imperial layer to Atlantic history but by helping us understand the whole seventeenth-century

Atlantic world more fully. Obviously, the Dutch brought their own institutions, legal practices, and cultural traditions to their projects in Africa and the Americas. The way in which they constructed their colonial project also differed from their European rivals. Whereas these shaped their Atlantic empires in an improvisational manner, the Dutch had actually planned theirs quite deliberately. The ad hoc nature of the Spanish invasion of the Aztec empire, the chance discovery of Brazil by the Portuguese, the equally coincidental English settlement of Bermuda and New England, and the private initiatives of Frenchmen in the Caribbean contrasted with the carefully constructed Grand Design of the Dutch. Military objectives were paramount in the years after 1621. Key bases such as Elmina and Curaçao, not to mention Brazil, were conquered after meticulous preparations.

In another sense, the Dutch were not exceptional. Whereas the Atlantic empire of Spain was a territorial empire from an early date, based as it was on ample indigenous labor, those of Portugal and England remained maritime in nature for many generations before eventually transforming into territorial empires as well. The transition occurred when the imperial goal shifted from the control of trade to the management of commodity production. The rise of Portugal as an imperial power in Brazil, which entailed the expansion of territory, took place in gradual fashion in the seventeenth century, whereas England did not reach the same stage until the middle of the eighteenth. Although historians have labeled the Dutch empire “seaborne” or “commercial,” the West India Company (WIC)—the joint-stock company that ruled the Dutch Atlantic after 1621—was also drawn to the creation of a territorial empire. The dream of supplanting Spain in America—which drove some of the Dutch expeditions to the New World—hinged on the conquest of the mining center of Potosí in upper Peru, far into the interior of South America. And managing Potosí would have involved land-based imperialism. Its capture never materialized, but the territorial impulse resurfaced after the invasion of Brazil. Faced with the largest sugar-producing area in the world, the Dutch succumbed to the temptation of empire. They did the same in the East Indies, where spices seduced them into conquering production areas and controlling the land.

The Dutch Atlantic empire was forged on the battlefield. The overseas deployment of troops was a—sometimes unheralded—extension of the decades-old independence war against Habsburg Spain. It is hard to overestimate the scope of the overseas wars between the Dutch and the Iberians, which first energized and then debilitated the Netherlanders. The war in Brazil was the largest interimperial conflict of the seventeenth-century Atlantic, a fight that historians have underappreciated. The battle

for supremacy between France and Britain during the second Hundred Years' War, from 1689 through 1815, has captured their imagination, expressed in a recent upsurge in interest in the Seven Years' War. Earlier rivalries between Atlantic empires, however, have received little attention. Consequently, the questionable notion persists that peace was the norm and war the exception.

The war with Spain was one of many involving the Dutch in the seventeenth-century Atlantic. Portugal, in fact, bore the brunt of Dutch warfare afloat and ashore during its crown union with Spain. Nothing changed, however, after the Portuguese rebelled and became independent. The Dutch maliciously captured Portuguese possessions in Africa and Brazil, setting off another war that would take decades to end. Meanwhile, the Atlantic became a prominent battleground once more during the last two of the three Anglo-Dutch wars, which were largely motivated by commercial competition. Dutch America came close to extinction—but survived. But it did not expand further during the war between the United Provinces and France, which saw more fighting in the Atlantic world.

The numerous armed conflicts involving the Dutch demonstrate that the mid-seventeenth-century Atlantic was not simply a time of new beginnings. It was a period of sustained warfare. Like the Dutch, the English and French started settling in the New World and acquiring West African bases for the slave trade, but their arrival on either side of the ocean was relatively peaceful. The Dutch appearance, on the other hand, was accompanied by untold acts of violence. A focus on the Dutch reveals that, far from being an era of peaceful settlement in the New World—especially by migrants from the British Isles—the middle decades of the seventeenth century were steeped in blood. Violence was the midwife of the Great Transformation.

In one sense, the martial dimension of the Dutch Atlantic was particularly conspicuous. The demographic weight of the soldiers and sailors who defended and extended imperial boundaries was larger than in the other empires. Colonial populations did not exist in the Dutch trading centers along the African coast and never outgrew their small size in the Americas. Yet, however modest the American settlements were, they still had difficulty feeding themselves. For nourishment, they remained dependent on supplies from the Republic, which were often long in coming. Routinely deprived of sustenance, garrison soldiers suffered from other deprivations as well. They were usually an afterthought for the colonial government, the WIC, and the States General, their crucial position in a Dutch Atlantic empire notwithstanding. Their neglect ultimately resulted in a refusal to fight, causing some colonies to be lost.

What also distinguished the Dutch Atlantic were the urban roots of most migrants and their lack of agricultural skills. After the loss of Brazil and New Netherland, the directors of the WIC acknowledged that the Dutch were not cut out to be colonial farmers, unlike the English, who were excellent colonists, as the recent transformation of Barbados had shown.² But, as the directors emphasized, the Dutch were first-rate traders. If empire was one pillar of the Dutch Atlantic, trade was indeed the other. Dutch Atlantic trade had taken off in the late sixteenth century, was reduced to modest levels during the 1610s, and then was placed under the umbrella of the WIC. Unlike its more famous counterpart, the VOC, which maintained major monopolies during its entire lifespan, the WIC was forced to give up most of its monopolies before long, due to its wanting commercial performance. As an unintended consequence of its colonial adventure in Brazil, the WIC did become the world's largest slave-trading company in the middle part of the century. The end of Dutch Brazil did not slow down the Dutch trade in Africans, which actually expanded, although the destinations were increasingly the foreign parts of the New World. Indeed, Dutch trade in the Atlantic world amounted to much more than commerce with Dutch-held ports and forts. The Dutch stood out for the scope of their transactions in Spanish, French, and English America, in some places regularly outnumbering merchants from the respective metropolises. The cash crops entering the Dutch markets—in particular that of Amsterdam—thus originated in all parts of the Americas. Furthermore, the workers carried by Dutch slavers were often embarked in ports and forts on the African coast that were not under Dutch jurisdiction.

If foreigners built their Atlantic domains with Dutch assistance, the Dutch likewise constructed their own Atlantic world with the help of others. Their fleets and armies included numerous foreigners, largely drawn from countries in northwestern Europe. Uncounted numbers of settlers of Dutch colonies, sometimes as many as half the population, were born in foreign parts of Europe or the New World. Particularly striking is the large percentage of Jewish settlers in Dutch America, where their economic exploits were indispensable to the survival of the colonies. Often born in Portugal or France, these men and their families either had returned to a full Jewish life in Amsterdam or would do so in the Dutch colonies. American Judaism thus took off in the Dutch Atlantic.

Nor would the Dutch have been able to achieve military victories without the native alliances they carefully cultivated in Brazil, Guiana, New Netherland, Angola, and the Gold Coast. In fact, the Dutch Atlantic was

quintessentially interimperial, multinational, and multiracial. At the same time, it was an empire designed to benefit the United Provinces. Because warfare was the main *raison d'être* of the WIC, many potential investors refrained from buying stocks, delaying the departure of the first military expeditions. More adventurous men preferred war over trade in view of the quick riches that could be amassed. For much of the Dutch Moment, privateering was a lucrative pursuit. Silver was the booty of choice, at least when Spain was the enemy. When Portugal remained as the only Iberian foe, ships carrying Brazilian sugar were the main target.

American natives figured in some Atlantic projects as ideal allies. Because Spain was supposedly at war with Amerindians everywhere, they were expected to receive Dutchmen with open arms. In reality, the Dutch relationship with natives was fraught with difficulties. Gold fever, acts of random violence, and occasional enslavement did not ingratiate the Dutch with their indigenous neighbors. Still, commercial networks connected them, and many reliable long-lasting ties were established on an individual level. Religion was hardly ever a meeting ground. Few Amerindians were converted to Calvinism, even if ministers arrived with the twin goals of spreading the Gospel to them and introducing them to civilization. Missionary efforts among Africans on their native soil or in the New World also bore little fruit. Blacks were initially not essentialized as slaves, but the need for coerced labor in Brazil made the colonial Dutch change their minds. Whatever objections had been raised to slavery in sermons or published works were then put aside.

Colonial clergy had to operate in a religious setting for which they had not been prepared. Although religious tolerance was uncommon in the Dutch Republic itself—despite the famous example of Amsterdam—it was the norm in most colonies. Liberty of conscience was a principle set down in the original administrative framework for the American colonies. Here and there, religious groups that were deemed critical for the future of a colony were even granted freedom of worship, which enabled the preservation of social peace. The Dutch failure to deliver on promised tolerance could, however, be costly.

The Dutch Moment, then, not only launched the Dutch as intermediaries in the Atlantic world but was itself an important stage in Atlantic history, linking the era before 1600, dominated by Iberian expansion, with the second Hundred Years' War. Although it may have been short, it left its mark on the wider Atlantic in numerous ways. Just as the Dutch had embarked on their early oceanic adventures as apprentices, others soon learned from Dutch expertise in navigation, cartography, planting, and the

slave trade. Dutch commercial assistance allowed both infant English and French colonies and mature Spanish colonies to remain afloat. By contrast, Dutch military campaigns left a trail of casualties and instilled fear in many parts of Ibero-America and later among French and English colonists. This display of power effectively came to an end in the late 1670s. The Dutch did not vanish from the Atlantic world but began a new chapter in their colonial history under the auspices of a new, slimmed-down, and unarmed WIC. The vestiges of their Atlantic realm—Elmina, Curaçao, and Suriname—remained intact, albeit not without military engagements. The role of the Dutch was now reversed: from attackers, they had become defenders.

Although historians largely ignored the seventeenth-century Dutch Atlantic for many years, it has become a fertile environment in recent decades. New light was cast on the WIC by Henk den Heijer's institutional history, Kees Zandvliet's study of the WIC use of maps, and Alexander Bick's micro-historical examination of the WIC in 1645. Benjamin Schmidt showed the importance of America in the Dutch consciousness, Danny Noorlander produced a wide-ranging dissertation on the clergy in the Dutch Atlantic, and Mark Meuwese explored the commercial and military liaisons between the Dutch and both the Africans and Amerindians. Interactions with Amerindians were also the subject of Lodewijk Hulsman's dissertation on Guiana. The study of New Netherland was advanced by Jaap Jacobs's comprehensive monograph, Willem Frijhoff's model biography of Evert Willemsz, the work of Donna Merwick and Paul Otto on Dutch relations with natives, and Susannah Shaw Romney's discussion of Dutch interactions with nonwhites. The literature on Dutch Brazil was enriched by the publications of Evaldo Cabral de Mello and Michiel van Groesen, and the Dutch period in Angola and São Tomé was illuminated by the publication of Klaas Ratelband's decades-old manuscript. Finally, Filipa Ribeiro da Silva has shed new light on the Dutch across the western coast of West Africa.³ What is still missing, however, is a book that offers an overview of the Dutch Atlantic, exploring the creation of overseas societies, economic pursuits across imperial boundaries, and the quest to create an empire of some sort.

Another necessary correction is to put Brazil front and center in the Dutch Atlantic. It is striking that among both historians and laymen New Netherland is the best-known seventeenth-century Dutch colony, whereas few know that a large part of Brazil was under Dutch rule in the same period. From the perspective of North America in general and that of New York in particular, the attention given to New Netherland is easy to understand. But historians who spend time in the archives of the WIC and the States

General or who study the contemporary pamphlet literature quickly discover that New Netherland was of marginal importance to the Dutch Atlantic, while the understudied colony of Dutch Brazil was no less than pivotal. Brazil was seen by many, if not all in the Dutch political and mercantile elite as the premier Dutch colony in the western hemisphere—hence the willingness to wage a long and, at times, seemingly endless war that consumed many thousands of soldiers and sailors. In terms of military personnel, Brazil dwarfed all other Dutch colonies and trading posts combined. The contemporary importance attached to Brazil can be also inferred from the decision by the WIC to subdue the two main focal points of Portuguese authority in Africa, Elmina and Luanda, to control outlets of the African slave trade for the benefit of Brazil. It is telling that both invasions were launched not from the Republic but from Brazil.

Its brief lifespan of three decades notwithstanding, Dutch Brazil had a lasting impact on the Atlantic world. After the conquest of Pernambuco, Dutchmen entered the transatlantic slave trade for the first time in a systematic way, thus initiating the transport until 1803 of more than half a million Africans to the New World on board Dutch ships. Dutch Brazil at the same time paved the way for a Jewish life in freedom in the Americas. After the first American synagogues opened their doors in Recife, that example was soon followed in other Dutch and English colonies. And usually the first Jews who moved there were settlers from Brazil and their relatives, who thus became the pioneers of the Jewish communities in both the Caribbean and North America.

The costly military adventure in Brazil unmistakably contributed to the bankruptcy of the WIC. The company engaged in colonial expansion in Brazil at a time when the bottom of the treasury was already visible. Its chance to regain financial health was lost for good in the years that Governor Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen ruled Dutch Brazil. The surrender in Brazil, which occurred even before the WIC was disbanded, gave rise in the United Provinces to a nostalgic longing for the once-flourishing colony, whose greatness was personified by the figure of Johan Maurits. In post-Dutch Brazil itself, Johan Maurits was remembered as a just and kind prince, and the regrettable traits of his regime were explained by reference to his supposedly bad advisers.⁴ In the aftermath of the Dutch surrender, Brazil was also used as an economic model on which both the Dutch and others based themselves in other colonial theaters. The way in which Dutch Suriname took shape was indebted to the former plantation colony, while the once thriving sugar industry in Brazil also inspired colonies in the French and English Caribbean.⁵

Because the establishment of those foreign Caribbean colonies in the 1620s and in 1630 occurred at the time of the Dutch-Iberian war over Brazil, we may wonder whether the latter enabled the former, especially because up until the Portuguese independence in 1640 the Dutch opponent in Brazil was the Habsburg empire. Although it is clear that the Spanish crown did not commit many ships or soldiers to Brazil that would otherwise have been sent to protect the Lesser Antilles from foreign encroachment, Spain suffered from imperial overstretch long before the Dutch invasions of Bahia and Recife. The war in Brazil must only have exacerbated its financial woes.⁶

The imperial dimension of the Dutch Atlantic, so prominently on display in Brazil, is fleshed out in the first four chapters of this book. In chapter 1, I provide a survey of early Dutch Atlantic imperial and inter-imperial activities, and in chapter 2, I detail the dramatic rise to power of the Dutch in Africa and the Americas from the 1620s until the mid-1640s. In chapter 3, I tell the story of the gradual decline of Dutch imperial might. Through it all, the Dutch presence in the Atlantic world was both facilitated and hampered by warfare. The Dutch became the heirs to the Elizabethans, although their preferred targets were Portuguese (not Spanish) ships, settlements, and trading posts. The wars of the United Provinces in the seventeenth century cannot be understood without their Atlantic dimension; although the military confrontations with Habsburg forces in Africa and the Americas were an extension of European hostilities, colonial issues featured prominently at home during the second Anglo-Dutch war and the war with independent Portugal. The men who created and maintained the empire in this Atlantic crucible occupy center stage in chapter 4, in which I provide a comprehensive treatment of the lives of soldiers and sailors.

The engagement by the Dutch with others is the subject of the remaining chapters. Following the trail of supply and demand, Dutch merchants crisscrossed the ocean in search of goods and markets. In the process, they became the leading slave traders, as I reveal in chapter 5. In sharp contrast to these merchants' mobility stood the resistance of the Dutch to settling in the Americas (chapter 6). As a consequence, the colonies depended for a good part on foreign European migrants or European Americans who were overwhelmingly non-Calvinists. Religious tolerance was introduced to manage religious diversity, but it was always challenged by ministers of the Reformed Church and sometimes circumscribed or proscribed by secular authorities afraid of a divided population or even a fifth column. And although the Dutch also came to depend on nonwhites (chapter 7), the notion prevailed that Amerindians and Africans failed to meet the criteria for civilization,

as did the zeal to commodify them, which led to discrimination, enslavement, and bloodshed. Violence, as I stress in the epilogue, became a staple of colonial life, in both conventional and unconventional ways. In spite of the multiple friendly connections forged by seventeenth-century Netherlands with foreign lands and peoples, the Dutch Moment was indeed a violent one.