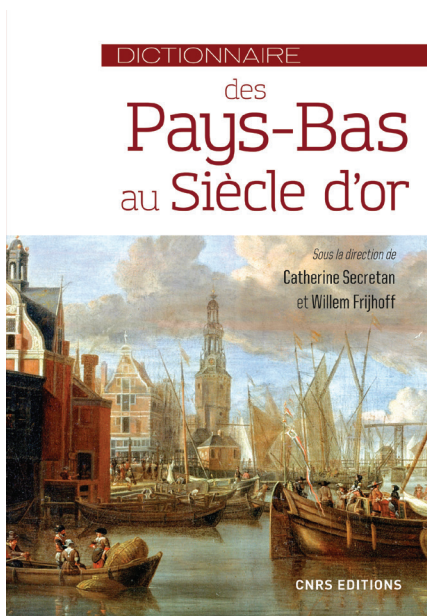


Review

Catherine Secretan and Willem Frijhoff (eds.), *Dictionnaire des Pays-Bas au Siècle d'or*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2018, 888 pp. ISBN 9782271115935.

Helmer J. Helmers and Geert H. Janssen (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Dutch Golden Age*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 454 pp. ISBN 9781316623534.



Johan de Witt has become an Internet meme: a digitised image (usually from an engraved portrait, sometimes from Jan De Baen's *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers*) circulates accompanied by some variant of the text 'In 1672 the Dutch killed and ate their prime minister. I'm just saying we have options.' This was widely shared in the summer of 2018, when Australia had a change of prime minister. Anybody wanting to know more about De Witt could turn to two recently published reference works on the Dutch Republic. The *Cambridge Companion to the Dutch Golden Age* aims to offer a general overview, and readers interested in De Witt would find a little bit of detail about his background and social connections in one chapter (illustrating a wider point about political faction and elite families), and a sentence or two about the symbolism of how his corpse was mutilated after his murder, while another chapter simply mentions that he and his brother dominated Dutch politics during the First Stadtholderless Period, and that he did not have a personal guard; a third chapter says his education at Leiden University had a strong mathematical component, and a fourth that he was associated with the concept of 'True Freedom'. Without first having an idea about who De Witt was, what he stood for, and the circumstances of his death, it would be hard to put these pieces together coherently. His best-known achievement, planning the raid on the Royal Navy dockyard at Chatham that captured the English flagship *Royal Charles*, seems to get no mention at all (and the

labeled after his murder, while another chapter simply mentions that he and his brother dominated Dutch politics during the First Stadtholderless Period, and that he did not have a personal guard; a third chapter says his education at Leiden University had a strong mathematical component, and a fourth that he was associated with the concept of 'True Freedom'. Without first having an idea about who De Witt was, what he stood for, and the circumstances of his death, it would be hard to put these pieces together coherently. His best-known achievement, planning the raid on the Royal Navy dockyard at Chatham that captured the English flagship *Royal Charles*, seems to get no mention at all (and the

whole of the Second Anglo-Dutch War appears only as a temporal marker for when New Amsterdam became New York). The *Dictionnaire des Pays-Bas au Siècle d'or*, in contrast, contains two full pages dedicated to De Witt, sketching his views, biography, policies, and death, and very briefly touching on his historiographical significance, with separate entries for the Chatham raid and the Anglo-Dutch Wars. On this showing the *Dictionnaire* wins hands down as a work of reference, but of course it is not a fair comparison: the *Companion* is not intended as a work of reference in at all the same way.

Tempting as it is to compare the two books point by point, they have little in common beyond their shared focus on the United Provinces in the 'long' seventeenth century, and opting in their titles for the brand familiarity of this period as the 'Dutch Golden Age' (acknowledging the problems accompanying this choice in introductory comments – problems that since the publication of these volumes in 2018 have led the Museum of Amsterdam very publicly to disavow the term entirely). The *Cambridge Companion* is exemplary of the academic genre of 'companions' that itself seems to be having a golden age. The editors explain in the introduction that they intend 'to emphasize the paradoxes and silences in the historiography' as well as 'providing traditional perspectives to readers unfamiliar with seventeenth-century Dutch history'. The example of De Witt shows that 'readers unfamiliar' might occasionally get left behind, but the volume more than makes up for this in other ways. Every chapter sets out how academic approaches and controversies have developed in recent decades, mapping the questions now being asked about the period, and providing useful introductions not so much for general readers as for specialists whose expertise lies elsewhere.

The *Dictionnaire* is much more straightforwardly intended as a work of reference, so naturally gives a more stable picture of settled knowledge and interpretation, rather than focusing on the uncertain or the debated. The coverage is capacious, reflecting a strong sense of the Dutch Republic not as a world apart but as part of Europe and a global actor: there are entries not only on Dutch places, people, events, and institutions, but also on foreign figures and locations that the Dutch interacted with in some way. There is, for example, an extensive piece on wine, a major import with considerable social and cultural significance, followed by a separate entry – longer than that on Johan de Witt – about the Dutch impact on developments in viticulture in both southern Africa and western France.

The volume is not only in French but betrays a measure of *francomanie*. There is, for example, an entry on diplomatic relations with France, but not with any other country, while several different entries relate to Jansenism, one of the most important points of contact between beleaguered Dutch Catholicism and the pugnaciously triumphant French variety. Sometimes the parameters of inclusion are not at all clear: Saumur has an entry, justified by the importance of its academy for training Dutch Reformed leaders, but Geneva does not. China, Formosa, and Ceylon have entries, but the reader has to know to look for 'Deshima' to find out about Dutch relations with Japan. Oddly, there is an entry for Charles II, the antagonist of the Second and Third Anglo-Dutch Wars, but none for Louis XIV, whose 1672 occupation of great swathes of the Republic precipitated the murder of the De Witt brothers, nor for Bernhard von Galen, the Prince-Bishop of Münster who invaded the northern province of Groningen in the same year (these conflicts are covered in the entry 'Guerre de Hollande', but so are the conflicts with Charles II in 'Guerres

anglo-néerlandaises'). It would have made more sense to leave out Charles II and James II (who also gets an entry) and include their aunt Elizabeth, who spent forty years in exile in the Dutch Republic and about whom much interesting work has appeared in the past decade or so. Reasons to complain are minor, however: while not knowing entirely what to expect can occasionally be frustrating, it is much more often a source of happy surprise.

Looking at the more typically (or stereotypically) Dutch entries, there is illuminating coverage of almost everything one might expect, or indeed imagine, making it clear why a particular place is reserved in the image of the Netherlands for peat, polders, tulips, canals, windmills, beer, tobacco, thrift, banking, shipbuilding, and self-reliant women (both in general and separately as traders and as painters), as well as militia companies, joint stock companies, pamphlets, painting, and philosophy (with individual entries on Erasmus, Coornhert, Grotius, Descartes, and Spinoza, but also on Locke, who spent a few years in Holland, and, unexpectedly, on the Dutch reception of Hobbes). Two Dutchmen make a church, and three a schism: every major confession, and some more minor, has an entry outlining their practices, beliefs, and legal and social position – Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, Mennonite, Jew, Socinian, Arminian, Old Catholic; tiny, shorter-lived sects get an entry under their founding leader, such as Jean de Labadie or Sabbatai Tsevi. Cheese and herring both took some searching, but the entry 'Pêche maritime' turns out to be almost entirely devoted to the herring fisheries (with a brief mention of cod and a separate entry for whaling), and both 'Agriculture' and 'Alimentation' touch on dairy produce. A disappointing absence is the Dutch news press: Marion Brétéché contributes an interesting overview of 'Journalisme et journalistes francophones', and Hans Bots makes passing mention of 'gazettes' in a piece on the Dutch book trade ('Librairie néerlandaise'), but there is nothing specifically on Dutch-language newspapers or the printers, booksellers, and journalists who produced them.

The quirkiness of the composition gives the dictionary a very personal feel, despite the large number of contributors, and closer inspection shows that most of the entries are by a small core group (the lion's share by the editors themselves), with specialists brought in to provide expertise on specific points. Sometimes these are people with established reputations – Alastair Duke on the Reformation, Craig Harline on Sunday observance, Marjolein 't Hart on taxes, and so forth – but there are also similarly specialist contributions from postdocs and assistant professors, such as Ruben Buys on Coornhert, Erika Kuijpers on immigration, Gerrit Verhoeven on travel, and Hans de Waardt on witchcraft.

The common ground and distinct approaches of the two volumes are most apparent in the work of their shared contributors: six of the nineteen authors of chapters in the *Companion* are among the hundred or so contributors to the *Dictionnaire*. Michiel van Groesen's piece on Dutch Brazil in the *Dictionnaire* provides a clear overview of the standard and most recent work on the topic (some of which is of course his own). His chapter in the *Companion*, however, is an effort to shift the whole perspective on Dutch global expansion by breaking down the silos that so often separate consideration of the Dutch Atlantic from the Dutch in Asia, while also charting some of the less explored human costs of colonial projects, in which systematic academic study now lags behind popular and fictional accounts of the period. With all the talk of political liberty and freedom of thought, it is useful to be reminded that the Dutch were among the last European powers



to abolish slavery in their colonies. Similarly, Judith Pollman gives a straightforward overview of the history of the Dutch Revolt in the *Dictionnaire*, but in the *Companion* draws upon the burgeoning field of memory studies – to which she has greatly contributed – to look not at what happened but at how contemporaries and immediately succeeding generations remembered and reproduced knowledge of the traumatic events of the Revolt.

The editors of the *Companion* provide an introduction that sets out the parameters of the work, and an epilogue reflecting on ‘The Legacy of the Dutch Golden Age’. Part one, ‘Space and People’, considers changes in social and demographic history. Maarten Prak discusses ‘Urbanization’, which was central to what made the Dutch Republic so distinct, while in ‘Water and Land’, J.L. Price takes the postcard images of canals,

windmills, and agricultural improvement out of a triumphalist history of technology and puts them into a broader environmental perspective. Geert H. Janssen’s chapter is about migration, a bigger part of the demography of the Dutch Republic than of most European countries of the time, giving consideration not only to incomers but also to emigrants, forced migration, and enslavement. Part two, ‘A State of War’, comprises chapters by Pepijn Brandon on ‘The Armed Forces’ and Judith Pollmann on ‘The Cult and Memory of War and Violence’, both emphasizing in various ways how the image of placid, peace-loving burghers emerged from what was in reality a highly militarized society, with war deeply embedded in both its economy and its psyche. Part three, ‘Political Culture’, evokes the cultural turn that political history has taken in the Low Countries. David Onnekink presents ‘The Body Politic’, with less interest in the detail of constitutional mechanisms than in the social networks that exercised power. Helmer J. Helmers discusses ‘Popular Participation and Public Debate’, showing how unusually strongly book history and political history are intertwined in a Dutch context. To be picky, it does seem a bit of a stretch to say that Dutch coranto publishers ‘initiated a new medium’ when the only real difference from the German *Zeitungen* was printing in columns to economise on paper. The contributions to part four, ‘Economy and Trade’, include Michiel van Groesen’s ‘Global Trade’ (already mentioned above) and Danielle van den Heuvel’s ‘A Market Economy’, which considers the domestic economy of the Republic, both rural and urban, as well as banking, consumer credit, and the Dutch reputation for thrift. Part five, ‘Religious Culture’, reflects the shift from Church History to History of Religion, and the latter’s own ‘cultural turn’: there is less about theology, doctrine, or ecclesiastical structures in these chapters and more about lived experience and the cultural expression

of belief. Only the Reformed get a chapter to themselves, in Charles H. Parker's 'Reformed Protestantism' – which can hardly avoid discussing doctrinal debate, given its centrality to the Dutch Reformed experience of religion, but directs as much attention to its social impact as to its intellectual nuances. Christine Kooi considers the paradoxes of religious pluralism in a confessional state in her chapter on religious tolerance, condensing lots of nuance into relatively few pages, while in her chapter on spiritual culture Angela Vanhaelen exemplifies the 'material turn' in religious history, focusing on the devotional use of objects and spaces. This is a fascinating chapter but with little about spirituality as such, another growing area of interest in the history of religion. Jansenism, which makes such frequent appearances in the *Dictionnaire* and is currently the subject of lively (and conflicting) reconsiderations by theologians and historians of theology, goes unmentioned in the *Companion*. Part six, 'Art and Literature', has a chapter of complexly intertwined themes in Claartje Rasterhoff's 'The Markets for Art, Books, and Luxury Goods'. For the present reviewer, this was the biggest discovery in the volume, and an example of how, while political history and religious history might have had cultural turns, cultural history itself is enriched by economics. Wayne Franits follows with an essay on genre painting, where another material turn shows how little the costumes depicted might in fact correspond to what Dutch people were actually wearing. Theo Hermans's chapter on literature is the least accessible in subject matter to readers without Dutch, and perhaps for that reason the closest of any of the chapters to a clean overview of the main facts. Stijn Bussels discusses 'Dutch Classicism in Europe' – another surprise, and less niche than one might suppose. Part seven's 'Realms of Knowledge' include Dirk van Miert on 'Education', briefly glancing at everything from guild apprenticeships to academic tourism; Harold J. Cook on 'Science and Technology', which touches on the cultural turn in the history of science, before focusing on its own material turn, with a new emphasis on experiments, instruments and collections rather than ideas; and Jonathan Israel on 'Radical Thought', presenting the paradox of a republic in which republican advocates of 'True Freedom' could find themselves an embattled minority given the monarchical leanings of Orangists and the theocratic leanings of Calvinists.

All the chapters show some appreciation that the Dutch Republic was 'an accidental state that emerged from the exigencies of war' (Kooi) and that its Golden Age was 'an age of iron, dirt, and blood' (Brandon). Very occasionally the consciousness of contingency slips, with Brandon, for example, referring to Habsburg soldiers being 'driven back to the Southern Netherlands' after the Dutch took 's-Hertogenbosch in 1629, although up until that point nobody had had any reason to doubt that the city was very much a part of the Habsburg Southern Netherlands – something that perhaps explains the Dutch army's callous attitude to the surrounding area (which Brandon also discusses). But any such nit-picking aside, both volumes, for all their differences, give much matter both to instruct and to delight the reader, and both fill gaps in what is available to scholars or interested readers more comfortable in English or French than in Dutch. The *Dictionnaire* is fun to dip into, while the *Companion* gives the more austere intellectual pleasure of seeing complex issues anatomized.

Note from the editors: a Dutch translation by Frits van der Waa was recently published with an additional editor and two new chapters: Helmer Helmers, Geert Janssen, and Judith Noorman (eds.), *De zeventiende eeuw* (Leiden 2021). The new chapters discuss slavery (by Pepijn Brandon) and the visual arts (by Judith Noorman). The book's introduction has been substantially expanded to incorporate the recent debate about the concept of a 'Dutch Golden Age' – a debate that is also reflected in the title of this Dutch edition.