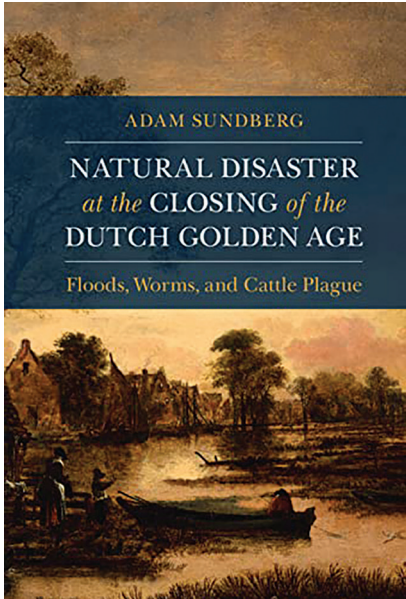


Review

Adam Sundberg, *Natural disaster at the closing of the Dutch Golden Age*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, 338 pp. ISBN 9781108923750.



Adam Sundberg has written one of the best environmental history books of the last few years. *Natural disaster at the closing of the Dutch Golden Age* is a rich and nuanced portrait of a country in transition. Coming from one of the most impressive Golden Ages in European history, the Dutch Republic had to reinvent itself as it was haunted and ravaged by one nature-induced calamity after another in the eighteenth century. Sundberg ends this thought-provoking book by reflecting on one particular statue: the Stone Man on the Westerzeedijk in Friesland. Currently, the monument is perceived as an honorary statue for Caspar De Robles, the Habsburg governor who built the dike and saved the hinterland from the threat of floods. Nevertheless, while going through this book, the reader is urged to reflect critically upon this Janus-like statue. The dike, made up of multiple layers that were added due to disastrous floods in the past,

is a *lieu de mémoire* showing us that the Netherlands are equally shaped by their victories and failures towards natural shocks.

Sundberg has set himself an ambitious goal: to write a book about both the historical experience of disasters and, at the same time, using those disasters to portray the decline and transition of Dutch society. Disasters are both a subject and a tool for evaluating social and economic change. Sundberg refuses to let either the economy, politics, or nature play the leading role; given that all of these factors interacted with each other, he meticulously analyses each of them. In addition, while most historians favour the Dutch seventeenth century, this book focuses on a century of decline and challenges, starting in the disaster year of 1672. After a century of rising prosperity, innovations, growing international trade, and political victories, the eighteenth century proved to be a century of ups and downs, with a clear declining trend toward the end. Without claiming that disasters caused the

Dutch economic and political decline, Sundberg shows that disasters and shocks are a test for every historical society, offering challenges but also opportunities.

The book comprises six chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. Every chapter zooms in on a particular disaster that tested the Dutch Republic throughout the long eighteenth century. Sundberg starts with the *Rampjaar* of 1672, a year that was the onset of four decades of war and struggles with water. This first alarming episode caused the failproof Dutch to doubt whether their lucky streak had run out. One particular print, *Ellenden klacht van het bedroefde Nederlandt*, shows how even contemporary artists and writers linked social, economic, political, and environmental woes. Late seventeenth-century observers believed that when moral decline incites divine intervention, the punishment was expressed in a myriad of social and natural events. While optimism survived after this turn of fate, in the second chapter Sundberg discusses how the Cattle Plague of 1713-1720 shattered the hopes for peace and prosperity after the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht. In the third chapter, Sundberg analyses the Christmas flood of 1717, the most deadly and disastrous flood of the early modern period. Shipworms are the main characters of the fourth chapter. While most environmental scholars focus on the detrimental effects of the coldest and wettest episodes of the Little Ice Age, Adam Sundberg picks out the warmer and drier decade of the 1730s to show how the intersection of increased international trade and warming sea temperatures created the ideal conditions for an unprecedented disaster. In the fifth chapter, we are taken inland to focus on the extraordinary river floods of the 1740s. The sixth chapter focuses on the cattle plague of 1744. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the nadir of the Dutch decline was in sight. Sundberg shows how the cascading effect of multiple disasters could lead to significant environmental and societal shifts.

Sundberg brings out the best kind of environmental history. While most studies are inclined to focus mostly on the societal or natural causes of disasters, this book strikes an almost perfect balance. As a kind of detective, all variables are studied and their interactions and cascading effects are clearly described. Take, for example, the first cattle plague episode. Sundberg disentangles climatic anomalies, environmental degradation, international cattle trade, local agricultural practices, cultural values of prosperity, theories about contagion and miasmas, religious practices, and declensionist anxieties. All of these variables help to explain how the disease reached the Dutch Republic, why the authorities opted for quarantine measures and drainage instead of trying to stamp out the disease, and how religious responses were developed.

While each chapter delivers a thorough and straightforward overview of how the disaster unfolded, the most innovative part of this book is Sundberg's choice to look at the evolution of Dutch society from the late seventeenth century until the end of the eighteenth century. He uses the responses to disasters to show how the Dutch Republic had significantly evolved by the second half of the eighteenth century. The cascading effects of disasters, wars, and economic change had not only undermined the Dutch' predominant position in Europe, but also changed their relief institutions, governmental structures, religious beliefs, scientific knowledge, and technological skills. In the face of danger, the Dutch used the disasters to develop a sense of national belonging, and to spur them to reach new scientific heights. As such, Sundberg shows how even at a time of significant vulnerability, reasons for optimism and signs of resilience could be found.

The only unfortunate side-effect of Sundberg's understandable focus on the Dutch Republic is his tendency to view the unfolding of disasters as uniquely Dutch. While Sundberg makes a compelling argument that floods, shipworms, and cattle disease struck at the heart of the Dutch economy and soul, these calamities also occurred in neighbouring countries, such as the Southern Low Countries, Germany, and Denmark. While the book deserves a much broader audience than readers interested in the Low Countries or environmental history, the appeal of the book could have been greater if at times the narrow focus on the Dutch Republic had been abandoned.

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