

## Review

Jaap de Haan, *De eerste minister van de Republiek. De Hollandse raadpensionaris in de zeventiende eeuw*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2024. 292 pp. ISBN 978 94 6372 209 4.



Together with the Princes of Orange, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, Johan de Witt, and Caspar Fagel dominate the political history of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century. As councillor pensionaries of the province of Holland, these men attained great power and prominence in the Republic as a whole, and European fame. Although they undoubtedly owed their prominence to their office (commonly called Grand Pensionary in English), it is not easily understood where exactly that power resided. The formal powers of the office itself, as expressed in the instructions drawn up by the States of Holland at various times throughout the century, were in any case much more restricted than its incumbents' actual influence. Officially mere servants or ministers of the sovereign estates of one province, the councillor pensionaries' role as directors of both the provincial estates and the

federation and its international relations was the result of a complex range of factors, including the ambiguous constitution of the United Provinces, Dutch political culture and inherited custom, the situation and character of the Princes of Orange, the personal attributes of the individual incumbents, and both national and international political contexts.

Jaap de Haan's book seeks to understand the office rather than the famous individuals who occupied it. In his own words, De Haan's main question is whether the Grand Pensionary of the province of Holland 'can be seen' as the first minister of the Dutch Republic, and therefore as analogous to contemporary first ministers in European monarchies such as Cardinal Richelieu in France or Axel Oxenstierna in Sweden. To answer this question, he adopts a comparative approach, along both a temporal and a spatial axis. Temporally, he compares 'the position', as he terms it, of the three most famous seventeenth-century councillor pensionaries (Oldenbarnevelt, De Witt, and Fagel) within the Dutch political landscape, where they had to navigate between the States of Holland (their nominal

bosses), the States-General, and the Princes of Orange. Spatially, he seeks to compare the 'functions' which they exercised with first ministers in European monarchies. As the title of the book might lead one to expect, De Haan eventually answers his question in the affirmative, arguing that the four functions he attributes to the councillor pensionary were largely similar to those of the dominant first ministers of the age. This, he writes, shows that the Dutch Republic and the way it was governed were less of an exception in Europe than the excentric title of councillor pensionary suggests and historians have hitherto assumed.

I have eagerly looked forward to this book. The topic is well-chosen, and urgent, for De Haan is right when he argues that, while much is known about the biographies of its most important incumbents, little research exists on the office itself. It is also a wildly ambitious and difficult subject to deal with, especially in a first book: De Haan had to be fully versed not only in the federal constitution of the Dutch Republic, shaped as it was by history and custom, but also in the biographies, personalities, and daily activities of the various councillor pensionaries, the affordances of their office (many of them informal), as well as the complex institutional world they navigated. The comparative approach only further complicated his task: though De Haan is aided by the many good studies on first ministers and favourites, to conduct an even-handed comparison on the basis of secondary literature is no mean feat.

In some respects, the book delivers. The labour of many years, it is on the whole well-written and well-researched. De Haan is clearly a good historian: he handles his many sources with care, has come to terms with an impressively wide range of secondary literature, and can rarely be faulted on a factual level. De Haan also offers good insight in the various aspects of the councillor pensionary's political role within the Dutch Republic. Although I have issues with his heuristic use of the four 'functions' of leadership in bureaucracies (the official, the representative, the political, and the executive), which he derives from the American scholar of public administration Larry D. Terry, the functions per se are a smart and helpful way to come to terms with the complexity of the office. The book is beautifully published by Amsterdam University Press. Lavishly illustrated and carefully edited, it is a delight to leaf through.

The weaknesses of the book are related not to the execution, but to the design of the study. This begins with the questions De Haan asks. The core question, whether the councillor pensionary 'can be seen' as the first minister of the Republic risks to produce a flat yes-or-no answer, which is exactly what it does here. Nor is De Haan's second question, concerning the 'position' of the councillor pensionary within the Dutch state, the most stimulating to ask. What exactly does he mean by 'position'? In the end, the question leads De Haan to show that the councillor pensionary's power was dependent on, and negotiated with, the States of Holland, the other provinces, and the Princes of Orange, which is the one thing we already knew.

The book also suffers from methodological problems. In analysing the 'position' of the councillor pensionary, De Haan applies two models developed by scholars of modern bureaucracy and politics. First, he uses Terry's four functions to compare the councillor pensionaries' political role in the Dutch Republic with those of foreign first ministers in their own states. The problem here is that Terry's categories are so general and prescriptive, that they can be applied to any powerful civil servant in any age (as indeed they were

meant to). While they are useful to make sense of the messy everyday reality of the councillor pensionary's job, to argue that the councillor pensionary was indeed the first minister of the Dutch Republic because he shared these four 'functions' with foreign first ministers, is to argue very little. That is not to say that their roles were incomparable. I think De Haan is right that these managers of state, all representatives of a sovereign power, shared many responsibilities, problems, and traits. Yet that acute observation should have been the starting point of a more precise investigation, instead of the end point.

Equally problematic is De Haan's strange and poorly argued adaptation of Philip Norton's rather obscure Prime Ministerial Power Analysis Model – which was developed in the 1980s to weigh Margaret Thatcher's power – to the early modern context. Norton identified three key variables in assessing the British prime minister's power: purpose, skill, and circumstance. Puzzlingly, De Haan focuses only on the third of these categories, circumstance, which provides him with three axes of inquiry (the political context in which the councillor pensionary operated, the expectations others had of him, and the international political context). Thus used, Norton's 'model', if indeed we may call it that, is utterly unfit to produce any new insights in the subject.

The core chapters of the book are three case studies, in which De Haan uses Norton's 'model' as a heuristic device to describe how the most famous councillor pensionaries (Oldenbarnevelt, De Witt, and Fagel, respectively) navigated a narrow selection of specific political conflicts. Because of his focus on specific circumstances (rather than, say, practices or techniques) and his choice to zoom in only on the three most famous and powerful pensionaries, De Haan presents the reader with a lot of contextual information on well-known episodes (such as the collapse of Oldenbarnevelt's power in the Truce Conflicts, De Witt's roles in 'harmonising' Overijssel and managing the second Anglo-Dutch war, and the conflict between the Prince of Orange and Amsterdam in the 1680s), all of which have been extensively studied before. It may have been much more revealing to have compared a remarkable councillor pensionary such as De Witt with an unremarkable one such as Anthonie Duyck (pensionary from 1621 until 1629). As they are, the chapters succeed in analysing the ways in which the power of the councillor pensionaries was shaped by both the affordances of his office and the three 'circumstances', and vividly evoke the complexity of the office for those new to the subject. For those already familiar with the period and the biographies of the famous pensionaries, much that is familiar is simply recast in Norton's categories.

There are places in the book where one can glimpse what might have been. On page 43, in a note to a biographical vignette, De Haan cites Van Deursen's rather astute observation that Nicolaes Heinsius was such a successful and long-lived councillor pensionary because he had mastered the 'technique of persuasion' in an altogether different way than De Witt. The comment would seem to be fundamental to a study thematising the rift between the politician's formal authority and his actual exercise of power, and at the core of what it meant to be successful as councillor pensionary. At least one thematic chapter on the craft of persuading the various members of the body politic would have been in order. Yet De Haan does not take Van Deursen's cue. Examples of the art of persuasion, both within and without political circles, do surface in the case studies of De Witt and Fagel, and these sections belong to the most interesting parts of the book. Yet the treatment is anecdotal rather

than analytic, and De Haan does not return to the subject in his conclusion. Similarly, when in his final chapter De Haan cites Jake Soll's study on Jean-Baptiste Colbert as information master of the French state, he unwittingly highlights the monumental opportunity Soll provided him. De Haan's observation that the management of state information was central to the office of councillor pensionary just as much as it was to Colbert, should not have been an end point, but a starting point of an investigation of the councillor pensionaries' (evolving?) information practices, and an actual, detailed comparison either in time, in place, or both.

This book will undoubtedly please a general audience interested in the Dutch Republic and its politics. Yet it would have been a more rewarding book had De Haan resisted the lure of facile models and asked the more precise and productive questions. How did the councillor pensionaries exercise power? How did they manage the budding bureaucracy of the early modern state, and the abundance of information that came their way? What were their techniques of persuasion in dealing with assemblies and princes? How did they develop and manage the committees that became ever more prominent in Dutch politics? How did they use and create client networks of dependents? How did they navigate the dangers inherent to political primacy? Schematic in design and descriptive in execution, *De eerste minister van de republiek* left this reader feeling rather unfulfilled and little the wiser.

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