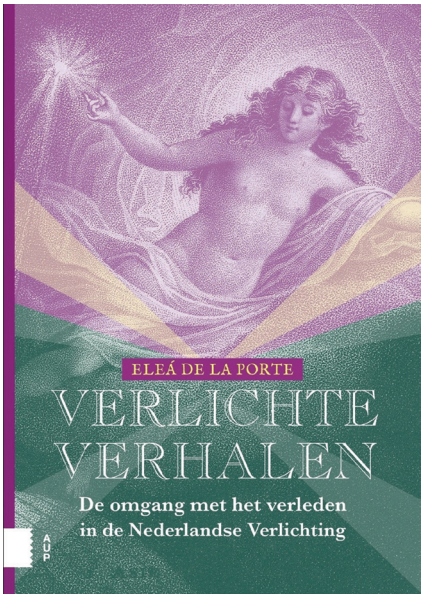
Review

Eleá de la Porte, *Verlichte verhalen. De omgang met het verleden in de Nederlandse Verlichting*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2023, 296 pp. ISBN 9789463720083.



Thanks to decades of wide-ranging research into the history of ideas, the unique characteristics of Enlightenment thought in the Dutch Republic have been thoroughly examined. Scholars have identified several core themes that preoccupied Dutch Enlightenment thinkers in particular, setting them apart from their contemporaries in other countries. These themes include the Christian character of the Dutch Enlightenment, classical republicanism, and a pervasive discourse of decline. With her book *Verlichte verhalen. De omgang met het verleden in de Nederlandse Verlichting (Enlightened Narratives. Dealing with the Past in the Dutch Enlightenment)*, Eleá de la Porte contributes a significant new chapter to this body of scholarship. The monograph is based on her doctoral dissertation, defended at the University of Amsterdam under the supervision of Wyger Velema. This intellectual lineage is clearly discernible: her work is firmly rooted in the rich tradition of Dutch intellectual history, which Velema helped to shape. The depth of this tradition is, for instance, apparent in the excellent liber amicorum, *Discourses of Decline. Essays on Republicanism in Honor of Wyger R.E. Velema* (2022), edited by Joris Oddens, Mart Rutjes, and Arthur Weststeijn.

As its title suggests, De la Porte's book explores the Enlightened character of Dutch historical writing in the eighteenth century. She employs the conceptual framework of the 'Enlightened narrative'. Scholars such as Arnaldo Momigliano and Hugh Trevor-Roper, and more recently Dan Edelstein, Karen O'Brien, and John Pocock, have grouped several distinctive characteristics of Enlightenment historiography under this label. More than the specific content of historical accounts, the concept of 'Enlightened narrative' refers

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to a characteristic narrative structure: one that sought to explain the Enlightened present by tracing the progress of civilisation and human reason through a series of historical epochs – classical antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance – each evaluated in terms of its degree of civilisation. The endpoint and vantage point of this narrative was, naturally, contemporary Europe, whose Enlightenment and civilisation were regarded as superior to preceding ages. This historical narrative encompassed a broad view of societal development, addressing topics such as the arts, sciences, statecraft and law, morals, and religion, and was marked by an effort to identify causal relationships in history. Figures like Voltaire, David Hume, William Robertson, and Edward Gibbon are widely regarded as leading representatives of this Enlightened historical tradition.

While the Enlightened historical narrative was a pan-European and cosmopolitan phenomenon, taking root in France, England, Scotland, and Germany, it acquired a distinctive form in each national context. De la Porte argues that in this regard, the Dutch Republic represents a particularly compelling case. First, its republican form of government was a rarity in early modern Europe, which meant that classical antiquity remained a uniquely potent point of reference for Dutch historians – at a time when the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* dominated elsewhere. The economic importance of modern trade to Dutch prosperity nevertheless introduced a measure of ambivalence toward the classical past. Second, the optimistic outlook of Enlightenment thought concerning historical progress stood in sharp contrast to the widespread perception of national decline. The prevailing belief that the Dutch Republic had deteriorated compared to its seventeenth-century Golden Age clashed with the Enlightenment ideal of continuous improvement. Finally, the Enlightened historical narrative confronted Dutch thinkers with the challenge of reconciling secular Enlightenment perspectives with the Christian explanatory framework that was so deeply embedded in the Protestant identity of the Republic.

These three thematic tensions form the core of De la Porte's analysis of Dutch Enlightenment historiography. Strictly speaking, that historiography was not particularly rich: the humanist tradition remained dominant well into the nineteenth century, preventing a full-blown Enlightened historiography to develop. Nonetheless, the Enlightened historical narrative was strongly present in the Dutch intellectual culture of the period. De la Porte's major contribution lies in her ability to trace this narrative across a wide array of texts. Her source base is both varied and impressively extensive. She examines four specific types of source material, each treated in a separate chapter: spectator journals (including *De Nederlandsche Spectator*, *De Menschenvriend*, and *De Vriendin van 't Vaderland*), prize essays submitted to learned societies (specifically those of Teyler's Second Society in Haarlem), world histories, and review journals. Each of these corpora is analysed through a different thematic lens as a distinct theme was central to each one: progress and decline, historical scepticism, the Bible and civilisation, and the 'ancients versus moderns' debate, respectively.

De la Porte's work is methodical and analytically strong. She sifts through a substantial volume of often dense and lengthy texts, consistently applying the conceptual framework of the Enlightened narrative. The result is a book that offers new insights into how Enlightened historical perspectives emerged in various intellectual contexts.

She demonstrates, for instance, that Dutch Enlightenment historians not only emphasised decline, but they also embraced notions of progress, and that their outlook was often distinctly European. Some of the most stimulating sections of the book explore the epistemological debates among society members concerning the knowability of the past, the periodisations of history during the Enlightenment era, and the reception of foreign Enlightenment authors in Dutch review journals. While the abundance of second-hand historical narratives can make for demanding reading, and occasionally introduces a sense of repetition, the analysis remains consistently compelling, and the work's scholarly value is unquestionable. Incidentally, De la Porte has also published her key findings in English-language articles, making them accessible to audiences outside the Dutch-reading world.

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