

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

---

# FOUR CENTURIES OF DUTCH-AMERICAN RELATIONS, 1609-2009: A MAJOR CONTRIBUTION TO ATLANTIC HISTORY

---

HANS KRABBENDAM, CORNELIS A. VAN MINNEN  
& GILES SCOTT-SMITH

September 11, 1609 was a fateful day in the history of transatlantic relations. Some time after noon the crew of the Dutch East India Company ship the *Halve Maen* spotted land and recognized the potential for a “very good harbor protected from all winds.” The precise location is unidentified, but this must have been somewhere between current-day Manhattan and Staten Island. The discovery encouraged entrepreneurs in the Netherlands, who had financed Henry Hudson’s voyage in the *Halve Maen*, to invest in trade with North America. Seventeen years later, one of the most famous “land transactions” took place when Manhattan became an official Dutch colony. The deal was also a fateful occasion for the Munsee people in the region. Initial contacts had led not only to the exchange of gifts and the trading of goods, but also to sporadic violence.<sup>1</sup> These first encounters across the Atlantic encapsulate the nature of the Dutch-American relationship that would unfold over the next four centuries, a narrative marked by hopes, opportunities, expectations, transactions, conflicts, and cooperation.

Over this time span relations between the two have developed from imperial linkages and informal economic partnerships to the declaration of official treaties and alliances between sovereign states. The idea of "America" as the New World was alive before the first encounter took place, and its importance has changed over time from being an unspoilt paradise to an attractive area for commercial exploitation, an innovative industrializing nation, and lastly a superpower. During the same four centuries the Low Countries became a major commercial and financial center and an imperial power before adapting to being a modern independent state — as Joseph Luns used to say, the largest of the small nations. Throughout these developments, linkages between the two have been maintained. The intensity of the contacts has shifted over time according to context and circumstance, and the emphasis has altered according to whether political, economic, cultural, ideological, or religious interests were paramount. Commitments, expectations, disappointments, and missed opportunities crisscross and collide throughout, but mutual interest, curiosity, respect, and fascination have never been far away.

As one might expect through the impact of globalization, the general trend of Dutch-American relations has been one of gradual convergence. Yet there have been various dynamics at work here. The density of the contacts has obviously increased overall, but there have been highs and lows and it is not possible to refer to any particular "straight line" that sets out the relationship in simple terms. It is hard, for instance, to find a period when both states regarded each other as equal partners. Asymmetric power relations have always played their role in influencing contacts, notably during the intense period of colony building in the seventeenth century and, in the other direction, the expansion of American influence in the twentieth. After all, the pull of convergence began in the seventeenth century when the Dutch established trader and settler communities as part of the drive for overseas expansion by European maritime states. Part of the first wave of Western Europeans to settle the American eastern shore, the Dutch occupied a central position during the formative period of colonial America. Political expectations in the Netherlands rose at the outbreak of the American War of Independence, but apart from expressions of good will and important financial transactions no immediate close relationship developed.

At first glance it would be hard to speak of a convergence during the nineteenth century, when inward-looking agendas and protective trade regulations prevented large-scale contacts. The ruling elites in the Netherlands, accommodating themselves to a monarchical system, were repelled by the expansion of mass democracy in the U.S. As a result, one can even refer to a divergence between the Dutch in the Netherlands and those in New York. In contrast, ordinary Dutch citizens were attracted by the space and the image of freedom, and the impact of migration is essential for this story — a quarter of a million Dutch men and

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

FOUR CENTURIES OF DUTCH-AMERICAN RELATIONS, 1609-2009

women crossed the Atlantic in search of a new life. These immigrants established themselves along a chain of settlements through the midwestern states of Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Investments flowed across the Atlantic into American property, canals, and railroads. As a result the Dutch-American connection was given new value, and it was precisely during the nineteenth century that Dutchness acquired positive meanings in American society and became popularized within the fields of both high art and mass culture. Nineteenth-century New Yorkers used the Dutch colonial period to pride themselves on the commercial origins of their city, praising the purchase of Manhattan by Peter Minuit as the best business deal of the age and using it as justification for their own commercial plans and political aspirations.<sup>2</sup>

The agents of convergence have varied in status and importance over time, from individual travelers and migrants to transnational interest groups and multinationals. The protagonists of the first decades represented various nationalities — the crew of the *Halve Maen* itself consisted of a mix of sixteen Dutch and English sailors.<sup>3</sup> Particular causes such as religious beliefs and business opportunities have led to certain sections of society engaging in a transatlantic dialogue to a greater extent than others. The overall process has been eased since the late nineteenth century by the transportation and communication revolution, a growing cultural awareness, and the global expansion of American power and influence. As the American presence in Dutch life has become more and more apparent through the centuries, manifesting itself through all political, economic, and cultural channels, so the Dutch presence in the United States has become more diffuse, maintained in the form of traditions, artefacts, and festivals by those keen to uphold it as heritage. Dutch studies does exist in the U.S. university system, but its most prominent position, the Queen Wilhelmina Chair in Dutch Language, Literature, and History at Columbia University, has lost its prominent place, and outside the Dutch-American colleges it is only represented by language departments (usually as a subfaculty of German).<sup>4</sup> Partly due to this diffuseness, and partly due to the dominance of English-speaking culture, the Dutch contribution to the United States does not occupy a prominent position within that nation's consciousness. In recent years the move away from American exceptionalism in U.S. historiography has allowed for a greater appreciation of the intermingling of the history of the United States with that of other nations.<sup>5</sup> Now is the moment to reclaim the Dutch element to this story, in all its many forms.

Although the overwhelming influence of the United States through the second half of the twentieth century has tended to typify relations, the Netherlands has never been a passive beachhead for the latest initiative from across the Atlantic. Americanization is a complex phenomenon, and most will agree that it involves a selective appropriation of products, styles, and traits rather than a

simple acceptance of the Made in the USA label. The Dutch have contributed a great deal to the dimensions and workings of the transatlantic relationship, and have invested much in the transfer and interchange of goods, services, people, and knowledge over the ocean. Dutch migration has far outnumbered Americans coming in the other direction. There was no recognizable American community in the Netherlands until after World War I, and this has grown slowly from around five hundred in the 1920s to thirty-one thousand in 2008.<sup>6</sup> Three Dutch queens—Wilhelmina, Juliana, and Beatrix—have addressed joint sessions of Congress, while since 1782 only one U.S. president—George H.W. Bush—has made a state visit to The Hague.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, relations between the two nations have never been marked by violence, but they have shared plenty of enemies: the Spanish, the British, the Germans, the Japanese, the Chinese, the Russians, and now the Taliban. There have been clashes between the respective national interests, the most direct and notorious being when Franklin D. Roosevelt, who cherished his Dutch roots, set in motion the end of the Dutch colonial empire in the East. Yet the incident that led to the most serious diplomatic fallout is now long forgotten, namely the seizure of Dutch shipping in U.S. ports in the spring of 1918 due to a bitter dispute concerning the neutrality of the Netherlands during World War I.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the absence of a clear Dutch-American narrative, it is possible to distill a developing common bond that represents more than simple opportunism, and that has gradually led to the two nations recognizing a shared set of ideals, interests, and common goals. It is appropriate that they were brought closely together by World War II and thereafter entered a period of profound internationalism, the one ending more than a century of neutrality, the other rejecting a decade or two of isolationism and abandoning its avoidance of peacetime alliances with Europe. Since then the United States and its Atlanticist call have provided the Dutch with the perfect escape route from the ambitions of its larger European neighbors. The successful maneuvering of a Janus-faced Dutch foreign policy, somehow simultaneously European and Atlanticist, is surely one of the great diplomatic conjuring tricks of the modern era. For the U.S. the Netherlands has been an ideal ally in the middle of European affairs, although Dutch allegiance has generally been taken for granted and has rarely generated rewards from Washington. Not everything about the relationship has been smooth, and plenty of adaptation has been required (more by the Dutch, of course, than by the Americans). But the post-World War II period has also cemented the themes around which these two nations have been able to unite: a common commitment to free trade and cultural exchange, a profound belief in international institutions as a source of order, and a strong moral vision on world affairs.

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

FOUR CENTURIES OF DUTCH-AMERICAN RELATIONS, 1609-2009

This study has made use of a clear understanding of the Dutch nation. It is important to point out that the early settlements in the New World included Flemish and Walloon inhabitants, and the West India Company was led and financed by former citizens of the Southern Netherlands. At first sight this justifies the explicit inclusion of present-day Belgium into the narrative in order to provide comprehensive coverage. However, such an extension stumbles over the discontinuities in the story between 1648 and 1815, when the Seven United Provinces in the north formed a republic, while the southern provinces remained separate under Habsburgian and Napoleonic rule. What is more, language, religion, and trade fed the development of ties between the Northern Netherlands and the United States in ways that were not replicated in the south. After a brief and unstable union between 1815 and 1830, Belgium became independent and established its own diplomatic relations with the United States in 1835. From then on the Belgians steered a different economic course with America, and mixed Dutch and Flemish immigrant communities were rare. As a result, the argument for a separate Dutch-American narrative is a strong one.

Over the centuries America and Europe have used each other to construct their own identity,<sup>9</sup> and the Dutch-American relationship fits in this broader context. Anglo-American relations have followed a remarkable trajectory from the seminal War of Independence in the eighteenth to the so-called special relationship in the twentieth. Relations with Spain and France have been caught up in imperial competitions and rival worldviews. Two world wars have defined the German-American relationship. In contrast, the Dutch-American story is more subtle and diverse in the record it has left, and therefore all the more intriguing to identify and put on display. Some historians claim that the Dutch came too late to North America to establish a fully developed economic relation with the region, but even if this were true there is no doubt that a mere half a century was enough for them to leave a lasting cultural imprint.<sup>10</sup>

Others have made the claim that there was a *Dutch Atlantic*, within the context of a distinct Atlantic history. The concept of the Atlantic as a contained historical space is an adaptation of French historian Fernand Braudel's study of the nations bordering the Mediterranean as a single, connected civilization.<sup>11</sup> Using a similar appreciation for linkages and networks the Atlantic Ocean has also provided a form of geographical and social unity for the nations along its shores, although its coherence for this purpose is questionable.<sup>12</sup> The impact of the transatlantic slave trade, the multinational history of the American colonial period, and a postcolonial interpretation of the European empires all point toward the need for some kind of Atlantic history perspective, within which a Dutch network covering Europe, Africa, and the Americas occupied a strategic position.<sup>13</sup> The history of Dutch-American transatlantic ties should therefore

be placed within the broad bounds of an Atlantic grand narrative. In doing so, this book also contributes to the burgeoning field of transnational history, with its focus on cross-border interactions and exchanges that transcend the stiff narratives of national progress.<sup>14</sup>

There has been plenty of scholarly attention for the many and varied aspects of Dutch-American connections, but they have tended to be specialized studies and as a result fragmented in the picture they give. Scores of essays have uncovered unique events and examples of political, demographic, artistic, religious, and economic exchange, but up till now a comprehensive overview and assessment of the multiple interactions across the centuries has been lacking. American scholars are mostly intrigued by the New Netherland phase in New York's history and generally lose interest after U.S. independence, so that surveys of American history fail to follow the effects of this presence over a longer period.<sup>15</sup> Their Dutch counterparts often focus on immigration history and post-World War II matters.<sup>16</sup> The present volume exactly integrates the various inputs and streams that have shaped the bilateral history in a wider transatlantic setting over the full four centuries of contact. We believe that the result is a unique overview of the dominant themes that have connected the two nations through the centuries, along the way intertwining their respective national histories to highlight what has pushed them apart and what, importantly, has held them together. While accepting the problem of defining "Dutchness" and what it entails,<sup>17</sup> the 1609–2009 anniversary offers an ideal moment to not only recapture a space for the Netherlands in North America but also to illustrate in detail both the diverse array of activities and the common interests that have propelled relations through the last four centuries and into the future.

- 1 Donald S. Johnson, *Charting the Sea of Darkness: The Four Voyages of Henry Hudson* (New York: Kodansha International, 1993), 118; Paul Otto, *The Dutch-Munsee Encounter in America: The Struggle for Sovereignty in the Hudson Valley* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 36–47.
- 2 David M. Scobey, *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 90–91.
- 3 S.P. L'Honoré Naber, ed., *Henry Hudson's Reize onder Nederlandsche vlag van Amsterdam naar Nova Zembla, Amerika en terug naar Dartmouth in Engeland,*

*1609* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1921), xxiii note 1.

- 4 The most prominent Dutch-American colleges are in Michigan: Hope College in Holland, and Calvin College in Grand Rapids.
- 5 See Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).
- 6 Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, available at <http://www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/bevolking/publicaties/artikelen/archief/2008/2008-2599-wm.htm> (accessed December 8, 2008).
- 7 The speeches by the Dutch monarchs took place as follows: Queen Wilhel-

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### FOUR CENTURIES OF DUTCH-AMERICAN RELATIONS, 1609-2009

- mina, August 6, 1942; Queen Juliana, April 3, 1952; Queen Beatrix, April 21, 1982. The visit of President Bush took place on July 19, 1989 during a European tour. See Cornelis A. van Minnen, ed., *A Transatlantic Friendship: Addresses by Queen Wilhelmina, Queen Juliana, and Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands to the Joint Sessions of the United States Congress* (Middelburg: Roosevelt Study Center, 1992); "A Visit Too Long Delayed," *New York Times*, July 20, 1989.
- 8 The Netherlands was seen as being pro-German because of its refusal to choose sides in the war. One of the results of this episode was the establishment of the Netherland-America Foundation in New York to combat anti-Dutch feeling in U.S. society.
- 9 Stephen Fender, ed., *American and European National Identities: Faces in the Mirror* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), 11-20.
- 10 Jan de Vries, "The Dutch Atlantic Economies," in Peter A. Conclanis, ed., *The Atlantic Economy during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 18.
- 11 See Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1975).
- 12 Alison Games, "Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities," *American Historical Review* 111.3 (2006): 741-757; Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- 13 Some historians have objected to the term "Dutch Atlantic" because the western outposts of the Netherlands were overshadowed by the British and they were anyway of secondary importance in comparison with other imperial interests in Asia. Nevertheless the Dutch presence within all the transatlantic political, economic, and social networks was substantial, especially considering how the Netherlands was surrounded by more prominent powers, and this input should be acknowledged. See Pieter C. Emmer and Willem W. Klooster, "The Dutch Atlantic, 1600-1800: Expansion without Empire," *Itinerario* 23.2 (1999): 48-69.
- 14 See for instance Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier, eds., *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- 15 See Suzanne Sinke, "Making a National Story: A Textbook Example of Dutch American Life," unpublished paper presented at the Organization of American Historians convention, New York, March 29, 2008. Sinke found that most U.S. history texts let the Dutch briefly appear in North America to be absorbed by the British.
- 16 Extensive bibliographies can be found on the websites of the New Netherland Project ([www.nnp.org](http://www.nnp.org)) and the Roosevelt Study Center ([www.roosevelt.nl](http://www.roosevelt.nl)). A chronological selection of collected essays are the following: J. W. Schulte Nordholt and Robert P. Swierenga, eds., *A Bilateral Bicentennial: A History of Dutch-American Relations 1782-1982* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1982); Robert P. Swierenga, ed., *The Dutch in America: Immigration, Settlement, and Cultural Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985); Rob Kroes and H. Neuschäfer, eds., *The Dutch in North America: Their Immigration and Cultural Continuity* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1991); H. Loeber, ed., *Dutch-American Relations 1945-1969: A Partnership, Illusions and Facts* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1992); Joke Kardux and Rosemarijn Hoeffte, eds., *Connecting Cultures: The Netherlands in Five Centuries of Transatlantic Exchange* (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij 1994.); D. Bosscher, M. Roholl, and M. van Elteren, eds., *American Culture in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1996);

George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam, eds., *Sharing the Reformed Tradition: The Dutch-North American Exchange, 1846-1996* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1996); Johannes Postma and Victor Enthoven, eds., *Riches from Atlantic Commerce: Dutch Transatlantic Trade and Shipping, 1585-1817* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam, eds., *Amsterdam-New York: Transatlantic Relations and Urban Identities Since 1653* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2005); Joyce D. Goodfriend, ed., *Revisiting New Netherland: Perspectives on Early Dutch America* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005); George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam, eds.,

*Morsels in the Melting Pot: The Persistence of Dutch Immigrant Communities in North America* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2006); Joyce D. Goodfriend Benjamin Schmidt, and Annette Stott, eds., *Going Dutch: The Dutch Presence in America, 1609-2009* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Margriet Buijn Lacy et al., eds., *From De Halve Maen to KLM: 400 Years of Dutch-American Exchange* (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 2008); and special issues of *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 121.3 (Summer 2008) and *Sociologie* 4.2/3 (2008).

17 Willem Frijhoff, "Dutchness in Fact and Fiction," in Goodfriend, Schmidt, and Stott, eds., *Going Dutch*, 327-358.