Historiography on the Dutch Caribbean (-1985): catching up?

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Over the past century, and especially since the 1940s, the historiography on the English, and Spanish, and, to some extent, the French Caribbean, has produced a vast amount of publications, many of these of high academic quality. This rich historiography was nurtured both by an ample interest for the West Indies at the universities of the metropolis and the United States and by significant contributions of local scholars working on Caribbean history.

The historiography on the Dutch Caribbean in contrast is only beginning to mature. Why is it that, apart from a few outstanding studies, so little of genuine scholarly merit was published on Dutch Caribbean history before the seventies? The answer to this question is simply that there was no interest. During the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, the West Indies were of little importance to the Netherlands, in sharp contrast to the East Indies; this was reflected in the field of colonial studies. Furthermore, both Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles had too tiny a population and too backward an educational system to support local historians. Finally, outsiders were by no means interested in these little colonies, much less so in the dusty Dutch archives describing their history.

The 1949 independence of Indonesia, the former Dutch East Indies, was preceded by several years of outright colonial warfare and came to most of the Dutch as a shock. Partly in an attempt to oust the traumatic memory of this episode in Dutch imperialism, partly because positions in the colonial bureaucracy, the raison d'etre for colonial studies, were no longer available, this field of study waned in the Netherlands. Academic interest in Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles shared in this neglect.

Only in the seventies did academic interest in the former colonies recover. Of course, the disreputed "colonial studies" were now often re-labelled development studies. The dazzling expansion of academic studies in general and the improvement in relations with Indonesia both stimulated this renaissance.
Again, the study of the Netherlands Antilles and Suriname followed suit. This time, however, interest in the former Dutch Caribbean was not just a side-effect of interest in the East Indies. Two additional factors provoked a growth of interest all through the 'seventies and 'eighties. Political relations and, especially independence, achieved (Suriname 1975) or envisaged (the Antilles), brought the West Indies into the spotlight. Caribbean emigration to the Netherlands, especially in the case of Suriname adding up to a dramatic exodus, only reinforced this, while at the same time shaping the conditions in which many young Antilleans and Surinamese embarked on studies in the former metropolis.

If we can thus indicate a definite upsurge within the Netherlands of academic and particularly historical interest and writing on the Caribbean, this may well be explained by the above. What about history writing in the Antilles and Suriname? In fact, very few studies have been published by local historians. Though both Paramaribo and Curacao have a university, these young universities do not have a faculty of history. This is well explained by development priorities and by the sheer fact of their small scale, adjusted to very modest population figures. Suriname has less than 400,000 inhabitants, the six Antilles altogether some 250,000. A result of this has been that Antillean and Surinamese historians received their education and, if so, published their books and articles mostly in the former metropolis.

In this essay, I will give an overview of extant historiography on Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, and the activities of the Dutch in other parts of the Caribbean. Since it is obviously impossible to cover all titles, I will limit myself to indicating all relevant works available in English, French or Spanish, while singling out of the Dutch-language publications only the most relevant and recent. I present this bibliographic overview in combination with a bird's eye view of the history of the Dutch Caribbean. I will conclude this article by commenting on the present state of historical research and by addressing the question whether the historiography on the former Dutch West Indies is indeed catching up with the tradition and development of history writing in the non-Dutch Caribbean.

General

Archival sources for the Dutch activities as well as their colonies in the Caribbean are basically kept in the Dutch archives for
the period up to 1845. Documents originating in the colonies themselves in subsequent periods have remained there, while those originating in the metropolis may be consulted in the Dutch archives. An exception to this rule are the documents pertaining to the former Dutch colonies of Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice that were transferred to the Public Record Office in London after the English conquest of these regions.³

An important contribution to the future historiography on the Dutch Antilles is the present project of microfilming the documents on the Netherlands Antilles that are kept in the Dutch State Archives. Obviously the completion of this project and the transfer of the microfilms to the Antilles will greatly enhance the possibilities for Antillean historians to write their own history.

The Dutch were from the very start heavily involved with the European expansion movement. Apart from occupying territories themselves, the Dutch contributed to the development of other nations’ colonies by investments and by the early dispersal of sugar cultivation. Its confrontations in the Caribbean with the Spanish were congruent with their War of Independence (1568-1648) against the Spanish in Europe. There is no doubt that the seventeenth century “Golden Age” of the Netherlands was partly based on overseas ventures.⁴

Dutch colonies in the West were basically colonies of conquest: only a limited number of Europeans, not only Dutch, settled there. Their colonization efforts followed the usual mix of economic, strategic and cultural motives. Settlements on the “Wild Coast” were located in north-eastern Brazil and along the Caribbean seashore. Brazil was lost to the Portuguese in 1654. Of the various settlements along the coast, after 1815 only Suriname remained Dutch; Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo were ceded to the British.

As to the Antilles, not surprisingly in view of the 900 kilometers separating them, the Leewards (Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao) and the Windwards (St. Maarten, St, Eustatius, Saba) never had much in common. Their importance lay mainly in strategic location.

Dutch colonial expansion in the Caribbean was a joint venture of private and state-enterprise. The first West-India Company (1621-1674) was basically a warfare and privateering institution, the second (1675-1795) had a more limited, commercial function.⁵ The Netherlands themselves up to the Napoleonic occupation were a quite loose composition of provinces; this
obviously did not facilitate colonial policies. Furthermore, the elites in the colonies were always competing with colonial officials over policies, taxes and military protection. State control was further weakened by widespread corruption. For these reasons and because of the loss of much archival materials, it is extremely difficult to estimate the volume of trade and the gains and losses made by Dutch entrepreneurs. This applies even more to the contribution of the West Indies to Dutch economic development. In fact, so far, only the Dutch Atlantic slave trade has been systematically analyzed.\(^6\)

During most of their history, the Antilles and Suriname have had no more in common than a metropolis. I will therefore discuss both countries individually, as indeed the great majority of historians have done.

**Suriname**

The history of Suriname as a Dutch colony is of course characterized by the development towards plantation economy, its decline, and the subsequent legacies of persistent underdevelopment. The Amerindians did not disappear from the country but, apart from the first decades, they had a marginal position all through the colonial period, staying mostly aloof from plantation society.\(^7\)

During the period of slavery, quite a few travel accounts were published on the colony, leaving subsequent researchers an important, though by no means always reliable source of information.\(^8\)

After Wolbers’ general history of Suriname, published in 1861, no attempt at a comprehensive history was made until the 1980s when the Surinamese novelist Albert Helman published “De foltering van Eldorado” (The torturing of Eldorado”). In this book, Helman elaborately and eloquently gives his interpretation of the history of the Guianas. Compelling as it is, the book loses much of its scholarly merit because of the mixture of facts and vision and its reliance on printed sources only.\(^9\)

In spite of its shortcomings, the most reliable general study on Suriname’s history is still Van Lier’s *Frontier Society*. This classic has a strong historico-sociological bias, particularly in its emphasis on social psychosis resulting from slavery and on the concept of “plural society”. Rather than offering a chronological description or systematic economic analysis, Van Lier selects special themes for elaborate interpretation. He is particularly interested in the distortions arising from the extreme segmenta-
tion of Suriname's population, both in ethnic and social aspects. Later research has relied heavily on Van Lier's pilot study.\textsuperscript{10} Suriname was developed as a plantation economy from the very start. Its products were destined almost exclusively for the Netherlands. Production and trade, together with the slave trade, grew continuously up to the late eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, long before slave emancipation of 1863, its economy declined due to a not yet sufficiently clear complex of factors (shortage of labour and capital, soil exhaustion, marronage, lack of metropolitan protection). Though the plantation has been the basic element of Surinamese society well into the twentieth century, plantation studies and economic history generally have only recently gained momentum.\textsuperscript{11}

Several social aspects of slavery and its legacies have received scholarly attention, though. I may refer here to studies on Dutch literary attitudes towards slavery, on the position of the free coloureds, on abolition and finally on subsequent popular Creole culture.\textsuperscript{12} The field of colonial legislation is fairly well documented.\textsuperscript{13}

Most research, however, has been done on the Maroons of Suriname. Their indeed heroic struggle against the colonial system and slavery was highlighted in Anton de Kom's Wij slaven van Suriname ("We slaves of Suriname"). His indignant and compelling book was the first history book on Suriname written by a Surinamer and with an explicit anti-colonial overtone. This book, so far only translated in Spanish, has been of great influence on subsequent Surinamese writing on marronage.\textsuperscript{14} Less polemic, but certainly no less convincing and monumental, are the studies of Silvia W. de Groot and Richard and Sally Price.\textsuperscript{15} At the Center for Caribbean Studies in Utrecht, a series of documents on Maroon history is published. Wim Hoogbergen draws heavily on earlier publications in the series in his 1985 thesis describing the origins and struggles of one of these tribes.\textsuperscript{16} Post-emancipation history among the Maroons has been studied by H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen et. al.\textsuperscript{17}

Emancipation was followed by large-scale immigration from British India and the Dutch East Indies.\textsuperscript{18} This immigration, planned to offset labour shortage in the plantation sector, only postponed the downfall of plantation culture. After indenture, most of the contractees not returning to their native land chose to settle as small farmers.\textsuperscript{19}

Suriname's twentieth century history is characterized by many internal and external counterpoints: relationships between
small-scale and large-scale agriculture and, subsequently, the rise of bauxite mining and a stagnant industrialization. Next, there is the “difficult flowering” of this highly segmented society and its consequences for Surinamese politics and nationalism. Finally, there is the coming of independence in 1975, preceded by the exodus of nearly one-third of the population to the Netherlands. It is astonishing that so far Suriname’s twentieth century social history has hardly been studied. Witness the above mentioned studies on specific topics. Though some substantial research has been carried out over the past decade or so, a synthetic study however is missing.

The Netherlands Antilles

The historiography of both Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles is clearly missing a firm quantitative basis with regard to demographic, monetary, trade and production figures. As for the Antilles, probably because of its economic development in the present century, the main island Curacao did attract quite a few historians, most of them residents. Their studies, however, tended to be purely descriptive, if not highly anecdotal.

On the pre-Spanish inhabitants and on the Spanish period (1491-1634), historical research has been limited, due in part to the difficulty of obtaining relevant sources. The archives of the Dutch West India Company are not complete nor easily accessible either, which explains the paucity of studies on the transit trade of the Antilles, notably in slaves and contraband goods.

In historical research directed to the main island, the social setting of “old Curacao” has been mainly studied. Hoetink was the first to analyse the nature of slavery and subsequent race relations in this preindustrial period, which came to an abrupt end with the foundation of the Shell refineries from 1915 onwards. Romer, among others, continued this analysis.

Basically, these scholars argue that slavery on Curacao was relatively mild, a mildness explained by the absence of a real plantation economy like in Suriname and most other Caribbean colonies. This absence of a plantation-like economic development is of course directly related to the unsuitable climatic and soil conditions of the Dutch Leeward islands. Since the Leeward Antilles were mainly commercial centres, unsuited for large-scale crop cultivation, their agricultural history is quite exceptional in the region. Plantations did exist, but were mostly small-scale
and geared to the production of a diversified set of subsistence products only partly destined for sale. The slave force was limited, the slavery system relatively mild. The one historian of Curacao's plantations of the nineteenth century, Renkema, felt tempted to compare these plantations with the Latin American "hacienda" rather than with Caribbean plantations. However, though slavery might have been mild, at least two slave revolts are documented for Curacao, one in 1750, the other, influenced by the Haitian revolution, in 1795.

Other aspects of the so-called "old society" of the Dutch Antilles have been covered unevenly. There is an extensive study by Isaac and Suzanne Emmanuel of the Jews of these islands, covering the period from the 1650s onwards and broadening its scope to the participation of the Jewish community in the life and economy of the Antilles in general. Some thorough studies in juridical history, notably on colonial legislation and landed property, have been published, as well as compilations of colonial laws.

The establishment of the refineries on Curacao and Aruba in the nineteen twenties was a major watershed in Leeward Antillean history. Apart from one demographic study, there are no studies covering both islands. The economic history of the new Curacao has been extensively studied by Jaap van Soest. The social history of the same period so far has not received equal attention, several studies on trade organization and politics notwithstanding. We don't know much, for example, about the ways in which immigrants from the Caribbean acculturated in Curacaoan society.

Only in the last years has Aruba's twentieth century history attracted some scholars. So far one study on Aruban migration in the pre-oil period and another on economic development in the 'thirties and 'forties have been published, both by Aruban students. Recent history of the Dutch Windwards Antilles continues to be neglected for the most part.

In view of the heterogeneity of the six Antilles, both between and within the Leeward and Windward islands, it is not surprising that comprehensive histories have hardly been written. Even studies of external political relations focus basically on the main island, Curacao.

Migration between the six islands, a phenomenon drawing the Antilles closer together than ever before, has hardly been studied, in contrast to emigration between Curacao and Cuba, and between the Antilles and its metropolis.
A historiography on cultural aspects of the twentieth century Antilles (language, religion, folklore) is virtually non-existent; historians so far have left this subject to anthropologists and sociologists.

Catching up?

In spite of the growth of interest in Dutch Caribbean history over the past years, the resulting historiography is still clearly lagging behind the state of research concerning the British, French and Spanish Caribbean. Many of the salient features of Caribbean history have been characteristic for the history of Suriname, and to a lesser extent for the Netherlands Antilles as well.

Still, only a few historians have studied Suriname and the Antilles in a broader comparative framework. Harry Hoetink in his important comparative studies included the Antilles and Suriname. Apart from his work and one or two other studies, the writing of "Caribbean history" in the Netherlands, the Antilles or Suriname is still limited to writing the history of the former Dutch Caribbean. This hardly splendid isolation has so far proved to be stubborn. I feel however that the breaking away from studying colonial history as such will stimulate a more comparative approach.

Breaking away from colonial history has in many former colonies, Indonesia included, led to new approaches and interpretations of national history. For the Netherlands Antilles, I cannot point at anything similar. Since 1954 the Antilles have become an autonomous part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands; they might in the not-so-distant future become independent. Over the past decades, Antillean or at least insular nationalism has become evident in many ways, witness the reevaluation of the Leeward language, papiamentu. It is therefore remarkable that so few Antilleans have studied, let alone rewritten their islands' history. In fact, most of the extant historiography on the Netherlands Antilles has been published by Dutchmen, either resident in the Antilles or in the Netherlands.

The Surinamese historiography does offer a contrast in this respect. I mentioned the book by the Surinamese nationalist Anton de Kom, Wij slaven van Suriname. A few words should be said about De Kom, who has become a hero of Surinamese nationalism in the seventies.

Anton de Kom came to the Netherlands in the twenties, where he became involved with left-wing radicals and Indonesian
nationalists. His return to Suriname in 1933 sparked off riots in the capital of Paramaribo, where the social and political situation had been tense in the previous years. The results were two fatalities, several wounded and the deportation of De Kom. Back in Holland, he continued his writing; \textit{Wij slaven van Suriname} was published in 1934. He also became active in various left-wing and communist organizations. In World War Two he joined the anti-nazi Resistance, was finally arrested and died in a German concentration camp in 1945.

Not much is known about the reception his book in the 'thirties. \textit{Wij slaven van Suriname} was re-discovered after the war and was to be of vital importance to the emerging Surinamese nationalism in the decades of the 'fifties and later. The book, like that of another Surinamese historian, Van Lier's \textit{Frontier Society}, may thus be termed a mile-stone in Surinamese historiography. It may be pointed out that this unique booklet was published well in advance of, for instance, C.L.R. James' \textit{Black Jacobins} (1938) or Eric Williams' \textit{Capitalism and slavery} (1944). But while the three books share an explicit anti-colonial stance, De Kom's books clearly cannot match the high level of his Trinidadian counterparts. In fact, the book was based primarily on a very limited number of extant Dutch publications, though of course the tone was completely different. It stands today as a stirring and passionate pamphlet, but not as a scholarly book.

Understandable as it may be, it is therefore a pity that the book became more or less canonical among many young Surinamese, not leaving much ground for a serious evaluation of its merits as a marxist contribution to Surinamese history.

It is a fact that, of the theses and books published since the seventies by Surinamese historians, most do not have strong ideological premises; I may refer here to Carlo Lamur, Humphrey Lamur, J.P. Siapersad and J.B.C. Wekker, among others. Out of a younger generation of Surinamese historians however, Ruben Goward, Sandew Hira, Waldo Heilbron and Glenn Willemsen shared, originally at least, a common inspiration in neo-marxist analysis: with some Antillean students they published a short-lived journal, \textit{Caribisch Forum}.

Out of this group, Sandew Hira attracted most interest owing to his book \textit{Van Priary tot en met De Kom} (1982). As title and subtitle (i.e., "The history of the resistance in Suriname, 1630-1940") indicate, Hira places himself in the tradition of Anton de Kom. Does his writing in this anti-colonial ideology lead to a substantial "catching up"? In fact, I am afraid one cannot
say so. Starting his book with a highly polemic but hardly convincing critique of Van Lier’s theoretical premises, he surprisingly proceeds by pinpointing some of De Kom’s shortcomings as well; he even alludes to De Kom’s insufficient scientific, as opposed to practical, marxism. The chapters that follow are not imbued with the same dogmatic theorizing, but are, because of their excessive schematizing, hardly more convincing. Hira’s book may answer the need to reconstruct a “history of struggle” in order to enhance a process of subjective nation-building. It is however most certainly not the new approach to Caribbean history that would enrich the historiography in the way Caribbean historians like Moreno Fraginals or Walter Rodney, just to mention a few of equally marxist orientation, have done.

In many ways, publications on the Maroons by scholars like Silvia de Groot, Richard and Sally Price and Wim Hoogbergen are more modest of tone, but have nonetheless much more power of persuasion than Hira’s dogmatism. In this context I should mention especially Richard Price’s First time, The historical vision of an Afro-American people (1983). In this book, Price meticulously compares the oral tradition of the Saramacca maroons of Suriname with Dutch archival sources. This stands as a monument to the ways in which one of Suriname’s population groups created and maintained an intense consciousness of the past, many times completely at odds with Dutch interpretations of the same events. The insight one thus gets in the often heroic struggle of these maroons is far more convincing than Hira’s self-defeating glorifying of a past that cannot possibly have been as unequivocally heroic as he claims it to be.

By way of conclusion as to the question of colonial vs. nationalist, or be it Euro-centric vs. Caribbean-centric history writing, I would suggest that we do witness a process of catching up both in terms of the emergence of Surinamese and, to a lesser degree, Antillean historians and in terms of the breaking away from a colonialist perspective. On the other hand, much of what might be termed as nationalist writing has not yet gone beyond the stage of polemics.

We touch here once more on the fact that, due to the absence of a long-standing tradition, the historiography on the Dutch Caribbean is still in this catching up-stage. As more studies are being published now, I feel however confident that the quality of research and publications will improve and a comparative approach added over the next years.
Finally, one disadvantage in comparison to other Caribbean countries will remain. The small population of Suriname and the Antilles and the absence of a university faculty of history makes it difficult for these countries to train their own historians. This means that most of the historians working on these two Caribbean countries will continue to be trained and based in the Netherlands, studying at universities in the Caribbean or elsewhere and therefore encounter both financial and language problems. There is clearly a disadvantage in this. On the other hand, the growing number of people of Surinamese or Antillean origins living and studying in the Netherlands will probably not only continue to stimulate teaching and research on the Caribbean, but also offset some of the Eurocentrism that always haunts the old-fashioned but stubborn colonial history writing in the old metropoles. That will make for an important catching up, too.

NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the annual conferences of the Caribbean Studies Association (Santo Domingo 1983) and the Association of Caribbean Historians (La Habana 1985). In this final essay, I have updated the bibliography to include 1985.


For general information, see W. Gordijn, *Encyclopedie van Suriname* (Amster-
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don 1977) and J.Ph. de Palm, *Encyclopedie van de Nederlandse Antillen* (Zutphen 1985).


On these companies, see the discussion, originally published in the early sixties, between Van Hoboken and Van Dillen: W.J. van Hoboken “The Dutch West
India Company: The Political Background of its Rise and Decline”, and J.G. van Dillen “The West India Company, Calvinism and Politics” in: Meilink-Roelofs, Dutch authors, 130-45, 149-80.


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quest of the Caribs of the Orinoco Basin, 1498-1771 (Dordrecht, forthcoming publication).


Detailed plantation studies are now carried out at the Universities of Amsterdam, Leiden and Utrecht. Only a few research reports have been published so far.


On Creole popular culture, including oral tradition and the Creole language Sranan, out of many publications I mention Willem F.L. Buschkens, The


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21. Edward Dew, The difficult flowering of Surinam, ethnicity and politics in a plural society (The Hague 1978) discusses the political situation before and in the first years of independence. Political relations between Suriname and the Netherlands before 1975 as well as Surinamese nationalism have only recently been studied; this research has not yet led to scholarly publications.


23. A detailed discussion may be found in Koulén, Oostindie, Verton, Nederlandse Antillen (1984: 6-14).


26. See however Araúz, Contrabando holandés.

Curacaose samenleving (Leiden 1977), translated as Curacao (San Juan P.R. 1981).


36. Various studies in related disciplines open with an historical synopsis. See for instance W. van den Bor, Island Adrift; the social organization of a small Caribbean Community: the case of St. Eustatius (Leiden 1981).


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42. Of the Dutch journals covering the Caribbean, the oldest are the Nieuwe West-Indisch Gids/New West Indian Guide and the Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde. Next, the Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe. An asset of the past few years is OSO, Tijdschrift voor Surinaamse taalkunde, letterkunde en geschiedenis. On Curacao the journal Kristof is published, but at present a regular journal in history and social sciences is not published in Suriname.