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A New Dutch Imperial History

Connecting Dutch and Overseas Pasts

Low Countries history is imperial history. While this proposition might come as no surprise to scholars currently working in these fields, it has not stimulated much interaction in Dutch academia until recently. Dutch metropolitan history, imperial history and – what’s in a name – non-Western history have in the Netherlands, over the past four decades, been divided across different specialisations. As a result they tended to be taught, studied and queried separately. One of the consequences of these divisions has been that the connections between the various historical approaches were scarcely explored and hardly ever as a common effort. This special issue of *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*, entitled *A New Dutch Imperial History*, seeks to connect these worlds, exploring the relevance for the Dutch historical community of the ‘New Imperial Histories’ in Great Britain and France. Four historians – Remco Raben, Alicia Schrikker and the undersigned guest editors of this issue – took the initiative by organising a conference convened under the auspices of *KNHG/The Royal Dutch Historical Society*, which took place in October 2010. This present issue is one of its outcomes.

The editors propose that the separation of the different research fields has resulted in at least two related historiographical problems. First, the history of the Dutch colonies and that of the metropolis (or the ‘mother country’ as it was referred to in old colonial sources) became completely detached from each other. Ironically, this happened precisely after decolonisation, when the question of the connections became urgent, partly in the light of (post-)colonial migration movements into Dutch society. Since the late 1960s recurring discussions about the nature and (financial) implications of Dutch military violence during decolonisation in Indonesia (1947-1950) and about the legacies of slavery in the Caribbean colonies expose the peculiar ways in which Dutch society, having separated colonial identity from itself, often did not come to terms with its past as a colonial empire and the violent activities deployed in its maintenance. Further complicating assessment of this past are the issues of postcolonial migration and of a changing popular memory that has informed our understanding of what empire has meant to Dutch society and to Dutch self-perceptions. This shifting (self-)understanding must also be taken into account more systematically.

Second, the separation of worlds of expertise has brought to light another apparent detachment – that of the Dutch (imperial) historical community from developments in international historiography. Early scholarship on Dutch overseas history was strongly oriented on the academic debate abroad. From the Second World War up until the late 1980s historians in Amsterdam, Leiden and Utrecht conducted international comparative research on modern imperialism, systems of slavery and colonial trade companies. Over the last two decades this international orientation among Dutch specialists seems to have waned or at least did not evolve further. Unfortunately, it was precisely during this period that the impact of ‘empire’ on metropolitan societies became a key to scholars in other countries, inspired by post-colonial theory. Few Dutch historians engaged with theoretical concepts from this new field.

For this reason, the editors decided to focus on one of the recent international trends in imperial historiography, which has its English, French and American variations, and is often referred to as ‘New Imperial History’ and which focuses on the imperial networks that linked the metropolis with its colonies. We aim to explore their relevance for concrete cases of research-in-progress in the Netherlands. As Remco Raben explains in his wide-ranging historiographical essay that serves as an introduction to this issue, the New Imperial History is not necessarily ‘a clearly circumscribed field of study’ but is ‘rather elastic’. Nonetheless, the generation of historians that identify with this field have some features in common that make connections with the Dutch case potentially fruitful. In particular, we asked participants of the conference to engage with some of the key concepts of the New Imperial History – migration circuits, cultural and information networks, the moral dimensions of empire and imperial knowledge.

During the ensuing discussions a question emerged: how new is the New Imperial History to scholars in the Netherlands? Indeed, we may refer to the Dutch historian J.C. van Leur who, as early as the 1930s recognised the need to incorporate the ‘Indonesian perspective’ in colonial history. He did so by focusing on inter-Asian trade networks. His work therefore is still referred to as a forerunner of current transnational and network-centred approaches in international scholarship. In addition, those attending the conference working on early modern colonialism pointed out that in their area of scholarship much attention has been paid to the entangled histories of different groups within the Dutch orbit. The connections between the histories of the Netherlands and its colonial possessions have also been addressed for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1992 a special issue of the *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, edited by Leonard Blussé and Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, presented a range of pioneering articles to give a new perspective on Dutch colonial history that was to turn things ‘outside in’ (‘buitenste binnen’). This volume was followed by scattered publications that addressed different aspects of Dutch colonial culture, amongst which were books by Frances Gouda, Martin Bossenbroek and Susan Legêne. The novelty of recent historiography should therefore not be overemphasised.

Despite these contributions we believe that the shared history of the Netherlands and its former spheres of influence deserves more sustained attention from scholars. The essays in this volume seek to integrate Dutch metropolitan and overseas histories, which could lead to a better understanding of the Netherlands and its place in the world. In addition, the contributing authors explicitly engage with concepts from the New Imperial History and thus put Dutch imperialism in the context of academic debates regarding other empires. These efforts resonate with the wider editorial policy of the *BMGN-LCHR* to explore the 'international relevance of Dutch history'. The following pages provide a state of the art overview of research about imperial history in the Netherlands, drawing attention to this rich research field amongst audiences in different countries.

In his comparative historiographical essay Remco Raben illuminates how the weak integration of metropolitan and imperial histories has not been unique to the Dutch case, demonstrating that the differences are relative. These, he argues, could have something to do with the different notions of 'being an empire' or 'having one', with the size of empire, and, in the Dutch case, with the lack of settler colonies, the development of a 'business mindset' and a technological approach to empire that contributed to what he sees as a 'lack of imperial imagination' in the Netherlands. Still, he concludes that the New Imperial History opens up valuable perspectives on the Dutch colonial past that allow us to see important transnational developments.

In the first of the six articles that follow Raben's introduction, Karwan Fatah-Black critically assesses the value of concepts of the New Imperial History – that tend to focus on the modern period – for the early modern period. In a case study on migration and settlements within the Dutch sphere of influence in the Caribbean world, he argues that models of nineteenth-century expansion are unsuitable because they put exclusive emphasis on the bilateral relationship between metropolis and colony. He shows that a variety of European agents were active in the Dutch Atlantic system, which suggests a more complex model of interconnectedness. In the following essay, Maartje Janse takes humanitarian and philanthropic associations as a starting point for exploring the nature of colonial awareness – in this case the awareness of overseas suffering – in the Netherlands in the mid-nineteenth century. To what extent did Dutch inhabitants understand their citizenship to be embedded in Dutch empire? According to Janse, historians too often take it for granted that the public interest in Dutch overseas possessions emerged after 1870s. She argues that from the 1840s onwards reformers already started to campaign intensively to abolish particular colonial practices.

In their contribution Marieke Bloembergen and Martijn Eickhoff engage with the New Imperial History's network-centred approach, in a study of archaeological activities in early nineteenth-century Java and the Netherlands, in the context of regime changes. Taking Java's ruined Hindu and Buddhist temple sites as the nodes of knowledge networks, they follow people, objects and ideas travelling via these sites in order to understand the origins and nature of heritage awareness of the modern colonial state. They show that there were complex, multilayered power hierarchies

at work at these sites, and forms of indigenous agency in the development of heritage awareness that we might miss if we follow only empire-centred networks. Fenneke Sysling also looks at colonial knowledge production, by discussing the connections between the training and fieldwork of Dutch physical anthropologists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of these scientists conducted research in the Netherlands and the Indies and in these two areas were confronted with differences between academic expectations and empirical findings. This shows the practicable limits to the anthropologists' search for 'pure specimens' of different races. Nonetheless, this did not prevent them from contributing to the popularisation of racial hierarchy and differentiation within, as Sysling makes clear, one imperial space.

Vincent Kuitenbrouwer builds on the New Imperial History's concept of transnational information networks in his analysis of the involvement of Dutch journalists in the propaganda campaign for the Boers in their struggle against the British Empire during the South African War (1899-1902). Dutch lines of communication were little developed, which made it hard to distribute propaganda abroad. Organisations that were set up to improve the information networks generally received support from journalists and some of them even played an active role in the pro-Boer propaganda campaign. Finally, Klaas Stutje reverses the perspective by following the transnational networks of Indonesian nationalists who studied in the Netherlands during the 1920s. These young men linked up with international counter-imperial networks of engagements and agitation to publish and to distribute their views on the rising Indonesian nation to the world. These writings found their way to the Indonesian archipelago and as a result the authors became influential opinion-makers in their home country.

Stutje's contribution reminds us of certain limitations of the New Imperial History. While, as the case studies in this volume illuminate, New Imperial History may provide us with useful tools to study metropolitan and overseas histories within one imperial framework, it does not necessarily help us to go beyond a metropolitan or colonial state-centred perspective. For if we stick to imperial networks of information, philanthropy or knowledge, the chances are we still miss the perspectives (and networks) of 'the colonised'. Integrating their stories therefore remains one of the major challenges for New Imperial Histories, whether they be Dutch, British or French. This volume, by addressing that problem and seeking for solutions, shows how and why Dutch scholarship is relevant for international scholarship.

On behalf of the Editorial Board,

The guest editors,

MARIEKE BLOEMBERGEN AND VINCENT KUITENBROUWER