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The past in a foreign country: Patriotic history and New World geography in the Dutch Republic, c. 1600–1648

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Picture, if you will, Holland in the first half of the seventeenth century. Imagine yourself on a lazy afternoon stroll through Amsterdam, on a warm summer day in the early 1630s. The city, like the province, appears prosperous, though these are not entirely carefree days for the whole of the Republic. The by now Sixty Years War against Spain rages on, if somewhat more faintly at this stage and on the peripheries – in distant cities like Den Bosch, which Frederik Hendrik has recently reconquered, and Maastricht, where Dutch troops maintain a successful siege. Religious feuds inherited from the 1620s continue to simmer, yet they too have been relegated to the back-burner; the Remonstrant church has been quietly reinstated in 1630. On this particular afternoon, however, you seek serenity rather than controversy and you head, accordingly, toward the park. To try something altogether different, you visit the newest doolhof, the ‘Oranje pot’, located in the recently constructed, relatively modest neighbourhood of the Jordaan.

A doolhof designates, literally, a ‘labyrinth’, yet the word then described, perhaps more accurately, the seventeenth-century equivalent of an amusement park. The ‘Oranje pot’, in any event, was in the business of fun, or at least the early modern Dutch version thereof. It assembled a collection of ‘leisure-time diversions’, which were ostensibly dedicated to ‘the pleasure and instruction of the free Netherlands’ and vaguely associated with the House of Orange – a patriotic theme park, thus, with an assortment of amusing side-shows. Attractions included, on the didactic side of things, a theatrical procession of ‘singing papists’, a drama describing ‘The Exodus of the Children of Israel’, and a grandiose ‘Fountain of the Seven Provinces’ sculpted by Jonas Bargois, fountain-maker to the
prince. In a more light-hearted vein, one could also find a band of pipers and drummers, a menagerie of exotic beasts and ‘green parrots’, and a rare elephant’s skull, tusks intact. Between a carrousel-like ‘Fountain of Orpheus’ (somewhat incongruously emblazoned, ‘Vive Orange’) and an exhibition entitled ‘The Land’s Welfare’ (an armada of toy ships in a festive pool of water) stood a central and presumably unifying tableau vivant illustrating ‘The Duke of Alva’s Spanish Tyranny Perpetrated in the Netherlands and the West Indies’: two men dressed up as soldiers assaulting a hapless maiden.¹

Good fun, one might wonder. The doolhof is striking for its seemingly haphazard mixture of frivolous distraction and solemn didacticism – verlichting en vermaak, as contemporaries might have put it. The visitor to the ‘Oranje pot’ could move easily from papists to parrots and then from Israelites on to the Indies. Yet this patriotic recipe for amusement made perfect sense within the context of seventeenth-century Dutch culture. Like so many works of art and literature, the hutspot served up in the Jordaan blended religion and revolt, commerce and conquest, to create the distinct flavour of history and recent Dutch history at that. At the ‘Oranje pot’, citizens of the Republic could study at their leisure the lessons of patriotic scripture and refresh themselves, quite literally, at the fountain of patria. They could experience the founding of the United Provinces and observe the benefits as well as the dangers which the young Republic now faced. Visitors could lose themselves in an afternoon of patriotic pastime, part recreation, part indoctrination, and surely part imagination that bridged the two.

The ‘Oranje pot’ reveals much about presenting the past in the early Dutch Republic. First and foremost, it underscores the importance of history at this particular time and place. To the seventeenth-century Dutch, history mattered. The recollection, recitation and representation of the Republic’s past mattered quite a bit, in fact, as is testified by the remarkable production, over the course of the Golden Age, of works dedicated to the project of history. Apart from the doolhoven, ample chronicles, dramas, poems, prints, paintings, sculptures and public ceremonies provided the means to narrate the relatively brief, though certainly compelling, story of the Republic’s foundation – of the religious upheavals of the later sixteenth century, the subsequent revolt against Habsburg Spain, and the drawn-out struggle for national survival. History mattered, moreover, in so far as it moralized. To recollect and to recite the saga of the sixteenth century was to rally the younger generation to arms and to rejuvenate its flagging piety. History offered the lessons of life on an ‘elevated stage’, wrote the dean of the Veere rhetoricians, Adriaen Valerius: ‘[It] induced
wisdom, through the remembrance of that which has occurred; devoutness, through the consideration of that which should have occurred; and circumspection, through the observation of that which could yet occur. 2 The designers of the ‘Oranje pot’ pointedly juxtaposed their display of ‘Alva’s Tyranny’ with that of the ‘Land’s Welfare’, hoping the former would provide a cautionary tale for the latter. Furthermore, history legitimized. During its momentous, yet in certain ways tenuous, transition to statehood, the Republic resorted to patriotic history to support the shaky foundations of a nation founded on ‘heresy’, revolt and abjuration. Especially during the first half of the seventeenth century, the heirs of the sixteenth-century rebels appealed to the memory of victories and pieties past to justify claims and presumptions for the Republic’s future. Within the world of the doolhof, the foundations of the Republic were meant to appear every bit as sturdy as the marble ‘Fountain of the Seven Provinces’.

Finally, the ‘Oranje pot’ suggests something of the disparate materials from which the seventeenth-century Dutch fashioned their history. To portray the Republic’s relatively recent triumphs, doolhoven transported their visitors to the distant past: in the first instance, to the biblical past – as illustrated by the enactment of the Exodus story and the other, primarily Old Testament tableaux within the ‘Oranje pot’ – and in the second instance, to antiquity – as represented, for example, by the classical ‘memorials’ and statuary advertised in another local park. 3 The other relevant past, described in numerous works of history, if not in any of the doolhoven per se, was the Batavian past, identified originally by Tacitus, reconstructed imaginatively by sixteenth-century humanists and embellished lavishly by Grotius in his popular Liber de antiquitate rei publicae Batavicae. 4 In each instance, the Dutch compared their own history with that of mythical ‘forebears’. In each instance, the Dutch drew strength from the heroism and exempla of an imagined past to nourish the claims of an uncertain future. History by analogy – or typology, to use the technical term – lent a patina of respectability to the upstart Republic.

One further facet of Golden Age historiography emerges from a trip to the ‘Oranje pot’, and that is the lesson delivered in New World geography. Visitors were reminded – initially by the exotic fauna and later by the exhibition of Spanish tyranny – of Dutch affiliations with America. In the first case, the foreign specimens reflected, quite simply, the recent expansion of commerce between the Netherlands and the West Indies, for which a trading company had been chartered in 1621. In the second case, the reference alluded more broadly to the presumed kinship between the respective histories of the Netherlands and the New World,
both of which described the experience of tyranny under Spain. This was no passing reference, but rather one of many made in contemporary histories and part of a broader strategy of Golden Age letters. For patriotic history was presumed to reside not only in the distant past but also in distant lands: pre-eminently in America, where Spain had perpetrated infamies that bore direct comparison with those committed in the Netherlands. Patriotic historians could reach out not only to mythical forefathers, then, but also to imagined brothers-in-arms – to the Indians, in this case – whose history was incorporated into that of the Republic. The Oranje pot’s tableau of international tyranny indicates a curious, though curiously overlooked, aspect of presenting the past in the early modern Netherlands, and it is on this blend of history and geography which I would like to elaborate.

The image of America, exotic though it might at first seem, entered the discourse of Dutch history by means decidedly domestic. By the seventeenth century, to be sure, the New World would hardly have registered as terra incognita in the urbane circles of the Netherlands. Works of geography had always enjoyed great popularity in the Low Countries, and the Dutch, by all indications, avidly consumed the earliest reports of the western discoveries. Yet, more to the point, a peculiarly Dutch portrait of Spanish conquests in America had flourished in the heated political climate of the late sixteenth century. Throughout the Revolt, Dutch pamphleteers attacked the enemy’s reputation by pointing to its renowned ‘tyrannies’ abroad. The rebels pronounced the experience of the Amerindians – conquered by Spain, tyrannized by Habsburg governors and victimized purportedly ‘under the pretence of religion’ – parallel to their own and justified the relatively radical course of the Revolt with reference to the cautionary example of the Indies. The topos of ‘Spanish tyranny in America’, in fact, became ubiquitous in rebel propaganda, appearing repeatedly in the polemics of Marnix from the 1570s and prominently in the Apologia of Willem of 1581. By the seventeenth century, the topos had passed from pamphlet literature to patriotic chronicle and from the discursive context of polemical ephemera to the more permanent repository of historical memory. The Dutch were now asked not simply to recognize the relevance of American history, but further to recall events in America for the purpose of committing them to memory. Historians entreated their audience to incorporate the narrative of Spain’s American adventure into the larger body of patriotic scripture and to commemorate the history of the Conquista just as they had memorialized instances of Habsburg abuse in the Netherlands. To the chronicler Pieter Janszoon Twick, the history of the West Indies elucidated that
of the Republic so vividly that it deserved pride of place within patriotic scripture. ‘Although, dear reader, I prefer not to digress too far from my chronicle, nor unnecessarily to prolong or obfuscate my history’, Twisck remarks, after a lengthy section on America which might otherwise have seemed digressive,

nonetheless I cannot desist from narrating a little of these affairs, which may serve as a warning and [thus] merit attention. To wit: that in the events of the years 1492 and 1542 discussed above, you may detect, as in a mirror, the character, nature, cunning, deceit, falseness, faithlessness, ambition, cruelty, tyranny and dominion of the Spaniards . . . committed in the New World. It behoves us always to remember, to recollect in lively and plain terms and never to permit to lapse into the house of forgetfulness [nimmermeer in’t huys der verghetelheydt te stellen] these memories; but rather to remain assiduously alert, diligently prepared, and always on our guard . . . that we shall never again fall under the dominion, tyranny, and violence of Spain.\(^6\)

Rather than in the ‘house of forgetfulness’, then, the history of America belonged in the palace of memory, preserved there in a prominent wing of Dutch historical consciousness, forever to endure as a locus of patriotic allegiance.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the pervasiveness of this sort of rhetoric or the place of America within it. Images of Spanish tyrannies appealed to an exceptionally broad audience that bridged differences of taste and education, faith and faction. On the most basic level, they thrived in popular, Calvinist historiography, as, for example, in Willem Baudartius’s *Morghen-wecker* (1610). Baudartius’s seminal text – singled out by bibliographers as the ultimate ‘folk’ text of the seventeenth century – served as the basis for the immensely popular textbook, *Spieghel der jeught* (1614), two works attributed to Joannes Gijsius and an anonymously published picture-book depicting the ‘more than inhuman and barbaric tyrannies of Spain in the Netherlands and the Indies’.\(^7\) One of Gijsius’s works was published as the ‘Second Part’ of Bartolomé de las Casas’s notorious American history, *Spiegel der Spaensche tyrannye* (1620), and it carried exceptionally graphic illustrations glossed by equally expressive ‘sonnets’ of doggerel. This account, together with Gijsius’s slightly more literate *Oorsprong en voortgang* (1616), appeared in some dozen editions by the mid-century. As in so many other of these popular histories, Gijsius’s narrative began with, concluded with and
referred throughout to the tyrannies of Spain in America. ‘One reads from a variety of authors of the insatiable ambition, intolerable haughtiness and unspeakable cruelty of the Spanish nation’, Gijsius opens his history of the Dutch troubles. ‘First, the Spaniards revealed their blood-thirsty nature to the innocent Indians’; only later does Gijsius turn to their perfidy in the Netherlands.\(^8\)

At the other end of the market were the grander, more learned and more lavishly produced volumes meant to appeal to a more prosperous, if not more refined, audience. A clear-cut division does not always separate the upscale histories from the more ‘popular’ variant. Gijsius’s *Oorsprong* twice appeared in a Latin translation and attracted, presumably, an erudite readership. Yet this work hardly compares in scale, grandeur and refinement to the offerings of a P. C. Hooft or Pieter Bor, works of a more liberal and learned temperament, which fall well outside Breen’s rubric of ‘gereformeerde populaire historiographie’.\(^9\) Like the popular works, though, the learned ones narrate extravagant tales of Spanish tyrannies in the Netherlands and make appropriate allusions to the memory of atrocities abroad. In recording the death of Philip II, for example, Emanuel van Meteren takes the opportunity to revive the memory of that monarch’s far-flung infamies and ‘the millions of souls’ slaughtered in America ‘under the false pretext of religion’.\(^10\)

None of the more prominent figures of Dutch historiography – van Meteren, van Reyd, Bor, Grotius, Hooft – devoted quite as much space to the New World as did the popular historians. They did, however, make careful and strategic reference to America, often at critical junctures in their narratives and always to great effect. Witness the *Neederlandsche histooren* (1642) of P. C. Hooft. Elaborately constructed and elegantly composed, Hooft’s history of the Revolt reads more like drama than chronicle. Like his earlier theatrical work, *Baeto*, the *Histoorien* focus on the actions of great men performed on the stage of human history. The *dramatis personae* comprise the prince of Orange in the leading role with the king of Spain and the duke of Alva as his chief antagonists. Alva’s departure from the Netherlands after six bloody, costly, yet inconclusive years of war, marks a climactic turning point in the narrative. It comes in the middle of the work and prompts a masterful overview of the iron duke’s campaigns, his rise and fall from grace and his ignominious tenure in the Netherlands. Hooft marshals all of his considerable imaginative and descriptive powers to convey the by now legendary tyranny of Alva with renewed vigour and urgency: the cowardly execution of nobles, the greedy confiscation of property, the scandalous desecration of maidens, the unholy slaughter of innocents, the barbaric mutilation
of corpses. As if overpowered by his own prose, Hooft steps back from
the carnage and refers his reader, simply, to the literature on America.
‘Abominations, surely incomprehensible even to the most impartial
observer’, he concludes, ‘are the likes of which one can find described in
[Spain’s] own books of the tyrannies committed on the innocent natives
of the West Indies.’ The curtain thus falls on this closing allusion to the
histories of America.\textsuperscript{11}

For what purpose did the Dutch exploit these images of the New
World? As they had for the rebels a generation prior, so the images of
America now served their seventeenth-century heirs by solidifying his-
torians’ recollections of tyrannies past and by strengthening the nation’s
moral suit against Spain. The memory of the conquest of the Indies
allowed the Dutch, first, to heighten the drama of their own ordeal
through a deliberate programme of historical analogy. \textit{Topoi} of tyranny
traded back and forth between the two narratives – of the Revolt and
the \textit{Conquista} – such that the Dutch borrowed liberally from American
histories to embellish their own with yet taller tales of Habsburg violence
and grislier vignettes of gore. The memory of America helped bloody
that of the Revolt with uncommonly rich hues of crimson. Second, it
permitted the Dutch to place their history in a broader, global context.
‘The Netherlands have become a theatre of the world’s bloody tragedies’,
wrote van Meteren in the preface to his \textit{Historien}. The title-page of that
work, appropriately enough, showed kings and emperors from around
the world and allegories of the four continents where Spain and the
Netherlands had waged their struggle. America lent an international
facade to what might otherwise have appeared a simple civil war. Third,
the image of the New World encouraged the Dutch to associate the birth
of their nation with the epochal events of the sixteenth century: the
Reformation and the Protestant struggle against papist heresy, and the
Discovery and the Indians’ struggle against Habsburg tyranny. By plac-
ing the story of the Republic’s foundation in such prominent company,
patriotic historians enhanced the prestige of their past. The analogy of
America dignified the revolt of the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{12}

Finally, reference to the history of America, like the biblical,
classical and mythological allusions so liberally scattered through-
out Golden Age historiography, helped to legitimize the Revolt. And
here the parallel with the sixteenth century is most revealing. Just as
the rebels, in their moment of isolation, turned to the example of the
Indies in order to justify their abjuration of Philip II, so the patriotic
historians, in a later moment of consolidation, revived the memory
of American tyranny to sustain their project of national renewal. The
remembrance of Spanish atrocities in the New World was meant to impress upon the young Republic the validity, solemnity and urgency of recalling the Spanish oppression of the Netherlands. The one reinforced the other, and the two combined galvanized the Dutch to remain alert and ever-watchful for signs of impiety at home and tyranny abroad. Whatever the actual circumstances by now in the New World – in Dutch Brazil or in New Netherland, where the Republic had by now commenced its own course of colonization – the image of Spanish tyranny in America remained in this way preserved in patriotic scripture and enshrined in historical memory. The history of America endured, thus, in the collective memory of the Dutch, as part of the very fabric of the commemorative tapestry of the Republic’s foundation. Its incorporation into Dutch historiography demonstrates the creativity, adaptability and – indeed – acquisitiveness of the Republic’s programme of presenting the past.