The Dutch in the Atlantic

From Henry Hudson to the War of Spanish Succession

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The Dutch presence in the Atlantic begins with a thunderbolt: The Dutch East India Company sponsored expedition of Henry Hudson in the year 1609. As it is the nature of thunderbolts: they happen suddenly and make noise. In this case, the noise was more of a long drawn out later effect, more like a hind sight than an instant revelation. For we know now that Henry Hudson ignored the Dutch East India Company’s instruction to find a passage to Asia through the Arctic Circle and instead turned westward and explored en route North American rivers, land, and resources. We should not forget that 1609 was the year in which three European explorers roamed the North Atlantic world: John Smith tried to recreate order out of chaos in the newly founded English colony Virginia and Samuel de Champlain discovered areas in the north where Hudson later explored the lake named after him. The deeds of all three explorers had important long term consequences: Virginia slowly overcame her starting problems; the Nouvelle France got a sound start and the exploration of the river later named after Henry Hudson established for the Dutch East India Company, founded in 1601, a legal title to much of the North American hemisphere. That was of course the European and Dutch perception: The indigenous people of North America on the other hand that discovered these white-skinned Europeans at the same time, did not need to discover their own lands anew and forgot to establish a legal title to their claim that they had discovered Europeans. The Dutch Republic, on the other hand, did not fail to transfer its legal title to the lands around the Hudson River to the West India Company that was founded in 1621.

With the foundation of the West India Company the Dutch Republic did not only react to the renewed wars with its former Sovereign Spain, whom the Dutch in 1581 had withdrawn their loyalty, but the foundation announced, too, to the European world that the Dutch Republic would henceforth be a player in the gamble for the lands in the other side of the Big Pond. It quickly became evident that the Dutch meant business: In securing new lands they knew neither inhibition nor were they restrained by bounds. The Dutch Republic cheerfully ignored Iberian legal claims that
monarchs of Castile, Aragon and Portugal had so skillfully grafted since the late fifteenth century with the sufferance of the pope in Rome. Rejecting the Catholic claim to dominate the world, based on strategic considerations in an effort to exploit contemporary political chances the West India Company extended its claims to South and North America, the West Indian islands, the Western half of Africa down to the Cape of Good Hope and the Atlantic that linked these continents. These extensive claims were vivid proofs of the aims, intentions, and ideals that guided and motivated the Dutch Republic, the Dutch West India Company, and the Dutch citizens. Despite the malice and the sarcastic taunts of France and England, their big neighbors, the Dutch energetically went about to secure their share of the booty in the Atlantic African and American hemispheres – all in an effort to partake in the rise to glory and riches. That in the final reckoning the West India Company failed in 1673/1674 in its quest for power and dominion has been interpreted by nationally minded historians as proof of Dutch failure in the Atlantic world. English and French sneering was the louder the richer the booty was that the Dutch East India Company brought from Asia to Europe in the form of spices, tea, furniture, and china ware. These historians maintain that Dutch efforts to dominate the Atlantic had to fail at the same time that French, Spanish, Portuguese, and English efforts to establish their claims to the Western World succeeded. With their arguments these historians betray their nationalistic perspective. In interpreting the struggle over the Western World in nationalistic terms these historians adopt the terminology and language of mercantilism and of national endeavors to establish nationally defined legal systems in the Atlantic world. In speaking of the failure of a Dutch Atlantic they fall into the trap of nationalistic arguments propagated and postulated by French, English, Spanish and Portuguese early modern politicians and enacted in their legal systems from the French l’exclusif to the Acts of Trade and Navigation. Their interpretation of the so-called Dutch failure superimposes a nationalistic model on the Atlantic. Yet the people in the Atlantic world conquered these national systems by generating trans- or better supranational energies and activities. I try not to fall into this nationalistic historiographical trap. Henceforth I will not speak of the history of the Dutch Atlantic but of the history of the Dutch in the Atlantic.

Although I am a supra-nationally minded German historian I will focus for the moment on the complex nature of the term “Dutch”. It is indeed ironic that all historians who specialize in the history of the Dutch in the Atlantic World and who like to project the Dutch failure at the same time are agreed that “Dutch” is not the same as “Dutch”. Seventeenth century sources demonstrate as well as famous contemporary historians (like P.C. Emmer) indicate the many meanings associated with the term “Dutch”. The term “Dutch” could be applied to inhabitants of settlements, plantation colonies, and of trade factories like New Nederland, Curacao, St. Eustatius, Surinam, Brazil, Aruba, Bonaire and to inhabitants of villages on the Cape of Good Hope who were either born in these regions, had come as migrants or were offsprings of immigrants from the Dutch patria. Yet if one changes the perspective, other definitions of “Dutch” emerge: “Dutchness” could be assigned as a
national characteristic to people that hailed from other nations or states within or without Europe (stemming from intercolonial migrations, or who hailed from German territories, from British Isles, from Scandinavia, from Switzerland, from France or from the Spanish or Austrian Southern Netherlands) who lived in the Dutch colonies, in the factories of the Dutch trading companies under the protection of the West India Company. From a perspective within, these inhabitants from other states acknowledged more or less the sovereignty and protection of the Dutch Republic or its derivative, the West India Company. Yet it is possible, too, to view this particular configuration of the term “Dutch” from an outside perspective. This was the perspective of the English, the Welsh, the Scots and the Irish, who called all people from Western Europe who did not hail from Britain of France as “Dutch” which for them meant “Deutsch” as in “German/Germanic”. The term “Pennsylvania Dutch” retains this meaning until our days. Its erroneous meaning is still retained and discernible in fascinating decorations in which US-Americans connect 17th and 18th century migrants from the Palatinate in Pennsylvania with items associated with Holland like wooden shoes, or tulips. Yet these should not distract us from the true nature of the term “Dutch”: For the multiple meanings and complexity of the term “Dutch” reflects historical reality and supra-national mentality of the early modern period. The meanings of the term “Dutch” prove that it is impossible to extract from a narrow national meaning of the term all the many-faceted activities of the Dutch Republic in the Atlantic world. If one takes into consideration all who perceived themselves as Dutch women and Dutch men, who lived under the sovereignty and dominion of the Dutch West India Company as colonial ruler as Dutch, then these different meanings of the term Dutch acquire a new meaning in the Atlantic world: They underline and highlight the informal nature and character of the Dutch expansion in the Atlantic world.

In 2001 Piet Emmer wrote, that the Dutch empire consisted of “an expansion without empire”. Probably one ought to modify this sentence: Probably the Dutch empire was an “expansion of empire that played the European international (in the sense of trans-national) card”. Viewed from this perspective the question who owned a particular piece of land or a colony in the Atlantic world was not really important, for it did not affect the domination and influence of the Dutch merchants in the Atlantic economy, trade and culture. The loss of New Nederland to the English did not impair or damage the Dutch role in the Atlantic, and the same is true for the effects of the rise of England to world dominion. At the same time it is evident that the Dutch influence and role in the Atlantic world is less evident and visible for the historian who looks through the lenses of nation states, and is fascinated with the English meteoric rise to greatness after the War of Spanish Succession. Those who want to understand the nature of Dutch influence in all its possible meanings after 1664/1674 have to read between the lines, study microstructures, and focus on the individual mercantile enterprise. In these microstructures they will find the elements and activities that so blatantly contradict the stipulations of nationally configured legal trade systems like the Acts of Trade and
Navigation. For these nationally defined legal systems postulate that these micro-structural activities could not exist because they were not allowed and what is not allowed does not exist – reality and realities notwithstanding. In my second part I will focus on these realities that national legal systems have declared to be none-existent or could be cleverly avoided.

In his introduction to this conference Willem Frijhoff confirms the evidence I found in my research during the 1990s: “the colony of New Netherland was not an isolated, fully autonomous, or marginal area of the Dutch alone, but was integrated along many lines in the network of relationships between the continents and the states, the regions and the colonies, the peoples and the nations, the migration patterns of the early modern period, the goods flows of the economy and the culture…” (S.5) This sums up nicely the results that are collected in my Habilitationsschrift “Atlantische Welten” which was finished in 1995 when hardly anyone paid attention to Atlantic networks. Some examples will prove that there was a formal Dutch empire in whose times people used their colonial interests, multiethnic background and their identities to do as they pleased. During this phase from 1623/1624 to 1674 with the intermission from 1664-1673 some highlights of political autonomy of inhabitants of Dutch as well as of English American colonies can be discovered. And there was an informal empire of Dutch connections between America and Europe which became evident after New Netherland had changed into New York for good in 1674. This working “Dutch connection” did not need governmental structures and the protection shield of the Dutch Republic or the WIC to succeed. Some examples of Dutch independence: commercial interests of New Nederland in the tobacco trade with the English Chesapeake colonies Maryland and Virginia generated an intensive intercolonial diplomacy. From the 1620s though to the 1630s right into the troubled times of an England shaken by Civil War Virginia had used her connections to New Netherland and the Netherlands to steer her own political course – which did not always amused the Stuart kings or the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell had been so angry that he had sent the fleet to America to subdue unruly colonists, especially Virginia. During the first English-Dutch War which had been started by a jealous Albion in 1652, the Dutchman Pieter Stuyvesant tried to confirm harmony with his colleague in Virginia, Governor Richard Bennett. In May 1653, eleven months after war had been started in Europe Stuyvesant dispatched a delegation from New Amsterdam to Virginia. He tried to tempt the Old Dominion with an offer of alliance, correspondence, and commerce”. His effort was in vain, but the friendly atmosphere and the fact that Virginia welcomed his delegate proof that the colonists did not follow rules and acts of behavior expected by the mother countries that were anxious for complete control over their ex-European empires. Late in 1653 Stuyvesant launched a new enterprise; that time he sent Reverend Samuel Drissius for Jamestown. The eloquent minister was able to convince the Virginian governor of their mutual interests: While the mother countries were still involved in a bitter struggle, felix Virginia and New Netherland did not exactly marry, but came to terms about a trade agreement.
While Virginia and New Nederland lived their special relationship, and vessels from New Nederland as well as from patria came to Virginian harbors and creeks to acquire tobacco for Dutch pipes, the situation between the neighbors Maryland and New Nederland was less agreeable. Quarrels over land and claims took their toll, but, surprisingly war was not the only way out. The rivals looked for solutions and methods that did not fit the pattern cherished in the mother-country. The colonists were not fixed on Europe or felt isolated from each other – something the mother countries would have liked very much and which would had fitted perfect their mercantilist ideas. In a way Stuyvesant in 1655 had used European and intercolonial power constellations, when he “conquered” New Sweden und integrated new “subjects“ (people from Scandinavia, Netherlands, German territories, and the British Isle) into an expanded New Netherland. Fort Casimir mutated into Nieuw Amstel. Some loyal Englishmen were not so happy about that change of luck. Some protested; some doubted Dutch claims: they said that Stuyvesant had taken the land within the reach of the Hudson and the Delaware/i.e. the fur trade!, the “center heart and bowels of the country” by “intrusion, insulting, [and] unjust claim.” One admirer of Lord Baltimore declared frustrated: “55! Years we have beat the Bush, now they [NN] catch the Bird.” [TNA CO1/13 fol 189r, 1659] Stuyvesant’s reactions to that opposition was surprisingly soft and cool; instead of acting true to his fame, he chose to soften the quarrel with his neighbors through the power of the convincing word, not of the sword. In 1659 he dispatched the non-Dutch Nieuw Nederlander, Ex-Bohemian Augustine Hermans for an embassy to Maryland. Hermans’ journey of his travel and the negotiations has survived; it offers important and fascinating insights into early modern mentality, daily life and perceptions of a typical New Nederlander. In Maryland he resided on the plantation of Simon Overzeer who had come from Rotterdam to Baltimore’s Catholic sake heaven. At the dinner table in Philipp Calvert’s house Hermans met reverend Francis Doughty, (former in-law of New Nederlander Adrian van der Doncks). Within this international setting colonial issues were discussed. Colonial interests and claims were justified through traditions and claims established by the mother countries: the British Marylanders referred to the actions of Sir Walter Ralegh in Elizabethan times; the Bohemian-New Nederlander chose a surprising argument for Dutch claims on the Americas. He referred neither to the deeds of Hudson, the VOC nor the WIC, but to the Spanish-Burgundian past of the Dutch Republic: ““we said, … we derive our origin from the King of Spain”, that the King of Spain was, at the time of the discovery of America, our! King, and we were as much his vassals and subjects…but afterwards, when we were obliged to take up arms, and achieved our liberty, the King of Spain conveyed over and to us, in full propriety…all his own and other conquered lands in Europe and America.” Hermans’ embassy to Maryland softened the situation; instead of going to war, both sides wanted peace and their communication in all its senses (traffic=Trade/ exchange of information) improved a lot. Further relief came through the return of the pro Dutch Englishman William Berkeley who once
more became governor of Virginia. Berkeley returned to his strategy of good relations to New Netherland while his bosses, the Stuart brothers started their efforts to destroy New Netherland first by law, later by military threat. At the same time when the Duke of York with the help of NN rival Connecticut organized his coup against NN, merchants and politicians in the Chesapeake colonies, and the northern New England colonies lived in happy harmony with NN, thanks to working intensive intercolonial-supranational communication.