Infrastructure and Nation Building in the Nineteenth Century

Michael Wintle
University of Amsterdam

Presented at the Conference
“Four Centuries of Dutch-American Relations”
Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 15-16 October 2009

Please do not cite, quote, or circulate without prior consent of the author.

My two fellow members on this panel are both, in their way, at pains to justify what at first seems to be a rather marginal subject. Bruce Kuklick pokes a bit of fun at it: the Dutch-United States axis was pretty unimportant in the nineteenth century, or at least it was as far as the United States was concerned. The bilateral relationship might be interesting in certain rather offbeat ways, like the orthodox Calvinist connection for example; he is seemingly a bit frustrated that the Flemish have to be excluded from the picture when they might be interesting, and that the intriguing but largely derogatory expressions about the Dutch in English come to America via Anglo-English, rather than originating in American English. They are to do with Anglo-Dutch rivalry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, I think, and not with American-Dutch mutual appreciation in the nineteenth. He concludes by positing that there may be a meaningful relationship between the Netherlands and the United States in the nineteenth century, but if there is it should be viewed as part of an ‘Atlantic’ perspective, especially if it’s Protestant, and so presumably one which includes lots of different countries on both sides of the Ocean in a multilateral relationship, rather than just the bilateral one between the United States and the Netherlands. Bruce doesn’t have much time for such broad concepts as the Atlantic perspective, but there might just be something there to save the American-Dutch relationship in the nineteenth century. Thanks for that, Bruce: you are well disposed towards the subject, but frankly you think it’s probably a bit overrated, certainly as far as the United States is concerned.

Wim van den Doel is more nuanced in his treatment of the nineteenth century. However, in his chapter summing up all the articles about the nineteenth century in this large book devoted to the relationship between the two countries, he has to admit that in terms of diplomacy and even economics there was not much of importance going on; migration was comparatively small, both in percentage and absolute terms, and even the trade and shipping was pretty negligible. In the nineteenth century cultural interaction took place from time to time, but it tended to be geographically limited, thematically obscure and of short duration. A structural, mutually important relationship eludes Wim, and instead
he chooses to highlight some interesting, charming contacts, mentioning Motley, land-hungry migrants from the Dutch sea-clay, cheap American grain, Catholics from Uden, and some Dutch Orientalist research into some first-nation American languages. Interesting, charming even, but hardly central or important. Both speakers point to the fact that the Dutch who emigrated were not typical, and could never provide an image of the Netherlands in America which was representative of the mother country. After all, Americans use the word ‘Dutch’ to describe the German Amish, and are happy to use that corruption of ‘Deutsch’ in all sorts of quaint ways, as in Bob Dylan's ‘Dutch Charlie's Bend’.

So what am I to make of this potentially damp squib, of the seeming non-event, or non-major event, of Dutch-American relations in the nineteenth century? I will briefly review the evidence in this book to see just how important the authors think that relationship was in the nineteenth century. The answer will be, I predict: occasionally very important indeed to the Netherlands, but almost not at all to the United States. Then I shall look at a couple of the ways in which the United States was indeed immensely important to the Netherlands in the nineteenth century, between 1815 and 1914.

After the close of the American and French Revolutionary periods, diplomatic relations were negligible. As for trade, Jeroen Touwen’s exemplary essay tells us that commerce ‘was not very impressive’, amounting to no more than 5% of Dutch exports, and 15% of Dutch imports at the very peak around 1910. The percentages of US imports and exports accounted for by the Netherlands are not mentioned, presumably because they were truly negligible. Interestingly, Touwen deals with US trade with the Dutch East Indies, which was indeed significant, especially in terms of plantation agriculture (not oil, which America actually exported to the Indies as kerosene). There is no doubt that Indies commerce and industrialized agriculture were immensely important to the Dutch economy, and I would like to know who was carrying that Indies-America trade, for it would not surprise me to learn that the Dutch had a hand in it. But again, this was interesting rather than central to the Netherlands, and a small matter for the United States.

In terms of financial services, the Dutch did better: the Amsterdam capital market was substantial, has recently been pronounced as sound as a bell in the nineteenth century, traditionally servicing foreign as well as domestic markets. Augustus Veenendaal knows all about Dutch investment in the American railway construction boom, and his chapter relates that during that boom of 1865 to 1900, about a third of the finance came from Europe, and the Netherlands was second only to the London money market in supplying that European financial fuel for the American economy. Here then, at last, we have a sector and a time-window in which the Dutch actually impacted on the American economy. To be fair, they spread their money around: about 25% of Dutch worldwide investment was in the US by 1914, but another 20% of it was in Russia, and I suspect an even larger chunk was in their own colonies;
tellingly, Veenendaal informs us that there was virtually no technology transfer attached to these investments, and no link between emigration and investment. So again, interesting, but hardly crucial.

The subject of migration from the Netherlands to the US, and the religious aspects of that migration, have been meticulously studied over the years: Robert Swierenga is the doyen of these matters, but there is a small army of scholars, professional and amateur, in which I myself have served, many years ago, which has investigated pretty much every nook and cranny of quantitative and qualitative evidence about those Dutch pioneers, especially the orthodox Calvinist ones, who headed in tight-knit groups from capital-intensive farms on the Dutch sea-clays for the vacant farmlands in very specific areas of America. They were by no means all poor: they often had money to buy land and set up business, but their kind of farming had become precarious in the rapidly changing Netherlands, assisted in some cases at least by a dream of religious unfettering. But the logical question about this much-studied migration flow is why it was so miniscule, compared to that from Germany, Ireland, Scotland, Italy and many other countries. The numbers were not so much a flow as a trickle, and an intermittent one at that. Wim van den Doel admits that despite their orthodox Calvinist distinction and their clannishness in settlement, assimilation or rather Americanization had really won the day by 1914. As for the Dutch Reformed connection, it was important in the Netherlands, to be sure, especially in the early part of the century when there was active persecution of some of the Secessionist Orthodox. But later in the century, in the 1880s when the numbers rose, there was no persecution any more, and indeed the more worldly of the orthodox, led by Abraham Kuyper, were experiencing a successful flowering of their movement in the Netherlands which eventually resulted in him becoming Prime Minister in 1901. He was important – even crucial – in the Netherlands, but I’m really not sure how well known he was in the United States: I think his Princeton lectures have probably been used to exaggerate things somewhat. And we should recall that in fact, a substantial part of this minor migration from the Netherlands to the United States was actually Roman Catholic. In summary, all the various connections between the Netherlands and the United States in the nineteenth century did not amount to very much, and certainly not to the United States, mighty as it was by the beginning of the twentieth century. The only exception, objectively, was the significant level of Amsterdam money-market investment in the American railroad construction boom.

But rather in the manner of my colleagues on the platform, I would like to argue that, if we leave aside the white elephant of there being a major, structurally important connection in the nineteenth century between these two countries, there are some very significant things after all, especially for the Dutch. I shall mention three. One is Othering, the second is infrastructure, and the third goes under the sign of ‘safety valve’.
First, Othering. The formation of any human identity, individual or collective, is made up of a number of complex internal processes, but it is also heavily dependent upon the location and selection of a collection of opposites or Others, against which one’s own identity can be set. In the Dutch case, some of these were internal - the persecuted orthodox Calvinist Seceders in the 1830s, Catholics during the No-Popery riots of the early 1850s, the so-called ‘gypsies’ especially after 1868, and so on. But outside its borders the process of nation formation in the Netherlands also sought its Others. This was a complicated matter, and the subtle differences which the Dutch imagined they noticed between themselves and the Germans or the English (let alone the Belgians) were all part of the construction of Dutch identity in the nineteenth century. Colonial activities were also crucial. The Dutch position vis-à-vis the United States was important for the construction of a perception of the Netherlands’ place in the world. Because of all the little ways in which America came into the Dutch consciousness, enumerated so well in this volume, and especially towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Dutch could measure themselves as a nation against their perceptions of the United States, amongst other countries of course. This Othering of the Dutch nation took place in relation to close neighbours too, of course, like Belgium and Germany and the United Kingdom, but the United States also played a role. And what is more, the process also took place in the other direction.

It is not my field (as academics say in moments of uncertainty), but during the nineteenth century the United States was also going through a critical period in its own identity formation, and its perceptions of the Old Continent undoubtedly fed into that process. It seems to me that from about 1850 up to as late as the 1970s, there was often an ambiguity in American writings about the relative positions of Europe and America, especially in terms of what might be called civilization. America was clearly young, vigorous, fresh, and right in most things; there was, however, some uncertainty about the status of Europe. The novels of Henry James are a case in point. An author who was born, raised and educated in the United States but who spent most of his life in Europe, much study has been devoted to his developing feelings about Europe and America. In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), which at one level is a story of expatriate Americans trying to come to terms with European civilization, there is a clear deference to the sophistication of London, Florence, and especially Rome, and some feeling of undefined inadequacy on the part of Americans in the face of all this ancient civilization. The character of Madame Merle in particular articulates these sentiments. Around 1900, whereas the self-image of the United States could sometimes be even jingoistic in relation to Europe, at the same time there is evidence that she would also sometimes appear happy to share the standard, more Eurocentric view of the continental hierarchy at the beginning of the twentieth century, with Europe definitely out in front. I don’t think the Netherlands figured large in the work of Henry James, but I think perceptions of the Netherlands, through the small but intimate lines of communication illustrated in this book (*Four Centuries*), played a part in the America’s coming of age vis-à-vis the Old Continent.
Europe was an important Other in the self-definition of American identity – how could it have been otherwise? – and the Netherlands no doubt took its own modest role in that.

Secondly, and perhaps with my feet more firmly on the ground, there is the question of a global, technology-driven, transport infrastructure. Towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the Dutch economy was taking on its modern form, as a services-based global trader and more particularly a global shipper. One of the keys was the country's transport system, and not only the domestic facilities. Within the constraints of economic policy and resources of the day, the major Dutch shipping companies like the ‘Nederland’ and Rotterdam Lloyd made sure they laid down the best investment for the future they could, in the form of shipping lines in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and then air transport as well. It was a crucial stage in the creation of a truly global capitalist economy. The system was based on large motorized shipping, and the Dutch carved out their own niche and maintained it in the face of menacing competition. By the 1920s the Dutch, alongside other capitalist nations with imperialist ambitions, had built up a genuinely global shipping network. The Dutch-run Silver-Java-Pacific Line circumnavigated the globe, and the Java-New York Line served all the harbours of the eastern American seaboard from Halifax to the Gulf of Mexico. The Pacific was criss-crossed with regular Dutch lines; it was almost as if the Dutch were surrounding the United States in a cobweb of shipping lanes. Most of the maritime nations of Western Europe, and America and Japan as well, achieved something along these lines. But the Dutch maritime shipping sector was a highly efficient one: it had the highest productivity levels of all its international competitors (including the US) in 1910, and the value added per worker was 20 per cent higher in the Netherlands than in the UK. In creating this global infrastructure, the Dutch and the Americans were in constant competition or collaboration, and always in contact to one degree or another. The network carved out by the Dutch, founded on the East Indies colonies and the ports of North America, contributed to the increasingly global economy of the time, which in turn fed Dutch trade-based growth. It was a critical moment in the development of the Dutch economy, and the United States was very much a part of it.

Finally, I would suggest that the contact with the United States had the effect of acting like a safety-valve in certain ways, and was therefore potentially life-saving. First, in the matter of religion. There certainly were religious tensions in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century, and the ways in which they were resolved led to that most characteristic feature of Dutch society for much of the twentieth century, vertical pluralism or verzuiling. The orthodox Calvinists were central to those developments, and their involvement with the migration stream to the United States may have contributed to the eventual arrangements made in the Netherlands to manage religious difference. The numbers were never very large, except in the famine year of 1847/48, but persecution following the orthodox Calvinist Secession of 1834, and also very localized religious friction between Catholics and
Protestants, was connected with the migration stream to the States. What I am suggesting is then that emigration to the States may have provided a safety-valve in religion of precisely the right size and nature to assist, perhaps even perversely, the Dutch method of dealing with religious tension.

And emigration to the States and elsewhere, over and above the matter of religion, also acted as a safety-valve, and here I am thinking particularly of the short-term food-shortages of the late 1840s, and more especially the longer-term and far more serious agricultural crisis of the 1880s. It was of course partly caused by the United States, along with the other open spaces of the world at that time, with the steam-transported supply of bulk foods, especially grains, undercutting the farming operations of the Netherlands and rendering much Dutch farming simply uneconomical. Railroads and steamships allowed global extensive farming to undercut local intensive farming in several important agricultural sectors. For various reasons the Dutch, like the British, did not feel able to cower behind tariff walls, as did their French and German colleagues, and as a result the most brutal transformation of the Dutch agrarian economy took place (and the British one, come to that), with the 1880s being quite most miserable decade of the entire century. I suppose you could call that an economic stimulus: some of our harder-nosed economic historians already have. It caused untold misery and social disruption, and in the period from the 1870s to the First World War, it was fortunate that the United States also provided a safety valve to release some of those social tensions, in the form of that emigration stream from the Netherlands to the States.

Lastly, there was another aspect to the safety-valve function. The cheap grain imports from the States eased the supply-side constraints on the famous distilling industry of the Netherlands, especially its factories for jenever, or Dutch gin, for which grain was a major cost ingredient. Civilization offensives from the prim Dutch bourgeoisie engendered stringent licensing laws and excises on alcohol, which were eventually staggeringly effective in reducing the consumption of gin by half. But for a while, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, cheap American grain helped sustain the prodigious consumption levels of hard liquor in the Netherlands. And given the economic mayhem of the 1880s, that’s what I call a safety–valve.