Book Reviews

Harold J Cook, *Matters of exchange: commerce, medicine, and science in the Dutch golden age*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007, pp. xiv, 562, illus., £25.00, $35.00 (hardback 978-0-300-11796-7).

Everyone knows the Dutch are practical, hard-headed, sensible types, good at business and even better at social organization. Much of that reputation was forged in the Dutch Golden Age. Curiously, however, and despite their undoubted position in a developing world economy and in international politics, the Dutch have otherwise remained more or less on the margins of European history. Or, people have regarded the Dutch Republic as some strange semi-aquatic beast, more connected to the British Isles than the continent. Simon Schama's influential *The embarrassment of riches* (1987) also projected a sense of Dutch peculiarity. More recently, however, a series of scholars have re-thought and re-situated the Dutch experience. In a number of works, Jonathan Israel has made the Dutch central to *European* history, as, for instance, progenitors of Enlightenment and of the democratic and republican politics more frequently associated with the French or the English. Now, Harold Cook argues for the centrality of the Dutch to the sea-change in ideas that we once facilely called the "Scientific Revolution". His book is a profoundly convincing contribution to the history of European intellectual history and one based on exceptional erudition.

Science, we now recognize, is not disinterested and this realization guides Cook as he blends the history of commerce with that of science and medicine in the Dutch Golden Age. "By looking at . . . science in this way", Cook notes, we observe how "the new philosophy arose not from disembodied minds but from the passions and interests of mind and body united" (p. 1). It was, he insists, no coincidence that the "beginnings of a global science occurred during the period of the rise of a global economy" (p. 416). *Matters of exchange* demonstrates how the values of commerce—its ways of discovering new things, of determining truth, and of assigning worth—were identical to the precepts of the new philosophy. Cook stresses the criticality of accumulation and exchange of knowledge as the *primum mobile* of this new philosophy, because "[g]lobal trade encouraged materialistic exchanges" (p. 377). The production of knowledge remained important, but the movements of goods and the collection of objects did more than merely stack facts. Such transactions altered the ways people thought about knowledge and shaped its generation. Above all, a "refusal to speculate" and a taste for "simple things" dominated. Success in commerce required a fine appreciation of specifics and of what was—and was not—"real" or worthwhile. It demanded and cultivated a deep comprehension of the material world combined with, and driven by, the passions, that is, of self-interest in the Mandevillian sense. Bernard Mandeville's Philipirio—or lover of experience—personified the merchant and the empire-builder, but also the *liefhebber* (the connoisseur of, for example, flowers) and the man of medicine. All united in contiguous and synchronous quests to understand the world about them. These new perceptions rested on what the Dutch call *kennen*—that is, acquaintance—rather than *weten*—knowledge of casual explanations. It was travel, exchange, and a ceaseless "to-ing and fro-ing", that produced not only knowledge of things, but also nurtured new ways of *seeking* knowledge and eventually endowed knowledge with novel meanings.

In building his argument, Cook draws on an enormous amount and variety of material, and relies on the skills of the biographer, the intellectual historian, and the historian of science. The author's enviable command of an extensive historical literature shines through

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especially in his ability to situate each person, each object, and each thought in its various milieus. And what an adventure it is for the reader as Cook skilfully captains us across the globe. We sail with the traders of the East India Company out to Batavia and back, and botanize with the physician Jacobus Bontius in Java. We chase butterflies and caterpillars with Maria Sybilla Merian in Surinam, follow Dr Willem ten Rhijne to far-off Japan, and accompany the physician Willem Piso to Brazil. But the story is also grounded (often literally!) in Europe: in the *hortus botanicus* in Leiden, in the sojourns of Descartes in the Low Countries, and in the politics of the Dutch Republic. The range of topics Cook successfully integrates into his analysis is breath-taking and if the reader is sometimes left a little breathless, he or she also feels that the effort pays great dividends.

Medicine and natural history were the "big sciences" of the early modern period and medical men play a particularly consequential role here. Many new philosophers trained as physicians, travelled to distant lands, and compiled natural history tomes. Cook devotes a goodly percentage of his pages to analysing their several roles in "matters of exchange". While some physicians, such as Georg Stahl, never abandoned a search for the ways in which God controlled the physical world and still "went far in their speculations" (p. 409), many others did not. Physicians like Herman Boerhaave did not turn their backs on reason, despite dethroning her. She became instead a handmaiden to new goddesses: Observation, Experience, and Experiment. Boerhaave, like Thomas Sydenham, privileged scrutiny over speculation. This shift worked the real revolution in medicine and natural philosophy: one no longer sought wisdom or knowledge for its own sake, but rather knowledge for its practical applicability.

For far too long affairs of business and commerce have been shoved off to the margins of historical writing. The "money-grubbing" merchants of the Dutch Republic (or other commercial centres) have often been stereotyped as philistines little interested in "pure" knowledge (if such ever existed) and singularly uncurious about anything that did not enrich them. Cook explodes these myths and places the man of exchange (admittedly not necessarily the man of commerce or business) at the heart of European intellectual life. It is a brilliant insight and his book is an important achievement. Admittedly, readers may sometimes feel overwhelmed by the wealth of information or a little baffled by what seem extraneous (if always engrossing) details. One might also quibble that Cook perhaps overplays practicality as the driving force behind the desire to know and perhaps underestimates the role of wonder or curiosity. Such tiny gnats of criticism, however, in no way detract from what is a strikingly good and strikingly original scholarly accomplishment, as well as a beautifully produced and reasonably priced volume.

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Joan Thirsk, *Food in early modern England: phases, fads, fashions, 1500–1760*, London and New York, Hambledon Continuum Press, 2007, pp. xx, 396, £37.99, $65.00 (hardback 978-1-85285-538-3).

Food in early modern England is a nuanced and exhaustive study of food habits and changes in food consumption in England between 1500–1750. Drawing on an array of sources that includes food writers, probate records, diaries, cookery books, literary figures, and household management and husbandry guides, Thirsk focuses on the meticulous detail of what, exactly, the English ate and drank in this period.

Thirsk's aims are threefold: to acquaint the reader with the diversity of foods in early modern England and thereby counter the idea that earlier diets were monotonous; to demonstrate regional and class variation in foods eaten; and to present both early modern food fads and gradual overall changes to England's diet. Throughout the book, she makes an effort to give all of these subjects considerable weight. Thus *Food in early modern England*

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