

BOOK REVIEWS

De wereld en Nederland. Een sociale en economische geschiedenis van de laatste duizend jaar. Red. Karel Davids en Marjolein 't Hart. Lex Heerma van Voss, Manon van der Heijden, Leo Lucassen, Jeroen Touwen. Boom, Amsterdam 2011. 372 pp. Ill. € 45.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859012000533

Transnational histories of nations are in vogue. We have even seen transnational histories with a global perspective.¹ *De Wereld en Nederland* is not conceived as a transnational history of the Netherlands, but it does try to connect the national and the global. Its central concerns are, firstly, to investigate how the development of the Netherlands fits in with that of other countries and, secondly, whether the Netherlands was an influential trendsetter or just a follower of global trends.

The book is intended to be a new socio-economic history textbook for first-year undergraduates, and it treats that “socio-economic” in a very broad sense. The text revolves around three key concepts – income, power, and risks – and it takes certain mental constructs as dialectical mediators between these concepts. “Income” (socio-economic history proper) should guide the reader to structural changes in the economy, “power” (socio-political history) implies structure and agency, whereas “risks” (socio-cultural history) stress agency. As a result, socio-economic history acquires a very broad meaning. “Income”, “power”, and “risks” are each covered by two chapters. All in all, six authors have contributed a chapter.

Covering roughly 1,000 years, the book is divided into two major sections, each comprising three chapters. Kenneth Pomeranz’s concept of the “Great Divergence”, here situated around 1800, serves as a caesura. Each of the book’s main chapters covers about forty pages, including informative graphs and tables as well as illustrations – one of them (on p. 86) shows the first editor and his children. All the chapters have been written in a very clear style, and it was a good idea didactically to start each of them with three or four leading questions, which guide the text and which are answered in concluding paragraphs to form a summary of the chapter’s main arguments. The American practice of intensively helping the students through the text has not been followed; this is good, because students should be prepared to invest time and effort in understanding and mastering the text themselves.

As a textbook *De Wereld en Nederland* is even more ambitious than a monograph connecting global and Dutch history would have been. Very often, textbooks are the first introduction one has to the intricate world of history, and Dutch undergraduates may not generally be expected to have a firm grasp of the last 1,000 years of their national history or, for that matter, of world history. This book, moreover, is a pioneering effort, because we lack sustained analyses of the relationships between Dutch and global history over the past 1,000 years. The authors have tried to build bridges between Dutch and global shores by using developments in north-west Europe as halfway pillars. The global shore receives concrete features through the focus on developments in China.

It is hardly possible for one author to investigate the relationship between the national and the global from a social angle, to explore the interconnectedness between the economic,

1. Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (Houndmills, 2007).

political, and cultural over 1,000 years, and at the same time to publish the results as a textbook. The degree of specialist knowledge required forces one either to shorten the time span or to invoke the help of colleagues. However, with every new co-author the complications of coordination grow exponentially, and it becomes quite difficult to produce a well-integrated text and to even out the specializations and preoccupations of the various authors. Through cross-references the team has tried to increase the level of integration. Cross-references can certainly be used, but only when referencing backwards. That gives students the opportunity to verify whether they still know what they have already studied. Moreover, writing a book that is intended to be absorbed by students within ten weeks requires a lot of courage on the part of its author or authors. You have to make key choices, and that requires mastery. It also requires courage because with rather short books, such as this one, it is even easier for critics to find all sorts of subjects that have not been covered.

The authors have chosen to concentrate on big structures and large processes: types of economic development, types of state building and varieties of political culture, demographic changes, and systems of social relief and discipline. This is certainly a good way to cope with the appalling amount of facts and figures. Another way to harness a structural approach could have been to regard the text as a toolbox, which will enable students to think in appropriate contexts when doing research on their own. Then the problem of structure and agency and of room for choice should play a more central role. Through their approach, however, the authors introduce readers to key historical debates and, in doing so, succeed in acquainting them with the work of important historians, sociologists, and theorists: Robert Brenner, Immanuel Wallerstein, Charles Tilly, Wayne Te Brake, Jared Diamond, Peter Burke, Max Weber, and many others.

The proof of this pudding, of course, is in its digestion. I am not sure what will ultimately remain in the heads of student readers. Global development and north-western European and Dutch processes are simply quite a lot of history to cover, even if you present a macro vision. Since Wallerstein, we have been aware that from 1500 onwards a capitalist world system has been on the rise, connecting all the parts of the planet. That, however, does not imply that from the start, every country had meaningful relations with any other country in the world. In many respects this book (perhaps unwillingly) shows this to have been the case for the Netherlands and China. As a colonial power in south-east Asia, the Dutch East India Company had dealings with the Chinese, but until the twentieth century the attention paid to China often reminds one of Monty Python: "And now for something completely different". That message needs only one sentence, but the more this book shows how completely different China was, the more the usefulness of this comparison, or juxtaposition, becomes questionable. This is a very important problem, because it invites one to rethink the reciprocal relations between the global and the local. That raises the book's message to a level quite superior to that of the traditional textbook.

China's role in the book decreases, however, the nearer we get to the twentieth century. By the time we reach chapter 9 (by Lex Heerma van Voss), on socio-cultural developments after 1800, China is almost completely absent. Compared with China, the attention devoted to developments in north-western Europe has much more relevance to the Dutch case, probably because the Netherlands was in much more frequent contact with countries in that region. This region has a more or less common economic, political, and cultural background, which allows the authors to analyse incisively the peculiarities of Dutch developments. Moreover, at times it enables the authors to delve deep beneath the surface and to give substance to the concept of path dependency. It also provides all sorts of opportunities to make students think and write about the meaning of differences in the Dutch case. Thus, the book stimulates the reader to evaluate Dutch history better.

Though the scope of the book is wide, its size is limited. And the question arises as to what actually are its subjects? And what is its place in an undergraduate history course?

The text seems more suited to students who already have a grasp of political history, because although *De Wereld en Nederland* considers structural political processes, it refrains from *histoire événementielle*. At times, however, you need just that to get a good grasp of the problems. Whereas in chapter 7 Jeroen Touwen is rather critical of the financial and economic policies of King Willem I during and after the Kingdom of Holland (1815–1830), in the next chapter Leo Lucassen is much more positive. Both authors disregard the king's policies in the southern Netherlands, except for the payment of taxes, and fail to elaborate on other problems of this temporary cohabitation of two populations. In a box, Lucassen explains the background to the creation of this kingdom and, very summarily, points to non-economic issues. But that does not help those students who read Touwen's chapter first. This shows the difficulties of integrating chapters by different authors. These difficulties also become clear when one compares the socio-cultural chapters by Manon van der Heijden and Lex Heerma van Voss. Both are very interesting and well-written, but they also diverge in terms of approach. Different times – different histories; different authors – different orientations.

The book comes with a website, which presents the students with a series of factual questions per chapter (no answers are given), which will undoubtedly be useful when students want to absorb the book's contents for examination purposes. In addition, it contains, per chapter, an extensive bibliography. It also provides students with more extensive information about debates and topics concerning the chapters of the book and the book as a whole: "What can we continue to learn from the *Annales* school?", for instance. Perhaps in the future it might also include case studies to put some human flesh and blood on the broad structures and processes the book deals with.

In conclusion, *De Wereld en Nederland* raises the question of the relevance of the global for national developments. When is it needed, and how does it come into play? It shows the importance of developments in the more immediate and congenial geographical context. In doing so, it enables authors and students to take a deep dive into socio-economic history (understood in a very broad sense) in order to see sharply the peculiarities of the Dutch experience. As such, the book seems perfectly suited to the more mature student.

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CHRISTOPHER, EMMA. *A Merciless Place. The Lost Story of Britain's Convict Disaster in Africa*. Oxford University Press, Oxford [etc.] 2011. vii, 432 pp. Ill. Maps. £16.99. doi:10.1017/S002085901200065X

This is a story. Not entirely a "lost" story as the title implies, but a story that illustrates the tensions that existed within Britain, and the British Empire, in the late eighteenth century. As a story dominated by convicts, it deals with the relationship between crime, property, and punishment, and with transportation as the apparently attractive solution to this problem. It is also a story of how imperial problems – the American Revolution, the rise of the abolitionist movement, and continued exploration and expansion – influenced internal issues within Britain. Finally, while the merciless place for some might be identified with improper stereotypes of Africa, it was merciless because of the system that primarily sought to rid Britain of its criminals by exporting them without much concern for their future in their new situation.

Emma Christopher's eloquently written and engaging story, carefully constructs an in-between, and lesser known, period of Britain's transportation system. It was in-between