



Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015, 448 pp., ISBN 978 0 8122 4646 9).

From time to time a new book surprises most of all for not having been written before. Benjamin Schmidt's *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World* is such a book. It deals with the pre-history of Said's 'Orientalism' (E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York 1978)), with the so-called 'consumer revolution' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and with the emergence of a globalised world economy in the early modern era. Despite contributing incisively to these almost over-exploited historiographical sites of interest, Schmidt's approach and arguments were hitherto largely missing from the literature.

The book is based on a wide-ranging yet detailed study of a particular genre of texts that flourished in the Dutch Republic in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: 'exotic geography'. During this period a new type of highly inventive and entrepreneurial book publishers such as Pieter van der Aa, Jacob van Meurs, or Cornelis de Bruijn began producing lavishly illustrated volumes on the geography of non-European places in a distinctly new style. These books quickly became successful on the commercial marketplace throughout Europe – quite apart from the traditional patronage circuit of luxury book production – and profoundly influenced the perception of the non-European world by European readers and consumers.

One of Benjamin Schmidt's main arguments is that this new genre of exotic geography helped to create Europe. Contrary to the travel writers who came before, the Dutch authors and publishers did not stress how the overseas world and its riches belonged to any particular European king, nation, or explorer. Instead, they took a 'universal' European perspective in representing the exotic world, thereby diminishing the importance of 'local' interests within Europe. In doing so, the Dutch prefigured Edward Said's late-nineteenth-century Orientalism in many ways; not least in the way violence and sodomy were cast as characteristics of the 'exotic' world and justified European intervention in it (chapter three). Dutch exotic geography also rendered the non-European world recognisable with the help of 'an aesthetic of the exotic', and prepared its products for appropriation as commodities by European consumers (chapter four).

Schmidt is not the kind of writer to boast grand claims before substantiating them, and although he engages in important discussions on empire, commodity fetishism, science and knowledge, the precise ways

in which he positions his book against the work of other scholars (Bernard Smith, Edward Said, William Pietz, Paula Findlen, Roger Chartier, and Roland Barthes – for instance) is often buried deep in between the details of his analysis. Despite the importance of Schmidt's contribution to these debates, this is not a book about exploration or empire: it is a book about books.

Books of exotic geography are a particularly interesting object of study since they are at once the product of a new consumer culture, and a medium through which this new way of perceiving the world was transmitted and reproduced (this was already pointed out with reference to cartographic products by Chandra Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (New York 1983)). The output of early modern Dutch publications in this field is indeed striking, and Schmidt's careful and seemingly exhaustive analysis of those works is a very welcome contribution. Compared to Harold Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven 2007), which studied a similar corpus of early modern Dutch publications on exotic botany and medicine, the much more critical position taken by Schmidt with regards to the scientific veracity of these texts, and their authors' relationship to (the striving for) 'objective truth' is also most welcome. (Schmidt does not enter into a debate with Cook, or even reference his work.)

Apart from the scholarly merit of *Inventing Exoticism*, there is the sheer joy of opening this marvellously illustrated book. With over 200 illustrations, most of which are perceptively discussed in the text, the book is a feast for the eye as well as the mind. In this age of digital discourse analysis and text mining software, the book draws our attention back to the physical product of early modern books, their appearance, their illustrations, and most of all the complex ways in which they came about. Studying only the text and not the book is to miss half the point – and most of the fun.

Unfortunately, the composition of the book is not as satisfactory as its appearance. The excellent and to-the-point introduction is followed by four lengthy chapters that read more like separate essays than as book chapters. This results in repetitions from one chapter to another, and similar topics being broached in very different places in the book in a confusing way. A second point of criticism relates to the analysis itself. For all the rich detail dug up from the sources of exotic geography, the broader context is rendered only in passing. Comparisons to the works of earlier periods (most notoriously the etchings by Theodor de Bry or Jacques le Moyne) appear a bit too sketchy to fully support the argument of the Dutch *invention* of exoticism in the seventeenth century. Dutch society itself also receives surprisingly little attention. This is, after all, a time and place credited with the birthplace of modern consumerism, cleanliness, comfort, science, the stock exchange, and capitalism no less, and one is thus left to wonder what role this (presumably) exceptional economy and society had in the coming about of exoticism. Moreover, *Inventing Exoticism* leaves this reader to wonder whether indeed

exoticism was the midwife to European consumerism, or whether the emergence of a new aesthetic of exoticism was but one aspect of a wider shift in consumer behaviour characteristic of a peculiarly Dutch urban political economy.

Despite these minor points of criticism, *Inventing Exoticism* is an important, thoroughly researched, and enjoyable book. Its basic argument concerning the early modern – and often Dutch – roots of representing the non-European world as ‘exotic’ is so compelling as to wonder why it was not already widely accepted in historiography. Now that *Inventing Exoticism* has come around, there is surely no reason not to seriously consider this argument.

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