



Michiel van Groesen, *Amsterdam's Atlantic: Print Culture and the Making of Dutch Brazil* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, 265 pp., ISBN 978 08 1224 866 1).

This is a double-faceted book. First, it is a history of the news of and debate over, in oral exchanges and print media, the Dutch conquest of north-east Brazil. This has not been studied as intensively, Michiel van Groesen contends, as is justified by the quantity of news and the effect of that debate in politics. The book also performs a history of that conquest and retreat (which took place between 1624 and 1654), as a necessary complement to the account of the media, a story that will be unfamiliar to many.

The study is focused on Amsterdam because it was the preeminent centre of Dutch news for this period, and the place in the Dutch Republic where discussion was most free. Indeed, Van Groesen contends, Amsterdam had the liveliest and most unconstrained culture of debate in Europe. This makes Amsterdam not only unique and semi-autonomous within the political culture of the Dutch Republic, but possibly exceptional as a news entrepôt within Europe. However, Van Groesen also emphasises that Amsterdam's Atlantic news and (to a lesser degree) the attendant debate spread from the city out to the Netherlands and beyond. His account, he proposes, should be a model for understanding the place of the Atlantic world in European political consciousness, and for the way that news – media management and public opinion – worked more generally in this period.

The book adopts a more or less chronological approach and tells a story of the rise, fall and remembrance of colonial rule. At the start of the seventeenth century limited information about Brazil was available: Van Groesen surveys the sources in print, and imaginatively offers a discussion of costume books to illustrate the nature of both the knowledge and the lack of it. However, with the initial conquest of Salvador in 1624 the trans-Atlantic information system found a way of overcoming distance – and geographical distance is rightly at the heart of this book – to supply Amsterdam's rapidly-growing market for news of Brazil. Van Groesen focuses on two main genres: newspapers, which, because of their weekly periodicity, were especially important in the formation of public opinion; and news maps. These latter were particularly influential to the reception of Brazil news, but had a distinctive and significant place in Dutch print culture more generally.

During the initial euphoria over the colonial success, which was also a blow to the Hapsburg enemy, the coverage of the news was entirely positive, and both the Dutch West India Company and the States General had little

need to effect censorship or control of the press: this would change over the years, though their efforts were only ever intermittent. When Salvador was lost in 1625 the Company lost control of the narrative. Word of mouth challenged the more-or-less official news in print, and eyewitness reports contested the managed media. Van Groesen explores several sites of what he calls 'friction' in the following years: debates over morality of slavery (and the duty to attempt the conversion of slaves), religious toleration, and over free trade. It was during the 1640s, when news of the fall of the Dutch colony was anticipated and rumoured, that public opinion became highly polarised. Rumours are shown to be especially important in this culture, necessitated by the distance and delays in receiving news (though these were not as great as may be thought), but nonetheless influential in shaping opinion and action. This opening of debate Van Groesen calls, following an English pamphlet, 'Amsterdammification'. Pamphlets shaped anticipation of and responses to news, and lay beyond the control of authority. Van Groesen offers a thick description of this culture, including the relationship between oral (including sermons) and printed communication. He pays particularly close attention to *praatjes*, a pamphlet genre representing fictional dialogues between characters that represent 'types' within Dutch society.

With the loss of the colony in Recife in 1654 the news from Brazil stopped, and Brazil disappeared from public debate. The Atlantic world was no longer so important to the political conversation. However, interest in Brazil continued. Instead of the more nuanced picture (the colonial period actually made more subtle the Dutch understanding even of the native inhabitants of Brazil) that had developed when Brazil had been part of an ongoing political and commercial story, a simplistic, romanticised, nostalgic view emerged. In terms of perspicuity this was much like the late sixteenth-century view, but it was coloured by pride as the period entered the history of the military triumphs against the Hapsburgs.

This history of news of Dutch Brazil in Amsterdam sits within a larger interpretative framework: Van Groesen offers a broader contribution to the history of print in early-modern Europe, a field that is anything but neglected. There was, he suggests, a 'public Atlantic'. In this printed news played a determinant role in shaping public opinion, and thereby shaped the actions of the authorities, individuals and institutions. The brief period of Dutch Brazil is sandwiched between the two other major news events that engaged public opinion in the seventeenth-century Netherlands: the fall and execution of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt in 1619, and the murder of Johan de Witt in 1672. But the trans-Atlantic dimension of Dutch Brazil adds an important layer to these other media events, even though they also had an international life. Moreover, while the Amsterdam experience of Dutch Brazil may be unique, Van Groesen suggests that it may form a template for how other countries experienced and worked with the notion of the 'public Atlantic' in their political cultures.

This is a welcome contribution to the history of news and print culture, far beyond the scope suggested by its superficially narrow subject. Its weakness lies in a tendency sometimes to describe readers' responses, and therefore to a degree public and popular opinion, through inference (e.g. 'The readers of *Historisch Verhael* presumably did not care' p. 63) rather than more direct evidence. Its strength lies in its very considerable originality, unmatched knowledge of the historiography, and clear, rich and nuanced account of the breadth of the newsprint culture of Amsterdam during the mid-seventeenth century.

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