



# Review of *A Concise History of the Netherlands* (2)

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This review aims at analysing historiography on the process of globalisation – a central theme of the book – from a critical post-colonial perspective. It calls for reconsidering the 16th to mid-20th centuries of Dutch history from the perspective of those who were enslaved, colonized and subjugated to imperialism. While early modern and modern globalization produced the Dutch miracle, even a second Golden Age (1890-1914), Dutch colonial presence overseas were highly detrimental to the colonized regions' socio-economic progress. Till date, it remains an inheritance of loss and an integral part of their identity.

The nature and character of Dutch identity has been intensely contested, especially in the last two decades. James Kennedy's book *A Concise History of the Netherlands*<sup>1</sup> is a fine, thoughtful and well-researched addition to debates on histories of the Dutch people. The book argues that the nature and character of the Dutch has been shaped by the region's long history. It encompasses the layered nature of Dutch identity formation over a long period of time: circa 5,500 BC to 2017. The book is a comprehensive overview of all of Dutch history. It is divided into seven chapters, apart from the Introduction and the Epilogue. The book is illustrated by fifty-two figures, sixteen maps, a chronology of events up to 2013 and suggestions for further reading. The index is substantial, covering names of places and people, apart from events and concepts. Interestingly, it has neither a bibliography nor notes.

*A Concise History of the Netherlands* is primarily structured around political history. The author's in-depth knowledge of modern history is evident in the division of chapters. The first four chapters – From the Margins to the Mainstream: Dutch History to 1384; Rise of the Northern Netherlands, 1384-1588; A Young Republic's Golden Age, 1588-1672;

Diminishing Returns and New Hopes, 1672-1795 – cover more than 6800 years of history since pre-Roman times. The last three chapters – Building a Nation-State, 1795-1870; Progress and Crisis, 1870-1949; A Progressive Beacon to the World, 1949-2017 – cover the last 222 years of history. The narration and analysis of the post 1795 years is much more detailed and in-depth. Most chapters begin and end with foreign intervention, a basic pattern that underscores Dutch history.

Kennedy has chosen two closely related ideas to organise his book. The first is globalisation: how has this region contributed to the process of globalisation and how has this region been impacted by it? The second is nation states: how did this perennially fractured and highly differentiated society manage not only to survive but also to thrive? A third idea, modern economic growth, is not explicitly stated but forms an important part of the analysis, especially in the sections dealing with the factors explaining the success of the Republic in the early modern period and later nation-building. The author aims to demonstrate how and why people emerged from soggy wastelands to miraculously create a free, secure and prosperous society. How did this very improbable success story of the Dutch come about?

The author at the onset states that he is very aware that there were episodes in Dutch history where violence, inequality, divisions, instability and deprivation accompanied the successes. The role of migrants in the Republic's financial growth during the so called Golden Age is well recorded. In 1600, 10 percent of the Republic's population hailed from the south and as much as one-third of Amsterdam's residents could claim Flemish roots (144). Many migrants were wealthy and skilled and contributed to the economic surge. Peaceful co-existence of people from many different religious and economic backgrounds was the hallmark of the time. Dutch migration to the Indies is also illustrated. Starting under the VOC and WIC, many Dutch men left Europe to seek better fortunes elsewhere. By mid-eighteenth century women started to migrate as well. By 1900, nearly 100,000 Dutch citizens lived in the East Indies, about 40 percent of whom were women (325).

The violence that the Dutch unleashed in the sea-borne trade of Asia, Africa and the Americas is an integral part of Dutch history. Kennedy does not shy away from stating numerous facts and figures as proof of this. While the 1621 butchering, enslaving and expelling of 15,000 people in Banda is cited (180), the equally violent massacre of 10,000 Chinese people in Batavia in 1740 is somehow missing. Slave trade carried by the Dutch, both in the Atlantic and in Asia is well recorded as is Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* and its impact in the 1860s on Dutch morals (316). Similarly rising discontent against the Dutch and its repression is also brought up (368). The bloody guerrilla warfare and almost 150,000 Indonesian casualties in the war for independence bring out the violent and traumatic end to Dutch colonial rule (385).

In contrast, Dutch imperialism between 1870 and 1914 is discussed as a new wave of globalization defined by ‘free trade, unprecedented technological advances and economic output’ (322). The narration here remains one of skilful management, profit-making and even pride of the Dutch in ‘their’ Indies: an overall success story. The Ethical Policy (*Ethische Politiek*) in the Indies is mentioned along with white Christian civilization’s moral burden (347) but nowhere is racism, discrimination and political domination, i.e. robbing the people of their sovereignty, laid bare. Discussing the German occupation of The Netherlands between 1940 and 1945, it is clearly stated that ‘German plunder of the economy substantially impoverished the country’ (374). In summarising Dutch colonialism, for example of Indonesia and Suriname, such clarity is lacking.

This makes one wonder if the purpose of history is not also to learn from mistakes and blunders. It is perhaps while analysing these aspects of Dutch history, that the author missed an opportunity to share insights on what exactly constitutes the success of a nation. At what costs were these successes achieved and what, if any, lessons were drawn? What place should Dutch slave trade, colonialism and racism receive in a protracted Dutch history? The damage done remains unquantifiable and reparations would be neither credible nor feasible; but perhaps bringing forth, in the form of history writing, some form of atonement and critical reflection of the injustices done, could have been aimed at.

The last chapter of the book pertains to the 1949-2017 period and is titled ‘A Progressive Beacon to the World’. The account here focusses on the slow recovery after the wars, the disasters of the 1953 flood and the extreme ‘pillarisation’ in the ensuing years. Transformation was definitely a key word for the second half of the twentieth century where many of the problems got solved, largely due to the 1959 discovery of the natural gas reserves in Groningen. It funded the social welfare provision, made the Netherlands into an international energy supplier and created a mentality, both inside and outside government, that the growth of government services had been effectively and securely financed (407). In the following years a consumer revolution set in motion. In 1957, only 3 percent of Dutch households had a refrigerator; within a decade the number had risen to 55 percent (408). Albeit less dramatic, the rise of automobile ownership was comparable.

Such prosperity also led to rebellion, for example by counterculture movements like the *Provos* or its successor the anarchistic group *Kabouters* (‘Gnomes’). They established Amsterdam’s reputation as a counterculture capital. This started a tradition in which pressure groups influenced the government with the aim of ushering in a better world. Kennedy’s eye for details and criticism of how some events unfolded (Srebrenica, 435) shows his interest and expertise in modern and contemporary history. His core message is ‘the historical ability of the Dutch to live together, despite many trying episodes’ (454). The author aimed at illustrating how the country’s past

has been shaped by numerous interfaces with external developments that intruded and influenced the Dutch. In this, Kennedy has an undisputable thesis. The adaptive and inventive ways in which the Dutch managed external challenges – geographical and political – made this a successful nation. One hopes that this distinctive characteristic of the Dutch will continue to shape society and politics in these times of de-globalisation, and remain an exemplary model to the world.

Kennedy's latest accomplishment, covering seven thousand years of history, within four hundred and fifty pages, is a concise and insightful labour of love, which, as he admits, took ten years in the making, interrupted by numerous projects in between. Readers across the humanities and social sciences will value it. No doubt, non-academic readers, especially expats living in the Netherlands and others interested in history, will also find the book's language accessible, the narration engaging and the arguments compelling. It can function as an excellent textbook for undergraduates, as well as graduate courses that are specifically designed for non-Dutch students.

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