



Julie van den Hout, *Adriaen van der Donck. A Dutch Rebel in Seventeenth-Century America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018, 203 pp., ISBN 9781438469218).

Adriaen van der Donck (ca. 1618-1655) is best known as the writer of *Description of New Netherland* (1655). Although unremarkable within the corpus of seventeenth-century publications on Dutch overseas expansion, his book remains an important source for the history of the Dutch colony of New Netherland and seventeenth-century North America. Yet, as Julie van den Hout highlights in her biography of Van der Donck, much more can be said about him. Van der Donck was born in Breda, only a few years before that city was captured by Habsburg forces in 1625. Van der Donck and his parents fled northwards and were only able to return after the army of the Dutch Republic retook the city in 1637. A year later, Van der Donck matriculated at Leiden University to read law. He was subsequently employed by Kiliaen van Rensselaer to serve as *schout*, chief judicial officer, at the patroonship Rensselaerswijck in New Netherland. After leaving Van Rensselaer's service he started his own patroonship Colendonck just north of Manhattan. Van der Donck soon became involved in the politics of New Netherland, which was rife with divisions in the aftermath of a devastating war with the Native Americans for which the West India Company was blamed. In 1649 Van der Donck traveled back to the Dutch Republic with two other delegates to present their complaints to the States General. After his return to New Netherland in 1653, Van der Donck stayed out of public life until his untimely death at the hands of Native Americans in 1655.

Historians of New Netherland have largely viewed Van der Donck in a positive vein. Edmund Bailey O'Callaghan (1797-1880), a journalist of Irish origin who had fled to New York after getting into trouble with the authorities in British-ruled Canada, recognized his own travails in Van der Donck's life and portrayed him as the leader of a popular movement that foreshadowed the American Revolution. Likewise, Russell Shorto (1959), a writer of narrative history, depicts Van der Donck as a paragon of the early enlightenment, a conduit for Dutch tolerance into North America, and as a shining example for our own troubled times in his bestselling *Island at the Center of the World*.

As Van den Hout explains in the preface (xii), her book builds on Shorto's work. Although she does not fully adopt Shorto's interpretation, she still considers Van der Donck a man of outstanding moral fiber who stood up for the oppressed colonists. Her goal is to present a cradle-to-grave biography,

without ‘offering a comprehensive account of New Netherland, or an in-depth look at the politics of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic’ (xii-xiii). This is understandable, especially as Van den Hout’s book is not primarily aimed at a scholarly audience. Still, a thorough study of the historical context would have saved the author from numerous minor errors, such as making the anatomy theater of Leiden University the location of Nicolaes Tulp’s dissections, depicted by Rembrandt (13). Neither does the author engage with the work of other scholars in a meaningful way. For instance, there are no references to the work of Donna Merwick (1932), one of the foremost New Netherland scholars.

A similar lack of incisiveness and critical analysis pervades Van den Hout’s treatment of crucial aspects of Van der Donck’s life. She highlights Van der Donck’s exile from Breda during the Spanish occupation (6-7), points to his marriage to a daughter of a puritan minister who had fled from England (65-67), and to his continuing membership of the Calvinist church (115), but does not entertain the possibility that his engagement in colonial projects stemmed from religious motives similar to those of New England colonists: the desire to create a safe haven overseas, free from persecution. Likewise, Van den Hout does not sufficiently contextualize Van der Donck’s struggle with the West India Company. She fails to recognize the partisan nature of the available sources. The assertions Van der Donck made during the proceedings of a committee of the States General are uncritically accepted by Van den Hout. Yet many of these assertions were half-truths at best or otherwise complete fabrications. For instance, the fact that Van der Donck styled himself ‘president of the commonalty of New Netherland’ may have enhanced his credibility in political circles in the Dutch Republic, but did not reflect an official role in New Netherland. The author’s focus on her protagonist obscures her view on the composition of the changing coalition of different groups opposed to the rule of the West India Company. As pointed out in a 2018 article in the *Journal of Early American History*, this coalition of common settlers, larger and smaller merchants, ministers, and patroons, covertly supported by the stadtholder faction in the States General, gradually began to break up, a process that significantly contributed to Van der Donck’s failure to achieve his main aim of obtaining a position of political influence for himself.

Of course, pointing out what Van der Donck personally stood to gain as patroon of Colendonck does not equate to making self-interest his sole or even his dominant motive, as asserted by Van den Hout (xii). There is no doubt that Van der Donck cared deeply about New Netherland and that his efforts and publications were geared to promoting its welfare. His attempt to reform colonial government was aimed at avoiding a repeat of the decisions of director Willem Kieft (1602-1647), which had led to the disastrous war with the Natives. Yet his campaign was thwarted by the death of Willem II and the subsequent loss of influence of the stadtholder faction. In order to be allowed to return to America, Van der Donck had to give up all political ambitions. It

is remarkable that Van den Hout nevertheless credits him with the creation of a city government of New Amsterdam (114). This had never been his aim in the first place. Nor did he gain anything by it, as it included none of his few remaining supporters. The main achievements that *jonker* Adriaen van der Donck is worth remembering for are his descriptions of New Netherland, informative despite its promotional overtones, and the city of Yonkers, named after him.

Still, this is the first full biography of this prominent colonist. Van den Hout has made the laudable effort to consult the original Dutch manuscripts rather than published sources in translation. In the process, she has discovered a number of new documents, uncovering unknown details relating to Van der Donck's connection to Breda. As such, this book is a useful addition to the historiography of New Netherland.

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