

Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade. Dutch–Indigenous Alliances in the Atlantic World, 1595–1674

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Author:

Mark Meuwese

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Simon Middleton

Brothers in Arms opens with two anecdotes that encapsulate its view of Dutch-indigenous relations during the 17th-century rise and fall of the West India Company (WIC). In 1642 three WIC officials and a West African leader, 'Ockij, King of Great Acraa', agreed a deal establishing a trading post on the Gold Coast which would open the region for Dutch trade in exchange for a monthly 'gift' of gold. Three years later, on the other side of the Atlantic, a cosmopolitan Tupi leader of the Potiguares Indians, who had spent time in the Republic and was fluent in Dutch, wrote to his cousin to persuade him to abandon his Portuguese backers, who had previously enslaved fellow natives, and join with the more fair-minded Dutch who 'live with us as brothers'. These and many more similar stories capture what Meuwese considers the importance of WIC negotiations and the striking of deals with indigenous leaders, without which Dutch trade and imperial ventures would have been impossible. Equally important is the sense that these alliances often extended beyond narrowly pragmatic and self-interested considerations, not least because like other European colonizers the Dutch were frequently bargaining from a position of weakness which bound them to respect indigenous peoples. At times, Meuwese argues, the Dutch presented themselves and the natives accepted them as not only trading partners but also allies, friends, and even brothers.

The book is presented in six chapters, beginning with a survey of the rise and fall of the WIC from the granting of its charter in 1621 to bankruptcy and re-organization in 1674. Chapter two considers the pre-WIC history of Dutch Atlantic overseas expansion and indigenous alliances. The remaining four chapters take the story forward through the years of WIC operation in four key Atlantic zones: north-eastern Brazil, Angola and Kongo in West Central Africa, New Netherland in North America, and the Gold Coast. In the

introduction Meuwese addresses conceptual premises and historiographical sympathies and gripes. Borrowing from ethnohistory and the literature of encounter, he focuses on interactions on ‘frontiers’ or ‘contact zones’ defined as ‘geographic spaces where peoples of different cultures were bounded together’ and where relations ranged from accommodation, integration, and cooperation to violent confrontation on all sides. Indigenous communities did not retreat from European colonizers, but sought alliances for their own reasons. Similarly, the Dutch approached indigenous peoples in ways shaped by their character and circumstances: uniquely among European colonisers, they operated without centralized government direction, or a zealous missionary program, and pursued limited settlements; led by a merchant elite predisposed towards decentralized provincial decision making, WIC agents sought firm and durable alliances with native leaders. This imperial *modus operandi* and ambition have sometimes been obscured by the WIC’s ultimate collapse and English and French victory over the Republic as a European power. But in the first half of the century the Dutch married maritime capacity and drive with a sense of moral superiority over their Spanish enemies, and pursued an Atlantic empire. A key strength of Meuwese’s study is its comparative analysis of these disparate imperial projects. Another is his determination to bring indigenous peoples to the centre of an Atlantic historiography more often concerned with shipping, European migration, imperial administration, and the adaptation of political and religious culture. There was a Dutch Atlantic, it seems, and indigenous peoples were critical in its construction.

By the late 16th century the Atlantic trade had developed four distinct ‘commercial circuits’ (p. 15) which served the by then well-established Iberian empires: Portuguese traders exchanged European goods and precious metals for slaves in West Africa, from Senegambia to Angola; ships taking trade goods to Spanish America returned with the silver that funded Hapsburg power in Europe; next came the movement of people and products, especially sugar, between Portugal and Brazil; and finally, the rapidly developing slave trade between West Africa and the New World. While the English and French were occupied with dynastic struggles and the domestic ramifications of the Reformation, the Dutch were propelled onto the international stage by the need to take the republican revolt to the Spanish. Dutch overseas expansion prior to the WIC established a pattern for later practice by seeking mutually beneficial alliances with native peoples who were eager to acquire their trade goods. On the Gold Coast a relationship akin to Richard White’s ‘middle ground’ developed between Dutch and Akan Kingdom whose loyalty they won over from the Portuguese and which neither coloniser could survive without.⁽¹⁾ The Akan were impressed by the availability and range of Dutch trade goods. It was a similar story in South America, where natives were eager to trade with the Dutch and also valued their assistance as allies against rival tribes and slave raids by the Iberian powers. Another early pattern indicated that Dutch native alliances were most stable in areas where the Iberian powers posed a mutual threat.

Plans for a WIC were first mooted in the 1590s, but then deferred to the establishment of the East India Company and later a truce agreed between Spanish and Dutch states in 1609. The return of hostilities in 1621 encouraged militarists, hard-line Calvinists, and ambitious merchants to lobby for the chartering of a WIC, intended to replicate the commercial success of its East Indian counterpart and harry Spanish interests in the Atlantic. Initially, the Company focused on the Angolan coast, aiming to sabotage the slave trade that generated Portuguese and Spanish wealth and power. Beginning in the late 1620s and 1630s there were more ambitious campaigns against slave ports on the Gold Coast and sugar plantations in Brazil. Progress was slow and setbacks were many. Even after the Portuguese formally ceded control of Brazil and Atlantic Africa in 1641, conflict continued. Early on the WIC benefited from divisions within the Brazilian Tupi Indians to better the Portuguese, before seeing their erstwhile native partners turned back towards the Portuguese 1645–56 and push the Dutch back to coastal enclaves and finally off the continent. The promise of great wealth meant the Company expended most of its resources on this ultimately failed attempt to build an empire in the South Atlantic, but it was also active elsewhere. In Angola and Kongo the WIC confronted large and powerful African armies which were able to play the Dutch and Portuguese off against one another. The result was a wretched cycle of territory taken and lost, native alliances, bloody conflicts, and double dealing. On the Gold Coast the Company managed to better the Portuguese with native support and to achieve a dominant position in the mid-century decades; until the English and French competition, here and in the wider Atlantic, challenged their monopolies. In North America, New Netherland offered access to

valuable furs and the Company established a trading post and small settlement in 1623. New Netherland's status as minor Company asset is belied by its prominence in a voluminous and growing colonial American historiography. Meuwese does a nice job of summarizing what we know – amongst other things, about clashes between colonizing and commercial factions in the Company's Amsterdam chamber that led to the end of the monopoly and opening up of private trade and the consequent impact on Dutch-indigenous relations, especially with the powerful Iroquois communities. Rather than a normative impression of Dutch-indigenous encounters, as some have suggested, New Netherland provides an noteworthy contrast to relationships developed elsewhere.

Overall, Meuwese clearly demonstrates that the WIC's imperial strategy and success, albeit transitory, depended on recognition of the rights, mores, and agency of indigenous peoples. Distinguishing its activities from morally corrupt Spanish ventures, the Company acknowledged Indian land titles and learned to adapt trade approaches and interests, for example to the native practice of gift exchange. Of course these alliances were frequently accompanied by threatened and actual violence of unimaginable brutality, and Meuwese doesn't stint on this aspect of the story. But indigenous peoples, or at least their leaders and representatives, also coveted European trade goods and weapons and entered into agreements with colonisers they considered allies and more. It is a considerable achievement to have unearthed these encounters and rendered their subsequent twists and turns in comparative Atlantic World contexts. Meuwese demonstrates an enviable confidence when dealing with diverse sources and historiographies which he knits together well. If there is a criticism it is that four central chapters tend to repeat themes and patterns and, by covering and then re-covering the same chronology, perhaps lose something of the narrative force and drama of the WIC's rise and fall. In the end, as Meuwese makes clear, the WIC's strategy of cross-subsidising failing and costly ventures with the more successful endeavours built on native alliances was unable to withstand challenges on multiple fronts, as the Company found itself facing indigenous and European enemies whose attacks impoverished its trade and made it impossible to deliver profits to investors.

Notes

1. Richard White, *The Middle Ground : Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 1991). [Back to \(1\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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