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Stuyvesant Bound: an Essay on Loss Across Time

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Over the course of a long and distinguished career Donna Merwick has produced one of the most sustained and compelling inquiries into the life and culture of a single colony in colonial American historiography. Her time and place is the 17th-century Dutch colony of New Netherland which she has considered in four books and numerous chapters and articles. When Merwick began her work, received Anglophone wisdom cast New Netherland as a benighted and mostly chaotic fur trading depot, woefully under-populated in comparison to its puritan New England neighbours, and poorly administered by a distant West India Company and a parade of drunks and tyrants they dispatched to serve as Directors General. Little wonder, historians once mused, that the colonists put up scant resistance to the 1664 English conquest, choosing to escape the Company's clutches and seize the opportunity to join the soon-to-burgeon English empire. I exaggerate, but only a little. In her first book Merwick told a very different and more nuanced tale of Dutch imperialists, mariners and merchants, farmers and burghers who navigated and possessed the colony, especially upriver at a place the English would rename Albany, according to deeply felt civic and cultural predispositions drawn from their urban, republican, commercial, and reformed Dutch heritage.⁽¹⁾ In the intervening years the field has caught up with Merwick, inspired in large part by the indefatigable efforts of Charles Gehring and Janny Venema at the New Netherland Institute (<http://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/>)^[2]

) in recovering and translating some 7,000 pages of the colony's 17th-century manuscript Dutch archive and adding it to what was an already rich collection of published translated sources. Embracing a broader Atlantic and recently global perspective on what used to be called early American history, a new generation of scholars, many Dutch speakers/readers mining hitherto unused records, have recovered the ambition and community building that actually characterized early New Netherland and its place in the Company's far flung empire. Merwick contributed to this revision in two subsequent books: one considering the English conquest from the perspective of a doomed, minor, but evocative notary public; and another tracing the compromise and sully of Dutch republican ideals following their encounter with the Indians. (2) Merwick is deeply engaged in the debates concerning culture, power, and subjectivity that have dominated historiography throughout her career. Perhaps in response to these theoretical debates, her style is innovative, original, and sometimes controversial. Solidly grounded in research, she speculates on senses and feelings, occasionally adopting the first person to capture the contingency of events. For critics who prefer their historical narratives more social scientific than literary, this can be disorientating. For fans a new book from Merwick is a rare treat.

In *Stuyvesant Bound* she offer a biographical study of New Netherland's longest serving and infamous Director, Peter Stuyvesant, who governed the colony for the last 17 years of Dutch rule following his arrival in 1647. The preface introduces the subtitled theme of loss, presenting us with Stuyvesant at a low point, momentarily bound and captive of a group of Indians just months ahead of the English conquest. He is a figure of scorn, not least by his employers who order him home to the Hague to answer for the surrender of the colony. Loss frames Merwick's study in multiple ways: the loss of a career, colony, and geopolitical influence, but also in our understanding of the "structures of feeling and reason available to a seventeenth-century Dutchman?". The first three concern the narrative of events surrounding Stuyvesant, the Company, and the faltering Dutch state, but the fourth reflects on debates concerning the colony's success or failure and the desire of modern scholars to connect New Netherland to the teleology of United States historiography. In many ways this search for connections and relevance is a by-product of the popular interest and revisionism inspired by the New Netherland Institute that has provided for the inclusion of the Dutch in early settlement American historiography. Merwick's point, at least as it strikes this reader, is that the New Netherland version of this loss of understanding is but one example of a widespread historiographical tendency to understand early modern colonial and commercial doings in relation to global integration and impending modernity of which Stuyvesant and his peers obviously had no knowledge. Failing to keep this seemingly simple but, if pondered, actually quite subtle point in mind risks presenting stories that consciously or unconsciously enact modern self-legitimation thereby losing sight of New Netherland and its culture. A more appropriate assessment, offered here, asks to what extent Stuyvesant and his contemporaries lived within the limits of their times. In pursuit of this question, Merwick arranges the book's 11 chapters around three sets of interlocking obligations and experiences pressing on Stuyvesant: his duty and oath as a senior officer in the West India Company; his experience and perspective as a Christian committed to the reformed faith; and his life as encounters with loss.

The first part, "Duty", begins with Stuyvesant's oath of office and the status and authority it afforded him, rooted in civil and ecclesiastical justifications drawing on Calvinist views of magistrates' rights and responsibilities. Stuyvesant began adult life as a theology student but left university to enter into the unstable world of chaotic colonial ventures with uncertain futures "administering plantations, factories, and sites that were often barely more than piratical bases. It is in this context that he learns to work within Company strategies with strangers and Indians. Never identifying himself with a specific Dutch town or province, as was common for others, Stuyvesant is very much a Company man. But he is also routinely placed in difficult positions by his absentee bosses who are quick to condemn perceived faults. Early on Merwick gets a sense of Stuyvesant's philosophy of governance in allusions to divine order and authority and the need to enact confessional politics, excluding undesirables and imposing moral order and drawing upon ministerial support. He needed all the help he could get. Arriving in New Netherland Stuyvesant faced a clique of merchants determined to wrestle control from Company in favour of local autonomy and direct rule from the States General; English and Indian neighbours intent on, at best, New Netherland's subordination; an undermanned and poorly resourced garrison paid by the Company and of questionable commitment and loyalty to

their commander. This placed Stuyvesant in an almost impossible position and in a series of well-documented set piece conflicts he earned his caricature as a glowering tyrant. In Merwick's more sympathetic reading, however, he responds to critics with compromise and joins them in remonstrating against some of the Company's restrictions and demands. He engages in an admirable program of public works, rebuilding Manhattan after the destruction overseen by his predecessor, Willem Kieft. Indeed he is active in multiple fields, ranging from border diplomacy to native relations and civic government and it is his willingness to see the colonists for what they are – land grabbing opportunists – that underpins their hostility towards him. Throughout her survey Merwick is careful to relate Stuyvesant's authority and administration to the religious components of public ordinances and commercial documents, seeing the declarations of faith and references to divine will and expectations not as mere formulae or evidence of early modern mystification, but as the dynamic interpenetration of secular and religious thought worlds.

Part two, 'Belief?', develops this inquiry into the interpenetration of the spiritual and secular worlds. Merwick engages the reader, declaring her own curiosity at fleeting references to the festive calendar and then inviting us to ponder the wider meaning and implications. Collating the references she builds an impression of faith and spiritual practice as intimately connected to the believer's lived experience, for example in the routine calling upon of the presence of divinity to mind in public performances, gestures, individual and group dynamics. Edification was a crucial part of this practice and nurturing of belief, hence the anxiety around the quality of serving ministers and the importance of public policy in support of ordinances requiring days of prayer and thanks giving. Religious belief did not simply suffuse everyday life, it made it intelligible and operative. In this way we better understand the bitter disputes concerning, to us, arcane religious practices, most notably here the Lutherans, who have powerful allies in Holland and against whom Stuyvesant and New Netherland's ministers deploy St Paul's arguments regarding the Galicians in defence of colonial practice. In the midst of Merwick's reconsideration there is a rap on the knuckles for less sophisticated interpretations which offer cartoonish characterization of sinners grovelling before an implacable Calvinist God. Rather than forced on sceptical and unwilling colonists, spiritual orthodoxy was valued and pursued in New Netherland in ways that have been obscured by the image of Stuyvesant as a domineering and narrow-minded despot.

In the final part, 'Loss?', we consider the English conquest and, in particular, Stuyvesant's recall to Holland to defend his directorship. Locked in a bureaucratic process, seemingly endless and with predictable snafus, he has to generate his own archive – producing some 70,000 words describing his administration and the challenges he faced. In particular, rebellious colonists, English menaces, and inadequate support from the Company which now accuses him of negligence, self-interest, and insufficient fortitude in the face of the enemy. Unsurprisingly Merwick sides with Stuyvesant and it's hard to dissent from her assessment of a man who loses out because of the intransigence and power of the forces rather than the justice of the case against him. In two final chapters Merwick considers the representations of Stuyvesant in the 350 years since his trial – most notably James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* and Washington Irving's *Knickerbocker History* – and traces the beginnings of the obscurity that culminates in the earliest, 19th-century historical narratives. The final pages offer interesting comment on more recent work, especially Willem Frijhoff's acclaimed study of the life and faith of Everardus Bogardus, and drive home Merwick's main point of the loss of Stuyvesant behind presentist paradigms relating New Netherland to modernity and the history of the United States.

Stuyvesant Bound has all the features one has come to expect from Merwick. Early on she talks about her ambition to travel with Stuyvesant and take us on a 'reading-journey' and throughout the book she demonstrates her enviable ear for the resonances of long lost bureaucratic processes and religious faith. Her argument rests less on a thesis developed through chapters to grandstanding revisionist claims, and more ruminations on notions and meaning of authority, piety gained from decades of living with and thinking about these sources. Readers are treated to richly suggestive vignettes – such as the complaint of an ill-served community of struggling Brooklyn farmers against their inattentive minister – which brilliantly captures the meaning and significance of edification for faith and religious practice. Undergraduate and graduate teachers will want to plunder these stories for the start of lectures and classes presenting these

tricky notions to almost wholly, at least in my experience, secular students. One might complain that Merwick's singular focus on New Netherland downplays the interaction with others, especially English puritans and the heterodoxy of colonial political and religious cultures also evident in the sources. But this is a besetting sin in early settlement historiography as Michael Winship's excellent new book, *Godly Republicanism*, and its singular focus on the English ably demonstrates. In closing, readers may not be surprised to hear that having waited ages for one study of Stuyvesant, there's likely to be another one along any minute. This is the long-anticipated biography from Jaap Jacobs, a leading figure in the current generation of New Netherland historians, a scholar endearingly brisk in his assessment of the work of others, whose dissertation/Brill monograph/Cornell University Press paperback is the current market-leading survey of the colony. When Jacobs's book arrives, it will be interesting to compare the two authors' Stuyvesants and consider what their similarities and differences tell us about the course of New Netherland studies over the last couple of decades and their likely direction for the future.

Notes

1. Donna Merwick, *Possessing Albany, 1630-1710: An Archaeology of Interpretations* (Cambridge, 1989).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Donna Merwick, *Death of a Notary: Conquest and Change in Colonial New York* (Ithaca, NY, 1999), and *The Shame and the Sorrow: Dutch-Amerindian Encounters in New Netherland* (Philadelphia, PA, 2006).[Back to \(1\)](#)

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/70543>

[2] <http://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/>