

Hugh Dunthorne. *Britain and the Dutch Revolt 1560–1700*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xxv + 264 pp. \$99. ISBN: 978-0-521-83747-7.

Hugh Dunthorne sets himself two tasks in this book. The first is to identify the influence of the Dutch Revolt on British contemporaries through a study of the content and form of the news and histories transmitted to Britain. The second is to assess the longer-term impact of the revolt and the rise of the Dutch Republic on Britain's domestic history: the mid-seventeenth-century British Civil Wars, Britain's commerce, and its religious and political culture.

Dunthorne meets his first objective admirably, providing readers with detailed tables and a penetrating analysis of the media that provided Britain with a record of current events in the Netherlands. After reminding us of the importance of the oral transmission of news (not just by refugees in Britain, but also by British communities in the Netherlands), he moves on to trace some significant developments in the form and content of manuscript newsletters and histories that, taken together, made news from the Netherlands more accessible to an English readership after 1580: the growth in the number of pamphlets written by British eyewitnesses; the more news-oriented character of the works in translation, which were often devoted to describing the various sieges that dominated the warfare and the victories at sea; and the shift from the printing of single documents to multiple documents embedded in a coherent narrative. Dunthorne also demonstrates that information on the Dutch Revolt could be gleaned from a wide range of visual materials available in Britain.

When considering who initiated the publication of these texts, Dunthorne argues that many were politically sponsored, whether by the authorities or powerful patrons such as the Earls of Leicester and Essex; but over time the stimulus came from printers and publishers, many of whom were both motivated by commercial considerations and committed to the Protestant cause. Although Dunthorne readily admits that historians have no way of knowing how wide was the social mix of those who read these materials or indeed how people reacted to what they read, heard, or saw, he provides clues: comments in diaries or letters, reprints of pamphlets or ballads, and the number of British soldiers and sailors who participated in the struggle.

From the printed material, Dunthorne shows — perhaps unsurprisingly — that the prevailing view of the authors was pro-Dutch. He also demonstrates — perhaps more surprisingly — that the writers presented the revolt as a struggle between Spanish tyranny and Dutch constitutionalism (rather than between rival confessions). Religious factors generally only entered into the picture when contemporaries explained why the Dutch emerged victorious. International factors were also recognized as important in explaining the Dutch success, as was the widely held, if exaggerated, belief that Britain was the “foster father” of the United Provinces thanks to the crucial military help it had supplied (12). Another contemporary observation of importance was that the new Dutch state represented a novel kind of polity: a series of “parliamentary regimes” in which sovereignty lay in the provincial states, and where power resided in merchants and tradesmen, not the landholding nobility. The United Provinces was also thought unique in what the traveler James Howell called “a strange kind of equality” and historians note as remarkable “social homogeneity” (39).

In his second task — examining the long-term impact of the Dutch Revolt — Dunthorne raises stimulating questions, but his answers are less convincing. His argument that veterans of the Dutch wars were prominent in the contending armies of the Civil War in Britain needs fleshing out, for example. It is also something of a stretch to see British imports of munitions from Amsterdam as part of the impact of the Dutch Revolt in Britain. In these chapters Dunthorne is at his best in returning to British contemporary attitudes toward the Dutch experiences: how, for example, the British explained Dutch prosperity and if they sought to emulate it; and how travelers noticed and commented upon the religious toleration in the United Provinces.

Dunthorne’s book is aimed at scholars and students of literature and history. However, anyone interested in the relationship between Britain and the United Provinces can read it with pleasure and profit. It offers a thoughtful analysis of its wide-ranging sources in an accessible style.

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