

*Een zee van traan: vier eeuwen Nederlandse walvisvaart 1612-1964*

by J.R. Bruijn & L. Hacquebord, Walburg Pers, 2019, €29.50, 368 pages, illustrations, index, ISBN 9789462493650

Jaap Bruijn and Louwrens Hacquebord, two emeritus professors in history and geography, have cooperated to write this general overview of whaling and the whale trade in the Netherlands between 1612 and 1964. Since most works on the subject have focused on specific periods in history, such a general overview is both necessary and long overdue. The book offers an excellent and up-to-date overview of the historical and scientific literature on Dutch whaling over a period of three and a half centuries, which both specialists in the field and those casually interested in the subject will find of great use. It details the maritime, social, economic, cultural and ecological history of whaling and puts the Dutch whaling efforts into a wider European perspective, for instance comparing it with English, Danish and Norwegian efforts at various points in history. Since the last major study on early modern Dutch whaling dates from the 1970s (C. De Jong's three-part PhD thesis on Dutch whaling), the authors rightly argue that a new study is necessary.

The book follows a simple chronological structure, with four chapters all treating one of the centuries. This is a good choice, since it allows those interested in a certain time period to move to that part. Since the introductions to the last three chapters shortly summarise the earlier chapter(s), this also allows those interested in, say, the nineteenth century, to skip the second chapter without missing too much of the necessary background information. All the chapters contain short, interesting stand-alone pieces on various aspects of whaling. Chapter 1 for instance provides valuable insights into the networks of the directors of the Northern Company, cultural heritage of whaling, while chapters 2 and 3 pay attention to primary sources which give an interesting contemporary take on the subject. Of general interest is the recurring foreign competition during the various centuries, including the long-standing English competition in the latter half of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Another strong point is the interdisciplinary approach the authors have taken, which makes the book attractive to readers from various angles (maritime, social and economic history). The social-maritime context of whaling is especially pronounced, which makes the book of interest to those working on labour history in a maritime context.

Still, there are also some less fortunate choices made in the book. The most annoying one is the lack of a general introduction and contextualisation at the start of the book. Chapter 1 dives straight into the establishment of the Northern Company (1614-42), without contextualising or quantifying the importance of whaling for the Dutch economy. Given the fact that both authors have published extensively on whaling, they may have taken this as common knowledge, but this seems unlikely, even within significant segments of the Dutch maritime history community. Moreover, the authors provide only a very short section on the Basque whaling efforts during the sixteenth century, which would be useful for those not familiar with the subject. The first maps of the areas where whaling was commonly done are only found on pages 36 and 38, which does not help those unfamiliar with the subject either. This reviewer had to read significant parts of the first chapter twice before understanding the chapter as a whole. From page 46 onwards, however, the chapter becomes much better and has to be commended for the in-depth research done into both the Northern Company and its successors. The historiographical re-evaluation of the charter of the Northern Company on pages 86-92 is of interest to economic historians, especially when read in the context of current discussions on Company-States. Chapter 4 also offers a discussion on the role of the Dutch government and Unilever in whaling until 1964, which could potentially speak to larger debates on the relationship between state, big business and the economy as well.

According to the blurb, the Dutch whaling efforts were abandoned in 1964 before ecological and environmental reasons became important in the discussions about the whaling trade. Even if

this may be true, these debates play a very minor role in the book itself. Only on the very last pages of the book there is any mention of current-day discussions on the impact of whaling on biodiversity and the political issues that come along with it. Mentioning this would, however, have strengthened their case in the opinion of this reviewer. Rather than offering moral judgement on whaling, the authors could have provided a historically informed perspective on how whaling evolved in the Dutch context over the period under study. As a result of this omission, the book is mainly tailored to those already interested in the subject, rather than a more general audience which could have benefited from the hard work the authors have done to detail every aspect of whaling in a historical perspective. Readers may thus be advised to start with the last four pages of the book, which contains some information on current-day debates.

There is much to be commended in this book, which offers a detailed overview of the many aspects of Dutch whaling between 1612-1964. Even if a general introduction is clearly missing and this book could have benefited from being situated in current-day debates over whaling (and biodiversity more broadly), it provides the first overview of Dutch whaling over such a long period, incorporating various scientific perspectives and literature in various languages. The comparisons with English whaling make it of interest to an English-language audience as well, so it may well be worthwhile to commission an English translation of this book. As the authors have shown, Dutch and English whaling efforts were after all quite often at odds with each other. That makes this book not only of interest to Dutch readers, but also those interested in whaling more generally or those seeking additional perspectives on social, economic, cultural and ecological perspectives on maritime history.

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