

## Reviews

**Pieter C. Emmer and Jos J. L. Gommans:**

***The Dutch overseas empire 1600-1800***

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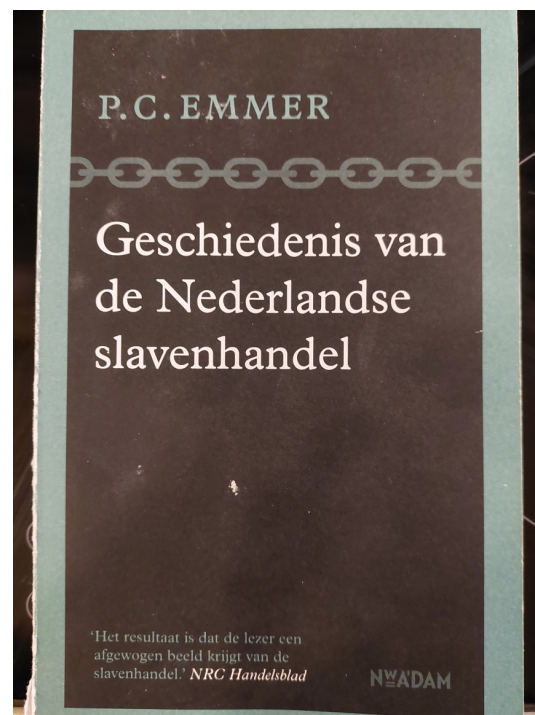
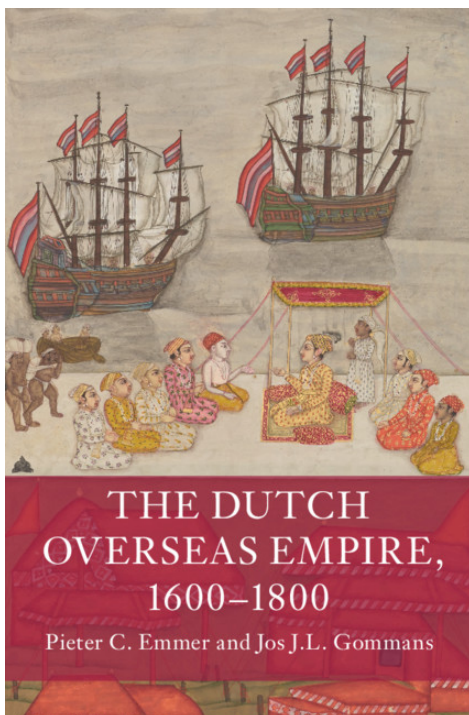
**Pieter C. Emmer:**

***Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse slavenhandel***

Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam, 2019. 336 p.

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*Reviewed by Paul M. M. Doolan*



Piet Emmer and Jos Gommans' *The Dutch overseas empire 1600-1800* is an impressive global account of Dutch trade, warfare, and cultural encounters in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. The two University of Leiden historians have produced a worthy extension of C. R. Boxer's seminal work of over half a century ago, *Dutch seaborne empire*. Their book is divided into three main sections, dealing in turn with the metropole, the Atlantic world and Asia. It provides a richly detailed and coherent image of how the Dutch impacted the non-European world, as well as how non-Europeans impacted Dutch identity.

The United Provinces of the Netherlands of the 17<sup>th</sup> century was, according to the authors, unique in Europe for being a republic (they ignore Switzerland) and for being "the largest trading empire in Asia" (59-60). The prosperous state was run, not by a hereditary aristocracy but by a merchant elite who possessed an almost "blind faith in what the market and trade could achieve" (2). They rightfully regard Hugo Grotius as the founder of international law and "the most important ideologue behind both the emergence of the Republic and its overseas empire" (11). The writers accept the metaphor of the beehive representing the structures and values of this busy republic, with Amsterdam emerging as the origin of a new consumer mass market as well as an artistic and cultural hub and the most important centre of world news: "Nowhere were as many words and images printed as in Amsterdam" (80).

However, the Dutch interest in the world did not stem exclusively from acquisitiveness but also flowed from a protestant attempt to interpret God's work through artistic and scientific observation. We are offered an intriguing account of Dutch botanists interpreting God's book of nature by means of assembling, classifying, and studying exotic plants in the magnificent new gardens of Leiden and Amsterdam. Not only were Dutch painters, like Rembrandt, admirers of Mughal art, but Dutch painters found employment at the Safavid court in Isfahan while Mughal painters proved to be receptive to Dutch artistic ideas. If the links with overseas empire are not always crystal clear, the historians are to be applauded for their attempt to make visible an entangled history in which Europeans and non-Europeans have equal agency. This is why, presumably, the cover of the book is not an image from a Dutch Old Master, as one might perhaps expect, but rather a Mughal miniature depicting a meeting between Dutch and Indians. The attempt to shift perspective from the provincial to the global is admirable.

One of the many pleasures of reading this book emanates from the global perspective that the authors bring to their subject. They demonstrate that the empire may have been Dutch, but it was an empire "in which numerous peoples from Europe, Asia, America and Africa actively participated" (5). We learn, for instance, that by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most sailors in the Dutch East India

Company (the VOC, short for '*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*'), were Chinese, Javanese and Bengali. The entanglement between Dutch and non-European becomes most obvious in the strongest section of the book, that dealing with Asia. Here we find an excellent overview of how the VOC was just one of many players vying for domination in Java. The authors admit that the success of the Dutch around Batavia was greatly due to Chinese support: "One could even use the term co-colonisation" (286). Dutch success against the Portuguese in Sri Lanka was possible because they worked with local allies. The VOC prospered in India thanks to a relationship between the Dutch and the Mughals that was "mutually beneficial" (311). The VOC emerged as a major carrier of goods across the Indian Ocean, but "Indian brokers were crucial to their success" (315). Similarly, Dutch merchants in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea depended on "the existing network of Indian merchants" (342). This does not suggest that the VOC's presence in Asia was exclusively benign. The authors correctly point out that on the Banda Islands the Dutch implemented an "extermination policy" (276). The islands were repopulated by Europeans and enslaved persons but remained "a kind of remote Dutch 'heart of darkness'" (282).

The authors maintain the same approach of highlighting non-European agency when it comes to their analysis of the Atlantic World. For instance, they point out that European power in Africa never extended beyond the walls of European coastal forts. Their business dealings, in the slave trade for instance, depended on maintaining the goodwill of local leaders. But what I found most uncomfortable is the authors' attempt to correct our view of New World Slavery.

In a "Note on terminology," Emmer and Gommans reject the use of the term "enslaved person" (x). The historians offer a justification for retaining the term "slave," but I suspect that they simply consider the newer term to be an example of politically correct culture. It is clear from their discussion of Dutch slavery that they reject any ideas that could be associated with political correctness. Emmer and Gommans argue that too often slave plantations have been depicted as concentration camps. On the contrary, they maintain, "slaves had the freedom to do as they themselves wanted" (160) in the late afternoons and evenings and weekends. They could travel to the market and go visit friends. They could fish, hunt and garden and could sell their produce. This explains why most enslaved in Dutch plantations remained "loyal to the slavery system" (160-166). Furthermore, we are told that slavery on the Dutch Antilles "was more humane than that in the plantation colonies" (181). *Even more humane*, I found myself thinking. I was taken aback by their description of Johan Maurits, governor-general of Dutch Brazil, "a liberal man who accepted Portuguese colonists" (194). This is the same Johan Maurits who played a pivotal role in initiating the Dutch trans-Atlantic slave trade. Yet, all the two historians can offer on this point is:

“After the conquest of a part of Brazil, the demand for slaves increased” (215). This intimates that the trade in human misery was entirely deterministic and free of human agency.

Turning to Piet Emmer’s account of the slave trade, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse slavenhandel*, I’m afraid my discomfort only grew. Of course, Emmer condemns the slave trade as one of the blackest pages of Dutch history, but he is too quick to relativize. He maintains that the enslaved Africans were not the only victims, because the European sailors on board the slave ships had an even higher death rate than those who were enslaved. He argues that the slave societies of the Americas were more peaceful than European society, with its bloody wars, ignoring the hundreds of wars against the native peoples of the Americas and the systemic violence of slavery itself. He describes the gruesome manner in which Dutch sailors put to death the leader of a slave revolt, Essjerrie Ettui, but then tells us that these were cruel times and needlessly gives a couple of examples of African cruelties. Emmer asserts that there is absolutely no reason to believe that enslaved females were prone to sexual abuse on the slave ships. His evidence for this is weak and speculative – he claims that the sailors would have been too weakened by tropical diseases. Apparently, they would have been able to sail a ship filled with enslaved Africans across the ocean but would not have had the energy to engage in sexual violence. Elsewhere, Emmer admits that of the 1,500 trans-Atlantic journeys completed by Dutch slave ships, about 300 experienced revolts. He informs us: ‘That is a fifth and that is a whole lot’ (“*Dat is een vijfde en dat is heel veel*”) (144). His analysis of why this was the case doesn’t stretch much further than that truism. He does mention that the Commercial Company of Middleburg issued an instruction that ship’s crews were not to sexually abuse enslaved females. Emmer is oblivious to the fact that such instructions would not have been needed if the sailors, according to his reasoning, had indeed been too weak to engage in rape.

Emmer continually squeezes the evidence until it fits his argument. Stating that Africans dominated the slave trade, he claims that the goods that European slavers paid in exchange for humans had to be of excellent quality, because African slave brokers were ‘extremely fussy’ (“*uiterst kieskeurig*”) (86). However, when making the argument that European guns had little negative impact on African society, he claims that they were mainly ‘old guns that often were already broken’ (“*oude geweren die vaak al kapot waren*”) (92). The fussiness of the Africans is now forgotten. We must believe that for a couple of centuries African slave merchants were happy to receive old, broken guns in exchange for human cargo. Never mind that Emmer admits that when examining the shipping inventories, ‘it is not possible to know if [the guns] worked well’ (“*niet op te maken of ze nog goed functioneerden*”) (87). Sometimes his contradictions appear in succeeding

sentences. He claims: 'No Dutch slavers themselves had ever attempted to turn an African into a slave' ("*Geen van de Nederlandse slavenhalers heeft ooit geprobeerd zelf Afrikanen tot slaaf te maken*") (109). But the very next sentence reads: 'Occasionally they would kidnap a free African' ("*Incidenteel kidnapten ze wel een vrije Afrikaan*") (109), and then tells of one kidnapped African who was put to work on a slave plantation before being rescued by means of payment (109). So how could he claim that this had never happened?

Emmer argues that the Atlantic slave trade, which forcibly transported 12 million Africans to the Americas had a negligible impact on Africa – 'Without the arrival of the European slave ships African society would not have been very different' ("*Zonder de komst van de Europese slavenscheppen had de Afrikaanse maatschappij er niet veel anders uitgezien*") (105). He then contradicts this, by claiming that if the trans-Atlantic slave trade had not happened, it may have been that Africa would have been unable to feed its population (106). This twisted logic implies that the slave trade actually saved people! In this counter-factual approach, he concludes that the only thing that can be said with certainty is that 'without the European slave trade the number of slaves in tropical Africa would have been even greater than it was and also the slave trade within Africa and North-Africa and the Middle-East would have been bigger. Statements about other effects are speculations' ("*zonder Europese slavenhandel het aantal slaven in tropisch Afrika nog wat groter zou zijn geweest dan al het geval was en dat ook de slavenhandel binnen Afrika en naar Noord-Afrika and het Midden-Oosten dan omvangrijker zou zijn geweest. Uitspraken over andere effecten zijn speculaties*") (114). Emmer is oblivious to the fact that this is speculation on his part. We simply do not know what would have happened if history had taken a different course. It is interesting to speculate, but he mistakes his opinion for certainty.

Emmer defends the thesis that the Dutch economy did not profit from slavery. On average, it was worth no more than 0.005 percent of the annual GDP, he maintains. Yet Brandon and Bosma (2019) demonstrated that in 1770 the slave trade contributed 5.2 percent to the Dutch GDP. Their names do not appear in Emmer's list of references. No doubt, they are shunned due to their political correctness.

Emmer uses the term *political correctness* when dealing with current historical ideas that seem to him unbalanced and emotional (Emmer, 2004, 2011). Perhaps Emmer's aversion to political correctness accounts for the glaring absences in the secondary literature in his book. He relies a great deal on works published between the 1970s and the mid-1990s. The first five chapters of his book contain 16 references to secondary literature, but none of these were written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Amidst the current culture wars that have weaponized

history, Emmer's volume has been widely touted in the Dutch press as an attempt to offer a balanced view. It is anything but.

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### About the reviewer

Paul Doolan is originally from the Republic of Ireland. He holds a master's degree in history from the University of Groningen (Netherlands) and a doctorate in Dutch colonial history from the University of Konstanz (Germany). He is the author of *Collective memory and the Dutch East Indies: Unremembering decolonization* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021). He has taught history in international schools in the Netherlands and Japan and currently teaches in Zurich, Switzerland.