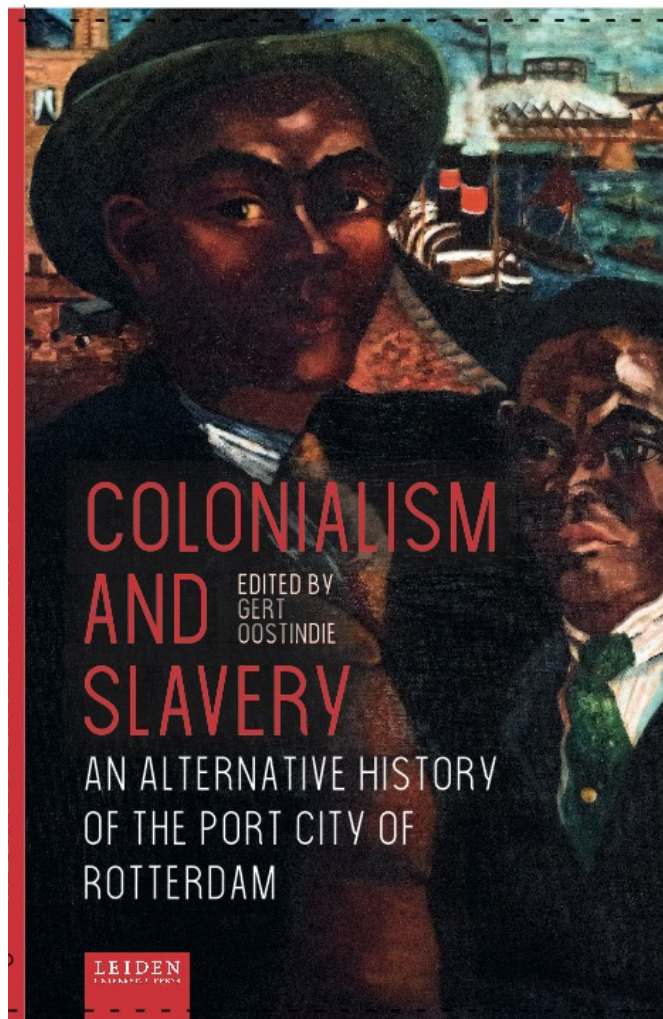


Review
Gert Oostindie (ed):
***Colonialism and slavery: An alternative history of the port
city of Rotterdam***

Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2021. 248 p.
ISBN 9789087283704

Reviewed by Jeroen Dewulf



Rotterdam's history has traditionally been narrated as that of a relatively small port city that thanks to the entrepreneurial acumen and hard labour of its residents grew into one of the world's largest harbours. This success story has been associated with a group of energetic business leaders and civic administrators, whose tribute to the city is honored in the names of streets, buildings, and companies. That many of those who were once heralded as exemplary citizens built their careers and fortunes at the expense of others in faraway lands is an uncomfortable message that this proud city is only reluctantly coming to terms with. This is even more so related to the bombing of Rotterdam at the onset of the Nazi invasion and the subsequent reconstruction that fostered a narrative of victimhood and resilience. To complement and/or correct this self-perception with a focus on oppression and guilt is not an easy process, hence the fierce reactions to the suggestion of Peggy Wijntuin—a city councilor of Afro-Surinamese descent—that it was time for Rotterdam to face its contribution to the Dutch colonial history and its involvement in the slave trade.

The latter was long perceived as a typical Amsterdam debate. It was, after all, in that city that both the East- and West-India Companies were founded and that the elite benefitted most from the Dutch overseas expansion. Moreover, Amsterdam is today home to the nation's largest African-descendent community and has traditionally been governed by a leftist-liberal majority that is keen on honoring the city's international reputation as a bulwark of progressiveness. Similar to what happened in relation to a correction in the traditional Dutch commemoration of World War II by including a focus on the suffering of the nation's Jewish population, Amsterdam proved again to have played a pioneering role by not only starting a debate on the painful legacy of the slave trade and colonialism but also by disseminating this debate at a national level, including in Rotterdam. Significantly, eleven years after Amsterdam had inaugurated its monument to commemorate the victims of the slave trade, Rotterdam unveiled its slavery commemoration monument in 2013. The latter was designed by Alex da Silva, a representative of the city's large immigrant community with roots in the Cape Verde islands, where the transatlantic slave trade from Africa had once been initiated.

One of the results of the discussion on slavery and colonialism in the Netherlands' second largest city is this collected volume under review. It has been edited by Gert Oostindie, director of the Leiden-based Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (*KITLV*, in Dutch, which stands for *Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde*) that was tasked with carrying out the investigation of the city's involvement in slave-trading practices as well its support to the Netherlands' colonial policy. The volume has nine chapters that investigate colonial connections in the city's history of shipping and

trade, industry and finance, missionary work, migration, and culture from the 17th century to the present day. The chapters are abridged and translated versions of separate studies that were originally published in Dutch, which occasionally led to the repetition of information that could have been avoided with stricter editing.

Considering its history as an industrial seaport, the book unsurprisingly revealed how Rotterdam played a key role in the transportation and commercialization of colonial products such as tobacco and sugar. It also highlighted the city's contribution to the flow of capital, insurance policies, and financial services that sustained colonial enterprises and slave-trading operations. All of this started at the onset of the 17th-century Dutch overseas expansion, with Rotterdam being assigned one of the six chambers of the East India Company and, together with Delft and Dordrecht, forming the Maas Chamber of the West India Company, and continuing for three centuries, until the final years of the Netherlands' colonial era. The book also revealed how several important figures in the development of Rotterdam into a major hub in global maritime trade made significant contributions to Dutch colonialist and slave-trading endeavours. Examples are Cornelis Matelief, who, as the 17th-century admiral of the East India Company fleet, was responsible for the choice of Jakarta as the capital of Dutch operations in Asia; former mayor Josua van Belle, who was director of the East India Company and, together with his brother Pieter and Balthasar Coymans, acquired the *asiento* ('monopoly contract') of the Spanish slave trade; Jean de May Sr., who, as a major investor in the West India Company, was responsible for the development of the Rotterdam sugar industry; Herman van Coopstad and Isaac Rochussen, who founded the city's largest slave trading company, Coopstand & Rochussen, that bartered goods of nearly three million guilders in West Africa, a quarter of which consisted of guns and gunpowder; Fernand Whaley Hudig, who was a major investor in Surinamese plantations; and Anthony van Hoboken, who led the foundations for the private shipping trade between the Netherlands and the East Indies. Yet the book also shows that, early on, Rotterdam was the home of people who voiced critical opinions about the oppression and enslavement of people in overseas possessions. Among them was Pieter Paulus, who, as the mayor of Rotterdam and chairman of the Assembly of the Batavian Republic, explicitly condemned slavery in 1797 and the remarkable coalition of female members of the early 19th-century Liberal and Protestant Réveil movement, who jointly formed the Ladies Anti-Slavery Committee.

While it does not come as a big surprise that much of the city's wealth originates from stakes in the East and West India Company or that Rotterdam helped lay the foundations for the worldwide maritime network that fueled the Dutch colonial expansion, the investigating team of historians also uncovered a wealth of new information that is little known, even to experts in the field. Before

this study, few people may have been aware that the first Dutch ship to circumnavigate the globe, the *Mauritius*, came from Rotterdam; that the Maas Chamber of the West India Company had its own trading post in the mouth of the Sierra Leone River before it was put in charge of governing the Caribbean island of Saint Eustatius; that most of the capital for the creation of the (Prussian) Brandenburg African Company came from Rotterdam; that the city once was a hotbed for Protestant missionary activities in Dutch colonies; or that the Rotterdam-based *Afrikaansche Handelsvereniging* ('African trading association') was the second-largest investor in Leopold II's public company for the colonization of Congo.

Perhaps the most intriguing finding uncovered in this book is the European character of the city's contribution to colonization activities. Significantly, it reveals that Rotterdam imported more coffee and sugar from French than from Dutch colonies. Other examples of this European colonialist entanglement are the Rotterdam branch of the 17th-century British Fellowship of Merchant Adventures, the development of the Dutch-British steamship services provided by the *Rotterdamsche Lloyd*, and the Dutch-Scottish investment company *Colin Campbell, Dent & Company* that was heavily involved in the development of the Surinamese plantation economy, most notably in the district of Nickerie and its capital Nieuw-Rotterdam.

The authors also show how colonial products, routes and people changed Rotterdam's economy, population, and city shape. Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen takes the readers on a fascinating walk through traces of Rotterdam's colonial past, some of which survived the 1940 bombing, while Esther Captain highlights the contributions of colonial and postcolonial migrants to the transformation of Rotterdam, and Alex van Stipriaan reflects on the survival of mental legacies, such as racism and stereotyping, as a result of three hundred years of colonization. The book concludes with a message of hope in a chapter dedicated to the city's annual Summer Carnival, a celebration of the city's super diverse character that the Afro-Caribbean scholar Francio Guadeloupe interprets as an event where ossified identity patterns and binary categorizations can be overcome and where the discovery of new commonalities and bonds between all Rotterdammers is encouraged.

This decision to end the book with an encouragement to look for what binds rather than divides the citizens of Rotterdam corresponds to the conciliatory spirit of Wijntuin's motion. Yet, Wijntuin also made clear that the latter cannot succeed without the acknowledgment of the city's involvement in and contribution to a history of oppression and exploitation. In this respect, this alternative history of the port city of Rotterdam will hopefully prove to be a

valuable document to present to future generations as, what Wijntuin calls, “an instrument for combatting ignorance” (11).

About the reviewer

Jeroen Dewulf is Queen Beatrix Professor in Dutch Studies at the University of California, Berkeley (US). His most recent book publications include *Afro-Atlantic Catholics: America's first Black Christians* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), *The Congo in Flemish literature: An anthology of Flemish prose on the Congo*, co-edited with Luc Renders, (Cornell University Press, 2020), *From the Kingdom of Kongo to Congo Square: Congo dances and the origins of the Mardi Gras Indians* (University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2017), and *The Pinkster King and the King of Kongo: The forgotten history of America's Dutch-owned slaves* (University Press of Mississippi, 2017).

