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De krimpende horizon van de Hollandse kooplieden; Hollands Welvaren in het Caribisch Zeegebied 1780-1830

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Summary

This study, entitled 'The Narrowing Horizon of Dutch Traders', deals mainly with the development of Dutch Welfare in the Caribbean Area in the period 1780-1830. On the analogy of Means's definition of 'The Spanish Main' the term Caribbean Area here comprises the West-Indian islands and the coastal regions of Venezuela and Central America.

In the Introduction some of the most important themes concerning the age of colonisation in America are indicated in brief. Thus attention is paid to the discussion in late-medieval Spain (1492-1552) about legitimate colonisation and to the critical attitude of 18c England and France towards the colonies in the American world.

In the 16th century the West-European nations – in particular the Low Countries – had come to the conviction that the superstitious and tyrannical Spanish Crown was prematurely exhausting the native population and was exploiting the riches of South America purely for its own benefit. The black legend, in which Las Casas appeared as chief witness for the prosecution, is an expression of this West-European sense of superiority with regard to Spain.

Moreover in this introduction mercantilism is described as a political and economical programme of great traders and government officials, testifying to their fighting spirit. The hazards of sailing, the defectiveness of international transfer of payment and the competition of neighbouring states made world-commerce a hard struggle. Thanks to their strategic talent European traders knew how to use the American precious metal as a medium of exchange for Asiatic spices, silk

and tea. In the 18th century the European sugar-plantations in West-Indian islands became very prosperous. For the mercantilists slave-trade, the sugar-plantations in the islands and the trading-posts in North America, which supplied wood and corn, formed the basis of ensured prosperity. In the 18th century England and France succeeded in pushing the Dutch Republic into the background as the confident mediator between nations.

In 1780 the Dutch Republic saw itself confronted with the decline of its prosperity, both in Europe and in the West Indies. The North American carriers won for themselves an important key-position as the 'Dutchmen of America'. The North American independence – brought about among other things by the English opposition against the natural coalition of French sugar and the commercial energy of the continental colonists – meant a serious interference with the monopolistic relationship between the motherland and 'His Majesty's most opulent sources' in the West Indies (Bryan Edwards). After 1780 the quick growth of the cotton industry led to the rise of the class of self-confident manufacturers. The political economists Adam Smith and Tucker dissociated themselves from the complex policy of the mercantilists. New consuming markets, open to English trade, would make possible a rational exchange of goods. Thus in 1820, with Latin America in mind, Alexander Baring could claim freedom of trade as the birthright of all Britons.

In the first part of this study a description is given of these changes with regard to the Caribbean Area. In chapter 1 the economic and humanitarian views are mentioned which in France and England caused an aversion to West-Indian prosperity based on slavery. Raynal, whose *'Histoire Philosophique des Deux Indes'* ran to 54 new impressions in the period 1770-1800, regarded free trade among nations respecting each other as the great precursor of civilization. After 1812 the North-Atlantic traders, supported by authors like James Mill, who in 1809 in the *Edinburgh Review* pointed out the brilliant prospects for trade to Latin America, turned away from West-Indian 'slave-prosperity'. Now that Latin America had been delivered from Spanish maladministration, it would witness a great and humanizing development.

In the second chapter the economic fortunes of Haïti, Jamaïca, Cuba, Puerto Rico and St. Thomas are discussed. After 1792 prosperity in

Haïti declined, at first with rapid strides but more gradually after 1805. Jamaica was better able to maintain its position, but the competition of Brazil and Cuba, which also gained in importance as consuming markets for English drapery, undermined the almighty position of the English possessions in the West. Jamaica began to be increasingly used as a commercial depot for the trade to Latin America. The planters fought a fierce struggle against the abolitionists – without, however, associating themselves inseparably with the West-Indian situation itself. Remarkable was the rapid rise of Cuba and Puerto Rico after 1815 as sugar-producing islands. Everywhere the economic system was changing, which partly explains the ambivalent commercial policy of the European mother countries.

In the third chapter the liberation of Gran Columbia and Central America is described. The economic positions of Great Britain, the United States, France and the German countries are compared with each other. English goods controlled the market, though there was still room for German linens and French fancy articles. The North American carrying-trade ranked first in the transit of goods. In Cuba the United States had built up a very important position, which enabled them to compete with English trade. Notable is the recovery of the Spanish trade to Cuba after 1825.

The Caribbean Area – and especially Cuba – once more became the disputed entrance to the riches of the new world. In the fourth chapter the political aspirations of the great powers and the independent states of Mexico and Gran Columbia are scrutinized. The Dutch chargé d'affaires in Washington, C.D.E.J. Bangeman Huygens, sent many North American newspapers over to the Netherlands, so that it was possible for me to analyse the political attitude of the United States. In many respects the United States pursued a kind of power-politics which was European in character. The contrasts between the Northern and Southern continents found expression in the debates about the Panama congress. From the outset (1826) the Pan-American unity wrestled with the conflict between the views of North and South concerning the 'manifest destiny' of the American world.

With the help of information from North-Atlantic traders, diplomats and travellers I have examined in the final chapter of Part one, how far the black legend determined the judgement of Latin America. The black legend, dealing both with natural riches and Spanish ignorance,

stimulated until 1825 the expectations concerning the riches of the new world, now independent. When after 1825 the card-house of high expectations collapsed, the black legend was used once more to explain the disappointing economic development of Latin America. In the eyes of North-Atlantic nations Latin America undervalued the civilizing influence of the Northern mission of culture. They kept regarding their own culture as the superior model by which the Latin American situation should be judged. On the other hand Latin American political leaders tried to make their peoples change over as quickly as possible to the North-Atlantic ideal of culture, which Alexander von Humboldt defined as 'culture facile, rapide et uniformément étendue'. Thus not only the North-Atlantic nations got entangled in their own legend. Latin America, seeking an identity of its own, would also be confronted with the 'Anglo-Saxon' cultural ideal of rapid wealth and political power. From the outset Latin America was ambivalent in its attitude to the style of living in the United States and Europe.

Thanks to this survey of the economic and political situation I could judge more accurately the real value of Dutch proposals and activities. After 1780 Dutch economists and political leaders discussed the decline of prosperity both in Europe and in the colonies. The middle classes, which were emancipating themselves and had robbed the regents of their political power, were critical of the policy of the West-Indian Company. The debates in the National Assembly (1795-1798) were to a certain extent characterized by the humanitarian anxiety about the lot of the native population, which was the central thing for English dissenters and French philosophers. All emphasis was laid on a more central administration of the colonies. The two social groups had their own idea of 'Dutch Wealth'. They both desired the Netherlands to keep their exceptional position in world traffic. The patriotic middle classes wanted to differentiate the economic structure of the country. They aimed at a centralized form of government, which would eliminate the privileged position of the regents. They wished to vitalize the staple-market by new economic and administrative means (Chapter 1).

Under King Willem I (1813-1841) this centralistic form of government was carried through in the West-Indian colonies. The economic recovery came about less rapidly. The King supported the patriotic

idea of Dutch welfare. Besides, he also wanted to vitalize The Netherlands and make them a staple-market. The Netherlands were to become what they had been in the 17th century. After 1824 the King tried to vitalize the Kingdom through the foundation of the *Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij* (The Netherlands Trading Company). He attempted to let the colonies in the West play a part in the trade to Latin America. Because of its free port (1827) Curaçao was to become the general trading-centre of the Caribbean Area. However, time had not stopped. In chapters, II, III and VI an examination is made as to how far in his West-Indian policy the King was guided by an accurate idea of the changes which had taken place in the West Indies since 1713.

After 1825 the *Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij* (N.H.M.) sent commercial agents to Cuba and Haïti and supercargoes to Central America and Venezuela. The Dutch government appointed consuls at Truxillo, Guatemala, Maracaïbo and La Guaira. They all developed laudable activities, but were insufficiently supported by Dutch traders. The N.H.M. and especially the Antwerp traders, too, managed to build up a relatively important position in Cuba. In Haïti the N.H.M. had little success, because after 1825 the island had lost its commercial importance. Central America offered few opportunities to European trade. In the coastal regions of Venezuela the Dutch traders achieved much less than the German and French ones, which was partly due to the failure of the Curaçao traders, who remained pro-Spanish until 1830 (IV).

The diplomatic activities of The Netherlands in Central America deserve special mention. In 1828 there were three consuls and two special ambassadors in the Federation. Among them the most important man was the Dutch observer for the Panama congress, General Jan Verveer. By order of Willem I he tried to intercede in the civil war between Guatemala and El Salvador. He had also been ordered to make a contract on behalf of his king for digging an interoceanic canal. The motherland refused to send the committee of hydraulic engineers, as long as the political situation was not stabilized. Verveer, on the other hand, wanted to break through the vicious circle of indecision by means of the work of this committee. His arguments obtained no hearing in The Netherlands. It may be said that Verveer's mission was symptomatic for the Dutch attitude towards the countries

in development. Turning to politically unimportant states, The Netherlands were aiming at optimum security. Anno 1829 they preferred caution to desire for action. It is obvious that in their reactions to the development in Latin America Travers, Haefkens and Verveer were influenced by 'the black legend', a theme discussed in Part 1. Moreover, their opinions clearly appeared to be coloured by their Dutch origin. However, a further analysis shows there are individual differences. As they more fully identified their personal security with the local situation, they were more powerless against the ever changing situation in Central America (v).

In order to get a better insight in the structure of the depression, which especially reigned in old Amsterdam, I have made a comparative study in chapter VII of the ideas and activities prevalent in the Rhineland, Antwerp and Amsterdam with regard to the Caribbean Area. After 1821 there was in the Rhineland a concerted action of a number of traders in order to find in Latin America a consuming market for their industrial products. After 1825 Antwerp surpassed Amsterdam as a market for colonial products. The Amsterdam traders, however, were still unable to shake off their feelings of impotence and subordination. In 1830 they welcomed the Belgian secession as a prelude to a new era. G.K. van Hogendorp prophesied that world-commerce would return to the funnel of the Dutch staple-market, now that free trade was to resume its old rights. In fact The Netherlands were entering upon their darkest period after 1830.

To Dutch traders Latin America became a remote and corrupt continent. The Dutch nation withdrew to its secure island to sublimate from there its own failure in pedant moralism. Though political and economic changes were of great influence on the decline of The Netherlands, yet the nation's failure to realize its own limits and possibilities was the principal cause of its slow economic recovery. This study was realized in the department of Economic History of the Institute for Economic Research at the University of Groningen. This publication is part of the research project broached by Professor Dr. H. Baudet. His study *Paradise on Earth*¹ was the inspiration for this much more concrete and more limited study of Dutch Welfare in the Caribbean Area. The material for this study was found in the

¹) Henri Baudet, *Paradise on Earth*, New Haven and London 1965.

Public Record Office (Algemeen Rijksarchief) in The Hague, the records of The Netherlands Trading Company (Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij), The Municipal Record Office (Gemeente-Archief) in Amsterdam, the Municipal Record Office (Stadsarchief) in Antwerp, the Staatsarchiv in Münster, and the Stadtarchiv in Wuppertal-Barmen. The relevant writings from the period 1780-1830 were consulted in the Economic-Historical Library in Amsterdam, the Stadtbibliothek in Wuppertal-Elberfeld, the Library of the Handel-Maatschappij and the Central Library (Centrale Boekerij) of the Royal Institute for the Tropics (Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen), both of them in Amsterdam, and in the Library of the former Colonial Office, which is at present housed in the University Library in Leyden.