



Maurits Ebben, eds., Simon Groenveld. *De Scheldedelta als verbinding en scheiding tussen Noord en Zuid, 1500-1800.* Maastricht: Shaker Publishing, 2007. 105 pp. EUR 36 (paper), ISBN 978-90-423-0326-3.

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The Forgotten Border

This slim book, *The Scheldt Delta as Connection and Division between North and South*, derives from the 2005 conference of the Vlaams-Nederlandse Vereniging voor Nieuwe Geschiedenis, held under the auspices of the Zeeuws archive at Middelburg. Consequently most of the essays concern Zeeland. This means that the collection can be considered as a useful addition to the provincial history of Zeeland as well as a clarification of the issues confronting a border region. This last perspective justifiably, given the title of the society, challenges the contributors. These studies are best considered as a good start to a broader understanding of this border region. Their importance lies in the acceptance that the Scheldt was never a strict border. On the contrary, like so many waterways, it remained a channel for interaction. The main concern of the Northern and Southern Netherlands was to control exchange; the idea being that it was better to tax it, rather than to stop it entirely. This is a real sea-change in perspective. Previously, this border was mainly studied from the perspective of the Scheldt Question, as, for example, in Stanley Bindoff's *The Scheldt Question to 1839* (1945). Zeeland is consistently characterized in all the essays as the entrepôt between Holland, Flanders and Brabant, "a junction of trade routes" (p. 5). How the easy co-operation of the early sixteenth century turned into the uneasy co-existence of the seventeenth century is the key question. Most of the contributions devote rather repetitive sections to setting out the chronology of this transition, which perhaps would have been better covered in the general summative introduction. In the context of

tackling the impact of the Revolt of the Netherlands, Victor Enthoven's essay is of particular interest as he tracks the consequences of the realization that Zeeland never entirely re-orientated its trade away from Antwerp towards Amsterdam. It could never afford to. In what Enthoven calls "a devilish dilemma" (p. 27), trade with the South continued, taxed and controlled to the benefit of the provincial and national governments. Indeed, blockades initiated on both sides of the border failed, due to the urgent need for cash, and the subsequent increase in smuggling.

The socio-economic aspects studied by these historians are a fascinating corrective to conventional interpretations. As Jan Parmentier demonstrates in his contribution, the port towns on the island of Walcheren had their own trade networks, separate from serving Amsterdam or Antwerp. Adriaan de Kraker, in a rather technical study of drainage projects in Staats-Vlaanderen, shows that drainage went hand in hand with internal colonization by Calvinist settlers with different dialects and customs. Finally, Van Lieburg analyzes the continuing existence of Protestants in the South, bolstered by pastors and missions sent from the North. The movement away from seeing a solid watershed in the Revolt of the Netherlands to concentrating on studies that cover both sides can only benefit Netherlandic history as a whole. The one thing lacking from this work is a conclusion setting out possible paths for future research. I will dare to suggest some in its absence.

For instance, an intriguing counterfoil to Fred van Lieburg's work would be a project on ties between Catholic communities in the North and the South. More ambitiously, shifting from Zeeland to study the divide of Brabant between North and South would be fascinating. If the anachronism of referring to Belgium before 1830 is permitted, the Belgian-Dutch border, compared to the Belgian-French border, is an undeservedly understudied phenomenon, especially when *transnationalism* appears to be the new buzzword. If Timothy Baycroft's *Culture, identity and nationalism: French Flanders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2004) on the Westhoek can reveal much about its integration into the French nation-state, future histories of Zeeland, Flanders and Brabant may reveal much of worth about identities and exchange across the Belgian-Dutch border.

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