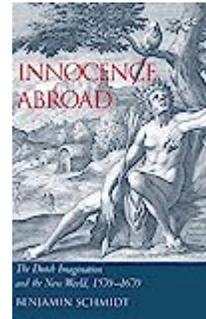




**Benjamin Schmidt.** *Innocence Abroad: The Dutch Imagination and the New World, 1570-1670.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xxix + 450 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-80408-0.



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## Dutch Perspectives on the New World

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This is a book about attitudes—perceptions of things not seen, and imagined solidarity with peoples not known. The story plays out in the context of the Dutch revolt against their Spanish overlords. Benjamin Schmidt deftly shows how the Dutch bought into the rhetoric of such individuals as Bartolom de Las Casas, who painted a picture of Spanish atrocities in the New World, and how the Dutch incorporated the idea of Spanish tyranny into their own language of revolt.

Like most Europeans, the Dutch were intrigued with the accounts coming out of the Americas that described a new world and new peoples. These early accounts came out of the European tradition of chivalry and honor. They described the exploration of the Americas in terms reminiscent of crusading zeal. Indeed, as Schmidt points out, the Dutch were smitten with the kinds of literature (travel accounts, cosmographies, and natural histories, as well as various kinds of graphical representations) that most commonly told the story of the early accounts of Spanish exploits. Lopez de Gmara, Cieza de Len, Agustin de Zarate, along with published editions of the letters of

explorers like Columbus, introduced the New World to a Dutch audience. The Dutch were swept up in these stories of discovery and conquest, and their imaginations soared as they read about the exploits of the Spaniards. Then came the Revolt.

As Spain became the enemy, the Dutch paid closer attention to the accounts describing Spanish cruelty coming out of the Americas. Above all others stood Las Casas's account of the destruction of the Indies, appearing in Dutch by 1578. This account painted Spanish action in the Americas in the dark shades of tyranny, and offered the rebel party in the Low Countries a case against Spanish rule. Schmidt shows that, for decades, accounts like that of Las Casas drove Dutch revolutionary rhetoric and formed the basis for a peculiarly Dutch negotiation of the Americas.

>From the earliest years of the Dutch Revolt, writers attempted to mold the stories coming out of Spanish America to fit the needs of the rebel party. According to the rebel rhetoric, the experience of the Dutch was not so different from that of the Indians, because both the Dutch and the Indians suffered under Spanish rule. As Schmidt

points out, however, the Dutch perception of the Indian experience in America was colored by the political situation in the Netherlands.

As the war with Spain waned in intensity around 1600, Dutch attitudes toward America changed, particularly as the eye of Dutch commerce focused on the riches of the New World. Rather than the sensational accounts of Las Casas and others, Schmidt shows how the Dutch became more and more influenced by travel accounts, and especially by Raleigh's descriptions of Guiana in which gold and treasure along with willing allies could be found among the Indians. At the same time, Dutch ships began to explore the Americas themselves, bringing a new Dutch perspective to these accounts. Rather than relying on Spanish or English interpretations, the Dutch could craft their own understanding of an America in which Dutch commerce, rather than Spanish tyranny, ruled.

What the Dutch encountered in America, however, was not at all what they expected. The Indians were not willing allies waiting to unite in common cause against the Spanish, while establishing a foothold in America was more difficult than the Dutch ever imagined. The

Dutch experiment in the New World failed to yield expected returns, and failed to avoid the kind of abuse of the Indians that was so much a part of Dutch criticisms of the Spanish. In the end, the Dutch themselves, so the pamphleteers wrote, were guilty of tyranny at least on a par with the Spanish.

In writing this book, Benjamin Schmidt took on the difficult task of tracing the way Dutch interpretations of an America they knew only through the accounts of others were formed and how these interpretations changed as they came to experience America themselves. There is no doubt in my mind that he has succeeded. Schmidt certainly left no stone unturned in his search for how the Dutch understood America during the roughly 100-year period he covers in this book—although those even more intimately familiar with the literature may find an omission that escaped my notice—by examining pamphlets, books, and graphical representations of America. Readers who enjoyed Pagden's *The Fall of Natural Man* will certainly want to read *Innocence Abroad*, but with this very readable book Schmidt goes where no other book has gone by looking at the peculiarly Dutch perspective on America.

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