Piet Emmer and Jos Gommans, *Rijk aan de rand van de wereld: De geschiedenis van Nederland overzee 1600-1800*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2012, 542 pp. ISBN 9789035133457. Price: EUR 29.95 (hardback).

Rijk aan de rand van de wereld (Empire at the edge of the world. The history of The Netherlands overseas, 1600-1800) is definitely worth reading. The narrative takes the reader along the far stretching ends of the early modern Dutch trading empire. Dealing with this vast and diverse empire, the authors seduce the reader to discover the rest of the book. The book is an interesting attempt to bring together the different aspects of the global history of the Dutch empire.

In doing so, the authors have engaged on a daring and impressive project. The intellectual challenge that Emmer and Gommans have taken on with their study is laudable. The authors want to study the 'silent invisible thread' ('stille onzichtbare streng') that connected the vast empire (p. 16). The authors are aware of the magnitude of the project. They boldly quote Rudyard Kipling in their first line: 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet'. The quote underlines the authors confessed doubt of whether it is possible to bring together the history of the Dutch expansion in the West and the East (p. 7). It is an understandable statement. At the same time, however, this opening statement points out the two main problems of the book.

The first problem concerns the lack of historiographical context and debate. The rhetoric of the 'prophet of British Imperialism in its expansionist phase'—as George Orwell characterized Kipling in a debate with T. S. Eliot in *Horizon*, February 1942—might serve well as an introduction to the problems of writing the history of the Dutch empire. It disguises, however, that there is much relevant literature that has done exactly this. We might, for example, think of *Dutch Seaborne Empire* by Charles Boxer, which is not mentioned. There are more authors that have brought West and East together, like Van Goor or Israel. Some are mentioned in the bibliography, but not always dealt with in the study.

The debate with these earlier histories of Dutch overseas empire and with the wider literature on historical globalization is absent. Some sections deal with important literature on specific subthemes, but no section really deals with the larger historiography of the Dutch empire or the current academic debates on imperialism, intercultural contact, and early modern

globalization. It remains unclear how the study of Emmer and Gommans positions itself in relation to other and earlier scholarship. This is all the more striking as they explicitly claim that the Dutch overseas expansion of the early modern era is a difficult phenomenon to interpret for modern historians (p. 19).

This brings us to the second problematic aspect of the book, not involving how they bring together the East and the West, which has been done convincingly and eloquently. Rather, the book curiously combines a rather brilliant and refreshing cultural analysis of empire by Gommans with an old-fashioned, weary denial of its economic impact by Emmer. This unhappy marriage between the cultural approach and the economic argumentation is the main shortcoming of the book.

In the introduction, the authors set out to investigate the 'economic and cultural interplay between the Republic and her overseas territories'. The authors 'start from the position that the Dutch identity was created in a constant interplay with the overseas world.' (p. 15) In the cultural parts of the book, the authors present inspiring cultural analysis of cross-cultural encounters and influences. They deal with early ethnography, linguistics, cartography, and early forms of orientalism. The interesting treatment of gardening—clearly the specialism of one of the authors—provides an admiring example of how global histories can be written from cultural perspectives.

Particularly in their economic analysis and argumentation on the West the authors fail to convince. The Dutch expansion is analysed on the 'mistakes' made in the trans-Atlantic trade. In a similar fashion, the authors claim that the impact of the Dutch empire on the world was marginal, as was the economic impact on the Republic. This criticized line of reasoning for the Atlantic trade is also projected to the Asian side of the Dutch empire. Basically, the authors argue that although the size of Dutch trading activities was small, it led to a high level of human suffering. This suffering of humans is expressed 'per kilo product'. This leads the authors to claim that the Dutch overseas expansion was economically irrational. From this perspective, they pose the question why the Republic continued its overseas activities. To explain this, the authors portray the Dutch Republic at the end of the eighteenth century as a poor and dependent nation, forced to continue unprofitable trading activities.

For the Atlantic economy at large, however, the academic consensus has shifted to the perspective that the Atlantic complex did have an important economic impact and was anything but irrational. The adherence to this old-fashioned and rather conservative argument seems part of the ongoing public-political mission of Emmer to marginalize the dark sides of Dutch imperial history. For the Asian side of the Dutch empire, the projection of the logic that the economic impact of the Dutch empire was marginal seems even more problematic. The VOC was the largest trader between Asia and Europe for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the same time, the intra-Asiatic trade of the VOC was mostly many times larger than the trade between Europe and Asia. Although the VOC was dwarfed by the total size of the large scale of Asian trade, it was certainly one of the biggest players in Asian trade.

The Dutch overseas expansion was profitable and had an impact. The European expansion was based on both rational economic calculations and large scale military and repressive violence. Both of these elementary aspects are unfortunately glossed over by the authors as a result of the attempt to show that economically the overseas expansion was not important. Finally, the value of this interesting and readable study is not in its arguable economic analysis, but in its insights to the cultural dimension of early modern globalization.

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