Roelof van Gelder, *Dichter in de jungle: John Gabriel Stedman (1744–1797)*. Amsterdam: Atlas Contact, 2018. 398 pp. (Cloth €34.99)

John Gabriel Stedman is known today mainly as the Scottish officer who fought for Suriname's planters in the 1770s to safeguard their property from the attacks by a new wave of maroons. Two books tell that story: Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, newly transcribed from the original 1790 manuscript, edited, and with an introduction and notes, by Richard and Sally Price (1988) and *Stedman's Surinam: Life in an Eighteenth-Century Slave Society* (1992), an abridged and modernized edition of the *Narrative* with an introduction by the Prices that analyzes other events of Stedman's life as well. In *Dichter in de jungle*, Roelof van Gelder discusses all phases of Stedman's life: his youth and the first years of service in the Scottish Brigade of the Dutch Republic (1744–72); his four years in Suriname (1773–77); the resumption of his military career in the Republic (1777–82); and his final years in England (1784–97). The book is the work of a scholar who has a profound knowledge of eighteenth-century European history and is cognizant of the relevant literature on Suriname. There are two areas where I tend to disagree with him.

First, Van Gelder does not question the retrospective image that a 41-year-old Stedman, living in England, painted of his youth as a soldier in the Dutch Republic. In these memoirs he portrays himself as a hot-tempered man, prone to violence and debauchery, leaving a trail of enemies in every garrison he had been part of—a “presentation of self” that was partly inspired by eighteenth-century novelists such as Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding. How true to life is this depiction of the artist as a young man? I would suggest that there is another Stedman who, for example, within a few weeks after his arrival in Suriname, succeeded in being received by the Governor, enjoyed friendly relations with several members of the Hof van Politie (Suriname's Political Council), and was taken on a weeklong trip by friends to several plantations. And three years later he declared himself “a particular favourite of Governor Nepveu.” Through a relative of his mother, Stedman was also in contact with Count Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel. This Brunswick, as the count was known to the English, was the dominant influence over the Stadholder, the royal counterpoint to the States General, the main power center of the republic. On several occasions Stedman profited from this connection; for example, he was received at court. Stedman himself, as Van Gelder points out, was convinced that he should remain “visible” to Brunswick and the Stadholder's court in general.

Secondly, Van Gelder dismisses, with a few sentences, the work of scholars such as Mary Louise Pratt and Marcus Wood who claim to have detected traces

of “humanitarian” or “emphatic” pornography in Stedman’s work. Not so fast I would say! Consider what happened on Stedman’s first day in Suriname: “When stepping on land the first object I met was a most miserable Young Woman in Chains ... carved by the lash of the Whip in a most shocking manner ... to drag a Chain of several Yards in length ... She was a beautiful Negroe Maid and while I was Meditating on the shocking Load of her Irons I myself nearly escaped being rivitted by Fascination.” And at other places in the *Narrative* Stedman shows himself eager not to miss an execution that was about to take place. “I heard a crowd pass my window. Curiosity made me start up, dress in a hurry, and follow them, when I discovered three Negroes in chains, surrounded by a guard, going to be executed in the savanna. Their undaunted look, however averse I may be to cruelties, fascinated my attention and determined me to see the result, which was viz., that the sentence being read ... one was condemned to have his head chopped off with an axe, while his accomplice was flogged below the gallows” (Price & Price 1992:285). Many years later, he watched public executions in London “when the opportunity presented itself” (p. 312).

Van Gelder has given us an excellent biography encompassing all phases of Stedman’s life, the result of much reading and some detective work in Devonshire, Stedman’s last home. The book is beautifully illustrated and has three helpful maps.

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