INTRODUCTION:
JAN DE VRIES AND HIS CONTRIBUTIONS

Joel Mokyr

One of the pleasures of writing a retrospective essay such as this is to go back many years, and dig up memories from one’s own past. Over three decades ago, I was asked by Business History Review to review de Vries’s Barges and Capitalism.¹ A book on canal barges (trekschuiten) in the hands of a lesser scholar could turn out to be rather dull, but I already knew Jan at that time, and expected a reasonably interesting book. All the same, I was not quite prepared to be so enthralled by the book as I was. Being young and impetuous, I praised the book quite lavishly: “the best work in economic history usually falls into one of two categories: it is either ‘pathbreaking’ (i.e., it says something about a subject that has hitherto not been touched by others) or ‘definitive’ (i.e., it says something about a subject that from now on will not be touched by others). In this book, de Vries has managed to be both pathbreaking and definitive—a rare achievement.”² As I look back at Barges, I see no reason to take back any of those youthful words. Now, moreover, I recognize more clearly one of the less obvious ingredients of the enormous respect and admiration that de Vries’s work has generated, namely his uncanny ability to take what may seem a “small” subject and turn it into something big and fascinating to a large audience by exploring its ramifications in a full way. This gift can be found in such eminent and diverse scholars as Natalie Zemon Davis, Carlo Ginzburg, Emmanuel Leroy-Ladurie, and Avner Greif. Barges has material in it to interest a wide array of scholars, from the analysis of a regulated monopoly to the estimation of a gravity model. The predictions of the estimated model are compared to the actual volume of passengers to measure the decline in demand for transport services, which proxied for a measure of economic activity in

the United Provinces. This led de Vries to penetrating questions about pre-industrial economic cycles and similar questions. Decades after its publication, it remains a gem of innovative and sparkling scholarship, far too little known in my view.

*Barges* was de Vries’s third book. It was preceded by his doctoral dissertation and, oddly enough for a scholar barely in his thirties, a textbook on European economic history in the “early modern” era. I have a special affinity for *Rural Economy*, largely because our dissertation advisor, Bill Parker, used to waive de Vries’s dissertation in front of me and advise me to do something “just like that.” In it, de Vries, as he himself put it, brought together the skills of the development economist and that of the Dutch historian. The Dutch Golden Age was, until then, primarily viewed as an urban phenomenon, in which shipping, commerce, manufacturing, and finance were the entire story. De Vries would have none of that. He pointed out the importance of progressive and productive agriculture in the Netherlands, and especially its integration with other sectors within an open economy. It is this integration of domestic production with foreign trade, he explained, that accounts for the success of the Dutch economy. This book, too, shows the ability to take a fairly small region (much of the original research focused on the northern provinces of Friesland and Groningen) and make them look significant and important by showing their role in the emergence of a world economic power. Having rescued the Dutch rural sector from an undeserved obscurity, de Vries could now turn to cities with a clear conscience.

De Vries once told me that while working on these three books he had made a habit of writing down in a little notebook the population size of every town he encountered in his extensive work in libraries and archives. He must have visited a lot of them, because in his next book that came out a mere seven years after *Barges*, he presented the scholarly world with a gift of a database of urban population statistics in a pre-statistical age that has never been matched. Its importance is especially striking because in the absence of better data on income, scholars have often used the proportion living in cities as a

---
