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The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade 1600–1815

JOHANNES MENNE POSTMA

Mankato State University



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To Laurel Menne Postma

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Preface

Since 1958, when as a student I crossed the Atlantic from Rotterdam to New York on a passenger ship, I have been intrigued by the massive movement of people across that ocean. As a graduate student during the 1960s I developed an interest in African history. Coupled with my Dutch background and my decision to stay in America, it is no surprise that all of this converged into a strong interest in transatlantic migrations. The Dutch involvement in the Atlantic slave trade had received only scant attention up to then, and I decided to fill this gap by writing a doctoral dissertation on the Dutch participation in that forced migration from Africa. After completing a dissertation for Michigan State University in 1970, and publishing a number of articles in scholarly journals, this book is the culmination of many years of research that should place the Dutch role in the Atlantic slave trade in proper perspective.

The Dutch involvement in the Atlantic slave trade is a subject of enormous complexity. Not only does it cover about two centuries of history, but it has wide-ranging geographical dimensions, including Europe, Africa, North America, South America, and the Caribbean. In addition, the subject involves complicated economic, demographic, medical, and statistical dimensions.

Organizing this rather complex subject into a readable book has not been an easy task, and it has necessitated a number of revisions. Chronological, geographic, and thematic developments have all been employed to provide a structure for this book.

The first chapter sets the stage of the beginnings of the Atlantic slave trade and the initial Dutch participation in it. It deals with the financial and institutional prerequisites for the traffic, such as the Dutch West India Company (WIC). The establishment of a Dutch colony in northern Brazil, "New Holland," is discussed as the catalyst for the Dutch entry into the slave trade. Chapter 2 continues the emphasis on the New World markets for slaves, because without such a demand for cheap labor there would not have been forced migration from Africa. Here, the significance of the so-

called *asiento* trade with the Spanish colonies and the role of Curaçao as a slave trade depot are examined.

In the next three chapters the focus shifts to Africa. Chapter 3 explores the Dutch presence on the West African coast; the Afro-European commercial and political relations are examined in the following chapter. Chapter 5 makes an assessment of the aggregate Dutch slave exports from Africa and also focuses on the question of African origins of the slaves.

The organization and mechanics of the Atlantic slave trade are discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. This involves the institutions and tools of the trade, such as commercial companies and ships, as well as the various techniques employed in acquiring and disposing of slaves. The nature of the triangularity of the slave trade is examined focusing on two specific slave ships in action.

Chapters 8 and 9 return to the chronological account, with an emphasis on the Western slave markets. But whereas the first two chapters deal essentially with the seventeenth century, these chapters deal with the eighteenth century. First, the establishment and supply of the Dutch plantation colonies on the Guiana coast are explored, especially the sizable settlement of Surinam. The Antillean island of St. Eustatius and its role in the slave trade are also discussed. The early part of the eighteenth century, with continued WIC monopoly over the Dutch slave trade, is discussed in Chapter 8. After the termination of that monopoly in 1738, the so-called free-trade slaving period is examined in Chapter 9.

Chapters 10 and 11 deal with special themes in the slave trade. In the first, the attention is on the slaves themselves, how they were housed, fed, and treated, and how they reacted to their fate. Much emphasis is placed on death and dying on the so-called middle passage. Chapter 11 explores the financial and economic intricacies of the slave trade and the question of profitability. The final chapter discusses the declining decades of the Dutch slave trade, 1780 to 1803. It also deals with the moral implications, the question of the abolition of the traffic, and the absence of an abolitionist movement in the Dutch Republic.

In a subject such as the Atlantic slave trade, the forced migration of approximately ten million human beings, one cannot escape the issue of morality. This phenomenon will always remain one of the dark pages in human history. The focus of this study is not on the moral dimensions of the slave traffic, but it is meant to clarify what in fact happened and when and why the traffic existed. I have tried to be as objective as possible and not to let moral considerations of human suffering and injustice be central, so that the subject could be therefore tolerable for lengthy examination. In a study such as this, one also develops a certain distancing to human suffering; in time slaves become mere statistics and commercial items, as they

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must have been to the slave traders. However, periodically one has to confront the enormous injustice and suffering that the slave trade brought about.

I clearly remember one day in the archives in The Hague, when I discovered a batch of letters and reports that brought to light the tragic sinking of the slave ship, *Leusden*, on January 1, 1738. Nearly 700 slaves drowned in this incident off the Surinam coast; of the 716 slaves who had left the African coast on November 19, 1737, only 14 survived (see Chapter 10). As I read the various reports written by surviving crew members, I realized that I had rediscovered one of the great maritime tragedies which had been completely erased from human memory, primarily because the victims were mere slaves. I felt a mixture of emotions: stunned by the tragedy and human suffering, but at the same time excited professionally about the rediscovery of a significant historic event. This is one example of the mixture of emotions that can be experienced in the research on the squalid aspects of human history.

Many people have assisted in making this book a reality. Scholars from all coasts of the Atlantic have offered advice and encouragement as this project unfolded through the years. It would be impossible to remember or mention all of them, but I wish to mention at least a few. Professors J. R. Bruyn and Robert Ross, of Leiden University, and Dr. G. W. van der Meiden, archivist at the Rijksarchief in The Hague, have read the manuscript and offered suggestions for content improvements. Similarly, the readers of Cambridge University Press, Dr. P. C. Emmer of Leiden University, and Dr. David Eltis of Algonquin College of Ontario, Canada, have offered valuable advice. All of the above are historians by training, and their suggestions have been extremely valuable in getting the manuscript into its present form, although I accept ultimate responsibility for the contents of the book. Professor G. W. Bruyn of the Leiden Medical Faculty read and critiqued Chapter 10, which deals with tropical and maritime diseases. Dr. C. J. T. Talar and Dr. Fred O. Doty have read and critiqued the manuscript primarily for style and grammar, and I greatly appreciate their contributions.

There are many quotations in this book that are translated from the Dutch language. All of the translations from archival and printed materials are mine, unless they are quoted from a published work already translated into English. Professor J. R. Bruyn also helped with the translations of some of the appendices.

Several people have given me assistance and advice in learning to master computer skills and applying them to this study. Three friends and colleagues at Mankato State University need to be singled out for their particular assistance and encouragement in this area. Professor Richard Weisgerber

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helped me to understand the basic principles of computer technology and he introduced me to various programs. Dr. Ronald Yezzi and Dr. Dennis Braun gave valuable assistance with the tables and graphics.

I also want to thank Mr. Frank Smith, editor at Cambridge University Press, for guiding the manuscript through the publication process. Special thanks are due to Mr. Herbert A. Gilbert for the final editing of the manuscript.

While on sabbatical leave during the 1986–7 academic year, I taught a graduate seminar at Leiden University on the subject of the Dutch and the Atlantic Slave Trade. My research and writing on this project were nearly completed by that time, but the research projects of the students and the discussions in the seminar contributed significantly to the final manuscript. Several students have been credited for their specific contributions in the footnotes, but to give adequate recognition to that valuable and enjoyable experience, I list all the students of the Leiden Seminar: M. van Bellen, J. de Boer, R. Chander, V. Enthoven, M. Eygenraam, J. Gewalt, H. den Heyer, A. Neeser, E. Neuman, H. Nooitgedagt, W. Reiger, R. Sewnarain-Soerdjbalie, P. Veder, and J. Verhoog.

Without special financial assistance, this lengthy research project could not have been completed. The following institutions and agencies have contributed over the years to make the many research trips to Europe and Africa possible: The National Defense Education Assistance (1967–8), African Studies Center at Michigan State University (1968), The American Council of Learned Societies (1972–3), Zuiver Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek in the Netherlands (1986–7), and several small research grants from Mankato State University.

Last but not least, major credit is due to my wife, Laurel Menne Postma, for her patience and steady encouragement in this academic project. Not only did she read the entire manuscript at least twice and make several suggestions for improvements, but she is also responsible for completing all the maps and diagrams, and she designed the jacket of the book. I dedicate this book to her.