CHAPTER 1

The Dutch Discovery of America

To begin at *a* beginning – a speculative and retrospective, yet singular and imaginative beginning all the same, articulated in both word and powerful image: "There is . . . a landscape, essentially a West Indies landscape, with many naked people, a jagged cliff, and a strange construction of houses and huts." So wrote Karel van Mander, the doyen of sixteenth-century Netherlandish art and a leading man of letters in the Republic, upon his encounter with the impressively grand *West Indies Landscape,* the very first painting of America by a European artist. Those who wished to judge for themselves could do so by visiting the town of Haarlem, where the panel decorated the residence of the *schout* (sheriff), Nicolaes Suyker, a grandson of the artist, Jan Mostaert. The latter would have encountered the New World sometime in the early years of the century and well before the Dutch ever ventured west: perhaps during his service in Mechelen as court painter for the regent Margaretha, perhaps during his European travels as a member of the Habsburg entourage, or perhaps even in his native Haarlem, where Mostaert began and ended his illustrious career.[1]

And what did America look like from the vantage point of Haarlem in the opening decades of the sixteenth century? Jan Mostaert's remarkable *West Indies Landscape* (fig. 1) offers a vista in certain ways provocative, though in other ways not: America appears less obviously exotic or familiar than it does familiarly exotic. A vast panoramic landscape, the painting shares certain compositional conventions with the work of the Northern Mannerists of the 1520s and 1530s, yet it also exhibits elements that distinguish it from virtually all other landscapes of its day and indicate an extraordinary painterly consideration of its exceptional subject. It illustrates, as van Mander sagely observed, "essentially" a West Indies landscape. Occupying the immediate foreground of the panel is a scene of bucolic tranquillity in which familiar European farm animals – cows, sheep, hare – graze peacefully on gently rolling

Figure 1. Jan Mostaert, *West Indies Landscape*, ca. 1520–30 (86 × 152 cm). Haarlem, Frans Halsmuseum.

hills of russet-colored pasture. On either side of the fields, land gives way to water: to a calm blue sea on the right and a pale, meandering river on the left that snakes back into a sylvan passage of green and, further, to a slate alpine range that recedes, like the sea, into the distant horizon. A bright, if brooding, sky with billowing clouds caps this view of the natural world: sky, sea, stream, forest, meadow, and mountain as seen by a Northern European mind's eye. Despite the prevailing sense of pastoral calm that fills the panel's peripheries, however, a disturbing scene of violent confrontation lies at the heart of the painting and sets a significantly different agenda. A host of steel-clad soldiers marches into the center of the composition (from the right), met by an advancing parade of naked, and apparently agitated, men. This second group is armed with simple farm tools and crude weapons of wood and stone – a sharp contrast to the foreboding array of cannons, muskets, and pikes borne by the phalanx of soldiers. A primitive hut in the center borders on an imposing and curious configuration of cliff-dwellings – "strange" is the adjective used by van Mander – beneath which rages a battle between the naked and armored troops. Caught in the crossfire, as it were, and at the narrative focus of the panel is an isolated pair of women (also naked), one clutching an infant and child, the other gesticulating desperately as she flees the scene of imminent bloodshed (fig. 1a).

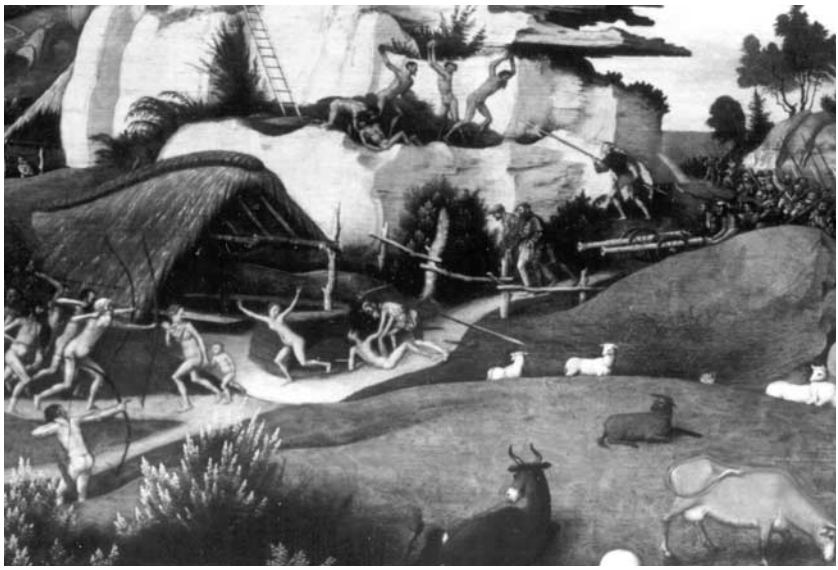

Figure 1a. Detail of figure 1.

Figure 1b. Detail of figure 1.

Closer inspection reveals further curiosities. A monkey sits on a withered stump in the foreground, oblivious to the turmoil behind it; and a parrot, the bird most widely associated with the New World, perches on a similarly wizened trunk. Together, they lend a distinctly foreign flavor to the otherwise familiar fauna. Among the corpus of "natives," two bearded men wear distinctive, fur-lined caps, headware commonly associated with Asian costume; while another figure (just behind them and in this case beardless) sports a laurel wreath of suggestively classical dimensions (fig. 1b). Two other men, running among the scattered village "huts," blow on a pair of medieval-looking horns, as they call their countrymen to arms. Behind them and trailing off in the center looms a prominent geological arch of a sort that, like the "jagged cliff," would seem utterly out of place in a Northern European landscape.

Place, however, may be beside the point. Or rather, the setting of America may be necessarily indeterminate at this early, if vivid, moment of geographic imagining, and Mostaert's construction well illustrates how disparate themes and settings comprised an as yet inchoate New World. The landscape itself, stripped of the central narrative, conveys a keen appreciation for the natural world in all its configurations and topographical variety. The prevailing mood is one of peaceful pastoralism, which, with its warm earthen tones and lyrical arcadian motifs, might have fit a Dutch burgher's notion of rural repose. The painting resembles, in this regard, the popular *Weltlandschaften* produced by the Flemish Mannerists, such as Joachim Patinir and his followers.[2] In quite another way, though, the central scene of soldiers and "naked people" would seem to allude to the meeting of Spaniards and native Americans sometime during the early course of the *Conquista.* The simplicity of the village, the rudimentary straw huts, the absence of clothing, and the very fabric of the natives' resistance – sticks and stones to chase away cannon-fortified pikesmen – recall a social state of innocence as conceived by the Renaissance, a prelapsarian golden age disturbed by men of iron. (And the lithe athleticism of the natives suggests the artist's gesture toward humanist taste for classicism.) A "world-landscape" perhaps, Mostaert's painting also conveys a worldly message of certain relevance to the Habsburg Netherlands. Finally, the curious wildlife, the fantastic rock formations, and the dash of extra-European costume lend the composition an air of exoticism. Yet, since these references seem oddly incongruous – an Asian hat, an American bird, and a more than likely African simian – the effect appears less convincing than gloriously chaotic. So, too, with the ancient wreath, the medieval horns, and the quintessentially early modern assortment of farm animals, the combination of which might seem otherwise incoherent.[3]

"All coherence gone," wrote John Donne many years later of his own encounter with America, and, in reading an earlier rendition of the same, coherence may not prove the most helpful criterion. Throughout the sixteenth and well into the seventeenth century, the New World remained just that: "new." Its very novelty, as well as its remoteness, sanctioned a certain elasticity, or even experimentation, in its representation. Rather than any single, broadly accepted picture of the New World, a number of "Americas" would compete for viewers' attention over the duration of its early reception. European authors and artists continually recast America to reflect not only the latest reports and discoveries, but also the latest tastes and trends. America could conform to literary styles or iconographic conventions; it could suit aesthetic preferences or patrons' demands; it could reflect political programs or historical traditions. America, naturally, could mean many things to many people and different things at different moments. New worlds assimilated in Renaissance Europe rarely came in tidy packages.

The Dutch, like the rest of Europe, fashioned America out of disparate fabrics and followed changing styles. In different stages and according to evolving sensibilities, the idea of America entered the literary, artistic, scholarly, and – only later – political discourse of the Netherlands, and all this well before any serious Dutch involvement *in* the New World. The Mostaert work brings together in a single panel many of the themes and conceptions of the New World prevalent in the Netherlands by the mid-sixteenth century: the marvel at the wonders of the natural world, the fascination with the exoticism of the unknown world, the predilection for the arcadianism of the ancient world, the concern with the expansionism of the Spanish world. It presents neither a fully coherent, nor an ultimately conclusive, view of "America," but something fundamentally more complex. The *West Indies Landscape* offers a pastiche of Netherlandish notions of the New World as they developed over the course of the sixteenth century, a suggestive pattern of assimilation rather than a singular paradigm of perception. It records, most particularly, a painter's process of discovery. And it testifies, more generally, to the powerful possibilities of America as they appeared in that pregnant period between the Spanish voyages of exploration and the ultimate discovery by the Dutch of the relevance those events could have to the Netherlands.

I

The New World came to the Netherlands long before the Netherlands ever went to the New World. In a dazzling variety of texts – travel ac-

counts and historical narratives, learned cosmographies and political pamphlets, decorative maps and epic poetry, popular prints and painted landscapes – the Dutch read about, gazed upon, or otherwise contemplated the "wondrous" novelty of the *mundus novus.* In the course of doing so, they embarked upon a process of discovery that permitted them, much like Jan Mostaert, to sift through and sort out the various versions of America. Early Americana circulated widely in the Low Countries, a region in many ways superbly situated to receive reports from abroad; and the Dutch process of reception turned out to be a rich one. It was extensive as well, stretching from the late fifteenth through the later sixteenth century, when a steady stream of texts conveyed the New World to the Netherlands. During this critical time and from their privileged place, the Dutch could freely investigate and interrogate the meaning of America, though the purpose of these textual explorations would only slowly become apparent.

News of the New World arrived in the Netherlands notably quickly and in abundance. Like the rest of Europe, the Low Countries first learned of America from the carefully crafted public letters and reports issued in the wake of the discoveries, some translated into Dutch, others into French, and many in Latin, the lingua franca of scholarly circles in the North. From the start, the New World found a broad and exceptionally receptive audience among readers of the Netherlands, who avidly consumed the earliest Americana. "These islands [recently discovered] are wondrous to describe," wrote a leading Dutch humanist in the opening years of the sixteenth century, "but there are already books written on them," and, in his opinion, the plethora of print rendered further comment unnecessary.[4] Those books would have included editions of Columbus and Vespucci, which appeared in Antwerp within months of their original publication. Other works of the first generation of conquistadors and chroniclers soon followed. The letters of Hernán Cortés to Charles V, López de Gómara's chronicle of Mexico, and Cieza de León's description of Peru all came off the presses of the Low Countries virtually simultaneously with their publication in Spain. The narratives of Agustín de Zárate (Peru) and Hans Staden (Brazil) went through more editions in Dutch than any other language, including those of their original composition.[5] All these and more filled the libraries of the Netherlands in impressive proportions. Well over half of the oldest private libraries in the (in this case Northern) Netherlands included books on America within their collections. Americana, moreover, featured twice as frequently in these collections as did works on Asia – a striking contrast to the oft-cited case of France, where four times as many books focused on Asia than on America in the period 1480–1609. In the textual mix of the Netherlands, the New World did make a splash.[6]

That printed accounts of foreign discoveries fell on fertile ground in the Netherlands should come as no surprise. Antwerp, the printing center of Northern Europe and home to a highly literate community of cosmopolitan merchants and Habsburg civil servants, was ideally suited to convey the latest tidings from America. More generally, the social, economic, and cultural development of the Netherlands on the eve of the Discoveries positioned it perfectly to assimilate the latest news from abroad. America played to the cities; and, in the late fifteenth century, the northwest corner of Europe, together with the northern strip of Italy, comprised the most urban and populous region in Christendom. In some provinces of the Low Countries (Holland is a prime example), nearly half of the population lived in cities, and those who remained in the densely packed countryside found themselves at most a short distance from an urban center. Sizable cities (over ten thousand inhabitants) proliferated: more than twenty at the turn of the sixteenth century, thirty by the turn of the seventeenth.[7]

Such outstanding levels of urbanization translated into equally impressive levels of urbanity. The burghers of the Low Countries made their money through trade, and their commerce in merchandise invariably encouraged a lively commerce in ideas and information – including news of the western "enterprise." By the early sixteenth century, the Netherlands lay at the economic center of an international Habsburg empire. The traffic of imperial goods brought the Dutch into regular contact with navigators from the Iberian peninsula, their financial backers from the emperor's German-speaking lands, and now the East and West Indies. Merchants from across Europe, moreover, worked and lived in the Netherlands and particularly in Antwerp, which developed during this period into a thriving and cosmopolitan metropolis. The city's population more than doubled in the decades spanning Columbus's voyages and Pizarro's conquests.[8] By the middle of the sixteenth century, some one thousand foreign merchants resided in Antwerp, the majority of whom came from Spain, Portugal, and Italy – those countries, in other words, most intimately involved in early exploration. Antwerp emerged in these years "not only [as] the first and principal commercial city of all Europe," as the city fathers proudly put it, "but also the source, origin and storehouse of all goods, riches and merchandise, and a refuge and nurse of all arts, sciences, nations and virtues": civic boosterism, to be sure, though not entirely off the mark. The growing population, the international community of merchants, and – not least – the emporium of exotic products all contributed to the city's considerable savvy concerning matters abroad. "Antwerp was like a world," wrote one contemporary, dazzled by the city's multinationalism; "one could lie there concealed without ever going outside it."[9]

One could lie there and read of other worlds, too, since the Netherlands during this period also enjoyed prominence as a center of the book trade, a purveyor of products about, no less than from, distant lands. Movable type came relatively early to the Low Countries and spread rapidly to nearly every province. Dutch printed books date from 1473, and by 1500 over twenty presses had been in operation. During the postincunabula period, it is Antwerp, once again, that stands out. Between 1500 and 1540 – the crucial decades for early Americana – at least sixty-six printers (about half the Netherlands' total) plied their trade there and published well over two thousand titles – in Dutch no less than Latin, French, Spanish, and English. And books found readers in similarly impressive proportions. Literacy rates in sixteenth-century Antwerp ran as high as fifty percent (among men), which matches the level for Amsterdam in the early seventeenth century.[10] "They all have some smackering of their Grammer [sic], and every one, yea every husbandman can write and read," wrote the Florentine historian, Lodovico Guicciardini, of antebellum Antwerp. He and others marveled further at the "infinite number" among the Dutch who possessed fluency in French, and the many more who were capable in Spanish, Italian, English, and German. Publishers of Americana prospered easily in this culture of polyglot readers and international traders.[11]

And what did the Dutch, "husbandmen" or otherwise, read? Print culture – or what has more aptly been termed "typographic culture" in the wide-ranging context of Dutch literary, graphic, and cartographic printing – thrived in the Netherlands, and this too contributed to the warm reception of early accounts of the Indies.[12] Devotional literature, in the Low Countries as elsewhere in Europe, topped most publishers' lists – the difference being that more readers in the Netherlands, where the *Devotio Moderna* movement and its emphasis on reading and Scripture had taken strong hold, may have been able to read it. Humanist literature also did well, building on the solid foundations of Burgundian, and later Habsburg, literary patronage and the Dutch tradition of classical education at the grammar school level. The influence of Erasmus encouraged the development of belle lettres from the early sixteenth century, as did the foundation of the Collegium Trilingue (1517) in Leuven, where Dirk Martens ran one of the most admired presses of Northern Europe. (Martens would publish among the first editions of Columbus's *Epistola* in 1493.) Cornelius Aurelius, a humanist-minded monk of Gouda, collaborated on one of the earliest printed maps to feature America (1514). And Aurelius's colleague, Erasmus, also acknowledged the Columbian voyages, which he cited typically as a "foolish passion," the outcomes of which could only encourage the legions of Folly.[13]

Along with devotional and humanistic literature, the Dutch also consumed a considerable quantity of vernacular texts that often fall under the rubric of "urban" or "bourgeois" (*burgerlijk*) literature. This literature – sometimes homegrown, though just as commonly annexed from other, nonbourgeois literatures – flourished in the civic culture peculiar to the late medieval Netherlands, where it appealed to the broad and urbane middle-classes, especially of citified Flanders, Brabant, and Holland.[14] Marco Polo's description of the Great Khan's domains fits into this category, as do other medieval travel narratives, whose success adumbrates the enthusiastic reception later accorded to Renaissance narratives of new worlds. Polo's account of the East, with its valuable trade information and useful travel instructions, enjoyed particular popularity among Dutch readers, first in manuscript form and later in printed editions. It was in fact an Antwerp edition from circa 1485 that Polo's Genoese successor, Christopher Columbus, read and carefully annotated in preparation for his own historic voyage; and Polo's account continued to be read and admired in the Netherlands well into the sixteenth century. So too did a full menu of late medieval travel literature: a mid-fourteenth-century anthology of geographic writings, the *Livre des merveilles*, which conveyed readers alluringly to the East; the late fourteenth-century *Itinerarius* of Jan Voet, describing an Utrecht priest's journey to the Holy Land and the *curiositas* that lay beyond; the *Voyage* of Master Joos van Ghistele, which follows a Ghent patrician, on the very eve of the Columbian expedition, to the Levant and North Africa; and that most popular of vernacular texts – for which the *Livre des merveilles* may have served as a source and on which the *Itinerarius* and *Voyage* almost certainly were modeled – the *Travels* of John Mandeville.[15]

The spectacular success in the Netherlands of "Jan van Mandevil" suggests both the breadth of "bourgeois" literature and the limited usefulness of that category. The utterly sensational narratives of that dubious Christian knight (and suspect overseas traveler) would hardly seem the stuff of sober merchants preoccupied with commerce. The numerous surviving manuscripts of the *Travels* attest, rather, to readers' delight in the magnificent realms, fabulous landscapes, and (not least) vivid naturalism of the late medieval imagination. The still more numerous *printed* editions – sixteen by the close of the seventeenth century – indicate that, even during the age of expansion, Dutch interest in the marvelous exotica "discovered" by Mandeville scarcely flagged.[16] They highlight a predilection in the Netherlands for the transporting *ridder-roman* – roughly "romance of chivalry" (Mandeville was a knight, after all), a notably inclusive genre that counts among the most popular of the first century of Dutch printing – and the taste of traders for pleasurable,

no less than practical, prose. They hint as well, though, at an inherently moralizing component of *burgerlijk* literature in general and geographic prose in particular, since, much though Mandeville would convey his readers to the most distant of wonders, he asked that they bear with his sermonizing all along the way. As would presbyter Jan and master Joos in the coming years, Sir John designed his narrative to be both delightful and didactic. He offered Dutch readers a pleasant journey with a pointed message – *lering en vermaak* in the vernacular – using the boisterous genre of travel literature to get at the discomfiting failings of Christendom: *ridendo dicere verum* (to tell the truth with a smile) in more Erasmian phrasing. That Mandeville and his fellow wayfarers became so conspicuous in the Netherlands by the turn of the sixteenth century suggests, finally, that a strong textual basis had been set for later Dutch encounters with distant worlds.[17]

Increasingly, too, sources other than Mandeville and Polo offered the pleasure of the exotic between the bounds of a book. In the Low Countries as elsewhere, the discovery of the New World coincided with the recovery of the ancient world – and the consequent expansion of Europe's intellectual world in newly published forms. From the west came the explorers' reports of exotic *naturalia* and unknown lands, while from the south – Italy – came humanists' editions of the ethnographic and geographic wisdom of antiquity. From the Netherlands itself came new editions of classical texts and fresh experimentation with rediscovered genres, such as the bucolic eclogue, a pastoral form whose development had been fostered, presumably, by the relentlessly crowded cities of the Low Countries. By the opening of the sixteenth century, in all events, Mandeville's monsters competed not only with Polo's treasures, but with Plinean races and Ovidian fables, Virgilian landscapes and Herodotean histories. Texts ancient, medieval, and now "modern" all converged to create a collage of new worlds, each more tantalizing than the next.[18]

The impending encounter with America would be, in its earliest years at least, a textual affair, and the Dutch were certainly well placed to participate in the ensuing process of textual reconnaissance. On the eve of the Columbian voyages, the Low Countries could be counted among the most urban, cosmopolitan, and literate regions of Europe. The Dutch – naturally not all, though an impressive number all the same – could obtain and read a variety of books (sometimes in multiple languages), which circulated in a vibrant typographic culture. The burghers of the Netherlands had ample reason to read energetically as well: to seek what commercial advantage, geographic knowledge, spiritual guidance, and, most basically, exotic entertainment that late medieval liter-