

Introduction

As the sun rose over the Río de la Plata on 3 April 1660, Albert Jansen could look out over the river and see two of his ships at anchor. The *Goude Leeuw*, just arrived from Amsterdam, was carrying merchandise destined not only for Buenos Aires, but also inland as far as Potosí. His other ship, the *Vergulde Valk*, had been in Buenos Aires for several months and would shortly depart the city for the return journey to Amsterdam. At age thirty, Jansen had already made a small fortune importing textiles, hardware, and other merchandise from Amsterdam to Buenos Aires and exporting hides and, especially, silver. Silver was the primary reason Jansen, and other Dutch merchants like him, were in the Río de la Plata. Buenos Aires itself was not a very large market. However, Potosí, with its thriving population, commercial economy, and silver mines, was just two months overland by pack mule and cart. The Spanish trading route to Potosí went the other way, via Lima to the west coast of South America and from there north to the Caribbean and beyond to Seville or Cádiz. Buenos Aires offered merchants a much more direct route, but there was the problem of accessing it as the port was officially closed to unauthorized shipping.

Jansen was not originally from Buenos Aires or, for that matter, even Spanish. Rather, he was from Amsterdam or Antwerp, depending upon who was asking. However, from 1657 to 1662, he made his home in that city on the Río de la Plata. Buenos Aires was not much in 1660. Situated on a rising ground on the banks of the river, it had perhaps 400 rather modest houses. The citadel, with a garrison of at most 150 men, sat low along the waterfront and dominated the approach to the port. The port itself was simply a channel between the shore and a sandbar formed by

sediment from the Riachuelo, a small stream that entered the Río de la Plata a quarter of a league to the southeast. Entering the channel put ships under the guns of the citadel, but for merchant captains with connections, there was no threat. Passing in front of the citadel, ships made their way to the mouth of the Riachuelo, where the guns of another, even smaller, bastion protected that entry. From there, ships could be loaded and unloaded. Jansen owned a small launch, which he kept along the banks of the Riachuelo, and he used it to access ships not only in the port but also those anchored far into the estuary.

With the exception of the citadel, the city had no other defenses. No wall or ditch surrounded it. That openness extended along the shorelines both to the northwest and to the southeast of the city, where *estancias* (landed estates) belonging to *porteños* (the inhabitants of Buenos Aires) divided the remote waterfront. Sparsely populated, the marshy landscape made it difficult for the authorities to patrol the area and thus offered opportunities for merchants without good connections in the port to land their goods. For Jansen, though, that was not a problem. Coming up into the city from his boat on the Riachuelo, Jansen would have passed a customs house, but his relationships with local officials meant that he was not stopped.

In Buenos Aires, Albert Jansen was known as Alberto Yansen.¹ Yansen's spoken Spanish was good, though his written Spanish was not very polished. Buenos Aires was, in its own small-scale way, a cosmopolitan city with Portuguese- and Dutch-speaking communities. Naturally, he had connections with his fellow Dutch speakers. In 1660, the Dutch community lived openly in the city, buying and selling merchandise, drawing up contracts, strolling through the streets and plazas, marrying local women, and, for Roman Catholics, attending mass. Concerning confessional identities, there were some tensions on both sides. Some locals complained of the heretics in their city, and some Protestant captains and merchants preferred to return to their ships on Sundays and thus avoid Catholic religious services. However, by and large, the Dutch in Buenos Aires were a part of the community.

Yansen's house was conveniently located near the edge of the city toward the Riachuelo. Adjacent to the church of Santo Domingo, it was well-known to visitors and locals alike. Sparsely furnished, it doubled as a warehouse and shop for goods from Yansen's ships. When Yansen

¹ From here on, I refer to Albert Jansen as Alberto Yansen, as that was the name by which he was known in Buenos Aires.

was away, his servant ran the shop. Yansen's house was one of the first stops for Dutch captains as they arrived in the city, seeking both advice and a place to stay while negotiating with the Spanish authorities over the entry of their ships into the port. Yansen was on good terms with the governor, Pedro de Baygorri y Ruiz (1653–1660), a local official open to trading with the Dutch. Baygorri entertained Dutch captains over dinner in his quarters in the citadel while lobbying for their business in the city. Yansen had other contacts in Buenos Aires as well. One of his business partners, Tomás de Roxas y Azevedo, who held a variety of official positions in the city, was the grandson of Diego de Vega, the “first banker” in Buenos Aires.²

A Silver River in a Silver World explains what Dutchmen like Yansen were doing in seventeenth-century Buenos Aires. As the title suggests, it seeks to place the Río de la Plata within broader historical and geographical frameworks. However, instead of focusing on long-term, macroeconomic trends, this study anchors the Dutch commercial activity locally and regionally within the Río de la Plata and analyzes discretely the commercial practices Dutch merchants and their Castilian associates deployed in the Río de la Plata between 1648 and 1678.

Much of the work on foreign merchants, especially Dutch, trading in Spanish America focuses on illegality, and labels the practice “contraband” and “illicit.”³ For the Río de la Plata in the seventeenth century, the dominant argument established that governors and fiscal officers of Buenos Aires used their positions to enrich themselves by allowing Dutch ships to trade illegally at this seaport, bypassing the official Spanish route and therefore depriving the crown of its revenues. Historians understood this practice as bureaucratic corruption in its purest form, resulting from the inadequate policies enforced by a distant monarchy regarded as both politically absolute and economically inefficient. The most nuanced interpretation argued that bending the rules of a closed commercial system essentially paid for the Spanish administrative and military establishments in this remote but strategic area that otherwise would have been lost to foreigners or depopulated. From the Atlantic and world economy viewpoints, existing studies explain the increase in Dutch commercial activity

² Raúl A. Molina, *El primer banquero de Buenos Aires. Jerarquía Alcanzada por su Descendencia* (Mendoza: Talleres Gráficos D'Accurzio, 1961).

³ See Zacarías Moutoukias, *Contrabando y control colonial en el siglo XVII: Buenos Aires, el Atlántico y el espacio peruano* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1988) and Wim Klooster, *Illicit Riches: Dutch Trade in the Caribbean, 1648–1795* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1998).

in the seventeenth century primarily by emphasizing their larger shipping capacity, their innovations in commercial organization and finance, and their ability to see opportunities for profit in shifting political alliances and warfare.⁴ Within this paradigm, quantitative studies recorded increasing numbers of Dutch ships sailing to Spanish American seaports to sell directly to avid consumers cargoes of coveted European and Asian goods and African slaves at competitive prices, in exchange for silver produced in the Americas.⁵ These trends, in particular the drain of silver from Spanish to Dutch hands, also informed the connected macro-narratives of a Dutch secular rise to worldwide trade dominance at the expense of a slow but steady Spanish mercantilist decline.

Scholars of the Atlantic world have primarily studied the subject within imperial boundaries, with histories of a Spanish Atlantic, an English Atlantic, and, to a lesser extent, a Portuguese and French Atlantic dominating scholarship. Comparisons, when they were made, usually focused on an English system dominated by private companies versus a Spanish system of state control based on mercantilism and understood as closed to outsiders.⁶ This paradigm largely emphasized the role of imperial

⁴ For example, see Wim Klooster, *The Dutch Moment: War, Trade, and Settlement in the Seventeenth-Century Atlantic World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Cornelis Ch. Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and on the Wild Coast, 1580–1680* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1971); Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic and the Hispanic World, 1606–1661* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

⁵ See Pierre Chaunu and Huguette Chaunu, *Séville et l'Atlantique (1504–1650)* 8 vols. (Paris: A. Colin, 1955–1959); Pierre Chaunu and Huguette Chaunu, *Sevilla y América siglos XVI y XVII* (Seville: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Sevilla, 1983); Albert Girard, *Le commerce français à Séville et Cadix au temps des Habsbourg* (Bordeaux: Féret & fils, 1932); John Everaert, *De internationale en koloniale handel der Vlaamse firma's te Cadix, 1670–1700* (Brugge: De Tempel, 1973). For a revision of decline narrative see Lutgardo García Fuentes, *El comercio español con América, 1650–1700* (Sevilla: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1980). On the slave trade, see Johannes Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade 1600–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁶ For essays on the Spanish, Portuguese, British, French, and Dutch Atlantics, see Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Benjamin Schmidt's contribution, "The Dutch Atlantic: From Provincialism to Globalism," is an excellent essay on the idea of a Dutch Atlantic. See as well J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492–1830* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006) and John J. McCusker and Kenneth Morgan, eds., *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). On Atlantic history, see Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005) and Bernard Bailyn and Patricia L. Denault, eds., *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500–1830* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

administrators and overlooked the amount of decision-making allowed on the part of local officials who interpreted, adapted, and then applied imperial policy for local needs.

Viewing the Atlantic through the limitations of imperial boundaries caused problems when discussing the Dutch and left that subject understudied. Dutch imperial activity in the Atlantic largely ended by the mid-seventeenth century with the loss of Dutch Brazil (1654) and New Amsterdam (1664). Moreover, the West-Indische Compagnie (WIC, Dutch West India Company), established in 1621, was a failure, especially when compared to the more famous Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC, Dutch East India Company), which monopolized trade with Asia.⁷ Forced by the failures of the WIC to take a broader view of the Atlantic, scholars view the Dutch role in the Atlantic beyond imperial boundaries, reframing of the role of the Dutch meaning in cross-imperial terms.⁸ Although Curaçao and Suriname continued under Dutch control, it was Dutch merchants, rather than colonial administrators, who were most active in the Atlantic. Based on Dutch merchant activity in Buenos Aires, this book analyses the development the Dutch Atlantic commerce within the Spanish imperial system and its impact beyond

⁷ On the Dutch Caribbean, see Cornelis Ch. Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and on the Wild Coast, 1580–1680* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1971). For recent work on New Amsterdam, see Jaap Jacobs, *New Netherland: A Dutch Colony in Seventeenth-Century America* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) and Willem Frijhoff, *Fulfilling God's Mission: The Two Worlds of Dominie Everadus Bogardus 1607–1647* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). For Brazil, see C. R. Boxer, *The Dutch in Brazil, 1624–1654* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957); Michiel van Groesen, ed., *The Legacy of Dutch Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Christopher Ebert, *Between Empires: Brazilian Sugar in the Early Atlantic Economy, 1550–1630* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). For the Dutch in West Africa, see Filipa Ribeiro da Silva, *Dutch and Portuguese in West Africa (1580–1674): Empire, Merchants, and the Atlantic System* (Leiden: Brill, 2011) and Klaas Rateband, *Nederlanders in West-Afrika 1600–1650: Angola, Kongo en São Tomé* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2000).

⁸ For example, see Pieter Emmer and Wim Klooster, “The Dutch Atlantic, 1600–1800: Expansion without Empire,” *Itinerario* 23 (1999): 48–69; Pieter Emmer, “The West India Company, 1621–1791: Dutch or Atlantic?,” in *The Dutch in the Atlantic Economy, 1580–1880: Trade, Slavery and Emancipation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 65–90; Jan de Vries, “The Dutch Atlantic Economies,” in *The Atlantic Economy during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: Organization, Operation, Practice, and Personnel*, ed. Peter Coclanis (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 1–29; Wim Klooster, *The Dutch Moment: War, Trade, and Settlement in the Seventeenth-Century Atlantic World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic and the Hispanic World 1606–1661* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); and Manuel Herrero Sánchez, *El acercamiento hispano-neerlandés (1648–1678)* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2000).

those boundaries. The silver exported from the Río de la Plata by Dutch merchants during this period helped fuel Dutch trade with the Baltic, the Levant, and China.

Beginning in the late 1640s, the Dutch in the Atlantic transitioned from building a territorial empire to focusing on commerce with other Europeans in the Americas. This switch in purpose dominates the Atlantic Dutch narrative for the mid-seventeenth century, but does not alone explain the expansion of their influence in the Río de la Plata. Rather, transformations taking place in that area opened local and regional markets to the Dutch, which previously the Portuguese had supplied until their revolt against Spain, beginning in 1640.

Although the Spanish crown opened Iberian ports to Dutch trade after 1648, ports in the Americas remained closed to nonlicensed shipping. Yet the implementation of that policy was left to the discretion of the governors appointed to the region. Emphasizing this feature of the Spanish composite monarchy shifts the attention from the macro to the micro and analyzes the governors' political capacity to coordinate local, regional, and Atlantic interests. The cases discussed in this book demonstrate that, depending on the local circumstances, governors chose to either facilitate or discourage the expansion of Dutch trade in their jurisdictions. Thus, governors were not only administrators, but also politicians and entrepreneurs.

The frequency of the arrival of Dutch ships and the capacity and variety of their cargoes highlight the expansion of Dutch trade in the Río de la Plata. However, once Dutch captains and merchants arrived in the estuary, they had to negotiate the terms of their entry to the seaport with the local authorities, relying on the assistance of business associates and translators. Dutch merchants needed buyers for their merchandise, which often required engaging in commercial partnerships with local residents. Using a multilayered but discrete approach to trade, this book brings to the forefront a variety of men, contacts, and contracts that were crucial to expand the Dutch commercial influence in the region. Thus, large volumes of European and Asian merchandise as well as African slaves transported in Dutch ships only reached distant consumer markets when they flowed through networks of trust and credit that connected Castilians and Dutchmen not only in Buenos Aires and Amsterdam but also, along the way, in Córdoba, Tucumán, Paraguay, Chile, Potosí, Madrid, and Luanda. Building and sustaining these far-reaching networks required accessing information, business acumen, and notarial expertise.

Instead of debating the legality or illegality of a practice and its negative and pervasive impacts, this book shifts the attention to the notarial and juridical infrastructures in Amsterdam, Madrid, and Buenos Aires that bound Dutchmen and their assets to their Castilian associates even when face-to-face contacts were rare. In other words, Dutch trade flowed through Buenos Aires both inward and outward not because the governors were greedy and corrupt (which ultimately increased risk and diminished opportunities), but because they functioned within a system of governance that allowed them to interpret the royal will to best serve local and regional communities. Within this system, entrepreneurial governors, their dependents, and business associates built the political, juridical, and financial infrastructure that, following the dictates of local circumstances and need, increased or decreased the risk of trading with the Dutch.⁹ This study, then, does not use the terms *legal* or *illegal trade*, but rather discusses registered or unregistered merchandise as, if a local authority deemed unregistered trade acceptable, then it was legal.

The period covered by this study is relevant geopolitically and commercially. In 1648, Spain and the United Provinces signed the Treaty of Münster, which ended 80 years of war and opened the Spanish Iberian ports to Dutch trade. For Buenos Aires, entrepreneurial governors such as Pedro de Baygorri y Ruiz created the institutional conditions that eased the flow of Dutch trade through the region. This study ends in 1678, when local and Atlantic trends converged to make Dutch trade riskier in the Río de la Plata. Curaçao grew in the 1660s to become the main center for redistribution of Dutch cargoes in the Americas while, simultaneously, new governors less inclined to engage in commerce with unregistered foreigners systematically denied entry to their ships. Thus, the three decades covered by this study roughly coincide with the decline of silver output in Potosí and the drop in the amount of silver arriving in Spain, at least as recorded in the official registers.¹⁰ However, silver bars and nuggets, as well as coins, continued flowing out of the Americas and

⁹ For trade in the region during a later period, see Fabrício Prado, *Edge of Empire: Atlantic Networks and Revolution in Bourbon Río de la Plata* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015). On trade risk, see Jeremy Baskes, *Staying Afloat: Risk and Uncertainty in Spanish Atlantic World Trade, 1760–1820* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ See Peter Bakewell, *Miners of the Red Mountain: Indian Labor in Potosí, 1545–1650* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984) and *Silver and Entrepreneurship in Seventeenth-Century Potosí. The Life and Times of Antonio López de Quiroga* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988).

through the hands of foreigners.¹¹ Focusing on commercial practices instead of trade policies reveals that, far from being smuggled out, inter-regional trade dispersed silver throughout this region to be collected at the Silver River by the Dutch. In doing so, Dutch merchants not only provided trading opportunities to their Spanish American partners, but also accessed the silver they needed to trade with the Baltic, the Levant, and the Far East, their Silver World.

The experiences of individuals like the Dutch merchant captain, Alberto Yansen, with whom I began this introduction, highlights the power of social actors in influencing the behaviors of others within the politics of trade. Analysis of their actions give life and meaning to the anonymous patterns described in the existing macro-narratives of trade. The deeds, careers, and strategies of people like Alberto Yansen, his business associate in Buenos Aires, Tomás de Roxas y Azevedo, and Governor Pedro de Baygorri y Ruiz and his Jesuit adviser, illuminate what it took to align the local, regional, and Atlantic interests that ultimately facilitated the expansion of Dutch trade in the three decades covered by this study.

One of my goals in this project was to unearth unknown or little-used Dutch and Spanish language sources and combine them in a study of the Dutch mercantile activity in the South Atlantic in the seventeenth century. By combining Dutch and Spanish sources, I aimed at stimulating further interest in this approach, and further analysis and interpretation of a theme and time period. In doing that, I wrote a primary source-informed narrative of an understudied theme. I followed the advice of William Cronon's 2013 American Historical Association presidential address in New Orleans. In his speech, Cronon called for a return to the narrative ("telling stories") as a way of engaging readers in histories while allowing room for interpretation and analysis on the part of the author. When writing, I kept this in mind, and so it is the story of Alberto Yansen and other Dutch merchant captains that drives the analysis.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

A Silver River in a Silver World is divided into eight chapters and organized in roughly chronological order. The opening chapter frames the Dutch in the Atlantic in the first half of the seventeenth century and

¹¹ John J. TePaske, *A New World of Gold and Silver*, ed. Kendall W. Brown (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

serves as a foundation for understanding the broader context for the following chapters. Using the first, disastrous Dutch visit to the city in 1599 as a localized starting point, it provides a brief history of Dutch attempts to emulate their European rivals through establishing colonial outposts or, in the case of Portuguese Brazil, attempting to seize the colonial possessions of others. Even before the mid-seventeenth century, it was clear that this vision would not come into fruition. After the Peace of Münster between Spain and the United Provinces in 1648, Dutch merchants, independent of the WIC, began trading in Spanish ports in the Americas. The lure for Dutch merchants was, obviously, silver mined in Peru, and Chapter 1 ties together silver output and circulation with increased Dutch activity in the Río de la Plata.

Chapters 2 and 3 bring the focus onto the Spanish administration and trade in the Río de la Plata in the 1650s and 1660s. Focusing on the Río de la Plata, Chapter 2 describes the commercial links between the city of Buenos Aires and the Alto Peruvian provinces; the provinces of Tucumán, Cuyo, Paraguay; and Spain, Brazil, and Western Africa. The trading networks that connected Buenos Aires to Potosí linked the urban centers in the governorships of Tucumán and Río de la Plata and brought to the seaport silver and, to a lesser extent, the commodities needed to engage in commerce in the South Atlantic. The focus is not just on direct trade in slaves and merchandise into Buenos Aires, but also on the mechanisms that allowed transshipment inland. This chapter also discusses the commercial and social impacts of the Portuguese rebellion against the Spanish monarch, which created the opportunities for the Dutch to access these markets in the 1640s.

Moving to politics, Chapter 3 sheds light on the career of Pedro Baygorri y Ruiz, governor of the province of Río de la Plata from 1653–1660, and uses his career in Buenos Aires to understand the importance of local autonomy. Although the chapter focuses on Baygorri, the governor during whose administration Dutch trade in Buenos Aires was most prevalent, his role is best understood in contrast to his immediate predecessor and successors. The governors played the central role in facilitating the environment in which business relationships between Dutch and Spanish merchants could flourish.

The remaining chapters analyze the Dutch connections in Buenos Aires. Chapter 4 turns to the arrival of Dutch ships on the Río de la Plata, beginning in the 1650s. With failed colonial ventures leaving Dutch with a limited territorial empire and increasingly marginalized by the mercantilist French and English, Dutch merchants turned to Spanish America for

trading opportunities for silver. The chapter focuses on the connections between Spanish and Dutch merchant networks.

Chapter 5 illustrates the worth of these merchant connections by exploring the conflicting ownership claims on the *San Juan Bautista*, a ship captured by a Dutch privateer in the Río de la Plata in 1660, near the end of Baygorri's governorship. The case reveals the extent of the Dutch presence in the Río de la Plata, as notary records indicate that Dutch merchants utilized the local Spanish legal system and drafted powers of attorney and contracts to build the foundation for repeated visits to the city. A small Dutch/Flemish community, acting as local agents, added a further layer to the bonds between Dutch and Spanish. Chapter 6 follows the case of the *San Juan Bautista* to Madrid, where Alberto Yansen, one of the merchant captains with a claim on the ship, was put on trial at the Consejo de Indias (Council of the Indies) for trading illegally in Buenos Aires. Yansen was acquitted as the Council accepted his defense: that his actions were allowed by the former governor, Baygorri.

Chapter 7 examines the politics in Buenos Aires after 1660. The prior chapters demonstrated that imperial policy against direct trade with the Dutch was reinterpreted locally by the governor to fulfill the needs of the city. However, in the early 1660s, that local compact was redefined. Governor Villacorta (1660–1663) interpreted the royal will in ways different than Governor Baygorri had. Villacorta's interpretation limited the access that Dutch merchants had to trading networks passing through Buenos Aires and insured that the king received his fees and taxes. Dutch trade through Buenos Aires continued, but at a much reduced scale. The book closes by bringing back Alberto Yansen and his actions following his acquittal. It ends with his disastrous 1678 voyage to the Río de la Plata and uses that trip as a final illustration of the changing view of Dutch shipping on the part of the governors.