

Natural Disaster at the Closing of the Dutch Golden Age

By the early eighteenth century, the economic primacy, cultural efflorescence, and geopolitical power of the Dutch Republic appeared to be waning. The end of this Golden Age was also an era of natural disasters. Between the late seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth century, Dutch communities weathered numerous calamities, including river and coastal floods, cattle plagues, and an outbreak of strange mollusks that threatened the literal foundations of the Republic. Adam Sundberg demonstrates that these disasters emerged out of longstanding changes in environment and society. They were also fundamental to the Dutch experience and understanding of eighteenth-century decline. Disasters provoked widespread suffering, but they also opened opportunities to retool management strategies, expand the scale of response, and to reconsider the ultimate meaning of catastrophe. This book reveals a dynamic and often resilient picture of a society coping with calamity at odds with historical assessments of eighteenth-century stagnation.

Adam Sundberg is an associate professor of History at Creighton University. His work has appeared in *Environmental History*, *Dutch Crossing*, and *The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History*.

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Floods, Worms, and Cattle Plague

ADAM SUNDBERG

Creighton University



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For Sara and Marsh

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Adam Sundberg
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> xiii
<i>Acknowledgment</i>	xvii
Introduction	I
1 <i>Rampjaar</i> Reconsidered	26
2 “Disasters in the Year of Peace”: The First Cattle Plague, 1713–1720	51
3 “The Fattened Land Turned to Salted Ground”: The Christmas Flood of 1717 in Groningen	89
4 A Plague from the Sea: The Shipworm Epidemic, 1730–1735	122
5 “Increasingly Numerous and Higher Floods”: The River Floods of 1740–1741	165
6 “From a Love of Humanity and Comfort for the Fatherland”: The Second Cattle Plague, 1744–1764	212
7 The Twin Faces of Calamity: Lessons of Decline and Disaster	251
<i>Bibliography</i>	277
<i>Index</i>	325

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-83124-6 — Natural Disaster at the Closing of the Dutch Golden Age
Adam Sundberg
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Figures

1.1	The United Provinces of the Netherlands in 1710	page 8
1.1	The <i>Rampjaar</i> of 1672	27
1.2	Romeyn de Hooghe, <i>Ellenden klacht Van het Bedroefde Nederlandt. Sedert het Jaer 1672 tot den Aller-heyligen Vloet van het Jaer 1675, 1675</i>	29
2.1	Daniël Stopendaal, <i>Vuurwerk bij de viering van de Vrede van Utrecht, 1713</i>	52
2.2	Hendrick Hondius, <i>Koeien in een landschap, 1644</i>	61
2.3	Jan van de Velde after Willem Buytewech, <i>Terra (The Elements), 1622</i>	65
3.1	Christmas Flood mortality across the North Sea	92
3.2	Christmas Flood mortality in Groningen	113
3.3	Post-1717 dike design improvements	119
3.4	Diagrams of <i>kisthoofden</i>	120
4.1	Pieter Straat, <i>Nieuwe kaarte van het dijkgraafschap van 't Ooster Baljuwschap van West-Vriesland, genaamt Medenblick en de Vier Noorder Coggen, 1730</i>	123
4.2	Pieter Straat, <i>Nieuwe kaarte van het dijkgraafschap van 't Ooster Baljuwschap van West-Vriesland, genaamt Medenblick en de Vier Noorder Coggen, 1730 (detail)</i>	125
4.3	Early evidence of shipworm infestations	128
4.4	Jan Ruyter, <i>Studie van wormen, 1726–44</i>	130
4.5	Total number of VOC ship arrivals in Dutch waters	135
4.6	Spring and summer temperatures in central England and the Netherlands between 1659 and 1799	137

4.7	Anon., <i>De slechte toestand van de zeedijk vanaf Diemen</i> , 1705	141
4.8	M. Walraven, <i>Profiel van de Westvrieslandsche Zee Dyk voor de Noorder Coggen</i> , 1732	142
4.9	Elias Baeck, <i>Abildung deren höchst schädliche unbekandten See-Würmer</i> , 1732	146
4.10	Pieter Straat and Pieter van der Deure, <i>Ontwerp tot een minst kostbaare zeekerste en schielykste herstelling van de zorgelyke toestand der Westfriesche zeedyken</i> , 1733	160
5.1	Cornelis Velsen, <i>Kaart van den loop der rivieren de Rhyne, de Maas, de Waal, de Merwe, en de Lek, door de Provincien van Gelderland, Holland en Utrecht</i> , 1749	167
5.2	Map of territories affected by inundations of 1740–1	168
5.3	The Rhine–Meuse River System	172
5.4	Isaac Vincentsz. van der Vinne, <i>Het doorbreeken van den band-dyk voor Elden Anno 1740</i> , 1741	178
5.5	Melchior Bolstra, <i>Figurative kaart vande situatie van Gelderland, Holland, Uytrecht en OverYzel, ten regarde van zee, en rivieren</i> , 1751	186
5.6	Jan l'Admiral, <i>Bedroefde Watervloed, Voornamentlyk van Het Land van Heusden, van Althona, de Alblasserwaard, Crimperwaard, en Tielerwaard, waar door meer dan 33500 Morgen Lands onder water staan, na 't leven afgetekend</i> , 1741	189
5.7	Jan Smit, <i>Ware Afbeelding na het Leven, van het overstroomden, der Revieren, en het Doorbreeken van den Dyck, by Elden . . . tot aen de Stat Cuylenburg . . . Anno 1740</i> , 1741	192
5.8	Jan Smit, <i>Tweede plaat der overstroomingen vande provincien Gelderland en Holland in den jaare 1740 en 1741</i> , 1741	194
5.9	Jan Smit, <i>Derde Plaat der overstroominge inhoudende het Ryk Nimweegen ... met alle desselfs doorbraken in 't Jaar 1740 en 1741</i> , 1741	195
5.10	Jan Smit, <i>De Vierde Plaat van der overstroomingen der Landen ... waar by gevoegd is een nette afbeelding van de Kettingmoolen die gebruikt is; om het water uit de Stad te maalen in den Jaaren 1740 en 1741</i> , 1741	196
5.11	Winter and “long winter” temperatures between 1706 and 1800	201

List of Figures

xv

5.12	Jan Caspar Philips, Title page from <i>Nederlands Water-Nood van den Jaare MDCCXL en MDCCXLI</i> , 1741	209
5.13	Jan Caspar Philips, <i>Nederlands Water-Nood en verscheide bezoeken</i> , 1751 (detail)	210
6.1	Jan de Groot, <i>Afbeelding van de Staartsterren, verscheenen in de jaaren 1742 en 1744</i>	213
6.2	Jan Smit, <i>Gods slaandehand over Nederland door de pest-siekte onder het rund vee</i> , 1744	219
6.3	Cattle mortality by <i>gemeente</i> (North Holland) and <i>grietenij</i> (Friesland) between 1744 and 1745	221
6.4	(a and b) Jan Smit, <i>Gods slaandehand over Nederland door de pest-siekte onder het rund vee</i> , 1744 (detail)	231
7.1	The “Stone Man” of Friesland	270
7.2	The Janus face of Terminus	271

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-83124-6 — Natural Disaster at the Closing of the Dutch Golden Age
Adam Sundberg
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Acknowledgments

Like so many foreign visitors to the Netherlands, my first view of the Dutch landscape was from above. I was immediately struck by its rigid order as my plane descended to Schiphol Airport near Amsterdam. My window seat vantage framed tidy lines of trees that flanked narrow fields, all impossibly squeezed between roads and clusters of densely packed buildings. It seemed vast and flat – not altogether discomfiting for a plains Midwesterner – except water seemed to be everywhere! The view was a dissonant mix of the familiar and seemingly alien. It seemed at once insistently modern yet quietly timeworn. The balance of land and water appeared comfortable and controlled, yet I could not escape the feeling that if the landscape could speak, it might tell a different story. I had not yet heard of environmental history, and I would not find the language to articulate my thoughts about what I was seeing for some time, yet I found myself immediately wondering what had fashioned this unique place. I would spend much of the next year (and many more since) exploring the country and learning as much about the landscape, the people, and their shared history as I could. I could not have expected at the time where these travels would take me. This book is one destination.

It has been more than ten years since this first encounter, and although the journey to this book was far from direct, it seems a fitting place to begin because it threw me in the path of so many of the people that would make this work possible. It was during this trip to the Netherlands that I met Petra van Dam. Petra introduced me to Dutch environmental history as an undergraduate exchange student, sponsored me during my Fulbright year at the Free University Amsterdam as a graduate student, and she has championed my work ever since. Her encouragement and

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xix

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