

## 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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# Natural Disaster at the Closing of the Dutch Golden Age

*Floods, Worms, and Cattle Plague*

ADAM SUNDBERG

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*For Sara and Marsh*

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## 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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