Review Of "New Netherland Connections: Intimate Networks And Atlantic Ties In Seventeenth-Century America" By S. Shaw Romney

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New Netherland Connections: Intimate Networks and Atlantic Ties in Seventeenth-Century America

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This well researched monograph explores the many ways that interpersonal relationships among predominantly non-elite individuals assisted Dutch trade and colonialism in New Amsterdam during its brief existence in the middle third of the seventeenth century. In five substantive chapters, Susanah Shaw Romney painstakingly traces commercial, family, and fictive kin connections among a wide variety of individuals—African, Amerindian, and Dutch, enslaved and free, female and male, indigenous and immigrant—within and, less often, across ethnic and racial boundaries. Of particular moment to readers of this journal, the author demonstrates that “intimate networks” (“ties that developed from people’s immediate, affective, and personal associations” [18]) enabled individual men and women of modest means to participate in transatlantic trade outside the chartered Dutch West India Company (WIC). Equally important, Romney argues, such relationships maintained vital trade between Native Americans and colonists despite repeated outbreaks of violence, fostered a unique type of slave emancipation, and facilitated New Netherland’s peaceful transfer to English control.

*New Netherland Connections* is an excellent example of scholarship that is currently reorienting the historiography of empires and commerce away from large-scale, formal institutions toward more fugitive, less structured forms of participation, notably by extending analysis of networks rooted in credit and trust from the extensive associations organized by and for professionals to more adventitious relationships among a broader range of individuals and groups. The book draws as well on the venerable strand of social history that emphasizes the agency of “ordinary” people, in this instance the indigenous, the enslaved people, and female settlers, combined with a more recent “turn” in Atlantic and global history toward accounts of geographically mobile and improvisationally entrepreneurial individuals and kin groups.

The initial two chapters make fine use of Amsterdam notarial archives to recreate lives and labor existing outside the WIC. The first, focused on Amsterdam, examines interpersonal bonds—with family members and friends and also with rooming house proprietors, many of them female—that assisted the recruitment of men for WIC service and the subsequent transatlantic management of such individuals’ finances in ways that promoted geographic, occupational, and in some cases socio-economic mobility. In the second chapter, the scene shifts to New Netherland (the Dutch colony in the greater Hudson River valley of present-day New York), where Old World personal relationships were both recreated and revised. Romney insists that family ties were as central to trade in New Netherland among the prosperous professional merchant elite as among the many artisans, sailors, and other non-professionals who likewise engaged in market exchange.

Based on careful appraisal of still understudied New Netherland colonial records, chapters three and four are the most impressive and original. The third provides a capacious description of the vigorous trade between settlers and indigenous inhabitants that encompassed not only the well-known exchange of furs for imported manufactures but the perhaps more vital supply of foodstuffs and firewood. Ongoing trade did not necessarily denote peace, however, and Romney argues that the coexistence of commerce
and conflict resulted largely from the failure of settlers and Native Americans to establish substantive intimate ties that could have bridged their deep cultural differences. Chapter four, in contrast, shows the salutary effects that viable transcultural relations could have, albeit on the limited scale of the “half freedom” achieved by a small group of WIC slaves who agreed to remain Company laborers in return for the removal of many of the liabilities of bondage. According to Romney, partial emancipation became possible after the group had formed what the Dutch recognized as viable intimate networks involving stable families and networks of godparentage encompassing enslaved converts to the Dutch Reformed Church as well as important Dutch settlers. Thereby, Romney maintains, those slaves demonstrated not only their economic importance to the Dutch but also, through marriage and conversion, their commitment to forms of affiliation that colonists valorized. The final chapter, about five individuals who served as negotiators in New Netherland’s endgame, contains suggestive but sketchy material about the mobilization of interpersonal relationships for political purposes.

Much of the book proposes interactive structuring of the Dutch imperial authority and commercial projects on the one hand and initiatives by intimate networks on the other, and Romney adduces plausible if not always persuasive evidence in support of her theses. Disconcertingly, however, she is also prone to reductive and one-sided statements, and this linguistic and apparently interpretive vacillation, as well as overgeneralizations about the agency of her protagonists in the making of New Netherland and of the Dutch Atlantic economy, undercuts the force of her arguments. Claiming, e.g., that “women’s relationships built this empire” [303], is no more convincing than the outdated top-down, centralized, institutional argument that the author inverts. Moreover, in the absence of quantitative economic analysis, the relative importance of trade conducted by intimate networks as compared with that of the WIC remains an open question.

Building on her sedulous detective work in the archival and printed sources, Romney’s close attention to New Netherland allows for remarkably detailed depiction of a range of micro-level relationships. But this focus also entails neglect of broader contexts, not only regarding other Dutch colonies and long-distance commerce but also concerning other European trade and imperial ventures of the time. A few of these issues are raised in footnotes, and some scholarship is critically though briefly evaluated therein. But had that material been integrated into the text, it could have been more adequately examined and perhaps helped nuance some of the author’s balder assertions (not to mention enhancing the book’s readability).

*New Netherland Connections* provides much food for thought both for specialists in Dutch and Dutch colonial history and for students of empire and commerce throughout the early modern Atlantic. Thanks to Romney’s research, they will want to place in comparative perspective her theses on the important role that popular participation played in local and long-distance trade, in inter-communal relations, and in the circumstances in which colonial slavery could be modified if not evaded. It may then be possible to judge the degree to which the fascinating stories that the author has uncovered were unique to the Dutch Atlantic—or even to New Netherland—and how much they were rooted in the early stages of European colonization and global commerce.