

Liberty's Triumph through the Lens of Dutch Brazil

J. M. Walsh

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Liberty's Triumph through the Lens of Dutch Brazil is popular history done right and a necessary corrective to an often overlooked epoch.

J. M. Walsh's *Liberty's Triumph Through the Lens of Dutch Brazil* examines the complex ideal of political liberty by studying an often forgotten episode in history.

In the mid-seventeenth century, the young Dutch Republic set out to accomplish their *Groot Desseyn*, or “Grand Design.” As part of this plan, Amsterdam and the powerful Dutch East India Company—a private, joint-stock corporation with its own private navy and army—sought to capture Spanish and Portuguese possessions in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. As the book shows, this was, on the one hand, about rising imperial ambitions among the Dutch; on the other hand, the Protestant republic wanted revenge against Catholic Spain for its long and bloody war against the United Provinces, which ran from 1566-1648. Brazil, a lush, tropical land with untold riches, became a primary target for Dutch acquisitiveness.

This book goes into great detail about why the Dutch invasion was successful at first, including that the Portuguese did not have the manpower to defend Brazil's long coastline. It also covers why it ultimately failed, following the Portuguese victory at the Second Battle of Guararapes in 1649. Along with an in-depth study of Dutch Brazil—its culture, and especially its export-oriented economy—the book provides a general overview of the early modern period. As shown in the beginning of the text, the European colonization of Brazil began when serfdom in Europe was the norm, while religious warfare between Catholics and Protestants presaged the later brutality of Dutch and Portuguese slave traders. Europeans were, in sum, brutal to each other first before they were brutal to the natives of Brazil and the people of Africa.

Although based in thorough research of its complex subject, the book is written in modern and easy-to-understand prose. The clarity of its language is mirrored in its clarity of thought, as one of the main theses of the text is that the battle between the Dutch and Portuguese in Brazil was in fact a battle between the future, represented by republicanism, individual liberty, and human rights, and the past, represented by hierarchical society, integralism, and monarchy. Although the Dutch lost Brazil, the book argues that they helped to plant in its fertile soil radical ideas about human society and the individual's relationship to government.

In the center portion of book, the firsthand account of Friar Manuel Calado, a Portuguese priest, is presented in an English translation. While fascinating, this portion of the text is awkward in its position, and disrupts the narrative flow. Still, the book is a true service to the study of history. Its conclusion leaves no doubt about the significance of Dutch Brazil, which, despite its oversized contribution to notions of liberty, has been forgotten in the Netherlands and Brazil alike.

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BENJAMIN WELTON (June 19, 2020)

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