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Historiographical overview

The victory at Dunbar on 3 September 1650 convinced the English in general and members of the Rump in particular that God had not forsaken England, making it possible for them to look beyond the problems of the British Isles. Since the days of Elizabeth the United Provinces of the Netherlands had appeared to many in England as their natural ally. Yet the foreign-policy wishes of the Stuarts and then the antagonistic attitude adopted by the Princes of Orange had dashed their hopes. By the end of 1650, however, the Stuart monarchy was ostensibly banished from England forever and William II, Prince of Orange, was dead leaving only a posthumous son to carry on the Orange line. The English Commonwealth consequently seized upon the opportunity, despatching two of its most eminent statesmen, Walter Strickland and Oliver St. John, to The Hague in the early spring of 1651. Their purpose, Oliver St. John told the General Assembly of the States General, was "to enter into a more intimate alliance, and nearer union" with the Dutch "whereby a more real and intrinsical interest of each other may be contracted for their mutual good."[1] The English people were kept informed of the initially triumphant progress of their extraordinary ambassadors by means of a variety of pamphlets and newspapers. These reminded the English of the variety of Dutch virtues, claiming for example that the United Provinces is "such a glorious State" which "for plenty, riches, and policy, hath preeminence of all the monarchies in Europe."[2] Unlike modern historians, contemporaries did not see the mission as a utopian fantasy. The Dutch were enthusiastic, "expressing their earnest desires in having an intimate correspondency with England and in all their discourses."[3] Indeed a correspondent to Marchamont Nedham's *Mercurius Politicus* claimed that "the alliance and amity of England is that which above all things is desired by the common sort of people" in the United Provinces: "They pray for it, and would think

1 Oliver St. John's speech, *Joyful Newes from Holland* (London, 1651), Thomason: 7 April 1651, p. 3.
2 *A Perfect Account*, 9–16 April 1651, p. 108.
3 Ambassadors to Council of State, 20 March 1651, Bod., Rawl. C129, f. 6.

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themselves happy if they could see the day."[4] Although the rest of Europe was less excited about the prospect of an Anglo-Dutch alliance, it did not cavalierly dismiss the goings-on at The Hague. The *Weekly Intelligencer* may have exaggerated when it proclaimed that the prospect of "the firm union" between England and the United Provinces dominated "all the discourse, all the joy and grief of other nations," but it did not do so by much.[5] After all, the officers of the English Commonwealth were proudly proclaiming in the capitals of Catholic Europe that an Anglo-Dutch union "would awe the whole world."[6]

Yet the alliance was not to be. The ambassadors returned to England in June 1651 empty-handed. Four months later the Rump would pass the decidedly anti-Dutch Navigation Act. And, despite frenzied attempts by the Dutch ambassadors to prevent a breach, war between the two great republics had broken out by the next summer. What had happened?

Historians have offered two types of explanation.[7] The economic explanation was classically stated by Charles Wilson in his famous study of Anglo-Dutch relations in the seventeenth century. Wilson argues that the three wars against the Dutch were the inevitable outcome of half a century of bitter economic competition. What was new in the England of the 1650s, he claims, was a "heavier depression in trade, which sharpened men's demands for action, and the new circumstances of naval strength, which increased their confidence that the time had come to strike." The Navigation Act, then, was passed because "the belief was widespread that Holland was the source of England's balance of trade troubles." Although Wilson is not willing to argue that the Navigation Act led directly to war, he does claim that the catalyst for the war, the principle of the right to search, really involved economic disputes over "the fisheries and the unsolved question of maritime sovereignty."[8]

This explanation was supported in the 1960s and the 1970s by the work of two American scholars, J. E. Farnell and Robert Brenner. Farnell's prosopographic study, focusing heavily on Benjamin Worsley and Maurice Thompson, concludes that there was an intellectual consistency in the diplomatic initiatives of the Rump in 1651–1652, that for the Commonwealth leaders the plan of union with the Netherlands and the Navigation Act "were probably alternate approaches to the same end the establishment

4 *Mercurius Politicus*, 10–17 April 1651, p. 724.
5 *Weekly Intelligencer*, 18–25 February 1651, p. 65.
6 Basadona to Doge and Senate, 15 July 1651, *CSPV*, p. 192.
7 Here I am deliberately excluding the work of Blair Worden, whose important article "Classical Republicanism and the Puritan Revolution," in Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden (editors), *History and Imagination* (London, 1981) is, as far as I know, the only serious attempt to unravel the ideological debates of the 1650s in relation to the outbreak of the first Anglo-Dutch War.
8 Charles H. Wilson, *Profit and Power* (London, 1957), pp. 56–59.

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of England as the entrepôt of the Western European trade." It was in this context that he was able to affirm "a causal relationship" between the Navigation Act and the first Anglo-Dutch War.[9] Brenner accepts this analysis, adding only an ideological framework in which the actions of the Rump are to be understood. Brenner traces the rise of a "colonial-interloping group" of merchants whose economic interests determined their political and religious allegiance to the Independents, allowing them in December 1648 "to ride to power on the backs of the Army after many years in the political wilderness."[10] It was this grouping then, Brenner argues, that promoted the Navigation Act and the Anglo-Dutch War. The two most recent scholarly articles treating the first Anglo-Dutch War modify, but do not ultimately reject this view. Simon Groenveld, after a very thorough survey of Anglo-Dutch relations in the 1640s, concludes that "a combination of bellicosity and commercial self-interest" made it inevitable that the Rump's mailed fist would "be turned against the Dutch" in 1652.[11] Research into the economies of the United Provinces and the English Commonwealth has led Jonathan Israel to a similar conclusion. The cessation of the Eighty Years War, he points out, left the Dutch free to evict the English from the footholds they had established in the Mediterranean trade. The resulting tension leads Israel to insist "that the Anglo-Dutch wars of the seventeenth century were the outcome of 'commercial rivalry'."[12]

A second group of historians argues that the Anglo-Dutch conflict arose from strategic rather than purely economic motives. S. R. Gardiner, in his encyclopedic study of the Commonwealth and Protectorate, argues that the failure of the ideologically motivated plan of union radically transformed the nature of political discourse. The Navigation Act, then, "did not profess to have other than material aims." But, it was intended to make all England, not just a select group of merchants, richer. It is in this context that Gardiner

[9] J. E. Farnell. "The Navigation Act of 1651, the First Dutch War, and the London Merchant Community," in *The Economic History Review* 2nd series, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1963–1964), pp. 439–454.

[10] Robert Brenner, "The Civil War Politics of London's Merchant Community," in *Past and Present* No. 58 (February 1973), pp. 92–95. Brenner's monumental *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550–1653* (Princeton, 1993) appeared too late to be considered fully. However, much of his argument about the Navigation Act and the origins of the Dutch War seem to have changed little from his earlier work. I want to emphasize that while I differ in detail from Brenner, and want to prioritize political and religious concerns over economic ones, I absolutely endorse his initial critique of early-seventeenth-century historiography on pp. 647–648.

[11] Simon Groenveld, "The English Civil Wars as a Cause of the First Anglo-Dutch War, 1640–1652," in *The Historical Journal* Vol. 30, No. 3 (1987), p. 566.

[12] Jonathan I. Israel, "Competing Cousins: Anglo-Dutch Trade Rivalry," in *History Today* Vol. 38 (July 1988), p. 17. For reasons of brevity I have necessarily eliminated the subtleties of many of these arguments, and consequently many of the differences among them. But, since I am trying to advance an ideological interpretation of the events I don't feel that I have treated them unfairly.

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could argue that although the Navigation Act did not lead ineluctably to war – he explains the actual outbreak of war by "the assertion in practice of the doctrine of the Plantagenets [of] the English sovereignty of the seas" – it did open a new era in which wars were precipitated by "questions of commerce" rather than "questions of religion."[13] More recently J. R. Jones has allowed an even smaller role for economic argument, insisting that "political and indeed personal motives were more important as causes of the Dutch wars than the economic and commercial reasons that were publicly proclaimed." The first war, then, was precipitated by a "tight knit republican faction" that wanted to preserve its own power in "a hostile world." Public opinion, in this scenario, has a very small role to play.[14]

Against these views I hope to show that the first Anglo-Dutch War was the result of an unusual political alliance between apocalyptic Protestants and classical republicans who dominated English political culture both inside and outside Parliament immediately after the execution of the king in January 1649. Initially these groups hoped to implement their long-cherished political alliance with the United Provinces – a goal which had been enunciated forcefully since the 1620s. However, once it had become clear to the Rump's ambassadors and then to a wide cross-section of the political nation that the Dutch were neither good Protestants nor committed republicans, the English felt compelled to deal with the Dutch as they had dealt with the Scots. While the political developments of the 1640s did vastly broaden the scope of the political nation, and while the membership of the Rump was in fact somewhat less socially exalted than pre-Civil War Parliaments, modern notions of national interest had not yet come to dominate political debate. While the Rump did pass the Navigation Act, I claim that this did not represent the first volley of a modern trade war, but rather a punitive move against a corrupt polity. The Rump went to war against the Dutch, I will argue, because its republican and apocalyptic leaders came to understand, indeed reimagined, the Dutch polity as materialistic and Orangist. Unfortunately neither the Rump nor the Dutch States General – both regimes which had come to power in recent revolutions – were able to control rising popular antagonisms or more importantly the animosities between their politically radicalized fleets, when the cooler heads of each regime's diplomats were successfully resolving their political differences.

[13] S. R. Gardiner, *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate 1649–1656* Vol. II, pp. 147–175.

[14] J. R. Jones, *Britain and the World 1649–1815* (Glasgow, 1980), pp. 53–68.

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