

## Donna Merwick's New World

"HERE, IN DONNA MERWICK'S DEFT HANDS, IS MICROHISTORY AT ITS BEST."

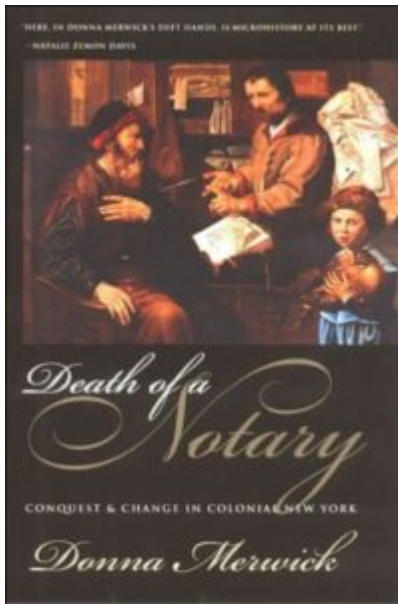
—NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS



# *Death of a Notary*

CONQUEST & CHANGE IN COLONIAL NEW YORK

*Donna Merwick*



Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999. 281pp, \$35.

Donna Merwick's *Death of a Notary: Conquest & Change In Colonial New York* is a bold and innovative study of the transition from Dutch to English colonial rule along the Hudson river in the late seventeenth century, as seen through the experiences of one man. Proponents of strong narrative and good storytelling will find much in this book to admire, and proponents of theoretical complexity also will find much to admire. That Merwick manages to combine these two approaches, which in recent years have been so frequently at odds, is in itself a considerable accomplishment. In the process, Merwick makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of crucial differences between Dutch and English colonization in North America. Moreover, in its focus on the transition from New Netherland to New York, *Death of a Notary* explores the impact that imperial rivalries had on the lives of individuals who did not make policy, but who were forced to live with its legacy.

*Death of a Notary* offers a particularly good example of the possibilities of microhistory, although Merwick never refers to her study in those terms. Merwick's careful reconstruction of Adriaen Janse van Ilpendam's life illustrates the rewards of microhistory's emphasis on rigorous interpretation of small details and small subjects. Merwick notes that van Ilpendam was incidental in the larger course of imperial history. She acknowledges that "England's grand designs did not include his death. He was so incidental" (xv). But Merwick then demonstrates that studying the effects of England's imperial ambitions on van Ilpendam's apparently insignificant life provides an extraordinary window onto the larger world of colonialism and imperial rivalries in seventeenth-century North America.

Merwick writes that her work has been influenced by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, Greg Dening, and Hayden White, among others, and those influences are clearly present in her analysis and in her organization

and presentation of the material. For instance, Merwick provides a "Notes and Reflections" section at the end, which combines traditional endnote references to primary sources with a series of interpretive and theoretical meditations on the evidence. However, Merwick has neither incorporated extensive discussions of interpretive theory into the body of the book, nor has she made extensive use of specialized theoretical vocabulary. As a result, this book is highly accessible to readers without extensive background or interest in postmodern and interdisciplinary theories, as well as to those with wider background or interest in them.

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In the end, many readers will value Merwick's book for the compelling story it tells. Merwick introduces van Ilpendam by writing, "[H]e was the only one. He was the only man to have committed suicide in the town's seventeenth-century history" (xv). And the question of why van Ilpendam took such an unprecedented course is the puzzle Merwick's book sets out to solve. In many ways, Adriaen van Ilpendam's life in North America was ill timed. Each time van Ilpendam seemed poised to improve his financial and social situation, the colonial world shifted, as the imperial rivalry between England and the United Provinces periodically reshaped the colonial landscape in North America. Notaries, for example, were extremely important in seventeenth-century Dutch mercantile and colonial culture. Van Ilpendam became a notary in 1669 at the age of fifty-one, in the transitional period when Dutch colonists in the new colony of New York still relied on notaries. But by that time, change was on the horizon, and English law and culture would have less of a place for notaries and their work. Notaries public are not the usual choice of scholars looking for historical heroes, but Merwick skillfully makes the reader care about the struggling van Ilpendam.

In many ways, *Death of a Notary* succeeds so well because Merwick employs such careful contextualism, but Merwick has also made some choices that seem at odds with her otherwise careful attention to historical context. Her choice of names is a perplexing one. Throughout the book, she refers to van Ilpendam primarily as Adriaen Janse. However, she later explains that Adriaen did not use the patronymic. He referred to himself as Adriaen van Ilpendam, rather than Adriaen, son of Jan (Janse). He sought to distance himself from association with a bankrupt and disgraced father. This makes Merwick's use of "Adriaen Janse" throughout the study curious, particularly because the study is informed by her desire to understand the seventeenth-century context on its own terms. In addition, a fuller treatment of Native Americans would have further expanded our knowledge of van Ilpendam's life in seventeenth-century Albany. Indians are a frequent presence in *Death of a Notary*, but they often appear as an almost generic presence. Merwick usually identifies Mohawk and Mahican, but just as

frequently, groups of native peoples receive no identification. Instead, they are described simply as "natives." This is perhaps because Merwick wants the reader to see Beverwijck, Albany, New Netherland, and New York through Dutch eyes, ultimately through Adriaen van Ilpendam's eyes. But given that van Ilpendam's world certainly included Native Americans, it is not clear why Merwick concludes that he would have known so little about them. The resulting treatment is a bit jarring amidst Merwick's otherwise careful attention to historical context.

Similarly, some readers will find Merwick's use of the present tense to be problematic. *Death of a Notary* uses the present tense, rather than the past tense, throughout the text. In the "Epitaph," Merwick writes, "[W]e are told that in any military adventure, the first casualty is truth. I think it is not. Janse is a reminder that the first casualties are people" (xvi). And it is clear to the reader from the first sentence that Merwick seeks to bring us into van Ilpendam's life with immediacy. She succeeds in doing so to an extraordinary degree, and she succeeds in part, through the narrative device of writing in the present tense. In the hands of some historians, this might be a disaster, but Merwick combines extensive research and careful contextualism with her use of the present tense, and, on the whole, it works to draw the reader into sympathetic engagement with Adriaen Janse van Ilpendam's world. *Death of a Notary* ends with the question with which it opened: why did Adriaen Janse van Ilpendam kill himself? To say that van Ilpendam committed suicide because he could not cope with the transition from Dutch law and culture to English law and culture is too simple. And ultimately, Merwick presents a more complex scenario. Indeed, Merwick points out that the exact reasons for van Ilpendam's suicide are probably irrecoverable. In the final analysis, this is a book about a man's life, not about his death. Significantly, *Death of a Notary* demonstrates persuasively that even the life of an apparently unimportant and unsuccessful colonist was embedded in a larger Atlantic context. That context included transatlantic ties of kinship and patronage, as well as the goals and policies of European empires planned and carried out differently on both sides of the Atlantic. All of those things affected Adriaen Janse van Ilpendam. The imposition of English law and government made it very difficult for him to function as a schoolmaster and a notary, and otherwise to earn a living. He quickly found himself on the outskirts of the system of administrative appointments, and he struggled to adapt to a new legal and colonial system, one that did not rely on notaries to function smoothly.

But Merwick's evidence suggests that other factors exacerbated van Ilpendam's difficulties. Van Ilpendam was growing older during the years when his world changed so dramatically, and his advancing age meant that he was less able to sustain himself in uncertain circumstances. The death of close relatives who controlled an inheritance in the United Provinces, combined with English imperial restrictions on travel of colonists from the former Dutch colony of New Netherland, also dealt a crucial blow to van Ilpendam's ability to survive in New York. He lost a much needed source of income in the shifting winds of the Atlantic World, because he was not able to maintain transatlantic

connections after the English conquest of New Netherland or to travel freely between New York and the United Provinces.

And yet, ultimately, it does not really matter which aspects of the transition from Dutch to English control of the colony were more costly to Adriaen Janse van Ilpendam. In the end, Donna Merwick has shown us how precarious life could be for colonists in seventeenth-century North America. *Death of a Notary* depicts the world of some seventeenth-century Dutch colonists, and the ways in which that world altered dramatically and painfully with the coming of the English. Scholars of early American history need to know more about the cost of empires for all who were part of them. *Death of a Notary* offers us a way to begin to think about those costs within a larger context, through the example of a humble and struggling man.

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