

How the Old World Ended: The Anglo-Dutch-American Revolution 1500-1800

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Reviewer: Tim Hasker

Jonathan Scott, Professor of History at the University of Auckland, in his recent book, *How the Old World Ended* (2019), has provided an intellectual bridge between the early modern period and the modern world, which was born out of the Industrial Revolution. This comprehensive study aims to explain why the Industrial Revolution started in England and how that connected to England's relationships with the Netherlands and their former colonies in the United States. What emerges is a fascinating analysis into three countries that throughout the 300 years concerned were intertwined by politics, economics, and religion.

The rise of England (and later the British Empire) is very much at the forefront of Scott's research. In some respects the book, contrary to the title, is less about the Anglo-Dutch-American Revolution and is, rather, an explanation of how the British century came to fruition. As such, the book can be viewed as a sequel to Scott's pivotal work *England's Troubles* (2000), and both pieces bookmark what has been a turbulent two decades in the UK's (primarily England's) relationship with the European Union. What started as a debate around the common currency has ended in Brexit and, just as it would be a mistake to view these events in isolation, so too does Scott argue that the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent British century have to be viewed within their wider European and transatlantic context.

Scott is not the first New Zealander to explore this subject matter. His work differs from that of J. G. A. Pocock, however, in the focus that it gives to the influence of the Dutch. Pocock coined the phrase Atlantic Archipelago as an attempt to reframe our understanding of the history of the British Isles. Pocock argued that the British Isles should be studied as a unique entity within Europe due to their connection with America. (1) In contrast, Scott expands this concept to the Anglo-Dutch-American Archipelago, arguing that, in order to appreciate the transatlantic relationship between Britain and America, the British Isles's role as a fully integrated European nation must be understood. Scott acknowledges that *How the World Ended* is not a monograph of archival research, and this is not surprising, given the scope of discussion covered. In fact, considering the breadth of topics which are examined across 300 years and three nations, it is remarkably impressive that Scott managed to condense it to 392 pages. Rather than view the lack of archival research as a drawback, it is more productive to see this work as a launchpad for further research. It is a rallying cry to historians who share Scott's outlook—on bottom-up history and the importance of

international links—to pick up on the numerous areas he has outlined in this book.

Part one explains how the Netherlands emerged as the economic powerhouse of 17th-century Europe, and how unlikely its foundations for the Industrial Revolution were within early modern society. Myriad circumstances combined to result in what is now known as the Dutch Golden Age, a period in Dutch history which saw the Dutch secure their independence from the Spanish Empire and become the urban centre of Europe. Scott argues, however, that this outcome was not planned, and was by no means guaranteed. Instead, an essential factor here was the geographical shift in the centre of political, religious, and economic power during the 16th and 17th centuries, away from the Mediterranean into north western Europe. On this point, Scott provides a refreshingly transnational perspective on an issue which is too often treated in national isolation: why did the Mediterranean powers perish on the world stage and the north western European countries prosper? Much of the technology that enabled the rise of early modern Europe, including printing, navigation, and gunpowder, was developed first in Asia, particularly in China. Scott argues, however, that a restrictive Chinese society suppressed these advancements. It was in Europe, without a central power to prevent their proliferation, that these technologies were able to fulfil their potential. Scott could go into greater detail about whether the Roman Catholic Church acted as a restrictive central power in the Mediterranean, therefore explaining why the predominantly Calvinist states of north western Europe were able to capitalise on the new advancements.

Nowhere was this more the case than in the United Provinces of the Netherlands, where Calvinist beliefs combined with geography and a political struggle for independence to create a perfect storm for technological progress. Water, Scott contends, forced the Dutch to constantly innovate, helping them withstand the Spanish. Additionally, the Dutch waterways and access to the North Sea allowed bulk trading of essentials, such as grain from the Baltic, which in turn enabled the Dutch to move away from demographic constraints and to produce market-oriented agriculture. Meanwhile, the succession of Philip II in Spain and the rise of Calvinism, influenced by the influx of Huguenot refugees from France, sparked religious and political revolt. It is against this backdrop of urbanisation and the defence of Protestant republicanism that the destinies of the Netherlands and England became intertwined. During their struggle for independence, the Dutch had asked Elizabeth I to become their sovereign in 1584. After she declined, the revolt adopted a unique republican stance. Religious tolerance and localised authority empowered the Dutch provinces to become economic hubs, and when Spain threatened this with embargoes, they adapted. In response to Spanish aggression, the Dutch invested in advancing long-range trade voyages to the East Indies to overcome the sanctions imposed on Mediterranean goods. Scott concludes part one by explaining how England, fundamentally different to the Netherlands during the 16th century, came to use the Dutch as a model for advancement in the first half of the 17th. For example, Scott highlights how economic policy in England after 1649 was designed along Dutch lines, utilising excise levies to build a fiscally solvent state and a modern economy. According to Scott, essential to this transformation was a shared belief in Calvinist doctrine, which sought to break the oppression of religious compulsion as well as economic and social restrictions. The result was a reorganisation of English society that institutionally and morally followed the Dutch model.

In part two, Scott advances this view, stating that 1649 represented a turning point in not just British and European, but global history. Arguably, it is in this section that Scott reveals the true purpose of this book. Rather than purely an explanation for why Britain emerged as the first industrialised nation, it is also a redemptive piece for the English Republic (1649–53). The English Republic, according to Scott, has been unfairly maligned as ineffective, and consequently written out of its rightful place in history. Partly responsible for this is a misunderstanding of Oliver Cromwell's role during the interregnum—Scott argues that many of the achievements of this period were in spite of Cromwell and inspired by Dutch republicans. However, Scott is potentially too dismissive of Cromwell, failing to thoroughly explore why the Republic collapsed in 1653. Despite the focus on the Republic and its achievements, the dissolution of the Rump Parliament and the introduction of Cromwell's Protectorate are granted less than two pages' coverage. This is a missed opportunity, as it could be argued that the history of the Protectorate complements elements of Scott's overall argument. For example, Paul Lay, in his recent book, *Providence Lost: The Rise and Fall of Cromwell's Protectorate*

(2020), argues that Cromwell's attempt to encourage religious toleration was inspired by the Dutch. This can be seen in his decision to allow the readmission of Jews to the Protectorate; in addition to a religious motivation (the hope that they could be converted to Christianity) this act had an economic motive. Cromwell had seen how key the Jewish community had been to the economic success of the Netherlands and wanted to utilise their skills. (2) Arguably one of the most successful achievements of Cromwell was the unification, albeit forced, of England and Scotland, which helped establish the British Isles as a continental power. Scott recognises that the creation of Great Britain as a political entity was pivotal in the development of the British Empire. However, the collapse of the Protectorate undid this and it would be another half century before the Act of the Union created the Kingdom of Great Britain. As such, while Scott is right to highlight history's tendency to overstate Cromwell, one should be careful not to dismiss him either.

Scott attempts to redeem the historical importance of the English Republic by focusing on the importance of its imitation of the Dutch. What is not clear, however, is which Scott believes to be more important—and most responsible for shaping the events of the late 17th century: religion or commerce? On the one hand, Scott buttresses Christopher Hill's argument that England's experiment with republicanism made the nation a haven for capitalism, which Scott contends they learnt from imitating the Dutch. The English had copied the Dutch economic models to such an extent that, by the 1650s, they viewed the Dutch as sufficient threat to their emerging maritime economy to warrant going to war. On the other hand, Scott also argues that for the 17th-century Dutch and English, religion permeated all aspects of society, from economics to politics. This can be seen in the English Civil Wars through to the deposing of the Catholic King James II in favour of William of Orange in the Glorious Revolution. Moreover, on both a domestic and international level, religious conviction led Cromwell to seize control and to institute many of the infrastructural changes which turned the British Isles into a modern state.

Throughout his account, Scott echoes the voices of historical figures who share his view that the English Republic played a more important role than the one history has granted it. The most prominent of these was Algernon Sidney, for whom the years of the English Republic were solely responsible for transforming a failed state into Europe's foremost power. In addition to Sidney, the 17th-century essayist William Temple argued that not only did the English need to imitate the Dutch; they needed to surpass them as the economic power house of Europe. This process was started by the English republicans, and was sufficiently successful to ensure that it survived the restoration, eventually resulting in the Dutch Stadtholder becoming the King of England, thus securing adherence to the Dutch model.

In the final section, Scott brings his thinking together and concludes his argument that the Anglo-Dutch-American Revolution brought about not just the Industrial Revolution but also a new age: the Anglo-Dutch-American Enlightenment. Despite being one third of the title, America is not granted the same level of attention which Scott warrants for England and the Netherlands. This is possibly intentional, as Scott aims to reduce the exceptionalism of the American Revolution and place it within the broader context of the Anglo-Dutch-American Archipelago. Rather than a novel, standalone event, the American War of Independence was the culmination of a series of precedents that the Dutch and English Revolutions had started. While each revolution was unique in its context, they all shared a desire to establish a particular type of liberty: the freedom to advance a form of capitalism established by the Dutch, perfected and exported by the English, but now under threat from a tyrannical parliament which had lost sight of its origins.

Scott makes hardly any mention of the French Revolution, despite arguing that it is intertwined with the others described. The lack of focus on the French Revolution can perhaps be explained by the fact that, unlike the Anglo-Dutch-American Revolution, it was based on the secular ideology of radical equality rather than on Protestant capitalism. Nevertheless, as one of the most important events of the early modern period, more attention could be given to how the French Revolution ties into the formation of the modern world according to Scott's model.

Scott's *How the Old World Ended* is fascinating, and draws on myriad primary and secondary sources to help explain the circumstances which caused the Industrial Revolution, providing a fresh insight into how

the early modern world interconnected across national borders. In particular, his focus on the influence of the Dutch on the English and American Revolutions is welcome, as it could be argued that this vital link has been written out of popular history on both sides of the Atlantic. This book also serves as a means of redemption for the place of the Republic, in not just English and European, but global history. Much of the focus is on how the Industrial Revolution and the establishment of the British Empire were due to the achievements made during the four years when England was ruled by the republican Rump Parliament. *How the Old World Ended* presents a provoking challenge to early modern historians—Scott’s argument is transnational and multi-faceted, encompassing economic, political, social, and religious history. His bold claim that 1649 and the republic which followed was responsible for the modern world as we know it is deliberately challenging. As stated at the start of this review, Scott’s book covers extensive ground and it will be interesting to see what further study it provokes and whether it is successful in redeeming the English Republic.

Notes:

1. G. A. Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History* (Cambridge, 2005)
2. Lay, *Providence Lost: The Rise and Fall of Cromwell’s Protectorate* (London, 2020)

The author has received the review and appreciates the full and careful discussion of his book.

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