

# Navigating History: Economy, Society, Knowledge, and Nature

*Essays in Honour of Prof. Dr C.A. Davids*

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# Dauids and Goliath: How Books Helped to Combat Historians' Adversaries

*Marjolein 't Hart and Jan Lucassen*

For Dik van Arkel, Professor of Social History at Leiden and one of Karel Davids's distinguished lecturers, Goliath really existed. Van Arkel believed that it was the social scientist's mission to beat the monster of fascism, national socialism and racialism through systematic research aimed at uncovering historical truth, supported by Popper's maxims of traceability, repeatability and falsification. He thus drew a link between Popper and the social responsibility of the intellectual.<sup>1</sup> These ideals were shared by Peter Klein, who lectured in economic history at Leiden, and had met a similar Goliath in person during WW II, though he rarely spoke of his experiences.<sup>2</sup> The trio was completed by Jaap Bruijn, Leiden's professor in maritime history, who stressed, above all, the truth-seeking historian's obligation to undertake careful empirical research.<sup>3</sup> The lessons of all three teachers fell on fertile soil in the person of Karel Davids, who combined meticulous research with a profound sense of justice.

Leiden did not provide the only ground for Davids's inspiration; his experiences in Rotterdam and New York also contributed substantially to his scholarly formation. At Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Department of History was in its early years of construction, enabling it to appoint prominent social historians such as Rina Lis, Hugo Soly and Wim Blockmans. Perhaps not accidentally, all three came from Belgium, with its great tradition of social and

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- 1 Netty Bremer and Chris Quispel, "Dik van Arkel. Proeve van een portret," in *Onderscheid & minderheid, Sociaal-historische opstellen over discriminatie & vooroordeel, aangeboden aan Dik van Arkel bij zijn afscheid als hoogleraar in de sociale geschiedenis aan de Rijksuniversiteit te Leiden*, eds. Herman Diederiks and Chris Quispel (Hilversum: Verloren, 1987).
  - 2 C.A. Davids, W. Fritschy, R. Raben, and L.A. van der Valk, "Inleiding," in *Kapitaal, ondernemerschap en beleid. Studies over economie en politiek in Nederland, Europa en Azië van 1500 tot heden*, eds. Karel Davids, Wantje Fritschy and Loes van der Valk (Amsterdam: NEHA, 1996); Karel Davids, "Levensbericht van Peter Wolfgang Klein," in *Levensberichten en herdenkingen KNAW* (2015).
  - 3 Leo Akveld, "Jaap R. Bruijn: Een leven vol zee-geschiedenis in een notendop," in *In het kielzog: Maritiem-historische studies aangeboden aan Jaap R. Bruijn bij zijn vertrek als hoogleraar zee-geschiedenis aan de Universiteit Leiden*, eds. Leo Akveld et al. (Amsterdam: De Bataafse Leeuw, 2003).

economic history inspired by the French *Annales* School and Henri Pirenne. They also maintained links to the recent, more Weberian, social history of the Bielefeld School in Germany. In New York, Davids spent a semester at the Center for Historical Studies at the New School for Social Research, led by the prominent historical sociologist Charles Tilly. Like Van Arkel, all of these mentors shared a sense of the social responsibility of the historian, producing publications that often focused on the common people, on poverty and exploitation, and on rebellion and representation. They ascertained the advantages of methods and concepts from the social sciences, not least comparative methodologies, as a way to beat Goliath's attempts to misinform the public with tendentious and selective history.

Davids always sought, and thus found, plenty of intellectual inspiration, but his exceptionally rich publication list of the past 45 years reveals how he developed as an independent intellectual, well-anchored in empiricism while also striving to develop theory.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, he preferred to avoid the perhaps all-too-ambitious designs of Van Arkel and Tilly, remaining more safely on the meso-level. The themes he studied could be captured in a table of contents ranging from such subjects as maritime history and the history of technology to human beings and their animals, Atlantic history, and so forth. Yet this would not explain how his intellectual focus expanded from the Netherlands to other European countries and then to the Atlantic and beyond, nor how he departed from the early modern period to end up writing books that covered a thousand years or more.

It is more helpful to follow Davids's steps with reference to a selection of core publications that capture his development over the years. We start with his dissertation *Zeewezen en Wetenschap* [*Seafaring and Science*] (1986), which combined maritime history with the history of science. We follow with the volume *A Miracle Mirrored* (1996), which connected different historical approaches in a comparative framework. The third section discusses *The Rise and Decline of Dutch Technological Leadership* (2008), which studied longer-term developments in an even broader comparative perspective. We end with *De wereld en Nederland* (2011) and *Religion, Technology and the Great and Little Divergences* (2013), which charted his successful evolution into a global historian.

## 1 Doctoral Thesis: Hypotheses and Interdisciplinarity

The topic of Davids's doctoral thesis initially combined the interests of two of his supervisors: Van Arkel's predilection for a Popperian approach to history

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<sup>4</sup> See the list of publications by Karel Davids in this volume.

and Bruijn's preoccupation with Dutch maritime history. Davids analysed the development of transoceanic navigation technology in the Netherlands between 1585 and 1815, by way of formal hypotheses that could be falsified. The history of science acted as a framework, or more precisely: "The subject of this book is the consumption of science. Its objective is to establish under what conditions scientific findings are adopted outside of the strictly scientific environment."<sup>5</sup> He examined 444 ships' logbooks, 286 seafarers' probate inventories (selected from 20,000 inventories!) containing one or more navigation devices, inventories of ships, travel accounts, the records of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and other companies, all available navigation textbooks and manuals published in the Netherlands between 1550 and 1820, as well as other primary sources including navigation devices preserved in museums or recovered from shipwrecks.

His book explored the interaction of the demand for and supply of innovative devices. The seafaring community was willing to adopt an innovation if it was aware of its existence and in a position to do so, financially or otherwise. On the supply side, innovations depended upon "diffusion agencies"; or, in other words, "institutions that are used by government agencies or private organizations as distribution channels for innovation."<sup>6</sup> The exploratory systems and navigational practices that entailed the use of innovative devices developed along two paths. The first involved the imposition of innovations from above, a method that had become generally accepted by the mid-eighteenth century, in particular in the East India Trade and the Navy. The second continued along the path of free decision-making, whereby crews themselves chose whether to use innovative devices. This latter path predominated in the other seafaring branches. Each chapter tackled a different hypothesis emanating from the latest research in the field, tested its validity, and structured the evidence in a highly transparent way. Remarkably, he found that the pace of innovations imposed from above was similar in complex organizations like the VOC and the more diffuse bodies of the Navy. Institutional aspects such as these would return time and again in Davids's later work. Another striking aspect concerned the interaction between practitioners and scientists, a topic that would also remain on his future agenda. In the Dutch case, that interaction occurred at a remarkably early stage.

In this way, his doctoral thesis showed how numerous factors interacted in the adoption of innovations in oceanic navigation, a problem that had initially

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5 Karel Davids, *Zeevezen en wetenschap. De wetenschap en de ontwikkeling van de navigatietechniek in Nederland tussen 1585 en 1815* (Amsterdam/Dieren: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1986), 378.

6 *Ibid.*, 383.

seemed so simple and straightforward. Although one might assume that all seafarers had always welcomed possible improvements to their situation, Davids elucidated the different roles played by specific actors to bring these innovations about. Scientific advancement formed just one of the considerations involved. The multifaceted and multi-layered character of his analysis would also be evident in his next major project, which would reach a much wider audience, as it was published in English.

## 2 Overcoming Divisions between Sub-disciplines in *A Miracle Mirrored*

Davids was aware of the disadvantages of overspecialization from very early on in his academic career. His own doctoral thesis combined economic, social and maritime history with the history of science. The publication of *A Miracle Mirrored* constituted an ambitious attempt to integrate social and economic history with the history of politics, culture and religion. In order to understand Davids's role in this major historiographic project, we first need to consider developments in the historical world from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s.

In the course of the 1960s, the methodology of the French *Annales* school had gained ground among Dutch historians. The *Annales* historians' radical departure from "political event history," their interdisciplinary approach, and their attention to the material culture of daily life, above all in the countryside, attracted an energetic group of historians under Bernhard Slicher van Bath in Wageningen. With his staff, in particular Ad van der Woude, Joop Faber, and Henk Roessingh, Slicher set out to reconstruct the demographic history of the Netherlands before 1800 and this country's rich history of agricultural specialization, topics that had received little attention to date. Unlike most Dutch historians of the time, they actively participated in international conferences and also published in French and English, gained an international audience, and inspired foreign historians such as Jan de Vries.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Marxist approaches were gaining ground, above all in Utrecht under Theo van Tijn, who applied the method of base and superstructure in his study of the history of Amsterdam.<sup>8</sup> The base constituted demographics and economics, also

<sup>7</sup> Ad van der Woude, "Dertig jaar agrarische geschiedenis," *A.A.G. Bijdragen* 28 (1986).

<sup>8</sup> K. Davids and J. Lucassen, "Sociale geschiedenis: Een momentopname," in *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 10 (1984); M. van der Linden and J. Lucassen, "Social History in the Netherlands," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 23 (1997); Jacques van Gerwen et al., eds., *Economic History in the Netherlands 1914–2014. Trends and debates* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

a focus of the *Annales* and Wageningen schools. The *Annales* approach gradually gained so much influence that the separate volumes of the authoritative *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* [General History of the Netherlands, 1977–1983] started with sections on geography and demography, an entirely new phenomenon in the field of Dutch history. The fifteen volumes of the *Algemene Geschiedenis* were received with approval, but also much criticism. Prominent traditionalist historians disapproved of the relatively limited space devoted to political history; social and economic historians complained that the structuralist approach robbed workers of their agency; and historians of religion and culture felt threatened by the dominant materialistic tendencies.

A new generation of social and economic historians was concerned about what they saw as false contradictions with a tendency to drive different branches of history even further apart. Davids stood at the centre of an attempt to escape from this blind alley of mutual mistrust. After a meeting of young historians to discuss the future of social and economic history, held at the International Institute of Social History (1987), he, Jan Luiten van Zanden and Jan Lucassen decided to write a brochure entitled *De Nederlandse geschiedenis als afwijking van het algemeen menselijk patroon. Een aanzet tot een programma van samenwerking* [The history of the Netherlands as a deviation from the general human pattern: towards a collaborative programme, 1988].<sup>9</sup> It set out to invite the various branches of historical scholarship to cooperate and submit a proposal on how to proceed. It argued that the case study should be the long-term history of the Netherlands, which should be tackled from different sub-disciplines and draw on international comparisons.

The brochure was discussed at a conference in May 1988 and provoked much debate.<sup>10</sup> The event resulted in an invitation from the prestigious Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study at Wassenaar to work on this groundbreaking project. From September 1992 to July 1993, the scheme brought together scholars with an intimate knowledge of the history of different countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy, Germany and Great Britain) and of different branches of history: social, political, economic, religious and cultural. Their efforts were reinforced by an impressive number of colleagues who actively participated in their workshops. The result was *A Miracle Mirrored. The Dutch Republic in European Perspective*, a coherent volume of essays

9 Karel Davids, Jan Lucassen and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *De Nederlandse geschiedenis als afwijking van het algemeen menselijk patroon. Een aanzet tot een programma van samenwerking* (Amsterdam: NEHA, 1988).

10 Karel Davids, Jan Lucassen and Jan Luiten van Zanden, "Schaduwboxen van Righart. Over samenwerking van Nederlandse historici," *Spiegel Historicael* 23 (1988): 492.

edited by Davids and Lucassen and published by Cambridge University Press in 1995.<sup>11</sup>

The introduction formulated the two guiding questions: first, “to what extent [was] the course of economic, socio-political and cultural developments in the Northern Netherlands [...] actually different from the path taken by other areas in western and central Europe during the later Middle Ages and the early modern period”; and second, to investigate “the interrelationships of developments in the economic, socio-political and cultural domains.” In order to visualize the successive leading European polities since the late Middle Ages, Davids introduced the concept of the “blue banana.” This notion, popularized among economists and urban geographers, printed in blue in one of their first publications, showed the arch of densely-urbanized areas upwards from Northern Italy into the Netherlands, and across the North Sea towards the British West-Midlands. The time dimensions of this spatial pattern referred to “a pattern of cities of Europe which in turn dominated European commerce or manufacturing from the Late Middle Ages onwards” and “the gradual shift of commercial and industrial hegemony from south to North-West Europe.”<sup>12</sup>

The results of this exercise proved rewarding as an alternative to the traditional European history of the early modern period. The joint project, which had started as a wake-up call for the Dutch historical community, ended in an attempt at rewriting not only the history of the Low Countries in the early modern era, but also of European history, sustained thanks to the committed driving-force of Davids. With reference to theoreticians such as Stein Rokkan and Charles Tilly, the book concluded:

The “upscaling” in centres of leadership in Europe during the early modern period was partly a matter of what by Chandler’s theory on modern industrial enterprise might be called “organisational capabilities.” Like big firms, combinations of cities and, even more, nation states were able to pool and recruit more human and physical resources and commanded more “management” skills than single towns [...]. The Dutch Republic was in this respect better armed for the rivalry in the international states-system than, for instance, city-states in northern Italy, but worse off than

11 Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen, eds., *A miracle mirrored. The Dutch Republic in European perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), published in paperback in 2011; the Dutch translation, *Een wonder weerspiegeld. De Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden in Europees perspectief* (Amsterdam: Aksant Academic Publishers, 2005), sold out.

12 Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen, “Introduction,” in *A Miracle Mirrored*, 4–5, 12.

Georgian Britain or other great powers in the eighteenth century, like Prussia and France.<sup>13</sup>

As such, this enterprise also served as a warning to historians about the danger of overspecialization in sub-disciplines.

### 3 Dutch Technological Leadership: Extending Comparisons in Time and Space

Dauids's own essay in *A Miracle Mirrored* had dealt with the concept of "technological leadership."<sup>14</sup> He extended the argument in a longer book on the *Technological Leadership of the Netherlands* in a much broader comparative way and within a much wider context, namely in a study of the relation between technology and the economy in general.<sup>15</sup> The challenge in this book constituted the mystifying tendency of historians to regard technology as a kind of "black box" that could explain the presence or absence of economic growth. The central concept of the book was the "circulation of knowledge," a term that had become a mainstay in Dauids's publications and lectures since 2006, and that would also form the centre of one of his major research projects, coordinated with Bert de Munck.

In his *Technological Leadership of the Netherlands*, Dauids measured leadership using an innovative instrument, the "technological balance of trade," which recorded international technology transfers and thus the circulation of designs and methods. He showed that up to 1680, the Dutch imported more knowledge from abroad than they exported, but that in the 1680s, this trend was transformed into an export surplus that would remain in place up until 1800. These exports were determined, above all, by the huge demand in other countries for Dutch "useful knowledge," supported by an advanced environment at home favouring publications on all sorts of technical issues.<sup>16</sup>

Remarkably, however, the velocity of inventions in the Netherlands was lower in the eighteenth than in the seventeenth century, with the exception of the water management sector, which continued to produce groundbreaking innovative devices. Although technical development did not come to a halt,

13 Karel Dauids and Jan Lucassen, "Conclusion," in *A miracle mirrored*, 458.

14 Karel Dauids, "Shifts of technological leadership in early modern Europe," in *A miracle mirrored*, 338–366.

15 Karel Dauids, *The rise and decline of Dutch technological leadership. Technology, economy and culture in the Netherlands, 1350–1800*. Two volumes (Leiden, Brill 2008).

16 Cf. Mokyr's contribution in this volume.

the century before 1680 had shown a much higher degree of vitality. This had nothing to do with high wages, guild restrictions or failing institutions, since these factors remained relatively constant throughout the period under study. More important was the absence of a link between “useful knowledge” and the development of “formal knowledge,” in contrast to the British situation, in which these two fields interacted in a fruitful way. As a result, the available resources were exploited to a lower degree than would have been possible. Technology, despite its advanced stage, could not prevent the Dutch economy from stagnating.

#### 4 The Global Turn and the Role of Religion

With the publication of *De wereld en Nederland. Een sociale en economische geschiedenis van de laatste duizend jaar* [The world and the Netherlands. A social and economic history of the last thousand years, 2011], which he co-edited with Marjolein 't Hart, Davids achieved a daring and remarkable breakthrough in the new field of global history. The volume was followed a little later by his *Religion, Technology and the Great and Little Divergences* (2013). The idea of writing the first book emanated from Davids's complaint, made during a meeting of a reading club that was discussing the latest issues of leading international journals, regarding the lack of a good, up-to-date student textbook in the field of social and economic history. At that time, textbooks took the relatively traditional approach of presenting chapters focused on national units such as the Netherlands, England, France and Germany.<sup>17</sup> Davids had already complained about such shortcomings in *A Miracle Mirrored*:

Textbook “European” history of the early modern period has often been written by lumping together bits and pieces of various national histories in a fairly conventional way. Thus a standard history textbook would discuss an Italian Renaissance, a German Reformation, a Dutch Revolt, an English Civil War and a French Enlightenment. Its account of rural life would largely be based upon the French experience, and the section about cities would concentrate on Germany with a dash of Paris and London. The chapter on state formation would jump from Spain in the sixteenth century to France in the seventeenth century to Prussia and

<sup>17</sup> Boudien de Vries et al., eds., *Van agrarische samenleving naar verzorgingsstaat. De modernisering van West-Europa sinds de vijftiende eeuw* (Groningen: Wolters, 1987).

Russia in the eighteenth century and back to France, just in time for the storming of the Bastille.<sup>18</sup>

This was all the more problematic because historians were increasingly calling for a less nationally-oriented, Eurocentric approach, and instead favoured large-scale comparisons with other regions, such as the Far East. At the same time, social and economic historians were engaging in a wide array of global debates, not least the debate on the Great Divergence, the phenomenon whereby economic and technological advances in Western European countries far outstripped those in other continents. The approach of the book was discussed at a meeting in New York during Davids's sabbatical at Columbia University, with leading social scientists and historians such as Julia Adams, Philip Gorski, Martha Howell, Ira Katznelson, Ann McCants, Steven Pincus and Wayne te Brake, to mention just a few. The team that eventually wrote the chapters was recruited from the journal-reading club mentioned above. In addition to Davids and 't Hart, it included Lex Heerma van Voss, Manon van der Heijden, Leo Lucassen and Jeroen Touwen. This enhanced cooperation and the coherence of the volume, since this group had already discussed numerous debates among themselves.

The template of the book started from three basic problems in history: power (chapters on social-political history), income (chapters on social-economic history) and risks (chapters on the history of groups and mentalities), and their interrelations. The dividing line constituted the time period around 1800, which coincided roughly with the time period of the "Great Divergence," thereby separating the book into Part 1: pre-modern history and Part 2: modern history. The "Little Divergence" prepared the ground for the Great Divergence in 1600–1800, which would result in North-Western (Atlantic) Europe gradually taking the lead within Europe. Throughout the volume, the history of the Netherlands was situated within a comparative framework of key global changes over the last thousand years, attempting to ascertain whether the Netherlands stood at the forefront of certain developments or whether it was actually following others. The book thereby challenged the common parochial claim that the Netherlands had followed a unique historical path shaped by advantageous principles, such as an early tendency towards democracy and a high degree of toleration. The book was extremely successful; in the following years, it became obligatory reading for many Bachelor's students of history in the Netherlands and on teacher training courses. The book also sold well on the general market, enabling a new edition to be published in 2017.

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18 Davids and Lucassen, "Conclusion," 453–454.

Dauids's *Religion, Technology and the Great and Little Divergences* (2013) is discussed in another contribution to this book, so just a few general remarks regarding this publication will suffice.<sup>19</sup> The misperception that Dauids wished to combat in this volume was the widely-held belief that Protestantism mattered in "the Rise of the West." The outcome of his study gave an original boost to the debate: not Protestantism per se, but religious institutions in Europe, including numerous Catholic institutions, supported the development of technology in the direction of "useful knowledge." Whereas on many accounts, Europe and the Far East had achieved a similar level of economic development before 1800, the dynamic toward innovation proved much stronger in Europe than in China. In the latter country, everything ultimately emanated from the enormous power of the central authorities. In Europe, market forces, local authorities and religious institutions all shared a role in the dissemination and development of technology and science, partly through competition, often by copying each other, and often by supporting educational institutions in the field of technology and science. The various actors in the field and the widespread use of printing created open access to and an exchange of knowledge, whereas censorship in a vast country such as China, controlled by a strong state, stifled innovation.

Students and scholars in search of historical truth must battle numerous adversaries: pernicious misperceptions, persistent mystifications, false assumptions, damaging divides caused by disciplinary boundaries, parochialism and exceptionalism. During the last 45 years, Dauids has managed to combat these obstacles by elucidating the advantages of interdisciplinarity, comparative history, the use of concepts from the social sciences, and, last but certainly not least, by his careful distinguishing of the main component parts of and requirements for historical explanations. In doing so, he has often stepped outside the traditional dividing lines of the separate historical sub-disciplines, by exploring the possibilities of the history of science and engineering, of economic history, of environmental history, and recently, of religious history. He has also brought people together from quite different backgrounds and fields and managed to proceed with ambitious plans, creating opportunities for numerous young scholars, as is testified by the impressive number of doctoral theses he has supervised.<sup>20</sup> His exemplary approach, supported by Popper's maxims, has broadened the field of systematic comparative history from the Netherlands to Europe, to the Atlantic world, and finally to East Asia and the globe as a whole, whilst covering increasingly long periods of time, and ultimately

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Mokyr's contribution in this volume.

<sup>20</sup> See the list of doctoral theses supervised by Karel Dauids in this volume.

the past 1,500 years. Goliath might not have been defeated, but Davids has surely managed to get him cornered.

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