

Book Reviews

Peer Vries and Annelieke Vries, *Atlas of Material Life. Northwestern Europe and East Asia, 15th to 19th Century* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020). 340 p. ISBN 9789087283544.

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'I wrote that book when I had extensive care responsibilities, so I wasn't able to leave home for long periods to do research in China. It was intended as a book written between projects, based largely on secondary sources and materials I already had at home.' It might surprise readers that this was Kenneth Pomeranz speaking informally in 2009 on a walk through the streets of London about *The Great Divergence* (Princeton 2000). That book requires no introduction to readers of *TSEG – The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History*; as is well known, the book breathed new life into the discipline of economic history and can be seen as an important factor behind the enormous growth of the field of global history. Pomeranz' idea that Europe and Asia (or more precisely, north-western Europe and the Yangzi delta in China) diverged economically, but not until the late eighteenth century, and only because of contingent factors, loosely identified as 'coal and colonies', also led to the appearance of a substantial number of further publications with the word 'divergence' in the title, including several book-length studies by one of the authors of *Atlas of Material Life*. As the authors point out in 'A brief introduction', however, students keen on arguing over such major topics as divergence, globalisation or the economic impact of slavery often miss 'the most basic facts concerning the societies that [are] being discussed' (p. 9). This atlas is written for them, offering 'easily accessible, basic data' (p. 9).

The detailed table of contents serves as a useful guide to the contents of *Atlas of Material Life*. There are chapters on geography and demography, energy, resources, agriculture and exchanges, stagnation and growth, sources of growth (including one on changes in production and transport and one on markets and states), the great divergence and lastly, a brief 'review and reflection'. The content of the book reveals the

economic landscape of the period, leaving out everything that is more difficult to capture in maps, tables, graphs and figures, such as spiritual, political, or broadly speaking, 'cultural life'. Of course, this does not mean that there are no interpretive choices that shape the contents of this book. There is a strong comparative element that places the data on Europe (notably England and the Netherlands) on one side of the equation, the data on East Asia (primarily China and Japan) on the other side of the equation and allows the reader to measure East Asia against the European model, where 'modern economic growth originated with the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain' (p. 185). While not everyone might agree with that statement, as the authors themselves point out, the *Atlas* never hides its position. Throughout the book, the data is presented clearly and succinctly, drawn from a very wide array of mostly secondary sources but organised in a manner that makes comparisons across space and time feasible. Much of that clear presentation is due to the work done by Annelieke Vries: she is responsible for all the excellent maps as well as the lay-out of the book.

It is not a book for reading from cover to cover, but a resource to find data. Perhaps it is somewhat surprising, then, that there is no index. If one wanted to find the price of bread in the seventeenth-century Netherlands (p. 111), or the kind of crops grown in rural China in the eighteenth century (p. 123), one has to do a bit of searching. Perhaps here the online version of the book will be helpful. But while searching, one always comes across other interesting nuggets of information, such as the map of cities in Europe with printing presses in 1500 (p. 221) or the graph showing the number of millionaire business families in late Tokugawa and early Meiji Japan (p. 316).

In many ways, this book is not unlike Pomeranz' book: its focus is on the comparison between north-western Europe and East Asia (though the additional information on Japan is very helpful), and its chronological span stretches from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It does not remedy Pomeranz' lack of attention to South Asia, nor does it substantially move on from the so-called 'Needham question', which was first formulated by the Cambridge biochemist Joseph Needham (1900-1995) and asked why Europe industrialized and modernized and Asia did not. And like Pomeranz' book, it is largely based on secondary sources (though probably for very different reasons). But its real value lies in making the very complex, often inaccessible and mostly incomparable data contained in those scattered sources simple, accessible and comparable, and that makes this a very welcome contribution

to the arsenal of resources we can make use of in teaching but also in our research. We owe the Vrieses a dept of gratitude for doing this.

Anne Gerritsen, University of Warwick and Leiden University

Lotte Jensen (ed.), *Crisis en catastrofie. De Nederlandse omgang met rampen in de lange negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021). 282 p. ISBN 9463722564.

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Culture occupies a liminal space in Low Countries historical disaster studies. Social-economic analyses have generally stood centre stage, prompted in part by social science-driven trends in disaster studies more broadly. These social-economic approaches have lent robust new interpretations of historical disaster causation and deepened their relevance as they tackled themes of ongoing relevance, such as disaster vulnerability, resilience, and adaptation. As the contributing authors to *Crisis en catastrofie* demonstrate, however, disasters were equally products of culture and no less connected to the concerns of the present.¹ Its eleven case studies from the long nineteenth century reveal that disasters intersected with communal identities, they reflected and refashioned shared values, and they were communicated through an array of mediated channels. The book also covers a wide variety of disasters in the Netherlands and abroad, largely eschewing the emphasis in Dutch literature on river and coastal flooding. Case studies range from little known fires in Brabant to the well-known gunpowder disaster in Leiden in 1807. In the process, they encourage readers to reflect on the role of language, genre, and memory in shaping the meaning of calamity and response.

The editor, Lotte Jensen, divides the book into three thematic clusters, which lends coherence to an impressively diverse selection of subjects and approaches. The first three chapters tackle the significance of scale in the cultural translation of local events into regional or national contexts. The next four emphasize the role of media and genre in evolving interpretations of calamity. The final three place disaster interpre-

1 Recently, cultural historical approaches have made significant inroads, due in no small part to the production of Lotte Jensen and her NWO-Vici funded 'Dealing with Disasters' research group at Radboud University. The present volume adds to this impressive output.