



Raphaël Morera, *L'Assèchement des marais en France au XVIIe siècle* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011, 265 pp., ISBN 978 2 7535 1466 9).

This book is an important addition to the literature on reclamation of wetlands in early modern Europe. Starting in the sixteenth century in northern Italy, the Low Countries and northern Germany, hundreds of thousands of hectares of wetland were reclaimed all over Europe until the middle of the seventeenth century. Older literature on this subject often has strong nationalist undertones – the continuous struggle of the brave Dutch and north Germans with the sea – and elements of hero worship, celebrating the deeds of engineers like Andries Vierlingh and Cornelius Vermuyden. More recently attention has shifted to the environmental, social and economic aspects of wetland reclamation.

For France in the seventeenth century there only is the work of Comte de Dienne dating from 1891, which was firmly in the classical tradition with King Henry IV and a Dutch engineer with the somewhat unlikely name of Humphrey Bradley (his father was an Englishman) in the heroic roles. Thanks to Raphaël Morera France no longer lags behind. He has written an overview of the history of wetland reclamation in France in the seventeenth century in which attention is paid to social, environmental, economic and political aspects. In comparison to the Dutch Republic, northern Italy and England, in each of which over 100,000 hectares were drained in the early modern period, the French contribution to wetland reclamation of at most 26,000 hectares was modest. However, it is historically interesting because Morera firmly places the French case within the framework of early modern state formation and European economic development, which offers ample opportunities for comparison.

Morera's analysis is based on a study of nine wetland reclamation projects from the first half of the seventeenth century. The reclamation of these wetlands is described in five chapters. In the first chapter the international context is sketched and the nine wetland areas are introduced. These areas were not wastelands, as promoters of drainage often claimed, but had been used for centuries by adjacent peasant communities for grazing, fishing and gathering of reeds and fuel. However, by the early seventeenth century many systems of wetland management had fallen into disrepair because of the wars of religion of the previous century and conflicts about maintenance between adjacent towns.

The French case was unique because the right to drain all wetlands in the realm was granted through edicts of 1599 and 1607 to one company, the *Association pour l'assèchement des lacs et marais de France*. In England, the Dutch Republic and Italy drainage patents were granted for individual projects to ad hoc companies. Humphrey Bradley was the chief engineer for the company during its first decades. The company was financed with private capital. As in other countries, the state itself did not participate in the projects. However, that does not mean there were no connections between the state and the drainage company: most investors had ties with court and in a later phase the cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin controlled the company through intermediaries. In this respect France was not unique; in England and the United Provinces the political elite also participated in such projects.

Among the investors were several people of Dutch or Flemish origin, both Catholic and Protestant. Until circa 1630 these included the Comans family and François de la Planche, Catholics from Oudenaarde and also the Protestant Van Uffle family from Amsterdam. After 1630 one of the main investors was Jean Hoeffft, a Protestant merchant and banker originating from Roermond who had settled in Rouen. Hoeffft and Barthélémy Hervart, an Augsburg banker, were the French state's most important bankers and had been granted their share in the company as a reward for their services. Morera rightly concludes that in this period the company was more a financial operation than an enterprise to improve agriculture. Both Low Countries capital and technical knowledge contributed to seventeenth-century wetland reclamation in France through engineers like Bradley and Jean van Ens. Dutch technical constructions like the *ringvaart* were introduced, although the influence of Dutch technical knowledge was mitigated by adaptation to local circumstances and the employment of local contractors for the hydraulic works.

The edicts of 1599 and 1607 granted the *Association* generous conditions to appropriate land in the reclaimed wetlands at the cost of local landowners and usage rights of rural communities. Of course this was a source of conflict and the company was confronted by lawsuits from disgruntled landlords and peasants. Sometimes peasants destroyed recently created dikes to obstruct the progress of the projects. Such conflicts also occurred in England, but there they lasted much longer than in France and peasant resistance caused the failure of several reclamation schemes. In France however, most resistance was relatively short-lived and did not endanger the projects. The cause of this seems to be that in France both the *Association* and the state which supported it were prepared to compromise. Often the investors were prepared to accept less than the edicts granted them, for example three sevenths of the reclaimed land instead of two thirds. In England, investors and the Crown refused to compromise and conflicts escalated.

Most of the nine projects studied were successful and infrastructure created in the seventeenth century has often survived until today. They also brought considerable profits to the investors. This result falsifies Jean-Laurent Rosenthal's thesis that wetland

reclamation in France could only be profitable after the abolition of seigniorial rights during the French Revolution (*The Fruits of Revolution*, 1992). Morera has been able to prove this through analysis of accounts of the exploitation of reclaimed land in Petit Poitou in the archives in Utrecht. Many documents concerning these projects are present in Dutch archives because of the connection with the Hoefft family. In the new polders large-scale commercial arable agriculture was predominant, as in many other reclaimed wetlands in seventeenth-century Europe. Grain was exported to destinations like Amsterdam and Lisbon. The French reclamations clearly were part of the expanding European economy.

It is difficult to find flaws in this book. Morera is an impeccable researcher who presents his results in a readable and well structured form. One point of criticism concerns his view that freshwater areas would be profitable sooner after drainage than saltwater areas because the soil does not have to be desalinated first (65, 203). This is not the case. In the Low Countries reclaimed salt marshes were sown with rapeseed immediately after drainage and with barley the year after. These crops are tolerant of soil salinity and produce very high yields in the first years after drainage. Some investors even claimed that one harvest of rapeseed was sufficient to reimburse the costs of drainage. I would also have liked to see some more international comparison, especially on the subject of the conflicts surrounding drainage schemes. Why were they so much more violent and long drawn-out in England than in France? However, these minor points of criticism do not alter the fact that this book is a major contribution to the historiography of wetland reclamation in Europe.

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