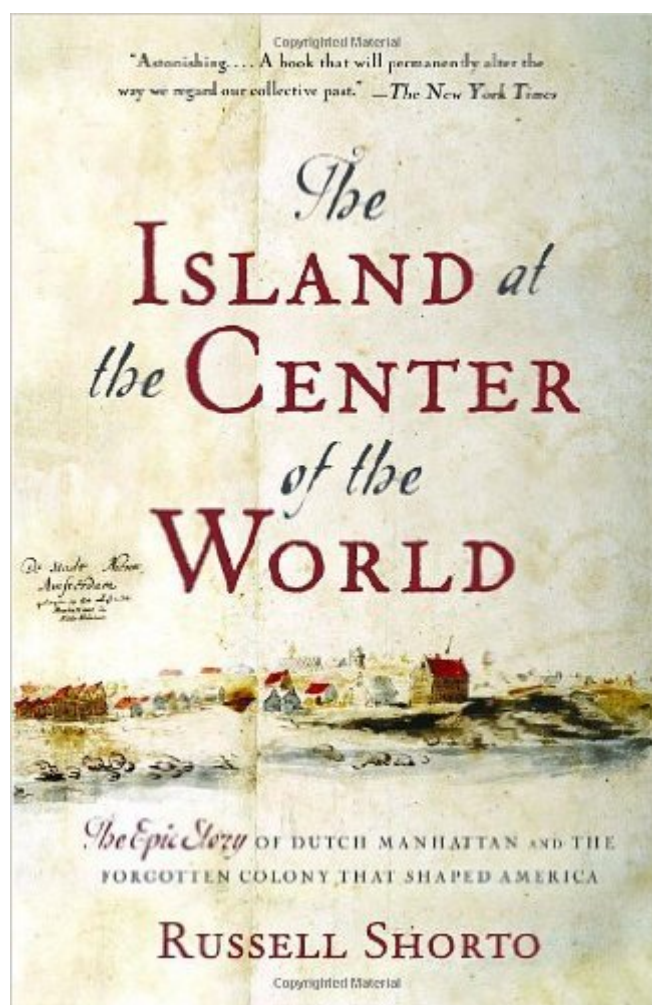


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# The Island At The Center Of The World: The Epic Story Of Dutch Manhattan And The Forgotten Colony That Shaped America



## Synopsis

When the British wrested New Amsterdam from the Dutch in 1664, the truth about its thriving, polyglot society began to disappear into myths about an island purchased for 24 dollars and a cartoonish peg-legged governor. But the story of the Dutch colony of New Netherland was merely lost, not destroyed: 12,000 pages of its records “recently declared a national treasure” are now being translated. Drawing on this remarkable archive, Russell Shorto has created a gripping narrative “a story of global sweep centered on a wilderness called Manhattan” that transforms our understanding of early America. The Dutch colony pre-dated the “original” thirteen colonies, yet it seems strikingly familiar. Its capital was cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic, and its citizens valued free trade, individual rights, and religious freedom. Their champion was a progressive, young lawyer named Adriaen van der Donck, who emerges in these pages as a forgotten American patriot and whose political vision brought him into conflict with Peter Stuyvesant, the autocratic director of the Dutch colony. The struggle between these two strong-willed men laid the foundation for New York City and helped shape American culture. *The Island at the Center of the World* uncovers a lost world and offers a surprising new perspective on our own.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Russell Shorto's *The Island at the Center of the World* is a chronicle of the early years of Manhattan, when it was known as New Amsterdam and was a relatively short-lived Dutch colony. According to Shorto, this period in New York history has not only been given short shift by historians, but also is crucial to understanding the development and character of New York City and

the United States. Shorto believes that most students of United States history have assumed that New York City's history only really got underway when the English took over and instilled some order. This is due in part to the disdain that the British held for the Dutch, and to the fact that the subsequent histories of the United States were told from their biased perspective. However, Shorto demonstrates that New Amsterdam was a viable society of its own, and that its unique character among the early American colonies had a remarkable impact on the future United States. For Shorto, as the first "multi-ethnic, upwardly mobile society on America's shores ... Manhattan is where America began." Shorto is not a professional historian, but rather a professional writer, and he is writing for a popular audience. As a result his work flows in a novelistic manner, with vivid descriptions, imaginative poetic license, interesting asides, informal language and even bawdy humor used to liven things up. His acknowledged inspiration is the late Barbara Tuchman, whose meticulously researched books set a standard for bridging the gap between dense scholarship and popular appeal. Indeed, she managed to make a bestseller out of a 800+ page book about the 14th century, among other subjects, and Shorto emulates her with a knack for a compelling narrative drawn from myriad primary sources. In this case, the primary sources are comprised of diaries, court documents, letters and municipal records found all over the world, principally in New York and the Netherlands, which are only recently being given the scholarly attention that they deserve. Shorto describes a sort of renaissance in colonial studies, spurred by a new interest in the Dutch period, and he is admittedly standing on the shoulders of giants, i.e., the professional historians who have let this popular writer have a look at their on-going research. At the center of this scholarship is a 12,000-page trove of documents relating to New Amsterdam, now residing in the New York State Library in Albany after narrowly escaping several brushes with destruction. Written in dense 17th century Dutch, they are still in the midst of being translated by Dr. Charles Gehring, a specialist in that narrow field. The story of the documents' survival and Dr. Gehring's research is itself very entertaining, and is told breathlessly by Shorto as if he can't quite believe his good fortune at being privy to the them. That Dr. Gehring's work figures so prominently throughout the book is testament both to his importance to the project, and Shorto's debt to him. Shorto traces New Amsterdam's character, naturally, to Amsterdam and Dutch society. He points out that Dutch society was the most tolerant in Europe at the time, a place where dissidents and controversial thinkers could come to escape persecution. The book is filled with examples of this enlightened atmosphere, from philosophers like Descartes and Spinoza to the interesting fact that one-half of all books in Europe were published in the Netherlands. Fresh from the highly resented imperial rule of the Spanish, the Dutch were particularly sensitive to liberal notions of free-speech and self-determination.

Furthermore, Shorto suggests that because New Amsterdam was a company town, and never intended to be a settlement colony, attitudes toward religious and national differences were put aside to a remarkable degree. Business is business, after all, and distractions were unwelcome in this market society. New Amsterdam was not entirely a reflection of Dutch society, however. Indeed, Shorto points out that because Amsterdam was a pleasant place even for the poor, only the very lowest order of society could be convinced to populate the far-away outpost of New Amsterdam, and thus the city became populated with a particularly rough-and-tumble crowd. Through court records he brings to life some of these figures, and this time spent with various average residents is one of the more delightful aspects of the book. He recounts a lively atmosphere full of drunkenness, casual violence, and casual sex, all of which help to make the book entertaining to a popular audience. He even mixes in a fair amount of humor, such as when he writes of a record concerning a woman who, as her husband sleeps off a drunken stupor, "'dishonorably manipulated the male member' of a certain Irishman while two other men looked on." Shorto can't help himself, and remarks, "Excessive rigidity (of the moral kind) was not the sin of New Amsterdam's residents." As interesting as it is to read about these forgotten average people, the backbone of the book rests with two more important figures. One is Pieter Stuyvesant, an early governor of the colony, who is well known to modern New York residents due to the fact that streets, squares and apartment complexes have been named for him. His statue can be seen in Stuyvesant Square, and his tombstone is built into the side of St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery church in the East Village. Running in front of that church is Stuyvesant St., still running today in true East-West (at odds with the surrounding grid) as it did in Stuyvesant's time. The other figure is Adriaen van der Donck, an attorney trained in Europe who, for mysterious reasons, turned his back on a prosperous and comfortable life in Holland and took a position in New Netherland. For Shorto, van der Donck is the true "hero of the story" who has been unjustifiably forgotten by American history; Shorto makes clear that he aims to rectify this lack of recognition. Both characters are vividly drawn. Stuyvesant is a no-nonsense, autocratic governor hardened by the loss of a leg to a Spanish round in the Caribbean. The pages detailing 17th century amputation techniques, and Stuyvesant's wound festering for nine years in a tropical climate, are quite harrowing, and one is left with no doubt as to why his personality may have developed as it did. Shorto's narrative structure sets van der Donck in opposition to Stuyvesant; van der Donck is a believer in liberal notions of tolerance, human rights, free speech and representative government who found himself at odds with Stuyvesant's world of absolute rule. Their struggle comprises the central conflict of the book, and Shorto credits van der Donck's (sort of) victory as setting the stage for modern America's recognition of liberal values. In

pursuit of this premise, despite a little bit of hyperbole that pops up in his zeal to "close the deal", Shorto has written a very engaging book with a convincing argument. The modern reader has been deliberately and skillfully engaged by utilizing anachronistic notions like "geopolitical landscape" and even "bar scene." It works: the reader is taken back and asked to imagine New Amsterdam via Shorto's vibrant descriptive ability, and in the process comes to appreciate the binds that tie a long-past society to our own.

The *Island at the Center of the World* is a worthy if flawed read. Two aspects in particular may annoy a reader--Shorto's use of imagined scenes and his stretching to make a point of the influence of Dutch New Amsterdam. I have to admit, the imagined scenes grated a bit on me throughout the book. They come far too frequently and lasted too long for my own liking. Too many passages began with "we might imagine", or "perhaps he . . .", or "it isn't hard to picture . . ." A few selected scenes like these could have been effective but used as frequently as they were they seemed to mar the book rather than improve it. This is more stylistic than substantive and while some readers may find it as grating as I did, others may enjoy the vivid intimacy of them. The other major flaw is Shorto's penchant to reach a bit to make his point that New Amsterdam had far-reaching influence on the America we have today. Any writer, of course, is going to push his/her thesis; the question is how far they strain the reader's credulity in doing so. The story of the Dutch colony at New Amsterdam is interesting enough in its own right, and its influence important enough in its own right that Shorto needn't have pushed and strained so much, as if to make sure the reader felt "justified" in reading the book. When he starts to talk about Cole Slaw (more than once) as an example of the Dutch influence, you know he's walked a bit over the edge. In that case, and a few others, he diminishes the colony's importance rather than highlights it. Those two flaws aside, and one can easily set them aside while reading, *Island* is an informative, entertaining read. The story of the New Amsterdam colony is told in some detail (at times, perhaps, as is often the case with single-topic histories, too much detail), filling in what is probably a large gap in most people's knowledge of former New York (especially those who don't live here). Shorto focuses of course on Peter Stuyvesant, probably the one name most people can remember, but he broadens out his character greatly. He focuses even more on Adriaen van der Donck, a young lawyer, previously unknown or little-known, whose presence was a major influence (though again Shorto at times seems to strain this point) on the colony. The dispute between these two and what they represent make up much of the book's description of the colony. A welcome decision on Shorto's part was to place his discussion of the colony in a larger context, both in terms of what was happening elsewhere in

America with the better known English colonies and as well the lesser-known European history. He does a good job of clearly and concisely explaining issues of succession, of civil war, of multiple wars between empires, etc. There is just enough that the reader understands the context but not so much that the reader is bogged down or loses sight ever of the books' main focus. All in all, the facts are interesting, the people more so, and if Shorto pushes a bit too far in trying prove a Dutch influence on present-day America or is a bit too imaginative, those flaws are easily spotted, almost as easily ignored, and mar the book only slightly. Recommended.

It is hard to picture Manhattan as the Dutch first saw it. It is hard to picture the Dutch here at all, as a matter of fact. Colonial history has always had such a strong Anglo bias that the Dutch (and New York, itself) never make much impact in the histories of America in the seventeenth century, focusing as it does so often on the Puritans and Pilgrims of New England. *The Island at the Center of the World* by Russell Shorto is a successful attempt to correct that for a pop history reading public. He makes a strong case for the importance of the early Dutch settlers as a harbinger of the future of New York (and hence America) as a multicultural nation that values individual liberties and respect religious freedoms, not values shared by the Puritans farther up north. His case is frequently overstated and not always backed up with the strongest evidence (Cole Slaw is mentioned a number of times as a prime example of Dutch influence) but the story he tells of this early colony is a fascinating one that deserves telling. By the end of the book, it is no longer quite so difficult to picture Manhattan as the Dutch first saw it and fought for it, with the natives, with the English, but, mostly, with each other. A wonderful slice of New York history.

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