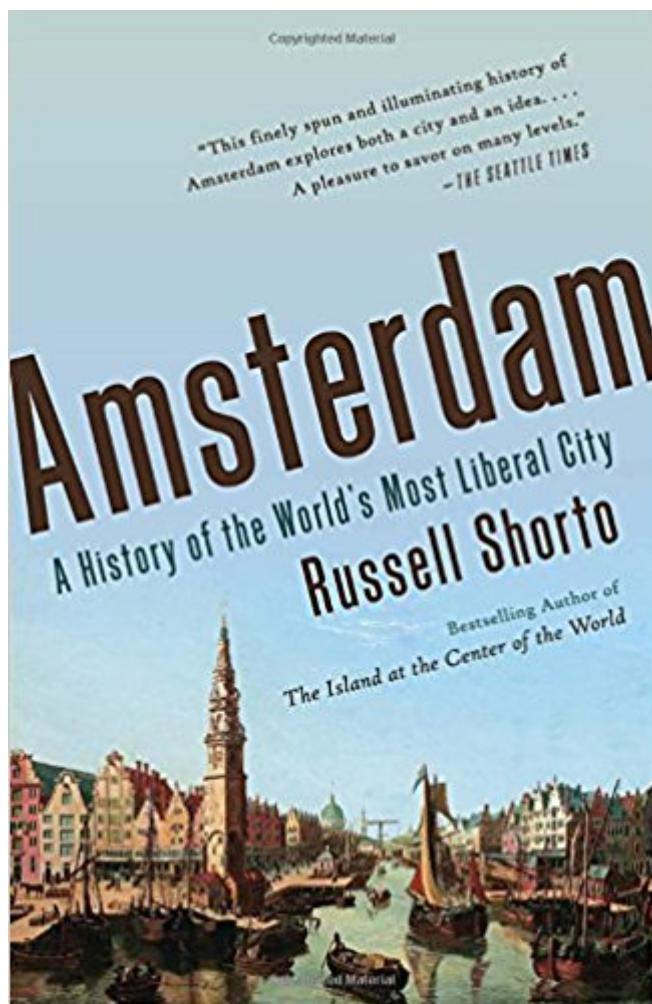


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# Amsterdam: A History Of The World's Most Liberal City



## Synopsis

An endlessly entertaining portrait of the city of Amsterdam and the ideas that make it unique, by the author of the acclaimed *Island at the Center of the World*. Tourists know Amsterdam as a picturesque city of low-slung brick houses lining tidy canals; student travelers know it for its legal brothels and hash bars; art lovers know it for Rembrandt's glorious portraits. But the deeper history of Amsterdam, what makes it one of the most fascinating places on earth, is bound up in its unique geography—the constant battle of its citizens to keep the sea at bay and the democratic philosophy that this enduring struggle fostered. Amsterdam is the font of liberalism, in both its senses.

Tolerance for free thinking and free love make it a place where, in the words of one of its mayors, "craziness is a value." But the city also fostered the deeper meaning of liberalism, one that profoundly influenced America: political and economic freedom. Amsterdam was home not only to religious dissidents and radical thinkers but to the world's first great global corporation. In this effortlessly erudite account, Russell Shorto traces the idiosyncratic evolution of Amsterdam, showing how such disparate elements as herring anatomy, naked Anabaptists parading through the streets, and an intimate gathering in a sixteenth-century wine-tasting room had a profound effect on Dutch—and world-history. Weaving in his own experiences of his adopted home, Shorto provides an ever-surprising, intellectually engaging story of Amsterdam.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Shorto conjures the anything-goes spirit of contemporary Amsterdam, with its pot-smoking and red-light districts, from the city's fascinating past as a major port city. Amsterdam,

to Shorto, was not only the first city in Europe to develop the cultural and political foundations of what we now call liberalism—•a society focused on the concerns and comforts of individuals,... run by individuals acting together, and tolerant of religion, ethnicity, or other differences—but also an exporter of these beliefs to the rest of Europe and the New World. Shorto composes biographical sketches of these originators (Rembrandt, Spinoza) and exporters (John Locke, the Dutch East India Company) as he guides readers on a narrative tour of Amsterdam's intellectual history, its rise from a sleepy site of religious pilgrimage to the center of a trading empire into the present. Shorto's examination of Dutch tolerance also focuses on its failures, including an examination of collaboration with Nazi occupiers during WWII, and its current struggle to integrate its immigrant underclass into a more egalitarian multicultural life. Shorto's brilliant follow-up to his previous book on Dutch Manhattan (*The Island at the Center of the World*) is an expertly told history of a city of new, shocking freedoms and the tough-minded people that developed them. Agent: Anne Edelstein, Anne Edelstein Literary Agency LLC. (Nov.) --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

“This finely spun and illuminating history of Amsterdam explores both a city and an idea. . . . A pleasure to savor on many levels.” • The Seattle Times “Rich and eventful. . . . [A] book that easily fuses large cultural trends with intimately personal stories.” • The New York Times “An absorbing history of a fascinating place.” • Pittsburgh Post-Gazette “[A] masterpiece.” • The Daily Beast “Engaging new history. . . . It brims with the sights, smells and sounds of a nearly thousand-year-old bustling, mercantile city. . . . Countless books have been written about Holland’s capital city. . . . [Shorto’s] contribution stands as a sparkling addition to the lot.” • Associated Press “Shorto’s brilliant follow-up to his previous book on Dutch Manhattan (The Island at the Center of the World) is an expertly told history of a city of new, shocking freedoms and the tough-minded people that developed them.” • Publishers Weekly, starred review “Insightful history. . . . Mr. Shorto masterfully describes how Amsterdam was built in only a few generations by reclaiming water from the sea, literally by hand in the 1600s. And he brings to life how the city attracted • with promises of freedom and tolerance • the most energetic people from all over Europe to create a free civic and economic society that became a model for the American Republic a century later.” • Jeff Bewkes, CEO of Time Warner, The Wall Street Journal, Favorite Books of 2013 “Entertaining

history. • The New Yorker • “Delightfully eccentric history. . . . Eye-opening and entertaining, it’s popular history of the best sort. • Michael Giltz, Favorite Books of the Year, Huffington Post • “Sometimes it’s clear from the off that a book is special, and that indefinable sense took hold quickly here. . . . An enthralling tale of radicalism and tolerance of strange and otherwise anathema beliefs and ideas. • Alex Crowley, Best Books of the Year, Publishers Weekly • “Masterful reporting, vivid history • the past and present are equally alive in this book. • James Gleick, author of *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood* • “Shorto is an excellent storyteller and rootler of strange facts, and Amsterdam should be issued as standard kit for anyone visiting the city. • The Guardian (UK) • “Russell Shorto writes engagingly about how a city can engender ideas • order, tolerance, comfort, egalitarianism, entrepreneurship • and in turn be shaped by them. • Amsterdam • argues convincingly that Western liberalism has been greatly influenced by this small, modest, crazy-yet-conventional place. • Witold Rybczynski, author of • *How Architecture Works: A Humanist Toolkit* • “An often brilliant, and always enjoyable, investigation of liberalism • Dutch roots. Shorto is once again revealed as a passionate and persuasive historian of culture and ideas. • Joseph O’Neill, author of • *A Netherland* • “Russell Shorto loves Amsterdam, I love this book. • Job Cohen, former mayor of Amsterdam • “Luminous. . . . An entertaining history full of deftly drawn characters and intoxicating ideas which have made Amsterdam the birthplace of liberalism in its many and shifting incarnations. • Katrina vanden Heuvel, Editor & Publisher, • *The Nation* • “[A] smart, elegant book. . . . A wonderfully readable account of the city that Shorto has come to call home. • Charles C. Mann, author of *1491* and *1493* • “Vigorous, erudite and eminently readable. • Kirkus Reviews

This book links historical basis for a tolerant (liberal) and free society already in the 1500’s with how the Western world evolved. Amsterdam and most of the Netherlands became the most progressive society in the world for about a century. It is well written, with stories and time, interspersed with historical event of significance. This affected the whole world and largely formed the basis of the US constitution. Russell has made very good connections of governance, tolerance, religious and economic freedom to paint a picture of a very small, but significant trading country. I would certainly recommend it to historical buffs and those who want to understand how Europe and the US evolved from the 1500’s on.

The task the author undertook is enormous. Therefore what we are offered is more or less a collection of personal and human stories, against a background of larger social and economic situations. Because of the author preferences, some ideological values are selected, and others rejected. Two main points are, to me, very relevant: what are some of the main tensions between individual and the community, and how these can be dialectically solved, and second, how a contructed landscape is somehow the result of a collective conscience, working whithin a natural setting.

Quite a good read for a history book and certainly engaging. Liberalism and tolerance as a background for the history of Amsterdam provides a good context to relate these events to present day concepts to much of what we take for granted. Perhaps out of deference to his adopted city, he avoids much of the controversial issues of Dutch colonialism in the more modern day context. The latter chapters providing a cursory reconciliation and enlightenment on the global legacy of Dutch colonialism. A topic for others to cover.

What an amazing story, much more than a tale of how an unusual city was built. The side history, the intersection of cultures, people,technology and dealing with unusual environmental challenges throughout time, this and the commentary are great reading. There is an interpretation of "liberal" and it's origins in Amsterdam is clearly presented.

A gift for my husband who likes reading non-fiction. Right now he is into books on the history of the world's great cities. He was not sure about this book when I gave it to him but he later told me he liked it and enjoyed it.

Russel Shorto has the rare gift of writing exquisite historical narrative using careful and thorough research. In this study, an excellent companion piece to his work on New Amsterdam, "The City at the Center of the World", he traces the unique firsts made by Amsterdam in inventing capitalism ( first joint . stock company and the first stock market), in official religious tolerance, in concepts of individualism, equality, liberal self- government, (Locke lived and wrote in Amsterdam, by the way), and so much more that informed Am. values and modes of gov't and social organization. It's a remarkable story, and it can be argued that America owes more to Amsterdam than to Britain for who and what we are. The audio version is also good.

Russell Shorto's study of the fascinating past and present-day history of the Dutch city of Amsterdam explains much about the live-and-let-live attitude that pervades its society. Having finished reading the book while on a short vacation in that city, I was able to understand the city in a way that I certainly wouldn't have otherwise. Shorto was living in the city during the period he was writing the book and some of it is taken up with material garnered from many interviews with a woman German concentration camp survivor who was a good friend of Anne Frank and reconnected when both were sent to the sick ward there. She and her mother survived the horrific march that the guards initiated in the very last days of the war by dropping from illness and fatigue, but Anne did not. Also examined is the role that the excommunicated Jewish philospher Bernard Spinoza played in lighting the fire that eventually became the Enlightenment, a separation of religion-based and natural-world-based thinking, and how that lit a fire of political liberal thinking in Amsterdam. Much is made, too, of the city's 17th century hey-day and how William of Orange came to power that eventually resulted in his invading England, where he became king without firing a shot in what came to be known as the Glorious Revolution. Although the city is known today for its permissive attitudes toward marijuana sales and prostitution, Shorto points out that only 22% of the city's natives have tried the drug compared to 38% of Americans. Their viewpoint is that those who want to avail themselves of drugs and a prostitute have a right to do so--the embodiment of live-and-let-live--yet both outlets are highly regulated. Anyone considering visiting Amsterdam or interested in the history of the evolution of a political and life-style culture that evolved in a fascinating way--or in shedding an important light on the Anne Frank story before visiting the house she and her family hid out in there--should consider reading Shorto's book. Joseph Amiel, author of A Question of Proof, Stalking the Sky, and Deeds

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