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## The Longitude Committee and the Practice of Navigation in the Netherlands, c. 1750–1850

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In 1826, the Netherlands switched meridians. Officially, the meridian of Greenwich became the prime meridian for Dutch seafarers rather than that of Tenerife. The shift was the result of advice from the Longitude Committee to the Secretary of the Navy. The Committee, which the Admiralty of Amsterdam originally established in 1787 as the ‘Committee concerning matters relating to the determination of Longitude at Sea and the Improvement of Charts’,<sup>1</sup> argued that other seafaring nations no longer used the meridian of Tenerife as their reference and that Dutch seafarers also rarely used it as a prime meridian. Naval officers had already switched to the Greenwich meridian because they often used British charts.

Since 1815, charts published by the Longitude Committee had indicated longitude relative to Paris as well as Greenwich and Tenerife. By the 1820s, the Committee considered the proliferation of prime meridians ‘ridiculous’ and a source of ‘error, uncertainty and inaccuracy’. If nations would only decide on a common prime meridian, it continued, the meridian of the Peak of Tenerife would doubtless be the best candidate since it would allow ‘a good division of the globe’: Europe would lie in the eastern hemisphere, the Americas in the western. But as this outcome was hardly to be expected, the choice was really between the meridians of Greenwich and Paris. Furthermore, since ‘England was the first seafaring nation’ and most charts and relevant nautical reports came from there, the Committee concluded, preference should be given to Greenwich.<sup>2</sup> This conclusion was accepted without further debate. On 26 July 1826, King William I issued a decree: henceforth, the Greenwich meridian would be the basis of the lunar tables in the Dutch nautical almanac.<sup>3</sup> The first such almanac based on Greenwich was produced for 1828.

The switch of meridians in the 1820s, and the elaborate arguments deployed to justify the move, was significant for several reasons. First, it marked the formal acknowledgement that the British, rather than the French or Dutch, had become the dominant power in the field of navigation. Second, this acknowledgement concerned the recognition of an existing state of affairs rather than the perception of a supposed mastery regarding methods and theory. Third, it clearly demonstrated that navigational practice could change irrespective of rules or incentives originating from maritime authorities. In 1826, the rules were adapted to practice, not the other way round.

This chapter concerns the relationship between state-supported provision and seafarers' practice in the field of navigation in the Netherlands between about 1750 and 1850. When, how and why did Dutch state agencies become more involved in the field of navigation and what exactly did their role imply? How and to what extent did they depend on input from Britain or France? What was their impact on the practice of navigation, and how to explain this impact? To answer the first two questions it is necessary to look back to the last decades of the eighteenth century, before returning to the second quarter of the nineteenth to address the third.

### **Growing state involvement, c. 1750–1820**

The creation of the Longitude Committee in 1787 was the climax of a growing concern among state agencies in the Dutch Republic with the practice of navigation, which had become evident from the middle of the eighteenth century. Around 1750, the Admiralties of Amsterdam and the Maze (which were by far the most important of the five Admiralties that existed in the Netherlands since 1597) joined with local governments and the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to found schools (zeemanscolleges) in Amsterdam and Rotterdam for training naval officers, masters and mates.<sup>4</sup> All the Admiralties at this time introduced statutory examinations for naval officers and mates. Each, with the exception of Friesland, appointed a permanent examiner.<sup>5</sup> In addition, regulations issued from the late 1740s specified the information that officers and mates had to record in their ships' journals.<sup>6</sup>

The establishment of the Longitude Committee was a clear sign that state agencies were prepared to substantially increase their involvement in the practice of navigation. The first Committee consisted of Jan Hendrik van Swinden, professor of mathematics, physics, astronomy, logic and metaphysics at the Athenaeum Illustre in Amsterdam, Pieter