‘HE WAS THE ONLY ONE. He was the only man to have committed suicide in the town’s seventeenth-century history.’ Thus Donna Merwick invites us into this sad and instructive tale about the colonial Dutch world of North America.

On one level, this is the story of Adriaen Janse van Ilpendam, a Dutch schoolmaster and notary based in the small settlement of Beverwijck, later known as Albany, who hanged himself on 12 March 1686, seventeen days after meeting with his last clients. Janse was sixty-eight years old. He left no suicide note, and we know nothing of the circumstances of his hanging. His death occurred a few years after the English had taken New Netherland from the Dutch and begun its transformation into New York. As warring powers swept up and down the Hudson River valley, Janse did his best to accommodate himself to whoever occupied Beverwijck, or ‘Albanij’, as he wrote it. He tried to learn English but, as a notary — a legal official trained in the recording and witnessing of personal and property transactions — it may be that Janse was a colonial Dutchman for whom the new English legal structures were ultimately impenetrable.

On another level, this story of one man’s tragedy is used to prise open a window into the Netherlands’ seventeenth-century North American colonies. Janse was caught between the colliding imperial worlds of the Netherlands and England. In Merwick’s words: ‘how it was that an imperial power’s design for territorial acquisition, military invasion and occupation, visions of continental hegemony, how these forces met with and made a casualty of so small a life as Janse’s.’

These great forces were manifested for Janse in the requirement that a man who had made his living from his expertise in writing Dutch now had to record legal complexities in English. His dilemma was caught in the irony of his attempt to write in English his occupation of ‘notary public’ as ‘note republic’. Another irony is not lost on Merwick: just as the Dutch had forced native Americans to adapt or die, so now Janse and others had to become proficient in the meanings of a newly dominant cultural system ‘to survive, if not to prosper or acquiesce with equanimity’.
Janse was also a lonely man. His mother died when he was two. He had left his childhood home in Leiden in about 1647, aged twenty-nine, to seek his fortune in the New World, initially as a schoolmaster on Manhattan Island. From 1652 he made a life as a schoolmaster and clerk in the new settlement of Beverwijck and, after a return voyage to Holland in 1668, as a notary, with a modest degree of comfort and respect, though he remained acutely troubled by the shame of his father Jan Janse’s bankruptcy (preferring to sign himself van Ilpendam). He had married Tryntje Jans, a woman who appears only fleetingly in his legal papers, and who died before him, in 1683. They were childless, leaving him alone as he struggled in vain to accommodate himself to the new ways. He seems to have become depressed after Tryntje’s death, making uncharacteristic errors in legal documents.

Death of a Notary is a sparkling example of what we call ‘microhistory’. We are accustomed to sweeping narratives of the rise and fall of nations, empires and social systems, on the one hand, and the earnest but often inconsequential detail of local histories on the other. Microhistory links the best of both, based as it is on the practice of closely detailed reading of historical moments as the best point of entry into the past. Here, for example, we learn a good deal about ethnic diversity, the endemic violence between native Americans and the Dutch, the intricate colonial social hierarchies, the fur trade (the town loaded more than 30,000 beaver pelts per year), and the history of Dutch and English jurisprudence, as Merwick teases details from the notarial acts registered by Janse.

The seduction of such stories is evident, but Merwick has brought a particular expertise to her telling. She is one of a number of Melbourne historians well known for their ‘ethno- graphic’ approach to the writing of microhistory. This small ‘school’, which thrived at La Trobe University and the University of Melbourne in the last quarter of the twentieth century and remains highly influential, is characterised by its sensitivity to cultural difference and interactions, and by its attentive reading of historical artefacts (written texts, buildings, gesture, clothing, memory) in order to decode that interaction. Ethnohistorians claim that these close readings (what Clifford Geertz has called ‘thick description’) take us closest to the realities of past experience.

Among the other prominent Melbourne exponents of ethnohistory are Inga Clendinnen (Ambivalent Conquests: Spaniard and Maya in Yucatan, 1517–1577, 1987), Greg Dening (Mr Bligh’s Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty, 1992), and Rhys Isaac (The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790, 1982). Whereas Clendinnen and Dening have been chiefly concerned to read between the lines — or ‘against the grain’ — of English, French and Spanish colonial texts in order to glimpse something of what the colonising moment meant to indigenous peoples, Merwick here turns her attention to the confrontation of two colonial powers. For all the close similarities of seventeenth-century England and Holland, the confrontation was as much one of cultural difference as of military power, as she demonstrated previously in Possessing Albany, 1630–1710: The Dutch and English Experiences (1990).

The difficulty of her task should not be underestimated. While Janse’s notarial acts have been collected and translated, the contextual evidence of his life and that of his community are fragmentary and difficult to interpret. The reconstruction of Janse’s story required extraordinary skill and perseverance in archives and libraries in the Netherlands and the USA.

Despite Merwick’s assiduity, the story is also one of gaps and silences. Merwick’s book is at its most suggestive — and controversial — when she fills the gaps in Janse’s story by transposing evidence from the lives of his contemporaries, or by using her imagination. But this ‘fictionalising’ is always careful and transparent.

The book is based on extraordinary expertise, which never overwhelms the reader because of Merwick’s device of using lengthy ‘notes and reflections’ at the end of the volume to lay out her evidence (these are erudite micro-essays in themselves). So the text of this engrossing tale can be read on its own in 186 pages, while the specialist may linger over fifty-seven pages of reflections on the minutiae of evidence.

First published in hardback in 1999, this paperback edition will allow many more readers to savour a superb example of microhistory, a haunting story of one man whose dignity Donna Merwick has rescued, along with a rich taste of his world.