



## Life Writing in the Netherlands\*

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**Hans Renders & Binne de Haan ed., *Theoretical discussions of biography. Approaches from history, microhistory and life writing* (Edwin Mellen Press; Lewiston 2013) 460 p., €130, ISBN 9780773440920**

**Binne de Haan, *Van kroon tot bastaard. Biografie en het individuele perspectief in de geschiedschrijving* [From prince to pauper. Biography and the individual perspective in historiography] (Groningen University Press; Groningen 2015) 382 p., €24,50, ISBN 9789036778077**

In the Netherlands, life writing texts are often referred to as ‘egodocuments’. Historian Jacques Presser (1899–1970) coined the concept in the 1950s, to describe ‘those documents in which an ego intentionally or unintentionally discloses, or hides itself’, i.e. autobiographical texts like letters, diaries and memoirs. In a time when the historical discipline was increasingly orientating towards the social sciences, Presser used egodocuments as empirical basis for his monograph *Ondergang. De vervolging en verdelging van het Nederlandse jodendom* (1965), which was translated into English as *Ashes in the wind* (London 1968) and *The destruction of the Dutch Jews* (New York 1969). Notwithstanding the popular success of the book, Dutch fellow-historians criticized Presser, himself a Holocaust survivor, for being too subjective and because of the choice of his equally subjective sources. In the late 20th century, the status of Presser himself, and the study of autobiographical documents changed immensely. This is largely due to the work of Rudolf Dekker, who was based at the history department of Erasmus University Rotterdam. This department was modelled after the *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* of the Bielefeld school, and had a strong

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\*Citations from Dutch are translated into English by the author of this review.

tradition in the study of the history of daily life, mentalities and microhistory. In the 1980s, Dekker embarked on a project to make an inventory of all egodocuments written and/or published in the Netherlands since 1500 (<http://www.egodocument.net>). Once the first inventory, covering the period 1500–1814, was printed in the early 1990s, many Dutch historians found their way to egodocuments, and it is safe to say that, in the Netherlands, there is a strong relation between egodocument-research and the historical discipline.

While the English concept ‘life writing’ includes autobiographical and biographical narratives, the definition of the Dutch concept ‘egodocuments’ excludes biographies – because these are written by someone else than the I or ‘ego’. This might explain the somewhat different trajectory of biographical research in the Netherlands, even though the chronology of developments overlaps. In 1990, the Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde (Society for Dutch Literature, founded in 1766) installed the Werkgroep Biografie (Biography Working Group). Despite its name, the Maatschappij is an association for literary and linguistic scholars as well as historians, and the Werkgroep was meant to organise biographers from different academic backgrounds. In practice, however, the group consisted of specialists in Dutch literature writing biographies of poets and writers, who approached biography as a creative genre. Historians, claiming the biography to be a historiographical genre, founded their own Historisch biografisch comité (Historical biographical committee, 1990), but this initiative faded almost immediately. Subsequently, literary scholars, historians and others have collaborated in the Werkgroep Biografie and its journal *Biografie Bulletin* (1991), now called *Tijdschrift voor Biografie* (*Journal of Biography*, 2012–). Dutch scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds also participated in ‘Life Writing in Europe’, the founding conference of IABA Europe, held at VU University in Amsterdam (2009). Nonetheless, territorial conflicts between historians and literary scholars remain to haunt the biographical field in the Netherlands. In 2012, for instance, the Werkgroep organised a symposium on ‘Dichting und Wahrheit: Fact and fiction in biography’ and it is this particular debate that was strongly fuelled by members of the Biografie Instituut (Biography Institute), who argue that biographers should follow the lead of historians.

The Biografie Instituut, founded in 2004, is based within the Research Center for Historical Studies at Groningen University, in the northern part of the Netherlands. Funding for both the institute and a chair in History and Theory of Biography was provided by the Stichting Media & Democratie (Democracy & Media Foundation), which supports ‘independent media and a strong and honest constitutional democracy’ (<http://>

www.stdem.org/en/who-are-we/). Hans Renders, literary historian, former journalist and biographer of two Dutch poets, was appointed professor-director of the institute that aims at two objectives: to facilitate and support biographical research by PhD students, and 'to stimulate the further development of a theoretical framework with regard to the biography as an academic genre' (<http://www.rug.nl/research/biografie-instituut/>). In the course of a decade 13 biographies have been defended as PhD theses; the second part of the mission statement has been tackled more recently in the volume *Theoretical discussions of biography. Approaches from history, microhistory and life writing* (2013), edited by Renders and his PhD student Binne de Haan, and De Haan's PhD thesis: *Van kroon tot bastaard. Biografie en het individuele perspectief in de geschiedschrijving [From prince to pauper. Biography and the individual perspective in historiography]* (2015).

The edited volume is a collection of twenty articles. One half of the book consists of previously published articles by (micro)historians like Giovanni Levi, Carlo Ginzburg, Sabina Loriga and Matti Peltonen; the other half is authored by Renders and/or De Haan. All contributions are divided into four themes – Historiography of Biography Studies, Biography and History, Biography and Microhistory, Biography and Life Writing – which express the editors' position on biography. As they write in their introduction: 'In this book, biography will consistently designate the study of an individual, based on the methods of historical scholarship, with the goal of illuminating what is public, explained and interpreted in part from the perspective of the personal. The personal is in this respect an important source, but not a determining one. The researcher remains in control of his subject and will critically judge the value of autobiographical material, such as letters, journals and memoirs, just as he would with other sources, and will deviate from them to the extent that he considers them to be unreliable' (1). Starting from this basis, Renders and De Haan define their approach in contrast with 'the practice of Life Writing' (3), which, in their view, is a-historical and a-scientific, because it has no 'theoretical foundation' (6) and must be regarded as 'commemorative activity' (4) or even propaganda on behalf of women, blacks, homosexuals and other 'depraved of the earth' (201).

Binne de Haan, whose contributions to the volume re-appear in his thesis, is a bit more elaborate. Based on 'theoretical literature' from Germany, France, the UK and the US, De Haan attempted to write a comparative overview of reflections on the nature of biography as a genre, a method and/or a perspective. His selection of source materials is not very clear, however. For instance, a title like Barbara Caine's *Biography and history* (2010), published in the Palgrave Macmillan series Theory

and History, is not included in his analysis of 'theoretical literature'. His argument, on the other hand, is hard to miss: biography has suffered from life writing. To prove this point, De Haan analysed the contents of the journal *Biography. An interdisciplinary quarterly* since its start in 1978. He observes a sharp decrease in the number of contributions on biography, biographical subjects and biographical theory in the 1990s, as well as a simultaneous rise in the number of articles on life writing. De Haan evaluates this development in negative terms, because, according to him as well, life writing is a field populated by a- or anti-historical scholars solely interested in 'theory', memory, identity, self and persona, and the 'emancipation' of 'subaltern cultures' (89). De Haan does recognise that biographers and life-writing researchers both use similar documents – 'egodocuments' – but in his account their approach is fundamentally different: 'In Life-Writing research the source remains the leading principle, without elaborate historical contextualization or evaluation. The biographer studies egodocuments equally critical as he processes other sources. The Life-Writing researcher focuses on the ethical, literary-theoretical and social-emancipatory analyses of life writing texts, and offers – also by means of the use of a personal style of writing – an analysis that stands on its own.' (88)

It is difficult to argue with such statements, because De Haan and Renders and De Haan do not back up their charges against 'life writers' with specific references. Where do their generalisations come from, and what studies do they have in mind when they disqualify 'life-writers' for being a-historical? I can agree that historians are somewhat less active in the field of life writing and organisations like IABA and its regional branches, but what is the use of attacking literary scholars for not writing history? One could equally argue that historians and literary scholars could or should collaborate more, but that is clearly not their objective. Renders and De Haan are busy claiming biography for history and historians, as illustrated in their introductory statement in the volume. In his thesis, De Haan repeats this proposition when he argues that biography is a historiographical genre, because its legitimacy is ultimately founded in its reference to reality and truth about the past (39). Consequently, De Haan wants to give counterweight to the 'often charged understanding that biographies should ultimately be seen as a form of literature' (11) and argues that the 'maturation' of 'biography studies' requires input from other disciplines than literature and literary criticism (54), most importantly from fact-seeking historians and journalists.

In their effort to separate themselves from 'life-writers', Renders and De Haan, in the edited volume, present themselves as solid historians on a quest for 'historical truth, however problematic that might be' (274).

Serious reflections on – the literature on – the possible meanings of ‘historical truth’ are absent from the volume though. De Haan, who claims his thesis to be a contribution to ‘biography studies’ and the philosophy of history, offers little more clarification. Nowhere does he explicate his conception of ‘history’, but his vision can be deduced from the contrast with life writing research – which is ultimately accused of leading to ‘relativism’ and the blurring of boundaries between fiction and non-fiction (90). It is also telling that De Haan, in his attempt to situate biography in historiography, provides the reader with a very general and selective picture. Largely based on textbooks like Georg G. Iggers’ *Historiography in the 20th century: From scientific objectivity to the postmodern challenge* (1997), De Haan’s outline of historiography does not include any substantial information on postmodern philosophies of history, the linguistic turn, studies in gender and post-colonial history, or the rise of memory studies and public history, which not only chronologically coincide with the ‘memoir boom’ and the ascent of life writing-research but also have in common that the reality- and truth-claims of the historical discipline were radically challenged. Instead, De Haan’s overview ends with the rise of the ‘biographical turn’ and the ‘singularisation’ of history in the era around 1980. By that, he means that historians distanced themselves from the social sciences to focus less on ‘structures’ and ‘collectives’ and more on ‘individuals’ and the ‘participant’s perspective’.

Both in the thesis and the volume, the historical singularisation and the ‘biographical turn’ are linked to the ascent of microhistory, exemplified by the works of Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi. Their contributions feature prominently in the volume edited by Renders and De Haan, and reading the collection it becomes gradually clear that ‘the methods of historical scholarship’, which biographers should follow, are microhistorical methods – more particularly the *Spie-* or Clue-method developed by Ginzburg. Renders and De Haan further claim that microhistory and biography are related, because they share a deliberate choice for the historical actor’s perspective. In their view, this is a non-ideological choice that simply serves to find the truth about the past. In his thesis, on the other hand, De Haan does acknowledge that microhistory originated from ‘marxist ideologies’ and tended to focus on understudied or ‘marginal’ historical subjects, which might be not that dissimilar from their charge against life writers’ focus on ‘the depraved of the earth’. However, without further proof, Renders & De Haan and De Haan continue to argue that, over time, microhistory changed into a neutral method to focus on small, non-exemplary cases in order to correct or re-interpret ‘the larger historical narrative’ (De Haan, 203). According to De Haan, microhistory uses singular historical actors to test and materialise historical concepts and

explanations on the level of ‘the daily historical reality as experienced by actors’ (226). In the 2013 volume, this is put slightly different as: ‘By means of biographical research on a person, one attempts to determine the extent to which the accepted story about a culture is correct. In this process, the biographer or microhistorian is not the advocate of the individual but the advocate of history, if a micro-advocate’ (9).

Claims like these are far from clear, for what exactly is ‘the larger historical narrative’ and who decides, on what grounds, what is a – or even the – ‘correct’ history? Precisely such questions have been asked by theoretical, public, gender and post-colonial historians as well as the broader disciplinary range of life writing scholars interested in, for instance, memory and the construction of (historical) knowledge in and beyond academia. But Renders and De Haan are not interested in these developments and approaches; their version of historiography ends with microhistory. In order to find proof for the biographical turn in historiography, De Haan thus spot-checked the volumes 1930–2010 of the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. He motivates his choice for this particular journal by posing that it exemplifies the larger developments in historiography (170). True as this may be for the period until the 1980s, it is very questionable whether the same goes for the late 20th century when reality-claims of the historical discipline, including the influential *Annales* school, were questioned by the likes of Hayden White and the Groningen-based philosopher of history Frank Ankersmit – and new journals saw the light, such as *Representations* (1983–) and *History & Memory* (1989–). What is even more problematic, is that De Haan does not seem to take seriously his own research results. Having analyzed the volumes of his chosen journal, he must conclude that the share of biographical articles in *Annales* has been minimal: no contribution was ‘purely biographical’, whereas only 11 of the total number of 359 checked articles could be labelled as ‘biographical history’. Nonetheless, De Haan – and Renders and De Haan – insist that the biographical turn in historiography is related to microhistory, which is regarded as the last stage of historiographical innovations that came forth from the *Annales* school.

Looking for an explanation why De Haan – and Renders and De Haan – insist on a strong link between biography and microhistory, the answer probably lies in a specific conception of ‘history’. Ginzburg and Levi are well-known for their opposition against ‘the skeptical implications (postmodernist, if you will) so largely present in European and American historiography of the 1980s and early 1990s’, as Ginzburg writes in the article ‘Microhistory: two or three things that I know about it’ (1993) – that features in the edited volume. De Haan and Renders and De Haan, therefore, seem to use microhistory as a means to circumvent

questions about the nature of historical knowledge and the historical discipline. This impression is strengthened by reading Richard D. Brown's contribution to the volume, on 'Microhistory and the post-modern challenge' (2003). This American historian also argues against postmodern relativism by claiming that history and fiction are two separate things, because the historian is bound to substantiate his arguments with historical evidence. He further describes himself as a 'convert' to microhistory, because: 'The glory of microhistory lies in its power to recover and reconstruct past events by exploring and connecting a wide range of data sources so as to produce a contextual, three-dimensional, analytic narrative in which actual people as well as abstract forces shape events' (193). A similar statement can be found in De Haan's thesis, when he presents microhistory as an instrument against 'the so-called linguistic turn in the philosophy of history, which focused on the narrative and therefore "constructive" character of history' (226).

No matter the repeated argument that biography is a historiographical genre, De Haan, in the last chapter of his thesis, does grant other scholars than historians a place under the biographical sun: 'The biographical perspective can be considered as an interdisciplinary participant's perspective on the past, by means of which historical mimesis can be organized from the perspective of human experience' (282). This sentence can also serve to highlight the central problem of this thesis: a complete lack of reflection on concepts like 'historical mimesis' and 'human experience'. De Haan does briefly refer to Jerome Bruner and Ira Bruce Nadel, who asked questions about social, cultural and narrative conventions in representing lives by biographers or autobiographers, but he fails to see that many of the generically disqualified 'life-writing researchers' – for instance the absent Paul John Eakin – have developed this line of thought. Overlooking all this, De Haan argues for more research on historical changes in the ways 'man' and 'individual' are conceptualized, for instance based on comparative research of biographies of the same person over time, or biographies from different eras and/or countries. This sounds like an excellent idea, but one wonders about the exact difference with the mass of disqualified feminist, post-colonial and life writing studies that have theorized the conception and/or construction of selves, identities, lives and humans from the perspective of autobiography, biography or the humanities at large? Once the construction of selves, lives and humans is acknowledged as an interesting line of research, moreover, I still less understand the use of holding on to strict demarcation lines between autobiographical, biographical and fictional genres. In *The intellectual life of the British working class* (2001), for instance, historian Jonathan Rose showed that 19th-century workers modelled their life stories after

narratives structures they were familiar with – be it fictional autobiographies like Charles Dickens' novel *David Copperfield* or regular biographies of famous men. Having read both recent products of the Biografie Instituut, I would therefore recommend more instead of less collaboration between historians, literary and other scholars – if only to prevent that 'history' and 'biography' become synonymous with naive realism.