

# Biography in the Public Sphere: The Year in the Netherlands

Hans Renders

Biography, Volume 39, Number 4, Fall 2016, pp. 641-647 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press



## BIOGRAPHY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

### THE YEAR IN THE NETHERLANDS

HANS RENDERS

The culture of the biography in the Netherlands is based on a strong national tradition. At the same time—and there might well be a relation with the size of the country—public opinion on the genre is strongly internationally oriented. An example can be found in the Dutch translating policy. When a biography of Hitler or Goebbels, written by Peter Longerich, appears in the United Kingdom, it takes roughly two years until this book appears on the American market. Often such books are to be found in Dutch bookstores, translated and nicely bound, more than a year before they appear in the United States.

A turbulent history precedes this state of affairs in the Netherlands. In 1990, the Nederlandse Maatschappij der Letterkunde established the Werkgroep Biografie. Since 1991, this workgroup has published the *Biografie Bulletin*, currently known as *Tijdschrift voor Biografie*. Earlier, in 1982, the publishing house De Arbeiderspers started producing the prestigious biography series Open Domein, and the privately funded Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds initiated a subsidy policy for biographies in the 1980s. They started by inviting ten biographers to write a biography of Dutch legators of culture. Each biographer received 100,000 guilders (45,000 Euro), a substantial amount of money in those days. In 2007, the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds implemented a second project, asking ten writers to pen a biography of a key figure in Dutch history. The (not uncritical) biographies that were produced on three Dutch kings who ruled the Netherlands during the nineteenth century were very successful. All three appeared when the Kingdom celebrated its two hundredth anniversary; the salary of these three biographers during four years was funded by the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds. The Letterenfonds, financed by the government, has a special bursary for biographers—every two years a sum of 40,000 Euro is given to nine biographers to promote the genre.

In 1990, the city of Dordrecht installed the Dordtse Biografieprijs; this encouraging initiative lasted until the year 2000. Apparently, new institutions were needed to put the biography on the map again in the new millennium. At that time, I published my biography of Jan Campert—the Dutch journalist, critic, poet, and WWII resistance hero. By the end of 2004, I set up the Biography Institute at Groningen University. We started with a programmatic text, stating that biographies had gained significant popularity in recent years. By 2007, we were able to add that the board of the university had installed a chair entitled History and Theory of the Biography. In 2012, the chair was transformed from an extraordinary professorship to a full professorship, and therewith the Department of History and Theory of Biography came into existence.

Foremost, we study and practice *biography* as an overarching field of study that includes life writing. In the Netherlands, “life writing” is often, unfortunately, an ideologically biased practice that does not have much consideration for historical approaches and is pursued without the narrative skill necessary for biographical writing. This is why the biographies of the Biography Institute are aimed to work in two ways: they require academic justification, and they are published by commercial publishers so as to reach a wide readership.

The Biography Institute considers biography as an independent genre in its own right—involving history, literature, journalism, and other disciplines that serve as auxiliary disciplines. Research for a biography, however, is always historical in nature. Apart from dealing with interesting persons, biography is, in my view, foremost about methods and the theoretical framework that is constructed.

Firstly, we publish on the subject of biography on a theoretical level. This has resulted, among other publications, in the edited volume *Theoretical Discussions of Biography* (2014); a series of edited volumes on biography related to different fields of knowledge (2006–2012); the edited volume *Microhistory and the Picaresque Novel* (2014); the PhD dissertation *From Prince to Pauper: Biography and the Individual Perspective in Historiography* (2015) by Binne de Haan. Secondly, we aim to employ this theory in practice: since 2004, twenty-one biographical projects have been initiated, including Nigel Hamilton’s text on US President F. D. Roosevelt; biographies on the Dutch poets J. C. Bloem and C. O. Jellema; on art collector Helene Kröller-Müller; on business entrepreneur Anton Kröller; on Dutch politicians André van der Louw, Jelle Zijlstra, Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, Willem Schermerhorn, and G. J. van Heuven Goedhart. These biographies allowed the writers to obtain a PhD degree, which was not new in the Netherlands (although it was rare), but quite unique from an international perspective. All dissertations that are

written under the supervision of the Biography Institute are published by commercial publishers. These dissertations, therefore, play a role both in the academic world and in the public sphere. With the exception of the biography written by Hamilton, all others were published in Dutch. All theoretical pieces in the form of articles, publications in peer-reviewed journals, or edited volumes are published in English. The website of the Biography Institute is written in both Dutch and English. We provide a variety of university courses, under the title *Biographical Approaches to History*.

As of 2015, the Biography Institute collaborates with The Biography Society/La Société de Biographie, which was established in France under the presidency of Joanny Moulin, professor of English literature and biographer. Besides conference papers, we publish the series *Tweede Leven*. In this series, for which the Biography Institute acts as an editor, influential biographies, both in Dutch and in foreign languages, are reissued. We opened the series with the Dutch translation of Peter Gay's biography of Freud.

After the Dordtse Biografieprijs was discontinued in 2009, a new initiative for a prize arose: the Erik Hazelhoff Roelfzema Biography Prize. The award (15,000 Euro) is donated by the widow of Hazelhoff Roelfzema, whose husband was a WWII hero. Since 2010, a prize is awarded every other year for the best biography; simultaneously a smaller prize is awarded to an unpublished biography written by a student.

These are not the only initiatives on the biography front in the Netherlands. Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker lead the Onderzoeksinstituut Egodocument en Geschiedenis in Rotterdam, where they publish interesting source material and incite theoretical literature on autobiography by means of their book series at Brill—Ego Documents and History. They published a very interesting and internationally acclaimed book, entitled *Child of the Enlightenment*, based on the diary of Otto van Eck, the young and wealthy son of a regent's family in Amsterdam in the late eighteenth century.

Several freelance researchers subsequently became active in putting life writing on the map in the Netherlands and other European countries. The work of Marijke Huisman and Monica Soeting deserves special mention, as it led to the establishment in 2009 of the European branch of the International Auto/Biography Association (IABA), founded in 1999 as a multidisciplinary network in the United States that aims "to broaden the world vision of auto/biographers, scholars and readers, to deepen the cross-cultural understanding of self, identity and experience, and to carry on global dialogues on life writing." IABA Europe aims to foster the participation of European scholars within the International IABA by organizing biannual conferences, and various publications, including the online *European Journal of Life Writing*.

It frequently happens that biographies lead to public upheaval in the Netherlands. Recently, the biography of Queen Juliana (1909–2004), written by Jolande Withuis, was an example of this. All major newspapers and talk shows expressed their views on this book. In this context, we should also mention a few other important Dutch biographers: Elsbeth Etty, Annejet van der Zijl, and Cees Fasseur (who passed away in 2016). All of them stepped into the public limelight with their biographies during the last decade and became opinion leaders on the meaning of biography. The fact that most of these writers are women illustrates that we have entered a new stage in biography. Until the beginning of this century, most biographers were men, and although there may still be more men active as biographers, successful women biographers now constitute the majority.

An essential feature of research into biography—employed by the Biography Institute—is to understand the important role that biographies play in society in the construction of public opinion. There is at least one known instance where the Dutch government released classified documents in response to the publication of a biography, of a former prime minister, Joop den Uyl, which mentions a report on the American aerospace factory Lockheed in its appendix. In this so-called Northrop appendix, bribes were revealed to have been paid to a member of the Dutch royal family.

Biographies, then, are not merely random stories about individuals: the choice of persons about whom a biography is written; the way in which this is done; and the overall interaction among the media, the public, and society at large reveal topics and debates that are relevant in the cultures in which biographies are released. There is often a political component to this: biographies have the capacity to influence public opinion, although usually only after a period of time. Biographies are “actual” histories of individual people, whether they are long-deceased or still alive and active. Biographers write history, but they are inevitably influenced by their own time and the *actuality* of this time. In turn, biographies can have an important and corrective impact on the evaluation of individuals and topics in history.

Biography, then, is closely related to (investigative) journalism: biographers aim to reveal a historical truth from a personal perspective—through academic research, substantiated by verifiable sources, and in order to serve historical and democratic understanding. Biography, in this way, like history and journalism, serves as a tool in the functioning of a transparent and democratic society. However, this position has come under threat since the so-called “authorized biography,” originating in the United States, is gaining respectability little by little.

Authorization appears to have become a seal of quality for modern biographies. This assumption rests upon the prevailing belief that the subjects of biography are surely in a superior position to determine the defining moments of their lives. It goes without saying, however, that everyone has his or her own story to tell. So why should this not be the case for the biographer, too? A biography benefits from being independent, free from outside influence and devoid of ideology. A biography does not exist to express the established views that the subjects have of themselves—that is what autobiography is for. So what until recently was an indication of rubbish is now, by way of a label reading “authorized,” perceived as an indication of quality. This is another reason to continue to honor biography reviewing—as a warning against such labels. “Authorized” has a funny history: originally a sign of quality, under the critical scrutiny of biography reviewers like Carl Rollyson, authorized biography came to be thought of as rubbish because it has been co-opted, but now the designation “authorized” is again a supposed sign of quality. This is another reason to continue to honor biography reviewing—as a warning against such labels.

Independent biography has the capacity to interpret or reinterpret someone’s life, depending on the era in which the book is written. Prudent biographers will certainly make use of the views of their subjects, but should only do so as one of many different aspects that make up a final result. Self-representation should indeed be studied, albeit with the necessary dose of skepticism. Most everyone realizes that an autobiography is written for the purpose of self-justification.

A personal list of important biographies (or biographically inspired books), written in Dutch or in translation, published between the middle of 2015 and the middle of 2016, is given below. Translations are marked. Besides Dutch publications, a considerable number of biographies are read in English in the Netherlands. This accounts for the need for fast translations. Translations should be published before potentially interested readers buy and read the book in English. In the Netherlands public opinion on the genre is strongly internationally oriented. As a critic, I am continuously selecting titles throughout the year; I reviewed all of the following titles:

- Léon Hanssen, *De schepping van een aards paradijs: Een biografie van Piet Mondriaan in de periode 1919–1933*
- Herman Liagre Böhl and Han Lammers (1931–2000), *Amsterdammer in de polder*
- Larissa Juliet Taylor, *Jeanne D’Arc: Biografie* (translation)
- Helen Rappaport, *De gezusters Romanov: De verloren levens van de dochters van Tsaar Nicolaas II* (translation)
- Leo Molenaar, *Nooit op de knieën: Marcus Bakker (1923–2009), communist en parlementariër*

- Andrew Roberts, *Napoleon de Grote* (translation)
- Meindert Fennema and Goed Fout, *Herinnering van een meeloper* (autobiography)
- Oleg Chlevnjoek, *Stalin: De Biografie* (translation)
- Paul Luykx, *Heraut van de katholieke herleving: Gerard Brom 1892–1959*
- Rudiger Safranski, *Goethe: Kunstwerk van het leven* (translation)
- Erasmus, *De correspondentie van Desiderius Erasmus*, deel 12 (letters)
- Piet de Rooy, *De Nederlandse Darwin: Bernelot Moens en het mysterie van onze afkomst*
- Tony Judt, *Wanneer de feiten veranderen* (autobiography, translation)
- Jan Fontijn, *Onrust: Het leven van Jacob Israël de Haan*
- Julian Bell, *Van Gogh: De complete en compacte biografie* (translation)
- Nienke Denekamp and René van Blerk in collaboration with Teio Meedendorp, *De grote Van Gogh atlas*
- Hans Renders, in collaboration with Max Pam and Piet Schreuders, *Het motorzipspan van Willem Frederik Hermans*
- Arjen Fortuin, *Geert van Oorschot: Uitgever*
- Paul Willetts, *Rendez-Vous in de Russian Thearooms* (translation)
- Georges Wildemeersch, *Hugo Claus: De jonge jaren*
- Steve Lee Myers, *Poetin: De Nieuwe Tsaar* (translation)
- Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger: 1923–1968, the Idealist* (translation)
- Heere Heeresma, *Bleib Gesund: Brieven*
- Max de Jong, *Dagboek*, edited by Marsha Keja
- Sytze van der Zee, *Hare Majesteits loyaalste onderdaan: François van't Sant 1883–1966*
- Paul Fischer, *Een Kim Jong-Il Productie* (translation)
- Elisabeth Leijnse, *Cécile en Elsa: Strijdbare freules*
- Rosemary Sullivan, *De dochter van Stalin: Het veelbewogen leven van Svetlanan Alliloejeva*
- Frank Westerman, *Een woord een woord* (autobiography)
- Henk van Osch, *Kardinaal de Jong: Verzetsheld en conservator*
- *Dienstbaar tot het einde: Brieven van en aan Elisabeth Couperus-Baud 1923–1958*, edited by H. T. M. van Vliet (letters)
- Sylvia Heimans, *Josepha Mendels: Het eigenzinnige leven van een niet-nette dame, biografie*
- Andrea Wulf, *De uitvinder van de natuur: Het avontuurlijke leven van Alexander von Humboldt* (translation)
- Pauline Micheels, *De waarheidszoekster: Henriette Boas, een leven voor de joodse zaak*
- Mark Verheijen, *Harm van Riel: Een rechtse provo*
- Elias Canetti, *Het boek tegen de dood* (translation)
- Simon Sebag Montefiori, *De Romanovs 1613–1918* (translation)
- Felix Klos, *Winston Churchill: Vader van Europa* (translation)
- Peter Ackroyd, *Thomas More: Biografie* (translation)
- Peter Longerich, *Hitler* (translation)
- Luc Panhuysen, *Oranje tegen de Zonnekoning: De strijd tussen Willem III en Lodewijk XIV om Europa*
- Jolande Withuis, *Juliana: Vorstin in een mannenwereld*

## WORKS CITED

- Renders, Hans. *Wie weet slaag ik in de dood: Biografie van Jan Campert*. De Bezige Bij, 2004.
- Renders, Hans, and Binne de Haan. *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*. De Haan, 2014.