Conference report

*Different Lives*: Global Perspectives on Biography in Public Cultures and Societies

September 19-21, 2018

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Biography’s importance in the age of alternative facts and fake news

Introduction

In the current age, in which the truth is under pressure from the increase of fake news and increasing polarization on an international level, biography is more important than ever, as it helps us to understand the world and humankind. Biographies are written about both the living and the dead, and they serve one clear goal: getting to know and understand both the biography’s subject and the society in which he or she lived. Biography as a genre has been receiving a lot of attention academically over the past few decades. Every biographer – whether he be journalist or historian – has his own vision on the concept of “biography” and how it should be studied academically. These aspects were central to the international conference “Different Lives: Global Perspectives on Biography in Public Cultures and Societies,” which was held from September 19 to 21, 2018, in Groningen. Renowned scientists and biographers from all over the world came together to explore the following question: what is the state of the art concerning biography in your country?

The conference was organized by the Biography Institute (University of Groningen) in collaboration with The Biography Society (France) and the Biographer’s International Organization (US). Richard Holmes (GB) and Nigel Hamilton (US) were guests of honor, sharing their knowledge, vision, as well as humor in inspiring lectures. Participants of the conference were given the unique opportunity to witness a traditional PhD graduation ceremony in the Academy Building’s prestigious aula. Furthermore, Onno Blom, the brand new winner of the Dutch Biography Prize 2018, was interviewed on his prize-winning biography of one of the most successful and influential Dutch artists, Jan Wolkers.

The conference existed of one day with a social program and two days with plenary lectures and panel discussions. Inspiring speeches were alternated with sharp monologues in which previously offered opinions were discussed. This is a perfect example of the fact that the academic debate on biography is still raging. Each day was concluded informally with drinks and the ability to discuss your thoughts on the day’s lectures. The conference dinner, which wrapped up the conference, was the perfect opportunity to celebrate the newly established friendships and to look back on a successful and inspiring conference.
On Wednesday, September 19, participants could choose from two cultural excursions: Memorial Center Camp Westerbork or a visit to the museum of the history of the printing press. At the same time, students and young researchers could follow a masterclass given by Nigel Hamilton, the author of award-winning biographies on marshal Montgomery, F.D. Roosevelt and J.F. Kennedy. Hamilton compared the biographer’s task to the detective’s: they should both be inquisitive towards their subjects and connect his or her influential actions with the world around them. Work hard and try to really understand the individual. A biography is written about a real individual with real actions, and their choices can have a great impact on history. Hamilton was sure to offer all contestants the space to talk about their research, and was able to ask inspiring questions to every researcher.

On Thursday the 20th and Friday 21st, scientists from a host of different countries came to speak about their ideas on national traditions in biography in their own countries. They came from the Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain, Russia, South Africa, Indonesia, Vietnam, Iran, New Zealand, Canada, and the US. Each country has its own unique history to tell about the place of biography in a societal national debate. The modern biography tradition was oftentimes tied to topical issues. Biography as a genre might be on the rise in the Netherlands, but in the United Kingdom we can discern a rise in the amount of memoirs, autobiographies and different kinds of life writing. In the current post-colonial era in South Africa, subjects who were historically seen as heroes are examined in a critical light. In a closed society such as Iran, being able to write a critical biography is not possible (yet), but the Iranian researcher Sahar Vahdati Hosseinian delivered an impressive lecture in which she connected the current political and social transitions in her country with the biographical tradition. She compared biography to an onion: you can peel both to reach its core, but this is a long and difficult process, especially in Iran.

Political, social and religious developments all influence biography’s national traditions, and biographies influence these developments as well. A good biographer keeps on asking critical questions and continues to dig until he founds an answer to these questions. Censorship can cripple this process, and censorship does not only exist in countries such as Iran and Russia; in Western societies certain archives are only publicly available to a limited extent, causing biographers to invest a lot of time and effort into finding alternative roads to the answers he seeks.
In his lecture, Hamilton emphasized Trump’s political climate, where the boundaries between truth, lies, and fake truth blur. This makes the biographer’s job – to connect the facts and reach a convincing conclusion – even more important. A biography is able to correct, nuance, or offer a different perspective on current historiography. In order to do so, a biography should consist of thorough and verifiable source research, a sound theory and the will to tell the truth. According to Hamilton, the biographer should have a great sense of responsibility, both to himself and to his subject.

Richard Holmes, biography’s “godfather,” has written the world famous *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1985) and *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (2008). His adage is “the biographer’s handshake,” where this proverbial “handshake” transcends and connects boundaries, cultures, generations, disciplines and personalities. Holmes focused on the biographer’s challenges. Apart from the theoretical basis and the biography’s structure, the biography’s form influences the end result. In Holmes’ view, a biographer needs empathy above all else – empathy to understand the subject and to get a grip on his behavior and actions. Holmes was presented the honor to receive the first copy of Hans Rengers’ and Nigel Hamilton’s new book, *The ABC of Modern Biography* (2018). The book is also available in Dutch, titled *Het ABC van de Biografie*.

Halfway through the program, the contestants were guided from the “sacred space” of the church building that hosted the conference to the “scientific space” in the Academy Building to witness Nicholas Weber’s PhD defense on *Piet Mondrian’s Early Years: The Winding Path to Straight Abstraction*. Some of the foreign contestants were startled by the Dutch custom of bombarding the PhD student with critical questions, but Weber was able to answer all of them expertly. He more than deserved the standing ovation after the graduation.

Hans Rengers, who organized the conference together with David Veltman and Madelon Nanninga-Franssen, concluded the conference. In his conclusion, he argued that a biographer should study his subject as well as the public domain; you cannot have one without the other. The conference initiated great debates, but there still remains a lot more to discuss. The biography should be visible in both the academic and the social debates. A biography is able to shine a light upon individuals, and this is what makes the genre viable and important.

Anke Jongste (translation Madelon Nanninga-Franssen)
Opening lecture Nigel Hamilton
Truth, lies and Fake Truth: The Future of Biography

Ladies and Gentlemen, fellow biographers and students of biography: thanks to this distinguished university and its pioneering Institute of Biography, as well as numerous kind sponsors, we've gathered here in Groningen to reflect on “Different Lives,” as addressed and expressed in different cultures across the globe, from Washington to Beijing. The first thing we'll learn, I'm sure, is just how varied are the ways in which biographers in these different cultures see and approach their biographical task, and perhaps examine why there is such a difference.

Biography, in other words, not as a genre that is the same everywhere, but rather as a relative concept, reflecting widely different cultures - and subcultures.

I use the word “relative” with some concern – for although biography in the United States, where I live and work, has enjoyed something of a golden age over the past four decades, the very culture in which it is undertaken is now facing what some observers see as a mortal threat: from “relativism.”

To the surprise and shock of almost all political pundits, the White House was won in 2016 by a real estate developer committed to a platform of misogyny, hatred of immigrants, opposition to federal government, and greed-obsessed fantasy as preferable to reality. Americans like myself are now living with the worrying outcome of that election – especially its implications for the concept of truth.

The long-time chief book critic of the New York Times, Michiko Kakutani, titled her own new book: The Death of Truth – and she didn't mean the title ironically. Chapter by chapter, drawing on her experience at the Times, she addresses the danger to democratic society posed by groups of people who have lost belief or even interest in truth – blaming, at the top of her list of enablers in this “degradation” of truth, those academics who, in the 1970s, gave rise to the tsunami of poststructuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism in our universities: a tidal wave in which not only the humanities but science too became overrun by men and women arguing “that scientific theories are socially constructed,” and are merely the product of “the identity of the person positing the theory and the values of the culture in which they are formed; therefore, science cannot possibly make claims to neutrality or universal truths.” Blame for the current US Administration’s current assault on the notion of
global warming, on the teaching of evolution, on the need for environmental protection, on the importance of vaccination, and other causes Ms. Kakutani lays in considerable part at the door of pdp’s – as might call them: the poststructuralists, deconstructors and postmodernists who, in thrall to Derrida, Foucault, Saussure and other theorists and critics, set about questioning and ridiculing the idea of an objective reality – their intellectual objections subsequently “pinballing” their “relativistic” way “through our culture” over recent decades, as Ms. Kakutani neatly puts it.

It was one thing for pdp’s to upend the staid conventions of academic thinking, Ms. Kakutani noted; another to replace it with what she called “jargon-filled prose and perversely acrobatic syntax,” which, in the hands of evil people then morphed into “dumbed-down corollaries” that not only took over the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue but huge swathes of the nation - thereby allowing the 45th President and his defenders “to use its relativistic arguments to excuse his lies.” Lies, or deliberate untruths, that had already amounted to some two thousand, one hundred and forty false or misleading claims made by the President in his first term of office - “an average of nearly 5.9 times a day,” as Ms. Kakutani recorded. Recently counted by the Washington Post as 5,000 “lies or misleading claims” since Trump took office.

What had once been playful, philosophical and linguistic musings, floated in the hallowed halls of elite universities, were now having real and menacing consequences in which an American president, enjoying huge constitutionally-given powers and his supporters in the “real” world outside of academia, could cynically use them to mask an ideological, fascist movement: one seeking naked power and control that could be wielded without legal constraint or even criticism by men with no knowledge of Derrida, Foucault or Saussure, but who merely use the notion of the impossibility of objective truth to openly advance lies and fake truths – such as the birthplace of the 44th President, or denial that the Holocaust ever happened, or even the mass-murder of children at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

As Ms. Kakutani rightly pointed out, George Orwell had warned of such a danger already in his book Nineteen Eighty Four – though the 1948 novel was an allegory based upon Stalinist communism and Hitlerian fascism. Orwell’s memorable invention had been, Ms. Kakutani points out, the “Ministry of Truth”: a ministry in which every concept prompted and promoted by Big Brother and those in power is the opposite of
the truth, if truth is defined as that which can be verified, or is based on accumulated, genuine evidence.

Ms. Kakutani’s book is only one of a growing number of works by alarmed authors, commentators, critics and political scientists in America, from Otto Shawn’s *The War on Science* to Edward Luce’s *The Retreat from Western Liberalism*; Kurt Andersen’s *Fantasyland*; Kevin Young’s *Bunk*; Lee McIntyre’s *Post Truth*; Jennifer Kavanaugh and Michael Rich’s *Truth Decay*; and Simon Blackburn’s *On Truth*. In a new technological, Internet-connected age in which misinformation and lies can be spread and used by trolls on a vast scale, whether to subvert elections or promote ideological aims, or simply to cause political disruption among opponents, America has become polarized and paralyzed as never before – leaving the role of educators and serious authors to become, in America, a crucially important one. One, moreover, that deeply affects biography.

I mentioned earlier the “golden age” of biography. It is a golden period of innovation and popularity, as well as literary and scholarly achievement – an age the biographical genre has enjoyed since the 1980s in what Hans Renders, in his collection of essays on the subject, called *The Biographical Turn*. In our latest book, though, *The ABC of Modern Biography*, we note how fortunate biography was to be for the most part saved from the ravages of pdp. And ironically, this was because biography – unlike Gender Studies, Sports History and Race and Ethnicity Studies – had never been accorded a place in academia, despite its two-thousand years of history.

By contrast, teachers of English Language, Arts and Literature were compelled by the advent of pdp not only to teach pdp, but teach “creative non-fiction” and “memoir” to students with diminishing attention spans and growing addiction to narcissistic blogs, while History teachers were reduced to pray for deliverance from the pdp onslaught. The great German-born British Tudor historian Sir Geoffrey Elton, whom we quote under “H is for History,” railed against the dying light. “[W]e historians are, in a way, fighting for our lives,” he declared. “Certainly we are fighting for the lives of innocent young people beset by devilish tempters who claim to offer higher forms of thought and deeper truths and insights – the intellectual equivalent of crack.”

Not being tasked with the instruction of young people, biographers, by contrast, went almost unscathed by poststructuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism.
Now it is true that Ms. Kakutani, in *The Death of Truth*, blames biography, in retrospect, for providing, instead of “chronicles of other people’s lives,” mere “platforms for philosophical manifestos” – such as Norman Mailer’s *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*; or “feminist polemics” – such as Francine du Plessix Gray’s *Rage and Fire*; or “deconstructionist exercise” – such as S. Paige Baty’s *American Monroe: the Making of a Body Politic*. She reserves her biggest beef, however, for Edmund Morris, castigating him for his “preposterous exercise in biographical writing,” namely *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, in which the chronicler was not Morris, the actual biographer, but an invented character who’d known Reagan when younger, and could happily if inauthentically describe the sports commentator, actor and would-be politician as he first made his way through college and early adulthood.

These are small pickings, in reality. Edmund Morris, in particular, was no pdp-stalwart. Rather he was a devotee of *le grand récit*, as demonstrated in his wonderful multi-volume biography of President Theodore Roosevelt. In *Dutch* he was merely seeking to find a way out from having to write, under an impossibly generous Random House contract, the life of a man he found more or less a cypher. *Dutch*, in any case, was swiftly denounced by critics – failing utterly to be accepted as a new biographical template, if that was its supposed aim. Besides, historians of biography well knew, Morris was not serious – he had merely strayed from the reservation. There had always been spoof biographies that crossed into the truthful, non-fiction realm, though most were published as fiction, such Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, or Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*. No, for all the addictiveness of the new pdp drug, biography was not going to shake off its two-thousand year history overnight. What is remarkable is that, in contrast to so much writing in history, English language, arts and literature, the social sciences, science and other areas of art and knowledge, biography remained impervious to pdp, at least in America and the UK. In fact it can be argued that, as a genre, biography happily stepped into the role vacated by so many former practitioners of history who’d been intimidated or silenced by pdp. Freed from many earlier restrictions on the genre – libel, the law on pornography, notions of privacy - biographers in the US reveled, from the 1980s onwards, in their unashamed right, in America, to weave *le grand récit*. Even *le petit récit* - in what Hans Renders termed Slice of Life biography - as well as group biographies. They certainly did not shy away from using new fictional, journalistic and cinematic *techniques*, in terms of structuring and
narrative; in fact by 2008 Hermione Lee could write in her *Biography: A Very Brief Introduction*, that no self-respecting biographer nowadays begins a biography with the birth of its subject. This was hardly deconstruction or postmodernism, though.

Freed from many traditional limitations on chronicling real lives, biographers of the golden age responded, in short, to an American public’s willingness to accept new narrative technique – but not lies or deliberate fake truths. For biographers in that respect, truth remained a red line: one that went all the way back to classical times. In its general, unashamed adherence to *le grand*, or even *petit récit*, biographers of the golden age overwhelmingly hewed to what was biography’s lifeblood: non-fiction. It was, after all, the very reason readers turned to biography rather than fiction, even if biography lacked the magic of invention. Respect for verifiable facts as opposed to myths and entertainment meant, moreover, that biographers were pressed to work harder than ever in their search of the truth about real individuals, past or present. Where footnotes and endnotes had once been considered *de trop* in biography, they now became mandatory, in order to support the author’s interpretation of a real life. As historians largely retreated before the pdp wave, American biographers – often trained as journalists, as we’ve noted under “J is for Journalism” and “N is for Non-Fiction” – arguably took upon themselves the historians’ cast-off mantle in chronicling the past – presidential biographers, in particular, often being seen as better historians of discrete ages than non-biographer historians, since such writers were willing to work harder to find and authenticate sources, do new interviews, challenge and update earlier accounts: to do, in short, the intense forensic research, footnoted and endnoted, that had once been the prerogative of the academic historian. Robert Caro, Ron Chernow, Blanche Wiesen Cook, Doris Kearns Goodwin, David McCullough, Michael Beschloss, Kenneth Davis, H.W. Brands, Robert Dallek, Edmund Morris: these and other American biographers demonstrated you could write popular modern biographies without resorting – save in the case of *Dutch!* – to invention, let alone to deliberate lies. And behind them there was a wave of biographers approaching the genre with the same enthusiasm and respect for fact as the basis for trying to tell the truth.

I say “trying.” Obviously, no biographer, going back to Plutarch and Suetonius, ever claimed to possess the sole truth about a real individual, or be definitive in recording his or her life. Different generations, different perspectives gave rise to different interpretations. Selection, as in shot selection in golf or tennis, led to different
outcomes – but the fundamental rules, as in golf or tennis, remained the same for all practitioners. *No invention*; no predetermined ideological motive, or veering into something that was not biography but a different genre, namely hagiography; no lying! No fake truth, or assertions that were not based, in other words, on documentary or reliable evidence.

Though the two share so many likenesses – especially their respect for fact - the very *process* of biography had never been quite the same as *history*, though. Historians search for a larger pattern, an explanation of how and why things happened and developed in the past; biographers on the *person* who happened, and who developed, over a lifetime, or part of it. Biographers are therefore more like detectives, following the clues, evidence and contexts from which a better understanding of an individual’s life can be deduced. *An* understanding, not *the* understanding – the biographer knowing his serious report or file will inevitably be superceded by later reports, but that this does not invalidate what he has done, in all honesty and sincerity. In this he is completely different, in America, from the author of a memoir, say, as we have noted in “M is for Memoir” – with the result that, while there have been continual cases of memoir-writers who have been exposed as deliberate deceivers, from James Frey to Misha Defonseca or Margaret B. Jones, there are few if any cases of serious biographers who resort to such fraud or “fake truth.” At the fringes – such as “A is for Authorized Biography,” which forms the first entry in our ABC, or “K is for Kings” – there have been examples of discretionary silence in terms of embarrassing facts. But outright invention? Lies? Fake truths? No.

Serious biography, after all, is serious *work*, unlike memoir or so much “creative” non-fiction – as Professor Renders and I have emphasized! The years spent tracking down the evidence of a real life mitigates against such short-cuts, or invention. Even the popularity of the modern genre does not mean biographers get temptingly rich in America – Ron Chernow being the most surprised person of all to learn his *Hamilton* would become a broadway hit musical. The root of all – or much – evil is thus, mercifully, a far lesser temptation to biographers than, say, to pharmaceutical scientists.

And so I come to the future of biography - at least in an America that has experienced a golden age of the genre, yet is now confronting the effects of American cultural decay –
just as, in its role as a more or less benign empire, the US is unraveling as the leading global power since World War II. For biography is not immune to a nation’s culture and politics, even if the genre was spared the tidal wave of pdp. As I’ve tried to show in Biography: A Brief History, biography in the West was and remains the natural outcome of man’s desire to commemorate the lives of the dead - even the living - but its interpretation of those lives has always been constrained by the pressures of the society in which the commemoration and interpretation are done.

These pressures are now serious and menacing, in America. Every reviewer and critic is worried about the current situation – even if there are few credible prescriptions that offer much hope to those who believe in truth as the backbone of human survival, environmentally, politically, socially and economically. It is as if the damage has been done, its destruction climaxing like a hurricane hitting land. With power given, legally and constitutionally, to a reckless American administration of willful know-nothings, there is nothing that can be done, many people say, save to wait out the storm, and survey the damage in the aftermath.

The challenge this poses for biographers is the same as that now facing journalists and educators: how to hold to the value of truth rather than lies, and facts in contrast to inventions, in a time of deliberate disinformation and Orwellian subversion of truthfulness. I loved the commencement speech of the outgoing president of Harvard University, Dr. Drew Faust, in May, this year, when she said: “We must be a place where facts matter, where reasoned and respectful discourse and debate serve as arbiters of truth.” As a university, her institution was often a “cacophony” of voices and argumentation, with reduced willingness to listen to other views. “But that must motivate us to redouble our efforts. Silencing ideas or basking in comfortable intellectual orthodoxy independent of facts and evidence blocks our access to new and better ideas. We must be dedicated to the belief that truth cannot be simply asserted or claimed, but must be established with evidence and tested with argument. Truth serves as inspiration and aspiration in all we do; it pulls us toward the future and its possibilities for seeing more clearly, understanding more fully, and improving ourselves and the world. Its pursuit is fueled by hope. Hope joins with truth as the as the very essence of a university.”

Noble words! Biography, for its part, is a hardy plant; it has survived thousands of years in the western world, in differing cultural manifestations and against many
headwinds, from censorship to arrest and execution. It won’t survive an environmental apocalypse, however, for it is as much a pawn of circumstance and power as any other cultural tradition. At least, in the short term. There is a wonderful passage in Chapter 23 of Margaret Atwood’s great novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*. “It can’t last forever,” the chronicler narrates. “I intend to get out of here. Others have thought such things, in bad times before this, and they were always right, they did get out one way or another, and it didn’t last forever. Although for them it may have lasted all the forever they had.”

Individually we may not live long enough to survive the current onslaught against the value of truth in America – truth based on respect for facts, and responsible argument. But in addition to Professor Faust’s plea for hope, here at this university, and among fellow biographers and students of the genre, coming from many countries. It concerns a thread running through the *ABC of Modern Biography* which Professor Renders and I have penned in this time of great cultural travail: one that might best be described as spiritual, and which is largely hidden from the world outside of biography and biographers.

It is this: namely the unique sense of fulfillment which biography, as the record and interpretation of a real individual’s life story, accords the biographer himself, or herself. We all know Dr. Johnson’s famous adage about biography, that it was a pursuit he esteemed “as giving us that comes near to ourselves, what we can most put to use.” Well, those were not mere words. Johnson was a biographer, and a proud one. For all its rules and limitations the doing of biography - at least in the Western cultural heritage since Xenophon, Plutarch and Suetonius - affords the biographer a *spiritual* fulfillment that no other endeavor does. It is not for everyone, however. Virginia Woolf hated it, as we’ve noted in our *ABC*, for she felt its constraints, for a great fictional artist, were intolerable – an “appalling grind” an “endless drudgery,” moreover a challenge she found she could not master. To her chagrin her biography of her friend Roger Fry turned out a complete disaster, without even “a flick of life” in it, as she herself wrote in her diary. But for those of us who appreciate and respect those rules and constraints in our research and in the representation of a real person’s life story, the reward is seldom pecuniary, or commercial, or even social in terms of fame. It is the fulfillment of the biographer’s long struggle with the *reality of the other – another person’s* actual life.

Anti-othering: the spirit of modern biography.
Not a great draw in an American nation, one must admit – a country headed by an elected president who has turned against the notion of immigrants, deliberately othering them as “rapists,” and “animals.” Nevertheless a challenge – and perhaps a new way of looking at the meaning, significance, even theory of biography - that abounds in lessons, insights, and a kind of joy, too: the joy of being a serious biographer, applying ones curiosity, intelligence, sensitivity, good judgment, education, energy, critical skills and a passion for truth to the literary recreation of another person’s real life, done for others, and - not least - oneself.

That challenge – the challenge of exploring the truth of another human being, both good and evil, may be disparaged or sneered at in an age of “alternative facts” and “fake news,” but it is real to the biographer – and if the past two thousand years are anything to go by, it will ultimately prevail.

Nigel Hamilton, Ph.D.
Senior Fellow
John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies
University of Massachusetts Boston
The conference in the media

- Elsevier Weekblad, 16 June 2018, p. 46-47

- Parool newspaper, 1 September 2018, p. 46-47.
We kijken naar onze helden in het licht van de problemen van vandaag

Vrij Nederland, September 2018, p. 92-105

Longlist
De vieringen van de Nederlandse Bogenaar Koning in 2018

1. Het verhaal achter de biografie van een held: 

Joseph Beuys (1921-1986)

2. De biografie van een held: 

Richard Wright (1908-1960)

3. De biografie van een held: 

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)

4. De biografie van een held: 

Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924)

5. De biografie van een held: 

Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968)

6. De biografie van een held: 

Adolf Hitler (1889-1945)

7. De biografie van een held: 

Stalin (1878-1953)

8. De biografie van een held: 

Gandhi (1869-1948)

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Het wordt geadviseerd om de biografie te lezen en te begrijpen,
Carl Rollyson on Facebook, 21 September 2018

‘The last day of the Different Lives Conference in Groningen. Yesterday I was part of the committee that awarded Nicholas Fox Weber a Ph.D. for his biographical thesis on the early life of Mondrian. It was quite a day, beginning with my talk on presidential biography. Today I’m part of a panel discussion on biography and censorship, the critical reception of biography, biography and psychology, biography and history.

This is, you should know, the most important international conference on biography that has ever been organized, including scholars from Russia, Indonesia, Spain, France, Vietnam, New Zealand, Canada, The Netherlands, South Africa, Italy, Iran, the U.S., the UK, and many others parts of the world. I have never seen anything like it.’
De biografie als ambacht. Een interview met Hans Renders en Nigel Hamilton

Hans Renders en Nigel Hamilton zijn elkaar meer dan een maatje vijf. Ze hebben een goede relatie en respect voor elkander. In deze interview praten ze over de biografie als ambacht.

Hans Renders: "De biografie is altijd de baas. Elke biografie heeft een eigen stem en een eigen persoonlijkheid. Ik hou ervan om een biografie te schrijven en te onderzoeken. Ik wil dat de lezer deel uitmaakt van het verhaal.""De A van Autorisatie" of de S van Seks

Nigel Hamilton: "Als schrijver ben ik altijd aan het zoeken naar de donkere kanten van een biografie. Ik wil dat de lezer deel uitmaakt van het verhaal en begrijpt waarom de persoon is zoals hij is.""Het ABC van de Biografie"
The story of Piet Mondrian

The oddball who painted joy

He was a visionary painter, but definitely an oddball too. In a compelling biography of Piet Mondrian, Nick Weber explores the becoming of an artist who became famous for his use of stark, black lines across white backdrop.

By Christien Boomsma

Why do people love Mondrian’s work so much?

Is it a coincidence that the very first drawing ever made, 74,000 years ago, consists of seven black lines painted on the wall of a cave? It was discovered only two weeks ago. Yet, Piet Mondrian too used straight black lines to depict another universe behind the one we live in. His ideal world.

‘There’s something about straight lines’, Nick Weber, who was awarded his PhD for his biography of Mondrian, muses. ‘There’s a certain quality in Mondrian’s works, that offers relief from the discordant, the upsetting. His designs are immensely satisfying.’
Weber was only twelve years old when he saw his first Mondrian. Of course he had never heard of the abstract painter. He had no idea that the painting that so caught his attention was *Composition in Blue and White*, the very first abstract painting ever purchased by an American museum.

Weber was only there because his mother’s work had been awarded an honorable mention and would be displayed in an exhibit at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. She took her son along. ‘Of course I was restless; I was not in love with the idea of all my parents friends clucking over me. I asked my father if I could wander upstairs.’

Fifteen minutes later he dashed back down, exhilarated. ‘Daddy, you have to see this!’ That initial moment of shock, of breathless discovery, has never left him. ‘This painting took me somewhere else. I thrilled to it. It was as primal as the first time I ate a banana split, or the first time I heard a piece of music that I really liked’, he says.

This painting took me somewhere else. I thrilled to it.

Even at that tender age, he saw what Mondrian wanted to reveal. ‘He was looking for another universe, another way of seeing. A composition that would have qualities of rhythm, joy, euphoria, satisfaction, pleasure. Pleasure untainted by anything else. There is no possibility of death: what you see in his paintings is going to last forever.’

*What do we really know about Mondrian?*

A lot of ink has been spilled trying to unravel and interpret Mondrian’s life and work. But Weber is trying to do something new with his biography. He only used primary sources for his research. ‘I only write what we know’, he says. ‘No one has any business misrepresenting another person. A biographer should be meticulous.’
To enter Mondrian’s universe is to encounter a singular form of beauty. No one else lived like this, and no one else painted this way. Many imitated his style, some of his contemporaries copied him, and in time the motifs he invented would appear on dresses and ladies’ shoes, from discount stores to haute couture, just as his name would be used to confer a certain panache on hotels and apartment buildings, but none of that was the same thing. The artist’s existence on rue du Départ, and the art he made there, harnessed manic enthusiasm with exquisite control, both at their extremes. Most people live by half-measures, or follow someone else’s ideas. Mondrian had created, in his rudimentary living quarters and bright airy work space, a private sanctuary, suited only for its sole inhabitant. What to others would be self-denial was for him the pathway to nirvana. Possessed by the fierce determination of a messiah, but with none of the self-consciousness of most messianic types, he used the ideal life he had created for himself to make paintings which, even when physically small and with their elements distilled to a minimum, became secure and uplifting worlds of their own.

From: Piet Mondrian’s early Years. The winding path to straight abstraction, by Nicolas Fox Weber

And so Weber talked to the few people who had known Mondrian, the man – including his art dealer. Weber read archived letters from his family and first-hand accounts written by the few friends who were intimately acquainted with the artist. He began to see that history had been unfair to Mondrian.

‘For example, there’s an oft-repeated story that he skipped mother’s funeral, even though he lived nearby, because he was busy with an exhibition. That is almost pathological; it coloured my perception of him: what kind of human being does this?’

But then Weber found a letter by Mondrian’s brother that explicitly mentions the artist’s presence at the funeral. ‘That made me furious. People repeated that story, but no one asked about the evidence’, Weber says.

There has also been a lot of speculation about Mondrian’s sexual preferences. Was he a homosexual? According to accounts of his acquaintances, he once broke off an engagement and otherwise seemed unable to maintain romantic relationships for long.

Also a bit odd: one female friend gave an account of a make-out session with the artist that lasted for twenty minutes – she kept an eye on the clock. But Weber refuses to speculate. ‘I tell these stories, but leave it to the reader to draw his own conclusions.’

Who creates such extraordinary paintings?

All the same, records of Mondrian’s behavior did leave the researcher with an impression that there was something off about the artist. Weber calls him ‘a bit of an oddball’ who had little regard for expected social norms.

‘I talked to Ben Sanders, whose father was among Mondrian’s acquaintances. When he was ten years old he went with his mother to see “Uncle Piet” in Paris. He remembered that when they entered the atelier, Mondrian didn’t even say hello. He just said to the mother, “will you dance with me?” They danced for half an hour while the boy watched. Then they left.’

It’s not speculation to call that odd behavior, Weber says. There are other stories: Mondrian attended many social events, but always kept to himself. When he was young, he was obsessively afraid of damaging his eyes – so much that he didn’t play with his brothers in case he might wound himself.
He was hysterically afraid of spiders – he once fell asleep during a concert; upon waking up his saw a spider and started screaming at the top of his lungs. He often broke off friendships; he never married; he never maintained any close relationships.

I think abstract art made him happy; to create a beautiful, visual universe. He lived in a world of pure lines

He cloistered himself in his studio, but not for lack of invitations. He ate every meal alone. All he did – and all he wanted to do – was paint. Is that sad? ‘I think he connected the way he wanted to’, Weber says.

‘This life suited him. It wouldn’t suit most of us, but it worked for him’ because it allowed him to focus on his work. He didn’t worry about money or fame – he only worried about the world at his fingertips. ‘I think abstract art made him happy; to create a beautiful, visual universe. He lived in a world of pure lines.’

Why did Mondrian go from landscapes to straight lines?

Too many people see Mondrian’s life as a timeline divided. On one side of the line is the young representational artist painting trees and dunes and sunsets, who learned all the classic principles of the The Hague School and worked alongside his uncle Frits – a painter who depicted living landscapes and sceneries exactly the way his customers liked them.

One very odd memento, however, augments our impressions of Mondrian in 1900. That year, he made a self-portrait. A few years after he painted it, Mondrian and the youngest brother of Albert van den Briel, a cadet at a military academy, keen about modern automatic weapons, was doing some pistol shooting with Mondrian in the basement of the building where Mondrian lived in Amsterdam. They generally used Mondrian’s discarded canvases, all of them failed portraits, as targets. The two men started firing. ‘Piet was a good shot; his hand was steady,’ Van den Briel tells us.

‘When all the portraits had been used, there was only that self-portrait left, and Piet wanted to shoot it too.’ He was determined to obliterate the canvas by riddling it with pistol bullets. Van den Briel’s brother objected, however. He told Mondrian that Van den Briel would be upset. ‘Besides, they were running out of ammunition.’

Mondrian then gave the painting to the brother to give to Van den Briel, saying ‘that it was an insignificant thing, made only to solve a technical problem — that of making the sitter’s eyes always meet the spectator’s.’

From: Piet Mondrian’s early Years. The winding path to straight abstraction, by Nicolas Fox Weber

On the other side of the line is the brilliant abstract artist who fled to Paris, the man who meticulously avoided the ‘tragic’ – as he called the natural world – and carved out a totally new reality. ‘But I don’t see his life as divided in two’, Weber says. ‘From the beginning Mondrian was attracted to something universal. He just hadn’t found his language yet.’

His lifelong quest is visible from his beginnings. He became a fairly appreciated painter after he left school. But Mondrian also began experimenting with new techniques and ‘odd’ subjects, which earned him harsh criticism at one exhibition after another.

The still life of a herring in 1892 offended the critics – couldn’t he have painted something prettier? Critics accused him of ‘lack of poetry, lack of mood’. At a 1909 exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, they said his art was ‘simply mindless. The work of a child indeed: a sick, rebellious child with a few pots of paint to hand’.

His uncle Frits was so enraged his nephew’s discomfiting style he demanded that Mondrian drop the second ‘a’ from his name. He didn’t want anyone to associate him with his now ‘depraved nephew’.
But now we can see how Mondrian was changing and experimenting to reach his goal with every new attempt. ‘He was gradually refining his art’, Weber says. ‘And he was developing, as most great artists do. There is no inconsistency here, only different stages with Mondrian always trying new things.’

Mondrian kept trying new things, says Weber, even late in life. Slowly but surely, Mondrian stopped painting reality as we see it and found ways to represent the vast universe beyond sense perception. ‘The criticism only strengthened his mechanism of self-protection’, Weber states. ‘It increased his resolve and tenacity and his will to follow his own beliefs no matter what.’
Blog Laura van Hasselt on *hart.Amsterdam*, online platform Amsterdam Museum, 26 September 2018

‘HISTORICI ZIJN SLECHTE BIOGRAFEN’

Masterclass van Nigel Hamilton


Argus, 2 October 2018

Hoe hangt de biografische vlag erbij?

 door Martin Schütte

Nigel Hamilton, 2007

Nigel Hamilton is in Engeland geboren en woonde voor het eerst in het Amsterdams Museum. Hij werd er in Amsterdam geboren en woonde zelf ook in Amsterdam. Hij heeft een aantal bijdragen geschreven over historische thema's en heeft in het Indonesiaanse Museum een reeks lezingen gehouden. Hij schreef voor het eerste de vlag erbij, maar had dan al een positie wat het variabel was.

Een soort stichtelijke praatje, kan zo domineer worden, die Hamilton

Einde2018

Stichtelijke praatjes zijn in Nederland en werden speciaal geschreven voor het museum. De vlag erbij is in Nederland en wordt speciaal geschreven voor het museum. Het museum is in Nederland en wordt speciaal geschreven voor het museum. Het museum is in Nederland en wordt speciaal geschreven voor het museum.
Urgent appeal by the biographer of John F. Kennedy: take heed of the truth

The truth is under pressure, biographer Nigel Hamilton states. Not the most controversial opinion, you would think. But Hamilton angered the guild of French biographers with his lecture before the audience of the biography conference Different Lives. Read the lecture, and judge for yourself.
As a biographer, Nigel Hamilton (1944) already had an enormous track record when he began to work on the first part of the monumental biography of the American president John F. Kennedy. That book appeared in 1992 under the title *JFK: Reckless youth*, immediately drawing wide attention.

Not only because it was written like a novel, but also because of its contents, based mostly upon new material about JFK’s remarkable life: for example about his loveless youth; his criminal father; the disastrous marriage of his parents; his greedy sexuality, resulting in many amorous adventures; the lethal disease, afflicting him during his entire life; the deep impression that the bombing of Pearl Harbor made on him; his weak academic results and later on his successes at Harvard; the wake of his political conscience and engagement in society; his run to get elected to Congress.

The moment his political career after this first hurdle shall start, the book stops. A second part was never published; the Kennedy family blocked Hamilton from beginning with that book. Hamilton had done his job so well – in the sense of thoroughly, seriously and unscrupulously, that the family objected successfully against a sequel to this shocking story. This is comprehensible from their point of view, because JFK is portrayed with sympathy – a great effort, especially when you take into account the horrendous family from which he came. Hamilton – strongly put – got his world fame from a biography he never finished, although this was never his fault.

*Excuse me, an attack on Derrida?*

Hamilton was there during the biography conference *Different Lives*, that took place from 19 until 21 September at the University of Groningen. He not only presented together with Hans Renders his book *The ABC of Modern Biography*, but he also gave a lecture. In ‘Truth, Lies and Fake Truth: The Future of Biography’, which you will find after this introduction, he strongly condemned the Trump administration. He made clear that a time in which a biography is written, is of huge influence to this book, and stated that in the Trump-era in which we now live, full of fake news, made up identities, denial of history and science, the truth is under threat.

Focusing upon the biographical genre, Hamilton turned against the practice of downplaying the truth, based as it is upon facts and arguments. Especially the group of French biographers, present at the conference, went mad at Hamilton’s clear words; they perceived it rightfully as an attack on ‘their’ Derrida and related philosophers from their language area. Judge for yourself.

Jeroen Vullings (translation David Veltman)
“Different Lives” Conference Provides International Perspectives on Biography

By John A. Farrell

Did liberal scholarship, degrading the principle of truth with postmodern theory, pave the way for Donald Trump’s duplicity?

Biographer Nigel Hamilton, a former BIO president, proposed as much in a biting address that launched “Different Lives,” a three-day conference on biography at the University of Groningen in The Netherlands, in late September.

“The White House was won . . . by a real estate developer committed to a platform of misogyny, hatred of immigrants, opposition to federal government, and greed-obsessed fantasy as preferable to reality,” said Hamilton. “Americans . . . are now living with the worrying outcome of that election—especially its implications for the concept of truth.”

Apply Now for the Caro Fellowship

BIO is accepting applications for the Robert and Ina Caro Research/Travel Fellowship. BIO members with a work in progress can apply to receive funding for research trips to archives or to important settings in their subject’s lives. The fellowship is restricted to supporting works of biography and not works of history, autobiography, or memoir.

The application deadline is February 1, 2019. In the spring of 2019, BIO will award either one $5,000 or two $2,500 fellowships, based on the judgment of the panel of three judges: Deirdre David, Caroline Fraser, and Marc Leepson.
To apply, click here.
Trump's “Orwellian suppression of truthfulness” has roots in postwar postmodern and deconstructionist theories, Hamilton contended. Laudably, he said, biographers have resisted the call.

Organized by Hans Renders's team at the Biography Institute in Groningen, with support from BIO and the Biography Society in France, the conference lured biographers from four continents and 18 countries.

The keynote address was given by British biographer Richard Holmes, winner of the 2018 BIO Award. The Dutch Biography Prize was given to Onno Blom, for his book on artist and writer Jan Wolkers. And the conference attendees were treated, midway through the program, to author Nick Weber's stately, successful defense of his Ph.D. thesis on the painter Piet Mondrian.

BIO member Carl Kollysen spoke on the art of presidential biography. Writers from Iran, Russia, and Vietnam reminded attendees not to take for granted the immeasurable value of artistic freedom. Lindie Koorts of South Africa and Spain's Maria Jesus Gonzalez gave instructive talks on how contemporary political issues affect the choices and interpretations made by biographers in their two countries.

Hamilton addressed issues of truthfulness and politics as well. We are "now confronting the effects of American cultural decay" symbolized by "a reckless administration of willful know-nothings," he said, in a talk titled "Truth, Lies, and Fake Truth: The Future of Biography."

"It was a wonderful, eye-opening, and dramatic biography conference—probably the best I've ever attended."  
**Nigel Hamilton**

Kakutani's book, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*, Hamilton traced a line from the more extreme forms of poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism—that paint history, political verities, and at times science as social constructions—to today's "fake news" climate.

With a few exceptions, biographers have resisted, Hamilton said. In the discipline, "truth has remained a red line," he contended, a reason that readers have turned to biography in its recent golden age, for its reliance on "verifiable facts."

Biographers "hewed to what was biography's lifeblood: non-fiction," he said, and were "pressed to work harder than ever in their search of the truth about real individuals. Where footnotes and endnotes had once been considered de trop in biography, they now became mandatory."

Biographers, resisting the lure of postmodern theory, are now "willing to work harder to find and authenticate sources, do new interviews, challenge and update earlier accounts—to do, in short, the intense forensic research . . . footnoted and endnoted, that had once been the prerogative of the academic historian."

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The Caro Fellowship, first awarded in 2018, is given in honor of Robert and Ina Caro, whose work demonstrates the crucial importance of depicting a sense of place in delineating character.

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**First-time Biographers, Apply Now for the Rowley Prize**

BIO is accepting applications for the Hazel Rowley Prize. The prize rewards a first-time biographer with funding (the $2,000 award); a careful reading from an established agent; one year's membership in BIO (along with registration for the annual Biographers International Organization Conference); and publicity for the author and project through the BIO website, *The Biographer's Craft* newsletter, etc. The prize is a way for BIO—an organization of biographers, agents, editors, and biography devotees—to advance its mission and extend its reach to talented new practitioners.

The prize is open to all first-time biographers.
Joanny Moulin, the president of the Biography Society and a member of BIO’s Advisory Council, replied in part to Hamilton in his own talk on biography. “My take on biography is theoretical, because I am French,” he said wryly. Biographers may resist the extreme interpretations—and extreme criticism—of postmodern theory, Moulin said, but it is foolish to say that social constructs and other forces don’t guide the lives and choices of individuals.

Biographers cannot close their eyes to the implications and insights of modern theory, Moulin contended. The notion that we can “go back to the good old days—this is nonsense,” he said.

Lectures about the culture of biography in Canada, the Netherlands, Italy, and Indonesia were alternated by roundtables. During these discussions, there was a lively debate on propositions about censorship, the reception of biography, and the relationship between biography and history. Finally, David Veltman made some remarks about the political impact of artists’ biographies in Belgium.

This well-attended conference was prepared to the very detail by Hans Renders (another member of BIO’s Advisory Council), Madelon Nanninga-Franssen, and David Veltman. During the farewell dinner, they were frequently called upon to organize such an event again.

John Farrell is the author of biographies of Tip O’Neill, Clarence Darrow, and Richard Nixon.

From the Editor

With this comes a slew of biography-related events in New York City, and in this issue we highlight two of the recent ones. Although we have two Big Apple correspondents and some others scattered across the world, there’s a lot more that we need to find the time to cover. This is the case for the Less Levy Center for Biography, which sponsors many of these fine happenings. We can always use an additional one or two New York-area members who would be willing to attend and report on events that would otherwise lack coverage. If you’re interested, let me know. And if you attend an event where you see that might be of interest to other BIO members, feel free to drop me a line and let me know about it, too.

Speaking of our correspondents, we have reports this month from Kilts, who represents TBC in Hawaii, and our Australian correspondent, Todd Nichols. Also this month, we have more details about the upcoming event honoring Tim O’Reilly, editor of this year’s Essential American Book Award.

Next month, we’ll have an article by Michael Burgan on the Different Visions Conferences, which was held in September in Groningen, The Netherlands. BIO co-sponsored the event as part of our ongoing effort to make the organization truly international. As a preview of our coverage of the event, here’s a quote from Carl Blythe, who also attended the conference: “It’s a fact that we should know the most important information center for biography that has ever been gathered, including scholars from Russia, Indonesia, South Africa, France, Japan, New Zealand, Canada, The Netherlands, South Africa, India, Iran, the U.S., the UK, and many other parts of the world. It has never been anything like it.”

Yours,

Michael Burgan
Photos

Frans Zwarts, former rector of Groningen University
Hans Renders, David Veltman and Madelon Nanninga-Franssen