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cousins, so to speak, once removed. They should certainly be addressed as teaching biography. Also, a degree of cross-pollination is no bad thing; I would like, for example, to see more biographers writing autobiographically about their experience, objectives, and works—nowadays the public often reads a biography for the author’s interpretation of a real life, rather than to know everything about the subject’s life itself.

8. The past decades feature the burgeoning biopics and TV programs in biographical fashion. Their audience may exceed the life writing readers. What is your comment on this phenomenon? Given the differences with textual life writing, can they be included in the category of life writing? Why? The proliferation of biographical works on TV, the Internet, radio, film, etc., is unsurprising, since curiosity about real people has always been the motivation for biography—both for the author, and for the author’s audience. But those outward or expressions of biographical curiosity have but a very recent history, with very little in the way of ethical rules or responsibility. It is true that such productions are highly influential in shaping the way we think about past or present individuals, and are worthy of dissection and study—but meantime most audiences recognize, I think, the difference between supposedly fact-based entertainment and serious print biography. (In this respect, the existence of literary prizes for good print biographies—such as the Pulitzer—is very important, since print biography is not, save in a handful of cases—remunerative, and relies on an author’s dedication to a sort of cause: the truth!)

Nigel Hamilton is Senior Fellow, John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston, USA. He has written some twenty-six works of biography, addressing the lives of Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Field Marshal Montgomery, President John F. Kennedy, President Bill Clinton, and currently President Franklin D. Roosevelt. His two books on biographical history (Biography: Brief History) and practice (How To Do Biography: A Primer) are published by Harvard University Press. He has won the Whitbread Prize for Biography, the Templar Medal for Military History, the New York Blue Ribbon Award for Best Documentary (profile), and his JFK: Reckless Youth was dramatized as an ABC television mini-series. His last work, The Mantle of Command: FDR at War, 1941–1942, was longlisted for the National Book Award in 2014, and the sequel, Commander in Chief: FDR’s Battle With Churchill, 1943, will be published in 2016.

Biography Studies in Holland

Hans Renders

Hans Renders presents a new look in the area of Life Writing Studies in China. In the Chinese academia, there have been few scholarships on European life studies; there have been unproportionate historians among the practitioners, a body that is built up mostly by literary scholars. For both reasons Professor Hans Renders’s view on biography and the development of life writing studies in Holland is valuable to the Chinese scholars. Our email interview with Hans Renders took place in October, 2015.

1. Would you please brief your own experience working in the field of life writing? What are your lessons from it?

In 2004 we have initiated at the University of Groningen the Biography Institute, in order to initiate and stimulate research into biographies. Our approach can be discerned in three elements. In the first place, we publish on a theoretical level about biography. This has among others resulted in the edited volume Theoretical Discussions of Biography (Leiden/Boston: Brill 2014); a series of edited volumes on biography related to different fields of knowledge (Amsterdam: Boom publishers, 2007–2012); the edited volume Microhistory and the Picaresque Novel (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014), and the PhD dissertation From Prince to Pauper: Biography and the Individual Perspective in Historiography (English title, 2015). Second, we aim to employ this theory practically: since 2004 21 projects have been started for writing biographies, among whom Nigel Hamilton on US president Roosevelt, biographies on the Dutch poets Bloem en Jellem, on art collector Helene Kröller-Müller, on business entrepreneur Anton Kröller and on the Dutch politicians Van der Louw, Zijlstra, Nieuwenhuis, Schermerhorn and Van Heuven Goedhart. The third element is education: we provide various university courses, under the title “Biographical Approach of History”.

2. Would you please give us an overview of the life writing development in your country in recent years? What are the success and problems? Could you recommend one or two of the life writings published in recent years? What is the worth do you think?
I would like to emphasize that we practice and study in the first place biography, and Life Writing can be a part of it. In the Netherlands the Life Writing approach, until now unfortunately often is an ideologically biased practice, without too much consideration of the historical approach and narrative skills that are required for writing biography. This is why the biographies of the Biography Institute all serve two aims: they require academical justification and they are all published by trade publishers, in order to reach a broad reading audience.

3. Would you please give us an overview of life writing theories popular in recent years in your country? What issues concern the life writing theorists most in your country? What are the leading works in life writing theories in recent years?

In the Netherlands like in Western humanities increasing attention is being paid to Life Writing, but unfortunately also here not a single author is trying to establish a sound theoretical framework for Life Writing. Life Writers tend to concentrate strongly on the so called ‘victims of history’, like women, homosexuals, colored people. But the first goal of historians is not to correct history, but to understand it. We have written on these issues and challenges facing Life Writing quite extensively in our Brill-volume Theoretical Discussions of Biography.

4. Are you satisfied with the life writing theories people are interested most in recent years? Are they helpful to life writing? What issues do you think life writing theories should explore?

No, I am not satisfied with the development of Life Writing in recent years, because the label Life Writing is too often used as an excuse to do not conduct serious research in archives. At the Biography Institute we focus on theoretical and scholarly consequences of the participant’s or agency perspective of biographical research, on concepts like unicity and representativeness of persons and their lives. We investigate egodocuments not to confirm history, but to explore changes in history. A positive note concerning Life Writing is that people from previously marginal or ‘lower’ social classes now receive more attention, but that is a development that took place in historiography in general too. Next year we will publish the edited volume The Biographical Turn (Routledge Publishers), an international volume on the consequences and use of biographical research in the humanities in the last three decades, with contributions from authors from 9 different countries (China, Germany, France, Great-Britain, Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, the United States and South-Africa).

5. More fictitious elements are added into life writing in a great many works now. In some cases, even important characters or events are invented. Some biographer even made believe the stories that he befriended with the late biographical subject. Do you approve of this method? Is this the trend? How do you define auto/biographical truth?

No, in principle we do not approve of this method: we have a duty with regard to history, and therefore we cannot allow an unclear fusion of fiction and historical narrative. A biographer as a historian has a contract with the reader: all that is written is as truthful as possible, a reader of a biography assumes that what he reads is true. Fiction or fictional representations of course in a way can enhance historical understanding, but the dividing line between fictional and non-fictional writing always has to be clear. Presenting speculations as historical facts does not add to proper knowledge of history and individuals. All what a biographer writes should be substantiated by sources or sound circumstantial evidence.

6. The genre of life writing has long been disputed. The controversy centers on whether it is a branch of history or a branch of literature. Some also claim that it should be an independent genre. What is your opinion on this debate? How do you define your identity in writing a life?

In my view, biography is an independent genre of its own right: it involves history, literature, journalism, and other disciplines; they all serve as auxiliary disciplines. The research for a biography however always is historical of nature. Apart from dealing with interesting persons, biography to my opinion is all about methods, the theoretical framework that is constructed.

7. With the increase of memoir, diary, letters and oral history, these sub-genres exert greater influence than auto/biography. What is your comment on this phenomenon? Should they be included in biography or autobiography? Why?

The emergence of these sub-genres to my view is very interesting, but they also simultaneously make the task of the biographer even more important. Diaries, letters, oral histories etcetera are important sources for biographers, but they are sources among other sources: they all come together in the critical narrative directed by the biographer. The biographer critically evaluates egodocuments and places them in a societal context. One often hears that biographers are opposed to autobiographical material: this is not true, on the contrary, they are very important sources for biographers.

8. The past decades feature the burgeoning biopics and TV programs in biographical fashion. Their audience may exceed the life writing readers. What is your comment on this phenomenon? Given the differences with textual life writing, can they be included in the category of life writing?
Why? Again, we do not practice Life Writing, but regard ourselves as scholars of biography. Biopics indeed can be very interesting, although the biographical research conducted for these movies should be the same as in books. The output certainly is different and involves its own cinematic poetics. But certainly biographical interpretations can be presented in these films, and distilled from it, and those should be based on the same principles of biographical research that are used in textual biographies.

In the next years, the Biography Institute will focus on exploring bodies of biographical writing in different countries and disciplines, thus in a way reconstructing the history of biography in an international comparative perspective. The field of Biography Studies is young and still in demand of fundamental research work concerning the actual body of biographical writing worldwide.

An essential feature of research into biography-conducted by Dr. Binne de Haan, employed by the Biography Institute-is to understand the important role biographies play in society in the construction of public opinion. Biographies are not merely random stories about individual persons: the choice of persons of whom a biography is written, the way this is done and how media, the public and society as a whole react to biographies reveal topics and debates that are esteemed as important in cultures in which these biographies are being published. Often this has a political component: biographies can influence public opinion, although mostly in a delayed manner. Biographies are ‘actual’ histories on individual persons, whether they deceased many years ago or alive and still active. Biographers write history, but they are influenced by their own time and the actuality of this time. The other way around, biographies therefore can have an important and corrective impact on the evaluation of certain persons and topics in history.

Biography for a good reason is closely related to (investigative) journalism: biographers aim to reveal a historical truth from a personal perspective, by academic research substantiated by verifiable sources, in order to serve historical and democratic understanding. Biography in this way, like proper history and journalism, serves as a tool in the functioning of a transparent and democratic society. The public effectiveness of biography in different countries and periods points at its important and significant role in shaping actual and historical debates.

**Hans Renders** is Professor in History and Theory of Biography and is director of the Biography Institute, both at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He was a member of the founding committee of Biographers International Organization (bio). He wrote two biographies, about the Dutch poet Jan Hanlo (1998) and the Dutch journalist and author Jan Campert (2004). He is editor of the Biographical Studies series and the editor in chief of a series of edited reprints of Dutch and foreign biographies. He has published studies on the theme of biography in various international journals, among them *Journal of Historical Biography, Le Temps des Médias* and *Storia della Storiografia*, and is member of the board of *Quaerendo: A Journal Devoted to Manuscripts and Printed Books*. He published the edited volume *Theoretical Discussions of Biography. Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* (with Binne de Haan: 2014). He is co-founder and vice president of the Société de Biographie/Biography Society, and member of the jury from the American biography prize Plutarch Award.