

## BOOK REVIEW

*Family, Culture and Society in the Diary of Constantijn Huygens Jr., Secretary to Stadholder-King William of Orange.* By Rudolf Dekker (Leiden, Brill, 2013. 208 pp. £84.00).

*Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing.* Edited by Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2013. 456 pp. \$159.00).

The past two decades have seen radical changes in historians' ideas about ego-documents (life writing), or first-person source material. In a sense the historians' approach may be said to have been transformed through growing interest in the significance of the subjective element in historical sources.

In simple terms, we may say that there are two main trends in the development of history from the early twentieth century until the present day: firstly, emphasis on conventional history, based largely on accounts of events, institutions, and "important" people. Secondly, the social scientists' influence on social history, which characterized innovative history in the latter half of the twentieth century. Social historians were of the view that there was some reality, or truth, beyond the events—on which conventional history generally focused—and that it was important to approach that reality. They saw the social system itself, shaped by a determined and systematic development of society, as providing the key to understanding the process of historical progress. For these reasons, social historians turned their attention to facts which recurred in a systematic way. At the same time they looked increasingly to the discipline of social science, which offered the methodological tools and methods to address the tangible and recurrent. In a sense, material reality in all its diversity was the subject of these disciplines in the early days, while cultural and social historians soon turned their attention to other, more subjective themes. Common to the various subjects of study was that they were researched on the terms of quantitative methods: social historians generally focused on groups and larger units.

Knowledge of personal relationships within the family in olden times; what were women's actual responsibilities; how husbands exerted their power as head of the household; how children were subjected to parental authority and what hopes and desires they cherished for the future: these are all questions that cannot be answered through statistical analysis and hardly through any other use of public records. It is possible, in other words, to explore a certain evolution of "the family" through statistical analysis over a long period, but that offers no chance of understanding personal reasons behind individual decisions in each family. For that, new sources must be sought.

During the 1980s (or even earlier) social scientists turned their attention to the “life history approach” once again. Their research was squarely based on the foundations laid by the Chicago School earlier in the century. Broadly speaking, the method may be summed up as an attempt to acquire reliable information about the past through carrying out many interviews with people of the same social class or profession, or other groups of that nature. The crucial point is that many social scientists saw a need to respond to the criticism which had been aimed at statistical analysis, as discussed above. That trend had, in due course, an impact on the work of social historians. Many started to look around in search of subjective testimony from people of various backgrounds, and their findings would have a great influence upon developments within the discipline.

European countries and the USA witnessed in the modern period the development of a rich and active ego-document writing tradition. Large numbers of ordinary working men and women of different classes set down records of their lives, using for this purpose different forms of communication. Diaries and autobiographies, to name just two, raise insistent questions among scholars about the general experience and modes of behavior of poor people in general. These sources are often strongly colored by popular ideas and the authors’ personal relationship with their everyday life environment. With the aid of these historical sources new ways are opened for interpreting the historical experience of those who are considered part of the general public—those who have tended to be excluded from the field of historical research.

All these texts—both from within the life-writing tradition and the other assorted ego-documents—bear witness to a lively literary culture among ordinary people in many countries. They provide a rich source for the historian interested in investigating the relationship between personal writing and people’s real-life experience. These sources thus presented an opportunity for responding to the criticism which had been directed at social history at the end of the twentieth century. The books reviewed here are part of the change of emphasis within history which entailed a systematic effort to establish the place of the individual in the world—but each in its own way.

In *Family, Culture and Society in the Diary of Constantijn Huygens Jr*, Dutch historian Rudolf Dekker has set himself the task of introducing Huygens’ diary, which he kept during the years 1673–83 and 1688–97. All in all over 1,500 pages in seven volumes have survived, now preserved in the Royal Library in the Hague. Huygens’ diary is a personal one, as well as being a documentation of his political involvement at the time, which was impressive. The new monarch, William III, dominates Huygens’ diary, and their relationship gets a lot of attention. The diary opens up an interesting perspective on the king’s character and behavior; his everyday life, so to speak, as well as events like the Glorious Revolution, which marked a new era in Huygens’ professional life. At the same time Huygens’ own life plays a prominent part—as he was the son of a very well known figure (poet, musician and a diplomat) and the brother of a great scientist, Christiaan Huygens. This was, in other words, a man who lived in the thick of culture, arts and politics in his time; and hence it relates to major events which have been exhaustively discussed in history books. But the personal angle of the document opens an entirely new view of familiar events and characters.

Rudolf Dekker does a good job of handling this text, which is both complex, and difficult due to the links with overwhelming historical material. Huygens, for

instance, accompanies his monarch to England, where he grapples with massive issues; and at the same time he is trying to deal with difficulties of his own—homesickness, family problems, and frustration over his own status within the court. Dekker's lot is thus not an enviable one: to place the main character in a comprehensible context, while also bringing out the priceless treasures the diary offers. And he succeeds in doing so—for Dekker was one of the ringleaders of the shift that took place in cultural and social history, recounted above, when the attention of many scholars was drawn to the value of the individual's subjective experience of historic events. Dekker and his colleagues have led studies of ego-documents in the broadest sense, and have made their mark upon history. This book is evidence of the opportunities such sources offer historians in general.

The latter book reviewed here—*Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches in History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*—is essentially an ideological demonstration of the changes which have occurred in cultural and social history in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and up to the present time. Editors Hans Renders and Binne de Haan have both collected together important published papers in the field (many of them are edited and updated revised versions of older well-known articles), juxtaposed with new papers on individual subjects of study, which may have been presented at recent conferences. The editors themselves play a prominent part in the book—and indeed Renders has been one of the most influential scholars in the field of biographical studies for years. In addition, contributions are included from Nigel Hamilton, Marlene Kadar, Sabina Lorga and James Walter, which makes the discussion more diverse, and more interesting. Other scholars represented in the book are Giovanni Levi, Matti Peltonen, Richard D. Brown, and Carlo Ginzburg—all of whom have been active in the field of microhistory. The relationship between microhistory and biography is, in fact, one of the factors that drew my interest to the book, especially the editors' discussion of the matter. Perhaps this is because the discussion of biography as a historical method in the book is rather generalized, without clear distinctions or references to methods, or means of analyzing them. As is stated in the book: "Biography *has* no method, but *is* a method" (336). The editors, however, are fully conscious of how they apply the concept, for instance in the following:

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 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, . . . (2).

The editors are preoccupied with the question of the "representativeness" of the subject: whether the subject has some specific relevance to larger phenomena. This is, of course, one of the classic subjects of microhistory but gains a new dimension in the context of the study of biography. I myself have found it interesting to explore the epistemological possibilities within the research unit itself, regardless of its position in a larger context. In my view the editors could have been less stringent in their opinion that it is necessary to examine the research unit in the context of the whole: "To understand the whole, we have to understand the parts, but to understand them, we have to understand the whole" (8).

This is the same view that is argued by István M. Szijártó in a new book on microhistory, claiming that a thorough understanding of the whole is a precondition for successful microhistorical research.<sup>1</sup>

In the end, both the books reviewed here are outstanding examples of how a group of historians have responded to the criticism directed at the discipline in the last two decades of the twentieth century—criticism relating to the great social scientific emphasis of the preceding decades, as discussed above. The two books demonstrate the huge importance that sources such as ego-documents can have for historical research and display the high standards that have been applied in many ways to the methodology of working with them. One thing is for sure: the subjective approach, which is discussed in both books, can be useful for every kind of historian in his/her research. Perspective is important in virtually any context within the humanities. I would recommend these books to all historians, as they will make useful contributions to discussions of biography and microhistory in both undergraduate and graduate education around the world.

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### Endnote

1. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (London, 2013), 62–64.