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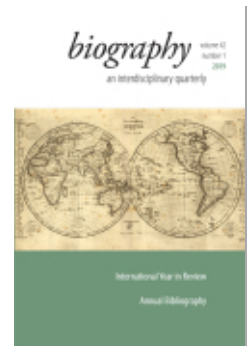
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Mediators as the Subject of Dutch Biography

The Year in the Netherlands

Hans Renders and David Veltman

On September 18, 2018, the biannual Dutch Biography Prize was awarded to Onno Blom's biography of the author Jan Wolkers. The list of submissions for the prize is a good way to look at the state of the art in Dutch biography. Using a broad concept of biography, one can say that no fewer than two original Dutch biographies are published every week. We will surely miss one or two, but for the Biography Prize the jury could choose from a list of 171 entries, all published in the last two years. What kind of books are these and what tendencies can be found in them?

After taking a quick look at the list of nominees for the Dutch Biography Prize, a few developments immediately come to the fore. Apart from who is chosen as subject for a biography, it is clear that there is an increased effort to use sound archival sources as the foundation for biographical research. The market—the reader—is apparently asking for quality. There is an increasing desire, if not request, to be able to retrace the facts presented to a verifiable source. Biography shares this demand for verifiable facts with journalism, two fields that always had a close relationship, not only because the reader wants to discover new things, but also because of the changeability of societal views. In a biography of the Dutch artist Lucebert published this year, Wim Hazeu reveals that his subject aired hardcore anti-Semitic opinions when he was nearly twenty years old. Would reactions to this discovery have been different twenty years ago? Also this year, biographer Onno Blom writes frankly about the coercive sexual behavior of the artist Jan Wolkers. Surprisingly, this book has so far not drawn any attention in relation to the #MeToo movement.

The Real Story

Because we are living in a world of alternative facts, biography and journalism seem to be more relevant than ever. Although many biographies of the Dutch dancer and

spy Mata Hari have already been written, only recently two biographers, Jessica Voeten and Angela Dekker, have started researching in her archives, and those of the British, German, and French secret services. In *Moed en overmoed: Leven en tijd van Mata-Hari*, they finally tell Mata Hari's real story, a story based on facts. Numerous biographies have already been written of Mata Hari in which she was depicted as a victim: since she was wrongly judged as being a spy, she was put before the firing squad unguilty. But in *Moed en overmoed*, it appeared that Mata Hari was indeed a spy, although one of meagre quality.

After all these years, some sort of correction is happening in biographies, both in their reliability and in their way of telling a story. Of course, it has become easier for readers to check facts on the internet. The availability of reliable online sources must have contributed to a change in the way biographies are written. Much has already been written about the Dutch nineteenth century statesman Johan Rudolph Thorbecke and his contemporary *homo universalis* Jacob van Lennep, but only now Remieg Aerts (author of *Thorbecke wil het*) and Marita Mathijssen (*Jacob van Lennep: Een bezielde schavuit*) have published biographies of these men that are stylistically appealing as well as thoroughly researched.

But there is still no reason to believe that these books are "definitive" biographies, as each generation has its own demands. This can be said for biographies of literary figures, as well as for biographies of politicians. In the case of Belgian biography, another factor comes into play: the language in which the book was written. Until recently, the French- and Dutch-speaking communities in Belgium were deeply divided by mutual prejudice and incomprehension. Biographies written by French-speaking authors were mistrusted by Flemish readers, and the other way around. Especially when the remembrance of the Second World War was at stake, the critical reception of biography often made use of clichés: all Flemish people were collaborators, for example, or all Walloon people were part of the resistance movement.

Now things have changed. The list of submissions for the Dutch Biography Prize features a well-written biography of one of the most prominent fascist leaders in Belgium: *Léon Degrelle: De Führer uit Boullion* by Bruno Cheyens. Cheyens is a young historian, writing in Dutch, although his subject was francophone. In 2008, Degrelle's legal file was the last one under the scrutiny of the Board of Registration and Domains, responsible for the seizure of the estates of former Nazi leaders in Belgium. Degrelle successfully escaped to Spain after the Second World War, where he continued to promote his extreme-right opinions until his death in 1994. This shows something about the way the *repressie* or punishment of former collaborators was accomplished after the War. The remembrance of this punishment remained an open wound in Belgian society for almost fifty years. Degrelle's biography shows how the two language communities try to converge in remembering the war.

Made-up Stories

Oorlogsouders by Isabel van Boetzelaar is a recent example that shows the gap between biographies that make use of serious research and the half-hearted chronicles, memoirs, autobiographies, or biographical books that are commissioned. When the first edition of *Oorlogsouders* appeared in 2017, various newspapers in Holland immediately wrote that this family history was based upon “alternative facts.” The biographer tried to make us believe a fabricated story about her father’s involvement in the resistance movement. In fact, her father was sentenced to life-long imprisonment for collaboration but was released after ten years. The revised version of van Boetzelaar’s book, published in 2018, was still worthy of criticism in many respects. This was mentioned in the press again. In the periodical *Vrij Nederland*, founded during the war as a resistance newspaper, Maarten van Voorst tot Voorst wrote that in the revised version, “it is still not possible for the reader to distinguish between truth and fiction.”

But Van Boetzelaar’s book is part of a trend. In 2017, many biographies were written by a family member of the subject. “My family, thank God, they are illiterate,” the Flemish author Willem Elsschot answered, when the literary critic Garnt Stuiveling asked him how members of his family reacted to the way he had portrayed them in the roman-à-clef *Pensioen*. Especially when a grandfather or grandmother is still alive, the relationship between a biographer and his subject often becomes difficult. However, when looking at the list of submissions to the Dutch Biography Prize, another development becomes clear: more biographies tend to be written by a family member who positions themselves at a critical distance from their subjects, instead of admiring them unconditionally.

Look for example at the biography of Isay Rottenberg, a Jewish manufacturer of cigars who in 1932 took over a factory in the German town of Döbeln. The book, titled *De sigarenfabriek van Isay Rottenberg*, was written by Rottenberg’s grandchildren, Hella and Sandra Rottenberg. In their history of the cigar factory, instead of focusing on the heroic status their grandfather must have had in their eyes, they pay most attention to the way the manufacturer became subject to the difficult political circumstances of the time. By doing so, the story goes beyond an idiosyncratic family history based on uncontrollable sources, and Isay Rottenberg gives us an unusual image of the contradictory economic policy of the Nazis at the onset of the Second World War.

Making a Deal

When a biography is written by a family member, the author sometimes gets access to archives that remain closed to the rest of the world. But more often than not families try to make a deal with the biographer, asking them to write a story that cannot be verified. For example, the lawyer Yehudi Moszkowicz wrote *De toga van mijn vader*, a faithful account of the downfall of his father Robert, who worked as an

attorney until he was disbarred because of his addiction to drugs. Although Moszkowicz spoke to many family members for his book, he said he “could only relate to his own experiences” (Romanillos). Naturally, Moszkowicz will never be able to fully chart the grim circumstances that led to his father’s perdition.

Also this year, the historian Wiebe de Graaf succeeded in writing the biography of his great grandfather, the communist Taco Kuiper. In *Taco Kuiper en de dood*, De Graaf portrays Kuiper in such a way that we can learn something about the communist mentality during the aftermath of the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War. Kuiper’s suicide in 1945 is placed in the context of a large group of people who had the feeling they were on the wrong side of history. The biography tries to give an answer to the question of why so many intellectuals took their lives in 1945. It appeared that there were multiple reasons: they were afraid of the future, afraid that their Jewish beliefs or communist convictions would still not be accepted after the war. De Graaf shows that the psychopathological explanations that were often given for this mass suicide were too simplistic: not every intellectual suffered from a depression in 1945.

In the same vein, the touching story of Marcel Langedijk’s alcoholic brother rises above the ordinary addiction narrative. Langedijk’s book *Gelukkig hebben we de foto’s nog* can be read as a search for the motives of young men to end their lives by asking for euthanasia. Langedijk describes the euthanasia of his brother Mark in the form of an eyewitness account, in which all people involved in the process could have their say. For example, Langedijk meticulously described two family gatherings, during which the premature death was discussed. How could this family cope with Mark’s decision that he did not want to be cured from his alcoholism anymore? By choosing this outsider’s perspective, the book does not need to tell too much about the personal motivation of Mark’s death wish. Ultimately, the biography gives cause for introspection, focusing on the question what it means to be a man in this period of time.

Some people have a difficult time when these kinds of first-hand accounts are published. Jewish families, for example, have sometimes protested when the names of their deceased family members have been mentioned on public occasions, such as war memorials and digital commemorative lists. This was also the case after the publication of the biography of the Dutch poet and resistance hero Jan Campert in 2004. Historians and journalists took great pains to uncover the identity of the man who was smuggled over the Belgian border by Campert in 1942. When the name of this man was finally discovered in the archives of a Jewish organization in Breda, in the south of Holland, it appeared that this organization simply did not want to release his name. This was of course good practice on the part of this organization—everyone has their own part to play in the historical process of remembering and forgetting. But the biographer has an ethical responsibility, too—to his professionalism and to the truth. After the publication of the biography, the name of Frans van Raalte was finally added to the Digital Monument of the Jewish Community in the Netherlands.

Remarkably, fourteen years after this release, Van Raalte's name was given without footnote in the 2018 biography of Campert's son, the poet Remco Campert. For this book, titled *Een knipperend ogenblik: Portret van Remco Campert*, biographer Mirjam van Hengel made use of her extensive talks with the author, who is still living at the age of 89. In the interviews Van Hengel gave surrounding the publication of her biography, she repeatedly said she deliberately avoided using footnotes, since these would make her book "too scientific." As a result, it is unclear whether the book contains facts or just the opinions of the biographer or her subject.

Mediators

One other trend has to be mentioned when looking at the 171 biographies that were submitted for the Dutch Biography Prize: an interest in people who have served as mediators. No less than fifteen titles are about figures who played an important role as distributors of facts and opinions. The reason still has to be examined, but it is striking that so many biographies have been published of editors (Johan Polak, Rob van Gennep, Emmanuel Querido), journalists (Louis Frequin, Rie Brusse), politicians (Max van der Stoel, Marinus van der Goes van Naters), and other mediators (Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, Frederik Ruysch). Is it a coincidence that people acting as gatekeepers of facts and information have become popular subjects among biographers?

So far, there has been no end to the stream of biographies about people responsible for cultural exchange between one country and another. A recent example is the biography of Jan Greshoff, written by Annemiek Recourt under the title *Moralist van de ontrouw: Jan Greshoff (1888–1971)*. "When does literature become politics?" Recourt asks herself many times in this biography. A good question, after her extensive tour through the life of this poet, critic, editor, and art lover, who actively wanted to protect the world against the increasing influence of ordinary people. But Greshoff was also a prolific journalist, a profession that surely required him to be aware of the problems of the street. He worked for the newspaper *De Telegraaf*, was editor-in-chief of the *Nieuwe Arnhemsche Courant*, and was in charge of various magazines. He was living in Holland at that time. Funnily, Recourt mocks Greshoff's love for various dance forms just emerging at the time, like the foxtrot and the boogie-woogie. Were these not a little bit at odds with his distaste for the masses? He often visited a dance hall in the town of Laren, where he now and then met another practitioner of modern dance: Piet Mondriaan.

Greshoff moved to Brussels, where he became a correspondent for a number of Dutch periodicals. He started to promote fine printing and bibliophile editions. He defended the taste of the aristocracy, of the elite. And more importantly, he was a gatekeeper for the arts, both literature and painting, from Belgium, France, England, and South Africa, where he emigrated at the dawn of the Second World War. As a result of his mediating, generations of Dutch writers became interested in

examples from abroad.

The arts are also the focus of Manu van der Aa's *Tatave!*, a biography of the Belgian art dealer and collector Paul-Gustave van Hecke. The way Van Hecke positioned himself as a mediator contributed to the success of the expressionist art of the village Sint-Martens-Lathem, near Ghent. Artists living in this community, such as Albert Servaes and Gust de Smet, were deliberately kept at a distance by Van Hecke from art centers such as Brussels or Antwerp. In doing so, Van Hecke wanted to preserve the "arcadian," "primitive," and "honest" impulses in their painting. Van Hecke offered patronage to various Lathem artists, which allowed them to make a living and supply Van Hecke's gallery *Sélection* with new paintings on a regular basis. Van Hecke was thus able to keep on presenting the Lathem school as a group of primitive, honest painters, proud of their Flemish land.

The bilingual Van Hecke was responsible for many cultural transfers between the two language communities in Belgium. But he was not only a mediator between different parts of the art scene in Belgium; he also claimed a prominent role in fields as diverse as politics, cinema, journalism, and the publishing world. Until Van Hecke's biography was published, his role as a mediator had been mostly overlooked by traditional historiographies of each of these fields.

Due to the financial crisis of the 1930s, Van Hecke was forced to sell large parts of his collection of expressionist and surrealist paintings. At that time, he started to see the art of the Lathem school as part of the unique character of Flemish culture. When the Nazis occupied Belgium, they also tried to involve Lathem artists in their call for a powerful art, capable of capturing the soul of the Flemish people. This development can be seen as a negative result of Van Hecke's mediating role. As he was omnipresent in the art scene of the interwar years, the artists in his school largely remained dependent on their master. For some of them, this caused intellectual short-sightedness, and some even suffered from an inferiority complex. Many painters from Van Hecke's group, including Albert Servaes and Prosper de Troyer, became collaborators once the Nazi regime took over in Belgium.

The three developments that we derived from the list of nominees for the Dutch Biography Prize—the urge to tell a real, verifiable story, the rise of biographies written by a family member of the subject, and the so-called "mediator biography"—show a striking resemblance. Biographies have to work with facts, but they also have to fit facts into a structure and an interpretation. And before you begin to write such a structured story, it is necessary to understand the facts. By choosing a family member or a mediator as a subject, it appears that a biographer can still relate to the historical developments in which he or she played a role in an objective way. This implies that biography is not just an accumulation of facts, but it is about the relation between those facts. The so-called "factual biography" is a euphemism for a poor biography. The late Dutch editor Martin Ros called this the "beaver," as opposed to the "butterfly" biography: the beaver collects facts and lists them like an accountant, whereas the butterfly uses facts but eventually reflects on them and transforms them into a convincing story.

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David Veltman is a PhD student at the Biography Institute at the University of Groningen, and he is working on a biography of the Flemish artist Felix de Boeck (1898–1995). Together with Hans Renders and Madelon Franssen, David organized the conference *Different Lives: Global Perspectives on Biography in Public Cultures and Societies* in 2018.