

Life Writing

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Biography across the Digitized Globe: Essays in Honour of Hans Renders

edited by David Veltman and Daniel R. Meister, Leiden, Brill, 2025, 299 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-72669-7 (hardback)

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BOOK REVIEW

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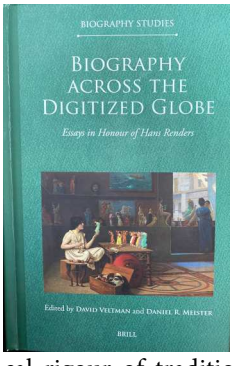

Biography has long been the most popular form of history even though academic historians once tended to disparage it. This condescension began to evaporate in the late twentieth century with the explosive rise of life writing that included the memoirs of professors who shared their intellectual journeys with the self-reflexive confidence that postmodernism endorsed. Prominent historians 'situated' themselves within the context of their times and personal identities that frequently elided the abstract predicaments of agency and structure, fact and fiction. If, for some, biography became a subset of life writing, not all biographers welcomed this development. Emerging from a journalistic background, Hans Renders defended the empirical rigour of traditional biography against the creative urges of life writing while simultaneously encouraging lively debate among those who disclose the general within the particular.

This festschrift for Renders pursues a number of interrelated themes connected to the digital revolution of the past decades. The digitisation of archives facilitates what the editors call 'text mining' and 'distant reading' across borders (3). This transnational proliferation and accessibility of source material creates opportunities that contributors explore in detail. In a chapter on the origins of South African Christian Nationalism, Jacques Pienaar demonstrates how during the early twentieth century the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper affected the distinctive Calvinism and political ideology of a racially oppressive state. Digitalisation opened 'vast amounts of new archival repositories and the opportunity to contend with data in new ways' (100). David Veltman, an editor of the volume, explains how new data sets disclosed the manner in which the German philosopher Helmuth Plessner sustained his research interests and intellectual associations after his exile to the Netherlands in the 1930s. 'Plessner did not have to choose between Dutch or German academic culture' (163). Jeffrey Tyssens documents the various 'turning points' in the colourful career of a defrocked priest who, not unlike Talleyrand, survived the French Revolutionary period by deftly adapting his allegiances to the prevailing political winds. The narrative demonstrates the 'indeterminacy, uncertainty, and the frailty of human choices' (72). Lodewijk Verduin explains how digital archives allowed him to retrieve easily the newspaper columns and musical reviews of the Dutch novelist Nanne Tepper scattered among various publications. In a note of caution, Jana Wohlmuth Markupová discovers and analyses a revelatory fairy tale written for his grandchildren in the archives of Hugo Vavrečka, a prominent Czech businessman with an elusive inner life. Such sources ' … are usually the last ones to be digitized' but 'often the most valuable … for our research' (185).

In the most provocative essay in this volume, Nigel Hamilton argues that Artificial Intelligence will eventually replace conventional biographies. AI can scan all the digitised sources available worldwide, including thousands of biographies. As the algorithms improve, it will absorb the rhetorical tricks of the most distinguished writers. Authoritative biographies

will become 'cheaper, more accessible, more interactive, and widely and more deeply researched, as well as more tailored, interactively, to the wishes and needs of the reader in length, in approach, in style' (197). Biographers will be put out of business by machines, a process of displacement with a long history, including most famously the hand-loom weavers of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Like others before him, Hamilton recognises that globalised mechanisation that once replaced workers in factories will soon be arriving for meritocrats in offices.

Another prominent theme in this diverse collection of essays centres on 'microhistory', a term variously defined and set off against unspecified 'grand narratives'. Sometimes the particular embodies the general as a representative figure or group. Or microhistory can make the exception prove the rule. Or it can be interesting for its own sake, not unlike a vivifying anecdote. Melanie Nolan ponders the various 'scales of history' in an essay that challenges the Dutch School's disparagement of memoir. With impressive bibliographical mastery, she revisits the well-trodden ground of the 'Stephen, Woolf, Bell' dynasty to argue that 'there has not been a simple progressive march in biography beginning with traditional frames, then moving on to modern forms of memoir, transnational/global biography and microhistorical practices' (41). Maryam Thirriard also revisits Bloomsbury in an essay that considers individual agency in Virginia Woolf's influential 'The New Biography'. Thirriard shows how Woolf's insights affected other biographers, including 'the eminent British historian' A. L. Rowse, a controversial figure whose fabrications contaminated his reputation in a manner that she perhaps underestimates (236). Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon confronts the issue of representativeness' in various 'egodocuments'. while acknowledging the importance of historical context, he only partially accepts Dilthey's hermeneutical circle. Fearful of losing subjective individualities within 'grand narratives', he declares that the Harvard historian Jill Lapore was 'quite wrong' in asserting that an individual life was 'an allegory for the culture as a whole' (67). Craig Howes defines microhistory as 'a practice focused tightly on a fact-rich moment, location, or individual' (134). Drawing on sources more capacious than other contributors, he notes the importance of film, as well as the massive data generated by email and other digital communication. Social media create the urge for many to become a 'microcelebrity' (143), a version of fame that Andy Warhol would have appreciated. Howes considers where biography can actively cause harm, offering two technological examples. Drawing upon other theorists he notes how traces and 'biobits' of lived experience create a dense, evolving, interactive environment that defy adequate reconstruction. This acknowledgement of complex singularity, perhaps a form of radical nominalism, both endorses and overwhelms the microhistorical project.

The tensions between traditional biographers and the emergent field of life writing in the late twentieth century weave through this volume. Hans Renders made rude comments about life writing provoking yet another skirmish in the stalemated culture wars. In a subtle essay that resists summary, Marlene Kadar begins by acknowledging what she learned from Renders. Certain key words link the research of both biographers and life writing but in distinct ways leading in different directions. Life writing expands the boundaries of auto/biographical discourse, opening its doors to marginal, ignored, often oppressed subjects that often remain profoundly unknowable. Kadar explores the fraught notion of 'privilege'. She wants to celebrate Renders without conceding their methodological differences. Her notion of 'transnational' departs from that of the editors. In the final analysis, 'the question that directs my vision is: who is included and who is excluded by our point of view, our use of generic norms and laws, and our research trajectory?' (129).

In the conclusion to the volume, one of the editors, Daniel R. Meister, provides a brief genealogy of the 'protracted battles between the now-competing approaches of Life Writing and

Biography' (244). Renders sought to make biography an academic discipline, replete with a theoretical foundation. Meister praises this project as well-deserving of a festschrift but also offers some suggestions to the 'Dutch School'. They need to more clearly 'distinguish between theory and method' (248). They might acknowledge that there can be 'no one, single unifying "theory of biography," no hidden principle that explains diverse aspects of *all* past lives under study' (250). They need to reconsider the tension between their 'scientific' claims for biography and their recognition that all historical work remains provisional, open to constant revision. Finally, there remains the issue of life writing. Meister agrees with Renders on some of his criticisms but departs from him on the accusation that life writing pursues an ideological agenda while traditional biographers do not. 'Biography Studies is not a neutral or value-free discipline' (254). It too pursues an ideological agenda when it focusses on rich, powerful elites, often male, often white. The Dutch School needs to connect with Life Writing more openly and productively. They must 'put down arms and engage with other scholars: crossing not just borders of geography, but borders of theory, methods, and disciplines (257).'

Biography Across the Digitized Globe contains many excellent essays both nuanced and provocative. The festschrift has been well-edited with a vivid portrait of Hans Renders in the Foreword and a concise Introduction that nicely sets the table. It is not surprising that most contributors take an essentially *logocentric* view of biography, ignoring biopics, documentaries, and other audio-visual sources that engage far larger audiences than published books. These digital sources require new forms of interpretation, especially non-verbal communication, that depart radically from the emphasis on written language. The coded dismissal of 'grand narratives' might have been more convincing if the book's title had not itself presumed such a narrative. The transnational adaptation of digital technology remains part of a larger process of globalisation begun centuries ago, accelerated recently, and now threatening the planet itself. Within such a dispiriting context, biography and life writing in general might seem self-indulgent. Yet they are not. This festschrift is itself a microhistory of debates that has preoccupied academia since the late 1960s. A professorial conflict between a traditional form of biography and a more diverse, socially committed approach to documenting individual lives mirrors larger, often fiercer ideological debates in both the social sciences and humanities. Meanwhile, a tsunami of reactionary venom, particularly in the United States, threatens the very foundation of higher education.

Notes on contributor

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