

THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATIVENESS

Biography, Life Writing and Microhistory

In the last two decades attempts have been made to find a theoretical foundation for a more personal mode of historiography. In this paper the author explores the theoretical relationships between Biography, Life Writing and Microhistory.

In spring 2010 appeared *Operation Mincemeat*, a study that meticulously reports on a plan by the British secret service in the midst of the Second World War to deceive the Germans through a dead British soldier.¹ The corpse had to be washed up deliberately on the coast of Spain. The aim was to pass the corpse via the Spanish authorities into the hands of the Germans, while personal and official documents on this corpse indicated that the Allied invasion would take place on Crete, and not on Sicily – like the Allies planned to do and like Hitler also expected. The Nazis indeed became confused and the Allied invasion of Sicily eventually was a success. This relatively small incident, that has been brought out into the open in *Operation Mincemeat* by means of extensive biographical research, does not only take back the history of the Second World War to a smaller scale, it also provides information that would have remained veiled when investigated by another method than the biographical one. MI5, the department that prepared Operation Mincemeat, did not prepare the operation overnight. Major William Martin was the new name given to the corpse of the social outcast Glyndwr Michael, who shortly before died in squalid conditions, and for this major a complete fictional biography was devised in a few months time. Behind every note in the few letters and bills that could be found in his clothes, a reality was created that indeed was fake, but on the other hand ought to be so realistic and concrete that the German secret service would not suspect anything was wrong. So the picture of his girlfriend referred to a real existing young girl whose friend was ‘at the front’, the ironic remark in a letter from a colleague of the major about General Montgomery (that something had to be wrong because Montgomery had not announced new decisions for 48 hours) was based on the prevailing idea that Monty

¹ Ben Macintyre, *Operation Mincemeat. How a Dead Man and a Bizarre Plan Fooled the Nazis and Assured an Allied Victory*, Harmony Books, New York 2010.

showed off an excessive desire for action. Examining clues in letters, clothing and an identity card, a social reality could be reconstructed that covered 27 witnesses who would know about the existence of the so-called William Martin, when thorough detective work was carried out.

What can we learn from this piece of constructed microhistory? A lot. For example, that this spying plan was almost a literary experiment for those carrying out this plan. How little according to the MI5 the German intelligence service was infiltrated in London, how the command structures between American and British military and secret services functioned, what technological innovations MI5 was capable to produce (Q in the later James Bond books was based on MI5 technician Charles Fraser Smith), how the German culture was esteemed, what was considered as German humor in England, how Spain – officially neutral – at local level (the coast where Martin washed ashore) in almost all cases collaborated with the Nazis, and last but not least, what kind of agents were recruited by the British secret service. Indeed: eccentric, boisterous and artistic men. The planners had read about a similar venture earlier in a detective and one of the excecutants, Ian Fleming, also became the famous author of the James Bond books. The personal backgrounds of the secret agents had a significant impact on the fictitious person that was created for the anonymous corpse. *Operation Mincemeat* is a piece of microhistory that is not just representative for the great history between the Nazis and the Allies, by scaling down the author opened up different sources, searched for other documents and added to the invasion of Sicily a new element, and as a result of that the grand narrative of history should be corrected. In recent military histories of the liberation of Europe Operation Mincemeat is not mentioned, not even in those studies that pay extensive attention to the invasion of Sicily that began on July 10, 1943.² Although, recently a second book on mincemeat appeared.³

Ben Macintyre, author of *Operation Mincemeat*, is not a biographer, but through

² Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War. A New History of the Second World War*, Allen Lane, Londen & New York 2009; Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944*, Henry Holt and Compagny, New York 2007. Operation Mincemeat actually only is mentioned in studies that specifically deal with military intelligence during World War II, cf.: Thaddeus Holt, *The Deceivers: Allied Military Deception in the Second World War*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 2004.

³ Denis Smyth, *Deathly Deception The Real Story of Operation Mincemeat*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

biographical research he has produced a fine piece of microhistory, by illuminating in a new way a great event by means of a relatively small incident. Not only because the story has been written down in a suspenseful way, but also because he has not made the mistake to describe Operation Mincemeat as an heroic epic because it simply ended well. In many ways, Macintyre shows that MI5 made amateurish mistakes, even while the outcome of the operation was successful. The assumption for example that the German secret service had no spies at hand in London, was the reason that the bill of a jeweller from New Bond Street was printed on authentic stationery, but simple inquiries about the engagement ring would have made clear that the order for this ring never could have been placed at this jewellery store.

Such criticism of Macintyre about the MI5 plan is the result of microhistory; he makes use of seemingly insignificant autobiographical documents and subjects them to critical examination. That is exactly what a good biographer would do too. Biography too often has been used to confirm the general picture of history. The biographee then is an illustration of a phenomenon, an event or a trend. Over the centuries, this view has yielded many commemorative and therefore confirmative biographies. That is to say that Hitler indeed was a devilish politician and that Hemingway was a tough man and the cyclist Lance Armstrong indeed is a shining example for all cancer patients. Even more, due to the biographies written about them, Hitler became an even worsen person, Hemingway became even tougher and Armstrong a greater warrior than we already thought.⁴

This is not surprising, because the choice to pick Napoleon, Marilyn Monroe and Joseph Stalin as a subject for a biography is often the result of an aggregate of ideas already prevalent. Traditional historiography has not in the first place ignored marginal or anonymous persons, but rather integrated them into the institutional story, told from a teleological point of view. One who knows the outcome or the result, is inclined to interpret the journey differently than someone who doesn't know the eventual outcome of a process.

⁴ Hans Renders, 'Did Pearl Harbor Change Everything? The Deadly Sins of Biographers', in: *Journal for Historical Biography* 2(2008)3 (June), p. 88-113. Hans Renders, 'De biograaf tussen context en actualiteit', in: Wouter Beekers (ed.), *Christelijk-sociaal in de jaren zestig*, Historisch Documentatiecentrum voor het Nederlands Protestantisme (1800-heden), Vrij Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam 2010, p. 9-16.

About how ‘marginal’ people have experienced history, we still know too little, for the simple reason that we know little about the perspectives of other participants in history other than those of the leading figures. From *Operation Mincemeat* we learn that most employees of MI5 had unreal and romanticized ideas of war, very different from the impressions the already mentioned Montgomery and Winston Churchill had about war. Historiography from the perspective of the participant or agent, is exactly what microhistory and biography share with each other. In other words, what is the meaning of the grand historical narrative related to a real life, painting or village? Asking this question takes us to a theoretical problem. Microhistorians proceed with this problem by using the term ‘normal exception’. This concept means that from the perspective of mainstream history many individuals are regarded as obscure and strange.⁵

Microhistorians, however, try to detect the social environment in which these people are fully accepted. This way these figures become a ‘normal exception’ in their social environment. In a similar way you can look at criminals, plague victims or other individuals in historiography that often have been dismissed as marginal. The staff members of MI5 were eccentric indeed, but they fitted very well in the decadent student-like surroundings of the metropolis that London already was by that time. That made them a ‘normal exception’.

In recent years, the academic school of so-called Life Writing emerged, wherein the ‘exceptional typical’ is considered as representative of certain groups. Life writers bring into the limelight discriminated groups of people, by using autobiographical documents of those discriminated people as a reliable source, without critical examination of these sources.⁶ So a diary of a disabled person or a gay person according to Life writers tells us something about all people with disabilities and all homosexuals, regardless of their historical context. Life writers from all over the world, especially in the United States, with backgrounds in cultural studies, gender studies, comparative literature, sociology and psychology are studying individual lives on the basis of autobiographical documents. The results of their work show that the people who have produced these personal ‘ego-

⁵ Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, “‘The Singularization of History’: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge”, in: *Journal of Social History* 36(2003)3, p. 701-735.

⁶ For an example, cf.: Marlene Kadar, ‘Coming to Terms: Life Writing – from Genre to Critical Practice’, in: Marlene Kadar ed., *Essays in Life Writing – From Genre to Critical Practice*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1992, p. 3-16.

documents' have always been victims of their social context, like black slaves in the nineteenth century or raped women on Haïti. Choosing to investigate the ego-documents of a certain sort of person has a liberating effect, but simultaneously means that the method of Life writers apparently is not as universal as they suggest it is. There is an ideological agenda behind the work of Life writers. Especially the deprived people of the earth receive attention and in this sense Life writers accomplish their self-imposed task to correct history. Precisely because Life writers omit to study the historical context, they leave room for researchers of all kinds – except historians – to project contemporary views about these groups of people on the past.

Ben Macintyre also wrote *Operation Mincemeat* as a result of a suitcase filled with autobiographical documents he discovered a few years ago in the properties of one of the descendants of the MI5 agents who were involved. He has subjected those diaries and letters to a critical examination and used them as a source and illustration for *his* story. A Life writer would have embraced this documentation as the truth and would have described the social world of a secret agent in wartime, as representative for the British secret service. Any boastful and blustering comment about the creation of this plan would have been presented as representative for all British secret agents. In the hands of a Life writer, the whole story about the invasion of Sicily would have remained a vague background, without the experiences of this secret agent being tested to the grand story of the Second World War for the benefit of the reader. (I now of course exaggerate to clarify the difference between Life Writing and microhistory. Life writers never would investigate secret agents.)

Microhistorians like the Finnish historian Matti Peltonen regard the difference between the 'exceptional typical' and the 'exceptional normal' rather as an incentive to study phenomena that previously were not subjected to investigation, potentially to trace homogenous patterns that are significant in mapping a social environment.⁷ The discussion text by Giovanni Levi for this conference already indicates that Life Writing and microhistory have little in common: 'Microhistory is not, therefore, necessarily the

⁷ Matti Peltonen, 'Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Micra Link in Historical Research', in: *History and Theory* 40(2001)3, p. 347-359.

history of the excluded, the powerless and the far away. It needs to be the reconstruction of moments, situations and people who, studied with an analytical eye, in a defined context, regain both weight and colour: not as examples, in the absence of better explanations, but as points of reference within the complex contexts in which human beings move.'

There are numerous examples that show that the dominant historical narrative must be put into perspective. Life Writers tell the story of minorities by means of individual autobiographical sources, microhistorians study individuals using actually all the resources they can find, in order to gain better insight with regard to general issues, without considering their heroes as representative for large groups, like Life writers use to do. The eventual outcome of microhistorical research, which also can be biographical research, should not be known in advance. Biography needs not be debunking in order to be valuable for history. Traditional historiography and traditional biography sought confirmation of the social representativeness of a human being from the past, but by studying an individual not in the first place as a writer or a general but as a member of a small village community or a member of a student union, one perhaps acquires a different image of this person. In other words: questioning this representativeness as issue to be discussed in research, opens up new vistas.

As an example of this proposition one can take the typical Dutch historiography of accomodation or pillarisation. Basically, public life in the Netherlands between 1870 and 1970 was divided into Protestant, Catholic and socialist segments or pillars. And those who fell outside these segments, were placed in the remainder pillar, like liberals and freethinkers. Political parties, schools, housing associations and the entire public life was divided into those pillars. Social, cultural and political life was parceled out.⁸

This classification of Arend Lijphart is clear and convincing. But the fact remains that there is a different story to tell. Only since 1980 the story of Lijphart has been put in perspective to some extent.⁹ Assessing the regional level instead of national politics, it appears that the segmentary aspects of the pillarisation were less omnipresent then

⁸ Arend Lijphart, *The politics of Accomodation; pluralism and democracy in the Netherlands*, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles 1968.

⁹ Hans Blom, in: 'Balans', J.C.H. Blom & J. Talsma (ed.), *De Verzuiling Voorbij. Godsdienst, stand en natie in de lange negentiende eeuw*, Het Spinhuis, Amsterdam 2000, p. 201-236.

expected, and there was indeed interaction between the different segments of Dutch society. Investigations into local communities proved that the interaction between different sections of the population in Dutch towns like Harderwijk, Naaldwijk or Woerden did not proceed according to the patterns Lijphart had identified in his study of national institutions. For example, national newspapers except *De Telegraaf* were strongly pillarized, but most inhabitants of the Netherlands read a regional – or city newspaper and those were not pillarized at all.¹⁰ The concept of ‘pillarisation’, as Hans Blom noted in his concluding article that appeared in an edited volume in which the alleged effects of the pillarisation at the local level are being investigated, is a metaphor that is being used to characterize a complicated reality.¹¹

Yet little research has been conducted concerning representatives of Catholics or Protestants who have experienced history in a different way than the historiography of Lijphart suggests.¹² If we consider agency with regard to the religious sphere, there is no study available that indicates the importance of this concept. Yet faith and agency as combined concepts can serve as an illuminating way to take a closer look at public life during the era of pillarisation. What influence exercised individuals who lived in a tight organization of Catholic, Protestant and socialist institutions and felt uncomfortable with it? Are the individuals who can be designated by this definition only marginal figures? There are good reasons to believe this is not the case. Consider literature; not only daily life at the time was parceled out, the history of literature was divided in pillars as well. There are numerous examples of biographies of Catholic or Protestant writers in which the upbringing and education are used to describe a career in a Catholic and Protestant context. There are some examples of biographies in which writers clashed with their social environment on moral grounds (Anton van Duinkerken who left seminary or Willem de Mérode who because of his pedophilia collided with the church wardens in his village), but we rarely see in these biographies a rigorous different perspective on the

¹⁰ Hans Renders, *Wie weet slaag ik in de dood. Biografie van Jan Campert*, De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 2004, p. 165-210.

¹¹ Blom, ‘Balans’, p. 236.

¹² Mathijs Sanders puts Lijpharts view to some extent in perspective in *Het spiegelend venster: katholieken in de Nederlandse literatuur, 1870-1940*, Vantilt, Nijmegen 2002.

concept of pillarisation.¹³ In the biography of Van Duinkerken the rich Catholic Roman life is the steel-made context and when our hero steps outside this context, the biographer describes this as very exceptional, but he does not regard it as important enough to develop further interpretations or to find out whether more Catholic writers in effect lived against their will in that steel cage. As if these writers conformed to their pillar by birth, education and work and only clashed with their environment on substantive and moral grounds. And since cultural history is dominated by liberal arts, which previously were located in the small margins outside the ‘pillarized’ spheres (in the Netherlands with regard to literature the ‘Tachtigers’ [writers from the Eighties Movement], the periodical *Forum* and the ‘Vijftigers’ [writers belonging to the group of experimental Dutch poets in the fifties]) a writer who belongs to one of the pillars always loses out to the dominant liberal movement in macro-historiography. Now one can say that history has shown that liberal writers were better than the other writers from the pillarized segments of society, for example by considering publishers as gatekeepers or assessing literary criticism. But that would be too easy. Our view of the Dutch history of literature is heavily overstated by general concepts about pillarisation, without literary institutions at regional or local level being investigated.

Approaching history at micro level tells us that a lot can be said against the macrohistory of pillarisation. In diaries and letters indications can be found that the typical characteristic of the most pillarized writer was that he or she indeed aspired to escape from the pillar he or she lived in. Writers of the Catholic or Protestant pillar, even authors who now are known as advocates of those pillars, have continuously made efforts to become part of the liberal pillar.¹⁴ We can consider the biography of the prominent Catholic writer Paul Haimon, who also thanks to his administrative and social positions was the undisputed patron of the arts in the Dutch province of Limburg. Biographical research and especially interpretation of his life leads to the conclusion that Haimon tried to enter the liberal pillar through the neutral publishing house Nijgh en Van Ditmar. What

¹³ Hans Werkman, *De wereld van Willem de Mérode*, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 1983; Michel van der Plas, *Daarom, mijnheer, noem ik mij katholiek. Biografie van Anton van Duinkerken*, Anthos/Lannoo, Amsterdam/Tielt 2000.

¹⁴ Hans Renders, ‘Oude levens, nieuwe kwesties. De biografie in Limburg’, in: Rob Bindels & Ben van Melick, *Oude levens, nieuwe kwesties. Dag van de biografie*, Huis voor de Kunsten Limburg, Maastricht 2007, p. 14-27.

new insights would emerge when instead of his representativeness Haimon would be investigated from the agency-perspective? In other words: what results would it yield to not interpret Haimon from the perspective of the Catholic pillar but from his individual efforts precisely to escape this pillar? And especially his ambition to change his environment is meaningful, 'social change' in history is always a powerful force for change in any sense whatsoever. Biographers therefore more often should act like a microhistorian and deliberately ask themselves where the breaking points in the studied life can be found. They should try more often to interpret facts of life as being deviating instead of looking for a socially valid confirmation of life experiences. The misunderstanding behind almost every biography is that a theoretical basic assumption would not be necessary for a biographer, that the sources and facts speak for themselves, whereas those sources and facts in a certain way are being presented by invisible, institutionalized hands.

Biographers themselves are jointly responsible for this misunderstanding. In prefaces of biographies or in interviews biographers give after completing their work, it is often read that before writing the biography they first consulted 'the theory'. It goes without saying that a theoretical and methodical understanding when exercising a profession is commendable, even necessary. But these remarks about 'consulting theory' show the naive notion that all literature about biographies is easily united into a practical guide on how to write a biography.

Microhistory and biography is the sum of a scientific attitude and a penchant for creativity to place a story from the past into a powerful interpretative framework. The form certainly is very important, yet it is at the same time subordinate to the content. This is also the big difference between fiction and biography, regardless of the great importance of the narrative structure in a biography. In biography form is subordinated to its contents, whereas the main feature of fiction precisely is the dominance of form, it's even its only value. Life Writing aims to correct history from an ideological view of how the world should look like. Sources themselves are almost presented as research results, a historical examination of autobiographical documents with regard to their context is not considered important and therefore, contrary to what microhistorians and biographers do, no distinction is made between published and unpublished letters and diaries. Even the

distinction between fiction and nonfiction within sources is not considered important. With equal ease Charles Dodgson, who wrote under the pseudonym name Lewis Carroll *Alice in Wonderland*, and James Barrie, the author of *Peter Pan*, are being charged by Life writers for child abuse, as diaries from lesbian teachers are used to demonstrate that sexual identity plays a significant role in transfer of knowledge.¹⁵

An innocent example in which the agency perspective from a microhistorian point of view can be tested against general history, is the story of Hans Jacoby and the Putsch of Hitler in 1923. Munich was on the morning of November 9, 1923 still in a shock after the failed Putsch of Hitler, but individual testimonials from residents of Munich at the time tell that almost nobody exactly knew where the excitement came from. Hans Jacoby worked as an apprentice at a bookstore in Munich. His boss thought it would be wiser for the young student to leave the city and bought a ticket for him in the morning. But in the afternoon the ticket could be returned, because the uprising was already over. What exactly had happened, the Jewish Jacoby only understood until much later.¹⁶

It is a fine example of scaling down, not in the sense of interpreting grand history from a ‘small’ perspective, but rather in scaling down a historical event back to a human dimension in which it is possible to test the experiences of an individual to the grand historical narrative. This almost automatically transforms microhistory into a socio-anthropological affair.¹⁷ Too often has been assumed that research on small social communities would teach us something about regional or national history. That is only partly the case, certainly from the perspective of representativeness, and more likely the concept of ‘normal exception’ fits better in these cases.¹⁸ It teaches us rather more about other social relationships which exercised unexpected impact on general history. For example, Joachim Fest shed with his memoirs a few years ago yet another light on the Nazi bureaucracy in Berlin, based on the vicissitudes of his own family. It differs for example from the observation of Daniel Goldhagen who concluded in *Hitler’s Willing*

¹⁵ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, The MacMillan Press LTD, London and Basingstoke 1984; Queer Girls in Class: Lesbian Teachers and Students Tell Their Classroom Stories, call for papers IABA Hawaii, July 7, 2010.

¹⁶ Hans Renders & Paul Arnoldussen, ‘Toen kwam Colijn binnen. Kaart Abessinië!’, in: idem, *Jong in de jaren dertig. Interviews*, Aspekt, Soesterberg 2003 (first edition, de Prom, Baarn 1999), p. 144-145.

¹⁷ Jacques Revel (ed.), *Jeux d’échelles. La micro-analyse à l’expérience*, Gallimard/Le Seuil, Paris 1996.

¹⁸ Giovanni Levi, ‘On Microhistory’, in: Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Polity Press, Cambridge & Oxford 2001, p. 97-119.

Executioners that the entire German population quasi forced its leaders to conduct a National Socialist policy.¹⁹

But this downscaling also has been applied by microhistorians on other fields than the social level only. Carlo Ginzburg describes the publications of Giovanni Morelli, who in the nineteenth century under the pseudonym of Ivan Lermolieff would have discovered a method through which one could identify the authentic painter of old paintings. The publications of Lermolieff were translated into German by Johannes Schwarze, actually also a pseudonym of Morelli. In short, the theory of Morelli stated that one has to examine the details of a painting to reveal the identity of the painter, not the major themes of a painting. These major themes in fact are easy to imitate. In this way, Ginzburg tries to demonstrate in his study, microhistorians also should look at history.²⁰ And biographers, I would like to add.

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¹⁹ Joachim Fest, *Ich nicht: Erinnerungen an eine Kindheit und Jugend*, Rowohlt Verlag, Reinbek bei Hamburg 2006; Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1996.

²⁰ Carlo Ginzburg, 'Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm', in Carlo Ginzburg, *Myths, Emblems, Clues*, Hutchinson, London 1986, p. 96–125.