

About Biography [1]

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One of the most important Russian historians in the field of psychology is, in our opinion, Felix Fradkin, whom we got to know personally in connection with a conference visit to Russia, in 1991, two years before his death. As one of the first, he managed to situate this internationally renowned psychologist in the social context of the 1920s and 1930s. There was certainly a need for courage, because that approach, even in times of *Perestroika*, criticized the bureaucratic way in which science policy was conducted in the Soviet Union. I do not know of any other historical psychologist who dared to do this then. But also with regard to the internal reconstruction of Lev Vygotsky's own thought, Fradkin's study was very enlightening. I have therefore used his analysis for years to explain the importance of Vygotsky to my students in the history of psychology. [2] For several reasons, it would be good that a biography could also appear on this remarkable figure. With my colleagues, with whom I have planned to make a book on Ovide Decroly, the almost only Belgian psychologist and pedagogue who can claim worldwide recognition, we explain this further on the basis of the boom over the genre.

More than ten years ago Jacques Dane, now head of collection and research at the National Education Museum of the Netherlands, in Dordrecht, together with Hans Renders drew attention to the unmistakable relationship between biography and psychology, [3] which obviously also has implications for the description and understanding of the life of so-called "great" pedagogues (such as Ovide Decroly, Lev Vygotsky, Felix Fradkin, and so on). "To interpret and explain a life, the ideal biographer will consult various scientific disciplines," according to the two editor of this book, who, with their publication, "tried to stir up the cold-water fear for interdisciplinary research" in biography. [4] It is difficult to determine whether this has succeeded in the meantime, but the fact is that the biographical genre in historiography, also in the history of education, is on the rise.

The fact that biography is currently experiencing an economic boom can be deduced from the wide variety of supply. Life stories of men and women who have made a name and fame in film, music, media, sports, politics, and even crime have been recorded in almost every book and newspaper store. At the same time, also life histories of "ordinary people" are reconstructed. In addition, biographical films and documentaries flourish, as do debates, discussions and seminars related to the biographical approach in the human and social sciences. Moreover, there are several international journals about the genre and there is a growing number of dissertations with a biography as a subject. Illustrative of the growth of the biographical research was, in 2004, the establishment of a Biography Institute at the University of Groningen and, in 2007, the creation of a chair in History and Theory of Biography (occupied by the above mentioned Hans Renders).

The so-called biographical turn has actually been going on for a while. In the mid-1980s Stephen Oates wrote: "Biography is currently enjoying immense popularity in the United States. The number of biographical titles published each year has virtually doubled since the 1960s". And a survey of 1986 by the *Library of Congress* indicated that more people had read a biography than any other kind of book. [5] In France, *Livre-Hebdo*, the professional weekly magazine of French publishers, recorded a turnaround for the same period with 200 published biographies per 50 publishers. In the 1990s, the publication of biographies continued to rise, 611 in 1996, 1043 in 1999, without counting the numerous autobiographies and memoirs. [6] The use of biographical methods in the social sciences had actually started with Paul Thompson's search for the roots of oral history and Ken Plummers' humanistic method in sociology. In both cases, the use of personal testimonies, but also of diaries, letters and photographs was essential for the study of everyday life, which once again drew attention to the role of the individual behind macro-historical developments. [7]

In a sense, cultural history thus experienced a reaction to the French *Annales* school which, by emphasizing structures and processes, had sidelined the individual subject. However, in the German historiography of the 1960s and 1970s, biography was described by many as "*überholt oder gar als reaktionär*" and famous historians such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka held a rather wait-and-see attitude on this matter. [8] Nevertheless many *Annales* practitioners have been stimulated by the biographical approach and have, among other things via micro-histories, rehabilitated the individual. Many researchers take over the term "biographical turn" without any hesitation, and as Barbara Caine puts it, they give it meaning as: "a new preoccupation with individual lives and stories as a way of understanding both contemporary societies and the whole process of social and historical change. Biographical approach is an addition to the understanding of general developments by providing a way of accessing subjective understanding and experience". [9] For personal histories show unambiguously how much wealth, power, class, gender, ethnicity, religion and the presence or absence of physical disabilities have influenced historical developments.

That this awareness has meanwhile penetrated to the level of handbooks (on which we have based ourselves for the above considerations), proves that biography is strongly anchored and also differentiated. For example, Christian Klein has tried to integrate the complex biographical genre from concept to practice (approaches, sciences, different countries, ...) in the German historiography. As a consequence his handbook, became an important standard work, especially in the German speaking world. [10] For the French language area, we can mention as a reference work *Les uns et les autres*, which is strictly speaking not a handbook, but a collection of essays, strongly focusing on the heuristics and research practices of biography and prosopography. [11] As far as the English language is concerned, leading examples are numerous, such as Barbara Caines *Biography and History* and Jo Burr Margadants *The New Biography*. Both works are also related to the feminist approach. During the years 1980-1990, feminist researchers have shifted the focus from the analysis of women as a biologically identifiable group to the way in which cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity work in various situations, mainly from the perspective of the social influence of gender. As is well known, such an approach is at odds with what biographers have traditionally regarded as their task, in particular the identification of an underlying pattern or motif in the life of a certain person, from which a recognizable and coherent biography is to be told. For the new biographers, self-conscious about their role as makers of history, such a project of an identifiable subject, which is the same in all circumstances, is just as suspicious as the idea that a definitive biography can be written. The new biography wants to avoid short-sightedness, as well as a monolithic approach. Her subject "is no longer the coherent self, but rather a self that is performed to create an impression of coherence or an individual with multiple selves whose different manifestations reflects the passage of time, the demands and options of different settings, or the varieties of ways that others seek to represent that person". Thus conceived, the new historical biography includes some "constructions of selves pieced together by individuals and their observers". That is why the new historical biography is characterized by multiple storylines, a variety of covered topics, different forms of empirical evidence, and very different explanations. [12] A good example of such a cultural-historical approach, which is putting "women in their place", is the work of Avril Madrell, *Complex locations*, a combination of biography and prosopography. [13]

Does this more collective approach form the key to the renewed interest in biography? Possibly, but maybe not. As the interest in biography never seems to have been absent. After all, as Peter Waite puts it: "Biography ... is at the core of history, not its periphery". Because biographical research introduces people - men and women - "in process of being" - a process which indicates in the concrete what it means to be human. [14] Etzemüller seems to be looking in the same direction to explain the success of the biography - a genre that "*entspricht der Alltagserfahrung der Leser, dass es handelnde*

und fühlende Subjekte gibt, die sich in der Welt orientieren müssen (...), Biographien bieten beispielhafte Lebensläufe". In biographies, the past is plastically pictured and facilitates identification; it awakens the nostalgic sense that individual action can still achieve something in the post-industrial society; biography has the advantage of examining all eras and all social fields; it encapsulates history, encompassing both the universal and the individual. [15] One can still draw many reasons, but already after the Second World War a still plausible and fundamental explanation was offered by the famous Dutch historian Jan Romein: "*Immer dann, wenn der Mensch zu zweifeln beginnt, d. h. wenn alte Werte wanken, neue aber erst noch gebildet werden müssen, ist die Regsamkeit im Biographischen Bereich besonders gross*". [16] Or in a slight variation: "It is this fact, life's unbearable lightness and our dissolving selves, that explains biography's popularity. Lacking a sense of who we are, or where we have come from and where we are going, we turn to biography as compensation ". [17]

So, it does not come as a surprise that in the history of science, biography, after a lesser period, has become more attractive again. [18] For example, in the history of psychology in France, there are many publications by Serge Nicolas, the bearer of the "*nouvelle histoire de la psychologie*". [19] Within the cohort of successful intellectuals with a recognizable way of thinking (i.e. neurologists, psychopedagogues, psychiatrists, and the like, to which also Decroly and Vigotsky belonged) the tension between general and individual biographical experiences has always persisted. [20] Viewing the problems from the biography is interesting, because in addition to the scientific content, one gets information about people, networks of people who use science, and the way in which science is practiced. Is it actually possible to transfer science without people? The whole problem is to determine which place the person occupies in science and what role the person exactly plays in forming science transfer. How does this particular person come to that content of science? Can personal biography throw its own light on the history of science? But can scientific developments be sufficiently explained by life stories alone? Is the individually oriented biography not in conflict with scientific aim for general validity? And how is the relation to the objects, the instruments, in short the material infrastructure, because those things also have a biography? But here too, how does one build with the insignificant, the banal and the everyday of things a coherent life story? And how does one find the extraordinary through the ordinary?

Yet, we dare to argue for some relativity concerning the so-called biographical turn. Over the past decades, we have been inundated with such "turns" in social and human sciences, starting with the linguistic turn and subsequent pictorial turn, the turn to things, and recently even the animal turn. Designating such trends is of course useful for delimiting scientific areas, setting up new research centers and possibly attracting research funds. But when one takes a certain distance, it is not possible to observe a generalized preference for the biographical genre. Even though some people call the biography the *Königsdisziplin* of all historical research, others continue to indicate biography as meager historiography - a fossil from days long past. Moreover, there is no unanimity about the nature of the biographic approach. There are on the one hand literary strong stories about figures that one wants to commemorate, but on the other hand also critical interpretations based on thorough source research. The latter are especially to be found in the Anglo-Saxon research tradition, which was actually never interrupted, while the first are more familiar to the *biographie à la française*, which is recovering from a deep depression in the second half of the 1980s and puts more emphasis on the style than on the content, and therefore not only comes closer to fiction, but also often leaves a biased and incomplete impression. [21] Be that as it may, in both cases we do recognize, if not an obsession, then a certain passion of the biographer for his or her subject, which makes him or her to some extent "anthropophagous". As Ian Kershaw at the end of his study on Hitler testified: "I cannot tell you how happy I was when it finally went through that bloke's head". [22]

Which brings us seamlessly to the methodology of biography. Are there innovative trends to be discovered in this respect? Or do we again deal with “old wine in new bags”? Of course, there is a lot of theoretical reflection, but when it comes down to writing, the pragmatic often prevails and that usually results in a more or less traditional format, without much methodological awareness. May be we have to return to Jan Romein. According to the Dutch biography specialist Hans Renders, Romein already stated that the ideal biographical method does not exist and therefore remains an ideal. “There will be few to dispute his [= Romein] words, but still this thesis provides an interesting insight: the terms theory and framing of theory too often support great ambitions. It is sometimes asked what the method of biography is, but that is a completely mistaken question”. Quoting Renders the Dutch historian Van Berkel writes: “biography **has** no method, but **is** a method. And that is the way it is”. How we have to write the ideal biography has been debated for centuries. All in all, it seems that the famous quote from William Somerset Maugham with regard to the writing of a novel, which we have adapted for the occasion to writing a biography, might be the best guide for the coming generation of biographers: "There are three basic rules for writing a biography . Unfortunately nobody knows what they are "[23]

Notes

1. Originally, this paragraph was part of a contribution to the Festschrift for Jeroen J.H. Dekker (see: M. Depaepe, F. Simon & A. Van Gorp, *Lusten en lasten van een Decroly-biografie*, in H. Amsing, N. Bakker, M. van Essen & S. Parlevliet (eds.), *Images of education. Cultuuroverdracht in historisch perspectief* (Groningen: Uitgeverij Passage, 2018), 169-181, but in the end, it was deleted from the article by the editors of the book, who argued that the text was too long. Because the paragraph offers a possible interesting overview of what is going on internationally, we have presented it here as a separate article.
2. M. Depaepe, [in Russian]: *An Uncompleted Symphony: Fradkin's study of pedology in East and West*, in: [in Russian] *Commemorative Book on Felix Fradkin* (Vladimir: s.p., 2004), 31-32
3. J. Dane & H. Renders , “Biografie & Psychologie”, in J. Dane & H. Lenders (eds.), *Biografie & Psychologie* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2007), 7-22
4. Id., 11 & 21.
5. S.B. Oates, “Prologue”, in S.B. Oates (ed.), *Biography as High Adventure. Life-writers speak on their Art* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), IX.
6. F. Dosse, *Le pari biographique. Ecrire une vie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), 13.
7. P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); K. Plummer, *Documents of life: An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983). See P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat & T. Wengraf (eds.), *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science. Comparative issues and examples* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.
8. See Th. Etzemüller, *Biographien. Lesen-erforschen-erzählen* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2012), 10-1. As starting point for the revival of biography in Germany one refers to Lothar Gall, *Bismarck. Der weiße Revolutionär* (Frankfurt am Main/Berlin: Propyläen-Verlag, 1980).
9. B. Caine, *Biography and History* (Houndmills: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2010), 1.
10. C. Klein, (Hrsg.), *Handbuch Biographie. Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien* (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2009).

11. L. Rollet & Ph. Nabonnand (dir.), *Les uns et les autres...Biographie et prosopographie en histoire des sciences* (Nancy: PUN/Editions universitaires de Lorraine, 2012).
12. J. Burr Margadant (ed.), *The New Biography. Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 2000), 7-9, 24-25. See also P. Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
13. A. Maddrell, *Complex Locations. Women's Geographical Work in the UK 1850-1970* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
14. P. Waite, "Biography and History: Reflections of a Biographer-Historian," *Canadian Issues/ Thèmes canadiens* (October 2003): 11.
15. Etzemüller, *Biographien*, 12-13.
16. Bernhard Fetz & Wilhelm Hemecker, *Theorie der Biographie: Grundlagentexte und Kommentar* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 337. Jan Romein, *De biografie, een inleiding* (Amsterdam: Ploegsma, 1946; Duitse vertaling 1948).
17. Donald Wright, "Reflections on Donald Creighton and the Appeal of Biography", *Journal of Historical Biography*, I (Spring 2007): 23.
18. Cf. L.J. Dorsman & P.J. Knegtmans (red.), *De menselijke maat in de wetenschap. De geleerden(auto)biografie als bron voor de wetenschaps- en universiteitsgeschiedenis* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2013).
19. A. Klein (éd.), *Correspondance d'Alfred Binet. Volume II. L'émergence de la psychologie scientifique (1884-1911)* (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 2011), 13-5.
20. See, in this respect, C. Charle, *Les intellectuels en Europe au XIXe siècle. Essai d'histoire comparée* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2011²).
21. For example the biography of Elisée Reclus: J.-D. Vincent, *Elisée Reclus. Géographe, anarchiste, écologiste* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2010), which won the Prix Femina. Since 1980 there is also a "Prix Goncourt de la biographie".
22. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/2045979.stm>, Ian Kershaw, BBC News, 14 June 2002, retrieved on 9 May 2015.
23. H. Renders, "The Biographical Method", in H. Renders & B. De Haan (eds.), *Theoretical Discussions of Biography. Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 223; H. Renders, "Het zelfbewustzijn van de biograaf. Waarom de biografie geen roman is", *Zacht Lawijd*, VI (2006-2007): 79-80.