

Autobiography and contemporary history

The Dutch reception of autobiographies, 1850-1918

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It was in 1854 that Mary Seacole learnt about the Crimean War. Seacole, at that time an unknown Jamaican-Scottish widow and nurse, subsequently sailed from the West Indies to England and asked the authorities to send her to the war zone. Her request was denied, but she went there all the same, at her own expenses. Near Balaclava she started a British hotel, where she tended the wounded soldiers. She not only offered them bandages and medicines, but also refreshments, wine and lemonade. Thus she earned the name 'Mother Seacole'. For she, according to a critic of the Dutch journal *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen*, filled a need that was generally neglected. In 1857 she published her autobiography which was equally appreciated:

There are plenty of other people who have, with varying degrees of elegance, published the main facts of the war, the leaders' feats of arms, the public events. She is not at all concerned with these official facts; she simply registers what she herself has seen, but it is exactly those details which cannot be found anywhere else. No Thucydides, no Livius or Robertson, Gervinus, Thiers, Wagenaar or Van Meteren convey as clearly what war really is about as this woman with her candid heart and sound judgment.²

With her life story a black woman thus competed with famous Dutch and classical historians. Consequently, the anonymous critic disapproved of the title of Seacole's book: *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*. This title alluded too much to an adventure story, when in fact it was 'history also of important events of this time', experienced personally by an eyewitness of that history. A minor point of criticism was that the autobiographer had written a bit too much about herself.

This seems rather a curious remark when reviewing an autobiography. In a common sense, autobiography is today regarded as a 'self-produced, non-fiction text that tells the story of its writer's life'.³ It is precisely the subjective aspect of the genre that, around 1900, made most historians lose their interest in autobiographies.⁴ An exception was the German idea historian Georg Misch who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, wrote a multi-volume standard work on the history of the autobiography, which in the fifties became available in an English translation. From that time, literary scholars in particular occupied themselves with the definition and history of the autobiographical genre, which was supposed to have taken a

¹ This article was previously published as 'Beter dan Thucydides en Wagenaar... Autobiografieën en de geschiedenis van de eigen tijd, 1850-1918', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 118:4 (2005) 513-532.

² Review of *Mary Seacole's avonturen in de West en in de Krim, of het belangwekkend leven eener heldin der barmhartigheid door haar zelve verhaald* (Rotterdam 1857), *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* (1858:1) 777-781. Henceforth abbreviated as *VL*.

³ Bonnie J. Gunzenhauser, 'Autobiography: general survey' in: Margaret Jolly (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of life writing. Autobiographical and biographical forms* (Chicago 2002).

⁴ Rudolf Dekker, 'Jacques Presser's heritage: egodocuments in the study of history', *Memoria y Civilización* 5 (2002) 13-37; Rudolf Dekker, 'Introduction' in: Rudolf Dekker (ed.), *Egodocuments and history. Autobiographical writing in its social context since the Middle Ages* (Hilversum 2002) 7-20.

definite form in the course of the nineteenth century.⁵ That same century saw an increase in autobiographical writing, which is usually explained from an increasing tendency towards introspection. Peter Gay, American historian, stated that the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie was ‘to the point of neurosis’ obsessed by the ‘self’, as in a rapidly changing world the own person was the only constant factor. He illustrated this with the rise of ego-novels, the increasing tendency to write diaries and the publication of famous European autobiographies, such as written by Goethe and John Stuart Mill. In passing he also mentioned that many ‘other’ people published their autobiographies as well. These texts supposedly illustrated the nineteenth-century tendency to self-examination, but, according to Gay, these ‘ordinary’ people seldom succeeded in writing down an explicit self-analysis.⁶

It is debatable whether self-analysis was indeed the intention of the unknown autobiographers, and whether nineteenth-century readers expected a personal testimony of autobiographers. Judging by the reviews of Mary Seacole’s autobiography, the professional reader of *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* appears to be averse to too much information on the autobiographer herself. Moreover, an inventory of Dutch egodocuments shows that, although the number of diaries and autobiographies increases, there are hardly signs of a tendency towards introspection.⁷ In this article, I will try to show that during the second half of the nineteenth century autobiography filled a readers’ need for histories of the own time, with focus on the changing life circumstances of people and their topical experiences. I interpret this interest in realistic information on topical issues against the background of developments in the press, the status of the novel and the professionalization of historiography. These developments also influenced the transformation of the autobiographical genre into a literarily judged personal testimony at the end of the century.

‘Knowledge of the people who have lived, suffered and struggled before us’

In the course of the nineteenth century, more and more autobiographies appeared on the Dutch book market, as is shown by the inventory of Dutch egodocuments.⁸ As publishers worked commercially, they will have expected there was money to be earned with these life stories. From the second half of the century, there was fierce competition between publishers and booksellers to gain the favour of an increasing number of readers. This was effectuated by more aggressive advertising campaigns, a change of the distribution system and a differentiation of the book supply. Trying to find gaps in the market, some publishers concentrated on popular publications or Protestant books, others introduced new genres such as textbooks and children’s books, hobby books and travel guides.⁹ The question is whether

⁵ For a survey of the formulation on the autobiographical genre, including the feminist and post-colonial critic on the term autobiography and the canon of autobiographies: Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading autobiography. A guide for interpreting life narratives* (Minneapolis/Londen 2001).

⁶ Peter Gay, *The naked heart* (New York/Londen 1995) 109-111.

⁷ Arianne Baggerman, ‘Autobiography and family memory in the nineteenth century’ in: Dekker (ed.), *Egodocuments and history* 161-173.

⁸ Hans de Valk with Gerard Schulte Nordholt, *Repertorium van gedrukte egodocumenten, 1813-1914*. This inventory of printed egodocuments can be visited at: www.inghist.nl/onderzoek/projecten/egodocumenten. This inventory is one base of the research project *Controlling time and shaping the self: education, introspection and the practices of writing in the Netherlands 1750-1914*. Regarding the basic assumptions of the research project: Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker, ‘De gevaarlijkste aller bronnen’. *Egodocumenten: nieuwe wegen en perspectieven*, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 1:4 (2004) 3-22 and the website: www.fhk.eur.nl/onderzoek/egodocumenten.

⁹ Marieke van Delft and Clemens de Wolf (eds.), *Bibliopolis. Geschiedenis van het gedrukte boek in Nederland* (Zwolle/Den Haag 2004); Lisa Kuitert, ‘Schrijver van beroep. De professionalisering van de literaire auteur in de negentiende eeuw’, *Boekmancahier* 13:47 (2001) 23-33; Lisa Kuitert, *Het ene boek in vele delen. De uitgave van literaire series in Nederland, 1850-1900* (Amsterdam 1993); Berry Dongelmans, ‘Over boekenslijters,

the autobiography was also a gap in the market and which need from which people this genre filled.

To probe the contemporary expectations regarding the genre, I went looking for reviews of autobiographies.¹⁰ Although critics are no ‘ordinary readers’, part of their task was to guide a growing group of inexperienced readers through an expanding book market.¹¹ As I assume that it was in the publishers’ interest to bring their books to the notice of as large a public as possible, I have gathered reviews of autobiographies from four popular general-cultural journals: *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* (1850-1876), *De Tijdspiegel* (1850-1918), *De Gids* (1850-1918) and *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede. Evangelisch Tijdschrift voor Protestanten in Nederland* (1864-1918). The first three journals were among the top-10 of most reviewing magazines in the midst of the nineteenth century.¹² The protestant journal *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede* is chosen because of the large share of protestants in the Dutch production of autobiographical books. The selected journals were of long standing, so that I could trace possible developments in the research period 1850-1918.

The four selected journals reflect the dominant bourgeois, liberal and protestant mainstream in Dutch society. *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* was founded as far back as in 1760 and aimed at a wide public whom it offered information, opinion and diversion in the form of ‘miscellany’. It was Dutch-oriented, and a large part of the information consisted of book reviews which generally were hardly more than a summary of the book with a morally motivated judgment. *De Gids*, from its formation in 1836, contrasted with the *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* and its editorial staff aimed at writing a kind of literary criticism with the national and international literary product as a central theme. *De Gids* developed into a distinctly liberal journal, from the sixties growing into the voice of the ‘upper middle class liberal establishment’.¹³ During the 1880’s, a group of young literators felt that, literarily and politically, *De Gids* had served its time, after which in 1885 *De Nieuwe* [new] *Gids* was founded. The status of *De Gids*, however, remained unaffected. In 1864, publisher W.H. Kirberger wanted to offer the orthodox-protestant public an alternative for *De Gids*, after which the journal *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede* was established. *De Tijdspiegel* was established in 1844 as a moderate social-liberal journal.¹⁴

boekverkopers en uitgevers in de negentiende eeuw. Enkele ontwikkelingen’ in: J.J. Kloek and W. Mijnhardt (ed.), *De productie, distributie en consumptie van cultuur* (Amsterdam 1991) 101-115.

¹⁰ In this article, I use the term ‘autobiography’ in a sense as broad as possible, including what has been called ‘memoirs’. I follow Philippe Lejeune, who regards a text as autobiographical if the reader is drawn into an ‘autobiographical pact’. The minimal criterion for this is that the proper name of the author is also the name of the narrator and the main character of the book. Employing this definition without any criterion about the contents of a book, I think it is possible to study what people in the nineteenth century read, wrote and published as an autobiography instead of finding in history what we think an autobiography is or should be. Philippe Lejeune, ‘The autobiographical pact’, in: Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis 1989) 3-30. See also Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories : Making Selves* (Ithaca/London : Cornell UP 1999) 43, 56, where he argues to stretch the definition and history of autobiography by including memoirs. On the relevance of research into reception of autobiography and other forms of ‘personal literature’, Philippe Lejeune, ‘Autobiography and literary history’ in: Lejeune, *On Autobiography* 141-161.

¹¹ Kuitert, *Het ene boek in vele delen* 90-96.

¹² José de Kruif, ‘Kijk, er zijn veel te veel boeken. De selectiecriteria van de negentiende-eeuwse boekkritiek in tijdschriften’ in: Gillis J. Dorleijn and Kees van Rees (eds.), *De productie van literatuur. Het literaire veld in Nederland 1800-2000* (Nijmegen 2006) 69-89.

¹³ Remieg Aerts, *De letterheren. Liberale cultuur in de negentiende eeuw: het tijdschrift De Gids* (Amsterdam 1997) 308.

¹⁴ G.J. Johannes, *De barometer van de smaak. Tijdschriften in Nederland 1770-1830* (Den Haag 1995); Aerts, *De letterheren*; Marita Mathijssen, ‘Concurrentie voor De Gids. Literaire tijdschriften 1835-1845’ in: idem, *Nederlandse literatuur in de romantiek 1820-1880* (Nijmegen 2004) 147-156; A.W. Bronsveld, ‘Souvenirs’, *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede* (1910) 43-56, henceforth abbreviated as *SWV*; ‘Bericht van de redactie bij den nieuwen jaargang’, *De Tijdspiegel* (1918:1) 1-2; J.G.S., ‘Ter inleiding’, *De Tijdspiegel* (1919:1) 1-5.

In these four journals I found 299 reviews of 242 different national and international autobiographies. During almost the whole period the percentage of foreign (translated or untranslated) autobiographies was almost fifty percent. It is, however, hard to say whether autobiographies filled a large or small percentage of the Dutch book market.¹⁵ The reverend A.W. Bronsveld, editor of *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede*, stated in 1891 that memoirs and letters were part of the most-read reading matter of the time. Earlier, in 1872, he signalled on the part of the reading public a growing interest in ‘particulars of life’, and a ‘- verging on indiscretion - inquisitiveness of our generation, which would have liked to open all records and archives, and to buy portfolios with letters of important persons, even at the price of discretion and piety’.¹⁶ In contrast with Bronsveld, critics from other journals complained about excessive piety and discretion.¹⁷ According to them, this was the reason for the limited number of printed Dutch diaries, letters and memoirs. Though critics of the four journals had different opinions on the amount of published egodocuments, they agreed about the importance of these documents: to contribute to the history of the recent past. Consequently, the thematic diversity of autobiographies was well-received by the critics. They were interested in autobiographies on all kinds of subjects: from religious and clerical developments, internal and external customs and traditions and the history of trade and industry, science, theatre and literature, to the situation in the colonies and (international) political subjects such as, for instance, the French occupation of the Netherlands and the Italian war of Independence.

Such subjects would now be classed among the contemporary political history, the cultural, socio-economic or mentality history. In the nineteenth century, these branches within the professionalizing historical discipline did not as yet exist.¹⁸ The influential Dutch historian Robert Fruin (1823-1899) concentrated mainly on the political developments in the Republic. His pupil, P.J. Blok (1855-1929), advocated in his inaugural lecture the necessity of paying more attention to the study of religion, literature, law and justice and economics of the past. In Dutch historiography this lecture of 1884 is regarded as the beginning of a thematic broadening of historical studies, although, actually, this did not get off the ground until after 1900. At Dutch universities, the start of a contemporary historiography is not to be found until the period around the first World War.¹⁹

Well before that time, in 1858, Mary Seacole was commended for her contemporary history of the Crimean War, in which, moreover, not politics but people were the central theme. Such praise can be found in more reviews of autobiographies. In 1873, a critic praised

¹⁵ Following Rudolf Dekker, Henk te Velde states that the number of Dutch egodocuments probably measures up to that in other countries. Henk te Velde, ‘Egodocumenten en politieke cultuur’ in: Remieg Aerts, Janny de Jong and Henk te Velde (eds.), *Het persoonlijke is politiek. Egodocumenten en politieke cultuur* (Hilversum 2002) 9-31, 18; Rudolf Dekker, ‘Dat mijn lieve kinderen weten zouden ... Egodocumenten in Nederland van de zestiende tot de negentiende eeuw’, *Opossum* 3:8 (1993) 5-22.

¹⁶ A.W. Bronsveld, ‘Mr. Is. da Costa en Mr. Groen van Prinsterer’, *SWV* (1872) 128-151; A.W. Bronsveld, ‘Onbevredigend’, *SWV* (1891) 276-288.

¹⁷ Reviews of *Het twaalfjarig soldatenleven van den Majoor Hodson, in Britsch-Indië* (Arnhem 1860) by V.R., *De Tijdspiegel* (1860:2) 451-461; Review Mr. H. van A., *Uit de Gedenkschriften van een voornaam Nederlandsch beambte over de tweede helft der achttiende en het begin der negentiende eeuw* (Tiel 1882) by W.H. de Beaufort, *De Gids* (1882:2) 360-363; Review of Mr. H. van A., *Herinneringen van vroeger en later leeftijd, en aan gedenkwaardige land- en tijdgenooten* (Tiel 1884), *De Tijdspiegel* (1884:1) 517-519; Review S.A. Naber, *Vier tijdgenooten. Indrukken en beschouwingen* (Haarlem 1894), *De Gids* (1894:2) 530-540; W.G.C.B., ‘Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis der Bataafsche Republiek’, *De Gids* (1895:2) 543-550.

¹⁸ Jo Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin. Denken over geschiedenis in Nederland sinds 1860* (Amsterdam 1990). Particularly chapter 1, ‘De liberaal-positivistische onpartijdigheidsleer van Fruin’ and chapter 2: ‘Blok en de discussies omstreeds de eeuwwisseling’.

¹⁹ Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin* hoofdstuk 3: ‘De vernieuwingsdrang der ‘epigonen’; P. Luykx, ‘De beoefening van de nieuwste geschiedenis in de 20^e eeuw’ in: P. Luykx and N. Bootsma ed., *De laatste tijd. Geschiedschrijving over Nederland in de 20^e eeuw* (Utrecht 1987) 9-64.

a Dutch translation of the German theologian Karl Hase's autobiography – *Ideale und Irrthümer. Jugenderinnerungen* (1872) – as a 'small, but not unimportant contribution to the German history,' that is to say 'for anyone who feels history is not to be found exclusively on the battlefields and in the cabinets'.²⁰ Two years later, in 1875, A.W. Bronsveld reviewed the autobiography of the German pietist Hendrik Jung Stilling, published in several volumes between 1777 and 1817. This rather old autobiography provided, according to Bronsveld, an altered historical interest which he wholeheartedly approved of: 'it is a great improvement that the study of history is increasingly involved, not with wars and battles and political negotiations, but with the knowledge of the people who lived, suffered and struggled before us'.²¹

Eyewitnesses of history

From 1850, critics stressed the importance of a more social, economic, cultural and personal oriented history of the own time. Autobiographies filled that need and thus had a surplus value compared to regular historiography. The fact that autobiographies were regarded as reports of eyewitnesses was also a positive factor in the eyes of the critics. 'It is the glow of the eyewitness that shines through, - it is the simplicity of the man who, himself, has seen and experienced everything he tells', as is said about the *Herinneringen van een oud-officier uit het tijdvak van 1793 tot en met 1815* (1863).²² As a participant eyewitness, the former military officer W.P. d'Auzon de Boisminart could tell the reading public at first hand about the time when the Netherlands were occupied by the French and not yet independent.

The interest in eyewitness reports on the recent past may be connected with the changing historical consciousness in the nineteenth century. Following Koselleck, the American historian Peter Fritzsche states that after the French revolution a modern historical consciousness came into being, the result being that examples of the past were no longer deemed applicable to experiences in the present. At the same time, the collectively shared breach experience of 1789 led to a 'common historical field', where contemporaries recognised themselves and each other as part of a new generation and participants in a historical process – for instance as a soldier in one of the European wars from that time, or as a relative of this soldier. This led to a blending of the public and private domain at the level of individual people. Fritzsche sees this blending as the central cause of the flow of autobiographical writings in the nineteenth century.²³ This thesis might also apply to the Dutch situation: the number of autobiographies and other egodocuments was increasing and the reception data show that autobiographies were seen as sources of information on a wide scale of subjects of contemporary history.

It follows that with this conception of the autobiography the intimate personality of the autobiographer was not of primary interest to the critics. In 1888, the businessman and critic P.N. Muller even stated that the best autobiographies were written by people who had 'forgotten' themselves, as was the case with industrialist and senator C.T. Stork who

²⁰ Review of Karl Hase, *Idealen en afdwalingen. Herinneringen uit mijne jeugd* (Groningen 1873) by W.F., *De Gids* (1874:1) 560-566.

²¹ A.W. Bronsveld, 'Hendrik Jung Stilling. Eene voorlezing', *SWV* (1875) 36-56.

²² Review of J.Th. Büser, *Vijftig jaren terug. Herinneringen uit mijn militaire leven vóór, bij en na Nederlands herstelling in 1813* (Deventer 1863) and W.P. d'Auzon de Boisminart, *Herinneringen van een oud-officier uit het tijdvak van 1793 tot en met 1815. In verband met de viering van het halve eeuwgetijde der herstelling van Nederlands onafhankelijkheid* (Amsterdam 1863), *VL* (1864:1-4) 23-27.

²³ Peter Fritzsche, 'Specters of history: on nostalgia, exile and modernity', *American Historical Review* 106 (2001) 1587-1618; Peter Fritzsche, 'The case of modern memory', *The journal of modern history* 73 (2001) 87-117; Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the present. Modern time and the melancholy of history* (Cambridge/London 2004). Also: Jeroen Blaak and Arianne Baggerman, 'Reizigers in de tijd. 19^{de}-eeuwse autobiografen en hun strijd tegen het vergeten', *Spiegel Historiae* 40:2/3(maart/april 2005) 156-162.

published *De Twentsche Katoennijverheid – Hare vestiging en Uitbreiding. Herinneringen en wenken* (1888).²⁴ Exactly because he kept a low profile, Stork offered an excellent history of the Dutch industry in the nineteenth century. Conversely, an autobiographer who did not forget his own personality, was bound to receive negative reviews. This was the case with Mary Seacole who, according to the critic of *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen*, had written a bit too much about herself. This marginal comment pales into insignificance when compared to the negative reactions regarding the man who today is regarded as the founder of the autobiographical genre: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Not surprisingly, a comparison in 1853 between *Les Confessions* (1782-1789) and a translation of *Lebensbeschreibung verfasst von ihm selber* (1851) by Claus Harms turned out in favour of the last one. Whereas the German theologian Harms had concentrated on his ‘external life’, and the developments in his practice as a reverend, Rousseau, according to the critic, was stuck in the ‘unnecessary disclosure of ‘secrecies’’.²⁵ In 1894, according to a critic, the general public’s response to Rousseau was still negative. Driven by vanity, pretensions and insincerity, Rousseau was said to have been obsessed by himself to such an extent that the social reality had faded completely into the background.²⁶ And that was precisely what it was all about: to acquire insights into the contemporary reality in all its aspects.

The historical value of memories got lost when the autobiographer put himself too much into prominence. Problems also occurred when the writer was too obviously involved in the history he described. Such was the case with the reverend P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, who published *La crise religieuse en Hollande. Souvenirs et impressions* (1860). A theologian of the moral and spiritual revival, Chantepie had been subjected to criticism from colleagues, which, according to critics, had made him write down a very biased ‘apologie personnelle’. Consequently, the critic of *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* strongly advised readers who wanted to take note of the contemporary theological conflict against consulting ‘mister Chantepie as an historian’.²⁷ However, people who were not prone to vanity and bias would, according to critics, be perfectly capable of providing information on a certain period and context. Here, perhaps, lay a special task for women. With regard to Mary Seacole’s autobiography we learnt that she was praised as a woman with a ‘candid heart and sound judgment’, who had simply written down what she had seen. This line of reasoning we also find in a review of Harriet Martineau’s *Autobiography* (1877). Since ‘a woman is excluded from the social benefits men tend to derive from their hypocrisy’, women were more direct, according to theologian and man of letters, Allard Pierson in 1878. As a woman, writer and sociologist Martineau had been a liberating force in society and as a woman she offered the reader a good history of the English social life in the first half of the nineteenth century.²⁸

This reception of Seacole and Martineau possibly supports the proposition posed by the American historiographer Bonnie Smith, who assigns a crucial role to women in the thematic and chronological development of professional historiography from 1900. According to Smith, this development had been prepared during the nineteenth century from the margin by ‘amateurs’: women who, whether or not as hacks, concentrated on documenting the own time, which under the influence of wars and revolutions would have been experienced as traumatic. This documentation was, according to Smith, expressed in memoirs, travel reports,

²⁴ P.N. Muller, ‘C.T. Stork’, *De Gids* (1888:1) 409-424.

²⁵ Review of *Levensbeschrijving van Dr. Claus Harms, door hem zelve meegedeeld, met welgelijkt portret* (Alkmaar 1852) by J.H.S., *VL* (1853:1) 535-539.

²⁶ Review S.A. Naber, *Vier tijdgenooten*. This reception may answer Phyllis Grosskurth’s question, ‘Where was Rousseau’ in: George P. Landow, *Approaches to Victorian autobiography* (Ohio 1978) 26-38. Also: Baggerman, ‘Autobiography and family memory in the nineteenth century’.

²⁷ Review P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, *La crise religieuse en Hollande. Souvenirs et impressions* (Leiden 1860), *VL* (1861:1-3) 289-393.

²⁸ A. Pierson, ‘Harriet Martineau’, *De Gids* (1878:3) 1-38.

historical novels and other genres which due to historical professionalization were banned from the historical discipline.²⁹ My corpus certainly does not show that most nineteenth century's autobiographies were published by women; it consists mainly of life stories written by men. What these men have in common with the women is that they were not schooled as historians and wrote down their lives as eyewitnesses. In this sense I think that Smith's concept 'amateurs' is also applicable to men who published their autobiographies. After all, these 'amateurs'(m/f) documented their lives as contemporary history with attention to socio-economic and mental-cultural themes which were not (as yet) subject of historical studies at the universities.

Looking for realism

The commentary of critics of autobiographies on regular historiography might indicate a gap between the current-historical interest of the reading public and the historical discipline. Dutch professional historians, after all, were particularly interested in the seventeenth century. Moreover, during the nineteenth century they increasingly used 'the nation' as framework for historiography. This resulted in a thematic emphasis on political subjects and developments. Maria Grever pointed out that people who were technically no citizens of the nation, like women, partly due to that fact disappeared from history.³⁰ The same possibly applies to other groups and their experiences. Peter Fritzsche stated that after 1789 people recognized themselves and each other as participants in a new time. Consequently, they began to regard and distinguish themselves as historical subjects. As such, they had a need for an exchange of experiences. The professionalizing historiography was probably not the most suitable medium for this purpose. Concentrating on national political developments in the far past, this historiography left Fritzsche's new historical subjects – such as soldiers, businessmen, missionaries, clergymen etc. – empty-handed.

Anyone who, around the middle of the nineteenth century, wanted to obtain information on contemporary history could, of course, consult the increasing number of journals. Next to book reviews, these provided articles and commentaries on political, scientific, religious, literary, social and economic developments. There appears, however, to have been less space for personal experiences. Neither were these to be found in newspapers which were mainly oriented towards (opinions on) political and economic topical matters.³¹ Although the abolition in 1869 of the 'dagbladzegel' – a tax on size and circulation of papers – led to a more extensive coverage, this mainly concerned all aspects of the daily news.³² Retrospectives of past days and years, therefore, will not have been likely subjects. Also, newspaper journalism was characterized by a rather businesslike style. While in England and America new journalistic forms as social reports, interviews with eyewitnesses and news reports written from a personal perspective came up, in Dutch journalism these did not show up until 1900.³³ Before that time, these forms could be found in illustrated magazines such as *Eigen Haard* (1875), *Wereldkroniek* (1894), *Woord en Beeld* (1896), *Het Leven* (1906) en *Panoramam* (1913), but reports in these periodicals referred to either the

²⁹ Bonnie Smith, *The gender of history. Men, women, and historical practice* (Cambridge/Londen 1998). For the Netherlands: Maria Grever, *Strijd tegen de stilte. Johanna Naber (1859-1941) en de vrouwenstem in geschiedenis* (Hilversum 1994), particularly chapter 3: "Het vrouwelijk verstand is van nature partijdig". Sekse, feminisme en de professionalisering van de Nederlandse geschiedbeoefening?

³⁰ Grever, *Strijd tegen de stilte* 105-106.

³¹ Maarten Schneider with Joan Hemels, *De Nederlandse krant 1618-1978. Van 'nieuwstydyinghe' tot dagblad* (4^e, revised edition. Baarn 1979); Huub Wijfjes, *Journalistiek in Nederland 1850-2000. Beroep, cultuur en organisatie* (Amsterdam 2004).

³² Wijfjes, *Journalistiek in Nederland* 39.

³³ *Ibidem* 30-33, 58-62.

world of art and culture or the direct news.³⁴ Non-illustrated journals contained mainly general opinions on current questions and fictional contributions. Professional historians concentrated on political developments in the distant past. So in all these media there appears to have been few opportunities for realistic personal stories about contemporary history. These opportunities did exist within the novel, but, in my opinion, it was the low status of the genre and the negative associations with literary realism which made the autobiography successful where the novel failed.

Far into the nineteenth century the novel was weighed down with a bad image. Novels were supposed to be addictive, to lead to immorality or unrealistic romantic expectations about life, resulting in discontent, laziness and depressions.³⁵ An important factor in the discussion about the status of the novel was the relation between fact and fiction, with 'history' always being regarded as superior to 'fabrication'.³⁶ Consequently, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the historical novel was highly appreciated, but realistic novels about contemporary life were to many critics beyond the limit.³⁷ With reference to Eugène Sue's serial novel *Les mystères de Paris*, about the dregs of Paris society, a Dutch critic stated in 1843 that daily reality did not belong in novels.³⁸ Even a progressive critic like Conrad Busken Huet (1826-1886) repudiated the realism of Sue and other French writers like Balzac and Flaubert; literature should be more than a simple portrayal of reality.³⁹ Less progressive critics, as well, expected from novels an 'idealised realism'. They applauded realistic figures and images, but at the same time felt that the commonplace should not be enlarged upon and that good should triumph over bad. 'One can, once in a while, for curiosity's sake, read a work which vividly pictures real life, but it is preferable to return as soon as possible to something which really captivates us and transports us to an imaginary, more beautiful life,' according to a critic in 1880.⁴⁰

Toos Streng, historic-literary researcher, concluded that up to the 1880s, Dutch critics failed to reconcile realism and idealism within the conception of the novel. Realism was always associated with French novels, which supposedly encouraged lawlessness, materialism and atheism. At the same time, critics wrote constantly about the 'realistic spirit of the age', with a need for contemporary stories which might offer guidance in the transitional period after 1848.⁴¹ The negative press concerning realism prevented the novel from fulfilling this need, but the autobiography might. These books, after all, had been written by eyewitnesses,

³⁴ Ibidem 42-43.

³⁵ Marita Mathijssen, 'Geschreven met het vergrootglas' in: idem, *Nederlandse literatuur in de romantiek 1820-1880* (Nijmegen 2004) 129-134.

³⁶ Willem van den Berg, 'Laveren tussen Huet en Heidegger. De discussie over het zedelijk nut en nadeel van een literaire parvenu' in: Klaus Beekman, Marita Mathijssen and George Vis (eds.), *Een bedachtzame beeldenstorm. Beschouwingen over de letterkunde van de achttiende en negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam 1999) 293-311.

³⁷ Pam Morris, *Realism* (Londen/New York 2003); Margaretha H. Schenkeveld, 'Vormen van realisme' in: W. van den Berg and P. van Zonneveld ed., *Nederlandse literatuur van de negentiende eeuw. Twaalf verkenningen* (Utrecht 1986) 226-244; Willem van den Berg, 'Realisme in de Europese letterkunde' in: G.J. van Bork and N. Laan ed., *Twee eeuwen literatuurgeschiedenis. Poëtische opvattingen in de Nederlandse literatuur* (Groningen 1986) 78-84; Marita Mathijssen, 'Realisme in de Nederlandse letterkunde (1840-1880)' in: Van Bork and Laan, *Twee eeuwen literatuurgeschiedenis* 85-90.

³⁸ Cited in Korrie Korevaart, *Ziften en zemelknoopen. Literaire kritiek in de Nederlandse dag-, nieuws- en weekbladen 1814-1848* (Hilversum 2001) 167.

³⁹ Olf Praamstra, *Gezond verstand en goede smaak. De kritieken van Conrad Busken Huet* (Amstelveen 1991).

⁴⁰ Ton Anbeek and Joost Kloek, 'Van idealisme naar naturalisme. Een onderzoek naar de romankritiek tussen 1879 en 1887', *De Negentiende Eeuw* 5:1 (1981) 3-30, 15. Also Ton Anbeek and J.J. Kloek, *Literatuur in verandering. Voorbeelden van de vernieuwing in het proza tussen 1879 en 1887* (Den Haag 1981); Ton Anbeek, *De naturalistische roman in Nederland* (Amsterdam 1982).

⁴¹ Toos Streng, 'Realisme' in *de kunst- en literatuurbeschouwing in Nederland tot 1875* (Amsterdam 1995) 215-216.

which for most critics was sufficient guarantee for reliability and historical truth. Consequently, many critics preferred the facts of the autobiography to the fiction of the novel. Military historian and critic W.J. Knoop, for instance, preferred the memoirs (1887) of L.J.H. Timmermans, major in the Dutch-Indian army, to the much-discussed anti-colonial novel *Max Havelaar* (1860) by Multatuli:

Timmermans (...) was *dramatis persona*; everything he describes he has seen and heard; his simple story shows the unmistakable signs of deep conviction, of nature, of truth; he captivates the reader, far more than the splendid prose of the Max Havelaar, where one involuntarily asks oneself: 'Did this really happen that way, or is it invented or strongly exaggerated?'⁴²

Because the information from autobiographers was true, critics felt that, in the discussion about topical issues, autobiographies were more valuable than novels. Contrasting with the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), critics presented the Dutch translation of *Narrative of William W. Brown, an American slave written by himself* (1850) as an factual account. At the same time, autobiographies compared favourably with sermons and general discussions on current issues, as they were written by people with first-hand experience. That is why P.N. Muller, in the matter of the freedom of trade, praised the before-mentioned autobiography by C.T. Stork. These memories of an industrialist who was well acquainted with 'big changes in government views' supported most strongly the plea for more freedom of trade:

For the positive results of this [freedom of trade, mh] are not argued in the so often challenged scientific oracular utterances, but proved by the eminent success of a man who, solely thanks to that unrestricted freedom, has risen to such heights. And that is exactly why this work deserves the attention of all those who, in the jungle of conflicting opinions and assurances of capable men from both sides, cannot find their way to the truth. Because facts prove, whereas words only claim.⁴³

Actually, this concerns 'bookish knowledge' as opposed to 'knowledge by experience' and critics seem to appreciate stories of experience by all kinds of people.⁴⁴ No matter whether they were witnesses of important historical events or of topical issues. With their testimonies they could shed more light on certain matters from the (recent) past and, next to novels and sermons or general reviews, contribute to the public discussion.

This conception of an autobiography probably offered great possibilities to all kinds of 'amateurs' and might possibly explain the often reputed 'democratic potential' of the autobiographical genre.⁴⁵ This refers to the various social, ethnic and gender background of autobiographers. The question is, however, how it is possible that so many different people had access to this genre. The American historian Michael Mascuch tried to find the answer in developments on the book market. With regard to the English situation he pointed out that in the eighteenth century, thanks to increasing literacy and dropping paper-prices, books became accessible to an increasing number of people: readers as well as writers. According to him,

⁴² W.J. Knoop, 'Een officier van ons Indisch leger', *De Tijdspiegel* (1888:2) 276-312.

⁴³ Muller, 'C.T. Stork' 413.

⁴⁴ For historicizing of the concept 'experience', see Joan Scott, 'The evidence of experience', *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991) 773-797.

⁴⁵ Bonnie J. Gunzenhauser calls the autobiography the most democratic genre in her 'Autobiography: general survey' in: Jolly, *Encyclopedia of life writing*. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, as well, see in the eighteenth century a 'democratization of the institution of life writing'. Smith and Watson, *Reading autobiography* 97.

this situation is at the base of autobiographical writing and the individual self-image.⁴⁶ Bonnie Smith also interpreted the work of ‘amateurs’ against the background of an expanding book market, where money was to be earned with contemporary history in appealing genres such as memoirs.

In the Netherlands, the book market grew exponentially from 1850.⁴⁷ Literacy increased considerably and reading was also stimulated by the separation between working hours and free time. Consequently, the potential market for publishers and booksellers became larger. The average book price decreased, due to competition between publishers. Printed matter became still cheaper when from the sixties fast printing presses could print lots of copies and in the eighties a cheaper kind of paper (based on wood pulp) was invented and used. This developments on the book market generated room for new genres and writers. Room which, in my view, was partly filled by contemporary, realistic and topical first-hand stories which could not be classified under the idealistic conception of the novel, nor under journalism and historiography.

Personality and authenticity

While from 1850 most autobiographies were praised for being useful and interesting reports from eyewitnesses and people with first-hand experience on a wide range of topical-historical subjects, during the 1880s the historical value of autobiographies began to be questioned. One of the first who queried the veracity of autobiographical memories was Allard Pierson. He wondered what importance should be attached to the information on Napoleon in the *Mémoires de Madame de Rémusat* (1880):

...these Mémoires, actually, show us nothing new except this one fact that the man Napoleon was so low a character. Was that really a fact? This we would like to know and, formally, this is the same question as: are these Mémoires in all respects those from an eyewitness?⁴⁸

Pierson thus argued in favour of memoirs ‘with conclusive guarantees of authenticity’, so that the reader could be certain that he was reading an authentic eyewitness report. With regard to a new volume *Mémoires de Madame de Rémusat* (1882) Pierson stated that, because of the bias of many an autobiographer, ‘purely from a historical point of view’ there was some objection to these kind of books.⁴⁹ After reading the *Mémoires du Prince de Talleyrand* (1891) the liberal politician and critic W.H. de Beaufort in 1891 reached the conclusion that memoirs did not so much serve as ‘source for history’, but rather as an ‘entrance to the person of the writer’.⁵⁰

This turn in the reception of autobiographies – from objective truth to subjective testimony – fits with the increasing doubts about the reliability of sensory perceptions. During the fin de siècle, within and without scientific circles the significance of positivistic epistemology was queried. No direct knowledge of the reality was thought to be possible, for

⁴⁶ Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the individualist self: autobiography and self-identity in England, 1591-1791* (Cambridge 1997).

⁴⁷ Van Delft and De Wolf (eds.), *Bibliopolis*; J.J. Kloek, ‘Reconsidering the reading revolution: the thesis of the ‘reading revolution’ and a Dutch bookseller’s clientele around 1800’, *Poetics* 26 (1999) 289-307; Dick van Lente, ‘Drukpersen, papiermachines en lezerspubliek: de verhouding tussen technische en culturele ontwikkelingen in Nederland in de negentiende eeuw’ in: Theo Bijvoet, Paul Koopman, Lisa Kuitert and Garrelt Verhoeven (eds.), *Bladeren in andermans hoofd. Over lezers en leescultuur* (Nijmegen 1996) 246-263.

⁴⁸ Review of *Mémoires de Mme de Rémusat 1802-1809* (Parijs 1880) by A. Pierson, *De Tijdspiegel* (1880:1) 337-343.

⁴⁹ Review of *Mémoires de Mme de Rémusat* by Pierson, *De Tijdspiegel* (1882:1) 263-264.

⁵⁰ W.H. de Beaufort, ‘Talleyrand’s gedenkschriften’, *De Gids* (1891:2) 330-343.

the observation was always coloured by the observer and his perception. The upshot was that it became increasingly difficult to discern fact from fiction.⁵¹ This change in mentality resulted in a new expectation concerning autobiographies and autobiographers. Attention shifted from the context of the autobiographer to his own personality, and the interest of critics focused mainly on the personality of public persons.

An interesting case in this context is a review of *Monsieur Guizot dans sa famille et avec ses amis, 1787-1874* (1880). W.H. de Beaufort was full of praise about this biography, that was written by a daughter of the French statesman Guizot. The critic saw this book as an addition to the memoirs written by Guizot himself. These memoirs related to the political career of Guizot and showed us 'the person of the writer only as far as his achievements were concerned'. This was in accordance with the historical value of memoirs. To show how Guizot came to his actions and what were his guiding principles in life, Madame de Witt-Guizot described her father's life indoors. The result, according to the critic, was of great importance:

For the history of France these are irrelevant matters; the minister's public documents and speeches will teach us more on that front than confidential outpourings about domestic and personal matters. But who would not be glad to steal a glance at the mind of men who have proved themselves so much more capable and daring than their contemporaries? The domestic life complements the political, the man explains the statesman.⁵²

Here De Beaufort expresses a new perspective on life histories. He shows an interest in the private personality of a public person.⁵³ In this case, this private person is not described by the autobiographer himself, but, increasingly, the autobiographer is expected to outline his own personality. If he fails to do so, reactions are negative. This is, for instance, the case with the review of the long-awaited *Memoiren* (1884) of Heinrich Heine, typified by a critic as the story of 'a weary sufferer, and a tired and tiring, forced and long-winded tone characterizes more than one page of these Memoiren'. Who really wanted to know Heine had better read *Les derniers jours de Henri Heine* by Camille Selden, or *Mme Jaubert's souvenirs: letters et correspondences*.⁵⁴

Perhaps the shift of interest towards the personality of the writer was not, as yet, wholly in keeping with the 'objective' task which autobiographers set themselves, or perhaps they were still too diffident to write about themselves. Others evidently were not. Relatives and intimate friends published their auto/biographical memories about these famous people. From the eighties, books like *Erinnerungen an Richard Wagner* (1883) by Hans von Wolzogen and *Alfred de Musset intime. Souvenirs de sa gouvernante* by Adèle Martellet (1906) were highly praised by the critics.⁵⁵ By profiting from the fame of relatives or friends some 'amateurs' in the fin de siècle might still secure a place within the autobiographical genre. With their own life stories these possibilities had become limited. Eyewitnesses

⁵¹ Mary Kemperink, *Het verloren paradijs. De literatuur en de cultuur van het Nederlandse fin de siècle* (Amsterdam 2001). Particularly chapter 6: 'Een koningin met een ijzeren kroon: de wetenschap'.

⁵² Review of Mme de Witt-Guizot, *Monsieur Guizot dans sa famille et avec ses amis (1787-1874)* (Parijs 1880) by W.H. de Beaufort, *De Gids* (1881:1) 617-622.

⁵³ See Jan Fontijn, *De Nederlandse schrijversbiografie* (Utrecht 1992), chapter 1: 'Geschiedenis van de biografie'.

⁵⁴ Review of *Heinrich Heine's Memoiren und neugesammelte Gedichte, Prosa und Briefe* (Hamburg 1884), *De Gids* (1884:3) 168-173.

⁵⁵ Henri Viotta, 'Richard Wagner's nalatenschap', *De Gids* (1886:2) 158-168; Reviews of Adèle Colin Martellet, *Alfred de Musset intime. Souvenirs de sa gouvernante* (Parijs 1906), *De Gids* (1906:3) 558-559.

themselves were generally not famous, they were no longer taken at their word and, in most cases, they did not have any literary talent.

But at the end of the nineteenth century, literary talent became increasingly important for autobiographers. Realising that an autobiography could never contain the objective truth and was, consequently, no 'history', critics gradually received the autobiography as a literary genre. This coincided with the distinction between biography and autobiography. According to Keith Rinehart, this had occurred in England in the eighties, but in the Dutch journals I researched, the first time a line was drawn between the two genres was in a review in 1896.⁵⁶ With reference to *Jan Willem's Levensboek* (1896), an autobiographical novel by the Dutch writer and playwright Hendrik Jan Schimmel (1823-1906), an anonymous critic from *De Gids* stated that the historical genre of the biography should comply with the demands for actual truth, while with the literary genre of the autobiography the important thing was 'genuineness'. Here, on the contrary, fabrication and stylising of the life story were required. Remarkable is that, at the same time, the critic set the autobiography against 'literature': not because an autobiography knew no fabrication, but because of the 'force of truth' which was effected by literary means.⁵⁷ Truth, here, stands for original, new and authentic.

With this phrasing the critic appears to be in keeping with the pursuit of authenticity which was the coordinating theme of new social and literary groupings during the fin de siècle. With notions like authenticity, unconventionality and truth, the literary Eighties movement and the radical liberals of Young Amsterdam tried to give modern culture a new foundation.⁵⁸ Rational, positivistic knowledge did not answer the 'real' vital questions. These required an other kind of knowledge, a 'wisdom which is focused on the spirit, the soul' according to Mary Kemperink.⁵⁹ Besides the work of the authors involved in the Eighties movement, such introspective wisdom was probably also to be found in autobiography. That is to say, in the type of autobiography which now has canonical status and can be defined as the authentic life history of a personality written by that person himself.

From this point of view, it is no accident that in 1903 the first Dutch translation of Augustine's *Confessiones* is published. This Church Father had searched his own soul and written a more or less personal life history. Augustine's history of his conversion was not published by one of the Christian publishers, but by the progressive S.L. van Looy. Through the journals *Vragen van den Dag* and *De Nieuwe Gids*, Van Looy had ties with the literary and political avantgarde of that time. In no way did Van Looy refer to the religious subject matter of the book. Instead, in his advertising material he presented *Augustinus' Belijdenissen* (1903) as a book for 'anyone who appreciates an inner spiritual life'. Van Looy put this book on the market as the work of an intellectual, one of the classics of the world literature.⁶⁰ In a review reverend Bronsveld complained about Augustine's transformation from convert to literary classic, but evidently elsewhere the book was well-received: in 1918 a cheap third edition was published.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Keith Rinehart, 'The Victorian approach to autobiography', *Modern Philology* 51(1954) 177-216.

⁵⁷ Review of *Jan Willem's Levensboek*. *Losse bladen verzameld door H.J. Schimmel* (Schiedam 1896), *De Gids* (1896:2) 533-537.

⁵⁸ Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders, *Literatuur en moderniteit in Nederland 1840-1990* (Amsterdam 1996) 105, 22.

⁵⁹ Mary Kemperink, *Het verloren paradijs* 217.

⁶⁰ Prospectus for *Augustinus' Belijdenissen* (1903), Bibliotheek van de Koninklijke Vereniging van het Boekenvak (KVB), Collectie Personalía en Prospectussen (PPA) 465-8; Autumn offer with notice of the second revised edition of *Augustinus' Belijdenissen* (z.j.), KVB, PPA 466-3; Prospectus for *Augustinus' Belijdenissen* (1907), KVB, PPA 466-3.

⁶¹ A.W. Bronsveld, 'Augustinus' Belijdenissen,' *SWV* 1904; Coll. advertisement editions S.L. van Looy (1918), KVB, PPA 468-1.

About that time, the other classic within the autobiographical genre had been thus canonised as well. In 1916 the first Dutch translation of Rousseau's *Confessions* was published, also by a progressive publisher, the socialist Wereldbibliotheek / Maatschappij voor Goede en Goedkope Lectuur. That Rousseau was regarded as an autobiographical standard at that time, becomes clear from a review of the autobiographical novel *Herinneringen van een onafhankelijke vrouw* [Memoirs of an independent woman] (1915). An anonymous critic was convinced that the book covered 'personal feelings and experiences' of Ada Gerlo (pseudonym of Annie Salomons), but according to him the book was a failure because the writer had not as yet reached a clear understanding of herself. Moreover, she lacked the 'completely unpretentious endearing irony' which the critic found in *Les Confessions*. Judging by that standard the critic concluded that Ada Gerlo lacked a 'truly great talent as a novel writer', which made her book sound 'artificial'.⁶² So this 'artificiality' was not caused by the actual unreliability of these memories, but by her mediocre writing talent. This reproach was held against more female writers after the turn of the century. Although their work was widely read, critics' reviews were generally negative. The popular female writers were said not to create 'real' and authentic art, but poor substitutes for the realistic and naturalistic experiments of the avant-garde writers. The commercial success made these female writers the more suspect, in common with their male writing colleagues. From the Eighties movement, the literary vanguard took up a position as writers of literature for a select public.⁶³ The journals selected by me did not belong to this vanguard, but in time the *Gids*-critics in particular appear to have become influenced by the new conceptions of art where originality and authenticity were at the centre. In addition, towards the end of the nineteenth century, literary critic conformed more to the (new) literary theory, resulting in book reviewers being more concerned with aesthetical norms.⁶⁴

The conception of the autobiography as a subjective and authentic history about the development of the writer's own personality very much impeded the opportunities for 'amateurs' (m/f) within the genre. Around 1900, the distinction between biography and autobiography led to only a restricted number of autobiographers being able to meet the literary demands of the critics. From the 1880s, the opportunities for amateurs had already been restricted on account of the interest shifting towards the life histories of public celebrities. These people, as a rule, were no 'ordinary' men and women. From the moment that the historical value of memories was regarded as minimal, the until then so well-beloved reports of eyewitnesses and first-hand authorities disappeared from the field of vision of the critics.

Separate circuits

Neither were, around the turn of the century, historians interested in autobiographical books of eyewitnesses and first-hand authorities. For the professionalization of historiography had been accompanied by a strict separation between literature and historiography. In this process, the genre of the historical novel had been removed from the discipline. Because of the subjective and fictitious elements, the autobiography around 1900 was qualified as an

⁶² Review of Ada Gerlo, *Herinneringen van een onafhankelijke vrouw* (1915), *De Gids* (1915:3) 566-571.

⁶³ Erica van Boven, 'Schrijven als beroep. Willy Corsari (1897-1998): een broodschrijfster met literaire passie' in: *Muzen aan het werk, vrouwenlevens in de kunsten. Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis 23* (Amsterdam 2003) 186-214. Also Erica van Boven, *Een hoofdstuk apart. 'Vrouwenromans' in de literaire kritiek 1898-1930* (Amsterdam 1992).

⁶⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The function of criticism. From The Spectator to post-structuralism* (Londen/New York 1994, oorspr. 1984) 65; C. van Rees, 'How a literary work becomes a masterpiece: on the threefold selection practiced by literary criticism', *Poetics* 12(1983) 397-417; Susanne Janssen, *In het licht van de kritiek. Variaties en patronen in de aandacht van de literatuurkritiek voor auteurs en hun werken* (Hilversum 1994) 23.

unreliable source.⁶⁵ Whereas before that time the critics still saw the reports of eyewitnesses as chronological and thematic additions to the professional historiography, this addition was probably less appreciated at the beginning of the twentieth century. Young historians like Kernkamp and H.Th. Colenbrander (1871-1945) felt that historiography after 1870 had become detached from 'reality' and from 'life'. Consequently, Colenbrander advocated history being written 'by order of the time' and the personality of the writer being put into the historical work. Kernkamp applied himself to a historiography committed to topical issues.⁶⁶ At the same time, these young historians distanced themselves somewhat from the positivism of Fruin and made overtures to literature. Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), as well, set great store by the styling of the historical story, but he rejected an 'aesthetizing emotional history stemming from a literary need, using literary means and aimed at literary effects'.⁶⁷ Primarily, the duty of the historian was to create a faithful image of the past. Noteworthy is the fact that Huizinga, who himself wrote in a literary style, was so keen on the distinction between literature and historiography. According to Tollebeek, this had to do with the competition between the two genres. Around 1930, Huizinga had signalled that between the two fields a 'commercially tinted emotional history' had come into being, which partly consisted of 'vies romancées'.⁶⁸

It is plausible that autobiographies also fell within this commercial category. Thus publisher P.M. Vink, in 1923, presented a series *Romantische Geschiedenis* [Romantic History] which consisted of 'fragments of history, biographies, memoirs etc.'⁶⁹ With this publication, Vink felt he filled a hardworking intellectuals' need for relaxation. Other genres were hardly suitable in this respect: the literary, psychological novel had, 'nine times out of ten, little appeal for one who was looking for relaxation', the reader of historical novels was 'involuntarily making an effort to distinguish fact from fiction' and detective novels contained too much implausibilities. Vink did not mention 'ordinary' history, but other publishers were quick to report that romantic history in the form of autobiographies had nothing to do with 'dull historiography'. Still, reading autobiographical stories would, supposedly, improve the mind. The first volume of Vink's series, a translation of *Yashka: My Life as Peasant, Exile, and Soldier* (New York 1919), was said to inform the intellectual reader on the struggle of the Russian Maria Botchkareva against Bolshevism in 1918. So with her life history Yashka provided a personal background for the world news.

In words and pictures this news had become accessible to an increasing number of people as from 1869 papers and illustrated magazines had become increasingly cheap. According to the publisher A.C. Kruseman, the result was a great interest in background information on the life history of 'the men who play a leading part on the stage of contemporary facts, and whose names are on everyone's lips'. In order to satisfy this interest, Kruseman in 1870 launched *Mannen van beteekenis in onze dagen* [Men of consequence in our days]: a most successful series of biographies with a photographic portrait of each central figure.⁷⁰ Photographs of principal characters from the daily news were also to be found in the illustrated magazines and these, according to the publishers Nijgh & Van Ditmar, had resulted in an insatiable biographical 'inquisitiveness'.⁷¹ The same conclusion was reached by the journalist Rompel, who in 1903 observed that the public was greatly interested in autobiographical stories about the Boer War (1899-1902).

⁶⁵ Grever, *Strijd tegen de stilte*, hoofdstuk 3; Smith, *The gender of history*; Dekker, 'Jacques Presser's heritage' 21.

⁶⁶ Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, chapter 3.

⁶⁷ Idem, chapter 4: 'Huizinga: vernieuwer binnen een cultuurtraditie' 230.

⁶⁸ Ibidem 231.

⁶⁹ Prospectus for the series *Romantische Geschiedenis* (1923), KVB, PPA 422-18.

⁷⁰ Circular on *Mannen van beteekenis in onze dagen* (1871), KVB, PPA 531-2.

⁷¹ Prospectus for *De Staats-hoofden der wereld* (circa 1902), KVB, PPA 507:6.

Rompel went as far as to link this thirst for 'sensation' to a shift within the autobiographical genre. Owing to the fact that Boer leaders like Christiaan de Wet and Paul Kruger had yielded to the pressure of the public which 'hungered for stimulating and exciting stories, now that the nervous tension was still great', neither of the two autobiographers had taken time to 'adequately deal with the great profusion of memories'.⁷² As a result their autobiographies were of little value for historiography. Rompel qualified De Wet, in particular, as a representative of a new generation of autobiographers, because he had given his memories an 'individual, personal character':

He tells the things he has to tell, concisely, bluntly, straightforwardly and sometimes raucously. He outlines them with all the vitality of a fresh memory. He does not provide any background. He does not justify his actions, does not try to explain anything, as he would have done after more careful consideration. (...) He tells the truth, fair and square.⁷³

Rompel's 'new generation' differs completely from the old generation of autobiographers. Those writers were supposed to keep their personalities as much as possible in the background, thus giving full attention to the historical context. Even in 1888 P.N. Muller had stated that:

...the work of a writer who is depicting his own or someone else's life, is of particular importance when he places his image within the framework of his time. (...) Within the framework of their time! Only then could this person give a truthful interpretation and only then did that picture have some impact.⁷⁴

De Wet, according to Rompel, placed 'nothing in the framework of times and situations' and was applauded for that fact. However, according to the journalist, the 'new autobiographies had no longer anything in common with historiography. Judging from Huizinga's reaction to commercial 'emotional history', professional historians probably agreed with Rompel's judgment. Besides a competition between literature and historiography, there is possibly also a rivalry between professional historians and amateurs. Literary critics after the turn of the century hardly paid any attention to these books. About 1900, I think there are two autobiographical circuits to be distinguished. On the one hand, a circuit of literarily sound autobiographies which showed similarities to the modern novels. On the other hand, a commercial circuit of 'emotional history', consisting of all kinds of memories of public persons, reports from eyewitnesses and other people who in one way or another were involved in current world affairs.

This 'emotional history' was probably related to journalism. After the turn of the century, reports and interviews became increasingly common genres in journalism. It was not unusual for journalists to be involved in the publication of autobiographical books. The Crimean-journalist W.H. Russell, for instance, had written an introduction to Mary Seacole's autobiography and the life story of Maria Botchkareva or Yashka had been written down by the Russian-American journalist Isaac Don Levine. Frederik Rompel revised the Dutch edition of Paul Kruger's memoirs (1902), which was distributed by the daily paper *Nieuws van den Dag*. At the same time, association with the commercial and sensation-seeking world of journalism might, in the eyes of professional historians and literary critics, once and for all have undermined the status of the autobiographical genre.

⁷² Frederik Rompel, 'De Wet en Kruger over den onafhankelijkheidsstrijd', *De Gids* (1903:2) 500-522.

⁷³ *Ibidem* 501.

⁷⁴ Muller, 'C.T. Stork'.

From eyewitness to personality: conclusions

A look at the (professional) readers of autobiographies offers a surprising perspective on the autobiographical genre. Unlike contemporary researchers, the nineteenth-century critics defined the autobiography *not* as a life history which first and foremost concerned the personal development. Not the person of the autobiography was subject of the interest of the professional readers, but what he or she had seen, heard and experienced. Consequently, the contemporary disqualification of many autobiographies as unsuccessful variations on a pattern of a nineteenth-century craving for introspection and self-analysis, is unjust.

Moreover, this disqualification disregards the purpose which autobiographies did serve in the nineteenth century: the realistic documentation of contemporary circumstances. In a rapidly changing world, historical examples no longer seemed applicable, but there were few other media which could act as directives in the transitional period one felt oneself to be in during the middle of the nineteenth century. In my view, autobiographies met the readers' need for contemporary, topical stories of experience. This need was not filled by journalism and historiography and did not fit in with the conception of the novel. Publishers probably saw this commercial 'gap in the market' between journalism, historiography and literature, judging from the increasing number of published autobiographies in the Netherlands. The expanding book market apparently offered all sorts of people the opportunity to make themselves known as autobiographers. Male or female, black or white, famous or unknown, all kinds of people could, in the eyes of the critics, contribute to the discussion on topical issues and the contemporary history in all its aspects.

Initially, these eyewitnesses were taken at their word. However, the growing scepticism with regard to the reliability of autobiographical memories and the distinction between the historical biography and the literary autobiography resulted in a change with far-reaching consequences for the 'democratic potential' of the genre. From the 1880s, critics reviewed mainly autobiographies from persons who were already well-known to the public, or autobiographies which were supposed to have (certain) literary qualities. At the same time, historians were busy professionalizing their own discipline, among other things by defining the boundaries with non-scientific genres such as the historical novel and the autobiography. When, after 1900, professional historians themselves began working at contemporary, socio-economic and cultural history in a readable form, autobiographies could no longer serve as supplement to the professional history. Bonnie Smith rightly concluded that, although the thematic and chronological expansion of the historical discipline had been prepared by 'amateurs', these amateurs ultimately never became part of the field.⁷⁵

Around the turn of the century, the value of most autobiographies was just the commercial value. And commercial value they had, judging by the need for memoirs with the reading public that journalist Rompel observed, and the continuously large number of published autobiographies in the Netherlands. At the same time, associations with journalism and the commercial success of these books might have led to a lower appreciation of autobiographies and autobiographers. Judging by the development in the reception of autobiographies by professional readers between 1850 and 1918, it seems impossible that after 1900 a book like *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* might have been applauded as an interesting history. However important the anonymous critic may have found her work in 1858, after his review the name of Mary Seacole is no more to be found among those of the fathers of historiography. But 'Mother Seacole' lives on in circles of

⁷⁵ Smith, *The gender of history*, hoofdstuk 9: 'Modernism, relativism and everyday life'.

'Black History' and in 1988 her autobiography was admitted in *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*.⁷⁶

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⁷⁶ The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers: Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands, with an introduction by William L. Andrews (New York/Oxford 1988). Until recently, the Dutch translation of Mary Seacole's autobiography was nowhere to be found in Dutch or international libraries. In 2006, Corry Staring-Derks, a teacher in nursing, discovered one exemplar of the book in the National Library of St. Petersburg. She published a facsimile edition of the book in 2007. Corry Staring-Derks (ed.), *Mary Seacole's Avonturen in de West en in de Krim, of het belangwekkende leven eener heldin der barmhartigheid, door haar zelve verhaald* (Nijmegen 2007).