

Review

Hans Renders and David Veltman (eds)

[in collaboration with Madelon Nanninga-Franssen]:

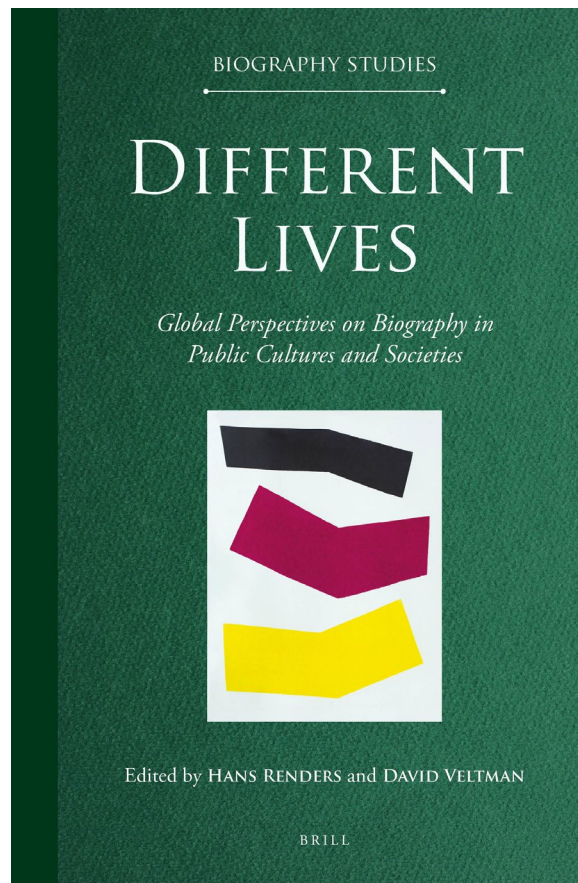
***Different lives: Global perspectives on biography in
public cultures and societies***

[Biography Studies, Biography Institute, volume 1]

Leiden: Brill, 2020. 278 p.

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Reviewed by Marlene Kadar



Hans Renders and David Veltman – both at the University of Groningen – have collected 18 essays by diverse scholars and writers, including well-known biographers, each of whom focuses on one biographical tradition or another. Not all countries are represented, of course, but an attempt has been made to engage with many: Iceland, Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands; Spain and Italy; Australia and New Zealand; Canada and the United States; the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic; China and Iran. A central assumption of the book is that we learn from difference and that historical events and crises shape the genre of biography, while also preserving a biographical impulse, a need to tell the story of a memorable subject.

The contributions in this collection grew out of an international conference held at the University of Groningen in September of 2018 where one of the editors, Hans Renders, teaches and is director of the highly reputable Biography Institute. An important collection, *Different lives* is also the first volume in a new English-language series, Biography Studies. As the well-known biographer Nigel Hamilton writes, “Biography, for its part, is a hardy plant; it has survived thousands of years in the Western world, in differing cultural manifestations and against many headwinds, from censorship to the arrests and executions of its practitioners” (19). As many authors in this collection imply, the biographical impulse can also fulfil a corrective impulse and challenge norms that may irritate the culture and the genre. The prominent Dutch biographer and scholar Elsbeth Etty stresses the generic chasm that might deflect from “high” biography (“scholarly sound” according to Renders), but it may also provide a corrective commentary on the idea that “truth is relative.” At the same time as Etty defends the good, the ethical and the revolutionary, she underlines that the “more painful the revelations” in biographical accounts, the “greater the need for verifiability” (215). I am not sure that this claim is itself verifiable, but I do concur that the victims of history benefit when the story about their lives is based in what the majority call “fact.” In my view, Etty has always been on the right side of history and continues to press against our assumptions of both history and fact through the supple generic contexts of biography.

Nowhere is the link between biography and history more crucial than in the multilingual example of “La pauvre Belgique,” a phrase taken from Charles Baudelaire, as Veltman explains (57). Belgium is a country with three “official” language groups, or “pillars” (French, Dutch, German), and a complicated political history that reflects the contours of traumatic memory in rich ways. Veltman spells out that the two “main” language groups in Belgium – French and Dutch – vied for the “correct” remembrance of the Second World War, and their remembrances have shaped a biographical tradition in Belgium that is late-blooming and complex. The Walloons and French-speaking culture(s) and the Flemish and

Dutch-speaking culture(s) have long-lived prejudices about each other: these prejudices construct biographical events and, in some cases, delay them and their visions for a democratic nation. The Walloons, for example, consider themselves the “moral victors of the war” (57); they believe the Flemish collaborated with the Nazis. Veltman demonstrates how such prejudices are reflected in the tradition of biography in Belgium. As the title of the collection implies: different lives focus differently. Focusing on the ideological consequences of pillarization continues to construct and deconstruct biography (and life writing) to this day. Antisemitism is still a news story in Belgium, and its influence on the subject of biography is unmistakable.

This book primarily samples Western European and North American traditions of biography-making, but it also invites comparisons with radically different traditions such as China’s and Iran’s, and in one interesting case, the Danish biographical tradition is analyzed by Joanna Cymbrykiewicz at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. Cymbrykiewicz has written about an agenda or a “pretext” that underwrites well-known subjects, and also the “undeservedly forgotten” ones who emerged in the biographical boom of the 1980s. About the latter, this reader, at least, is keen to know more. Cymbrykiewicz mentions, for example, women’s biographies, such as those written by Sidsel Eriksen and Birgitte Possing (206). The paucity of women’s biographies is a repeated theme, as illustrated in the graph detailing gender in Canadian biography by Daniel R. Meister (36).

Indeed, as the author of “Hidden and forbidden issues in works of Iranian biography,” Sahar Vahdati Hosseinian, writes: “to get a better understanding of differences between societies, biographical works should be studied comparatively” (147). Extreme social measures that construct womanhood in Iran also construct its biographical themes and constrain its reception. Iranian biography vies with biographies that either celebrate women’s independent histories, or ply historical and micro-historical story lines in order to reveal “progress,” a steadfast motivating force in biographical motifs.

Comparison is an obvious methodological aim of *Different lives*. On occasion, as in the case of New Zealand, biography is discussed alongside autobiography, and in other essays the authors cannot avoid referring to memoir because the generic differences in life writing traditions may soften or blend in exciting or complicated ways. Doug Munro makes the point that sporting auto/biographies – Munro uses the virgule – are favoured by New Zealanders. He insinuates that auto/biography is used in the sports genres because athletes do not always have the writing skills to carry out the story of their lives. The extent to which a coauthor is involved in the telling is not easy to measure, as in the case of *The Kiwi pair* (2016) where authorship looks like this: “Hamish Bond and Eric

Murray with Scotty Stevenson.”¹ Munro rightly asks: what does “with” really mean? He later speaks of group biography, which includes the history of great white men but is also adapted to include Maori, women, and other social groups.

Certainly representation is an issue for biography studies in every language and every country: consider Spanish examples during Franco’s fascist era, as indicated by María Jesús González; or, the omissions in the “historical biography” of Canada’s First Nations as a result of the long arm of colonization as explained by Daniel R. Meister; the extreme silences in Iranian biography as mentioned above; the other extreme political influence of apartheid in South Africa, as Lindie Koorts explains.

Koorts talks about biography in her country as “discourse,” and successfully posits that “the majority of South African lives are simply not that well-documented” (41) given the country’s history of extreme racial inequalities and obvious relations of power that mostly served white men. To her credit, Koorts aims to defy power relations that continued to ossify in the period of nation building in South Africa. Because of the country’s post-apartheid anxieties, Koorts admits that there is variation in the quality of biographies written. She notes: “the space for dispassionate biography is extremely limited” (56). In a country where inequalities linger, she writes, the well-documented and well-preserved lives are elite lives, mostly white, reflecting “the preoccupations” of a white state (42). Koorts suggests that since 1994, great white men’s lives have been replaced by great black men’s lives – leaving room for innovation in biography in the current period.²

As important as representation is to most of the authors, the relationship between history and biography is also key to the idea of “different lives.” There is some debate about the relationship between the life writing genres and historical biography especially in the Canadian context. According to Meister, there is a continuing need for biography to illuminate past heinous injustices but also a need to address the wide-ranging consequences of these injustices in the current period. He lands on the example of the enormous prejudice settler cultures imposed on Canada’s First Nations and suggests that biography does not always serve Indigenous women, men, or their communities either in the past or in the present. In spite of this reservation, Meister still hopes for biography’s power to achieve “positive change” (40) – a vague term that begs for further comment in Meister’s next work.

¹ Without being able to verify the title in a library during the current lockdown due to the pandemic, internet sources indicate that the title is *The Kiwi pair*, not *Kiwi pair*. The latter is cited in a footnote (150) and the bibliography (233) in Renders and Veltman (2020).

² Unfortunately, Lindie Koorts’ own biography is missing from the “Notes on contributors” (ix-xv).

In the case of Chinese biography, there are two essays whose political views differ. Liu Jialin reports that since China's Reform and Opening-Up in 1978, biography and theoretical studies of biography have been revived (229), whereas Kerry Brown notes that in spite of the "immense achievement of Sima Qian over two thousand years ago" (97), there are "significant cultural and political restraints" (97) that have constrained the shape and the subject of stories about individuals within the People's Republic of China. As in other essays, language and source are significant to Brown's analysis, choosing to treat only biographies where the original is written in Chinese. Such diverse interesting views as Liu Jialin's and Kerry Brown's invite further consideration.

Language and nationality intersect often in *Different lives*. This leads us to understand that this is an enterprising project and, at times, overwhelming in its cultural details. Biography itself is, as theorists and critics like to say, "a notoriously difficult form to define" (Hoberman 2001, 109), and here we have the evidence. Biographical truth itself is a moving target and although I prefer to believe Richard Holme's view that biography is an act of friendship, a "handshake across time, across cultures, across identities" (2), the essays in this collection force us to reconsider the adage and its contradictions, especially its relationship to nationalism and nation building. Although Holmes is speaking specifically of the West and "menacing" pressures in America in particular, Nigel Hamilton has put it succinctly: "biography ... was and remains the natural outcome of man's desire to commemorate the lives of the dead, and even the living – but its *interpretation* of those lives has always been constrained by the pressures of the society in which such commemoration and interpretation take place" (18). The essays in *Different lives* are salient and compelling exactly because of constraints and the variety of forms in which they are expressed socially, culturally, and eventually in the story of a life.

References

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About the reviewer

Marlene Kadar is a professor in the Department of Humanities and the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at York University in Toronto (Ontario, Canada). She is founding editor of the Life Writing Series at Wilfrid Laurier

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