

Review

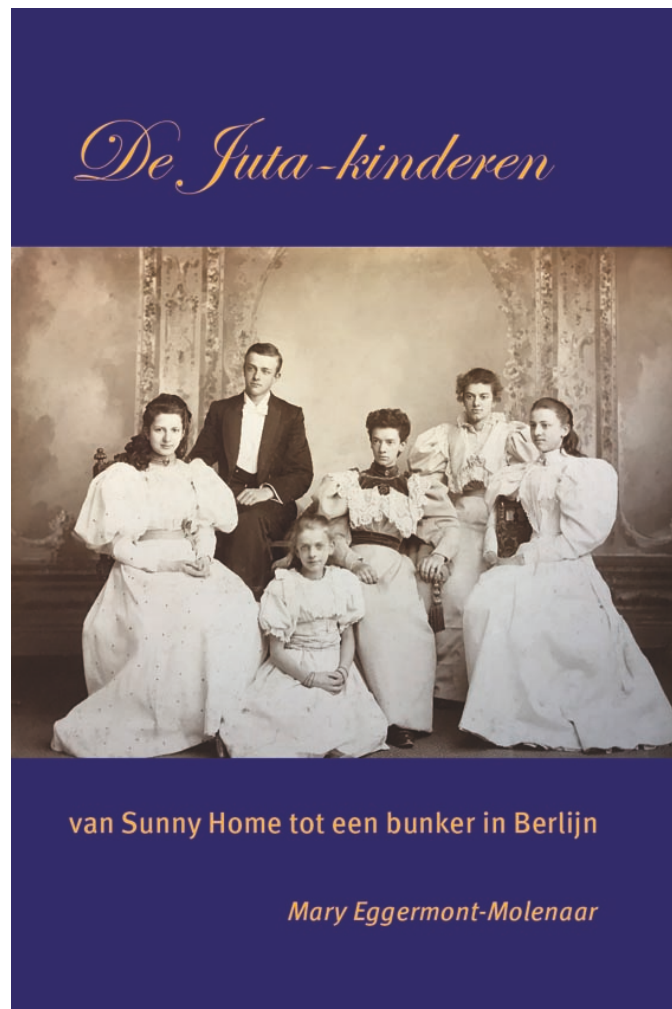
Mary Eggermont-Molenaar:

De Juta-kinderen van Sunny Home tot een bunker in Berlijn

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Reviewed by Paul Knevel



Popular family history in practice

“What does this book tell us about public history?” With this question posed by the editor of the *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* in mind, I, a public historian, started reading Mary Eggermont-Molenaar’s *De Juta-kinderen*. Soon the question itself proved to be an elusive one. Public history is often seen as the practice of history outside of academia, or in the words of Lyle Dick (2009), as the “historical practice [carried out] of, by, and for the people” (7). What then has Eggermont-Molenaar’s book to do with public history?

Clearly, the book does not fit into the traditional academic historical practice, with its problem-driven approach, its historiographical perspective, and its academic transparency, demonstrated in footnotes and discussions with other historians. Eggermont-Molenaar just wants to write about the lives of a 19th century Dutch merchant and his eight children (seven daughters and one son). During the research for a former book, she stumbled upon some remarkable stories about the family of the first owner of Sunny Home, the wooden house in Leiden in which Eva Biesheuvel and her husband, the well-known Dutch writer Maarten Biesheuvel, had lived for almost twenty years. Why not tell their stories? ‘Why not also narrate about the wool trader Juta, his children, a single grandchild, limited to their (school) work and their vicissitudes? These stories rollercoaster on the plagues, tuberculosis and world wars of the first half of the twentieth century.’ (“*Waarom ook niet verhalen over de wolhandelaar Juta, zijn kinderen, een enkel kleinkind, dit beperkt tot hun (school)werk en hun wederwaardigheden? Deze verhalen rollercoasteren over de plagen, tuberculose en wereldoorlogen, van de eerste helft van de twintigste eeuw*” [10]).

But does this starting point alone make the book an example of an historical practice outside of academia? As an author, Eggermont-Molenaar can hardly be defined as an academic outsider: working as a translator in Canada and being the author of eleven history books in English and Dutch, she is clearly a professional in her own right. Being the prolific writer she is, her *De Juta-kinderen* is nonetheless in style and content miles away from the popular history books we know so well from non-fiction bestsellers-lists, the works of authors like Geert Mak and Suzanna Jansen in the Netherlands and Daniel Francis and Margaret MacMillan in Canada. In her book, Mary Eggermont-Molenaar doesn’t use the literary techniques so characteristic for those authors or doesn’t seem to have any of their narrative ambitions. The topics covered in *De Juta-kinderen* are big and important: the lives of Juta’s children center around health and diseases, social change and women’s suffrage, war and even Nazi-war crimes and Holocaust. But presenting a well-crafted, suspenseful family story mirroring the period (1871-1971) and themes she is dealing with seems not to be its author’s aim. Eggermont-

Molenaar is clearly not writing popular history *for* the people in the grand style of for instance Geert Mak's *De eeuw van mijn vader* ('My father's century').

The book is rather rooted in the practice of genealogy and family history; it offers a collection of life-stories, organized by the generational logic of the family tree and driven by the available archival records, mostly generated by the *rites de passage* of someone's life: birth, school, marriage, work, and death. The availability of these archival records, more than the author's perspective or interests, confine the topics covered, the narrative and sometimes even the composition of the book. When the author, for instance, finds more information about Andreas van der Stok, the husband of Betsy Juta, the oldest daughter of progenitor Herman Jute, than fit in the chapter (2) devoted to her, she simply adds an appendix to this chapter: 2a. This strategy leads, time and again, to digressions and an eagerness to quote extensively from the sources found. As such, *De Jutakinderen* amply demonstrates the lure of the archive.

It may be seen as a characteristic trait of popular family history. "Family historians do not so much make a cult of the archive as act as its slaves," Martin Bashforth (2012, 203) once stated. It is this (sometimes blind) trust in and dependence on archival sources that have given genealogists and family historians such a bad name among academic historians. For a long time, academics (but not Bashforth, for that matter) have distanced themselves from the activities of these so-called amateurs and ridiculed them for wallowing too easily in "self-indulgent nostalgia" (Evans 2020, 311), and "seeking emotional connections with the past lives of their forbears" (Evans 2020, 317). Popular family history certainly has its flaws. It represents a mode of historical knowing that might be considered conservative and profoundly Western, based as it is on archives, family linearity and often heteronormative norms (Evans 2020, 318; De Groot 2015). Moreover, it misses the complexity, layering and transparency of the analyses, source criticism and argument that characterize academic historical research. But what is the point of *not* taking the historical pursuits of so many people (history *by* and often, as we shall see, *of* the people) seriously on its own terms? It is here, that public history can offer a different perspective.

Over the last number of decades, a booming interest in genealogy and family history has manifested itself. Millions of people all over the world are actively involved in genealogy or family history as a hobby; for them it is a form of "serious leisure," a means of both enjoyment and education (De Groot 2015, 103). But there is more at stake. As various quantitative and qualitative surveys of the popular meaning of the *past* in different (Western) countries have shown, most of those outside academia explore history above all through family stories, memories, objects, photographs and places. This preferred approach includes

Canadians, as Margaret Conrad, Jocelyn Létourneau and David Northrup (2009) concluded in their survey about the ways Canadians orient themselves to the past:

An impressive number of Canadians are making conscious efforts to preserve the past by passing on heirlooms, preparing scrapbooks, keeping diaries, writing family histories, researching genealogies, or visiting places from their family's past. Although Canadians report that they see a number of different pasts as important, including the past of the country [or of the country of their birth – pk], the past of there is far and away the most important past. (33)

People feel at home with the past, to rephrase the results of another survey (Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998), but the past people feel connected with is often “intimate and personal” (18), and as such helps to address questions about relationships, identity, immortality, and agency (36). These observations underline the importance of history as a social activity. History, as Raphael Samuel (2012) once famously stated, is not “the prerogative of the historian” [or even] a historian's ‘invention’ [...] It is, rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands” (8). Whoever wants to understand contemporary historical culture simply cannot ignore the practice of doing family history.

Seen from this perspective, *De Juta-kinderen* offers some interesting insights into such a practice. Although Eggermont-Molenaar does not write about her own family, her research is so firmly rooted in the ways most people examine their own family's history that it reveals enough about the lure and peculiarities of doing family history in practice. One of the main appeals of family history is undoubtedly that it individualizes the past. Considered from the perspective of a past family member, abstract topics can become palpably close. Partly this explains, too, the *cult of the archive* among many practitioners of family history, because, as the historian Ludmilla Jordanova (2000) stressed when she introduced the concept a long time ago, “the archive implies a kind of intimacy with particular aspects of the past that are more personal, individual, private and hence worth looking at precisely because they concern ‘real life’” (187). Reconstructing the lives and vicissitudes of a past family member from original sources can, indeed, be an addictive and enriching experience, giving ample opportunities for “affective engagements” with the past and reflections about one's own life (Evans 2020, 317).

For most practitioners of family history these engagements with the past are closely intertwined with their own identity. This is obviously not the case in *De Juta-kinderen*, as the author is not dealing with her own family. But the stories she narrates give her nonetheless many starting points for reflections about past

conditions, choices made, and lessons to be learned for our own life and our future. She even writes a personal letter to one of Juta's children: Hermana Cornelia, who died when she was only eight months old (163-165). The shocking Nazi-careers of the husband of Arnoldina Johanna Juta, Siegfried Louis Emanuel Taubert, and of their son-in-law Ernst-Robert Grawitz, lead understandably to a different type of reaction. In response to their involvement in the Holocaust and the Nazi-terror, Eggermont-Molenaar not only warns against the contemporary dangers of alt-right and fascism, but also reflects on the inability of many to learn from history and the so-called dark side of many a family's history: 'By the way, the stories about the Tauberts and the Grawitzs are not nearly as "unusual" as I thought, when I see how many people were involved in all those terrible things. How many family stories also contain such black chapters? How many family stories to be written in the future will contain chapters like this?' (*Overigens zijn de verhalen over de Tauberts en de Grawitzen lang niet zo 'apart' als ik dacht, als ik zie hoeveel mensen bij al die verschrikkelikheden betrokken waren. Hoeveel familieverhalen bevatten ook zulke zwarte hoofdstukken? Hoeveel familieverhalen die nog geschreven zullen worden gaan dit soort hoofdstukken bevatten?*) [161]).

These reactions illustrate well how doing family history is often far more than a non-committal leisure activity: the engagements with a family's past help to stimulate one's historical consciousness, once described as 'the multiform and often inarticulate feelings and thoughts about the past in relation to the present' (*de veelvormige en vaak ongearticuleerde gevoelens en gedachten omtrent het verleden in relatie tot het heden*) (Van Vree 1998, 8). Moreover, Eggermont-Molenaar's reflections seem to underline the observation by Tanya Evans (2020) that most family historians "are using stories about their ancestors' past lives to argue for better lives to themselves, families and people less fortunate than themselves, in the present. They are using their research to learn more about the impact of structural disadvantage and social inequality and to share that knowledge with others" (321). As such, family historians contribute to what Dave Thelen (Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998) has called a participatory historical culture, "in which using the past could be treated as a shared human experience and opportunity for understanding, rather than a ground for suspicion and division" (190). Maybe, it is an overly optimistic view, but it is tempting one.

In its assumptions, methods and aims, family history thus clearly differs from academic history; these are, in many ways, two different worlds of engaging with the past. Academic historians can, nonetheless, learn much from these "thousand different hands" (Samuel 2012, 8). As members of the family they are researching, popular family historians have access to the kind of expertise, knowledge and research data that is often hard to get at for academic historians: family's private archives, frequently a heterogenous collection of written

documentation, photographs, stories, memories, and the like. Moreover, as family members they know how that archive functions, as it were: how objects and documents are linked together, which meaning specific objects have had for specific family members, how stories circulate, and others are silenced in family circles. They reveal, in other words, “the lived reality of remembrance in family life” (King & Hammett 2020, 246-247). Again, as an outsider, Eggermont-Molenaar, can only hint at how history is constructed and created within the Juta family. But thanks to internet, email, social media, and the digitization of archives, she, nonetheless, has gained access to essential parts of their private archive (intriguing photographs, documents, objects). The spirit of volunteerism in the family history community is strong. It helps her to supplement the information from more official public archives, and thus gives her an opportunity to colour the lives of the seven daughters of Herman Juta. There are still many gendered silences in the stories Eggermont-Molenaar presents, but at least we become aware of what it must have meant to be a female poet in the male-dominated literary culture of the late 19th century, how women played a crucial role in social issues like the fight for suffrage or the care for refugees, and how they otherwise tried to shape their own agency. Giving voice to often marginalized groups in more official archives is without any doubt one of the most important contributions of popular family history to our understanding of the past. Given the fact that family history is no longer the obvious privilege of the elite, its practice has become not only history *by* the people, but often also history *of* the people. It gives the practice a radical potential, as Evans (2020) has argued: their engagement with the past has the potential to reveal “the power relations that have worked to marginalize the activities of women in the past and present” (313) and to share their new knowledge about “the impact of structural disadvantage and social inequality” (321) with others.

The past, indeed, is too important to be left to professional historians alone. Popular family history matters.

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About the reviewer

Paul Knevel is associate professor of public history at the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands). As a university-based public historian, he is the author of various popular history books, has advised Dutch history museums and public history organizations and written scripts for a television series on the history of Amsterdam. He has also written numerous academic articles on the Dutch reception of the American tradition of public history, the work of Pierre Nora and history on television. His historical research focuses on urban history, memory, and sense of place. Two of his more recent publications include the book chapter “*The Occupation and beyond: Presenting, doing and watching history on Dutch television since 1960*” (in Paul Ashton, Tanya Evans and Paula Hamilton, eds., *Making histories* [De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020]) and the article “*Sophiatown as lieu de mémoire*,” (2015) *African Studies* 74.1:51-75.

