

# Selves in Numbers: A Book-Historical Perspective on Nineteenth-Century Autobiography in the Netherlands

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“The narrative of life [levensbeschrijving] begins to play a critical role.” Thus wrote publisher A. C. Kruseman about books available on the Dutch market in the 1870s (Kruseman 1886–1887, II:407). The examples he provides reveal that the number of biographies was growing steadily. Yet in the nineteenth century, the number of autobiographical narratives also was on the rise. This is clear from an inventory of Dutch *egodocuments*, a category that includes secular as well as spiritual first-person narratives, such as autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and travel journals. Covering the period between 1500 and 1914, the inventory shows significant growth in the number of published texts beginning in the early nineteenth century. Within the category of autobiographies and memoirs, for example, it lists more than 1,500 printed texts for the period 1813 to 1914, and only 21 in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The shift from manuscript to printed book appears to have caused a significant transformation in the practice of autobiographical writing in the Netherlands. While Early Modern narratives usually existed only in manuscript form, late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century autobiographical texts were more frequently set in print.

The shift towards print is not only a Dutch phenomenon; many scholars have set the birth of modern autobiography somewhere between 1770 and 1830, when earlier texts began to be published as “autobiographies” (Olney 1980; Nussbaum 1989; Folkenflik 1993; Peterson 1993). Mascuch (1997)

even suggested a close link between the ascent of autobiography and developments in the book market. Nonetheless, little to no attention has been paid to the fact that their very publication implies that nineteenth-century publishers were interested in autobiographical narratives, which, in turn, suggests that they were in demand by the reading public. Little, in fact, is still known about contemporary expectations regarding the genre of autobiography. It is also unclear how the rise of autobiographical publications related to the general expansion of the book market in the course of the nineteenth century. A book-historical perspective might be of use here, because the history of the book shifts focus from authors and texts to other agents involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of literature—publishers and readers, for instance—and to the socioeconomic and cultural contexts in which printed texts take shape (Finkelstein and McCleery).

Focusing on the book market in the Netherlands in the period 1850 through 1918, I first determine the number of published autobiographies in relation to total book production. I then examine the bibliographical classification of the period in order to examine the rise of autobiographical books in a more qualitative manner. Finally, it will undertake an analysis of publishers' promotional materials in order to shed light on the contemporary reader's expectations. Underlying this exercise is the presupposition that a book-historical perspective that departs from the idea of autobiography as a marketed commodity is useful for understanding the rise of a practice as well as a genre that acquired its form through publication.<sup>2</sup>

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND THE DUTCH BOOK MARKET**

Because of the relative freedom of the press in northern areas of the Low Countries, the province of Holland became one of the most important book production and distribution centers in Europe in the seventeenth century. Yet due to the liberalization of the intellectual climate in France, and more severe censorship in the politically weakened Dutch Republic, the country eventually lost its lead in the international book trade. The national market, however, developed after the mid-eighteenth century (Delft and Wolf 2003, 108–9). In the course of the nineteenth century, the small-scale Dutch book trade became a major industry. Thanks to a growing population, education, and commercialization, the number of potential book buyers escalated, especially from the 1850s on.

Little is still known about the precise size of Dutch readership in the second half of the nineteenth century, but middle-class purchasing power grew, technological innovations led to something of a decrease in the price

of books, and the number of book sellers increased throughout the country. In order to attract new clients, moreover, publishing houses introduced new marketing strategies, such as price variation and serialized publication. The reading audience in the Netherlands could also choose from a wider selection: the number of new published books rose from 240 in 1806 to 1734 in 1850, and 2948 in 1900 (Huisman 2008, 293). Books appeared in a wider variety of genres too: next to traditional categories, such as devotional books and manuals, new genres, such as novels and children’s literature, gained prominence.

In order to estimate the share of autobiographical publications in the burgeoning Dutch book market, I spot-checked the National Bibliography and counted all autobiographies published in four sample years. Since the bibliography began in 1849, I began my research in 1850, and continued with the years 1870, 1890, and 1910. I also relied on the inventory of Dutch egodocuments and on lists of new publications in the Dutch book trade journal, *Nieuwsblad voor den Boekhandel*. Following Philippe Lejeune’s ([1975] 1985) definition, I counted all the books in which the name of the author was identical to the name of the narrator and the protagonist of the narrative. I applied the definition loosely and included both anonymous and other books that had been reviewed or marketed as autobiographies. The results of my bibliographical research are presented in table 1, which reveals that the number of published autobiographies nearly tripled between 1850 and 1910, rising from eleven to thirty. Most of these narratives were written by men; only sixteen out of the total of ninety-three published autobiographies were by women (17 percent).<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: Published autobiographies available on the Dutch book market, 1850–1910**

| Year | Title production  | Autobiography | %   |
|------|-------------------|---------------|-----|
| 1850 | 1734 <sup>4</sup> | 11            | 0,6 |
| 1870 | 1930              | 22            | 1,1 |
| 1890 | 2490              | 30            | 1,2 |
| 1910 | 3960              | 30            | 0,8 |

\*Sources for Tables 1 and 2: Hans de Valk and Gerard Schulte Nordholt, *Repertorium van egodocumenten van Noord-Nederlanders uit de negentiende eeuw* (<http://www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/Egodocumenten>); *Nieuwsblad voor den Boekhandel*, vols. 1850, 1870, 1890, 1910; *Alphabetische naamlijst van boeken, landkaarten en verdere in den boekhandel voorkomende artikelen die in het jaar 1850 in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden uitgegeven of herdrukt zijn . . .* (Amsterdam: C.L. Brinkman, 1851); *Alphabetische naamlijst van boeken, landkaarten en verdere in den boekhandel voorkomende artikelen die in het jaar 1870 in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden uitgegeven of herdrukt zijn . . .* (Amsterdam: C.L. Brinkman, 1871); *Brinkman’s Alphabetische lijst van boeken, landkaarten en verder in den boekhandel voorkomende artikelen die in het jaar 1890 in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden uitgegeven of herdrukt zijn . . .* (Amsterdam: C.L. Brinkman, 1891); *Brinkman’s Alphabetische lijst van boeken, landkaarten en verder in den boekhandel voorkomende artikelen die in het jaar 1910 in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden uitgegeven of herdrukt zijn . . .* (Leiden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1911).

**Table 2: Translated and original Dutch autobiographies published in the Dutch book market, 1850–1910**

| Year | Autobiography | Dutch | Translated | English | German | French | Swedish |
|------|---------------|-------|------------|---------|--------|--------|---------|
| 1850 | 11            | 8     | 3          | 1       | -      | 2      | -       |
| 1870 | 22            | 15    | 7          | 5       | 1      | -      | 1       |
| 1890 | 30            | 25    | 5          | 3       | 1      | 1      | -       |
| 1910 | 30            | 19    | 11         | 5       | 4      | 1      | 1       |
|      | 93            | 67    | 26         | 14      | 6      | 4      | 2       |

Notwithstanding the general increase in published autobiographies, absolute numbers of the genre are low and its share never rose above 1.2 percent. Since circulation rates are unavailable it is impossible to draw profound meaning from the figures, but certain supplementary findings indicate that autobiographies were quite popular among readers. Evidence of this lies in the significant number of translations; of the 93 autobiographies I found in the four sample years, 26 were initially published in other languages (table 2). On average 28 percent of the published autobiographies were translations, but the share of translations was (much) higher in all years besides 1890. The general share of translated books on the Dutch market, however, declined from 45 percent in 1850 to 11 percent in 1890 and 1910. Compared to these figures, the high number of translated autobiographies could indicate that the demand was greater than what native Dutch authors could offer.

The notion that autobiography was a type of text that had to be imported in order to satisfy local demand is confirmed by the fact that Dutch critics regarded it as a foreign genre. For example, in a journal article of 1856, a critic noted how French presses were “sweating” to print vast amounts of French memoirs (Anonymous). In 1869, another critic claimed that nearly every Frenchman who had played some public role felt obliged to publish his memoirs (Knoop 1869). In 1881, a reviewer discovered many memoirs in England (Muller 1881). Most critics, however, felt that the Dutch were not inclined to publish their life stories. The paucity of Dutch autobiographers was highly regretted because critics considered autobiographies the “building blocks” from which contemporary Dutch history would eventually be constructed. Consequently, some tried to persuade native autobiographers and diarists to make their life writings public, but for the time being critics sought autobiographical literature from abroad (Huisman 2008, 171–172).

Foreign books in their original language could be acquired through the so-called imported book trade, which was fairly comprehensive in the Netherlands (Laan 2005, 18). Upper-class, educated readers generally knew French, German, and, to a much lesser extent, English. It is therefore no

surprise that the Dutch book trade journal publicized quite a few untranslated autobiographies, such as *The Book of Wonderful Characters: Memoirs and Anecdotes of Remarkable and Eccentric Persons in all Ages* (1870), *La vie de Henri Brulard* (1890) by the French writer Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle), and *Erinnerungen aus dem Leben einer 95-jährigen* (1910) by Hedwig von Bismarck, Otto von Bismarck's niece. It is difficult to estimate the quantity of such non-translated books on the Dutch market, but it is clear that more autobiographies were available to the audience than the ninety-three titles composed in or translated into Dutch.

The jealous remarks made by Dutch reviewers about the apparent abundance of life narratives in France and Great Britain betray their attraction to the genre, but the lack of circulation figures makes it hard to quantify the popularity of autobiographical books. A closer inspection of the physical appearance of autobiographies might offer some clues, for small-sized and low-priced books suggest high circulation and hence a large intended audience. Unfortunately, the physical appearance of the ninety-three autobiographies does not offer much information. The books were generally published as octavos, a format common in the second half of the nineteenth century. The average price of the ninety-three autobiographies was 1.33 guilders, but prices varied widely from dirt cheap—less than fifty cents—to very expensive—more than four guilders.<sup>4</sup> When compared to the price of other Dutch literature of the period, however, it is clear that autobiographies were more expensive than religious books such as sermons, while cheaper than most novels and history books (De Kruif 2001, 136).

### **BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ORDERING OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

In order to determine the place of autobiographies within the total book production in the Netherlands in a more qualitative manner, I analyzed their classification within the National Bibliography. The first finding of this study is that the Dutch National Bibliography does not have a separate category for autobiographical texts in the period under study. Nevertheless, it does contain a category called “Geschiedenis en levensbeschrijving” [History and biography], which, by 1870, had been expanded to “Geschiedenis, oudheidkunde, heraldiek, levensbeschrijving” [History, archeology, heraldry, biography]. This category includes biographies, autobiographies, correspondence, and other sorts of (posthumous) egodocuments written by noteworthy individuals. Closer inspection, however, reveals that there are also autobiographical narratives classified outside this category.

Of the ninety-three autobiographies that I found in the four surveyed years, seventy-six appear in the annual lists of the National Bibliography. Of these seventy-six titles, twenty-three are classified under the category of “Novels.” Examples in this category include the memoirs (1870) of the Dutch writer Jacob van Lennep, and a Dutch translation of *Memoiren einer Sozialistin* (1910) by the German writer Lily Braun. Another twenty autobiographies appear in the category of “Protestant Theology,” which includes conversion narratives by Dutch pietists, autobiographical sermons by Dutch ministers, and translated memoirs, such as *Aus meinem Lebensbuch* (1890) by the German minister Otto von Funcke. A few autobiographies were also found in the category of “Catholic Theology,” as for instance, a translation of *Zurück zur heiligen Kirche. Erlebnisse und Bekenntnisse eines Convertiten* (1910) by the German historian Albert von Ruville. In the combined category of Theology—both Protestant and Catholic—there are twenty-three autobiographies, that is, as many as in the category of Novels.

Of seventy-six autobiographies, forty-six (60 percent) were classified under either Theology or Novels. The remaining thirty books were bibliographically divided into no fewer than thirteen categories. After Theology and Novels comes “History,” which contains eight autobiographies, including the Dutch edition of the *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (1850) and *Gedenkschriften* [Memoirs] by Gijsbert Jan van Hardenbroek, a Dutch civil servant. “Politics and Political Economy” is in fourth place, thanks to translations of socialist autobiographies from the German-language zone, such as *Aus meinem Leben* (1910) by the German SPD leader August Bebel and *Die Jugendgeschichte einer Arbeiterin* (1910) by Adelheid Popp, an Austrian feminist and socialist. “Geography” and “Medicine” are both fifth in order because each contains four autobiographies. *Zestien zeereizen. Herinneringen uit een veertigjarige loopbaan bij de Nederlandsche marine door Jhr. H.J.L.T. de Vaynes van Brakell* [Sixteen Voyages. Memoirs of a Forty-year Career in the Dutch Navy by H.J.L.T. de Vaynes van Brakell Esq.] (1870) is an example in the category of Geography, while Medicine includes *7<sup>e</sup> Vervolg op de beschrijving zijner opsluiting gedurende 13 maanden in het krankzinnigengesticht te Zutphen* [Seventh Sequel to the Narrative of his Thirteen-Month Confinement in the Lunatic Asylum in Zutphen] (1890) by someone named A. Luyten.

In many cases it is far from obvious why an autobiography is placed in a certain category. Memoirs by ministers and other clergymen, for example, are generally placed in the categories of Protestant or Catholic Theology. However, *Autobiographie* (1870) by Juan B. Cabrera, founder of a Protestant

church in Spain, is set in the category of History. This is also the category that contains the memoirs of the Dutch military officer J. L. Henckens (1910), as well as a collection of partly autobiographical documents by the Swedish woman of letters Frederika Bremer (1870). Autobiographical texts of other writers and military men, on the other hand, appear in the categories Novels and Military Science & Military Records. Some books are listed in more than one category by editors of annual bibliographical lists, whereas other books are classified differently in different editions of the National Bibliography. The Dutch translation of *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, for instance, was included in the History category in the annual list of 1850, but in the category “Fraaie Letteren” [Belles Lettres] in the cumulative bibliography of 1850 through 1875.

Sometimes it seems as though the classification is based on the autobiographer’s occupation, but in the end it appears quite random. This in itself suggests that contemporaries did not consider these books as a defined or identifiable category. Eventually there arose an image of a diffuse genre, if one could speak of a genre already. On the other hand, an analysis of the bibliographical classification of autobiographies does provide a tool for estimating their small share in the spectrum of the general book supply in the Netherlands (table 3).

**Table 3: Categories of books available on the Dutch book market, 1850–1910**

| Year | Title production | Autobiographies |     | Novels |      | Theology |      | History |     |
|------|------------------|-----------------|-----|--------|------|----------|------|---------|-----|
|      |                  | Total           | %   | Total  | %    | Total    | %    | Total   | %   |
| 1850 | 1,734            | 11              | 0,6 | 70     | 4,0  | 315      | 18,2 | 98      | 5,7 |
| 1870 | 1,930            | 22              | 1,1 | 269    | 13,9 | 504      | 26,1 | 55      | 2,9 |
| 1890 | 2,490            | 30              | 1,2 | 246    | 9,9  | 392      | 15,7 | 94      | 3,8 |
| 1910 | 3,960            | 30              | 0,8 | 231    | 5,8  | 414      | 10,5 | 113     | 2,9 |

As noted earlier, the percentage of autobiographical books on the Dutch book market never rose above 1.2 percent. However, the bibliographical

\*\* Sources: Hans de Valk and Gerard Schulte Nordholt, *Repertorium van egodocumenten van Noord-Nederlanders uit de negentiende eeuw*, <http://www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/Egodocumenten>; *Nieuwsblad voor den Boekhandel*, volumes 1850, 1870, 1890, 1910; *Alphabetische naamlijst van boeken, landkaarten en verdere in den boekhandel voorkomende artikelen die in het jaar 1850 in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden uitgegeven of herdrukt zijn . . .* (Amsterdam: C.L. Brinkman, 1851); *Alphabetische naamlijst van boeken, landkaarten en verdere in den boekhandel voorkomende artikelen die in het jaar 1870 in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden uitgegeven of herdrukt zijn . . .* (Amsterdam: C.L. Brinkman, 1871); *Brinkman’s Alphabetische lijst van boeken, landkaarten en verder in den boekhandel voorkomende artikelen die in het jaar 1890 in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden uitgegeven of herdrukt zijn . . .* (Amsterdam: C.L. Brinkman, 1891); *Brinkman’s Alphabetische lijst van boeken, landkaarten en verder in den boekhandel voorkomende artikelen die in het jaar 1910 in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden uitgegeven of herdrukt zijn . . .* (Leiden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1911).



categories that listed most autobiographies had a rather large share of the book market in the Netherlands. The share of novels, for instance, rose from 4 percent in 1850 to 13.9 percent in 1870. Although the share of novels declined to 5.8 percent in 1910, the novel was still in fourth place on the chart of largest book categories in that year. Theology, moreover, was an exceptionally large category. Protestant and Catholic theology combined accounted for 18.2 and 26.1 percent in 1850 and 1870, respectively. Toward the end of the century, the share of theological books declined to 15.7 in 1890 and 10.5 in 1910, but the latter percentage is still twice as much as that of the popular genre of novels in 1910. History books comprised a much smaller share; the category dropped from 5.7 percent in 1850 to 2.9 percent in 1910. Nonetheless, history books were profitable to publishers because they sold exceptionally well, or so wrote A. C. Kruseman in his history of the nineteenth-century Dutch book trade (Kruseman 1886–1887, I: 68, 201–202, 450; II: 25, 61, 406).

Although the lack of circulation figures is a recurrent problem, the bibliographical survey indicates that autobiographies formed only a small part, maximum 1.2 percent, of the total supply of books on the Dutch market. Nevertheless, the absolute number of published autobiographies almost tripled in the period 1850 to 1910. Moreover, the significant number of translations suggests that the demand for autobiographical books was higher than the indigenous supply. Furthermore, bibliographical classification shows that autobiographies were part of large and/or profitable book categories: Novels, Theology, and History. Besides revealing a large percentage of translations, this finding may indicate a certain popularity of autobiographies in the Dutch audience. A bibliographical analysis, however, is incapable of determining the appeal of autobiographical books for contemporary readers. The next part of this article thus focuses on publishers' promotional materials.

### **MARKETING AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: THE SENSATION OF HISTORY**

Advertisements and other promotional materials aim to seduce consumers into buying a certain product. This is equally true for book promotion, which gained a more prominent role in the Dutch book trade in the second half of the nineteenth century. Using different types of materials, such as book prospectuses and advertisements in journals and magazines, publishers tried to sell as many copies of books as possible, both to local booksellers and consumers. Precisely because its goal is commercial, promotional material reflects the desires, beliefs, and expectations of its



intended audience. Thus promotional materials are a useful source for determining the position of autobiographies within the general supply of books and, simultaneously, grant greater insight into contemporary expectations about autobiographies.<sup>5</sup>

The Vereeniging ter Bevordering van de Belangen des Boekhandels, the professional book trade organization in the Netherlands, was founded in 1815 and started to gather book promotional material in 1854. Its holdings are preserved in the collection *Prospectussen en Personalia* [Prospectuses and Biographical Matters] (PPA) in the Bibliotheek van het Boekenvak [Library of the Book Business], one of the largest book historical collections in the world, housed in the University Library in Amsterdam. In order to understand the marketing and hence expectations of autobiographies, I searched the PPA collection for promotional materials from seventy publishing houses, each of which had offered at least two original Dutch autobiographies in the period under study. Because publishing houses did not come up with an expensive prospectus or flyer for every book, I also looked for advertisements in the book trade journal, *Nieuwsblad voor den Boekhandel*, and the much-read newspaper *Nieuws van den Dag*. I eventually found 260 different examples of promotional material for both original Dutch and translated autobiographies. As advertisements and flyers for spiritual memoirs, conversion narratives, and autobiographical sermons were scarce, I will now discuss the marketing of nonreligious autobiographies.

As stated, nonreligious autobiographies were most often classified among the bibliographical categories Novels and History. Promotional material reveals, however, that publishers situated autobiographies between these categories. This is evident, for example, in publisher C. van der Post Jr's 1856 flyer for *Het leven van Benvenuto Cellini, Florentijnschen goudsmid en beeldhouwer, door hem zelve beschreven*, a Dutch translation of Cellini's famous *Vita*. The translation was first printed in 1843, but Van der Post lowered the price and offered it again to the reading public in 1856. He expected the book to attract a "wide variety of readers," for he felt that the book was of interest both to those who liked novels and those who preferred history:

Anyone who favours incredible adventures, great dangers, horrible murders, frightening prison houses, ghosts, witchcraft, incantations and everything else that is appealing in the most widely read novels nowadays, can find full satisfaction in this book. However, the book is also attractive to those readers who are willing to hear, from

a contemporary and an eye-witness, about the acts and words of famous and infamous persons, and to anyone who is interested in a lively and as it were vivid image of the mental and moral civilization of one of the most interesting periods in history. (Post 1856, np)

Although Van der Post describes Cellini's book as "one of the most remarkable productions of the human mind," he does not use the word *autobiography*. Due to its celebration of individualism, however, twentieth-century critics have identified the sixteenth-century *Vita de Benvenuto Cellini* as a landmark in the history of autobiography. Yet it is highly questionable whether nineteenth-century readers were attracted by the story of the person of Cellini. Van der Post, in his flyer, places much greater stress on the "wonderful adventures" of Cellini and his being an "eye-witness" to history. The publisher tries, in other words, to sell this autobiography as a historical source book that is as entertaining as a novel. This was not a maneuver typical solely of Van der Post; other publishers also presented autobiographies as history books that could serve as alternates for common novels. Nineteenth-century publishers, in other words, claimed that autobiographies combined the entertaining aspects of the novel with the instructive side of history. Hence the slogan "Looking for a novel? Then ask for history" was adopted by the publishing house Gebr Van der Kraay in its promotion of *Zes jaren te Tripoli in Barbarije. Uit de gedenkschriften eener Nederlandsche vrouw* [Six Years in Tripoli of Barbary. From the Memoirs of a Dutch Woman] (1875).

Presenting autobiographies as historical alternatives to novels, publishers aimed at attracting the large and ever growing audience of novel readers. By stressing that historical truth could be found in autobiographies, publishers implied the negative image of the novel. As in other countries, critics deemed the novel an inferior genre and tried to direct the reading audience towards the superior genre of history books (Berg 1999). Eighteenth-century Dutch novelists thus tried to present their fictions as historical reality, by having their protagonist recount his or her (wonderful) life story in the guise of an autobiography (Leemans 2002, 68). Another strategy was to add a preface in which the writer claims to have found an autobiographical manuscript that he now presents to the general public. Writers of historical novels, such as Sir Walter Scott and his Dutch epigones, even tried to write history in this way, but in the Netherlands the historical novel's heyday was over by the early 1840s (Wiel 1999, 461). In autobiography, it seems, publishers found a new genre that mixed historical facts and novelist fiction in an entertaining and attractive way.

Contrary to what is suggested by the flyer for Cellini's book, the historical facts provided by autobiographies usually pertained to the recent past. Contemporary history was a new field, not much studied by academic Dutch historians until World War I (Luykx 1987). Autobiographical writings, on the other hand, dealt with the recent past (Smith 1998; Fritzsche 2004). Particularly in mid-century, Dutch publishers launched numerous memoirs of the period when the country had been occupied by the French (1795–1813), when Napoleon had been defeated at Waterloo (1815), when the Netherlands had regained its independence (1813), and when its political structure had switched from a republic to a monarchy (1815). In 1853, publisher A. H. van Gorcum stated that the general Dutch audience was greatly interested in “everything that is related to our nationality, the genesis of our kingdom, and the characterization of the most noble core of our Nation.” In December 1854, Van Gorcum therefore provided the public with an opportunity to subscribe to the publication *Herinneringen van den baron Strick van Linschoten* [Memoirs of baron Strick van Linschoten]. According to the antimonarchist van Gorcum (1854), the memoirs of Strick van Linschoten are “most important” because the nobleman unveiled what was normally hidden from the public and from history. Writing from “behind the scene,” however, Strick van Linschoten offered many “curious details” that might help readers understand “this period of time, which is characterized by our rejection of the French yoke and by the enforcement of the monarchy” (Gorcum 1854, np).

More publishers tried to sell autobiographies with the promise that through a narrative of an insider-eyewitness, readers would gain sensational insight into the recent history of the Dutch nation. Beginning in the 1870s, publishers also claimed that autobiographical books enabled the reading audience to experience topical world events that were being chronicled in newspapers.

The number of subscriptions to Dutch newspapers began to rise after 1869, when a heavy tax on newspapers was abolished (Schneider & Hemels 1979, 190; Wijfjes 2004, 18–20). Almost simultaneously, public interest in topical news was stimulated by the outbreak of the Franco-German war (1870–1871). Side by side with newspapers, publishers flooded the market with popular, historical titles dealing with the war, that is, illustrated books, novels, biographies and (pseudo-) autobiographies (Kruseman 1886–1887, I: 450; II: 405–406). In 1871, for instance, publisher J. P. Revers announced the Dutch translation of *Le siège de Paris* by Francisque Sarcey. According to Revers, this was a special book because unlike other authors, the French

journalist Sarcey had been an eyewitness of the siege of Paris. This was strongly emphasized in the flyer for the book:

The siege of Paris is undoubtedly a momentous and memorable event; it is not only the headline in the most recent war, but it is a headline in the History of the World. No matter how many books may be written, the subject will never be exhausted and a narrative by an EYE-WITNESS such as Sarcey will always attract thousands of avid readers and will never lose its value.

Sarcey's book was popular. According to Revers (1871), in a mere four months more than 100,000 copies were sold in France. The book was also translated into English, and excerpts from foreign reviews were added to the flyer for the Dutch edition. One critic applauded *Le siège de Paris* as a truthful and realistic account with a twofold attraction. Not only did Sarcey as an eyewitness provide food for thought on the Franco-German war, he also enabled readers to travel mentally to Paris and experience the topical events through his eyes.

Until the turn of the twentieth century, Dutch journalism conformed to a rather businesslike style with no elements, such as interviews, that might attract human-interest attention (Wijffes 2004, 61–62). Appetite for human interest was apparently satisfied by forms of autobiographical writing published alongside news coverage in various media. From 1870 on, the desire to take part in topical events elsewhere in the world became one of the most crucial arguments in the marketing of autobiographies. Yet however “gripping” the many autobiographical books on the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) in South Africa were thought to be, publishers always stressed that these “documents” differed from novels. After the turn of the century, however, publishers no longer distinguished autobiographies from novels on the basis of the opposition between (historical) facts and fiction, but did so instead through the contrast of realism and idealism.

The change in the marketing of autobiographies can be explained by the rise of the modern, naturalist novel around 1900. Several Dutch publishers noted the general reading public's distaste for the raw type of realism taken up by a new generation of novelists. According to publishers Van Holkema & Warendorf (ca. 1900), for example, the general audience did not like to read “tiring decompositions of psychic and nervous diseases” or “flatly realistic drawings of unsightly dunghills.” According to publisher Van Dishoeck (1907), the general audience preferred to read positive, uplifting

stories and thus demanded “the old-fashioned novel.” In response to such requests, a number of publishers offered autobiographies by self-made women as both readable and positive-minded alternatives to the naturalist novel.

In 1902, for example, publisher P.M. Wink presented the Dutch translation of Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* (1902) as a sequel to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s best-selling *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). In his flyer, Wink proposed that this autobiography was much more than merely a novel; it was “one of those books one cannot read without improving oneself.” In his life story, Washington demonstrated how a “man, who was born as a slave, lifted himself to such a height that he was admired by thousands of people in his own country and would be granted esteem in every place where his book would be read.” In a similar way, the Dutch edition of Helen Keller’s *The Story of My Life* (1904) was marketed as a “testimonial” that was deemed highly instructive to “members of our disgruntled and sulking generation,” because “[m]any, only half as deprived as Helen Keller, sit down in the impotence of despair. May this life history of a companion spur them to something even better than resignation—self-examination and self-improvement” (Broese, s. a.).

In marketing Booker T. Washington and Helen Keller’s autobiographies, Dutch publishers sent the message that through willpower and perseverance, it was possible to conquer the hardest conditions. These autobiographies, in other words, were pitched against the fashion of modern, naturalist novels in which characters were often at the mercy of circumstances. The absence of an uplifting moral was not the only problem, however. According to contemporary critics and readers, modern novels were not good reads. In this sense too, autobiographies could serve as alternatives. In 1923, for example, publisher P. M. Wink launched a book series titled *Romantic History*, which consisted of “fragments from history, biographies, memoirs etc.” This series was meant to offer relaxation to hard-working intellectuals who wished to enrich their minds (Wink 1923). Other genres could barely serve this end. The literary, psychological novel had, “in nine out of ten cases, only little attraction for the reader who was looking for relaxation”; the reader of historical novels “would involuntarily try to tell fact from fiction,” and detective stories were too full of implausibilities. If autobiographies had formerly served as an entertaining type of historical literature, after the introduction of naturalism, it turned into the ultimate source of pleasure reading.

The marketing of secular autobiographies by Dutch publishers demonstrates that throughout the period 1850 through 1918, they were presented as either historical and factual or as moral alternatives to the popular novel. This analysis of Dutch promotional material demonstrates also that autobiographies offered something to various types of readers: inside-information on the Dutch nation's recent past, a sensational background to topical world news, exciting stories, and instructive life lessons. Not every autobiography served all interests, but the general supply of autobiographical books must have been attractive to a wide range of readers—from the large audience that favored history books and edifying literature, to the ever more numerous readers of novels and newspapers.

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHERS, OR CHRONICLERS OF THEIR TIME**

Looking back at a phase of autobiography criticism that was obsessed with the genre's definition, Paul John Eakin proposed in 1999 that scholars be less rigid with the definition of the genre and focus instead on the ways in which people have expressed their "selves" in different times and places (55–56). Such a perspective suits the Dutch tradition of lifewriting scholarship, which is based in the discipline of history. The inventory of Dutch egodocuments, begun in the early 1980s, was the initiative of historian Rudolf Dekker, who wished to open up new sources for historical studies on the daily lives and thoughts of people. In the course of time, however, new questions arose, such as that of the historical relationship between form and content of autobiographical texts (Baggerman and Dekker 2004). One significant shift, the transition from manuscript to print, was the reason for my study on the position of autobiographies in the nineteenth-century Dutch book market.

My study demonstrates that the number of published autobiographies nearly tripled in the second half of the nineteenth century, from eleven in 1850 to twenty-two in 1870, and thirty in 1890 and 1910. Nonetheless, the percentage of autobiographies of the whole output of book publications was small: maximum 1.2 percent. The relatively high percentage of translated autobiographies on the Dutch market, however, may indicate a certain popularity of the genre. This assumption is strengthened by the envious remarks of Dutch critics with regard to the high number of autobiographies printed in France and Great Britain. The supposition that autobiography was a much loved form of literature is further confirmed by the bibliographical classification of these books in the large and/or popular categories of Novels, Theology, and History. The analysis of promotional material presented here confirms this hypothesis. By presenting

autobiographies as either an historical, factual or moral alternative to the novel, publishers tried to portray them as a sort of text that satisfied the interest of those who loved novels as well as those who enjoyed history or edifying literature.

In view of the way in which Dutch publishers marketed autobiographies, the appeal of these books does not appear to have rested so much on the particular stories of individual autobiographers. In fact, the autobiographer as person is strikingly absent in promotional materials. While stressing the value of autobiographies, publishers did not use portraits and did not emphasize the autobiographer's personality. Instead, they stressed the idea of autobiographer as "eyewitness," as one whose report of historical developments and events was based on firsthand experience. Such a presentation demonstrates, in my view, that autobiography was not considered a personal or intimate genre but a romantic-historical genre.<sup>6</sup> I therefore conclude that the type of texts known in twentieth-century autobiography criticism as "memoirs" are much more representative of the practice of autobiographical publishing than is the introspective developmental history of a personality, with which the genre of autobiography has traditionally been associated.

Publisher's perceptions obviously affect the autobiographical practice, because autobiographers who want to see their life in print have to adhere to codes which regulate the market. In the nineteenth-century context of the Netherlands, this meant that autobiographers had to perform as chroniclers of their times and offer firsthand experience of a major historical event or development. Since the concept of history was largely restricted to public events, women had significantly more trouble than men presenting themselves as autobiographers (Huisman 2012). Otherwise, however, the book market was rather democratic and provided space for life narratives by men from all ranks of society. After all, neither psychological self-knowledge nor literary talent were required to perform successfully as an autobiographer. Instead, the more "simple" one's style, the more one's narrative was valued as "historical document."

## NOTES

1. The inventories of Dutch egodocuments, manuscripts as well as publications, result from several projects initiated and headed by the historian Rudolf Dekker. The inventories are accessible on the internet: [www.egodocument.net](http://www.egodocument.net). On the concept of "egodocuments," see: Dekker (2002a, 2002b).

2. My study was part of the project *Controlling Time and Shaping the Self. Education, Introspection, and Practices of Writing in the Netherlands*, headed by



Prof. Arianne Baggerman. For more information on the larger project: Baggerman (2001); www.egodocument.net; Baggerman, Dekker, and Mascuch (2011).

3. Most women's autobiographies—ten of sixteen—were translated from foreign languages, such as English, German and Swedish. See Huisman (2012) for more information on the translation politics of Dutch publishers and the place of women autobiographers on the book market in the Netherlands.

4. Average wages of laborers increased from 1 guilder per day in 1850 to 1.77 guilder in 1910. From the 1870s on, moreover, the price of basic needs decreased, so the purchasing power of laborers increased (Regt [1984] 1995, 37–39).

5. The marketing of autobiographical narratives is still an understudied subject in the field of life-writing scholarship. An interesting exception is Douglas (2001).

6. This historical perception of autobiographies is confirmed by the way nineteenth-century critics reviewed the genre in various Dutch journals, as I have shown elsewhere (Huisman 2011).

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