

# **Rewriting biography – the past (long) 25 years**

**Congress by the working group Biography at the occasion of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde**

In order to celebrate the 250 years of the Society for Dutch Literature, the working group Biography is organising a symposium in which we will consider various ways in which biography has been rewritten.

## **Programme**

**October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016 - Senate room, RUG Academy Building, Broerstraat 5 Groningen**

09.30 – 10.00 Coffee and welcome by Mineke Bosch, chair of the Working group Biography of the MdNL

10.00 – 10.45 Yvonne Hirdman reflects on her biography of Alva Myrdal

10.45 – 11.30 Elisabeth Leijnse reflects on her biography of Cécile and Elsa de Jong van Beek en Donk

11.30 – 11.45 Small coffee break

11.45 – 12.30 Lecture by biography critic Thomas Etzemüller

12.30 – 13.30 Lunch in the restaurant of the Academy building (not included)

### **Senate room**

13.30 – 14.30 Masterclass biography (three PhDs present their work) that is discussed by some master biographers

### **De Bruins hall**

14.30-16.30 Biographers market – biographers present their posters and discuss their work with other biographers and the audience – tea and coffee is served

16.30-17.15 Closing lecture Elisabeth Lockhorn on her biography of Andreas Burnier

### **De Bruins hall**

17.15-18.00 drinks

## Rewriting biography: the past (long) 25 years

‘This study rejects the existence of its subject, Thomas Alva Edison, and will not attempt to recapture him in language. He once existed, but neither he nor any other figure can be recreated. The references in these pages lead not to a hero, but to yellow papers, restored buildings, old photographs, furniture, cartoons, newspapers, magazines, and museums. These documents are not made to represent a person, but are understood as fields of meaning.’

It was with these bold words that in 1983 David E. Nye began his ‘antibiography’ of Thomas Alva Edison in which he aimed at a radical rewriting of the biography.<sup>1</sup> Nye reacted against the essentialist and realist belief in the ability to determine who someone ‘really’ was. Influenced by the philosopher of history Hayden White – who drew attention to the historiographic styles in which historians were trapped when composing their historical narratives – and also inspired by semiotics, David Nye wanted to dispose of the myth of historical realism. Instead of distilling a linear story out of the great amount of completely fractured and fragmented material that was to be found in Edison’s ‘archive text’, Nye subjected the whole Edison legacy to synchronous analysis. In this legacy, which comprised not only documents but also buildings, photographs, films and cartoons, a referent (Edison) was not sought, but his search was for ‘what Edison meant’ in a specific context at a specific moment.

According to Nye the desire to create unity or an unambiguous picture of a human life is a biographical fallacy. By focussing on the diverse tracks of such a life in different places and times, he wanted to demonstrate that the individual can certainly not be known as a unity, but is divided in various discursive areas – the public and the private sphere, male and female roles, various public appearances and the views of these held by outsiders. Indeed in his ‘antibiography’ the unambiguous subject Edison disappears because Nye leaves for what they are, all the various overlapping and mutually influencing forms in which ‘he’ is passed on or ‘mediated’ (photographs, films, the museum or ‘heritage site’ and the many biographies of him) – forms that contain pictures of Edison and tell all sorts of stories about him.

Nye was not the only one who, under the influence of changed ideas of subject and identity, the relationship between language and reality, gender and ethnicity, author and narrative, tried to renew the old ‘authoritative’ biography. Various biographers brought into question the role of the ‘omniscient narrator’ by making the process of research visible in the text. Others have attempted to turn the tide of the tendency for the uniform biography by bringing in ‘fictional’ elements – a letter to the protagonist, or interim comments on the research process. That served not only to question the invisible omniscient narrator, but also to break free from the processes of identification that affect biographical research most particularly.

This last option was taken by Yvonne Hirdman in her internationally known biography of Alva Myrdal, the Swedish social scientist, who with her husband Gunnar, tried to change the world. Based on a gigantic legacy that gave expression to their democratic desire for transparency in all areas, Hirdman wrote a portrait of the 20th century icon of welfare politics on a world scale in all its ambivalences. Known as extremely progressive and author of works dealing with the modern family, women’s emancipation, anti-Semitism and the arms race and the Cold War, she was involved in a constant gender drama with Gunnar. Instead of reducing this drama to the private sphere, Hirdman placed the relationship in a broader framework in

---

<sup>1</sup> David E. Nye, *The invented self. An antibiography, from documents of Thomas A. Edison* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983) p. 5.

which she tried to grasp the mutual relations. In order to maintain the necessary distance from what seemed to be a universal drama, she scattered her (Swedish) text with lamentations about her protagonist and remarks about the dilemmas in the research. These, however, were lost in translation to the English text.<sup>2</sup>

What other experiments have been done with biography and have the newly written celebrated biographies been tainted by such experiments? To discuss such and other questions we drew up the following program:

### **Three key note lectures – (English spoken)**

In the morning, Yvonne Hirdman (Stockholm University, who besides her biography of Alva Myrdal wrote a prize winning book on her mother, and Elisabeth Leijnse (University of Namur), winner of the two-annual Biografieprijs 2016 will discuss their biographies considering the way in which and to what extent these biographies represent the urge to ‘rewrite biography’. Biographer and biography critic Thomas Etzemüller (University of Oldenburg) will likewise reflect on his practical and theoretical biographical work, and will draw some general comparisons with the more traditional or classical, historical forms of biography.

### **Masterclass (Dutch/English)**

During a master class biographers in the making may present their work in progress to an expert who is especially invited to comment on the specific biography. A selection of three master class students (who may be retired but passionate biographers) will be made. Whoever is interested can apply by writing before September 30<sup>th</sup> (but rather as soon as possible) to [r.van.de.wal@rug.nl](mailto:r.van.de.wal@rug.nl).

### **Biographer’s Market – poster presentations (with short Dutch spoken speeches)**

The working group Biography also invites every biographer who finished a biography or is in the process of writing one to present his or her work with a poster in the biographer’s market. Please let us know before September 30<sup>th</sup> (but rather as soon as possible) whether you will actively participate in the poster market by contacting: [r.van.de.wal@rug.nl](mailto:r.van.de.wal@rug.nl). Applicants will receive an easy to follow instructions manual for making a poster. We will print the poster for you on A1 format. A few talked-about (and talkative) biographers will be invited personally to give a small soapbox presentation at their posters.

### **Closing lecture (Dutch spoken)**

The closing lecture will be delivered by Elisabeth Lockhorn who wrote the prize winning biography of Andreas Burnier.

### **Participation**

Participants can sign up at Rozemarijn van de Wal: [r.van.de.wal@rug.nl](mailto:r.van.de.wal@rug.nl).

Entrance fee: € 20 (subscribers to the *Tijdschrift voor Biografie* and/or poster presenters and/or students € 15).

---

<sup>2</sup> Yvonne Hirdman, *Der tänkande hjärtat. Boken om Alva Myrdal* (Stockholm: Ordfront, 2006); Idem, *Alva Myrdal. The passionate mind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).