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### History Made More Scholarly and Also More Popular: A Nineteenth-Century Paradox

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# The Making of the Humanities

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*The Modern Humanities*

Edited by  
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Jaap Maat and  
Thijs Weststeijn

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## 3.2 History Made More Scholarly and Also More Popular

### *A Nineteenth-Century Paradox*

MARITA MATHIJSSEN

The Game of the Goose (*Ganzenbord*) is the name of a traditional game with dice and pawns still played by many a Dutch family. Its popularity goes back to the Dutch Golden Age. You throw dice to get from field 1 to the winning field 63. Along the way you surmount various obstacles – a pit, a thorn bush, or a churchyard may throw you back or get you stuck until somebody else's pawn lands in the same field, thus setting you free again. Some other fields assist your advance, e.g., you may throw a second time and thus keep moving your pawn ahead. I recently discovered a nineteenth-century variety of the Game of the Goose with pictures of historical events that determine both the obstacles and the chances for quick advance. If you move ahead to the picture for 1789, 'Beginning of the Revolution', you must start the game all over again. If, by contrast, you land on the year 656, 'Conversion of the Heathen', you receive a reward. This peculiar family game of 1816 makes it crystal clear that history has become common property; it has been tailor-made without more ado for the historical aim it is meant to serve.<sup>1</sup> We have here just one particular consequence of the changes that have meanwhile taken place in people's conception of the past. Ordinary people have learned to deal with history. This in its turn is a consequence of history having turned public. It is as if in the nineteenth century history has moved from the closed spaces of society halls and stately rooms of well-educated noblemen to the living room, no longer necessarily stately but just run-of-the-mill. History has become part of collective memory, thus stepping into public space.

Until far into the eighteenth century history is private cultural property, both materially and immaterially so. It may be present in public space, as with early buildings or ruins, but there is no sense of an added quality of historical patrimony. These are just early buildings, which may or may not be in actual use for some specific purpose. History is present in collective memory only where the locals look back upon something extraordinarily impressive, as, for instance, a large natural disaster. For the rest, the past is in the hands of specialists, of lawyers,

of political and church authorities. It is being examined by narrowly confined, scholarly circles, united in societies or connected with the academy. Or history is being cultivated in the circles of amateur antiquarians, who are likewise united in societies, partly the same as those of the scholars. The boundaries between amateur and scholar, then, are not very strictly drawn. No chairs for the recent history of the fatherland do yet exist; in the academy everything is still directed toward antiquity and its classic texts.<sup>2</sup>

By the mid-eighteenth century, views of history begin to alter all over Europe. I shall distinguish between, and address successively, investigators of history of three different kinds, all of whom contributed to this large-scale development in their own way. Next, I show that these men began to tread other, so far unexamined historical territory, thus attracting another kind of audience. So we encounter trespasses wherever we look – of disciplines, of target audiences, and of objects of study.

We cannot assign a precise birthday to when this new vision of the past emerges. But it is easy to establish that an orientation toward history is growing everywhere. So much is certain that two editions of medieval poetry, which hit the British market almost simultaneously, have greatly furthered the breakthrough of history toward a large audience. In 1765 James Macpherson published his collected Ossian poetry, or rather Ossian forgery. Ossian became popular all over Europe, and even though some doubt about authenticity arose at once, belief in Ossian proved near-unassailable. In the Netherlands we may even speak of dual mystification. Willem Bilderdijk, the leading Romantic poet of his time, translated Ossian for the Dutch market, all the while asserting that his own translation was closer to the – imagined – original Gaelic documents, as he had allegedly consulted them in person! True, Derick Thomson demonstrated in 1952 that Macpherson really recorded authentic, orally transmitted songs and really inspected early texts, yet it remains true that the largest part of Ossian's work stems from Macpherson's own pen.<sup>3</sup>

Equally important is the definitely authentic collection of early ballads that Bishop Thomas Percy published in the same year 1765 under the title *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. The bishop had found a medieval folio manuscript in a friend's kitchen, where the maid used it to kindle the fire. He took it home, edited the ballads in a fairly rigid manner, supplemented them with a few from other sources, and had them published.

The seed of the semi-forgery, Macpherson, and of the sincere amateur, Percy, spread over all of Europe. Now an interest arises in vernacular editions, and a scholarly editing discipline emerges, in which the attainments of classical philology are extended toward its vernacular counterpart. But they also influence the historical turn in literary fiction – between c. 1780 and c. 1840 one finds hardly

an author anywhere in Europe who has not written a historical romance, play, or novel. Percy's ballads and Macpherson's *Ossian* have an impact on all historically oriented poets and novelists of Romanticism, from Goethe to Bilderdijk, from Coleridge to Walter Scott, from Lamartine to Victor Hugo.

Another revolution in the scholarly pursuit of history that may be dated to the period is less tightly connected to the *Ossian*/Percy hype. This particular revolution has more to do with Enlightenment thinking and with new standards being set for the sciences. In what follows I shall show how editors, literary authors, and historians explored new pathways at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, with enduring results over the entire nineteenth century up to and including our own time.

### **Scholarly standards for history writing, and an appeal to the imagination**

The emergence of scholarly standards for history writing Europe-wide is marked by Wilhelm von Humboldt's establishing in 1810 a university in Berlin. From all over Germany he attracted interesting historians. His prime showpiece was Barthold Niebuhr, a specialist in Roman history who immersed himself in the Reformation. Niebuhr wanted to write objective history: 'I seek to denude of all its foreign components a skeleton of fossil bones carelessly scraped together'.<sup>4</sup> He was succeeded by Theodor Mommsen, who focused on reliable text editions all the while his primary end was to turn history into fine stories – a goal he attained so eminently that early in the twentieth century the effort even earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The no less well-known historian Leopold von Ranke was also a professor at Berlin University. Ranke was concerned above all with establishing rigorous scholarly methods for the writing of history, which entailed a critical examination of the sources. As a born storyteller he managed to engage large groups of readers. He consequently regarded historiography as a profession halfway between the arts and the sciences. Strict methods should not stand in the way of the historian pleasing his readers in an aesthetic sense, too.<sup>5</sup>

The striving for objectivity demonstrated by Niebuhr, Ranke, and like-minded scholars made its way all over Europe. Lorraine Daston has pointed out that it is rather an anachronism to use the term 'objectivity' for the early nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> I stick to the term nonetheless, in the sense of a striving for reliability. The requirement of objectivity became ever more compelling, and standards for a solid education in history kept being raised. Most universities had departments for ancient history but none for the history of their own country. These came

into being in course of the nineteenth century. In the Netherlands this happened fairly late; the first chair in the History of the Fatherland (a term still in use today) dates from 1831. In France, a curriculum for archivists was set up in 1821. All over Europe source editions appeared, as indispensable groundwork for reliable historiography. France produced a series entitled *Collection de Documents inédits sur l'histoire de la France*. German historians found each other in a series of medieval source editions entitled *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, with for nationalist-Romantic epigraph *Sanctus amor patriae dat animum* – ‘a holy love of the fatherland grants us the true spirit’.

This new way of writing history is linked up quite closely with a higher-profile innovation in historiography – the Romantic variety. Thomas Macaulay described his objective thus: ‘The perfect historian is he in whose work the character and spirit of an age is exhibited in miniature.’<sup>7</sup> A historian such as Ranke, then, takes part in both currents: he insists on scholarly reliability but also wants to ascertain the real meaning and significance of past facts.

Around the 1820s the ‘nouvelle histoire’ starts with authors like Prosper Amable Barante, Augustin Thierry, and Jules Michelet, all of whom come up against their eighteenth-century predecessors. Thierry goes even farther than the others. He accuses them of impoverishing the past – life and inspiration are lacking in their narratives. Also, their accounts fail to narrate the true history, which is one of citizens and their striving for liberty. The new history writing ought to be not conventional, not rhetorical, not solemn, but in constant motion. No one phrased these principles in finer words than Alfred de Vigny, who wrote that history is a novel, with the people for its author.<sup>8</sup>

A Romantic historian saw the past as a rhythmical alternation of periods of flourishing and of decay, with huge crises possibly occurring in between. They derived this insight, surely from the classics, but more specifically from the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, whom Michelet translated into French. Johann Gottfried von Herder provided German history with a similar cycle. In this manner the French Revolution acquired a place in history, as it now became possible to compare it with earlier historical crises, such as barbarian invasions of the Migration Period (fourth to eighth centuries). The new historian to describe these processes was compared with Champollion, who deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphs.<sup>9</sup>

It was in line with such aims that Barante engaged in battle with the novelist Walter Scott – it should be possible to tell a captivating historical narrative *without* using fiction. Thierry insisted that the historian should set himself up as a judge of the past – an ideal of neutrality was not for him! He also pleaded for the writing of history, not only *about* all classes of society, but also *for* them, that is, for popularization. The most famous of all French Romantic historians, Jules

Michelet, regarded his craft as literary writing of a special kind. His nationalism and the attention he paid to oppressed parties can still be detected in current thinking about French history.

In other countries, too, Romantic historians gained a firm foothold, which differed for each nationality. We already saw that in Germany the objective school of historians also counted in its ranks storytellers like Mommsen or Ranke – objectivity in a neat dress. England had its own great narrators, like Thomas Carlyle, who wrote with a passionate intensity hitherto unknown in historical writing, and Thomas Macaulay, in such splendid command of the rhetoric of the black-and-white story. In an essay entitled ‘History’ (1828) Macaulay voiced his annoyance over contemporary historiography:

While our historians are practicing all the arts of controversy, they miserably neglect the art of narration, the art of interesting the affections and presenting pictures to the imagination. [...] A history in which every particular incident may be true, may on the whole be false.<sup>10</sup>

He pointed out that official historians were given to filling hundreds of folios with state events, making no mention whatever of changes in customs and morals, of poverty and wealth, which have such an outstanding influence on humanity’s sense of life.

So we are watching here a dual process of simultaneous exclusion *and* widening. In the universities history is turned into a scholarly craft, thus establishing itself as an academic discipline of a small number of practitioners writing for small, specialized audiences. At the same time the Romantic historians attract a new, large public in their effort to draw the writing of history out of closed into public space. In so doing they widen the fields of history: no longer histories of princes and their wars but the history of common people, their customs and their ways of life.

### **Editors as historians**

We have already seen that philologists were at the very forefront of the new interest in the past. Their numbers increase quickly, due among other things to the circumstance that during the French Revolution many medieval manuscripts come into public possession. With these editors, too, we witness a heightening of scholarly standards. But here, too, there is at the same time a noticeable movement toward larger audiences and toward other, more popular sources from the past. In the eighteenth century already, Herder was out to collect popular songs



– an effort continued by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano in a similar collection entitled *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm also swim with this current of attention paid to the people and its collective character. They collect fairy tales, chase medieval manuscripts, and set high standards for the scholarly reliability of their publications. On the basis of the attainments of classical philology, their friend Karl Lachmann, a philologist at the University of Berlin, develops a scholarly method for editions in the vernacular – a method which once again spreads all over Europe. Just as with the historians, there are among the editors men who aim for a large audience and who know how to play it. Other editors aim for scholarly specialization, thus narrowing the market. These two pathways merge with the Grimm brothers – fairy tales for the people, scholarly editions for the academy.<sup>11</sup> This is true likewise for editions of medieval texts. Popular editions of texts like the *Nibelungenlied*, simple and cheap, may appear at the same time as scholarly editions of the same text, but now furnished with variant readings and with comments meant for fellow scholars. Widening takes place here as well. Previously the attention of philologists was directed primarily toward classic texts in Greek or Latin, or upon medieval chronicles in the vernacular, but now narrative texts in the vernacular may likewise boast scholarly attention.

### Literary authors as history writers

Artists, too, felt at liberty to occupy themselves with history. Eighteenth-century experts had formed a closed world – a phenomenon to repeat itself when, by the end of the nineteenth, professionalization becomes predominant. But in between, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the most prominent historians are artists in search of a large audience. Authors like Walter Scott or Victor Hugo, or the painter Géricault, may well have contributed even more to people's historical awareness than, say, Ranke or Thierry.

Particularly remarkable is how literary fiction manages to colonize history. In one sense this is, of course, nothing new – seventeenth-century drama often used historical matter, and medieval tales frequently went back to the past as well. What is novel, is the expansion toward new genres, to the history of the fatherland, and also the massive scale on which all this takes place. Here Walter Scott is the pivot – both in his poetry and in his novels he breaks new ground, soon to be covered all over Europe. Narrative history, notably about the Middle Ages, becomes popular on a scale without any precedent.

Not that popularization, as also the move toward imaginative genres, fails to meet with objections of a theoretical nature. Journal articles point at the histori-

cal novel as a hybrid genre, it has been called 'history in ballroom garb',<sup>12</sup> and serious historians fear that readers' tastes will be corrupted by just imagined history, so that public interest in their objective history will wane. These risks look rather overdone in retrospect – it is impossible to find an era when there was a larger interest in history and when more novel functions for it were being developed than precisely the nineteenth century. Literary authors themselves argued that their imagination and their imitation of 'couleur locale' might well yield a better picture of an era than historians are able to produce.

In short, literary authors are responsible for history really turning into a popular possession. The professionalization of the historians might have led to history withdrawing further into the sphere of the academy. That this did not happen, is due to the evocative force of literary authors who, on a massive scale, began to write historical novels, drama, and poetry.

### **Transgression and expansion**

I have now pointed at students of history of three kinds – the editors, who become true scholars but also seek to popularize; the historians, who professionalize and seek objectivity all the while taking a stance as romantic users of their historical imagination; finally, those literary authors who jump on board of the ship of history. Quite remarkably, these three distinct categories are often united in one person. Walter Scott was an editor, a historian, and a literary author, and hardly a failure in any of these respects. The same is true of Goethe, of Willem Bilderdijk, and of other leading public moralists. No problem is involved here in their own view – their border transgression requires no passport.

Disciplines are being transgressed, then, not only inside the humanities but also from the outside, as we need hardly doubt that the new standards for the cultivation of history by editors and historians have been influenced by innovations in the exact sciences of the Enlightenment. Take an editor like Lachmann, who constructed his stemma hypothesis in a manner deliberately similar to William Jones' language family tree, but possibly inspired as well by the analysis of earth strata in new fields like geology or paleontology.

The object of study is not only transcended, it is also expanded. If history ceases to consider nothing but battles and political events, there is much new history to be written. This is more than history from a novel point of view, it is also the writing of a history of a people, of its habits, its customs, its morals. This is what Macaulay meant when addressing the fake objectivity of official history writing:

The circumstances which have most influence on the happiness of mankind, the changes of manners and morals, the transition of communities from poverty to wealth, from ignorance to knowledge, from ferocity to humanity – these are, for the most part, noiseless revolutions. Their progress is rarely indicated by what historians are pleased to call important events. They are not achieved by armies, or enacted by senates. They are sanctioned by no treaties, and recorded in no archives.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, so he argues, historians extol political victories, even though these have as a rule worked out miserably for the population at large.

The Netherlands were at the forefront of such expanded attention to the fate of the people, with a considerable impact upon authors abroad. Between 1749 and 1759 the amateur historian Jan Wagenaar published a twenty-one-volume *History of the Fatherland*, which was all about the past of the Dutch people and its struggle for liberation. As such, Wagenaar was far ahead of French historians when these, too, took up the theme of liberation. Abbreviated German translations of Wagenaar's tomes were read by both Goethe and Schiller. The latter used it for his drama *Don Karlos* (1787). In course of the nineteenth century popular culture habitually received a place in official histories.<sup>14</sup> In the Netherlands the schoolmaster Jan ter Gouw retold in the second half of the century the history of the Dutch Golden Age, viewed from the perspective of everyday life of the common people, with attention being paid to toys, games, habits, the kitchen, signposts, expressions.

## Urgency

We return to Europe and to the background of this all-round fascination with history. Its urgency is closely tied up with the rise of nationalism. Processes of nation formation needed history, and history flourished due to the demand that came from these very processes. Each emerging nation at the time sought to legitimize itself by an appeal to the past, be it mythologized or genuine. Large groups of people acquired a sense of history, as a large variety of media kept instilling in them the idea that history belonged to themselves. The public at large came under the spell of history through a process of ongoing appropriation.

Paradoxically enough, the urgency of history was stimulated likewise by an awareness that past and present are not of one and the same guise. A sudden breakthrough of a sense of history may also induce a feeling of estrangement. According to Reinhart Koselleck, around 1800 the experience of a unity of present and past gets lost, due to the very upheavals of the French Revolution.<sup>15</sup>

The past is different, and it requires an expert approach in that particular quality. It is no longer immediately applicable, so he argues, and thus it becomes a contemplative scholarly discipline. Peter Fritzsche, too, regards the Revolution as a trauma, due to which the past is no longer experienced as being one's own.<sup>16</sup>

In 1828 Macaulay made another interesting comparison. He saw the reader of history as a traveler to regions yet unknown:

The effect of historical reading is analogous, in many respects, to that produced by foreign travel. The student, like the tourist, is transported into a new state of society. He sees new fashions. He hears new modes of expression. His mind is enlarged by contemplating the wide diversities of laws, of morals, and of manners.<sup>17</sup>

This, then, is what Koselleck meant with his 'estrangement', and this very strangeness of history makes its ongoing appropriation such an intriguing feat, as also appears from a fascinating study by David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*.<sup>18</sup>

The effects of the explosive interest in history are reflected in the book market and in the diversity of ways in which history is being published. The Netherlands saw numerous editions of Wagenaar's work: straightforward reprints of his twenty-one-volume *History*, school books based thereon, versions for children, versions for less educated grown-ups, short versions, illustrated luxury editions, versions in question-and-answer format. Moreover, in various countries abbreviated translations saw the light of day.<sup>19</sup> When we examine the print histories of all great European historians, we see the same thing. In addition, the print runs of historical novels are larger than would ever have been thought possible. The same goes for books for children filled with historical matter, also for history journals, surveys, and illustrated histories for a large audience. Pertinent statistics show a vastly enlarged interest in history.

Even so, the fields of tension remain the same. On the one hand, there is professionalization and academization, hence, a curtailment of the massive spread of history. On the other hand, there is the democratization of the past, with its expansion of the reading public in level and in age. Every practitioner of history in the nineteenth century seems to have doubts about his proper role. The academic historian wonders whether he may appropriate for his own ends the tools of the literary author, whereas the latter wants to be a historian as well. The dilemma is with us still.

## Notes

- 1 *Nieuw Historie spel van Nederland* (Amsterdam: H. Moolenijzer, 1815). Collection Historisch Museum Deventer (1974-0044).
- 2 The hypotheses developed in this chapter sum up conclusions attained in my recent book *Historiezucht* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2013).
- 3 See Dafyld Moore (ed.), *Ossian and Ossianism* (London: Routledge, 2004), vols. 1-4.
- 4 As quoted in Reginald De Schryver, *Historiografie. Vijftiengint eeuwen geschiedschrijving van West-Europa* (Leuven, Assen: Universitaire Pers, Van Gorcum, 1990), 184.
- 5 For this survey of historiographical change I have used De Schryver, *Historiografie*, and Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Further: Jo Tollebeek, *De illusionisten. Geschiedenis en cultuur in de Franse Romantiek* (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 2000); Jo Tollebeek, Georgi Verbeek and Tom Verschaffel (red.), *De lectuur van het verleden. Opstellen over de geschiedenis van de geschiedschrijving aangeboden aan Reginald de Schryver* (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 1998); Hayden White, *The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1973); Daniël Woolf et al. (eds.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing, Vol. 4: 1800-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 6 See p. 27-41 in this volume.
- 7 Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'History', in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (Philadelphia: Caney & Hart, 1841), vol. 1, 192.
- 8 See Tollebeek, *De illusionisten*, 56, 64.
- 9 See among others Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), and *idem*, 'Literary Historicism: Romanticism, Philologists, and the Presence of the Past', *Modern Language Quarterly* 65 (2004), 221-243.
- 10 Macaulay, 'History', 188-190.
- 11 See among others Joep Leerssen, *De bronnen van het vaderland. Taal, literatuur en de afbakening van Nederland, 1806-1890* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2006); *idem*, 'Literary Historicism'; Marita Mathijsen, 'Stages in the Development of Dutch Literary Historicism', in Dirk van Hulle and Joep Leerssen (eds.), *Editing the Nation's Memory: Textual Scholarship and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2008), 287-303.
- 12 I take the expression from the title of a study about critics of historical novels by J. van der Wiel, *De geschiedenis in balkostuum. De historische roman in de Nederlandse literaire kritiek (1808-1874)* (Leuven, Apeldoorn: Garant, 1999). This title is borrowed in its turn from a certain book review that appeared in the nineteenth century.
- 13 Macaulay, 'History', 190.
- 14 See Anne-Marie Thiesse, 'Modernising the Past: The Life of the Gauls under the French Republic', in Lotte Jensen, Joep Leerssen, and Marita Mathijsen (eds.), *Free Access to the Past: Romanticism, Cultural Heritage and the Nation* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), 43-54; Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales. Europe XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999).
- 15 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985). About Koselleck, see also, among others, 'TOR', *De opstand van de intellectuelen. De Franse revolutie als avant-première van de moderne cultuur* (Amsterdam, Kapellen: Pelckmans, 1989), and N.C.F. van Sas, *De metamorfose van Nederland. Van oude orde naar moderniteit, 1750-1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004).

- 16 Peter Fritzsche, 'The Melancholy of History: Disenchantment and the Possibility of Narrative after the French Revolution', in Lotte Jensen, Joep Leerssen, and Marita Mathijssen (eds.), *Free Access to the Past: Romanticism, Cultural Heritage and the Nation* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), 3-20; Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- 17 Macaulay, 'History', 191.
- 18 D. Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 19 For Wagenaar's influence, see: L.H.M. Wessels, *Bron, waarheid en de verandering der tijden. Jan Wagenaar (1709-17730), een historiografische studie*. Hollandse Historische Reeks 27 (The Hague: Stichting Hollandse Historische Reeks, [1997]).