

Hans Renders and Binne de Haan
Biography Institute/University of Groningen

Richard Holmes: A Biographer-Historian *Par Excellence*. Uncovering the Roots and Methodology of the Modern Field Work of a Romantic and Humanistic Biographer

The British biographer Richard Holmes (1945-) hardly needs introduction in the field of Biography Studies, especially since British production of and reflection on biography is one of the dominant schools in the field. Since his first biography *Shelley: The Pursuit*, published in 1974, Holmes is one of England's most famous biographers, probably even one of the most famous in the world. He is particularly well known as a master of 'literary biography,' in the two meanings of the concept: he is famous for his biographies of Romantic authors—studying *literary* subjects—, and he often has been praised for his skills in storytelling and style—his *literary* skills. Holmes gained further prominence after 1974 as biographer of British literary giants like Coleridge, Samuel Johnson, and Mary Wollstonecraft.¹ His hybrid book *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1985), in which Holmes combined the genres of biography, travel writing and autobiography, became a classic, at least in professional biographical and literary circles.² In the last two decades, Holmes published two more volumes of collected essays on the arts and crafts of doing biography, and he published another two successful books, books that were not biographies but resulted from biographical research, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (2008) and *Falling Upwards: How We Took to the Air* (2013).³

Holmes not only wrote highly acclaimed biographical works that were translated abroad, but he also became one of the ambassadors of the genre of biography, speaking internationally about the importance and values of the biographical pursuit. In the last years he played this role of ambassador as critic of biographies for *The New York Review of Books*. In 2001, Holmes was installed as Professor in Biographical Studies at the University of East-Anglia, Norwich, and taught courses in biography at the

¹ Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974; Richard Holmes, *Coleridge (Past Masters)*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982; Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1989/Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*, New York, Harper Press, 1998; Richard Holmes, *De Feministe en de Filosoof; Een liefdesgeschiedenis*, translated by Eugène Dabekausen, Barbara de Lange and Tilly Maters [*The Feminist and the Philosopher*, 1988], Amsterdam/Antwerpen/Utrecht, Contact, 1989; Richard Holmes, *Dr Johnson & Mr. Savage*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1993.

² Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1985.

³ The volumes of the collected essays, in a way regarded as successors to *Footsteps* (see the parallels in the subtitles), are: *Sidetracks: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer*, New York, Harper Press, 2000; *This Long Pursuit: Reflections of a Romantic Biographer*, London, William Collins, 2016.

university's creative writing department, thus continuing the strong tradition of this university in creative writing courses.

In his position as a biographer-ambassador, Holmes wrote several theoretical essays on biography as a methodology and genre.⁴ He reflected deeply on the challenge and craft of biography in his famous *Footsteps* too, and in the volumes of collected essays succeeding it. In all of this the image of biography as a personal, romantic and humanistic activity emerges. Holmes has revealed his deep personal engagement with the past not only in his writings, but also in interviews, and this engagement is indeed the essential subject material of his *Footsteps*. Famous is the anecdote that Holmes once dated a check for a bank transfer 1772 instead of 1972, thus setting the example of a historian who is living in the past rather than in the present. In this way, the biographical enterprise is portrayed as a pursuit, by Holmes himself and in public portrayals of Holmes.

And indeed, Holmes's approach consists of Holmes literally following the footsteps of his protagonists, travelling to the same places they have been, following the same routes. The Holmesian biographer is being haunted by the past, and is engaged in a continuous dialogue with this past. This leads to his unique and seemingly 'full' understanding of the biographical past he examines. Holmes was not only studying Romantic figures and their age, but he was becoming Romantic himself, a 'Romantic biographer,' as Holmes himself also characterized his role in the subtitle of *Footsteps* and its two successors. In *Footsteps*, the autobiographical stake of conducting biography was expressed in full light. Holmes unveiled the dimension of 'self-expression and/or self-discovery' that guided his education as a biographer.⁵

His development into and total embodiment of the dedicated biographer-historian has led to no small results, to say the least. Holmes has been widely acknowledged for both his narrative and interpretative skills. Since his debut, all his major works have been awarded prizes. 'No writer alive and working in English today writes better about the past than Holmes,' *The New York Times* wrote in 2013.⁶ Holmes combines his skills in storytelling with deep historical understanding. How can we interpret and analyze these major achievements? The aim of this article is to assess Holmes' approach from a more academic perspective, specifically the historical-biographical perspective, thus analyzing in a more down-to-earth mode, so to speak, the scholarly value of Holmes's haunting journey in biography.

To add to this, from the start of his career, Holmes self-consciously presented the aspect of haunting as an important part of his approach. The last sentence of the introduction to his first biography, dating from 1974, ends with the words 'that Shelley's life seems more a haunting than a history.' But rather than doubling and repeating the interpretation that Holmes himself, as a very conscious writer and scholar, grants to his work, what can be said of Holmes's work when a fresh perspective on the

⁴ Richard Holmes, 'Biography: Inventing the Truth,' in John Batchelor (ed.), *The Art of Literary Biography*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 15-25; Richard Holmes, *De biografie en de dood. Huizinga-lezing 1997*, Amsterdam, Bert Bakker, 1997; Richard Holmes, 'The Proper Study?,' in Peter France and William St Clair (eds.), *Mapping Lives. The Uses of Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 7-18.

⁵ Nichola Anne Haxell, 'Footsteps and Hauntings: The Theory and Practice of the "Romantic Biographer"' in Richard Holmes's *Footsteps* and Jacques Reda's *Le Sens de la marche*, *Orbis Litterarum*, No. 53(1998), p. 355.

⁶ Paul Elie, 'Upper Atmospherics. Review of *Falling Upwards* by Richard Holmes,' *The New York Times*, 15 November 2013.

sources and functioning of his approach is offered, apart from the already known characteristics? Can the approach Holmes applies to his work be illuminated by applying certain qualifications? In what way is he a 'literary biographer,' a non-fiction writer, a 'biographer-historian,' or perhaps a microhistorian? This article will attempt to explore possibilities in defining Holmes's approach based on his work. Eventually, it will try to answer the question of whether we can discern a basic theoretical framework in all of Holmes's work, or a development in this framework throughout his career that emerges from his approach, whether intentionally or unintentionally. What are the theoretical assumptions that can be deduced from his operational method as a biographer-historian?

Holmes also has been denoted as epitomizing the 'neo-romantic' school in biography in the 1970s and 1980s. He fitted in a new tendency in which fictive techniques were openly integrated in biographies. Crucial for Holmes in this process is the competition in imagination between the biographer and the subject. The real biographical process starts where the naive identification of the biographer with the subject ends. Holmes's program as a biographer then is one of pursuit and exploration of the inner truth of his protagonists.⁷ On the occasion of his professorship in biographical studies, Holmes wrote a programmatic essay on biography as an academic subject, 'Biography: The Proper Study?'. He concluded the essay with Ten Commandments. With a touch of witticism, Holmes himself called this ending an 'ironic postscript' after his exposition of 'neo-romantic aspirations for biography.' Nevertheless, these Commandments also witness some of Holmes's inclinations in esteeming what is important for biography.⁸ It is time to uncover the roots and methodology of the essential 'modern' field work of the romantic and humanistic biographer that Holmes seemingly is, and these Commandments can do good service as beacons to navigate this *terra Holmesiana*.

1. Thou shalt honour Biography as living, experimental, and multifarious in all its Forms.

Holmes has been dubbed an 'experimental' biographer. Why? Was his approach that deviating, when compared to other modern biographers? Was his first biography in 1974 perceived already as experimental? For sure, in 1985 Holmes presented with his *Footsteps* a style figure that hardly could and can be copied: the biographer as an integral part of the story, while placing the biographical, historical story on the same footing. Since *Footsteps*, every biographer dreams of executing precisely this, but it is hard to conduct this task at the same level as Holmes has done. In *Footsteps* the reader accepts the fact that the biographer enters the stage. The historical-biographical *fascination* Holmes demonstrates clearly is essential for Holmes's historical-biographical *explanations*. This integration of fascination and explanation perhaps can be regarded as the source of all successful historical work. *Footsteps*, then, was not a

⁷ James Walter, "'The Solace of Doubt'?: Biographical Methodology after the Short Twentieth Century,' France and St Clair (eds.), *Mapping Lives, op. cit.*, p. 321-335.

⁸ Richard Holmes, 'The Proper Study?', France and St Clair (eds.), *Mapping Lives, op. cit.*, p. 7-18. The Commandments we comment here can be found on p. 18.

‘proper’ biography, and the question is whether ‘proper’ biography may admit such a large share of autobiography without losing its claim to be a biography.

The experimental dimension should rather be found in the methodological form biographical research assumes in Holmes’s work. *Footsteps*, *Sidetracks*, *This Long Pursuit*, and *The Age of Wonder* originated from profound biographical research, as is the case with *Falling Upwards*, but these works are not biographies. Rather the author shows that a certain knowledge field can be enriched by implementing the personal story as a driving force for change and progress. Holmes shows that it isn’t processes that change the world first and foremost, but above all human beings who propel these processes.

Footsteps confirmed the public image of Richard Holmes as a ‘famous biographer.’ The parallel with the author of another biographical ‘experiment’ that was published a year later, Julian Barnes, who wrote *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1986), is striking. Barnes also gained prominence thanks to an innovative biographical venture, but would remain a novelist rather than develop into a biographer.

2. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s Novel, for there are as many rooms in the Mansion of Non-Fiction as there are in the House of Fiction.

Holmes expanded his image as biography ambassador with a theoretical enthusiasm for biography as a genre: his professorship and courses are testimonies to that interest, as are the analyses of biographies and biographical procedures he has published on several occasions. A striking example is *Dr Johnson & Mr Savage*, that has been called a ‘biography of a biography’—in this case of Johnson’s *The Life of Richard Savage* (1744). In his work on Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin (1987) Holmes scrutinizes the latter’s biographical approach of Wollstonecraft. In ‘Biography: Inventing the Truth’ he offers sharp characterizations of the landmarks in the history of biography, the works of Samuel Johnson and James Boswell.

In these reflections Holmes eloquently analyzed general challenges of the genre, the way other biographers had conducted their task, and he too dealt with the topic Virginia Woolf addressed in her analysis of the emergence of New Biography in Great Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. This topic is the seemingly never-ending debate on how in biography the story-telling aspect of literature and the research component of writing history or journalism are combined. Woolf coined the image of biography as ‘granite and rainbow,’ referring to the way in which the retrieval of facts and the interpretation of personality can be combined in the biographical enterprise. Holmes elaborated on this topic in his 1995 essay, ‘Biography: Inventing the Truth,’ coining as a solution for this problem the metaphor of biography as a handshake with the past.⁹

Next to this metaphor, in the same essay Holmes engaged in the idea of regarding biography as a ‘coffee-house form,’ situating the birth of modern, critical biography in a period of enormous growth of coffee-houses in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, contrasting it with the development of the novel, that emerged thanks to an ‘architecture of growing privacy,’ with private rooms. Holmes concluded that ‘biography could thus be seen as a coffee-house form.’ Biography then is regarded

⁹ Holmes, ‘Biography: Inventing the Truth,’ *op. cit.*

as a narrative that is lively as a tale, to be told for an audience to be entertained, while at the same time playing a role in public matters and debate. Biography is seen as a relevant public medium, given the role it plays in the formation of public opinion.¹⁰ This indeed is a direction in which biography as a non-fiction genre can surpass the fiction/fact debate: in studying its public meaning and its contribution to public debate, in the spirit of biography as a critical genre, whatever form it takes.

Nevertheless, Holmes never neglected the great importance of imagination for the historian-biographer. One of his often cited quotations is his statement that a biographer must ‘dream’ (a word he uses often and with pleasure), and therefore should be an example of a *literary* biographer—we presume this means a biographer who wishes to write like a novelist. However, in his theoretical reflections on biography, Holmes distinguishes in biographical research between archival field work and the interpretative ‘dreamwork’ a biographer performs. This often has caused misunderstanding: a biographer cannot solely rely on ‘dreamwork,’ on the contrary, this ‘dreamwork’ is possible only when the field work has been conducted thoroughly.

On the eve of his Huizinga lecture in 1997, on November 14, presented in St. Peter’s Church in Leiden, an abridged version of this lecture was published in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*.¹¹ In this text, Holmes divided his working process in three phases:

- collecting the materials, the deskwork;
- the fieldwork, on the road, visiting locations, interviewing people;
- the writing, the dreamwork.

The difference with the ‘normal’ historian really is not in the last phase. There are truly historians who use their imaginative power (dreamwork). *The Waning of the Middle Ages* by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, from whom the lecture derives its title, meets the demands of all these phases, without giving anybody reason to call this evergreen from 1919, translated into many languages, a novel. The biographer, the historian and every non-fiction writer is allowed to ‘dream within his sources,’ and this last point is the essential difference with the novelist. Above all, the biographer is a historian, that is what Holmes tries to make clear with this second Commandment. It has been suggested elsewhere that biographers can be distinguished as either ‘beavers’ or ‘butterflies.’ The beavers closely follow their sources; the butterflies allow themselves more independence from their documentation.¹² In short, many of the admirers of Holmes apply faulty reading when they try to interpret what he means by ‘dreamwork’.

¹⁰ There have been some studies on biography as a public and journalistic medium, but this still is an area in the field of Biography Studies that deserves more attention: Hans Renders, *De zeven hoofdzonden van de biografie: over biografen, historici en journalisten*, Amsterdam, Bert Bakker, 2007; H. Renders, ‘Roots of Biography: From Journalism to Pulp to Scholarly Based Non-Fiction,’ Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (eds.), *Theoretical Discussions of Biography. Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2013, p. 35-62.

¹¹ The full text of this lecture has been published as Holmes, *De biografie en de dood*, *op. cit.*

¹² Martin Ros, ‘Een nieuwe toekomst van de biografie,’ *Maatstaf*, No. 38.9/10 (1990), p. 2-7.

3. Thou shalt recognize that Biography is always at best a Celebration of Human Nature, and all its glorious Contradictions.

Richard Holmes stated in ‘Biography: Inventing the Truth’ that in biography the ‘fluid, imaginative powers of re-creation pull against the hard body of discoverable fact. The inventive, shaping instinct of the story-teller struggles with the ideal of a permanent, historical, and objective document.’ Therefore, Holmes concludes, ‘biography is something like a handshake, a handshake across time. But it is also an arm-wrestle, even if a friendly one, like most lively marriages.’

There is something problematic with the handshake in favour of which Holmes argues. The handshake seems to indicate you are understanding someone. But if one writes a biography of Hitler for example, one would not easily say: this is a handshake! However, Holmes defended his metaphor in an interview held end of 2016.¹³ ‘The French say: *tout comprendre c’est tout pardonner*—but that is not true, in my opinion. A handshake simply says: I am not prejudiced, I intend to play fair with you. The start of a boxing match also consists of touching each other’s boxing gloves! It is always a mistake to refuse to shake hands. That would mean you are closing the door between you and your subject. In a biography you cannot be permitted to do that. You take the risk of understanding someone, and take all the consequences. Many biographers of the depressed poet Sylvia Plath ended in a nervous breakdown themselves, to draw from the unconscious can be precarious. Biography can be a risky business, like all contact sports!’

4. Thou shalt demand that it be greater than Gossip, because it is concerned with historical Justice and Human Understanding.

The depth of Holmes’s biographical and historical interest is unquestionable. Naturally, a historian does not live in or for the past only. A historian bridges the past to the present. The central question should be: what is the value of the historian’s work nowadays? In this case, what has the work of Richard Holmes to say to us nowadays, what makes his biographical writing and pursuit count for the present? For the field of Biography Studies, the functioning of Holmes’s approach might reveal essential characteristics of biography produced since the 1970s.

In the metaphor of biography as a ‘handshake’ with the past, a physical aspect of conducting biography can be discerned. Holmes indeed tries to do justice to the past by giving deep attention to the traces and documents left by the past—examining them detective-like, like a microhistorian, by presenting them in such a way as to let the past speak for itself properly, but also by interpreting them ingeniously and tactfully as a biographer from the present. Holmes understands like no one else that while a human life develops in historic time, however the interpretation of a life is not necessarily directed by historic structures, but must recognize the paradoxical and individual nature of the decisions people can make.

¹³ Hans Renders and Jeroen Vullings, ‘Een biografie moet rechtvaardigheid brengen,’ *Vrij Nederland*, 19 November 2016, p. 60-67.

One of the fathers of microhistory, or *microstoria*, an Italian-based historical school of thought that emerged in the 1970s, was Carlo Ginzburg. Ginzburg also pointed at this double movement or function of the historian.¹⁴ The historian is a spokesperson for but also interrogator of the past, a past that has once been famously called ‘a foreign country.’¹⁵ The style of Holmes breathes his ambition to explore the past as a foreign country and let it speak for itself. He regularly quotes extensively from poems and letters. In general, his tone is strongly a tone of ‘interpretative reconstruction.’ He respects his protagonists, speaks for them, but also explains them, indeed almost novelist-like, giving the impression in his interpretations that he is immersed within their world, and yet has the calmness to be detached and ‘objective,’ and tell others, us, the readers of today, about it, without spoiling the authenticity of the past.

In the frame of the biographical turn, biographical research can be understood as a specific approach that is applicable within different fields of research, and does not necessarily lead to book-length biographies.¹⁶ The importance Holmes attaches to biographical research as an act of *historical* understanding, recognizing the importance of historical context, eventually indeed caused him to write books that are not directly cradle-to-grave biographies or biographies in the proper use of the word, dedicated to one individual. It brought Holmes to write what we can call ‘group biographies’ or ‘assemblages of mini-biographies.’ In *Footsteps* several protagonists in consecutive chapters already fill the stage. But *The Age of Wonder* and *Falling Upwards* are the most prominent proofs of a mechanism in which biographical research is employed for assembling a collective image. In fact, in hindsight we can observe that this mechanism provided the fundament too for his previous biographical works, in which often other figures near the ‘central’ life, originally perceived as secondary, received much biographical attention too, eventually leading to the later works in which several protagonists on an equal level filled the stage. Traces of group biography, or acknowledging the importance of also paying intense biographical attention to persons next to the main protagonist of the biography, are visible in his first biography on Shelley. Holmes sensitively reconstructs the relationships and contacts of and surrounding Shelley within the so-called Pisan Circle, with Mary Shelley, Claire Clairmont, Jane Williams, Edward John Trelawny, Leigh Hunt, and last but not least Lord Byron.

This development over many years of Holmes as a biographer is not only an interesting observation in the perspective of the field of Biography Studies, but also in the public perception of Holmes as a biographer. The shift away from traditional ‘biography’ perhaps has altered Holmes’s position as a public author, since the general audience still perceives him as a literary biographer, while *The Age of Wonder* is really a history of science book. Biography in general is the more popular form; however,

¹⁴ Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It,’ in Renders and de Haan (eds.), *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, *op. cit.*, p. 139-166; Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Our Words, and Theirs: A Reflection on the Historian’s Craft, Today,’ in Susanna Fellman and Marjatta Rahikainen (eds.), *Historical Knowledge. In Quest of Theory, Method and Evidence*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, p. 97-119.

¹⁵ David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985; D. Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country – Revisited*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015. The phrase is coined by L.P. Hartley at the opening of his novel *The Go-Between* (1963).

¹⁶ Hans Renders, Binne de Haan and Jonne Harmsma (eds.), *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2016.

contradicting this, *The Age of Wonder* was Holmes's first best-seller.¹⁷ It sold over two hundred thousand copies in the United Kingdom and the United States, and was translated into Russian, Chinese and Arabic.¹⁸

An understanding of biography as a scholarly method that can be applied to a broad range of fields and in various forms—the aforementioned biographical turn—is important from a methodological perspective, but also raises the question of the impact of Holmes's work in public debates, with regard to the protagonists and themes explored in his books. What was new in the interpretations he presented us? Are his books not merely skilful assemblages of what we already knew, especially when he does not focus on one person anymore, but on several protagonists?

5. Thou shalt require that it chronicles an outward story (the Facts) only to reveal an inward life (a Comprehensive Truth).

In *This Long Pursuit* Holmes tells us that he owns two hundred notebooks, all illustrating his concept of 'the Two-Sided Notebook,' his format of 'double accounting' during his biographical researches. On the right-hand pages Holmes puts his objective, factual remarks on his subject, on the left-hand pages his subjective, personal experiences. In this way, he can employ his empathy in answering the essential question: what was this human life truly like and what does it mean for us now? Indeed, biography is the fruit of both historical research and imaginative power, and *This Long Pursuit* in this way provides a glimpse behind the scenes during the conception of his oeuvre, the biographies who brought him his fame. *This Long Pursuit* is his most personal book, based on what is written on all these left pages. He provides a telling illustration of the importance of 'an inward life' by presenting an anecdote. Holmes cites Roger North, that subtle seventeenth-century memoir writer (not to be confused with Plutarch's Tudor translator, Thomas North), who crisply summarized the argument as follows: 'What signifies it to us, how many battles Alexander fought. It were more to the purpose to say how often he was drunk.' Holmes is strongly convinced that the form of a biography contributes to a better understanding of its contents. Naturally, this means that a biography, like any other text, should be well written. At the same time it means more than that, it is a realization that biography is being interpreted differently every time. Holmes writes: 'The genre of biography is still regarded as ephemeral and utilitarian, rather than as a permanent art form. It is strongly content-orientated, and it is shelved alphabetically by subject, not by author. Even Boswell is shelved under 'J', for Johnson.' And also in *This Long Pursuit*: 'It is exactly in these shifts and differences—factual, formal, stylistic, ideological, aesthetic—between early and later biographies that students could find an endless source of interest and historical information. They would discover how reputations developed, how fashions changed, how social and moral attitudes moved, how standards of judgment altered, as each generation, one after

¹⁷ Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder. How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*, London, Harper Press, 2008; Elie, 'Upper Atmospheric,' *op. cit.*; Renders and Vullings, 'Een biografie moet rechtvaardigheid brengen,' *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Communication from Richard Holmes to Hans Renders and Jeroen Vullings, London, 22 September 2017.

another, continuously reconsidered and idealised or condemned its forebears in the writing and rewriting of biography.’

6. Thou shalt see that this Truth can be told, and re-examined, again and again unto each Generation.

One way to assess the originality of Holmes’s interpretations is to look at his use of sources. Holmes makes use of a broad range of sources, including a considerable amount of archival, primary sources. This seems to confirm again the thesis that Holmes works to deserve being in a position to provide original interpretations, but eventually perhaps this can only be genuinely confirmed by specialists of the addressed fields or well-informed reviewers. Therefore, another way to regard and assess Holmes’s work as a coffee-house form, to investigate his biographical writings as contributions to public debates, is to assess the responses of public reviewers or specialists to his work. This cannot indicate the impact of his work more broadly in society, but investigating this would be a very complex task, and through reviews we can at least study in some concrete way biography as part of a public debate.

For this aim, it has been instructive to read reviews of *The Age of Wonder*, the successful and award-winning book Holmes published in 2008. In this book, Holmes reconstructs the lives and accomplishments of a group of so-called ‘natural philosophers’—the word ‘scientist’ came into use only later—including Joseph Banks, William and Caroline Herschel, Mungo Park, Humphry Davy, and several other protagonists who played a central role in the emergence of British sciences in the atmosphere of Romanticism, during the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century.

The Age of Wonder has been reviewed not only in mainstream publications, but also in academic peer-reviewed journals in the field of (natural) sciences or the history of science.¹⁹ In general, and this unfortunately is typical for reviews of biographies, most of the reviews mainly summarize the contents of the book. Little space is devoted to actually evaluating the methodological and formalistic qualities of the work that has been conducted. This is something the field of Biography Studies has to take into account, and perhaps also has to compensate for. By and large however, the reviews are highly enthusiastic about the *The Age of Wonder*, when they present final judgments. The critics admire Holmes’s narrative skills, next to his scholarship.

Even though sharing these judgments of praise, only one review was more critical about *The Age of Wonder*. This article strikingly was published in the *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*.²⁰ Strikingly, because this Royal Society is the main institutional context in Holmes’s account. The review is written by David Knight. Knight is ambivalent in his criticism, and eventually seems to be a victim of self-

¹⁹ For this essay, we have selected twelve reviews from the following publications: *The Nation* (31 May 2010), *Science* (4 March 2010), *New Criterion* (September 2009), *The Wilson Quarterly* (Autumn 2009), *Physics Today* (August 2009), *London Review of Books* (January 2010), *Isis* (2010, No. 4), *The New York Review of Books* (13 August 2009), *Nature* (1 January 2009), *South African Journal of Science* (2010, No. 1/2), *American Scientist* (May-June 2010), and the *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* (20 June 2009).

²⁰ David Knight, ‘Essay review: *The age of wonder*,’ in: *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, No. 63.2 (2009), p. 203-206. All further citations below refer to the same review.

reproach. First, while two other reviewers felt that Holmes's work fell short of recognizing the impact of German natural philosophy, in Knight's eyes the main shortcoming is its insufficient recognition of France's impact in that field within this period: 'Revolutionary France was, scientifically speaking, in a different league from other countries,' so he states. Knight agrees that Holmes's study deserves much praise for reaching out to a large audience, but for Knight the book therefore is not unproblematic. This concerns two features: 'the first about popularization, and the second about how far history is the sum of heroic biographies.' Knight seems to be adverse to the tricks and trade of popularization. 'The popularizer painting a big picture shuns academic caution, is bold about homing in on illuminating anecdotes, and picks up current concerns that the historian [...] avoids.'

With regard to 'heroic biography,' Knight points at the tendency of biography to focus on the successful, the big names, although Holmes in his book has also put Caroline Herschel in the limelight. Knight seems to hold rather rigid views on the divide between the biographical and historical method. 'The biographical, the historical, and the scientific imagination are distinct, and they are controlled rather differently by interaction with facts and sources, critically handled.' Knight seems to hold the opinion that the three imaginations he distinguishes cannot and/or should not be blended together. Scholars seemingly are not able to reach out to a wider audience. This eventually leads him to a rather curious conclusion, combining praise with regret: 'So, still rejoicing that a distinguished man of letters should be very properly excited by science, and hoping that *The age of wonder* will provoke wide interest in the history of science (and in the wider intellectual history of the Romantic era), we cannot but be sorry that as in science, popularizers, however learned and skilled, should be necessary in our field.'

Can *The Age of Wonder* then be regarded as a success, in terms of biography as a 'coffee-house form'? In the context of all reviews read, biography as a vital contribution to current debates can seem to be rather an ideal than a reality, with critics mainly summarizing the contents of the book in their reviews. Then is 'a handshake with the past' without consequences, only leading to exchange of information? It is possible that the reviewers are fascinated by the presented material to such a degree, that they are content simply to recount the story alone. Or maybe the level of Holmes's debate with other interpretations of the past under scrutiny is beyond reach in the limited space of a review.

7. Thou shalt greet it as a Life-giving form, as it is concerned with Human struggle and the Creative spirit, which we all share.

'Misunderstandings quickly arise, I know since my book *Footsteps*, which was my breakthrough,' Holmes said in an interview in 2016. 'People often start with that book because of its dream part, it appeals to them romantically that I follow the footsteps of my subject and try to imagine myself what they felt like. They think I became my subject permanently, and forget that after you have done that you return to reality.'²¹ Let alone the research one has to conduct, Holmes adds. 'Only after

²¹ Renders and Vullings, 'Een biografie moet rechtvaardigheid brengen,' *op. cit.*

intensively studying the sources it is possible to “dream” about your subject. *Footsteps* had its effects, because no one had written a book quite like that before. The book has been imitated with varying results, to say the least.’ Much later, when Holmes lectured in biography, he often discussed with his students how to introduce oneself in a biography. ‘Often I just said: don’t do it unless you have to! The “two sides” of the notebook (as explained in chapter 1 of *This Long Pursuit*) is one way of dealing with that problem: on the right side your research, on the left side your personal comments. Maybe this is a little bit schematic, but it’s one way of initially clarifying the issue, and I have always used that method.’²²

In his books, personal experiences often assume the form of biographical metaphors. It just happened like that. Holmes visited the room in which Coleridge wrote his letters in the Lake District. Nowadays, a boarding school for girls is housed in the building. Coleridge admired the view so much that he always cut himself when he shaved; so greatly was he distracted. ‘After we had inspected the room, I asked Matron if I might climb out of the dormitory window onto the flat roof, where Coleridge had often sat writing. As I stood examining the magnificent view, and thinking of his secret beloved Asra, I suddenly saw at my feet two bottles of Vladivar vodka, and a box of Black Russian cigarettes carefully wrapped in cellophane against the weather. When I climbed back in, Matron asked if I had found “anything biographically interesting”. As I prepared to answer—“A biographer is an artist upon oath”—an angelic-looking blonde sixth-former appeared in the doorway behind Matron, and fixing me with a mute appeal, silently shook her head. “Yes, Matron,” I replied gravely. “Clear signs of artistic inspiration.”’²³

8. Thou shalt relish it as a Holiday for the Human Imagination—for it takes us away to another place, another time, and another Identity—where we can begin quietly to reflect on our own Lives and come back refreshed.

Holmes often is being referred to as biographer or historian. This entails the danger that one overlooks his education in journalism. Without his journalistic experience, according to Holmes himself, his work would not have amounted to much. His university education in Cambridge was first-rate, thanks to George Steiner, who knew so many European languages, and kept in touch with scholars all around the world. Holmes could have stayed in Cambridge to do a PhD under Steiner, but in his last year 1967 he became, in his own cryptic words, ‘quite unhappy.’ Holmes ‘longed to go to London, simply to write.’²⁴ Steiner probably telephoned some of his press connections, because Holmes soon began contributing to *The Times* as a freelance journalist. He was allowed to write about all kinds of subjects, from seventeenth-century poetry to contemporary science fiction, often full-page pieces in the form of features for the newly-launched *Times Saturday Review*. This was very important training for him, and continued for over a decade.

²² Holmes, *This Long Pursuit*, *op. cit.*, p. 17; Renders and Vullings, ‘Een biografie moet rechtvaardigheid brengen,’ *op. cit.*

²³ Holmes, *This Long Pursuit*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²⁴ Renders and Vullings, ‘Een biografie moet rechtvaardigheid brengen,’ *op. cit.*

As a journalist, he learned to delve in archives and to conduct in-depth investigations. ‘To me there was something thrilling and journalistic about a biographer taking a boat or a plane and simply disappearing in the footsteps of his subject.’ Yet Holmes adds: ‘But nowadays what is the difference between biography, memoir and journalism, with the stretching of all forms and disciplines and media? I think about the football player who said he was deeply satisfied after reading his own “autobiography” (written of course by a journalist).’ He adds: ‘We live in another world than that of traditional biography, I think. Perhaps one explanation is the internet.’²⁵

According to Holmes, biography should bring justice. To do right by people who have been removed from history, or have been mistreated by history. ‘You are more than a curator, you ought to aim to restore your subject’s true reputation. Like a lawyer for the defence, who says: let us review the case, from another angle. New materials can lead to another perspective. Reopen the cold cases.’²⁶ In his Huizinga lecture *De biografie en de dood* (Biography and Death, 1997), Holmes writes about a cultural dialogue through which biography can reach its ultimate humanistic aim. To achieve this goal, he even pleaded for establishing university Professorships in Comparative Biography, to study the phenomenon of biography internationally.

9. Thou shalt be immodestly Proud of it, as it is something that the English have given to the World, like cricket, and parliament, and the Full Cooked Breakfast.

And there is much of England to be proud of, Holmes has shown in his work. In *The Age of Wonder* Holmes reveals through nine biographical profiles how science in England burgeoned supervised by the Royal Society. One of the main profiles is dedicated to the astronomer William Herschel, who together with his sister Caroline built the largest telescope in the world, showed by the English king to the archbishop of Canterbury with the words: ‘Come, bishop, I will show you the way to heaven.’²⁷ Another is dedicated to Humphry Davy, the chemist and poet who relied to such a degree on his own experiments, that he inhaled numerous unknown gases including deadly carbon monoxide and euphoric nitrous oxide (‘laughing gas’). To see whether his linguistic competences were harmed by these experiments, he sometimes reported the results in poetry. The nitrous oxide test succeeded, but the physical euphoria did not result in any spiritual enrichment. Davy repeated his experiment after reading *Vie de Voltaire* (1787) by Condorcet. He felt the physical sensation of the gas in his lips and cheeks, but it still did not yield any new intellectual enlightenment. His friend and brother-poet Coleridge was also disappointed, he had experienced overwhelming sensations during his taking-in of opium. But Davy persisted, and the great engineer James Watt even designed a portable gas chamber for him. So eventually these wild experiments did result in a genuine break-through, a completely new science, that of anaesthesia. The reader also becomes a bit euphoric as he inhales these stories, so skilfully told by Holmes.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

The Age of Wonder is an example of a book through which Holmes has found a theme in which he could mobilize all his knowledge. In that way he succeeds in blending history, natural sciences and literature into one logical entity, and with his ample experience as a biographer he demonstrates convincingly that biographical research does not necessarily need to result in a traditional biography, but can just as easily be deployed to interpret a certain period in history in a slightly different manner to what we were used to. The Romantic Age not only is the age of setting suns and poetic national myths, but also the period in which adventurous researchers with a scientific education explained the world.

In yet another perspective this was also an important book. Since the novelist C.P. Snow spoke about 'the two cultures' half a century ago, the image of an unbridgeable gap between humanities and science has come into existence. In *The Age of Wonder* this gap is completely absent. Holmes does not mention C.P. Snow once in his voluminous book, but he claims the aim of the book is to investigate the controversial merging of science and poetry.

However, in *This Long Pursuit* Holmes indeed does write that he aimed with *The Age of Wonder* to close the 'two cultures' gap as described by Snow. Coleridge, Walter Scott and William Wordsworth deemed natural sciences as important as literature, and the scientists described by Holmes all are characterized by their unremitting application to incorporate their scientific findings in literary form or popular lectures.

In the Romantic Age poets and scientists were unified by their wonder at the natural world surrounding them. They set off on their passionate journeys and experiments, and Holmes sees himself as an heir to this movement. 'There is a great tradition of travel writing in my country, a lot of British writers desire to escape from their island. Shelley took me, as an adolescent, in his footsteps, to Italy, to France and further afield—that was my first European connection. That immediately provided me with a European identity.'²⁸

Holmes was baffled when the British voted in favour of a Brexit. He thinks this self-selected isolation is deeply strange. 'I was raised as a European: as a boy I was taken to France and Spain on holidays; as a teenager I travelled alone in Tuscany and the French Cevennes; later I lived for two years in Paris; and all the time I devoured European literature. During my education at Cambridge I was hugely lucky to be lectured by George Steiner. One of the first things this extraordinary international scholar said to me, in his perfect English but with its distinctive German accent, "Mister Holmes, unless you have a second language, you know NUTHINK about your own." European culture is essentially multilingual, and what a sadness, if this Brexit threatens it in England. It may take generations to restore the balance... After all the good things Britain can be proud of on the international stage, a new cultural isolation would be a tragedy. At least I hope that UK university students will remain part of the brilliant EU exchange plan so appropriately named ERASMUS.'²⁹

²⁸ Renders and Vullings, 'Een biografie moet rechtvaardigheid brengen,' *op. cit.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

10. And, lastly, thou shalt be Humble about it, for it demonstrates that we can never know, or write, the Last Word about the Human Heart.

Already in the first pages of his first biography, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, Holmes stresses the typical interpretative and ‘local’ flavour of his biographical-historical enterprise. He writes: ‘The reader who asks what is literally “new” partly misunderstands the nature of this kind of biographical research. It is more the case that perspectives change, “old” facts and events and documents take on new significance and relations, while fresh local research puts events and experiences in a new setting, drawing in elements that before had not been given proper consideration.’³⁰ Ginzburg and his colleague microhistorian Giovanni Levi eventually summarized the microhistorical approach aptly in a concise maxim: ‘local answers, general questions and vice versa (local questions, general answers).’³¹

It is no coincidence that many of the great twentieth-century and twenty-first-century biographers began as a journalist or were/are journalists. Holmes is yet another example of this phenomenon. The journalistic roots and capacities of modern biography gradually emerge to the surface in Biography Studies nowadays. The biographer often acts in a detective-like way too, closely studying clues, derived from written and oral sources—the detective part in being a journalist is generally known. The same applies to microhistory and its practitioners.³² The biographer conducts research *locally*: literally, travelling to places where the action(s) happened, visiting witnesses, alive and/or dead. The journalist as a travelling, locally investigating and witnessing reporter is the fixed image of a true journalist, reporter, and correspondent.

Holmes learned the tricks of the journalistic trade at *The Times*, but at the same time he continued to be a Cambridge historian. Therefore, when Holmes writes about literary protagonists, and he often has done that, he never loses sight of the historical, specifically: the political and cultural-social background that informed the actions he recounts. Indeed, he reveals again the natural historical interconnectedness that has been lost from sight. In the beginning of *Shelley: The Pursuit*, Holmes inserts his main protagonist into his times: ‘Shelley had been born in 1792. It was the year in which Tom Paine published his *Rights of Man*, and the year in which the French Revolutionary forces declared war on Europe. It was the beginning of a decade of unprecedented upheaval which affected most of Europe and had repercussions not only in politics but also in literature and science.’ In the subsequent one-and-a-half page Holmes sketches the French and mainly English manifestations of the major political and social upheavals of this time, before he lets Shelley enter and arise from this stage.

The resemblance between the approach of Holmes and the method of microhistory is striking. In the microhistorical approach the author, historian or scholar plays an important role in the final narrative too, in the same way Holmes performs his role as a biographer. The microhistorian and the biographer are in a way ‘guides,’ in a natural way present in their narrative, and they are justified in being so very present by virtue of the authority they have gained by their scrupulous local and archival research.

³⁰ Holmes, *Shelley, op. cit.*, p. xii.

³¹ Giovanni Levi, ‘Microhistory and the Recovery of Complexity,’ in Fellman and Rahikainen (eds.), *Historical Knowledge, op. cit.*, p. 121-132.

³² Hans Renders and Binne de Haan, ‘Introduction: The Challenges of Biography Studies,’ in Renders and de Haan (eds.), *Theoretical Discussions of Biography, op. cit.*, p. 1-8.

This fits in a tradition in historiography and journalism of ‘narrative’ historians and reporters. Based on this research, in ideal cases also incorporating and adding to received and common scholarly knowledge existing with regard to the topics that are under scrutiny, they formulate innovative interpretations of the lives and subject at hand.

Should Holmes then still be considered a Romantic biographer? In what way can one be a Romantic at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century? The journalistic, psychological, and microhistorical aspects of his approach reveal modern scholarly concepts behind his work. In this way Holmes is able to unveil deep connections between the past and his own time. But even this already has been formulated by a Dutch publisher and Holmes himself. His 1988 work *De feministe en de filosoof* (The Feminist and The Philosopher) was described on the back cover as a ‘eighteenth-century love story,’ recounted and analyzed in a ‘completely twentieth-century fashion,’ by the ‘experimental English biographer Richard Holmes.’ In the ‘Introduction’ to his *Shelley: The Pursuit*, Holmes wrote: ‘I have redrawn the critical estimate of both Shelley’s major poetry and his prose, and attempted to set it as vividly as possible in its immediate physical setting, and against the disturbed and excited political period which brought it into being, and which flashes up through the years towards our own.’³³

The extensive use of letters and information derived from letters, of manuscripts and private papers, adds to the microhistorical dimension of Holmes’s work. It leads to the precise reconstruction of lives, and also what one can call ‘deep contextualization,’ in which the investigated protagonists are reconstructed but also measured within their environment and time. In this way, Holmes is able to explore the uniqueness and representativeness of his characters. His voice is one of a masterly presence. Holmes shows he masters his materials and his analyses of the recounted lives and events. He tells, reconstructs, demonstrates and interprets all at the same time. This sense of the entertaining, omniscient, wise, psychologically sharp, inventive and sensitive biographer-historian that arises from his books, is the core of the appeal of his work. This way, when an audience is able to ‘read’ and enter the past with a ‘guide’ who seemingly has seen, lived through and understood all, *in casu* Holmes, his books are highly informative, in the many meanings of that word.

Another striking feature in Holmes’s work, when one takes a glance over his whole oeuvre, is the regular insertion of verse in his narrative. In the case of biographies of poets this is self-evident, but in *The Age of Wonder* poems abound too, and even in *Falling Upwards* there is some verse, although non-lyrical quotations take in the majority of the citations. It can be regarded as a feature of Holmes’s approach to catch the spirit of the times, to add to the narrative rhythm of the story in which as meaningfully and vividly as possible the past is being evoked. In this too, it is Holmes’s sensitivity to the past that he tries to transfer to his readers.

Pointing at the legacies of the Romantic period for our own age, Holmes succeeds in one of the most important tasks a historian can fulfill, by genuinely and historically reconstructing but at the same time contrasting the past with our own time, therefore illuminating the differences *and* similarities between them, and revealing the sources of the present. In trying to cope meaningfully with the present, we also try to do this with the past, and vice versa, and with laudable intentions, when we follow Holmes,

³³ Holmes, *Shelley, op. cit.*, p. xiii.

because the ultimate aim is to try to understand the legacy of the past and its protagonists for understanding our current mental notions and the structures of society today.

In his Huizinga lecture in 1997, Holmes predicted a Chair in Biography, and suggested that the Netherlands—home of Erasmus, whose biography Huizinga wrote—would be the ideal country of international debate and tolerance in which to establish such a post, and enrich the knowledge and comparative study of biography throughout Europe. And indeed, exactly ten years later, just such a Chair was established at Groningen. So Richard Holmes is not only a Romantic, but also a visionary.