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The Renaissance Studies Book Prize was established in 2011, first suggested by Professor Claire Jowitt, as a means of making more visible the exciting and innovative work produced in our area and as a way of honouring the achievements of new and established scholars. Our aim is to reward work in any area of Renaissance Studies – literature, history, art history, philosophy, history of science, book history, and so on – that has made a significant difference to scholarship. Books will be judged by a committee appointed by the council, and the prize will be awarded every two years. In order to be eligible the chair of the committee must receive 3 copies of each book from the publishers. The next prize will be awarded in 2014 and will award the prize for a book published in 2012-3.

In 2012 we awarded our inaugural SRS Book Prize to Dr Sjoerd Levelt. In the following article Dr Levelt describes the research behind his winning book, Jan van Naaldwijk’s Chronicles of Holland: Continuity and Transformation in the Historical Tradition of Holland during the Early Sixteenth Century. The two books that were highly commended were Peter Mack’s A History of Renaissance Rhetoric, 1380-1620 (Oxford – Warburg Studies: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Ulinka Rublack, Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Peter Mack’s book was recognised as a magisterial, authoritative history of rhetoric written by one of the key figures in the field. Based on extensive research, the book is much more than an overview of the history of European rhetoric, but a series of astute, balanced and incisive judgements on the significance of each figure and movement. It shows the importance of classical theories of rhetoric and explains how they were adapted by religious movements and how each area of Europe received and transformed Roman and Greek ideas and practices in interestingly different ways. Professor Mack shows how rhetorical practice was often determined by schoolroom use and he also suggests that thinking about logic was determined by rhetoric. It is hard to imagine anyone working in Renaissance Studies who will not need to acquire this book.

Dr Rublack’s book was commended because it was a suggestive and exciting piece of research. The argument of Dressing Up is that clothing had a significant effect in determining an individual’s identity. Not an unfamiliar claim for many of us, but this is a book based on original, archival research that extends and fleshes out what many have only understood in
rather shadowy ways. While many turn to philosophical and theological ideas to determine the history of the self, it may be that we have ignored the evidence of material culture and need to look at how ordinary objects and practices determined how individuals imagined who they were. The book is handsomely produced and the committee also wanted the publishers to be commended for their production values and the wealth of significant images that make the book such a treasure trove with evidence that can be enjoyed as well as used.

Andrew Hadfield
University of Sussex

Jan van Naaldwijk’s Chronicles of Holland: Continuity and Transformation in the Historical Tradition of Holland during the Early Sixteenth Century

The Dutch medieval chronicle has been described by one of its most prominent students, Jan Romein, as ‘grey and paralysed like an overcast November day in the flat country where it came into being and where no summit, not even a turn of the road offers unexpected vistas’. Consequently, when I first came across the descriptions of the autograph manuscripts of two early sixteenth-century Dutch prose chronicles of Holland in the catalogue of the British Library, I had little inkling that the study of these particular two works would have bearing on fields of study extending beyond that of medieval chronicle studies.

When I set out to transcribe and study them, I did so from the conviction that any medieval chronicle is worth studying in its own right as a product of a culture and tradition of history writing. Written by the same, otherwise unknown author, Jan van Naaldwijk, these two chronicles at first sight appeared to present material perfectly suited for such a case study of late medieval historiography. I aimed to understand how an early sixteenth-century author set out to write about the history of Holland. To achieve this, I explored a number of questions. Which sources did he use? What reasons did he have for his choice of sources? How did he shape the material at his disposal into a new history?

Over the course of my research, however, I came to feel that in order to

1 J. Romein, Geschiedenis van de Noord-Nederlandsche geschiedschrijving in de middeleeuwen: bijdrage tot de beschavingsgeschiedenis (Haarlem, 1932), pp. xix-xx: ‘grauw en vleugellam ... als een druiligen Novemberdag in het vlakke land waar zij ontstond en waar geen bergtop, zelfs geen kromming in de weg onverwachte vergezichten biedt’.
answer these questions, and particularly the additional question why ‘my’ author had set out to write a history of Holland not once but twice, a more thorough understanding – and a re-evaluation – of the late medieval and early modern historical traditions of Holland was a necessity. The early sixteenth century had by previous scholars been identified as the period in which a decisive change had taken place in the history of historiography about Holland – a change that was at the basis of the humanist and national historical tradition of the Dutch ‘Golden Age’ of the seventeenth century. It appeared to me that this view projected knowledge of later developments onto the period, while in addition its emphasis on the ‘new’ was highly misleading, creating as its reverse the suggestion of a Middle Ages which was stable, unchanging, and, above all, different. It should be self-evident, however, that throughout the Middle Ages there was change; and, as Helen Cooper reminded us in her inaugural lecture as C.S Lewis chair of Medieval and Renaissance English Studies at Cambridge, this ‘change continued, and we notice the changes; but we need to rediscover how to wonder at the continuities that underlie them too’. Historiography is the pre-eminent genre for the study of such continuities, due to its rigid demands with regard to both form and content. The wider goal of my study, then, became to examine the continuities and transitions within Holland’s historical tradition in the early sixteenth century, a period of intense experimentation in Dutch history writing.

Such a study led me to a consideration and often reconsideration of a range of issues affecting historical and wider textual culture in the late middle ages and the early modern period: the impact of humanism, of the printing press; the continued recording and dissemination of texts in manuscript in the early modern period; the choice of early modern authors to write for the printing press, or not; the issue of anonymity of authors and responses of contemporary readers to such authorship; the creativity of the activities of compilation and translation, and the influence of genre on a compiler’s choices; the respective significance of local, provincial, ‘national’ and universal historical information to late medieval and early modern audiences, etc. Closer attention to each of these and other subjects showed continuities stretching back and forth over the centuries, paired with innovations based on these very continuities. And in some respects, attempting to see these continuities and transformations through the eyes of a con-

temporary chronicler made aspects of early sixteenth-century culture look rather different from previous understandings of the period.

But perhaps the strongest challenge to previous scholarship, and certainly to my own preconceptions about the late medieval chronicle tradition, was posed by the materials that informed what became the final chapter of my book. Since ‘my’ author had not had any noticeable impact on later writers, I had originally planned only a brief epilogue to my study, outlining the fate of the historical tradition that had informed his chronicles. Scholars of Dutch historiography, as in other countries, had long argued or presumed that the medieval chronicle tradition had ceased over the course of the sixteenth century. I was therefore surprised to find a great wealth of evidence for continuations of that tradition in a wide range of contexts throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From almanac chronicles to chronicles of noble families now found in provincial archives, from influences of the chronicle tradition on humanist and antiquarian historiography to an early sixteenth-century chronicle which was reprinted, revised and read continuously up to its final edition in 1802: the ties between the early modern and medieval historiographical traditions of Holland had been much stronger than previously recognized, as the medieval chronicle tradition continued to inform the early modern historical awareness. Much of early modern Dutch historical writing can be described as either the second part of a historiographical diptych, continuing on from the very same date many late medieval chronicles left off, or as a recasting of medieval historical debates in a new language; an old story, retold in a humanist vocabulary, part of a continuous tradition of experimentation in history writing from at least the middle of the fourteenth century onwards.

There were also a number of collateral findings to my study, the most striking of which for me as student of both Dutch and British historiography was the prominence an interest in Britain held within the historical consciousness in Holland, particularly with regards to the earliest history of the region. ‘In order to understand the beginnings of ... the county of Holland, we must commence from English history’, writes Jan Beke, the mid-fourteenth-century author whose chronicle is at the basis of the late medieval chronicle tradition of Holland, referring to Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People. The conflicting views on early British history presented respectively by Bede and Geoffrey of Monmouth were recognized and utilized by medieval Dutch chroniclers. Initially, their histories of the region had commenced with an account of the conversion of the region by Anglo-Saxon missionaries, based on Bede’s history. In the early fifteenth century this narrative was replaced with a narrative about giants,
expelled from Britain by Brutus and his men, settling along the North Sea coast as Holland’s first inhabitants (this development, signalling a shift away from ecclesiastical to more exclusively secular concerns, was occasioned by a narrowing focus on the county of Holland, excluding the history of the diocese of Utrecht). This account was subsequently rejected for the ‘humanist’ account of the Batavians, based on an interpretation of Tacitus. Nevertheless, even in this version a link with British history was maintained, not only through the extensive space allotted to the debunking of the story of the giants, but also by its replacement with new information about the presumed role of the Batavians in the Roman conquest of Britannia. It is not an accident that Richard Verstegan, in the early seventeenth century, was able to write histories of England and of the Netherlands based partly on the same sources and adhering to the same historiographical model. And in this light it is also not surprising that there is ample evidence, if one is willing and able to look beyond the traditional romance material, to suggest that an interest in Arthurianna did not wane in the fifteenth century in the Dutch Low Countries, as scholarly communitas opinio holds.  

The study of medieval chronicles has long been the Cinderella of medieval studies. Literary scholars traditionally showed little interest in historical texts as literature, while historians considered the chronicler ‘a slave to his documents’. Both approaches deny the potentially creative nature of the process of selection and reorganization. Those approaches to medieval historiography are more fruitful which do not presuppose categories, but instead trace in detail the process of change over time in the transmission of texts, as it affects their narratives, ideologies and structures. But even when scholars did start to look for more than merely ‘historical facts’ in medieval chronicles, only those considered to be of particular significance were seriously studied – and a late medieval chronicle’s significance was generally measured either by its novelty value or by the extent to which it could be regarded as a fore-runner of the (early) modern era: the first chronicle to be printed, the first to be written under the influence of humanism and so on.

Over the last two decades, this situation has to some extent been corrected by the important work of the relentlessly multi-disciplinary and international Medieval Chronicle Society, but scholars, like me, whose work


crosses conventional national, chronological and departmental boundaries continue to encounter the problematic results of disciplinary thinking: the very vocabulary I use as a framework for my research is complicated by the fact that the term ‘historiography’ means something different to scholars in the field of medieval literature than to historians of the Renaissance.

Such problems, however, each also provide opportunities. ‘My’ two Dutch chronicles in the British Library lay virtually dormant for such a long time, exactly because they were kept in England (and the microfilms were of limited reliability due to fire damage to the manuscripts); countless seventeenth- and eighteenth-century manuscripts and printed editions of medieval chronicles remain unstudied exactly because they have been of little interest to medievalists, for whom they were not medieval enough, or to early modernists, for whom they were too medieval. It is not the lack of evidence but disciplinary entrenchment that led to the oft-repeated misconception that the medieval chronicle tradition ceased in the sixteenth century. In fact, to provide just one example from a different tradition than the one I treat in my book, almanac chronicles, grounded in medieval traditions but at the same time addressing contemporary concerns, were also printed in English throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; interesting cases of re-appropriations of the chronicle genre in the early modern period can for example be found in the ‘chronologies’ included in the Protestant Almanac and its counterpart the Calendarium Catholicum, or in the ‘Chronology of the Kings of Ireland ... till Henry the 2d. the First English Monark of this Kingdom’ in Bourk’s Almanac, printed in Dublin.

It is exactly for these reasons that it has been particularly pleasing to me to see my study find such a welcome readership among the members of the Society for Renaissance Studies. As historians, we ignore the times before and after the era of our primary interest at our peril; the recognition of my study with the Society for Renaissance Studies Book Prize is a sign of recognition that early modernists and medievalists can not only learn from each other’s findings, but more importantly be fascinated by each other’s sources.

Sjoerd Levelt
University of Sussex