It was in 1854 that Mary Seacole learned about the Crimean War. Seacole, at that time an unknown Jamaican-Scottish widow and nurse, subsequently sailed from the West Indies to England and asked the authorities to send her to the war zone. Her request was denied, but she went there all the same, at her own expense. Near Balaclava she started a British hotel, where she tended the wounded soldiers. She not only offered them bandages and medicine, but also refreshments, wine and lemonade. Thus she earned the name, “Mother Seacole.” For she, according to a reviewer writing in the Dutch journal Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen, filled a need that was generally neglected. In 1857 she published her autobiography, which was equally appreciated:

There are plenty of other people who have, with varying degrees of elegance, published the main facts of the war, the leaders’ feats of arms, the public events. She is not at all concerned with these official facts; she simply registers what she herself has seen, but it is exactly those details which cannot be found anywhere else. No Thucidides, no Livius or Robertson, Gervinus, Thiers, Wagenaar or Van Meteren convey as clearly what war really is about as this woman with her candid heart and sound judgment.1

With her life story a black woman thus competed with famous Dutch and classical historians. Consequently, the anonymous critic disapproved of the title of Seacole’s book: The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands. This title alluded too much to an adventure story, when in fact it was “history also of important events of this time,” experienced personally by an eyewitness of that history. A minor

* This article was previously published as ‘Beter dan Thucydides en Wagenaar… Autobiografieën en de geschiedenis van de eigen tijd, 1850–1918’, in Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis 118 (2005), pp. 513–532.

1 Review of Mary Seacole’s avonturen in de West en in de Krim, of het belangwekkend leven eener heldin der barnhartigheid door haar zelven verhaald (Rotterdam, 1857), in Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen (1858:1), pp. 777–781.
point of criticism was that the autobiographer had written a bit too much about herself.

This seems rather a curious concern about an autobiography. In a common sense, autobiography is today regarded as a “self-produced, non-fiction text that tells the story of its writer’s life.” 2 It is precisely the subjective aspect of the genre that, around 1900, made most historians lose their interest in autobiographies.3 An exception was the German intellectual historian Georg Misch who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, wrote a multi-volume standard work on the history of autobiography, which in the nineteen-fifties became available in an English translation. From that time, literary scholars in particular occupied themselves with the definition and history of the autobiographical genre, which was supposed to have taken a definite form in the course of the nineteenth century.4 That same century saw an increase in autobiographical writing, which is usually explained by an increasing tendency toward introspection. Peter Gay, the American historian, stated that the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie was “to the point of neurosis” obsessed by the “self,” as in a rapidly changing world one’s own person was the only constant factor. He illustrated this with the rise of ego-novels, the increasing tendency to write diaries and the publication of famous European autobiographies, such as those written by Goethe and John Stuart Mill. In passing he also mentioned that many “other” people published their autobiographies as well. These texts supposedly illustrated the nineteenth-century tendency to self-examination, but, according to Gay, these “ordinary” people seldom succeeded in composing an explicit self-analysis.5

It is debatable whether self-analysis was indeed the intention of the unknown autobiographers, and whether nineteenth-century readers

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