The Limits of Representativeness

Biography, Life Writing, and Microhistory

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A study about a military operation in the Second World War (Operation Mincemeat) shows how microhistorical and biographical research can amend fixed historiographical narratives with regard to specific topics. Skilled biographers in their research also problematize the representativeness of the studied life and thus of historiographical concepts. Life Writing claims to bring into the limelight individuals and groups of people hitherto neglected by scholarship by using autobiographical documents. Unfortunately, many Life Writing researchers leave out the historical context and historiographical practices. In contrast with this approach, examples of biographical research in this article illustrate how the human dimension and agency perspective within history can be put in a powerful interpretative framework through microhistory and biography. The particular positions of these two fraternal methods within past and contemporary historiography do not detract from their potentially challenging qualities for historiography.¹

In 2010 appeared Operation Mincemeat, a study that meticulously reports on a plan by the British secret service in the midst of the Second World War to deceive the Germans through a dead British soldier.² The corpse had to be washed up deliberately on the coast of Spain. The aim was to pass the corpse via the Spanish authorities into the hands of the Germans, while personal and official documents on this corpse indicated that the Allied invasion would take place on Crete, and not on Sicily – like the Allies planned to do and like Hitler also expected. The Nazis indeed became confused and the Allied invasion of Sicily eventually was a success. This relatively small incident, that has been brought out into the open in Operation Mincemeat by means of extensive

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biographical research, does not only take back the history of the Second World War to a smaller scale, it also provides information that would have remained veiled when investigated by another method than the biographical one. MI5, the department that prepared Operation Mincemeat, did not prepare the operation overnight. Major William Martin was the new name given to the corpse of the social outcast Glyndwr Michael, who shortly before died in squalid conditions, and for this major a complete fictional biography was devised in a few months time. Behind every note in the few letters and bills that could be found in his clothes, a reality was created that indeed was fake, but on the other hand ought to be so realistic and concrete that the German secret service would not suspect anything was wrong. So the picture of his girlfriend referred to a real existing young girl whose friend was ‘at the front’, the ironic remark in a letter from a colleague of the major about General Montgomery (that something had to be wrong because Montgomery had not announced new decisions for 48 hours) was based on the prevailing idea that Monty showed off an excessive desire for action. Examining clues in letters, clothing and an identity card, a social reality could be reconstructed that covered 27 witnesses who would know about the existence of the so-called William Martin, when thorough detective work was carried out.

What can we learn from this piece of constructed microhistory? A lot. For example, that this spying plan was almost a literary experiment for those carrying out this plan. How little according to the MI5 the German intelligence service was infiltrated in London, how the command structures between American and British military and secret services functioned, what technological innovations MI5 was capable to produce (Q in the later James Bond books was based on MI5 technician Charles Fraser-Smith), how the German culture was esteemed, what was considered as German humor in England, how Spain – officially neutral – at local level (the coast where Martin washed ashore) in almost all cases collaborated with the Nazis, and last but not least, what kind of agents were recruited by the British secret service. Indeed: eccentric, boisterous and artistic men. The planners had read about a similar venture earlier in a detective and one of the executors, Ian Fleming, also became the famous author of the James Bond books. The personal backgrounds of the secret agents had a significant impact on the fictitious person that was created for the anonymous corpse. Operation Mincemeat is a piece of microhistory that is not just representative for the great history between the Nazis and the Allies, by scaling down the author opened up different sources, searched for other documents and added to the invasion of Sicily a new element, and as a result of that the grand narrative of history should be corrected. In recent military histories of the liberation of Europe Operation Mincemeat is not