

***Literacy in Everyday Life: Reading and Writing in Early Modern Dutch Diaries***, by Jeroen Blaak. Trans. Beverley Jackson. Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2009, xiii, 422 pp. Cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-17740-6  
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*Literacy in Everyday Life* is a translation of Jeroen Blaak's monumental dissertation, originally written in Dutch. It consists of four case studies of personal diaries that systematically recount the reading activities of four individual writers. Two of the diaries, one by a Leiden schoolmaster David Beck, and another by an aristocrat and state official, Pieter Teding van Berkhout from The Hague, date from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The other two are eighteenth-century personal documents of a somewhat different description: a daily chronicle by an Amsterdam clerk Jan de Boer (with plenty of printed materials, mainly pamphlets and newspaper clippings, bound in) and a devout "account-book of the soul" by an unmarried daughter of a clergyman, Jacoba van Thiel. Each diary is discussed in a separate chapter, with the purpose of reconstructing and analyzing each person's "literate life." The four diarists and their diaries are very different from each other, and together they make for an impressively diverse and rich panorama of reading and writing practices in early modern Holland, along with a wealth of relevant historical information.

In the opening chapter Blaak reviews the recent publications in the field of history of reading in the Netherlands. The statistics in the existing studies seem to raise more questions than they answer. For instance, examination of probate inventories (posthumous inventories of personal possessions) from Haarlem and Amsterdam shows hardly any change from 1650 to 1915 in the number of books mentioned. "Does this mean," asks Blaak, "that the reading public was always small, or do the sources distort the picture to some extent?" (23). Like other statistical findings based on official and business documents, such questions require an enormous amount of contextualization in order to clarify the meaning of the figures. The advantage of diaries, or more generally "egodocuments" (including letters) is that, in spite of their statistical non-representativeness, they provide a readable context for the statistics that one can extract from them.

Blaak approaches the diaries with a basic, straightforward and effective set of questions: what, when, where and how did this person read? His approach combines qualitative with quantitative methods: he searches for any new categories to describe practices of literacy that emerge from the diaries' texts, and at the same time makes quantitative assessments that sometimes lead to surprising conclusions. For instance, he discovers that the seventeenth-century schoolmaster Beck would very often read in the late evening hours, especially in autumn and winter, which goes against

the widespread assumption that readers of that period depended to a great extent on daylight hours. Blaak frames his approach as media-history, not studying reading in an isolated way, but seeing it in the wider context of communication, as only one of several communicative media – correspondence, various forms of printed and handwritten publication, political debate in newspapers and pamphlets, and of course spoken communication. The uses of literacy, embedded in this multimedia context and exemplified by each of the diaries, are extremely diverse and clearly individualized, but some of their differences can also be easily traced to the factors of social class, gender, occupation, education and the belief system of the writer. For an aristocrat and public official like Pieter Teding van Berkhout, literacy would be vital for conducting an extensive correspondence, a mandatory part of social life in his circles, for his administrative work, for maintaining an easy, informed and fashionable conversation in high society, but also for preserving, ordering and augmenting his father's "ocean of papers" (137), in other words, "creating a collective family memory," which, together with the family library, constituted a vital part of aristocratic family heritage. For schoolmaster David Beck, literacy was first of all the essence of his profession, but reading and writing poetry constituted another crucial part of his identity; and the practice of writing the detailed diary itself, which he maintained for a year, served both as a reflective practice (the subtitle of the diary is "A mirror of my life") and for the creation of family memory, but also, it seems, as a mourning practice, since he started it two weeks after his first wife died in childbirth. For the eighteenth-century pious woman reader Jacoba van Thiel, reading and writing were central in her Protestant religious practice (even more so than for van Berkhout and Beck) – but also for her, as well as for the other diarists, reading was a major source of pleasure and recreation, and quite highly invested with emotion. Thus one can say that literacy served these diarists not only for professional and utilitarian purposes, but also for shaping and expressing their sense of life and of self. Even for Jan de Boer, who did not focus on the personal but rather on the political, literacy was a major means of both clarifying and expressing his subjectivity, as an active citizen and a responsible witness of his historical period.

Blaak's analysis of the language that the diarists use to describe their reading and writing practices yields a rich and lively picture: Beck, for instance, used the following words for reading in different contexts: *lezen* for systematic uninterrupted perusal, as of the Bible (which he regarded as a religious duty and performed regularly); *bladeren* – leafing, glancing through – e.g. through Mercator's *Atlas* at his neighbor's house; *doorsnuffelen* (browsing, nosing) e.g. through herbaria; *futselen* (toying

with) bibliographies, etc.. This range of verbs provides important evidence of how this reader perceived his own reading practices (and by inference, how many other readers probably perceived them, since Beck couldn't have invented *all* of these verbs for reading: at least some of them must have been already available in the language). Van Berkhout's language often uses evaluative terms about the reading matter, which gives a glimpse of his – and possibly his circle's – expectations -regarding reading: "curious," "good and curious," "scrupulous" (about Mezeray's history of France), "very fine" and "excellent" (about theological books that were in line with his own views), or written in "very fine language." Blaak is skeptical about the notion of a "reading revolution" in the Netherlands, as neither in the diaries he studies, nor in other scholars' work does he find any clear distinction between intensive and extensive reading such as one would expect to see between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, some of Blaak's sources (J. de Kruif, 1999) reasonably suggest that a reading revolution, in the sense of a sharp increase in literacy and demand for printed matter, should be looked for earlier, in the Dutch Golden Age, taking into account the specifics of Dutch history. Yet whether or not the practices described by Blaak fit the pattern of a reading revolution, the book is a valuable source of information on practices of reading, writing, publishing and distribution of texts in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Holland. This information is engaging and easy to retrieve thanks to the detailed and intuitive system of subtitles in every chapter.

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