

Academic Culture of Remembrance. The Combination of University History, Jubilees and Academic Heritage

PIETER DHONDT* & CHRISTOPHE VERBRUGGEN**

ABSTRACT

As an introduction to the special issue of *Studium* on 'Academic culture of remembrance: the combination of university history, jubilees and academic heritage', this paper presents an account of the conference on this topic, organised at Ghent University in March 2011, aiming to reveal the main conclusions and points of discussion.

Keywords: university history; academic heritage; jubilees; historiography; university museum

This issue of *Studium* results from a conference that was organised at Ghent University on 16 and 17 March 2011, with the support of the Flemish Research Council (FWO-Vlaanderen) and the UGent University Library, where the conference also took place.¹ Approximately five years ago the Belgian 'Studium generale. Contactgroep Universiteitsgeschiedenis – Groupe de contact pour l'histoire des universités' and the Dutch 'Werkgroep Universiteitsgeschiedenis' merged with the existing societies for the history of science into 'Gewina. Belgisch-Nederlands Genootschap voor Wetenschaps- en Universiteitsgeschiedenis' (also one of the organisers of the conference). Since then, mostly under the colours of Gewina, in the Netherlands regular meetings with a focus on university history have been organised by Leen Dorsman, Peter-Jan Knegtman and others. However, in Belgium conferences or workshops with a special interest for university history had disappeared almost completely. Therefore, the idea was put forward to organise a forum on this topic as the public start of

* University of Eastern Finland, Department of Geographical and Historical Studies, P.O. Box 111, 80101 Joensuu. E-mail: pieter.dhondt@uef.fi.

** UGent, Instituut voor Publieksgeschiedenis and Social History since 1750, UFO, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 35, 9000 Gent. E-mail: christophe.verbruggen@ugent.be.

¹ For the programme of the conference, see www.ugentmemorie.be/3-programme.

UGentMemorie 2017, the historical commission that is established to prepare the bicentenary of Ghent University in 2017.

In the process of developing this forum, it became apparent that it would be significant to extend the originally intended Belgian-Dutch forum for university history to an international conference devoted to the topic of the history of university jubilees itself, addressing several actual research questions, also in the field of historiography and academic heritage. In that respect the conference can be considered quite successful. A great number of scholars active in the field of university history in Belgium and the Netherlands participated in the conference, and at the same time we managed to attract a great number of speakers from other (European) countries. The participation of scholars with a professional background in the archives and/or the museum community fostered a debate about the possibilities of a university museum or an academic museum to operate at the crossroads of history, academic heritage and public activities.

In consequence of the original interpretation of the conference as a Belgian-Dutch forum for university history, a few presentations, in themselves most interesting and well presented, were not really connected to the general theme of the conference. They were devoted to (1) the status of and the education at the Belgian engineering schools (Willemijne Linsen, Krista De Jonge en Pieter Raymaekers);² (2) the rationalisation of the landscape of Flemish higher education from the 1970s, with a theory of 'blame avoidance' as an alternative for the traditional theory of pillarization (Ton Van Weel),³ and (3) to the experiences of female foreign students in Belgium between 1905 and 1940 (Pascale Falek).⁴ Finally, the plea of Herman Paul for a new reflection on the legacy of the historians Robert Fruin and Godefroid Kurth, also expressed in 2010 on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Fruin's inaugural address, was an appropriate link to the main topics of the conference.⁵

The first general subject was the history of university jubilees itself.⁶ In this category the starting point was often a specific case (such as the centenary of the University of Rostock in 1519 or the jubilees of 1848 and 1948 in Prague), from which some general characteristics of university jubilees could be deduced.⁷ Of these, most striking was undoubtedly the highly political interpretation of most of the jubilees; political in a double sense: on the one hand the course and the content of the jubilees was highly dependent on political developments (something which was particularly noticeable in the overview of academic ceremonies at the

2 See the project 'Engineering a New World: the Role of Engineers in Modern Society', on: <http://www.researchportal.be>.

3 See the project 'The political question of macro-level efficiency (rationalization) in Flemish higher education 1989–2014', on: www.utwente.nl/mb/cheps/phdportal.

4 P. Falek, *A Precarious Life. East European Female Jewish Students in Interwar Belgium* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, European University Institute Florence 2011).

5 H. Paul, 'Voorbeeld en voorganger: Robert Fruin en Godefroid Kurth als vaders van de geschiedwetenschap', *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 126:1 (2011) 30–53.

6 Cf. J. Blecher and G. Wiemers (eds.), *Universitäten und Jubiläen. Vom Nutzen historischer Archive* (Veröffentlichung des Universitätsarchivs Leipzig 4) (Leipzig 2004); T.P. Bekker, 'Jubiläen als Orte universitärer Selbstdarstellung. Entwicklungslinien des Universitätsjubiläums von der Reformationszeit bis zur Weimarer Republik', in: R.C. Schwinges (ed.), *Universität im öffentlichen Raum* (Basel 2008) 77–107; P. Dhondt (ed.), *National, Nordic or European? Nineteenth-Century University Jubilees and Nordic Cooperation* (Leiden 2011) and P. Dhondt (ed.), *University Jubilees and University History Writing* (forthcoming: Leiden 2013).

7 See for example: M. Ďurčanský, 'Two great anniversaries, two lost opportunities – Charles University in Prague: 1848 and 1948', in: Dhondt, *University Jubilees and University History Writing* (n. 6).

Romanian University of Cluj after 1919)⁸, but on the other hand the jubilees themselves often also disseminated a political message, e.g. through the conferment of honorary degrees. Pieter Dhondt argued that these honorary degrees have a much older and more complex tradition than often has been assumed.⁹ The somewhat contradictory development of the internationalisation of the academic world and the increasingly national elucidation of university jubilees, confirms the interpretation of this kind of celebrations as political events. Invitations to foreign universities are increasingly limited to those institutions with which a partnership agreement already has been concluded. Whereas most of the speakers focused on obvious visible expressions of university jubilees, Wolfgang Eric Wagner made an appeal also to take into account subcutaneous elements, such as the subtle mention, in 1520, of the centenary in the educational programme of the University of Rostock, or the depiction of a disputation with the date of the centenary of the University of Ingolstadt at the back of the altar in the local church.¹⁰ Wagner's argumentation was to conclude on the basis of such subtle indications that also in past centuries the anniversary of the foundation of a university did not pass unnoticed.

A second part of the conference was devoted to a more visible and always returning component of university jubilees, viz. the historiographical production linked to these events. Here too, mostly a case study was taken as the point of departure,¹¹ in order to draw some general conclusions on the basis of this particular history. Sometimes it also appeared that, due to the specificity of certain contexts, it is not always possible to reach any generalizing statements. Emmanuelle Picard for instance, the keynote speaker and first contributor to this special issue, proved very convincingly that the situation in France differed fundamentally from those in most other European countries, because of the fact that professors and scholars identified themselves primarily with their discipline, rather than with the institution to which they were attached. The historical overviews of these institutions, written on the occasion of a jubilee, therefore often have a clearly artificial character.

In contrast with this, two of the other keynote speakers, Sylvia Paletschek (the second contributor to this issue) and Laurence Brockliss, explicitly attempted to present a more general historiographical approach of the history of university jubilees. This resulted in an interesting discussion with the audience. Two somewhat caricaturally sketched traditions of publications dealing with university history were placed opposite to each other: on the one hand extremely detailed factual accounts of the university as an institution, combined with some developments in separate scientific disciplines, written by a number of authors and published in several volumes; and on the other hand abridged 'coffee table' synthesis, written by only one author, with a lot of pictures and ignoring dark episodes in the institution's past. A final consensus was not reached and of course different arguments can be put forward for moderate versions of both types of publications existing next to each other. Brockliss' conclusion, which was agreed upon by a large part of the audience, was the need

8 A.-M. Stan, 'Academic ceremonies and celebrations at the Romanian University of Cluj 1919–2009', in: Dhondt, *University Jubilees and University History Writing* (n. 6).

9 P. Dhondt, 'Pomp and Circumstance at the University. The Origin of the Honorary Degree', to be published in *European Review of History* (2013).

10 W.E. Wagner, '*Observantia lectionum in universitate Rostochiensis*' (1520). *Das älteste gedruckte Vorlesungsprogramm der Universität Rostock* (Hamburg 2011).

11 See for instance the publication on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the University of Dundee: K. Baxter, D. Swinfen and M. Rolf, *A Dundee Celebration* (Dundee 2007).

of a 'master narrative' in both kinds of stories. Brockliss himself tries to realise this in his forthcoming history of the University of Oxford, to be published in 2014 in one volume, with as *leitmotiv* a story of continuity and discontinuity.

Another animated discussion resulted from the presentation of Marc Depaepe, in which he discussed the difficulty for historians of education to produce 'an annoying, troublesome, disturbing discourse for policymakers, teachers, educators etc., which makes us not always the best speakers at celebrations'. He wants to place his own story about the 50th anniversary in 2014 of the campus university in Kortrijk (KULAK) in the context of democratization (as a 'master narrative'), which (as recent research has shown) was often far less successful than politicians are sometimes ready to admit. According to Klaas van Berkel, however, on the contrary, most current policymakers no longer object to a critical university history. Two important reflections should be added to this discussion: firstly, university history as a discipline is much more embedded in universities in the Netherlands than in Belgium, and secondly the position of historic disciplines, such as university history, history of science and history of medicine (some located within the departments of history) is considerably less threatened than a discipline as history of education (which is traditionally located within the departments of educational sciences).

Besides, both Depaepe and Van Berkel agreed that university history is limited too much to publications produced on the occasion of jubilees. However, the ambition to enlarge the field with projects with a comparative and transnational approach is clearly more easily pronounced than realized.¹² Another speaker, Trude Maurer, attempted to do so in her presentation on the celebration of patriotic anniversaries in Russian and German universities.¹³ Such a comparative and transnational approach has achieved already quite a lot in the research dealing with the admission and presence of female students at universities by, among others, Natalia Tikhonov, although she showed that there is still a long way to go. Moreover, the increasing attention for gender equality at universities does not always result in the most advisable outcomes. On the occasion of its 450th anniversary, the University of Geneva, for instance, organised an exhibition with portraits of seventy men and seventy women who had played a role in the history of the university. However, it appeared to be quite difficult to find enough female figures, and in the end being enrolled as a student in Geneva during one semester was already sufficient to be selected. Including only 10% women in the exhibition, equivalent to the 10% women in the higher staff of the current university, most probably would have been a much more powerful signal.¹⁴

In this way the connection was made with the third general theme of the conference, namely academic heritage and the way in which it can be used in the public representation of the university as a historical entity. The presentation of a delegation from Portugal¹⁵ and particularly the talk of Rolf ter Sluis (curator of the university museum in Groningen) revealed an important obstacle in this regard: to what extent can a university museum be devoted to the history of its own university, and to what extent is one stuck in the pattern

12 E.g. P. Mattingly, K. Jarausch, J. Craig, J. Kett and J. Turner, 'Universities in Europe: North American Perspectives on European Historiography', *History of Education* 37:3 (2008) 469–490.

13 T. Maurer, 'Commitment, reserve and self-assertion. The celebration of patriotic anniversaries in Russian and German universities 1912/13', in: Dhondt, *University Jubilees and University History Writing* (n. 6).

14 B. Mantilleri (ed.), *Faces à faces 06/09. Exposition Uni Dufour* (Genève 2009).

15 Ana Mehnert Pascoal presented: 'Surveying the scientific and artistic heritage of the University of Lisbon: Scope, methodology and preliminary results'. See: <http://memoria.ul.pt>.

of a kind of science museum? In this connection the joint presentation and collaboration between academic archives, museum and library collections using a cross-sectoral approach is crucial, as was shown in the contribution of Henriette Reerink. The Dutch UNICUM project, commissioned by the Dutch Academic Heritage Foundation (Stichting Academisch erfgoed: SAE) and carried out by the five so-called ‘classic’ Dutch universities has resulted into a digital portal to Dutch academic heritage (see her contribution in this volume).

The round table with representatives of a large number of university collections in Ghent, combined with the preceding presentations that put this discussion in a broader international perspective, resulted in two main conclusions.¹⁶ Firstly, if a university museum would be established in Ghent, it should be more than a special kind of science museum. Instead, it should become a museum in which the history of the university as an institution, as well as the history of human sciences would be included. At the same time a straightforward ‘progress story’ should be avoided, which approach is surely a continuous threat in traditional science museums. Also the boring, time-consuming and often unsuccessful side of science production deserves a place in such a museum as well. Secondly, the debate proved the need and at the same time the willingness to unite (at least to some extent) the currently scattered Ghent university collections and their keepers. The collections themselves were presented very nicely in a poster exhibition.

In addition to these local issues, some promising initial answers were formulated on some of the postulated questions, for instance with regard to the challenges experienced in writing a university history, especially on the occasion of a jubilee, or on the question in which way universities are dealing with their own past and what kind of commemorative practices are used in this process. The final article in this special issue of *Studium* (written by Fien Danniau, Ruben Mantels and Christophe Verbruggen) presents a possible synthesis of (digital) university history, memories and academic heritage. The overall aim of the papers in this volume is to show the complexity of these problems and to contribute to a continuation of the debate regarding these topics, also in view of the upcoming Belgium university jubilees, in Liège and Ghent in 2017.

¹⁶ P. Monsieur, J. Bourgeois e.a., ‘Academic heritage at Ghent University: the field’s outlook on the future’, in: D. Segers, K. Wautier, and A. Jonckheere (eds.), *Mededelingen van het Museum voor de Geschiedenis van de Wetenschappen Universiteit Gent* 4 (2011) 3–17.