

Business History versus Economic History in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Business history is often seen as a subfield of economic history. A later addition and, a younger field of research. This chapter will argue the opposite: when economic history developed in the Netherlands as a specialisation within the academic field of history at the start of the twentieth century, it placed great emphasis on business history. As the discipline of economics changed during the twentieth century, so did economic history, with the consequence that interest in business waned. The content of economic history changed, although the name remained the same. As a consequence, business history had to reinvent itself by focusing on the history of individual businesses. In linking up with commissioned history, the field became mostly concentrated on the nineteenth and twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, economic and business history have grown closer again through their shared interest in institutions.

Keywords: business history, economic history, institutions, the Netherlands

The development of economic history at the start of the twentieth century

At the turn of the twentieth century, history was predominantly political history. Other approaches had to seek recognition. In defending an economic approach to history, practitioners frequently came up with references to firms and branches. When P.J. Blok gave his inaugural lecture as Professor of Dutch History in Leiden in 1894, he spoke about history as a social science and he raised the question of when historians would be ready to write a history of the Amsterdam trade, or the East India Company, or the West India Company. Was it not time to write about the colonial past, the important trade with the Baltic countries, the important industries in the

cities or life in the countryside? Of course, the answer was yes: these were the topics historians should study.¹

The materialistic interpretation of historical developments by K. Marx and F. Engels and the mid-nineteenth century debates among economists about the inductive versus the deductive method both inspired historians to study economic developments. The stages of capitalist development drawn up by the economists of the German Historical School formed a challenge for historians, or rather an invitation to discuss the validity of these stages and underpin their discussions and suggestions for revisions with new research. For historians, the German Historical School of economics was interesting because it looked at changes rather than 'eternal truths', as did the classical economists and the Austrian School.² In 1901, G.W. Kernkamp contrasted the materialistic interpretation with what was termed the 'bourgeois' interpretation of history. He argued that there were many similarities as well as differences, but that each could learn from the other. He also mentioned several examples of how historians through the study of their own time could come to a better understanding of the past. For instance, the functioning of the Noordsche Compagnie (Nordic Company) for whaling trade, established in 1614, could be better understood when compared with a modern day cartel, and the same might be true for the East India and West India Companies.³

To quote another inaugural lecture, in 1904 H. Brugmans argued for the importance of economic history alongside mainstream political history. He explained that the position of the Dutch Republic within Europe could not be understood if only its modest political power was considered. Because of its trade, its colonies and its important money market in Amsterdam, the country remained a force to be reckoned with by its neighbours. He underlined that by promoting economic history he was not arguing for a Marxist approach to history. Simply because economic history was still underdeveloped, it needed extra attention through 'academic rigour' and the collection and study of business archives. He hoped to build a bridge between his research and the rich history of Amsterdam as a trading city. To

1 P.J. Blok, 'De geschiedenis als sociale wetenschap (1894)', in: Leo Noordegraaf. *Ideeën en ideologieën: studies over economische en sociale geschiedschrijving in Nederland 1894-1991* (Amsterdam 1991) 16-35, 30.

2 S. van Brakel, 'Economische historie en historische economie (1923)', in: Leo Noordegraaf. *Ideeën en ideologieën: studies over economische en sociale geschiedschrijving in Nederland 1894-1991* (Amsterdam 1991) 121-128, 123.

3 G.W. Kernkamp, 'Over de materialistische opvatting van de geschiedenis (1901)', in: Leo Noordegraaf. *Ideeën en ideologieën: studies over economische en sociale geschiedschrijving in Nederland 1894-1991* (Amsterdam 1991) 49-72.

illustrate his approach to history he reminded his audience of a quote from Spinoza, used by the nineteenth century historian R. Fruin: 'the historian's task is not to admire or to condemn but to understand'.⁴ In thinking about economic history, these three professors referred frequently to firms and economic sectors. For them, economic history and business history were clearly closely connected.

An early milestone in the development of economic history in the Netherlands was the establishment of the association the Netherlands Economic History Archive (NEHA) in 1914. This new association collected business archives, set up a business history library and created a publication channel: the *Economisch-Historisch Jaarboek* (Economic History Yearbook). The association sought financial support from individual members, but also from businesses and the government.⁵ N.W. Posthumus, the first NEHA director, turned out to be a great organiser and fundraiser as well as an indefatigable collector. He found his inspiration in the economists of the aforementioned historical school of economics. He wrote his dissertation under D. van Embden, a professor of economics and statistics, who himself had a keen interest in history. For instance, Van Embden discussed the tasks of the manager of large enterprises, taking examples from the Roman Empire, seventeenth century France and nineteenth century America. Posthumus was inspired by the theories of Marx and Engels, but was not politically active. History had to be written from the sources and for economic history, business archives formed important sources that had to be collected and published. However, he also used and published other material such as papers about Dutch trade policy and statistical sources.⁶

The support of business was considered essential in funding the NEHA and in helping to collect business archives. The board of the NEHA, which included a number of businessmen, succeeded in engaging many people from the business community as members of the association. It is clear that business history formed an important part of the initial activities of the NEHA. It is interesting to note that it took the Harvard Business School until 1924 to set up a comparable organisation. In that year, a group of faculty members and practitioners worked together to launch a national

4 H. Brugmans, 'Het belang der economische geschiedenis (1904)', in: Leo Noordegraaf. *Ideeën en ideologieën: studies over economische en sociale geschiedschrijving in Nederland 1894-1991* (Amsterdam 1991) 73-98. Reference to inaugural lecture by Robert Fruin, 1860, 40.

5 H.F.J.M. van den Eerenbeemt, 'Het groene front in een gouden rand: 50 delen jaarboek NEHA 1915-1987', *Economisch- en Sociaal-Historisch Jaarboek* 50 (1987) 1-31, 1-6.

6 Leo Noordegraaf, 'Nicolaas Wilhelmus Posthumus, 1880-1960: van gloeiend marxist tot entrepreneur (1992)', in: Leo Noordegraaf. *Ideeën en ideologieën: studies over economische en sociale geschiedschrijving in Nederland 1894-1991* (Amsterdam 1991) 727-752.

depository of business records. Dean Wallace Donham augmented the scheme by establishing the Business Historical Society and persuading companies to affiliate with the association. In 1927, the newly constructed Baker Library assumed possession of the collections accumulated by the Business Historical Society. Moreover, business helped to fund the first chair in business history at Harvard Business School and N.S.B. Gras became its first holder.⁷ In this context, the NEHA initiative was certainly not late. After a successful start, the NEHA soon had to temper its ambitions during the period of the First World War, because funds became scarce. However, the first yearbook appeared in 1915.

Topics studied in the period up to 1945

Now that the new field had its own publication channel, what did it publish? Which subjects? Which periods? Which themes? In the period up to 1945, the yearbooks were filled by the publication of original sources. In that sense, the yearbook was facilitating future research more than presenting the results of research. The editors of the sources wrote an introduction, usually of two or three pages, sometimes even less and very occasionally more. The sources ranged from the Middle Ages to the present, but the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries dominated. Trade and trading houses were the favourite topics, followed by manufacturing and financing. About a quarter of the articles dealt with a range of other subjects, such as the economy of a city or the highest revenue of a city in a certain year.⁸ The NEHA also prepared larger source publications, including six volumes about Dutch trade policy in the nineteenth century.

In its aim to facilitate historical research, the NEHA collected the archives of businesses and institutions, including trade unions. The board members played an active role in acquiring business archives, but the NEHA had no clear acquisition profile. Chance played an important role. The number of archives steadily rose, but the capabilities for storage and inventorying lagged far behind. By 1935, the NEHA had acquired 142 archives, but only 23 per cent of them had been opened up for research through inventories, and most of those inventories were rather basic. Some of the archives were consulted by historians, even historians from abroad. However, to what

7 Barry E.C. Boothman, 'A theme worthy of epic treatment: N.S.B. Gras and the emergence of American Business History', *Journal of Macromarketing* 21, June (2001) 61-73, 70-71.

8 *Economisch-Historisch Jaarboeken, 1916-1945*; Eerenbeemt, 'Het groene front in een gouden rand: 50 delen jaarboek NEHA 1915-1987'.

extent researchers made use of the whole collection is not clear.⁹ In his book about the life and business of G.H. Roentgen, the author M.G. de Boer referred in his introduction to the fact that the company Fijenoord had given its archives to the NEHA for safekeeping, and he encouraged other companies to follow suit.¹⁰ Some business members of the NEHA felt inspired to study their own companies. For instance, A.W. Wichers Hoeth wrote the history of his own company, Van Heekeren & Co, followed by the history of the branch organisation, Vereeniging voor den Koffiehandel. He enjoyed this work so much that he also wrote the history of a family related company, Louis Bienfait and Sons. For many years, he was a board member of the NEHA.¹¹ Thus, through different routes, the NEHA stimulated business history research.

In his 1974 overview, J. de Vries counted some 110 business histories before 1914, including studies of entrepreneurs and business institutions, and well over 400 between 1914 and 1945.¹² The quality of the company histories varied between thoroughly academic and lightly entertaining. Many authors remained close to the original documents and thus made extensive use of the company archives. Three multi-volume company histories stood out because of their thorough approach: C. Gerretson's history of Royal Dutch Shell, W.M.F. Mansveld's history of the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij and A.M. de Jong's history of the Nederlandsche Bank. In these extensive studies, the authors positioned their companies in their political, economic and social context, thus contributing to both economic and business history.¹³

Economic history and business history were still closely connected in the 1930s. When J.G. van Dillen in his inaugural lecture in 1934 called 'social and economic history a young branch of history' and explained its development, he referred to an article by the aforementioned N.S.B.

9 J.L.J.M. van Gerwen, 'Het papieren geheugen van kapitaal en arbeid: de archieven van het NEHA', in: E.J. Fischer, J.L.J.M. van Gerwen and J. J. Seegers. *De Vereeniging het Nederlandsch Economisch Historisch Archief, 1914-1989* (Amsterdam 1989) 37-64.

10 M.G. de Boer, *Leven en bedrijf van Gerhard Moritz Roentgen, grondvester van de Nederlandsche Stoomboot-Maatschappij thans Maatschappij voor Scheeps- en Werktuigbouw "Fijenoord", 1823-1923* (Rotterdam 1923).

11 W. Voorbeijtel Cannenburg, 'A.W. Wichers Hoeth', *Economisch-Historisch Jaarboek* 27 (1958) 204-205.

12 Johan de Vries, 'De stand der bedrijfsgeschiedenis in Nederland', *Economisch- en Sociaal-Historisch Jaarboek* 37 (1974) 1-22, 17-18.

13 W.M.F. Mansvelt, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij* (Haarlem 1924-1925); C. Gerretson, *Geschiedenis der 'Koninklijke'* (Baarn 1973); A.M. de Jong, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche bank van 1814 tot 1864* (Haarlem 1930); A.M. de Jong, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Bank van 1864 tot 1914* (Enschede 1967).

Gras, a Harvard professor of business history. In this article, Gras described business history as ‘an aspect of economic history of great constructive promise’ and he defined economic history ‘as the story of how man has obtained a living’.¹⁴ In his lecture, Van Dillen argued that economic history owed its rise to the German Historical School of economics, though the fierce debate between the inductive and deductive methods had long been resolved with the conclusion that both approaches had their merits and needed each other. Facts were useless without concepts to organise them and without the questions researchers wanted to answer. On the other hand, theoretical economists became better aware of the complexity of economic life. Van Dillen added that behind the debate about methods was hidden a political debate about the question of whether or not governments should interfere in the economy. Van Dillen found that economic historians were not much interested in economic theory, but in his view they should have been. Collaboration between economists and historians would be useful because much changed over time, but also much remained the same. For instance, the study of guilds could give useful information to inform the debate about public-private partnerships (*publiekrechtelijke bedrijfsorganisatie*). The protectionism of the 1930s could be compared with the policies of Mercantilism and those dealing with the currency confusion could learn from currency problems in earlier periods. These examples illustrate the kinds of issues Van Dillen was interested in: the organisation of economic activities and the influence of governments on the economy. By using the concepts of economists, historians could even contribute to solving economic problems.¹⁵

Similar to his colleague Van Dillen, Z.W. Sneller, a professor of economic history in Rotterdam and later Leiden, was interested in the link between contemporary economic problems and historical research. In 1932, he looked at the economic crises of the past and noted differences and similarities.¹⁶ On another occasion, he discussed the relationship between economics and history. For him the usefulness of economics lay more in its concepts than in its theories. The economic historian and the historian in general

14 N.S.B. Gras, ‘Rise and development of economic history’, *The Economic History Review* 1 (1927) 12-34.

15 J.G. van Dillen, ‘De sociaal-economische geschiedenis in haar verhouding tot economie, sociologie en politieke geschiedenis (1934)’, in: Leo Noordegraaf. *Ideeën en ideologieën: studies over economische en sociale geschiedschrijving in Nederland 1894-1991* (Amsterdam 1991) 129-148, 150-161.

16 Paul van Stuijvenberg, ‘De weerspiegeling van de depressie van de jaren 1930 in de beoefening van de economische geschiedenis (1979)’, in: Leo Noordegraaf. *Ideeën en ideologieën: studies over economische en sociale geschiedschrijving in Nederland 1894-1991* (Amsterdam 1991) 719-726.

could benefit from the clear way economists formulated concepts such as socialism and communism, market and stock exchange, economic cycle and crisis, banker and bank, cartel and guilds, handicraft and house industry, manufacture and factory.¹⁷ These concepts were all clearly very useful for economic as well as business historians. It is no surprise then that Sneller wrote frequently about industry and trade, including a history of business in Rotterdam and an extensive study about the Rotterdam coal trade.¹⁸ All these business studies were seen as part of economic history, not as a separate field.

New interests in the study of economic history

In 1947, the newly appointed Professor of Economic History at the University of Amsterdam, I.J. Brugmans, discussed the new developments in economic history. Prior to then, much worthwhile research had been done, he argued, but economic historians should not limit themselves to describing the past and instead should ask general questions related to economics. Economic science, he argued, occupied itself with the 'wealth of nations', with the question of how people satisfied their needs and how they dealt carefully with scarce resources to satisfy their needs. To understand how people had dealt with these problems in the past, it was necessary to acquire knowledge about incomes, wages, prices, taxes, the value of money, the cost of living, and employment: all themes on which information was hard to find in the available works concerning economic history. Only recently, he explained, had economic historians started to deal with these subjects, including Posthumus with his work on the Dutch history of prices. What is interesting in his list of important subjects is the focus on income rather than production. In addition, Brugmans urged economic historians to pay more attention to statistical information and statistical methods and to make more international comparisons.¹⁹

In a 1949 review of Henrietta Larson's *Guide to Business History*, H. Klompmaker introduced the field to a Dutch audience by assuring that

17 Z.W. Sneller, 'De economische geschiedenis in hare betrekking tot economie en geschiedenis (1939)', in: Leo Noordegraaf. *Ideeën en ideologieën: studies over economische en sociale geschiedschrijving in Nederland 1894-1991* (Amsterdam 1991) 149-165.

18 Z.W. Sneller, *Geschiedenis van den steenkolenhandel van Rotterdam* (Groningen 1946).

19 I.J. Brugmans, 'Wendingen in de economische geschiedenis (1947)', in: Leo Noordegraaf. *Ideeën en ideologieën: studies over economische en sociale geschiedschrijving in Nederland 1894-1991* (Amsterdam 1991) 149-165, 195-199.

what Larson and her colleague Gras understood as 'business history' was the same as 'economic history' in the Netherlands.²⁰ In his dissertation, written under Posthumus and finished in 1949, Klompmaker analysed the history of capitalism, the cycles in economic life and the question of whether newcomers were the ones to bring innovation. In contrast to Posthumus' approach, he did not base his study on archival research but on academic literature. He used a wide range of foreign authors, including J. Schumpeter and H. Pirenne, but also Gras and A. Cole. His dissertation clearly whetted his appetite for business history.²¹

As a teacher of history, Klompmaker picked up a discussion on the future of business history in the American journal *Business History Review* in 1962, which resulted from a conference with the theme 'Business History as a Teaching Challenge'.²² One participant gave the following comment on the conference: 'If there was any consensus at the conference, it was that business history is not what many had thought that their fellow participants thought it was. [...] a great majority of those who were present did not identify business history solely in 'company terms'. The revelation that pioneers in company history shared this view was as startling to some of their fellow practitioners as it was to newcomers'.²³

F. Redlich, then a retired professor of Harvard, argued that such a narrow definition of business history was never the original intention when the field was defined in the US by the Dean of the Harvard Business School. The economic crisis and the institutional setting forced the discipline in this direction and into isolation.²⁴ Indeed, in 1939 Gras had written a general history about business and capitalism as an introduction to business history, underlining how broad the field of business history could be. In his introduction, he argued: 'The field of business history, bordering so many social estates and skirting so many cultural streams, is no narrow speciality'. On the other hand, he argued that the challenge of the business historian was in a large part to discover the main lines of development in business policy and the chief results of business management through the centuries and to correlate the two. Thus formulated, it appeared a much narrower field.²⁵

20 H. Klompmaker, 'Business history', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 62 (1949) 358-372.

21 *Ibidem*, *Studiën over de geschiedenis van het kapitalisme* (Groningen 1949), 1949.

22 *Ibidem*, 'People or circumstances?' *Business History Review*, Winter (1962) 459-462.

23 A.M. Johnson, 'Where does business history go from here?' *Business History Review*, Spring (1962) 11-20.

24 F. Redlich, 'Approaches to business history', *Business History Review* (Spring 1961) 61-70.

25 N.S.B. Gras, *Business and capitalism: an introduction to business history* (New York 1939).

In 1964, H. Klompmaker wrote an article for *Business History Review* on Business History in Holland at the invitation of the editors, who wanted to 'facilitate fruitful conceptualization and research in business history among scholars throughout the world'. To assess the state of business history in the Netherlands, Klompmaker pointed to the NEHA as the oldest institution in the Netherlands involved with business history. He looked at the *Economic History Yearbooks* of the NEHA published between 1915 and 1964. He counted 156 articles, of which one third dealt with individual businesses while the other two thirds dealt with complete sections of industry and descriptions of particular aspects. He also pointed to publications on trading, trading houses and share dealings, as well as a number of recently published company histories by professors of economic history and sociology. Both in the narrow sense of company history and in the broader sense of the development of economic activities, business history in the Netherlands seemed a thriving field.²⁶ He also could have mentioned the economic and social history of the Netherlands by I.J. Brugmans, published in 1961.

Brugmans had written a number of company histories, despite his above-mentioned focus on incomes. He presented his book, *Paardenkracht en mensenmacht (Horsepower and people power)* as an economic and social history of the Netherlands, not as a business history. However, for his book he used many studies on individual companies as well as sector studies and contemporary reports. His book was a combination of sector studies, discussions on labour relations, and relations between business and government, in the context of changing capitalism. He distinguished three stages of capitalism and two turning periods: early capitalism, the industrial revolution, modern capitalism, reversal, and new capitalism. In the use of stages, he followed in the footsteps of the Historical School.²⁷ Not surprisingly, his book was used in the discussions about the five stages of economic development introduced in 1960 by W.W. Rostow.²⁸ However, Brugmans' discussion of the nineteenth century was overshadowed by the dissertation of J.A. de Jonge that appeared in 1968. Similar to Brugmans, he looked at industry sectors, but with far more statistical information. He directly connected his findings with the theories of Rostow and argued that

26 H. Klompmaker, 'Business history in Holland', *Business History Review* 38, (Winter 1964) 501-510.

27 I.J. Brugmans, *Paardenkracht en mensenmacht. Sociaal-economische geschiedenis van Nederland, 1795-1940* (Den Haag 1961).

28 J.H. van Stuijvenberg, 'Rostow's groeifasen en hun gebruik in de praktijk van de economische geschiedenis', *Economisch- en Sociaal-Historisch Jaarboek* 33 (1970) 167-185.

the stage of the 'take off into self-sustained growth' in the Netherlands had taken place after 1895.²⁹

When he started as professor of economic history in 1947, Brugmans had described the new developments in economic history. When he retired in 1968, he returned to that theme and concluded that economists had taken over the field with their rigorous models and statistical methods. The economists complained that the data they thought relevant had not been delivered by the historians. To a certain extent, Brugmans agreed with the criticisms of economists: historians tended to describe rather than explain events. Economists were interested in two themes: economic growth and the problem of underdeveloped countries. The New Economic History posed new questions about the past and in order to find answers, they needed quantitative information about national incomes, savings, investments and the balance of trade. Moreover, the economic historian needed theories. Brugmans agreed that all this would be useful, but he refused to accept that the only task for economic historians was to calculate national income retrospectively. Economic history was so much more. For him, the historian was also a storyteller, the one who painted a picture. 'Clio can't be replaced by the computer', he argued in his farewell lecture in 1968.³⁰ However, he was on the losing side of the argument.

Of the next generation of Dutch economic historians, P.W. Klein embraced the new approach. The statistical and theoretical approach of the New Economic History had deepened historical insights.³¹ The macro-economic models based on M. Keynes, the concerns about world economic growth and the New Economic History, moved economic history from micro to macro, from production to income and from description to modelling, although the contrasts should not be painted too strongly. Klein also made an important contribution to business history with his dissertation on the seventeenth century entrepreneurial family Trip. As the framework, he chose Schumpeter's theories on monopolies, entrepreneurs and innovation.³² In the US, business history and entrepreneurial history developed as

29 J.A. de Jonge, *De industrialisatie in Nederland tussen 1850 en 1914* (Nijmegen 1968), 339-358.

30 I.J. Brugmans, 'Clio en de computer', *De Economist* 116, 1 (1968).

31 P.W. Klein, 'Economische geschiedenis: over theorie en historie in de economische wetenschap', in: J. van Herwaarden, *Lof der historie: opstellen over de geschiedenis en maatschappij* (Rotterdam 1973) 1-29.

32 Peter Klein, *De Trippen in de 17e eeuw: een studie over het ondernemersgedrag op de Hollandse stapelmarkt* (Assen 1965).

two different and sometimes competing disciplines, but in the Netherlands both approaches were seen mostly as two sides of the same coin.³³

In the 1960s, the NEHA made plans to attract money in order to employ researchers to study the archives and create a fully equipped centre for economic and business history research. Those plans were not realised, perhaps because of the new direction in which economic history had moved.³⁴ From its start in 1914, the NEHA had acquired 316 archives, the majority of which were business archives. By 1970, only 31 per cent of those archives had been opened up for research through inventories. The NEHA lacked the space and money to look after the archives properly. It could have tried to apply for more money, though success was certainly not assured. Instead, under its new director J.H. van Stuijvenberg, the NEHA decided to decentralise the archives. They were handed over to the national archive or to municipal and provincial archives, according to their place of origin. This had the advantage that the business archives returned to their original local context. The new caretakers also promised to make inventories within five years.³⁵ Without the archives, the NEHA saw the number of its corporate sponsors decline further. However, the number of academic members increased, very likely as a consequence of the growth in the number of university teachers and researchers in the early 1970s.³⁶

Van Stuijvenberg, the successor to Brugmans, described the shift from traditional to modern economic history in 1977. For him, traditional was attention to the segmented and institutional aspects of economic development; modern was the analytical, integrated approach that was focused on the theoretical, model-based, functional and quantitative aspects of economic developments in the past.³⁷ In this approach, the business archives were not the first point of call.

33 F. de Goey, 'Ondernemersgeschiedenis in Amerika, Nederland en België (1940-1995). Trends in vraagstellingen, onderzoekmethoden en thema's: een overzicht', *NEHA-jaarboek voor economische, bedrijfs- en techniekgeschiedenis* 59 (1996) 21-65.

34 H.F.J.M. van den Eerenbeemt, 'Het groene front in een gouden rand: 50 delen jaarboek NEHA 1915-1987 (vervolg)', *Economisch- en Sociaal-Historisch Jaarboek* 51 (1988) 1-34.

35 Van Gerwen, 'Het papieren geheugen van kapitaal en arbeid', 50-59.

36 Van den Eerenbeemt, 'Het groene front in een gouden rand (vervolg)', 14-16.

37 J.H. van Stuijvenberg, 'Traditionele en moderne economische geschiedenis', *Economisch en Sociaal Historisch Jaarboek* 40 (1977) 1-25.

Reinventing Business History

With economic history moving in a new direction, business history had to reinvent itself. On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the NEHA in 1974, Johan de Vries gave an overview of business history. He opened with the sentence: 'it's fair to say: no anniversary, no business history'.³⁸ He immediately associated business history with commissioned history and thus the history of individual companies. He agreed that other types of publications had also added to the field, but in his article the focus was very much on company histories. He highlighted the many company histories that had been written since the nineteenth century and described their varied character. In particular, he discussed the problems facing historians writing commissioned business histories. In one of the footnotes, he also defined business history as part of economic history and 'the study of the past from the perspective of companies and business life'. He then went on to reproach business history for its isolation, its lack of theory and lack of synthesis, although in part these problems were created by the perception of business history as (commissioned) company history. He could have cited the book by Brugmans as an example of a synthesis based on a wide range of company histories, set in a framework informed by insights from economics and economic history on the stages of capitalist development. Apparently, he did not consider this book to be a business history. In his article, De Vries was not clear about which theories he would have liked to see used in business history studies.³⁹ However, he was certainly not the only one complaining about the lack of theory in business history. It was more like a running theme in all discussions of this field.⁴⁰

In another overview from 1978, De Vries elaborated on his earlier definition as: [...] business history as that part of economic history that studies the past from the perspective of companies and takes the company, groups of companies or business life as a whole or part thereof, for instance one entrepreneur or a group of entrepreneurs as special object of study. Always the company is the starting point and point of return'. De Vries included

38 'Zonder jubileum geen bedrijfsgeschiedenis, mogen wij welhaast zeggen': De Vries, 'De stand der bedrijfsgeschiedenis in Nederland'.

39 'Zonder jubileum geen bedrijfsgeschiedenis, mogen wij welhaast zeggen': De Vries, 'De stand der bedrijfsgeschiedenis in Nederland'.

40 Leslie Hannah, 'New Issues in British Business History', *Business History Review* 57, 2 (1983) 165-174; D.C. Coleman, 'The uses and abuses of business history', *Business History* 29, 2 (1987) 141-156; T.R. Gourvish, 'Business history: in defence of the empirical approach?', *Accounting Business and Financial History* 5, 1 (1995) 3-12; Peter Hertner and Geoffrey Jones (eds.), *Multinationals: theory and history* (Gower 1987).

private companies as well as state companies under this definition, but not government as such. Social aspects were not specifically mentioned, but could easily be accommodated within this definition. In this overview he gave a number of suggestions for theories business historians might use, for instance growth theories in general and the growth of a firm more specifically, organisation theory, decision theory, theories around innovation, communication, administration and control and the person behind the entrepreneur.⁴¹ Though one reference to the American business historian A.D. Chandler was included, De Vries did not recommend his 1962 book on *Strategy and Structure* and the article was probably finished before Chandler's 1977 book *The Visible Hand* reached the Netherlands.⁴²

It is somewhat ironic that soon after the NEHA's decision to decentralise its business archives, interest in business history started to grow again. Publications focusing on the nineteenth and twentieth century tended to be categorised under the heading 'business history', while studies on entrepreneurs and businesses in earlier periods were mostly seen as economic history or early modern history. The latter paid particular attention to the role and personality of the entrepreneur.⁴³ This overview concentrates on publications dealing with the last two centuries. A number of dissertations appeared in the early 1980s, with such themes as mergers, concentration and competition, the Schumpeterian entrepreneur and industry policy. They positioned business history as an academic specialisation independent of commissioned history.⁴⁴ As such, they needed their own publication chan-

41 Johan de Vries, 'Bedrijfsgechiedenis', in: H. Baudet and H. van der Meulen. *Kernproblemen der economische geschiedenis* (Groningen 1978) 180-192.

42 A.D. Chandler jr., *Strategy and structure. Chapters in the history of the industrial enterprise* (Cambridge 1962); A.D. Chandler jr., *The visible hand. The managerial revolution in American business* (Cambridge, Mass. 1977).

43 See for instance: J.W. Veluwenkamp, *Ondernemersgedrag op de Hollandse stapelmarkt in de tijd van de Republiek: de Amsterdamse handelsfirma Jan Isaac de Neufville en Comp. 1730-1764* (Leiden 1981); C. Lesger and L. Noordeggraaf (eds.), *Entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship in early modern times: merchants and industrialists within the orbit of the Dutch staple market* (Den Haag 1995); J.W. Veluwenkamp, 'Familienetwerken binnen de Nederlandse koopliedengemeenschap van Archangel in de eerste helft van de achttiende eeuw', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden (BMGN)* 108, 4 (1993) 654-672.; Oscar Gelderblom, *Zuid-Nederlandse kooplieden en de opkomst van de Amsterdamse stapelmarkt (1578-1630)* (Hilversum 2000).

44 H.H. Vleesenbeek, *De eerste grote industriële fusie in Nederland na de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Het ontstaan van Nijverdal-ten Cate- een bedrijfshistorische analyse-* (Rotterdam 1981); E.J. Fischer, *Fabriqueurs en fabrikanten, de Twentse katoennijverheid en de onderneming S.J. Spanjaard te Borne tussen circa 1800 en 1930* (Utrecht 1983); K.E. Sluyterman, *Ondernemen in sigaren. Analyse van bedrijfsbeleid in vijf Nederlandse sigarenfabrieken in de perioden 1856-1865 en 1925-1934* (Tilburg 1983); G. Hogesteegeer, *Concentratie en centralisatie bij de openbare telefonie in Nederland, 1881-1940* (Rotterdam 1984); Willem van den Broeke, *Financiën en financiers van de Nederlandse spoor-*

nel. In co-operation with historians of technology the business historians set up the *Jaarboek voor de Geschiedenis van Bedrijven Techniek* (*Yearbook for the history of business and technology*). The first yearbook appeared in 1984.

The combination of business and technology turned out to be a success. Between 1984 and 1994, one third of all the articles dealt with both fields.⁴⁵ Of the 143 articles, approximately half discussed business history subjects and one sixth focused exclusively on the history of technology. These latter articles were also the more theoretical ones,⁴⁶ whereas on the business history side there were few theoretical articles. In the first volume, H. de Vries encouraged business historians to look at business economics and use their methods to analyse annual reports. Bläsing pointed to the usefulness of Schumpeter's view of the entrepreneur as an innovator, and the issues arising out of commissioned histories.⁴⁷ The yearbook published few 'mini company histories', articles dealing with all the aspects of one company. About a quarter discussed one aspect of one company in a more focused way. More dealt with the level of the business sector. A wide range of themes were highlighted, including the successes and failures of individual companies, entrepreneurship, technology on the shop floor and its impact on the workers, financing, and the relationship between banks and industry, and government and industry. Surprisingly little attention (just one article) was given to the internationalisation of companies.⁴⁸ After outsourcing their company archives, the NEHA sought to facilitate business history research by publishing a series of overviews of business history archives in public archives as well as private companies. Realising from the overviews how many archives there were, and would be in the future, they also studied the problem of how to select the most relevant archives to safeguard. Would it be possible to formulate criteria that would meet with general approval?⁴⁹

The link between business history and commissioned history remained close, because commissions provided valued access to archives and fi-

wegen, 1837-1890 (Zwolle 1985); E.S.A. Bloemen, *Scientific management in Nederland, 1900-1930* (Amsterdam 1988).

45 In 1994 the *Jaarboek voor Bedrijf en Techniek* merged with the *Economisch en Sociaal Historisch Jaarboek*, see Chapter by Van Gerwen and Seegers.

46 E.S.A. Bloemen and K.E. Sluyterman, 'Epiloog: tien jaar Jaarboek voor de geschiedenis van bedrijf en techniek', *Jaarboek voor de Geschiedenis van Bedrijven Techniek* 10 (1993) 307-318.

47 Hille de Vries, 'De bruikbaarheid van begrippen uit de bedrijfseconomie voor de historicus', *Jaarboek voor de Geschiedenis van Bedrijven Techniek* 1 (1984) 24-43.; J.F.E. Bläsing, 'Een Brabants ondernemer van prototypisch-Schumpeteriaans kaliber: W.H. Hendrix 1929-1963', *Jaarboek voor de Geschiedenis van Bedrijven Techniek*, 5 (1988) 119-133.

48 Bloemen and Sluyterman, 'Epiloog: tien jaar'.

49 E.J. Fischer, J.L.J.M. van Gerwen and G. Reudink, *Stap voor stap. Een proeve van macro-selectie inzake Nederlandse bedrijfsarchieven* (Amsterdam/Zeist 1994).

nancial funding. In 1984, H.H. Vleesenbeek set up a Centre for Business History (CBG) at Erasmus University Rotterdam, to attract commissions and to facilitate business history research. He became the first professor of business history in the Netherlands.⁵⁰ In the 1980s and 1990s, the CBG published a large number of monographs and a series of booklets, titled the *CBG Cahiers (CBG Short books)*. It also organised two international conferences on business history.⁵¹ The NEHA was also active in commissioned history in this period and in 1994 funded a special chair in business history at the University of Amsterdam. The first holder of the chair was E.J. Fischer, followed in 2012 by J.P.B. Jonker. Some other universities also tried to source extra funding from business. In the 1990s, H. Lintsen and his colleagues at the Technical University Eindhoven set up a foundation for the history of technology and launched large research projects on the development of technology in its societal context during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Netherlands. These projects were supported by commissions from companies for individual case studies and resulted in two series of handsomely published books for a broader audience than just an academic one.⁵² The Research Centre for History and Culture of Utrecht University enabled a group of researchers, led by J. Dankers, to focus on commissioned history, including business history. In addition, I was nominated as Professor of Business History at Utrecht University in 2004.⁵³ All the above-mentioned commissioned projects led to a discussion about the independence of the researcher, a problem that initially seemed particularly relevant for business historians, but became equally pertinent for many university researchers when outside funding became more and more relevant to cash-strapped universities. The various institutions used different methods to achieve their aims of academic independence and the certainty that research results would be published in one form or another.⁵⁴

50 Mila Davids, Ferry de Goeij and Dirk de Wit (eds.), *Proceedings of the conference on business history, October 1994, The Netherlands* (Rotterdam 1995).

51 The CBG stopped functioning in 2002. In 2003, some of its researchers founded an independent organisation for commissioned history: Stad+Bedrijf. It is not clear whether at some point the CBG was formally wound down. Information provided by Ferry de Goeij, who was for many years closely involved with the CBG.

52 H.W. Lintsen (ed.), *Geschiedenis van de techniek in Nederland: de wording van een moderne samenleving 1800-1890*, six volumes, Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1992-1995; J.W. Schot, H.W. Lintsen, A. Rip and A.A. Albert de la Bruhèze (eds.), *Techniek in Nederland in de twintigste eeuw, seven volumes*, Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1998-2003.

53 Initially the chair was a special chair funded by the Unger-Van Brerofonds; in 2009 it became a 'profiling' professorship.

54 Wouter Beekers, 'Tussen Scylla en Charybdis: over een kleine eeuw historisch-wetenschappelijk onderzoek in opdracht', in: L.J. Dorsman and P.J. Knechtmans. *Onderzoek in opdracht: de*

In the 1980s, the dominant debate among international business historians concerned the theories of Chandler on the rise of the managerial enterprise, the superiority of the managerial company over the family firm in the industries of the Second Industrial Revolution, and the benefits of the multidivisional organisation. Few picked up on these debates in the Netherlands. However, Chandler's book *Scale and Scope*, in which he compared experiences in the US with those in Germany and Britain, stimulated comparative research in the Netherlands.⁵⁵ I. Blanken found Chandler's model of the three-pronged investment very useful for understanding Philips' entry into the radio business during the interwar years, though he did seek to reconcile Philips' success with Chandler's criticisms of the family firm. H.J.M. Winkelman and I argued that based on the largest Dutch manufacturing firms in 1930, family management was not synonymous with failure. E.S.A. Bloemen, J. Kok and J.L. van Zanden followed Chandler's method of drawing up lists of the largest industrial companies during the twentieth century to see how stable the large companies were. They found more mobility than fitted with Chandler's generalisations.⁵⁶ Dutch business historians began to engage more actively with their international colleagues and their debates, for instance on multinational firms. In this international exchange of ideas, they were helped by the foundation of the European Business History Association (EBHA) in 1994, which from 1996 onwards organised annual conferences. From the start, Dutch business historians were involved, both as participants at the conferences and board members of the organisation.⁵⁷

In my 1999 overview of Dutch business history over the last fifteen years, I concluded that many researchers from different backgrounds were active in business history. I distinguished four streams: dissertations, journal articles, company histories (often commissioned histories) and finally research from other disciplines with a business history angle. The overview was in part organised around themes inspired by the work of Chandler, includ-

publieke functie van het universitaire onderzoek in Nederland sedert 1876 (Hilversum 2007).

55 A.D. Chandler jr., *Scale and scope. The dynamics of industrial capitalism* (Cambridge (Mass.) 1990).

56 E. Bloemen, J. Kok and J.L. van Zanden, *De top 100 van industriële bedrijven in Nederland 1913-1990*. Adviesraad voor het wetenschaps- en technologiebeleid (Den Haag 1993); K.E. Sluyterman and H.J.M. Winkelman, 'The Dutch family firm confronted with Chandler's dynamics of industrial capitalism, 1890-1940', *Business History* 35, 4 (1993) 152-183; I.J. Blanken, *De ontwikkeling van de N.V. Philips' Gloeilampenfabrieken tot elektrotechnisch concern*. Geschiedenis van Philips Electronics N.V.3 (Leiden 1992).

57 G. Jones and K. Sluyterman, 'British and Dutch business history', in: F. Amatori and G. Jones. *Business history around the world* (Cambridge 2003) 110-145.

ing the rise of managers and the managerial company, the family firm, cartels, mergers and takeovers, and the entrepreneur. Other themes, such as labour relations, government-business relations, financing, innovation and internationalisation were part of the general discussion among business historians. The overview showed that work had been done on all these themes in recent years. Business historians were still not united in what should be their theoretical home. Many different approaches were used. Theories were used to organise and analyse the historical material, not to create alternative theories. The overview mentioned the lack of a synthesis and I decided to write one.⁵⁸ The article also mentioned the missing history of Royal Dutch Shell after 1914. This gap would finally be filled in 2007.⁵⁹

As a consequence of the NWO funding policies, university researchers were encouraged to design large research projects, which was also true for business historians. Utrecht University took the lead in organising a large interuniversity research project on Dutch business in the twentieth century (BINT). This brought together researchers from Erasmus University, Eindhoven University of Technology, Free University Amsterdam and the IISH/NEHA. The project returned to debates about capitalism and its changes over time. It looked at the impact of institutions and the extent and speed of changes in those institutions. To that purpose, it used literature from sociologists and political economists about varieties of capitalism and national business systems in order to develop the research framework. In this literature, the Netherlands was typified as a co-ordinated market economy, but was this also the case at the beginning of the twentieth century? Further, is it still true for the start of the 21st century?⁶⁰ The answers were clearly negative, which elicited new questions, such as how change was being brought about, and could different results be seen from a liberal or a more co-ordinated economy, measured in economic growth and the spread of economic benefits over the whole population? The project has

58 K.E. Sluyterman, 'Nederlandse bedrijfsgeschiedenis: de oogst van vijftien jaar', *NEHA-jaarboek voor economische, bedrijfs- en techniekgeschiedenis* 62 (1999) 351-387; Keetie E. Sluyterman, *Dutch Enterprise in the twentieth century. Business strategies in a small open economy* (London and New York 2005).

59 Joost Jonker and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *From Challenger to Joint Industry Leader. A History of Royal Dutch Shell 1* (Oxford 2007); Stephen Howarth and Joost Jonker, *Powering the Hydrocarbon Revolution. A History of Royal Dutch Shell 2* (Oxford 2007); Keetie Sluyterman, *Keeping Competitive in Turbulent Markets, 1973-2007. A History of Royal Dutch Shell 3* (Oxford 2007).

60 See also the articles by Jeroen Touwen, 'Varieties of capitalism en de Nederlandse economie in de periode 1950-2000', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 3, 1 (2006) 73-104.; Jeroen Touwen, 'How does a coordinated market economy evolve? Effects of policy learning in the Netherlands in the 1980s', *Labor History* 49, 4 (2008) 439-464.

addressed the main topics of the varieties of capitalism debate, including corporate governance, the firm and its leaders, multinationals as agents of change, co-ordination between firms, labour relations and innovation. One important finding is that different elements of the national business system changed at different points in time. The coherence between the various elements was less constraining than the varieties of capitalism literature suggests. People have choices. Another finding is that the Netherlands was quite successful in terms of economic growth and the spread of economic benefits during the long period it was a co-ordinated market economy, but it was also successful during the 1990s when the economy became more liberal. Overall, the country seemed to do worse than other European countries during international economic crises. At the time of writing, this project is reaching its conclusion.⁶¹ In this project, business and economic history are moving closer again through their shared interest in institutions.

Though it is not presented as a business history project, the research project 'Outport and Hinterland, Rotterdam business and the Ruhr industry, 1870-2000' by H. Klemann has a large business history component.⁶² Therefore, this project also shows a rapprochement between business history and economic history. The journal *Enterprise and Society* describes the field as 'the historical relations between businesses and their larger political, cultural, institutional, social and economic context'. In his inaugural lecture, J.P.B. Jonker defined business history as 'the history of people going

61 Gerarda Westerhuis, *Conquering the American market. ABNAMRO, Rabobank and Nationale-Nederlanden working in a different business environment, 1965-2005* (Amsterdam 2008); Maurits van Os, *Grensoverschrijdende fusies in de twintigste eeuw. De zoektocht van vijf Nederlandse ondernemingen naar de ideale buitenlandse partner en het beste integratiemodel* (Amsterdam 2009); Jacques van Gerwen and Ferry de Goey, *Ondernemers in Nederland. Variaties in ondernemen* (Amsterdam 2008); Keetie Sluyterman and Ben Wubs, *Over grenzen: multinationals en de Nederlandse markteconomie* (Amsterdam 2009); Erik Nijhof and Annette van den Berg, *Het menselijk kapitaal. Sociaal ondernemerschap in Nederland* (Amsterdam 2012); Bram Bouwens and Joost Dankers, *Tussen concurrentie en concentratie: belangenorganisaties, kartels, fusies en overnames* (Amsterdam 2012); Keetie Sluyterman, 'Introduction: changing business systems in the Netherlands in the twentieth century', *Business History Review* 84, 4 (2010) 737-750.; Keetie Sluyterman and Ben Wubs, 'Multinationals and the Dutch business system: the cases of Royal Dutch Shell and Sara Lee', *Business History Review*, 84, 4, 799-822; Abe de Jong, Ailsa Röell and Gerarda Westerhuis, 'Changing national business systems: corporate governance and financing in the Netherlands, 1945-2005', *Business History Review*, 84, 4, 773-798; Bram Bouwens and Joost Dankers, 'The invisible handshake: cartelization in the Netherlands, 1930-2000', *Business History Review*, 84, 4, 751-771.

62 For a first research result of this project see: Hein Klemann and Joep Schenk, 'Competition in the Rhine delta waterways, railways and ports, 1870-1913', *The Economic History Review* 66, 3 (2013), 826-827.

about their business'.⁶³ Though he did not refer to Gras, he gave a definition for business history that is very similar to the one Gras gave for economic history in 1927: 'the story of how man has obtained his living'.⁶⁴

There is clearly an overwhelming consensus among practitioners that the scope should be broad. However, the debate is still open on the application of theories. Business historians have been agonising for decades about the use of theory and application of models. Few would argue that theories are not useful, but practitioners differ in their view on which theories to choose from and how to apply them. Under the somewhat ominous title 'New Business History?' A. de Jong, D. Higgins and H. van Driel started a debate about the use of theory in business history, not just in the Netherlands but worldwide. They have not attacked the use of case studies or the abundant use of empirical material by business historians, but have expressed the wish that business historians would direct their empirical observations towards developing theory and testing hypotheses. It is not enough to show that 'history is complex', they want business historians to add to the circle of knowledge creation where theory is confronted with empirical evidence and empirical observations feed into theory formulation. Though all theory is welcome, they would like to see more sophisticated quantitative techniques applied and in any case more rigorous testing of hypotheses.⁶⁵ While economic historians have become less enamoured with the New Economic History approach,⁶⁶ business historians want to examine its possibilities. Perhaps this will be another way in which business historians and economic historians will grow closer together in the future.

Conclusion

When the NEHA was established in 1914, economic history was mainly interpreted as business history. Business archives were considered important sources to collect, study and preserve, and contacts with business people were highly valued. During the interwar period, economic and business history remained closely intertwined and together covered the period from

63 In Dutch: 'De geschiedenis van mensen in hun bedrijvigheid': Joost Jonker, 'Aller ogen gericht op ...? De relevantie van de bedrijfs geschiedenis' (Amsterdam 2012).

64 Gras, 'Rise and development of economic history'.

65 Abe de Jong, David Higgins and Hugo van Driel, 'New business history? An invitation to discuss, call for paper, July 2012.

66 J.W. Drukker, *The revolution that bit its own tail: how economic history changed our ideas on economic growth* (Amsterdam 2006) 19-31, 237-272.

the Middle Ages to the present. The link with economics was considered important and led to studies about the organisation of capitalism and its various stages of development. However, when the discipline of economics became more focused on macro-economics and processes of growth, economic history moved away from business history. The content of economic history changed, although the name remained the same. As a consequence, business history had to reinvent itself and did so by focusing on the history of individual businesses. In linking up with commissioned history, as it had done in the past, the field became mostly concentrated on the nineteenth and twentieth century. In the twenty first century, economic and business history have grown closer together again through their shared interest in institutions. As a next step forward, business history should once again include the study of businesses and business people in earlier centuries, going further back in time than the nineteenth century. By comparing general themes such as customer relations, financing, the limits of markets and corporate social responsibility over centuries, we can reach a deeper understanding of those issues, which may also help with understanding the differences between countries in the present.

About the author

Keetie Sluyterman is a Professor of Business History at Utrecht University. She is a specialist in Dutch business history of the nineteenth and twentieth century and has written or jointly authored a large number of business histories, including the histories of Hagemeyer, Royal Dutch Shell and Heineken. In the study *Dutch Enterprise in the twentieth century: business strategies in a small open economy* (Routledge 2005), she gave an overview on the history of Dutch business in the twentieth century through the looking glass of business strategies. She is one of the leaders of the research project BINT, Dutch business in the twentieth century, which studies varieties of capitalism and changes over time in national business systems. Keetie Sluyterman is a past president of the EBHA and member of the advisory editorial board of the British journal *Business History* and the American journal *Business History Review*.

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