

Jury Report

Jan Brouwer Thesis Award 2021 – History

Teddy Delwiche (University of Groningen)

Masters of the Manuscript, Makers of Knowledge: Colonial New England Students and their Shorthand Notes

One of the advantages of participating in a thesis jury is the surprises supplied by the creative and unexpected research topics students have come up with, and by the inventive ways they have designed to research these topics. This year the jury of the Jan Brouwer Thesis Award had the pleasure of reviewing a series of such inventive topics, and a number of impressive examples of excellent scholarship. The members of the jury could clearly see that in the last year, students have seriously invested in their work. The MA and research master's theses we have read and reviewed were quite extraordinary.

From these high-quality works, the jury finally selected Teddy Delwiche's research master thesis 'Masters of the Manuscript, Makers of Knowledge: Colonial New England Students and their Shorthand Notes' for the Jan Brouwer Thesis Award 2021. The thesis has a large surprise factor: Its subject matter is shorthand notetaking amongst students in the 18th century. Shorthand? Amongst students? In colonial New England? At first sight this might seem like a niche topic and perhaps even quite a dull topic. These days, we know shorthand mostly as secretary's skill, in the Netherlands traditionally taught at Schoevers. Shorthand is a method to speed up the writing process, which helps to further managerial tasks. Why would we want to learn more about that? Well – Teddy Delwiche shows us why.

From the practice of notetaking, Delwiche directs the reader towards the cultures of knowledge in early modern England and colonial New England. He shows us why and how students learned shorthand, how it was embedded in their education and social environments, and how much shorthand was connected with religion. Delwiche underlines the importance of communities of learning: how school children helped each other in acquiring these skills and indicated which words were used so often in religious practice that they would merit shorthand coding. The religious realm is an interesting one: up to now, shorthand has been researched more from the perspective of secrecy, of espionage and coding. This is, as Delwiche states, a real niche topic for colonial New England. The bulk of shorthand as a practice lies in the dominant culture of religious education, training scribal piety through shorthand sermon notebooks.

On top of this, Delwiche also shows how shorthand is not merely a technical skill. As a knowledge practice deeply embedded in cultural communities, it, like calligraphy, articulated specific values, aiming to civilize the colonial youngsters. Shorthand set the tone for American youth culture, breathing the supremacy of the old world. This is an interesting point, as historians of colonial history and of education, who mostly have looked at which books were used in the classroom, have overlooked these practices of continuous connection between old and new England.

Now how can Teddy Delwiche know all this? Here we come to one of the essential qualities of this thesis: its extensive source and methodological work. For his thesis project Delwiche went on an

expedition through the American and English archives and libraries, searching for shorthand notebooks, instruction books for shorthand taking, and for handbooks with shorthand notes in the margins. On top of this, Delwiche also excerpted newspapers to seek for ads for shorthand tutors. What impressed the jury even more is that the student started to learn shorthand himself, so he could read the notes and experience what it takes to master this skill. Apparently, enough time and ibuprofen are essential here. Furthermore, the topic urged him to develop a methodology to investigate the use of shorthand, to measure its utility. That Teddy Delwiche operates on such an advanced level also speaks from the fact that he has already written a peer-reviewed article on the basis of this work.

An often-used qualification for a new historical research project is that it covers a phenomenon which, until then, had not yet received (enough) attention. One can be quite sceptical about these kinds of claims. (The fact that something has not been researched does not in itself make it interesting.) Perhaps there was a good reason for the lack of earlier research? Perhaps it was utterly uninteresting? A niche topic has to prove itself worthy of our attention. And that is what Delwiche has done with shorthand notetaking by students. This knowledge practice merits attention as it can help us understand how knowledge is produced and communicated. In our current society of copy-paste culture, of students struggling with written language, and of kids who hardly read books anymore, it is essential to understand how knowledge skills can be trained. How often do you hear professors complain about their students not taking notes during lectures? Delwiche's thesis can provide new insights in how note taking can be trained, and how important community shaping is for such a practice. Universities construct communities of learners. We congratulate the University of Groningen with this outstanding student from their community of learners.

Prof. dr. R.A. (Ruud) Koole, hoogleraar politicologie, i.h.b. Nederlandse politiek Universiteit Leiden

Prof. dr. I.B. (Inger) Leemans, hoogleraar cultuurgeschiedenis Vrije Universiteit

The jury meeting took place on 23 November 2020, was chaired by KHMW-director Prof. dr. H.J. (Hans) Bennis and also attended by Prof. dr. R.B. (Rudy) Andeweg, Secretary of Humanities KHMW and S. (Saskia) de Boer (minutes).