

“Counting Chickens: Richard Smyth, Miquel Parets and the Small Spaces of Biography”

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[Note: please accept my sincere apologies for not having a written version prepared in time for pre-conference distribution. Poor planning on my part, including woeful underestimation of commitments elsewhere, account for this].

The reference to chickens derives from the unusual title of the office one Richard Smyth held in the municipal government of London from 1644 to 1655. He was known as the Secondary of the Poultry Counter, the latter being a prison located at the eastern end of Cheapside, the main shopping street in the center of the City. Two distinctions earned Smyth his entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The first was his having amassed what has been referred to as the finest library of books and manuscripts later dispersed by post-mortem sale in seventeenth-century England. The other was his maintaining during almost fifty years a rather singular journal. Known as the "Obituary", it was a chronologically-ordered list of individuals who died in London from 1627 to 1674.

This work attracted my attention some time ago because of its typological resemblance to a document with which I had worked earlier. This was a nearly contemporaneous manuscript written from 1626 to 1660 by a master tanner from Barcelona named Miquel Parets. This much longer text in two volumes is a rather unusual combination of autobiography, family chronicle, and contemporary urban history, and it served as the centerpiece of an earlier book I wrote on personal documents by artisans,

peasants, and other members of the popular classes during the early modern era. The resemblance lay in an appendix which Parets had attached to his work, in which he listed in chronological order the deaths of some of his fellow tanners, along with a few brief remarks regarding them as individuals. This textual coincidence led me to begin thinking of ways in which they might shed light on various cultural practices, including biography.

In my talk I will quickly review some of the linkages between these two series of what might be called "mini-biographies" on the one hand, and more developed specimens of the genre on the other. I will suggest that these biographical lists might be seen as representing a somewhat more developed and above all personalized stage of what originally began as impersonal collection of biographical information. The early modern period witnessed a major increase in the gathering and redaction of such data, thanks above all to the need by various bureaucracies to identify individuals under their purview. I will also venture some guesses regarding earlier and non-governmental variants of this practice, including hagiography, genealogy, poetry, and even the inclusion of mini-biographies in full-scale exemplars of the genre itself. I will conclude with the suggestion that more focused consideration of such minor forms might help us rethink how biography has developed over the long haul. At the same time, it may also aid in deciphering-- and responding to-- this enigmatic (and frankly haunting) admonition to future historians by a young woman who shortly before perishing in the Shoah wrote the following in her diary:

"the only truthful report worthy of being written down would be one that included the full stories of every individual deportee" (Hélène Berr, *Journal*, trans. and ed. David Bellos, afterword Mariette Job, London: Quercus, 2009, p. 260, dated 15 February 1944).