Heritage of coal mining in the Netherlands: when memory turns into history

Portraits from former miners who have been interviewed during the oral history project 'Onze Mijnwerkers' (www.onzemijnwerkers.nl)

Serge Langeweg and Mijke Harst - van den Berg
Museumeplein Limburg, Kerkrade (The Netherlands)
Introduction

Dutch coal mining, which saw a fast development during the first few decades of the 20th century, remained restricted to a small area in the south of the country. Mining, however, had an enormous economic, social and cultural impact on society in the region. Around 1955 the mines offered employment to almost 60,000 workers. There used to be towns and places where almost 60 to 70% of the men worked in the mines. Besides, the mines supported almost the whole of the cultural life in the region. Between 1965 and 1974 the mines were closed down and society was left in a state of disorientation for a number of decades.

Many of the objects that were salvaged from the mines or that had been part of the mining culture were given a place in a new mining museum that was opened in 1974. Former miners took an active part in presenting the collection for exhibition and preparing the story that the museum was to tell its visitors. Their accounts were primarily based on their own recollections of their active time as miners. There were also other ex-miners that took all sorts of initiatives. Till this very day there are local societies of ex-miners that run their own small-scale museums, or share their tales of the mining past with interested audiences.

But time moves on. It will not be long before the last miners who can give a first-hand account of the work in the mines and the mining culture will have passed away. A new generation will have to take over. This is when memory turns into history. This also applies to museums that pay attention to the region's mining past.

This paper is first to deal with the uneasy relation between memory and history. After these rather theoretical reflections the focus will shift to more practical considerations. Continium discovery center in Kerkrade, a town located in the centre of the former mining region, possesses the largest collection of objects connected with the history of mining in The Netherlands. It is the museum's ambition to pass on the story of the mining past to the next generations, together with Columbus earth theater, which is also part of the Museumplein Limburg organisation. How do both institutions deal with the mining past and how does the transition from memory to history will take shape?
Memory versus history

The French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs wrote that when only a handful of eye-witnesses survive memory will turn into history.¹ The transition from one state to the next implies that memory and history are two different concepts, although they both seem to be representations of the past. The relation between memory and history has been subject of discussion among historians for the past fifteen years.² The debate centres around the concept of memory as a universal human phenomenon, a wide-ranging concept to contain personal and collective memories. Contrary to this, history, in the sense of recording the past, is defined as the scholarly study of the past and a specific way of gathering knowledge about the past.³

Over the past few years memory has become a keyword in dealing with the past. This large-scale interest has been attributed to the loss of traditional certainties in fast-moving modern times. This degree of uncertainty has led to cherishing the lost past as a part of a veritable recollection cult.⁴ A concrete result of this increasing interest in the past has led to so-called lieux de mémoire, sites of memory. Initially these places were set up in France as part of an ambitious project of historian Pierre Nora, later similar places were created in other countries. Sites of memory are places that make memories tangible and that safeguard a continuity of the past.⁵

The 'memory approach' of the past, a domain of cultural history, deals with the analysis of man's memory culture, which is the way people deal with the past and lend it significance. The leading thought is to give back to ordinary people in their daily lives their proper places in history. They are usually the ones that tend to be forgotten. It is also a reaction to those movements in historiography that analyse history as an abstract and impersonal process.⁶

¹ Maurice Halbwachs, Het collectief geheugen (Leuven 1991 - La mémoire collective) 18. See also: http://collectiefgeheugen.tripod.com/
³ Ed Jonker, Ordentelijke geschiedenis.(Ordered history) Herinnering, ethiek en geschiedwetenschap (Recollection, ethics and historiography)(oratie Utrecht 2008 - lecture) 9. Most historians distinguish between history as the process of social change and history in the sense of historiography as a reflection on this process.
⁴ Willem Erauw, ‘Herinneringscultuur, herdenkingsplicht en de historici in onze democratie (The culture of recollecting, the duty to commemorate and historians in our democracy). ‘On dealing with the history of the 20th century and the heritage of totalitarianism.’ CHTP-BEG no 17 2006) 253-266, p. 253
⁵ Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire.’ Representations 26 (Spring 1989) 7-24
⁶ Willem Frijhoff, De mist van de geschiedenis. (The fog of history) Over herinneren, vergeten en het historisch geheugen van de samenleving (On remembering, forgetting and the historical memory of society). (Nijmegen 2011) 7.
Memory, and especially that which is recollected, is culturally and socially influenced. There is no such thing as 'pure' and unaffected memory. It is inevitable that our memories will change in the course of years. This is due to new information and communication with other people.\(^7\) The memory culture is in fact a combination of personal, social and cultural forms of recollecting. This narrowing down to ‘types’ of recollecting was introduced by Aleida Assmann, a German scholar literature and culture. First of all she distinguishes between personal memory and social or collective memory. These two, often informal, ways of recollecting have a limited social and temporal range as they die out with their bearers. Apart from this there are cultural memories. They are more long-lasting that the personal or social memories, but they are also more restricted. These memories are based on a process of recollecting and forgetting, of preserving and discarding. As a matter of fact, they represent a selection from the cultural historical archives.\(^8\)

Historians often look at recollection with Argus’ eyes. In many cases memories are seen as dubious sources of information when it comes to verifying historical facts. This negative approach to memories dates back to the 19th century when historiography was first professionalised and methods were developed for a scholarly and ‘objective’ analysis and interpretation of historical phenomena. The attention was mainly focussed on written sources. They seemed to be far more reliable sources of information than the subjective and emotional memories that were hard to verify and that were passed down from one generation to the next.\(^9\)

The scholarly approach of history first of all contains a critical research of sources based on specific questions.\(^10\) Historiography developed quantitative and qualitative research methods to order and classify information from sources on the basis of predefined criteria. These methods made it possible to find answers to new questions, to establish connections and gather historical insights from sources that had remained hidden for the original writers of the sources and their contemporaries. As they were hidden these types of insights cannot possibly

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8 Jonker, Ordenelijke geschiedenis, 17-20
9 Kerwin Lee Klein, ‘On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse’ Representations 69 (winter 2000) 127-150, pp. 129-130
10 The following is based on: Knotter, ‘Geschiedenis, geschiedschrijving, herinnering, (History, historiography, memory) 80-83
be seen as elements of memories. When it comes to reconstructing the past, historiography surpasses memory.

A second component of scholarly historiography is interpreting and understanding historical phenomena. This ambition does not only pay attention to the acting persons, pre-eminently bearers of recollections, but also to the underlying, anonymous structures and patterns that influenced the behaviour of people, whether or not they were conscious of this influence. This context is analysed with the help of concepts and theories that were frequently taken from the social sciences. This is the basis on which the historian formulates his explanatory hypotheses, which he then checks against the information gathered from sources. This characteristic of scientific historiography also surpasses the level of individual or collective memory. The explanatory concepts were constructed at a later stage and therefore they cannot be part of the (collective) memories of the historical acting agents.

On balance history as a profession deals with the recording of the outcomes of research as part of a systematic argument, complete with proof and embedded in the existing scientific literature. This approach, too, is essentially different from the handing down of recollections. Although there are considerable differences between memory and history, both concepts should not be taken as opposing ideas. Memory and historiography are different forms of representing the past and have to be in dialogue. This also applies to the way a museum deals with the past. The interplay between memories in the shape of oral or written accounts of historical actors and historical objects offers an excellent opportunity for an evocation of history. History is brought to life and is given a personal aspect. The rather abstract, analytical historiography is much less suitable for this. On the other hand, exhibits, photographs, films and interviews generate or stimulate the recollections of visitors.

The significance of memory in the representation of the past does not imply that there should be no room for a scientific approach of history. After all, recollections must also be interpreted. Memory as a concept is of little interpretative significance for an understanding of the past. Recollections must be subject of historical research so that they can be put in the wider context of the story about history. In this way recollections gain in significance and at the same time they add depth to a larger story about history as the outcome of people acting

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11 Klein, ‘On the Emergence of Memory, 128
12 Klein, ‘On the Emergence of Memory, 130-131
13 Confino, ‘Collectieve memory, 1388
within the context of larger processes and structures on which they could hardly bring to bear any influence.

Continium. Columbus and coal mining

Although coal mining is an important theme in Continium discovery center, it does not make it to a mining museum. It is a museum for science and technology where visitors can find out how the world functions. Not only today's world, but also yesterday's and tomorrow's world.

In October 2015 Continium became part of Museumplein Limburg, which also encompasses Cube design museum and Columbus earth theater. Columbus also pays attention to the region's mining heritage.

This preoccupation with the past is an outcome of Continium's own past. The museum traces its origin to Industrion, a museum that dealt with the history of 150 years of industry and social life in the Dutch province of Limburg as its central theme.

Coal mining was of great significance for the development of the region. This was one of the reasons to incorporate the mining museum, which was set up in Kerkrade when the last mine closed down in 1974, into the concept of a new museum for industry and society that opened in 1990 as Industrion.

Industrion took over the substantial mining collection, which meanwhile has grown into the largest mining collection in The Netherlands, thanks to donations, purchases and objects on long-term loan. By the second half of February 2016 this sub-collection contained about 7,900 objects. The collection gives an idea of coal extraction between around 1750 and 1974 and consists of a number of different parts.\textsuperscript{14}

The first part represents the technical aspect of the extraction of coal. It contains tools and auxiliary equipment used to reach the coal seams, to break out the coal and to transport the product to the surface.

Among the objects are pieces of equipment such as air picks, pneumatic drills, picks, supports, bikes used down in the mines, safety clothing, instruction and signalling signs, measuring instruments and mine lamps.

A second cluster is made up of objects that are related to the social-cultural role that the mines played in society. The mines took care of housing, acted as sponsors and stimulated clubs and

\textsuperscript{14} Plan for the Discovery Center Continium collection 2013-2016 (Kerkrade 2012) 16-17.
other social activities. Employment offered by the mines attracted large numbers of people from outside the region. They founded their own clubs and their shared experiences as miners had a catalysing effect. Attributes, uniforms and banners of clubs that were closely related to the mines also belong to this part of the collection.

The mysterious and dangerous work under the ground and the imposing plants with their mineheads, cooling towers and slagheaps were sources of inspiration for numerous artists. Many aspects of coal mining were used in works of art such as paintings, drawings, stained-glass windows or sculptures. This cluster of objects is a third separate part of the mining sub-collection.

A specific part is made up of a large collection of photographs (ca. 6,000 items), containing unique visual material about coal mining in Limburg.

Finally, Continium possesses a large collection of documents that deal with coal mining. This collection mainly consists of manuals and instructions for use that came with tools and machines, instruction manuals and educational material used by the company training centres, as well as brochures published to recruit miners. This documentary material is indispensable when it comes to describing the collection of objects.

A major part of the mining collection is permanently on show in the so-called Hall of Fame, which is organised as an open museum storeroom. Objects from the mining collection are also regularly on show during temporary exhibitions.

The combination of memory and history is constantly reflected in the organisation of the collection, but also in its management, presentation and research activities.
Below a number of examples taken from the day-to-day work on the collection and specific mining projects, in which in particular Continium participated, illustrate how the combined memory and history approach is taking on shape.

One of the most prestigious mining projects that Continium started in recent years was the Mijn Verleden Mijn Toekomst (2010-2012) project (My past/mining past My future).15 The central aim of the project was to enlarge the knowledge about the mining past in the region and to provide visitors with a better understanding of the present and to help them approach the future with an understanding about identity. A number of sub-projects were carried out over a period of almost one and a half years together with volunteer organisations and professional institutions active in the coal mining sector. The mainstay of the project was connecting and opening up the mining collections of the various institutions in the former coal mining region that administer mining collections. Time and budgets could be made available for historical research work within the framework of the project. A significant role was set aside for oral history in the shape of producing joint descriptions of artefacts by the museum's professional staff members and former miners.

The insights that were gleaned from these personal and collective memories were used to enrich and complete the object registration in combination with a historical examination of written sources. The tangible memories contained in the mining objects were linked to the

15 http://www.mijnverledenmijntoekomst.nl/home (17-2-2016)
memories of those that used to handle them in the past. Memories turned out to add value to what was known about the objects and consequently also to their registration. This was of particular significance as it turned out to concern information that was not recorded in written sources. More often than not it appeared there was a certain degree of discrepancy between the actual use of tools and technical auxiliary equipment as laid down in manuals and compulsory instructions on the one hand, and the way the miners handled them in the daily and unpredictable circumstances of coal mining on the other hand. This is one example of the significant role that memory in the shape of “oral history” can play in the reconstruction of the past, provided it is checked against the knowledge contained in archives and publications. At the same time a start was made with the development and compilation of a list of screened key words for the coal mining sub-collection. This activity was part of “Mijn verleden, Mijn toekomst” project. This instrument was the guiding principle for ex-miners and professionals when working together on the registration of mining objects. The development of the list of key words proved necessary, as the Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) did not prove to be a sufficiently usable tool for the registration of technical museum collections in general and for mining collections in particular. The compilation of the list of key words was based on a method that combined the ex-miners' memories with the examination of written sources. Currently the development of the coal mining thesaurus is continued in collaboration with Erfgoedcel Mijn Erfgoed Genk (Heritage Centre My Heritage) en Mijnmuseum Beringen (Mining Museum).

It is interesting to note that this development makes it possible to compare the oral sources and miners' slang in the former mining regions in the neighbouring Dutch and Belgian provinces of Limburg.

A large part of the national mining collection has been accessible online since 2012 via the mining portal DeMijnen.nl.16 This website, which is hosted by Stichting Industrieel Erfgoed Online and which is part of a collaboration between Continium discovery center and the Heerlen Betawerk internet consultancy, is another example of an initiative in which memory and history are placed side by side to reinforce each other. In the past few years the heritage site demijnen.nl has become a significant source of knowledge of coal mining in The Netherlands. Memories that are still accessible are recorded for later generations with the help

16 http://www.demijnen.nl (17-2-2016)
of modern media. These memories are for a large part available as oral history. Dozens of interviews with former miners and other important players from the coal mining past in the region can be accessed on the website. The site contains hundreds of hours of material, a treasure trove of information. Besides thousands of company photographs films, a number of company magazines published by the mines can be integrally consulted on the website. These direct historical sources and the museological mining collections that can be found there, are put in a framework and are interpreted with the help of additional scientific contributions in the shape of articles about particular themes. The website also offers various interactive learning activities for schools. The website attracts a great deal of interest, from the former mining region as well as from beyond it.

Many of the interviews that can be watched and listened to on demijnen.nl were printed for use in the project De Koempel Verhaalt (The miner tells his story). One of the aims of this project, which was started in 2010, was the publication of a scientific study of the Dutch coal mining past as an homage to the miners of Limburg. The initiative was born from the conviction that the mining past had to be made recognisable again in a scientific manner, but also with a deep respect for the miners, their labour, their families and the surroundings in which they lived. Continium delegated its scientific staff member as one of the authors of the

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book that appeared in November 2012.\(^{18}\) The managing director of Continium chaired a brainstorming group of former miners, who acted as significant sources for historical research. *Mijnwerkers in Limburg* is a good example of the way how memory and scientific historiography can complement each other. The authors (academically trained historians) make ample use of oral history for their reconstruction of the mining past. The memories of former miners, which were handed down orally, were checked against other data gained from a multitude of sources before they were used in a scientifically substantiated discourse.

Real estate dating back to the mining past in the former Dutch mining region is scarce, in particular when it comes to industrial buildings. Immediately after the closing down of the mines the mine heads and other industrial structures were rigorously demolished. One of the exceptions is the Nulland mine head of the Domaniale Mijn at Kerkrade which was shut down in 1969. The Nulland mine head dates from 1907 and is an early example of a concrete structure. The building was restored in 1975-1976 and is preserved in an exceptional condition and is now of great significance as a mining relic. The building is a Dutch national listed monument.\(^{19}\)

Currently a group of former miners that used to work in the Domaniale Mijn are in charge of the mine head. They opened a small mining museum and visitors’ centre with which they aim to keep alive the memory of the mining past. Continium discovery center supports this initiative by providing objects for exhibition in the building and historical expertise and facilities. In this way Nulland mine head can give shape to the link between memory, history and museological expertise.

A final example for the connection that can be established between memory and history is the Zwart (Black) production which was especially developed for Columbus earth theater, which is part of Museumplein Limburg, together with Continium. Zwart is a documentary in three parts about the Dutch mining past. The most spectacular part is a projection on a round


screen, ten metres below the visitors. This projection on a lower level is ideally suited for a cinematic descent into a coal mine. Visitors experience the spectacular high-speed descent to a depth of hundreds of metres and the underground journey of the miners aboard narrow-gauge trains to their workstations at the coal seams. Large quantities of archive material, historical photographs and films were used to produce the projection. Besides, recordings were made in a working mine in the Czech Republic. The many talks with professional mining historians and former miners with expert knowledge and memories were added when the material was edited to create a realistic impression. Again, memories and history proved to be a good combination.
Conclusion
Continium discovery center and Columbus earth theater are located in the centre of the former mining region in the Dutch province of Limburg. For a period of 75 years coal mining played a prominent part in the establishing of an economic, social and cultural landscape.

Museological institutions, whose themes are the continuing development of past, present and future, have the ambition to pass on the coal mining past as a mainstay of identity of the people in the region to the next generations. However, the number of surviving witnesses of this past is dwindling rapidly. Personal memories are bound to turn into history. Continium acquires, studies and makes accessible material and immaterial objects which are today's basis for the Dutch coal mining history. It is a museological challenge to turn personal memories into history for visitors and future generations in particular. In various ways and with different projects Continium and Columbus contribute to convey Dutch mining history to a wide audience. This contribution is due to in-house efforts and collaboration with other parties.

Continium discovery center is committed to fulfilling its role as a centre of mining expertise. One aspect of this task is to establish the special history of mining not only in this region that is marked by its mining past, but also in a much wider geographical context. Memory and history are two sides of the same coin as far as this context is concerned. Both serve to provide insights into the past and therefore in the present. Memory and history are the indispensable baggage to make our way towards the future with confidence.
Biographical Descriptions

Mijke Harst – van den Berg MA (1978) studied museology at the Reinwardt Academie of Amsterdam and in 2003 she took a master degree in Industrial Archaeology at the University of Birmingham. On behalf of Kleio heritage consultants she was involved in studies of a new destination for the coal mine site at Beringen and the cultural-historical opening up of coal mines in the Belgian province of Limburg.

She is collection manager at Museumplein Limburg in Kerkrade, an umbrella organisation for three museological institutes: Continium discovery center, Columbus earth theater and Cube design museum. She is also an editor of the Flemish-Dutch magazine Erfgoed van Industrie en Techniek (Industrial and Technological Heritage) and a member of the LGOG-SHCL committee ‘Geschiedenis van de ondernemingen en het ondernemen in Limburg’ (History of businesses and business in Limburg).

Dr. Serge Langeweg (1958) studied social and economic history at the University of Utrecht. In 2011 he took a doctoral degree at the University of Maastricht, his thesis was entitled Mijnbouw en arbeidsmarkt in Nederlands-Limburg. (Mining and Labour Market in the Dutch Province of Limburg) Herkomst, werving, mobiliteit en binding van mijnwerkers tussen 1900 en 1965. (Origin, recruitment, mobility and long-term settlement of miners between 1900 and 1965) He works as a scientific staff-member for collection and heritage at Museumplein Limburg in Kerkrade, an umbrella organisation for three museological institutes: Continium discovery center, Columbus earth theater and Cube design museum.

Contact

s.langeweg@museumpleinlimburg.nl
T: +31 45 5676019 (direct no.)

m.harstvandenberg@museumpleinlimburg.nl
T: +31 45 5676018 (direct no.)

www.museumpleinlimburg.nl
Museumplein 2 | 6461 MA | Kerkrade
Postbus 164 | 6460 AD | Kerkrade