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Introduction

So great is the current interest in biography, not only amongst general readers but also amongst academics working in a number of different disciplines, that many scholars now talk of a 'biographical turn' in the humanities and social sciences.¹ The 'turn' that they describe involves a new preoccupation with individual lives and stories as a way of understanding both contemporary societies and the whole process of social and historical change. Biography has long been seen as part of history and as a way to enliven it by rendering the past 'more human, more vivid, more intimate, more accessible, more connected to ourselves'.² But its narrative form and its concern with individuals has often resulted in its relegation to the margins of historical study while political institutions or social and economic structures occupy the centre. Now, however, biography is coming to occupy more of this centre ground as it is seen to offer ways of throwing new light on a range of different historical periods and problems and of bringing individuals and groups who had previously been ignored into the framework of historical analysis.

For some, the most important contribution of biography to history is the insight that it offers into the lives and thought of significant individuals. It serves to remind us, Arthur M. Schlesinger argues, that political leaders, including American presidents, are not supermen but human beings, 'worrying about decisions, attending to wives and children, juggling balls in the air, and putting on their pants one leg at a time'.³ But for others, including social, feminist and some post-colonial historians, it is not the light shed on the lives of powerful individuals which is most important, but rather what can be learnt from the lives of less-exalted and ordinary people. Detailed study of the lives of individuals and of families and other groups offers extraordinary insights into the ways in which particular institutions and events and larger-scale social, economic and political developments were felt, experienced and understood by those who lived through them. A biographical approach in history, as in the social sciences, thus offers an important addition to the understanding of general developments by providing a way of accessing **subjective** understanding and experience.⁴

While there have always been biographies written by historians, increasing numbers have turned to biography in the last two or three decades, including

many who had never before contemplated researching or writing it. It is worth noting here that biography is greatly prized by publishers and offers historians the opportunity to reach wide general audiences in a way that few other forms of history can do. But there are other important reasons why historians have recently directed more attention to it. Several of them explain their new interest in individual lives in terms of wider developments within contemporary historical analysis. The move away from structuralist approaches and explanations which has been so marked in all the social sciences over the past three or four decades is particularly important. The decline of Marxism both as a theoretical approach and as an intellectual influence, which began in the late 1960s and 1970s and became even more marked with the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the course of the 1980s, gave rise to a range of new historical questions.⁵ As the pre-eminence of class division gave way to concerns about categories which often cut across class boundaries, including gender, ethnicity and sexual identity, so too the large-scale theories and analyses of historical and social change which had been widely accepted across the twentieth century were called into question and seen as 'grand narratives' which privileged the views and perspectives of particular dominant groups while silencing or suppressing those of subordinate ones. At a time when historians want to stress the need to encompass the many different historical narratives which could be produced at any one time, all of which are contingent on particular situations and locations, individual lives have come to appear more and more important because of the many ways in which they can illustrate how differences of wealth and power, of class and gender and of ethnicity and religion have affected historical experiences and understanding. Within this framework, biography can be seen as the archetypal 'contingent narrative' and the one best able to show the great importance of particular locations and circumstances and the multiple layers of historical change and experience.

This recognition of the illustrative capacity of biography reflects the very significant expansion in the range of biographical subjects which has been evident for the past few decades. Although once confined primarily to the discussion of individuals whose political, social, intellectual or literary contribution was deemed sufficiently important to entitle them to a biography, many ordinary people have now also become the subjects of biographical interest. It is not their exceptional nature or status which has been seen as most interesting about them, but rather their similarities to their peers. The life stories of ordinary folk are important because of their capacity to illustrate in detail how others who shared their class, gender, ethnicity, interests or problems understood or were affected by particular historical developments. The lives of individuals within this framework become significant because of what they show about the worlds

in which they lived and their capacity to reveal facets of that world which are not available in other ways.

This new approach to biography accompanied the rise of the new histories which have become so prominent since the 1970s, including the 'new social history' microhistory, women's history, black history, and post-colonial history. All of these forms of history share a concern to explore the activities, experiences and historical agency of groups with relatively little political and economic power or social status and to locate and listen to the voices of those who had been silenced in earlier historical writing. They focus on marginal groups, including women, members of ethnic and religious minorities, and indigenous peoples, seeking to understand the nature of their experiences and the ways in which they understood the worlds in which they lived. As questions about the importance of gender, race and class and about experience and representation have come to the fore, so too has the recognition that the detailed analysis of individual or collective lives offers one of the best ways to explore them.

The lives of prominent individuals have not ceased to interest biographers, historians and readers. On the contrary, biographies of major political, religious and military leaders continue to attract immense interest, as indeed do those of artists, writers and scientists. Many of these biographies continue to be written in a quite traditional way, seeking to show what was unique or significant about a particular individual, and often stressing the extent to which they stood out against others in terms of their particularly progressive views or unusual outlook and insight, or through their power and achievements. But even in some political biography and in studies of other eminent men and women, one can see new approaches, especially in the growing insistence on the need not only to understand the social and political contexts in which individuals lived but also to explore in much more detail the complex ways in which individuals relate to the worlds they inhabit. Thus in some recent biographical work on figures of immense religious or political significance – Augustine and Charlemagne, for example, or Hitler and Mussolini – considerable emphasis has been placed on the ways in which even dominant figures serve in some circumstances to illuminate the social and political world in which they lived or, alternatively, on the need to have a very detailed understanding of the particular social, intellectual and political circumstances which enabled their rise to prominence and their exercise of power.⁶

One of the issues which has come to the fore as a result of this concern to show individuals within their own social worlds is a recognition of the ways in which traditional biography, with its intense focus on the life of one individual, imposes an artificial isolation on people whose lives were often lived enmeshed within close-knit familial and social networks. The desire to understand lives more fully as they were actually lived and to give proper weight

to the relationships which many individuals had with 'significant others' or with wider networks and communities has also led to an increasing interest in biographical studies of couples, families and groups alongside those of individuals. This interest in group biography has appealed strongly to feminist scholars seeking to understand the impact of the legal, economic and social constraints and the ideals of feminine nature that women had to negotiate in particular societies and at particular times. By taking a family which included several daughters and analysing the similarities and differences in their domestic, sexual and social experiences, several historians have sought to question accepted ideas and to offer new insights into the general situation of women in particular societies.⁷ Much of this work serves also to stress the significance of women's ties to each other both within familial groups and with friends outside. But this approach has not been confined to women and is evident also in studies of brothers and of cross-generational family groups which include both women and men. It is evident also in recent biographical works which focus on friendships and on the shared and common experiences amongst people prominent in political and social activism or in the intellectual, literary and cultural world.

This relatively recent interest in writing the lives of families, groups and intellectual coteries constitutes a new form of collective biography, a genre which in other forms has long been important for historians. Although most of those who write general works on biography deal mainly with the issue of how best to research, understand and write about individuals, the question of collective biography is a very important one in relation to history. Collective and comparative biographies of rulers have been written since classical times, and have been augmented over several centuries by others devoted to the lives of artists and writers and, more recently, scientists and engineers. The encyclopaedias and dictionaries of biography which have been prominent at least since the late seventeenth century are particularly important. In some cases they stake a claim to historical significance for particular groups; in others they provide a major adjunct to nation-building and to the creation of a sense of a national past. What is notable at the present time is the simultaneous reassertion of the significance of dictionaries of biography, both national and selective or sectional, *and* the emergence of new forms of collective biography dealing with people in familial groups or within the framework of friends and colleagues. This latter approach serves both to position people more securely in their immediate social context and to expand the illustrative capacity of biography by showing both the common and uncommon features of particular lives.

Although the immense current popularity of biography gives the question of the relationship between it and history a particular cogency, debate and discussion about the relationship between biography and history is not new.

On the contrary, questions about the similarities and differences between biography and history have over many centuries played a significant part in defining and establishing what history is and how it is understood as a form of discourse. The similarities between them derives from their shared concern with narrating events and developments and with exploring and explaining human motivations, actions and experiences. Although the traditional concern of history with public and especially political events and actions separates it from biography with its focus on private life, from the time of Plutarch and Suetonius onwards historians and biographers have both concerned themselves with the actions, the motives and the impact of significant individuals – and often with the very same individuals. Over time, and indeed at any one particular time, historians have expressed very different views on this question of the similarities and differences between biography and history and the relationship between them, and the question has often been the subject of heated debate. Within this debate there have also been some significant shifts in focus. In the past three or four decades, for example, an earlier concern that biography paid too much attention to the role of the individual in history has given way to a newer one concerning the capacity of an individual life to reflect broad historical change.

Although the writing of biography and the discussion of its relationship to history go back at least to classical times, this book will focus mainly on the period from the late seventeenth century to the present. It seeks to provide both a history of modern biography and an analysis of the changing ways in which the relationship between biography and history has been thought about and understood. Taking as its starting point the new interest in life writing associated with the rise of individualism and with the religious and political upheavals of the late seventeenth century, it explores the expanding range of biographical subjects which emerged at this time alongside the extensive new discussion about how lives should be written and understood. The word 'biography' first came into use in English in this period, and its introduction serves both to illustrate a growing interest in life stories and their increasingly important place not only in literary cultures but also in emerging ideas about the nation. The use of the term 'biography' and the discussion of it also show a new sense of how lives should be written. Concern with the presentation of a unique individual in such a way as to give a clear sense of what the person was actually like was one of the defining features of modern biography which served to differentiate it from its classical and medieval predecessors, which tended to work much more with established and exemplary character types. And of course this is also the start of the period in which history began to be seen and defined as a discipline, and in ways which made its relationship with biography a matter of particular importance. A series of new debates emerged about the relationship between biography and history: some argued for its superiority to any other

form of historical writing; others set forth new methods and rules for historical writing in which biography apparently had little, if any, place.

The ideas about biography articulated by a number of different historians and the long-standing debate about the precise relationship between biography and history is the subject of Chapter 1. It includes some discussion about the ideas concerning the relationship between biography and history evident in the classical and medieval periods as a way of indicating the significant changes which occurred during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and which establish the framework for the rest of the book. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on changing biographical practices. Chapter 2 explores the changes in how biography has been written and in the aspects of individual lives deemed appropriate for biographical treatment. Chapter 3 turns from the lives of individuals to the collective biographies which have been so important since the seventeenth century and to the group biographies which have become so prevalent today. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 discuss a range of contemporary developments in biographical writing. Chapter 4 explores the recent interest in life writing and the tendency to link autobiography and biography within it and also the ways in which this has been taken up by historians. Chapter 5 moves beyond history to consider a range of other approaches to biography. It looks at the ideas of those approaching biography as a form of literature, at some of the arguments about the importance of psychoanalysis within biography and at the interest of some recent biographers in texts and in the question of performance. Chapter 6 surveys some of the new biographical practices which have become widespread amongst historians over the past few decades, focusing particularly on questions about gender and on new ways of thinking about the relationship of an individual to the society in which he or she lives.

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