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Introduction

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AHR Roundtable
Historians and Biography

Introduction

DAVID NASAW

“FOR A LONG TIME, ACADEMIC HISTORIANS have been somewhat ambivalent about the genre of biography. While most certainly recognize it as a legitimate and venerable mode of historical discourse, many are skeptical of the capacity of biography to convey the kind of analytically sophisticated interpretation of the past that academics have long expected.” So wrote the editor of this journal in his invitation to historians to participate in this *AHR* Roundtable.¹

Biography remains the profession’s unloved stepchild, occasionally but grudgingly let in the door, more often shut outside with the ruffraff. Graduate students are warned away from writing biographies as their dissertations. Assistant professors are told to get tenure and promotion before taking on a biography. College and university libraries, including my own, adhere to collection protocols that discourage the purchase of biographies. And the leading journals in the field, this one included, “rarely, if ever, publish articles that are biographical in nature [and often refuse] to review biographical studies.”²

This characterization of biography as a lesser form of history extends far and wide. Note, if you will, the tentative, often apologetic tone of some of the essays in this roundtable. Several contributors begin by critiquing biography as usual before explaining why theirs are not the usual. Judith Brown introduces her essay by insisting that she does not see herself “as a biographer, or these works as biographies, in the accepted sense of tracking and interpreting a life from the cradle to the grave, and, more problematically, of taking the individual as the only intellectual and analytical center of the argument.”³ In doing so, she identifies the common denominators in the attack on biography as a degraded form of historical writing. “Biography is not history,” Nick Salvatore was warned by a reference librarian thirty-five years ago, “because the question of periodisation is a given, as biography is framed by the birth and death of the subject.”⁴

Despite the persistence of such critiques, historians rarely structure their biographies in this way or take their subjects “as the only intellectual and analytical center” of their arguments. In the “R” section of my bookcase are biographies of

¹ Robert Schneider to David Nasaw et al., personal communication, June 2007.

² *Ibid.*

³ Judith M. Brown, “‘Life Histories’ and the History of Modern South Asia,” this issue, 588.

⁴ Nick Salvatore, “Biography and Social History: An Intimate Relationship,” *Labour History* 87 (November 2004), <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/lab/87/salvatore.html>, para. 2.

Eleanor Roosevelt by Blanche Wiesen Cook, Paul Robeson by Martin Duberman, Ronald Reagan by John Patrick Diggins, Jackie Robinson by Jules Tygiel. Each takes as its subject not the individual alone, but the individual in a particular historical context. Not one begins with a birth or ends with a death. Duberman, to cite but one example, opens *Paul Robeson* with a brief portrait of race relations in Princeton, New Jersey—the town and the university—and a mention of Grandfather Robeson’s escape from slavery because his focus will be on “racism” and one man’s attempts to find his way in a social world enveloped in and defined by it.⁵

Biographies by historians are, to borrow Salvatore’s words, “rooted in ideas and events larger than the individual subject.”⁶ Historians are not interested in simply charting the course of individual lives, but in examining those lives in dialectical relationship to the multiple social, political, and cultural worlds they inhabit and give meaning to. “The proper subject of biography,” Oscar Handlin wrote two decades ago, “is not the complete person or the complete society, but the point at which the two interact. There the situation and the individual illuminate one another.”⁷

It is this attention to the individual that, for Handlin, a biographer and editor of biographers, sets biography off as “a mode apart” from history. “The biographer uses evidence from the past but focuses upon the individual and answers questions about personality and character that the historian usually does not ask.”⁸ Carl Rollyson, who is not a historian but the author of several biographies and studies of biographies, suggests that historians make poor biographers because they are ill-equipped, by the nature of their discipline, to write about individuals. “If you ask a historian to write a biography, you are more likely to get history. Biography puts characters first while history favors events.” To drive home his point, Rollyson references W. W. Brands’s short biography of Woodrow Wilson and Michael Wreszin’s biography of Dwight Macdonald, each of which he finds lacking. He criticizes Brands for not devoting enough space to Wilson’s wives and their influence on his presidency. He faults Wreszin for excluding any mention of Macdonald’s affairs with his students because, as Wreszin explained to Rollyson, they were “not germane to an understanding of why Macdonald was important and why people read him.”⁹

Historians who write biographies do not, it is true, put characters first or provide their readers with a full birth-to-grave, warts-and-all narrative. Like all writers of lives, fictional or real, they make choices as to what is trivial and peripheral and what is significant and worthy of inclusion. Their larger objective is not simply to tell a life story, though they often do that well, but to deploy the individual in the study of the world outside that individual and to explore how the private informs the public and vice versa.

⁵ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, vol. 1: 1884–1933 (New York, 1992); Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York, 1989); John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (New York, 2007); Jules Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York, 1983).

⁶ Salvatore, “Biography and Social History,” para. 9.

⁷ Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 276; see also on this point Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York, 1951), 58–59.

⁸ Handlin, *Truth in History*, 266.

⁹ Carl Rollyson, *Biography: A User’s Guide* (Chicago, 2008), 48, 140–144. In a personal exchange with the author, Wreszin says that the primary reason he did not discuss these “affairs” was that he had no credible evidence they had ever taken place.

If Macdonald “had affairs with his students,” as Rollyson claims, and there is sufficient evidence to support this, then that aspect of his private life should be revealed, but only if it has some larger significance. Does knowing about these “affairs” provide us with another perspective from which to interpret Macdonald’s public life and work? Does it reveal something new and significant about the social, political, and cultural worlds Macdonald inhabited and gave meaning to? If so, then it belongs in the historian’s biography. If not, it can and should be left out.

Historians are constrained in ways that other writers of life studies are not. And there is nothing wrong with that. Historians are neither equipped for, nor capable of, nor, for the most part, interested in constructing individual portraits with the density and depth of characterization that are available to and prized by writers who are differently bound by their evidence and more comfortable with random, untethered psychologizing, interior monologues, and imagined dialogues. The work of a historian who writes a biography must ultimately be judged by the same standards that are applied to works in other historical genres. Whether the historian chooses to tell the story of eighteenth-century Bristol sailing vessels or twentieth-century lives, she is, as a historian, bound by her evidence and compelled to go beyond it, constrained by the conventions of the discipline to make connections, to give significance, to glimpse a larger whole through a smaller part, to construct a chronologic that both links and separates today’s events from yesterday’s.

DESPITE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CRITIQUES and the profession’s studied ambivalence, biography has been and continues to be a vital genre of historical writing. “Biography is once again in fashion,” writes Jo Burr Margadant in the introduction to *The New Biography*, “not only for a general reading public that never lost its taste for individual life stories, but also for academic historians who endlessly turn over the debris of earlier generations in search of fresh lessons to tell us about ourselves.”¹⁰ Liana Vardi opens her article in this roundtable by remarking on “the renewed vogue for scholarly historical biography.”¹¹ Five of the last eight presidents of the American Historical Association have written or edited biographical studies. In my own field, United States history, the Bancroft Prize has been awarded to a biography three times in the past eight years.

What are the reasons for this recent efflorescence of historians’ biographies? The most obvious one is that historians in search of an audience outside the academy have gravitated to biography because that is where the readers are. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., conceded as much in the editor’s notes to the series of American presidential biographies he edited. “Biography offers an easy education in American history, rendering the past more human, more vivid, more intimate, more accessible, more connected to ourselves.”¹²

While some historians have chosen to write biographies in the hope of attracting

¹⁰ Jo Burr Margadant, ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000), 1.

¹¹ Liana Vardi, “Rewriting the Lives of Eighteenth-Century Economists,” this issue, 653.

¹² Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Editor’s Note,” in John Patrick Diggins, *John Adams* (New York, 2003), xviii.

larger audiences, others have been drawn to the genre because of the dramatic expansion in the range of possible subjects. Biography is no longer restricted to the lives of the rich, powerful, famous, and infamous. There are infinite stories to be told of unknown, inarticulate, unlettered men, women, and children, and, as feminist, labor, and social historians have discovered, telling them offers a fruitful approach to re-examining, and perhaps reconfiguring, the categories of class, gender, and ethnicity as they interact at the level of the individual.¹³

Historians need not be frightened away from writing individual lives by the absence of organized archives or personal papers. In her contribution to this roundtable, Robin Fleming offers the example of “a different kind of early medieval biography,” one based not on written texts but on inferences drawn from the examination and interpretation of skeletal remains and grave goods. The results of her preliminary ventures toward a biography of “Eighteen” (the name Fleming gives her subject “because this is the number archaeologists assigned her”) are no less than astounding. We learn that “Eighteen” enjoyed a healthy childhood, died young, was buried with honor, and was a leper. The sources for writing her life were both limited and unconventional, but Fleming, as a historian, was uniquely positioned to make them speak. “There is that wrecked face, which is not the generic face of a generic leper, but the particular face of a very real woman, the dim outlines of whose life can be perceived if we think about it in the context of the lives of those other individuals whose real and particular skeletons surrounded her own.”¹⁴

Part of the allure of biography for historians in this first decade of the twenty-first century is that it allows, even encourages, us to move beyond the strictures of identity politics without having to abandon its ever-expanding and often useful categories. In the process of researching and writing about individual lives embedded in particular times and places, biographers discover and reveal the ways in which their subjects assume, discard, reconfigure, merge, and disassociate multiple identities and roles. As Margadant argues in her introduction to *The New Biography*, “a narrative strategy designed to project a unified persona has become for the new biographer nearly as suspect as claims to a ‘definitive’ biography. The subject of biography is no longer the coherent self but rather a self that is performed to create an impression of coherence or an individual with multiple selves whose different manifestations reflect the passage of time, the demands and options of different settings, or the varieties of ways that others seek to represent that person.”¹⁵ In the construction of an individual life, gender, class, race, ethnicity, nativity, sexual orientation, nationality, family background, occupation, vocation, and much more intersect and interact in myriad ways. It is the task of the biographer to disentangle, to prioritize, to attempt to understand how, in a given time and place, a “self” is organized and performed.

Writing history from the vantage point of individuals is not a retreat from but a way of confronting the theoretical complexities and confusions of the early twenty-first century. “Like many others of my generation,” Alice Kessler-Harris notes in her contribution to this roundtable, “as I’ve come to terms with the limits of what we

¹³ See, for example, *Labour History* 87 (November 2004), or the H-Net call for papers for “Roundtable on ‘The Subject and Critical Feminist Biography,’” *Journal of Women’s History*, <http://www.h-net.org/announce/show.cgi?ID=159661>.

¹⁴ Robin Fleming, “Writing Biography at the Edge of History,” this issue, 611.

¹⁵ Margadant, *The New Biography*, 7.

used to call ‘objective’ standpoints and begun to interrogate the perspectives from which our subjects speak and write, I’ve paid increasing attention to the importance of the individual actor—not for what he or she may have done, but for what his or her thoughts, language, and contests with the world reveal.”¹⁶

The biographical form may become a favored one for twenty-first-century historians because it offers a way of transcending the theoretical divide between empiricist social history and linguistic-turn cultural history without sacrificing the methodological or epistemological gains of either. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, in the April 2008 *AHR* Forum on Geoff Eley’s *A Crooked Line*, notes that in “the attempt to move ‘beyond the cultural turn’ . . . many historians are deploying a (largely implicit) concept of ‘social phenomenology’ in which, as the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz explains, ‘The aim of social analysis is to take over the “subjective perspective.”’”¹⁷ This “neo-phenomenological approach” might well serve as the theoretical ground for a new biographical turn founded on the reevaluation of the individual actor as historical subject. A “modified phenomenology” would provide us, in Spiegel’s words, with “an actor-centered perspective,” quite consonant with Kessler-Harris’s, “a belief in individual perception as the agent’s own source of knowledge about, and action in, the world—a perception mediated and perhaps constrained but *not* wholly controlled by the cultural scaffolding or conceptual schemes within which it takes place.”¹⁸

Historians writing biographies attempt to envision the worlds of their subjects as perceived and made meaningful by them. Where both social history and linguistic-turn cultural history, in their most extreme articulations, reject the significance (sometimes even the existence) of the individual as historical agent, biographies written by historians refocus attention on the once-living individuals who were both formed by and provided meaning to the social and discursive orders in which they were inserted at birth and lived their lives. The historian as biographer proceeds from the premise that individuals are situated but not imprisoned in social structures and discursive regimes. “What defines man,” French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty has written, is the “capacity of going beyond created structures in order to create others.”¹⁹

While intent on reinserting individuals into their histories as signifiers and agents, biographers do not grant them independence or autonomy in either capacity. Viewing the world from the perspectives of the individuals they write about, historians must simultaneously look beyond the focus of their subjects’ gaze and achievements to the meanings and possibilities they did not recognize or pursue in their lifetimes. As E. P. Thompson explained in the introduction to his intellectual biography of William Blake, his object in writing this study was “to identify, once again, Blake’s tradition, his particular situation within it, and the repeated evidences, motifs and nodal points of conflict, which indicate his stance and the way his mind meets the

¹⁶ Alice Kessler-Harris, “Why Biography?” this issue, 627.

¹⁷ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Comment on *A Crooked Line*,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 411.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 412.

¹⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden Fisher (Boston, 1963), 175.

world. To do this involves some historical recovery, and attention to sources external to Blake—sources which, very often, he may not have been aware of himself.”²⁰

The historian as biographer might well take as her credo this statement by Karl Marx from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”²¹ Or, as stated more concisely in *The German Ideology*, “circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances.”²²

IN HER CONTRIBUTION TO THIS ROUNDTABLE, Kessler-Harris reintroduces us to Virginia Woolf’s “The Art of Biography.” Woolf begins and ends her remarkable essay by posing the question of whether, given the constraints put upon it, biography is “an art.” She concludes that it is not, because, unlike poetry and fiction, which are wholly works of imagination, biography is tethered to documents, evidence, facts. When the biographer reaches beyond the evidence and gives license to his imagination, as Lytton Strachey did in his biography of Queen Elizabeth I, he must inevitably fail, as Woolf believed Strachey had. “The combination proved unworkable; fact and fiction refused to mix. Elizabeth never became real in the sense that Queen Victoria [the subject of a previous Strachey biography] had been real, yet she never became fictitious in the sense that Cleopatra or Falstaff is fictitious.”²³

Rather than attempt to escape the limitations of the genre as Strachey had, Woolf urges biographers to endorse and celebrate them. “The biographer must go ahead of the rest of us, like the miner’s canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions. His sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe.” Biography, she wrote in 1939, was “only at the beginning of its career; it has a long and active life before it, we may be sure—a life full of difficulty, danger, and hard work.” Biographers might not be artists, but they were “invaluable” nonetheless. “By telling us the true facts, by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very greatest.”²⁴

²⁰ E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York, 1993), xxix.

²¹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1963), 15.

²² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology, Part One*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York, 1970), 59.

²³ Virginia Woolf, “The Art of Biography” (1939), in Woolf, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York, 1942), 192.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 195–197.

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