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1 Historians and the Question of Biography

Introduction

Although debate on this subject continues, the central place that biography occupies in the writing and the study of history is accepted now in a way that has not been the case since the mid nineteenth century. One can see this very clearly in the numerous roundtables, lectures and symposia on biography that have been hosted by major journals, conferences and institutions like the London-based Institute for Historical Research in the last eight to ten years. To be sure some of these discussions have served to question rather then to recognise the place of biography in history. David Nasaw, in introducing the roundtable on biography in the American Historical Review, argued that biography ‘remains the profession’s unloved stepchild, occasionally but grudgingly let in the door, more often shut outside with the riffraff’. But the very fact that a roundtable on this subject was published in the American Historical Review testifies to the widespread interest in the subject amongst historians, as indeed do the subsequent ones with much more enthusiasm for biography in the Journal of Women’s History and the Journal of Interdisciplinary History. What is particularly notable is that several of the participants in the American Historical Review roundtable refused to apply the term ‘biography’ to their work, even if that work was a lengthy reconstruction and discussion of the life of an individual. Instead, they insisted, they were using ‘the medium of “life histories” of individuals and groups of individuals, to seek for evidence to probe many key historical issues’,¹ or using an individual life to ‘help us to see not only into particular events but into the larger cultural and social and even political processes of a moment in time’.² These, however, are precisely the things that other historians see as valuable in writing an historical biography. It does raise questions about the extent to which the concern amongst historians is focussed as much on the idea of biography as a particular literary form as it is on the related question of the role and importance of studying an individual life as a way to expand historical understanding and insight.
Discussion about the relationship between biography and history has been an important one for millennia. Beginning with a brief discussion of the contrast between biography and history established in the classical world, this chapter focuses on this debate over the past three centuries, the period in which the claim of biography to be seen as a significant part of history has been repeatedly asserted.

**Biography and history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries**

Much of the modern debate about the relationship between biography and history begins with the differentiation between them established in the classical world. History was seen as something quite different from biography in the classical world and as having much greater quality, seriousness and importance. The high status of history came both from its concern with the important legal, political and military deeds and actions of any period and from its rigorous methods and concern with accuracy. This concern with the relations between different nations and peoples, and especially those involving wars, made history a form of knowledge that was of the utmost importance for anyone interested in political life.

To suggest that history had a higher status than biography is not to say that biography was unimportant in the classical world. On the contrary, it was considered one of the major ways in which to commemorate the life of a significant individual and to bring to mind noble characters or to evaluate the deeds and the lives of significant public men. Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, for example, for many centuries the most widely read and influential of classical biographies, paired and contrasted Greek and Roman rulers, military leaders and philosophers in ways that showed both their strengths and their failings and allowed the scope for extended moral and philosophical reflections on their motives and conduct, and indeed on the civilisations that they served to represent. It was Plutarch who emphasised most strongly the differences between biography and history and who demanded freedoms for the biographer from the rigour that was so central to the writing of history. For the biographer, Plutarch insisted, it was not deeds that mattered so much as character, and the delineation of character often demanded that attention be paid to aspects of the private life or public figures that were not usually deemed significant in the writing of history. Plutarch refused either to confine himself exclusively to the political and military aspects of a person’s life or to cover the public life of his subjects chronologically and comprehensively. On the contrary, he was deliberately selective, choosing those aspects of each person that he saw as most revealing of his character, accepting that these would not necessarily be the most significant episodes from an historical point of view. In a famous passage at the beginning of his life of Alexander, Plutarch pointed to the
differences between biography and history, insisting that, unlike an historian, he would not deal comprehensively with everything Alexander had done.

For I am writing biography, not history, and the truth is that the most brilliant exploits often tell us nothing of the virtues or vices of the men who performed them, while on the other hand a chance remark or a joke may reveal far more of a man’s character than the mere feat of winning battles in which thousands fall, or of marshalling great armies, or laying siege to cities.

The freedom to choose the incidents that reveal ‘character and inclination’ that Plutarch demanded for biography served further to underline its lower status. A biography might well offer a basis for private contemplation, and thus serve a moral purpose. But its stress on the individual and its concern with the private realm and with daily life meant that for many centuries it was regarded as a lower and less important form of writing than history.

This classical sense of the distinction between history and biography and the greater importance and seriousness accorded history in the Classical world was generally accepted up until the end of the sixteenth century. In the early seventeenth century, however, Francis Bacon challenged it, arguing that individual lives needed to be seen as a part of history, rather than as something quite distinct from it. For Bacon, there was not just one category or type of history, but several, of which biography was one. In his The Advancement of Learning, he suggests that

history, which may be called just and perfect history, is of three kinds, according to the object which it propoundeth, or pretendeth to represent: for it either representeth a time, or a person, or an action. The first we call chronicles, the second lives, and the third narrations or relations. Of these, although the first be the most complete and absolute kind of history, and hath most estimation and glory, yet the second excelleth it in profit and use, and the third in verity and sincerity. For history of times representeth the magnitude of actions, and the public faces and deportments of persons, and passeth over in silence the smaller passages and motions of men and matters ... But lives, if they be well written, propounding to themselves a person to represent, in whom actions, both greater and smaller, public and private, have a commixture, must of necessity contain a more true, native, and lively representation.

Bacon’s insistence that individual lives might prove to be more useful and lively than chronicles of major political and military events anticipates the challenge to history that was offered much more extensively by biography in the eighteenth century.

This belief that biography was more lively and appealing than other forms of history was held strongly by many writers in the eighteenth century. Hugh Blair’s widely read Lectures
on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783), for example, included a discussion of ‘the inferior kinds of historical composition’, in which he stressed the usefulness and importance of biography. It was less formal than history but often very instructive for readers to whom the small details of daily life would be appealing and instructive. Robert Bisset, who wrote a number of histories as well as a biography of Edmund Burke, made a similar point. ‘No species of writing’, he argued, ‘combines in it a greater degree of interest and instruction than biography.’

Our sympathy is most powerfully excited by the view of those situations, which, by a small effort of the imagination, we can approximate to ourselves. Hence Biography often engages our attention and affection more deeply than History. We are more concerned by the display of individual character than of political measures, of individual enjoyment or suffering, than of the prosperity or adversity of nations. Even in History the biographical part interests us more than any other.\textsuperscript{5}

This emphasis on the capacity of biography to excite sympathy points to a concern with a new readership that emerged in the eighteenth century, making demands that traditional history could not satisfy. A significant part of this new readership was composed of middle-class women whose favourite genre was the novel. The rise and prominence of the novel, the emergence of sentimental poetry at the same time, and the extensive discussion of what women should read brought to the fore a recognition of the importance of the ‘sentimental reader’ and a new sense of the need to engage the emotions in all literary forms and for men as well as women.

In earlier times, the connection between history and public men assured its high status. The reader of history was generally assumed to be an educated man, interested in public matters and disciplined in his habits. To gain the greatest benefit from reading history, it was necessary that the reader ‘be not confused, wandering and desultory in his reading. ... that he have a clear and good Judgement, that he may with dexterity apprehend what he reads and well discern what is to be selected’.\textsuperscript{6} The increase in literacy amongst women and others not engaged in public life made many writers argue that if history spoke only to public men, it was ‘meaningless to the largest part of mankind’. This was in marked contrast to biography, which spoke to everyone.\textsuperscript{7}

The emergence of this new readership was accompanied by some new ideas about history. David Hume, for example, believed that women needed to study history, which was both more instructive and more entertaining than the novels that they read. History, he insisted, offered the best way ‘of becoming acquainted with human affairs, without diminishing in the least from the most delicate sentiments of human virtue’ and the only possible basis for women to be able converse sensibly with men ‘of sense and reflection’. In part as a way of attracting this readership, Hume sought to introduce episodes and incidents into his histories that would affect his readers, and he deliberately experimented
with sentimental approaches usually associated with fiction and designed specifically for a female readership. His account of the execution of Charles I, for example, was carefully written in a way that would move some to tears. As David Wootton has argued, Hume offered a new approach to history in his concern to retell a story that had already been told. Prior to that, it had been assumed that those seeking a knowledge of history would do so through reading the works of great contemporary historians who had participated in the events that they depicted: Livy or Tacitus, if they wanted to know about Rome; Clarendon if they wanted to know about Elizabethan England. Hume argued that working with these original sources was both too time consuming and too confusing for most contemporary readers, who needed a concise and carefully composed account that would provide both instruction and pleasure. This approach involved a new sense of progress in historical knowledge, but it also involved a new way of incorporating individual lives into historical accounts.

**Thomas Carlyle and the idea of biography as history**

Interest in the nature of daily life in earlier times, and a sense, which had begun in the eighteenth century, that this was essential if there was to be a real understanding of the past, continued into the nineteenth century. Indeed, it formed the basis of a critique of earlier approaches to history that had placed political developments at the centre. In the early years of the nineteenth century, Francis Jeffery, the first editor of the influential *Edinburgh Review*, and a noted essayist and critic, insisted on the need to extend beyond the political realm of ‘regular history’ if one sought to understand even the forces shaping the character of the nation. For these forces consist of ‘everything which affects the character of individuals: – manners, education, prevailing occupations, religion, taste, and above all the distribution of wealth, and the state of prejudice and opinions’. Literature was particularly important because of what it revealed about the ‘state of prejudice and opinion’, but so too were individual memoirs and diaries, which provided an unparalleled insight into the lives, activities and opinions of particular individuals. Jeffery responded with great enthusiasm to works like Lucy Hutchinson’s *Memoirs* or to Pepys’s *Diary*, which was first published in 1825. Pepys’s diaries, he insisted, ‘fulfilled the desire of knowing, pretty minutely, the manners and habits of former times, – of understanding, in all their details, the character and ordinary way of life and conversation of our forefathers’.

In Britain, the strongest cases for linking biography and history – indeed for seeing them as completely inseparable – was made by Thomas Carlyle. ‘History is the essence of innumerable biographies,’ Carlyle insisted, in his 1830 essay ‘On History’. A study of the inner life, the changing nature of the conscious or half-conscious aims of man and of spiritual beliefs, he argued, might offer a more significant history than that evident in the study of political institutions or military episodes. His work on Cromwell, with its emphasis on
the importance of his religious beliefs, and through which a different way of understanding the seventeenth century was suggested, served to illustrate his approach.\(^{13}\)

We are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience, and verifying them here. All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is properly no history; only biography. Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself, – must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know.\(^{14}\)

Carlyle's belief in the importance of individual lives is evident throughout his *History of the French Revolution*, which continually refers to particular individuals in illustrating political developments or indeed the state of France itself and the pattern and process of the revolution. Following on from this, Carlyle used the terms ‘history’ and ‘biography’ interchangeably in his massive *History of Friedrich II of Prussia, Called Frederick the Great*. This focus on individual lives commended his way of presenting historical figures as ‘real beings, which were once alive, beings of his own flesh and blood, not mere shadows and dim abstractions’.\(^{15}\)

The illiberal and anti-democratic nature of Carlyle's thought, his strongly judgemental approach both to individuals and to historical events and his complete disregard for any wider analysis of economic or social or political conditions or developments, combined with the tortuousness of some of his prose, have led to a neglect of his writing and his ideas over the past few decades. Since the late 1990s, however, there has been a move to reconsider his work and to recognise the impact of some of his historical research. Blair Worden, for example, has argued that Carlyle’s work on Oliver Cromwell served not only to rehabilitate Cromwell in the mid-nineteenth century but also quite markedly changed how the English Civil War was seen and understood.\(^{16}\) In his discussions of Cromwell, Carlyle absolutely rejected the eighteenth-century view of him as a hypocrite and a manipulator, arguing that these interpretations of Cromwell illustrated the blindness and shallowness of eighteenth-century thought, rather than offering any insight into Cromwell. What stood out for Carlyle was the intensity and sincerity of Cromwell's religious beliefs. In his work on Cromwell, Carlyle began to describe the English Civil War as a Puritan Revolution in which moral questions and passionately held religious beliefs were at the fore, in place of the eighteenth-century concern with constitutional and legal issues. At the same time, he pointed to the insights biography could offer into the hidden conflicts of individuals, which had a profound impact on their actions.

Carlyle saw Cromwell as a tormented man who found it extremely difficult to deal with the public and political world, but who was driven to do so by his religious beliefs and his strong sense of the rightness of his cause. As Worden and others point out, Carlyle felt a great empathy, even a sense of kinship, with Cromwell, whose inner torment resembled his own. In his deep and in many ways personal involvement with Cromwell as a man and as a ruler, and in his writing about him, Carlyle used a biographical
approach to offer a quite new interpretation of a major historical event – and one that has continued to dominate British historiography. At the same time, it is worth noting, as Fred Kaplan has done, that for all his obsession with and hard work on Cromwell, Carlyle was unable to write the biography of Cromwell that he spent years planning to write.\textsuperscript{17}

Carlyle’s approach to biography and its relationship to history was taken up in America by Ralph Waldo Emerson, for whom biography offered a better way of understanding the past than did history. Echoing Carlyle’s belief that ‘there is properly no history; only biography’, Emerson insisted, ‘Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself, – must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know.’\textsuperscript{18} Emerson too insisted that history was essentially composed of the lives of significant individuals and that great men deserved particular veneration and attention. He wrote of essays on the men he saw as having the greatest universal significance, with an introductory essay on ‘the uses of great men’ in which he set out his general views.

The world is upheld by the veracity of good men: they make the earth wholesome. They who lived with them found life glad and nutritious. Life is sweet and tolerable only in our belief in such society; and actually, or ideally, we manage to live with superiors. We call our children and our lands by their names. Their names are wrought into the verbs of language, their works and effigies are in our houses, and every circumstance of the day recalls an anecdote of them.

The title of Emerson’s volume \textit{Representative Men} emphasises his sense of the capacity of some notable individuals, in particular Plato, Montaigne, Swedenborg, Napoleon, Shakespeare and Goethe, to illustrate valuable human qualities that were widely shared and were particularly espoused by the American Republic.

Emerson’s use of biography in developing and articulating ideas about the nation was followed by many others in America in the nineteenth century as many different authors sought to record the lives and activities of men (and very occasionally women) who had played a significant part in national or in local community life and to make clear the nature of their achievements. This noting of the lives of particular people was seen as important in itself, but also as showing the significance of America as a new nation staking its claim against the old world. Memoirs and biographies of eminent American men, the \textit{American Law Journal} suggested, would serve to teach ‘an envious world that America is not less the nurse of liberty than the cradle of glory’.\textsuperscript{19} Biographies of presidents and military heroes played a particular part here, as figures like George Washington or Thomas Jefferson or Andrew Jackson were depicted in ways that helped define American character and values. James Parton, who became possibly the foremost American biographer of the nineteenth century, excelled at this. His \textit{Life of Andrew Jackson} and \textit{Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin} enabled him to illustrate two sides of the American character. Jackson served to embody
the American frontier and the frontier spirit, whereas Franklin, with his many talents and interests, exemplified American ingenuity and the American belief in a person’s capacity to determine his social standing by talent rather than birth.20

The professionalisation of history

While Carlyle and Emerson stressed the close connection between history and biography, very different ideas about the nature of history and the way it should be approached were being discussed in Europe. This was particularly so in Germany. There is now some debate about precisely when the recognition of history as a discipline occurred in Germany – with increasing attention being paid to late eighteenth-century developments and to the establishment of the first German Chair of History in 1804. But the new emphasis on the importance of thorough archival research and the need for a critical analysis of historical sources, and the distinctive training seminars through which young men were taught how to become professional historians, were not evident until the 1820s and 1830s.

The establishment of history as a discipline and as a profession in Germany is closely linked to the work of Leopold von Ranke, who sought both to define a new scientific approach to history and to establish its proper method and forms of training. In the period from the 1820s to the 1840s, when Carlyle’s influence was at its peak in Britain and was spreading through the ideas and approaches that he shared with Emerson in America, Ranke published his first book, History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations from 1494 to 1514, and began teaching his history seminars at the University of Berlin. At these seminars, students presented their research and were interrogated about their methods and especially about their approach to sources, which they were required to approach with great scepticism. The aim was to train them to the highest possible standards of rigorous inquiry. This approach was then introduced into other German universities by Ranke’s students. All of Ranke’s students were young men and this new training and the whole process of professionalising history served to exclude women from it in ways, which had not happened when history was written by amateurs.21

Nothing could have been more different from Carlyle’s imaginative invocation of past events or his constant and often savage judgments on individuals and events than Ranke’s careful approach to the dispassionate recording and documentation of the past. He explicitly eschewed any form of judgment in the ‘Preface’ to his first book.

‘History has had assigned to it the task of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of ages to come. To such lofty functions this work does not aspire. Its aim is merely to show what actually occurred.’22 For Ranke, the questions that historians needed to deal with centred on political developments, especially those in Europe. He was interested also in the major religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but there was little place for the study of individuals or for any form of biography in Ranke’s
work. Some scholars have noted the impact of Ranke’s Christian idealism and his search for the guiding hand of God in history, and questioned the extent to which this theological approach undermined his empiricism and demand for impartiality and objectivity. But none of this made him either more interested in or more sympathetic to biography or to the question of the individual in history. There is a suggestion of a biographical interest in his history of the Catholic Church, which is entitled *History of the Popes*. And this work did pose a number of problems for Ranke. His other works were structured around the course of national political history, which could be discussed quite independently of individuals. The Catholic Church, however, could not be written about in this way. The extent and the nature of papal influence at any given time was very much a consequence of the personality and capacities of a particular pope and so individual popes had to be analysed and indeed had to provide the structure of the work. However, this biographical framework served merely as a kind of scaffold as Ranke moved as quickly as possible beyond the individuals in order to explore the development and impact of the institution of the papacy on modern Europe.

Ranke’s approach was quite well known in the Anglophone world in the nineteenth century, but his concern with the need to professionalise history and to articulate precisely its method were not taken up in Britain until the final decades of the nineteenth century. History was introduced to university curricula in the course of the 1850s, but without any of the insistence on rigorous method or on objectivity that had been so important for Ranke. On the contrary, far from raising the status of history, its initial inclusion within the university curriculum lowered it markedly. In 1852, Sir James Stephen, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, explained that history was being included in the moral science tripos in order to cater for those young men who were incapable of reaching high standards in classics or mathematics, but who were still ‘men of whom it is unjust to despond and who might thus be rescued from the temptations and the penalties of a misspent youth’. The University Commissioners agreed that history might benefit academically limited but well-born young gentlemen through its capacity to develop ‘larger ideas and kindlier feelings’. Biography, of course, played quite an important role here, as individual figures provided the ideal focus for the moral questions and evaluations that history was supposed to provide.

In subsequent decades, the introduction of honours degrees meant that more able young men studied history, but until the end of the nineteenth century, history was considered far more important as a training ground for men who would become active in public life than for those who might seek to undertake research themselves. History, insisted J. R. Seeley, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge in the 1880s, was above all ‘the school of public feeling and patriotism’. David Amigoni argues that biography was a strategic tool in Seeley’s attempt to use history as a discipline that would help to reconstruct public opinion as well as to educate future statesmen. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, when there was a new sense in Britain of the need for more rigorous historical
method, the moral importance of biography was still recognised. In his inaugural lecture ‘The Study of History’ in 1906, Lord Acton, while pointing to the need for history to deal primarily with political ideas and institutions, makes clear his sense of the moral importance of studying individual lives: ‘We cannot afford wantonly to lose sight of great men and memorable lives, and are bound to store up objects for admiration as far as may be.’

As the tone of his comment indicates, Acton was aware that he was fighting something of a rearguard action. Increasingly in the last few decades of the nineteenth century, academic historical writing had focussed on constitutional history and the development of English law and of legal, political and religious institutions. This is not to say that moral questions were ignored. On the contrary, history, especially at Oxford, was taught, in Reba Soffer’s words, ‘as a resurrected record of admirable development which accommodated simultaneously the transient subjectivity of time, place, thought and institutions and the absolute reality of moral, intellectual, material and political progress’.

There was still concern to understand not only the underlying causes of English progress but also the motivations and characters of the significant men who had been important in its unfolding. Nevertheless, the emphasis that was now being placed on the collecting and reading of the primary documents that explained legal and political developments meant that there was considerably less focus on individual lives than had been the case in earlier decades.

This point was made very clearly in the first issue of the *English Historical Review* in 1886. Explaining the reasons for their new venture, the editors of the review pointed out that, at this time, England stood alone among the great countries of Europe in not having a periodical devoted to the study of history which enabled those engaged in scholarly research to publish their work and to communicate regularly with one another. They wanted their new journal to cover a field that was broader than the political history concerned solely with states and governments, but not to attempt to offer a picture of the whole past, including everything man has either thought or wrought. They chose to regard history as the record of human action, and of thought only in its direct effect upon human action. States and politics will therefore be the chief part of its subject, because the acts of nations have usually been more important than the acts of private citizens. But when history finds a private citizen who, like Socrates or St Paul or Erasmus or Charles Darwin, profoundly influences other men from his purely private station, she is concerned with him as the source of such influence no less than with a legislator or general.

It was assumed that the journal would contain ‘articles on personages’ in much the same way as it did on specific legislative developments or military events, but it was concerned only with the ways in which these ‘personages’ affected the public world – rather than with exploring the questions of character and personality that were so important in other forms of biography.
Marxist history and the question of biography

The late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries saw the development of a number of different theories concerning the underlying structures or the pattern or laws of development governing human history and demarcating the phases through which societies had passed. For those concerned with the writing of history, the most influential of these general theories was the materialist conception of history propounded by Marx and Engels, centreing on the importance of class struggle within history. For Marx, it was the changing ways in which labour and resources were organised and controlled that explained the nature of social change and development. Opposing those who argued that one could define social stages and explain social change through changing ideas or systems of belief, Marx insisted that it was social existence that determined the nature of human thought rather than the other way around. As with any approach concerned primarily with questions of social structure and development, Marxism directed attention away from the study of individuals and from biography. What was of significance for Marxist historians was the question of economic and social processes – including above all the nature of feudalism, the transition to capitalism and the impact of industrialisation on social structures and social groups.

This is not to say that Marx himself or later Marxist scholars had no interest in biography. Marx rejected absolutely the kind of ‘great men’ approach to history articulated by Carlyle, as he did the idea that history ought to celebrate the achievements of notable leaders or inventors. However, Marx provided an alternative way of thinking about individual lives to that of Carlyle through his insistence that ‘circumstances make men as much as men make circumstances’. Marx’s statement, ‘Men do make their own history, but they do not do it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly given and transmitted in the past’, both underlies Marx’s own approach to individuals and has also been very influential for later and non-Marxist historical biographers.

Questions about the role of the individual in history troubled many Marxist historians in the later nineteenth century as they sought ways to encompass their sense of the immense importance of rulers like Napoleon or Bismarck within a broader analysis of the transition to capitalism. This question was discussed at some length by the Russian historian and theorist G. V. Plekhanov in an essay titled The Role of the Individual in History. A great man is great, Plekhanov argues, ‘not because his personal qualities give individual features to great historical events, but because he possesses qualities which make him most capable of serving the great social needs of his time, needs which arose as a result of general and particular causes’.

In arguing his own position, Plekhanov applauded Carlyle’s suggestion that great men could see further than others and desired things more strongly. A Carlylean hero, he argues, ‘is not a hero in the sense that he can stop or change the natural course of things,
but in the sense that his activities are the conscious and free expression of this inevitable and unconscious course’.

Across the twentieth century, several Marxist historians have written major biographies. In some cases, this was a consequence of the popularity of biography – rather than an individual choice. Isaac Deutscher, for example, wrote his first biography, *Stalin: a Political Biography*, at the behest of his publisher, who persuaded him that a biography of Stalin would be far more widely read than the critical history of the Soviet Union that he had planned. Subsequently, however, Deutscher chose to write a major biography of Trotsky as a way of offering a more sympathetic portrait of Trotsky, a man he admired profoundly, than he felt that Trotsky had offered in his autobiography, *My Life*. Deutscher sought to provide a picture of someone he considered to be ‘one of the most outstanding revolutionary leaders of all times, outstanding as fighter, thinker and martyr’. In his discussion of Trotsky, he wanted also to suggest an alternative possible development of Russian communism to that which followed the rise to power of Stalin. Deutscher’s monumental biography has remained in print over several decades and is essential reading for anyone interested either in Trotsky or in the early decades of the Soviet Union. Ironically, despite its great scope and power, the close identification of Deutscher with Trotsky lessens its capacity to provide a critical analysis – and indeed there are some historians who see it as a work of hero worship that is not in accord with historical scholarship.

### Biography and history in the twentieth century

The question of how historians saw and thought about biography across the twentieth century is a complex one. There were always some historians who insisted on the importance of biography within history alongside a much larger number who disagreed, fearing the tendency of biography to place too much stress on individuals and to neglect wider historical processes. This view was often accompanied by a general sense that writing biography was an easier task than writing history because coming to terms with one individual did not require the complex and sophisticated analyses of political institutions and parties, or of economic and social structures and developments that was required in history. Hence, though often accepted as part of history, biography was generally looked down on as an inferior historical form. At the same time, many historians have written biography at some point in their careers, including those who have been most critical of it. The point at issue here is often a question of balance: few historians reject entirely the idea that biography is of some use, and most accept that it can at least offer insight into the motivations of particular individuals or the meanings of certain events. But many fear that the stress on individual motives and actions in biography directs attention away from broader and more important questions about underlying social and economic causes or about political developments. The balance has changed markedly over time and doubtless
will do so again. But reading the record of this changing balance is itself sometimes rather
difficult as past ideas and attitudes can be represented in different ways. We have seen this
already in relation to Marxism. At the present time, when biography is both extremely
popular and seen as very important, those engaged in explaining and assessing the nature
and value of Marxist history stress the extent to which Marx himself thought about and
offered ways of approaching biography. By contrast, books on Marxist history written in
the mid-twentieth century, scarcely even mention Marx's approach to biography.

The same point can be made in regard to the Annales group in France, which was so
important and influential in the first half of the twentieth century. Those connected to the
Annales were concerned to extend the boundaries of history to include not only economic
developments but also the insights that came from historical geography and anthropology.
They rejected an emphasis on events, looking rather at longer patterns of social organisa-
tion, activity and beliefs. Their concern with mentalités (general outlooks and frames of
mind) also meant that several of the Annalistes had a pronounced interest in psychology
and the ways in which it might contribute to understanding the intellectual outlook and
emotional make-up of people in earlier societies. But this was emphatically something that
needed to be done in general rather than individual terms. 'Not the man, never the man,
human societies, organized groups', Lucien Febvre argued in his book La terre et l'évolution
humaine, a kind of slogan that was evident in much of the subsequent work done by him-
self, by Marc Bloch and by the others associated with them.

However, Annalistes have begun to rethink the question of biography, and more espe-
cially autobiography. The work of Pierre Nora has been central here, particularly his
encouragement to historians to write autobiographical essays that linked their own lives
with the historical research that they are undertaking – an approach that is discussed in
more detail in Chapter 4. Several of these essays were published in his pioneering volume
Essais d' ego-histoire, and in the years since then a number of other historians have written
at greater length about the close connection between their lives and their work.36

This interest in biographical approaches among Annalistes has been accompanied by a
new stress on the place of biography in the early work of the Annales. The exploration of
mentalités that was so central to the Annales has thus been seen as leading the way into bi-
ographical work – as indeed is the case in some forms of microhistory. But some of the work
produced by Annalistes is also now looked at through the frame of biography. This is the
case with Lucien Febvre's work on Martin Luther. Febvre himself argued that his book Un
Destin, Martin Luther was not a biography, but rather an analysis of the problem posed by
the need to explore the relationship between an individual and the group. He offers very
little by way of discussion of Luther's early, or indeed his later life, concentrating heavily
on the crucial years 1517–1535 and on the issues of indulgences, Luther's conflict with the
Catholic Church and with Charles V, the question of the peasantry and the establish-
ment of Lutheranism. But later writers routinely describe it as a biography. This is done more
easily at a time when an increasing number of biographies focus precisely on these questions
of social and intellectual relationships, accepting that a biography does not need to deal in equal detail with every aspect of an individual’s life. Thus an approach to history that once eschewed biography in the interests of reorienting history around long-term patterns of economic, social, religious and intellectual life is now given a privileged place in the history of that very form which it sought to displace.

The rejection of individual stories evident amongst the *Annalistes* was typical of the attitude amongst many of those engaged in social and economic history as it became more and more widespread in the mid-twentieth century. The extent to which the advocacy of biography was a minority view is evident in the defensiveness of tone amongst those who saw themselves as defending biography and the role of the individual against those who accepted the idea that human behaviour was determined by external pressures and forces. One can see it in the lectures and essays of Herbert Butterfield on ‘The Role of the Individual in History’, for example in Butterfield’s suggestion that what he calls ‘the primary interest in history’, the ordinary human desire to know about our predecessors might now persist only in the hands of popularisers, while the enthusiasm for scientific techniques might transform academic history ‘into something like a species of algebra’. In opposition to this, Butterfield stresses:

> The genesis of historical events lies in human beings. The real birth of ideas takes place in human brains. The reason why this happens is that human beings have vitality. From the historian’s point of view it is this that makes the world go round … Economic factors, financial situations, wars, political crises, do not cause anything, do not do anything, and do not exist except as abstract terms and convenient pieces of shorthand … It is men who make history.

It is not easy to find equally strong voices opposing the acceptance of biography as a part of history because, for the most part, those who did not see biography as having a significant role in historical writing or interpretation simply ignored it. There was a pervasive sense that biography, in concentrating on one individual, was much simpler and less rigorous or demanding than history that is referred to by many of those who recall how strongly they were discouraged from undertaking it. And this general sense was so widely shared as to require little formal articulation. Thus no more than a couple of sentences were devoted to dismissing biography in two of the most widely read of the general discussions of the nature of history of the mid-twentieth century: E. H. Carr’s *What is History* (1964) and Geoffrey Elton’s *The Practice of History* (1967). Both Carr and Elton were amongst the large group of historians who wrote biographies. Nonetheless, Carr argued that a focus on the lives of individuals tended to exaggerate the role and significance of individuals as against the importance of structures and of people in the mass. Elton acknowledged the importance of individuals but insisted that they have to yield first place to institutions. He was also concerned, moreover, that if one focussed on biography, there was the risk of bringing a literary approach to history that was inappropriate to the discipline.
And yet, despite this hostility biography continued to be an integral part of history and particularly of the political history that often claimed pre-eminence. In both Britain and the United States, the detailed biographies of major political leaders were always required reading on history courses. And indeed, major political biographies often continue to be read and studied long after other historical works produced at the same time have been superseded. In British history, for example, John Morley’s three-volume biography of Gladstone continued to be in print and required reading for students of nineteenth-century history well into the twentieth century, as did Moneypenny and Buckle’s five-volume biography of Disraeli. Throughout the twentieth century, excellent biographies of political leaders appeared and continued to be essential reading for historians, such as John Griggs biography of Lloyd George, David Marquand’s biography of Ramsay Macdonald and Jose Harris’s biography of Beveridge.

The low status of biography was reinforced by the emphasis on language and on the need to understand cultural encoding which became so influential in the course of the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of poststructuralism. What was important here was not so much an explicit attack on biography, which was not a subject of much interest, but rather the new ways of thinking about texts and reading which displaced the author and focussed on the various meanings in a text and the different kinds of reading that were possible. This new approach to reading was accompanied by a critique of earlier ideas of the self as a singular or coherent entity, and an insistence rather that this idea of an individual self as an autonomous being, able to act in accordance with its own will, was a fictitious construct. It was critiquing the idea of the author that was of most interest and concern within this framework, and a key text here was Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’, which announced a metaphorical event: the ‘death’ of the author as an authentic source of meaning for a given text. In any literary text that has multiple meanings, Barthes argued, the author was not the prime source of the work’s semantic content. It was readers who made texts meaningful, drawing on both their own knowledge and cultural position, and their sense of the location of the text within a range of different forms of discourse, different forms of knowledge and different structures of power. Questions about individual lives were of no interest within this framework and appeared to become increasingly irrelevant and unimportant.

But even here, biography did not entirely disappear. On the contrary, Barthes himself engaged in a form of it, in his study of the nineteenth-century French historian Michelet. The book, Barthes insisted, was neither a history of Michelet’s thought or of his life, but an attempt to restore his coherence and to recover the structure of his life ‘or better still: an organized network of obsessions’. There was no suggestion of chronological narrative in this study, which consisted rather of a series of paragraphs which linked Michelet’s writing of history with specific phases or episodes in his life or with other features of his personality and his physical health. But though not a biography in a conventional way, it was clearly a study of an individual life and one that stressed the importance of that life in the way in which Michelet had understood and written history.
Changing ideas about the role of biography in history

Although the idea of a ‘biographical turn’ in the humanities and social sciences has only been the subject of discussion for the past decade or so, one can see changes in approach to biography amongst historians from at least the early 1970s. It was in that decade that a number of historians began to insist on the capacity of individual lives to illuminate larger historical patterns and developments. Historians interested in this approach sought to bring individual lives and the wider historical context together by showing the impact of legal and social institutions or large-scale social, economic or political developments on the lives of particular individuals or groups. Like microhistorians, they argued that one often gained far greater understanding of particular institutions and forms of social change by analysing how they had been understood and negotiated by particular individuals. Hence for many historians, biography was increasingly seen to provide ‘a unique lens through which one can assess the relative power of political, economic, cultural, social and generational processes on the life chances of individuals,’ or to provide a prism which enabled later historians to see how particular individuals understood and constructed themselves and made sense of their lives and their society.\(^{45}\)

The general historiographical works that expounded this view of biography did not appear until the 1990s. What appeared in the course of the 1970s and 1980s were, rather, discussions by particular historians of the way in which their own work linked biography and history and drew on an individual life in order to discern wider historical patterns. This approach was particularly significant in the new field of women's history. Kathryn Kish Sklar's widely acclaimed *Catharine Beecher: A Study in Domesticity* (1973), for example, was one of the pioneering works of this kind. Her book, she insisted, was a study of the middle decades of the nineteenth century through the life of one woman. ‘It is also an effort to use the biographical density and motivational impulses of one person to uncover and isolate significant questions about the relationship between women and American society.’\(^{46}\) Mary S. Hartman's *Victorian Murderesses* was another important pioneering work, developing this approach in a collective way through a series of biographical essays. While not wanting to ignore the particular characters or circumstances of her subjects, Hartman made it clear that she wanted to stress how the lives of these exceptional women were ‘linked to those of their more typical female peers’ and how they serve to throw light on some of the domestic and familial tensions and conflicts that many nineteenth century women faced.\(^{47}\)

In the course of the 1980s and 1990s, a similar approach to that of Sklar, Hartman and Huggins was taken to the lives of workers, soldiers and craftsmen across several centuries. Much of this work bore a close affinity with, and can indeed be seen as part of, the microhistory that emerged in Italy in the course of the 1970s by Carlo Ginzburg and which was to be so very influential on much American and British history. Influenced in turn by the ethnographic approach of Clifford Geertz, those concerned
with microhistory concentrated on the ‘analysis, at extremely close range, of highly circumscribed phenomena – a village community, a group of families, even an individual person’. The similarities between microhistory and new styles of biography were clearly evident in the ways in which an individual life came to be seen as able to shed light on whole groups who have tended to be ignored by historians in the past, and some historians argue that the lives of little-known individuals are better described as microhistories than as biographies. But as I argue more fully in a later chapter, what seems more significant is the similarity in approach and concern of some forms of microhistory with that of biography, as both seek to show through an individual life the workings of a larger society. Just as this use of biography was evident in the early stages of women’s history, so too it has become prominent in the last few years in post-colonial and transnational histories as historians have turned to particular individuals in their concern to explore the lives of marginal people who lived between cultures or who transgressed the racial, ethnic and religious expectations of their societies.

It is scarcely surprising that this new approach was evident most clearly in works on women. The advent of women’s history in the early 1970s brought a vast increase in interest and research into women’s historical experiences, and the detailed study of individual lives offered one way to understand the nature of women’s private and familial lives and the relationship between their private and public activities. And one can see over several decades that it is feminist historians and those concerned with women’s history who have continued to deal most positively and effectively with questions about the value of biography in history and about how individual lives can best illuminate the writing of history. The difference between feminist approaches and that of some other historians can be seen if one contrasts the special roundtable on biography and history that has already been mentioned and that appeared in *The American Historical Review* with a similar roundtable in *The Journal of Women’s History*. The unease with biography referred to by David Nasaw was echoed by almost all the contributors, several of whom refused to label their work biography, even if they were writing the life of an individual, preferring to say that they were using ‘the medium of “life histories” of individuals and groups of individuals, to seek for evidence to probe many key historical issues’, or using an individual life to ‘help us to see not only into particular events but into the larger cultural and social and even political processes of a moment in time’. By contrast, Antoinette Burton and Jean Allman in their editorials for the two special issues on ‘Critical Feminist Biography’ published by the *Journal of Women’s History* reflected the views of their contributors in stressing how important and innovative feminist approaches to biography have been and how closely linked to the development of women’s history. Women’s history was concerned from the start with exploring the private and domestic world in which women were often thought to be confined – and with questioning the meaning of ‘separate spheres’, challenging accepted ideas about their separateness while looking at the links between the private and the public. Focussing on women’s lives, they suggest, not only offered new historical insights but
also challenged existing ideas about biography itself. Women’s lives, they argue, in which public activity might be minimal and in which there is rarely a linear narrative or indeed the kind of ‘linear self’ that unfolds in a public life, require new ways of thinking about what biography is and how to do it. In their very capacity to explore decentred or fragmented subjects, they claim, feminist biographers are challenging and expanding biography as a form – and linking it ever more closely with history.

Biography has also played an important part in the emergence of other kinds of history concerned with marginal groups who had suffered both oppression and discrimination: in black and Afro-American history and in some areas of postcolonial history. In the case of Afro-American biography, Nathan Huggins contends that any black biography ‘has a racial and social meaning larger than the life portrayed: the life comes to exemplify the need for reform,’ and to raise broader questions about the impact of slavery and the Afro-American past on the ways in which individuals see and understand themselves.54

This suggestion that biographies and biographical approaches allow for and encourage the questioning of long-held assumptions about how particular institutions and established political forms actually worked has also been made in regard to imperial history. ‘Biographical research’, Achim von Oppen and Silke Strickrodt argue in a special issue of the Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History devoted to ‘Biographies between Spheres of Empire’, ‘offers a particularly useful approach to the examination of practices and experiences of boundary crossing in imperial and colonial history.’55 Sharing with the practitioners of women’s history an interest in the lives of ‘ordinary’ individuals and groups, they see biographies as offering insights into how individuals moved between the different spaces, jurisdictions, milieus, identities and even temporalities (e.g. traditional and modern, precolonial and colonial, past and future) into which the ideologies and rules of colonial worlds categorised them. This allows for a focus on how individuals living in complex and heterogeneous imperial spaces understood themselves and their own place. This approach through lives, they suggest, also points to the importance of understanding the British empire as made up of networks rather than being simply territorial.

In the course of the last decade, this new and expanded sense of the importance of biography within history has become evident in journals, symposia and in some general works seeking to define the nature and the practice of history. In her History in Practice (2000), for example, Ludmilla Jordanova suggests that biography is a distinctive and important form of history, which she terms ‘holistic history’ and sees as offering significant insights into the past. Taking a person ‘as the unit of analysis’, she suggests, ‘is to adopt a quite particular historical approach, which emphasizes individual agency and sees the individual as a point at which diverse historical forces converge, while taking the span of life as a natural period of time’. In this way, biography has the capacity to cut across a number of different kinds of historical fields and approaches and to bring them together in ways that other historical approaches cannot match.56 Making a slightly different, but even larger claim, Shirley A. Leckie sees biography as having an ever-larger role to play in a constantly changing world.
‘As our globe becomes smaller and our communities more diverse’, she argues, ‘biography, which breathes life into dry census data and puts faces on demographic tables, will become the means by which to weave the stories of new groups into our national fabric.’

An equally strong claim about the inseparable relationship between biography and history was made in Robert Rotberg’s introductory essay to the symposium on this question in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* in 2010. Although far from asserting any change in approaches to either biography or history that brought a new kind of relationship, as Burton and Allman did, Rotberg insists that their inseparability is long-standing.

Biography is history, depends on history, and strengthens and enriches history. In turn, all history is biography. History could hardly exist without biographical insights – without the texture of human endeavour that emanates from a full appreciation of human motivation, the real or perceived constraints on human action, and exogenous influences on human behaviour. Social forces are important, but they act on and through individuals. Structural and cultural variables are important, but individuals pull the levers of structure and act within or against cultural norms.

Although Rotberg’s extravagant statement underlines his sense of the importance of individuals in history, it does not address the qualms and concern expressed by many historians about biography as a particular kind of approach to and a form of writing about individuals or the view that in its concern to detail and interrogate a whole life, biography is antithetical to the concern of historians with structures or institutions or whole societies.

It is time now to recognise that we cannot assume that all biography is the same or that the general term ‘biography’ constitutes a uniform and undifferentiated category. Lucy Riall points this out in her very thoughtful and nuanced essay on ‘the substance and future of political biography’ in this special issue of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* that Rotberg edited and introduced. There are considerable differences between literary and political biography and their acceptance by specialist readers, Riall insists, as indeed there are major differences between the assumptions and approaches found in most political biography and those evident in the biographies of little-known women that have become so important in women’s history. Much political biography continues to work within a framework established in the nineteenth century that accepts the power, influence and importance of great (or bad) men. For Riall herself, this approach is not adequate, and there is a need to look at and to take on board some of the approaches developed in other kinds of biography if political biography is to have a serious place in the writing of history. What is needed now is a new kind of political biography that seeks to interrogate how an individual came to fill the position he (or occasionally she) did and what that reveals about the world in which he lived and the strategies or forms of representation that enabled his success within it. Addressing these questions allows for new ways of understanding the relationship between significant individuals and the times in which they lived.
In her discussion, Riall draws quite heavily on the work of Ian Kershaw as evident both in his important work on Adolf Hitler and his discussions of biography and history. In the book itself, however, Kershaw insists that he is not writing biography: that he passes over many of the details in which a biographer would be interested because he is interested ‘solely and squarely in the nature and mechanics, the character and exercise of Hitler’s dictatorial power’. He is more interested in the wider context that enabled Hitler to come to power and in theories of leadership, especially Weber’s idea of ‘charismatic domination’ than in the features of Hitler’s life. But in Kershaw’s subsequent general discussion of biography and history and of the role of the individual in history, he accepted that his work was biographical, although it was biography of a particular kind. Here Kershaw accepted the importance of biography in history but also stressed its limitations. Biography can ‘help to illuminate the motivation behind actions, and how decisions, sometimes of momentous importance, were reached,’ he argues, and it has something to offer in dealing with particular episodes or short-term developments where the actions of an individual may be crucial. But biography is for him only one small part of history, and it cannot help in understanding long-term processes of historical transformation – or even in illustrating them. However, it is important to point out here that Kershaw is working with a different model of biography from that suggested by Jordanova or by Riall, and thus with a very different sense of relationship between biography and history. In both his general discussions of biography and in his work on Hitler, Kershaw stresses the need to see the close connection between individuals and the society in which they lived. Nonetheless, for him, the discussion of the importance of biography is directly connected to the question of the role of the significant and powerful individual in history and hence to the question of how much historical weight can be attributed to the views, motivations, actions and agency of significant and powerful people. He takes it for granted that the subjects of biography will be prominent men – or, occasionally, as he says, women. Although Riall too was dealing with a significant individual, her discussion of Garibaldi focuses as much on the myths that surrounded him and on the ways in which he established and embellished them as on his inner life. Hence for her, writing his life was a way into understanding not only the society in which he lived but also his skill in communicating with and his mastery both of contemporary ideas and values and of new technologies of communication.

All of this discussion, even that coming from those who continue to insist on the marginal and limited place of biography, makes it clear that biography is being given a larger place in historical research and writing than it has been accorded for much of the twentieth century. But what seems equally clear is the need to move beyond rigid ideas about or definitions of both ‘biography’ and ‘history’ and to engage in a wider discussion of the different ways in which individual lives can be and are being used to elucidate our understanding of the past.
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