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Subjects of Interest: Biography, Politics and Gender History

Stephen Brooke

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Article abstract

This article discusses the biographical genre in history in the light of recent trends in gender and cultural history. It suggests that biography has the possibility of building on the strengths of these developments, but only through a resistance to the temptations of authoritative meta-narrative. Instead, it points to the creative unevenness of lives and the potential of using that ambiguity to describe in more interesting and creative ways both the lives of individual subjects and the connections between those individuals and larger collective identities. The argument reviews the work of authors such as Becky Conekin, Sheila Rowbotham and Carolyn Steedman.

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Abstract

This article discusses the biographical genre in history in the light of recent trends in gender and cultural history. It suggests that biography has the possibility of building on the strengths of these developments, but only through a resistance to the temptations of authoritative meta-narrative. Instead, it points to the creative unevenness of lives and the potential of using that ambiguity to describe in more interesting and creative ways both the lives of individual subjects and the connections between those individuals and larger collective identities. The argument reviews the work of authors such as Becky Conekin, Sheila Rowbotham and Carolyn Steedman.

Résumé

Le présent article porte sur le genre biographique en histoire à la lumière des tendances récentes en histoire culturelle et en histoire de la problématique hommes-femmes. Il avance que la biographie a le potentiel de faire fond sur les forces de ces nouvelles tendances, mais seulement si l'auteur résiste à la tentation du métanarratif de nature autoritaire. Il fait plutôt ressortir l'inégalité des vies et le potentiel que cette ambiguïté présente pour décrire de façon plus intéressante et créative la vie des sujets ainsi que leurs rapports avec les identités collectives plus vastes. L'auteur revoit ici les travaux d'auteurs tels que Becky Conekin, Sheila Rowbotham et Carolyn Steedman.

I work in a national field, twentieth-century Britain, in which biography has been a very successful literary genre. I mean successful in two ways. The first is in terms of the business of publishing. Biographies consistently figure in the best-seller lists; they are regular winners of noteworthy book prizes such as the Whitbread, Samuel Johnson, and Orwell Prizes and have dedicated competitions in the Costa and Elizabeth Longford Prizes; not least, biographies are often regarded as fairly sure bets in an age when publishing history in other

My thanks to Adele Perry for inviting me to write this article and to Claire Langhamer and Becky Conekin for discussions about the subject.

forms is much more uncertain. Secondly, I mean successful as a means by which academic historians can make a connection with a wider popular audience, if not through actually selling books, at least in winning column inches in the books' section of the quality press such as the *Guardian* and *The Independent* and in important literary journals such as the *London Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. Some even cross over into the promised land of slots on radio and television.

In intellectual terms, however, I think the dividend is much more suspect. As a successful literary genre in historical writing, biography has not necessarily produced good history. There are a number of reasons. First of all — at least in twentieth-century British history — biography tends to offer a view of the century that stars the same old people — the stalwarts of Bloomsbury, Oxbridge, and the (white) imperial frontiers. Indeed, I would say that this illustrates a weakness with the new imperial and cultural history, that it tends to reproduce an older historiographical tradition of taking colonizers or the upper middle classes as the primary subjects of study, while adding a new gloss of post-colonial, gender, or post-structuralist analysis.¹ Secondly, biography is a historical genre that encourages work that mistakes gossip for detailed research and that separates its subject from context, dwelling far too much on showing off often laudable, but irrelevant research that weighs down analysis, the equivalent of wearing a down parka in summer.² And not least, biography invites the historian as writer into that most dangerous position: as critic or apologist of his or her subject, evoking sympathy, antipathy, or disappointment.

Those people who do social, cultural, or political history sometimes avoid or dismiss biography because it seems a genre divorced from questions or subjects central to their historical interest: the recovery of marginalized subjects, rather than “great person” history; the power and nature of collective endeavour and social movements; questions of agency; the character and reach of language; and the nature of power itself.

So that is the case *against* biography. The case *for* biography as an historical genre is, first of all, born out by the very good history that it has produced. Recent examples in my field include Sheila Rowbotham's 2008 study of Edward Carpenter and Ben Pimlott's *The Queen* (1996); there are older examples in the tradition of the “life and times” (a much lamented tradition), such as Alan Bullock's life of the trade unionist Ernest Bevin written between 1960 and 1983.³

The case for biography might also be that it has enormous potential as an historical genre. Through biography, I would argue, we can explore collectivity as much as subjectivity and agency and power in a contemporary way. Through biography, as well, we might also undermine the temptations that attend the writing of history, not least the temptation to generalize too much, to advance unreasonable truth-claims or to construct new metanarratives as a means of

deposing old ones, instead of bringing out the wonderful unevenness of history. Finally, through biography we can, as well, if not actually know another person, see how many of the historical questions in which we might be interested — such as agency, power, emotion and affect, faith, space, and, of course, identity — can be played out not simply in particular contexts, but more obviously through particular subjects.

My own experience with biography is that I tried and failed to write two short biographies. That they were short underlines the scale of the failure. But I have also used biography in three or four articles as a form to write about socialism, ideas of sexuality, politics and gender, sex and war. I have also contributed to that grand biographical project, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.⁴ There is no question that biography is a difficult form, but it is also a satisfying one in many ways. This is not an *ex post facto* justification of my own work, but I would like to offer an argument for biography less in its grand form and more as a form of micro-history and historiographical experiment that might be particularly useful in terms of writing about politics and gender.

What I think is most appealing about biography is actually the tension between the ability to be authoritative about a subject's life (through marshalling evidence) and the realization that one has to surrender control — that one will never really entirely know one's subject. In other words, it is a wonderful microcosm of the larger tension in history. Why this is particularly interesting is, for example, to see the complexities of people's lives: when those lives are shaped by gender, for instance, and when they are not; when our lives are driven by sexuality, desire and love, and when they are not; to map the uneven and always unknown landscapes of a subject's life. I am guided here by Walt Whitman's famous lines from "Song of Myself" (1855): "Do I contradict myself? / Very well I contradict myself / (I am large, I contain multitudes)." Biography opens both the author and the reader up to the contradictions and multitudes of a subject's life and times.

In terms of tracing the history of politics — if we think of this as how people exercise power and agency or engage with the social and the public sphere — biography has the advantage in a similar way of revealing the ambiguous context of one's political life, the way it can go in and out of focus, acquire coherence and evince incoherence. Such ambiguity is true not only in terms of political or ideological outlook, but also political engagement — the moments when people act politically and when they don't. The point here is to live with contradictions and to write in an acknowledgment of those contradictions.

In terms of my own work, on socialism and sexuality, acknowledging such uncertainty has particular purchase with respect to two questions. The first is how or when sex, desire, or love move between private, intimate acts or emotions, involving something that is both in language and beyond language (whether we think of the body, emotion or affect, or pleasure) towards the pub-

lic world of politics — when, for example, sex or the expression of love or desire becomes about rights, whether in terms of sexual orientation or reproductive control. To be sure, this can be traced collectively, through the work of organizations or movements, but that leaves out the absolutely critical and intimate connections of love and desire. This interaction between public and private can also be satisfyingly explored through a personal life — something that I did, partially, through the sex reformer Dora Russell. I am not saying that such an approach can lead us to a general conclusion, but biography allows us to see the movement between private and public, the body and language, affect and effect, the boundaries between politics and the personal, and to see how that movement can be historicized: what can be said by a particular person at a particular time, how their relationships or the prevailing gender or sexual ideologies shape their subjectivity. I do not claim to be saying anything new here, but simply emphasizing what biography can do.

The second example is about class. Because of the dearth of written records until the mid-century, we have a harder time writing biographies of working-class or even lower middle-class people. But to find out when class matters in people's lives and how they feel it, and how it becomes political, is a key, unanswered, and increasingly neglected question in modern British history: class is a fact, but what kind of fact? In this, people such as Kate Fisher, James Hinton, and Claire Langhamer have done wonderful work using oral history and the Mass-Observation archives to point the way forward to a form of biography or life-writing that might be Bradford as much as Bloomsbury.⁵ This requires not necessarily an abandonment of the cultural turn, but rather combining the theoretical insights of that turn with a return to the methods and concerns of social history.

Thinking of the cultural or linguistic turn, biography can highlight the strengths and weaknesses of that movement. As will be familiar, the linguistic turn in critical theory, as explored by Derrida, underlined the instability of texts, their refusal to be gathered into a single narrative or meaning, indeed continually escaping singular meanings. Historians built upon this work and that of Foucault by destabilizing older metanarratives. The difficulty was, of course, that those older metanarratives (about social identity or the space of power) were replaced by new ones, so that gender crowded out class, cultural politics pushed aside party politics. This shift was no bad thing, in the same way that younger generations should claim the stage from their elders. But younger generations also tend to repeat the same mistakes as their elders. Thus, we forget in accounts of sexual politics that parliamentary legislation shaped sexual lives as much as cultural constructions of sexuality, especially if one were gay. The other problem is the question of narrative itself, which, as I will argue below, is both compelling and reductive. Recent work by Diana Taylor on performance has suggested balancing narrative against other ways of telling stories, such as

the concept of scenario, an avenue that might prove useful for historians.⁶

In biography, I think we have the chance to find a rich middle way. It is crucial to resist the temptation to generalize or even construct or impose a single narrative of someone's life — to even out people's lives. It might be far better to see people's lives as a series of connected narratives or threads that do not always come together or make sense. One of my favourite biographies, for example, is not an historical one, but a life of the novelist B.S. Johnson by another novelist, Jonathan Coe, a work that gives in to the many twists, turns, and inconsistencies of Johnson's life instead of ironing that life out.⁷ Gender and cultural history, drawing on post-structural theory, has given us the tools to be open to such ambiguity and such rich unevenness, but it always surprises me how rarely gender and cultural historians pick up on or make use of it, instead falling back on what often comes across as monocausal explanations of historical change, the refusal to engage with material experience and the reduction of people's lives to a single factor, whether this is gender or sexuality.

There are great exceptions, of course — I am thinking of John Howard's *Men Like That* (1999), Matt Houlbrook's *Queer London* (2005), Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1988), and Becky Conekin's work on Lee Miller.⁸ As this work shows, biography allows us the opportunity to see the multiplicity of identity and behaviour, to allow that form to afford new and multiple narratives, to map, however uncertainly, the "multitudes" spoken of by Whitman.

I want to concentrate on Conekin's important intervention to illustrate my point. Lee Miller (1907–1977) had, by any account, an extraordinary life. As a young woman, she was a model for *Vogue*; she was Man Ray's lover, inspiration, and apprentice; she became a photographer in her own right in the late 1930s and 1940s, not only documenting the London Blitz in *Grim Glory* (1941), but also becoming one of the first photographers, male or female, to photograph the hellish aftermath of the death camps in Germany. After the war, she photographed fashion for *Vogue*, but, in 1954, effectively gave up photography to, as Conekin says, "cook gourmet meals, entertain weekend guests in the East Sussex countryside, travel, enter competitions, read, eat and drink, and learn a tremendous amount about classical music."⁹ Because of the extraordinariness of her life from 1907 to 1954, Miller has been something of an icon for both historians of photography and feminist cultural critics. But, as Conekin points out, the 20 (apparently) fallow years between 1954 and her death frustrate narratives of the female artist. She is no Georgia O'Keefe, Tina Modotti or Vanessa Bell. As Conekin says, "[w]hen a life story does not in any obvious way follow such a script, it is not as easy to tell."¹⁰ Ordinarity defeats extraordinariness; life defeats narrative. Conekin rehearses the various analyses, explanations, and narratives that have been offered to explain Miller's apparent exile from creativity and then rejects them. Instead, sensitive to the ambiguous

contours of personal life, Conekin does not push aside the facts of that personal life that do not fit into particular narratives, but shows instead how activities such as cooking and entertaining both existed in their own terms for Miller and, at the same time, intersected with other parts of her life. The result is the portrait of a life that is complex, multi-layered, and, critically, without an easy resolution, open to explanation, but not captured by it. The methods by which Conekin accomplishes this will be familiar: thinking about historical and cultural context (albeit those that include both the social and cultural history of postwar Britain and food culture); the imaginative use of primary and archival sources; and oral history. What is striking in the article and instructive for other historians interested in gender history and biography is Conekin's admirable refusal to put the pieces together in a simple, but reductive way. The result is, in fact, greater clarity about the landscape of a person's life. Indeed, in terms of gender history, the contribution is all the greater. It is important that Miller was a woman, but, as Conekin points out, the life course Miller took after 1954 neither fits in with narratives of feminist triumph or defeat or reductive analyses of particular modes of femininity.

In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Carolyn Steedman wrote of "lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretative devices of the culture don't quite work."¹¹ The lives of which she wrote were the most intimate: herself and her mother. Her book is an attempt to recount the conflicting themes in those lives. It was not, I think, to *tell* those lives, or to *narrate* them in a particular way. At the end of *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Steedman offers a reflection on childhood worth quoting at some length:

Once a story is told, it ceases to be a story: it becomes a piece of history, an interpretative device Using devices like this, the story forms. I know that the compulsions of narrative are almost irresistible: having found a psychology where once there was only the assumption of pathology or false consciousness to be seen, the tendency is to celebrate this psychology, to seek entry for it to a wider world of literary and cultural reference; and the enterprise of working-class autobiography was designed to make this at least a feasible project. But to do this is to miss the irreducible nature of all our lost childhoods: what has been made has been made out on the borderlands.¹²

Biography invites us to gather strands together in a single story, a story with a literally natural chronology from birth to death. But as Steedman and Conekin point out in different ways, this can miss out on the potential richness of biography, the jumble of experiences, ideas, feelings, and actions that sometimes are comprehensible in a particular historical context and sometimes not. In a wonderful quote, Sheila Rowbotham offers the myriad and disparate influences at play in her articulation of her own feminism in the late 1960s: "[m]e; Hairdressing girl; Brentford nylons; Birth control; Unmarried mothers; ...

USDAW [Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers]; Ford's [strike] women; strip tease girl."¹³ Making sense of those influences did not involve narrative with closure, of course, but an ongoing dynamic of reflection and action.

This is going to be a jump, and a pretentious jump at that: 2010 was the 50th anniversary of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960), a film that, as various critics have recently commented, always seems not simply modern, but from the future, with its scrambled narrative, long periods of conversation that goes nowhere and refusal to always explain motivation.¹⁴ The thrill of that film is its constant newness and its compelling ambiguity, both of which still seem to smack of real life in an odd way. That is the promise of biography as well, a form that can reflect all the ambiguities, uncertainties, and some certainties of our subject's lives, paying homage to the particular, but also to the peculiar multitudes of the self.

* * *

STEPHEN BROOKE is Professor of History at York University. He is the author of *Labour's War* (Oxford, 1992) and *Sexual Politics* (Oxford, forthcoming), as well as biographical articles on Bill Brandt, Dora Russell and Evan Durbin. He has been an editor of the journal *Twentieth-Century British History* since 2004.

STEPHEN BROOKE est professeur d'histoire à l'Université York. Il est l'auteur de *Labour's War* (Oxford, 1992) et de *Sexual Politics* (Oxford, à paraître). Il a aussi publié des articles biographiques sur Bill Brandt, Dora Russell et Evan Durbin. Il est le rédacteur en chef de la revue *Twentieth-Century British History* depuis 2004.

Endnotes:

- 1 A notable exception to this is Richard Price, *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- 2 A personal note here: I have nothing against gossip, but, like dessert, whisky, cigarettes, and reality television, the point is moderation.
- 3 Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (London: Verso, 2008); Ben Pimlott, *The Queen: A Biography of Elizabeth II* (London: Harper Collins, 1996); Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*, 3 Vols. (London: Heinemann, 1960–1983).
- 4 See Stephen Brooke, "Evan Durbin: Reassessing a Labour 'Revisionist'," *Twentieth-Century British History* 7 (1996): 27–52; *ibid.*, "The Body and Socialism: Dora Russell in the 1920s," *Past and Present* 189 (November 2005): 179–209; *ibid.*, "War and the Nude: The Photography of Bill Brandt in the 1940s," *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 1 (January 2006): 118–38; *ibid.*, "Janet Chance," "Alice Jenkins," and "Dorothy Thurtle," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/>, accessed 18 March 2011.
- 5 Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain 1918–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

- 2009); Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920–60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Claire Langhamer, "Love and courtship in mid-twentieth century England," *Historical Journal* 50 (2007): 173–96; *ibid.*, "Adultery in Post-war England," *History Workshop Journal* 62 (2006): 86–115; *ibid.*, "The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain," *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 (2005): 341–62.
- 6 See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). I am grateful to Danielle Robinson for suggesting this reference.
- 7 Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2004).
- 8 John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago, 1988); Becky E. Conekin, "Lee Miller and the Limits of Post-war British Modernity: Femininity, Fashion, and the Problem of Biography," in *Fashion and Modernity*, eds. Christopher Breward and Caroline Evans (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 39–57; Becky E. Conekin, "'She did the cooking with the same spirit as the photography': Lee Miller's Life After Photography," *Photography and Culture* 1 (2008): 145–63.
- 9 Conekin, "'She did the cooking with the same spirit as the photography'," 146.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 11 Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, 1.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 13 Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream* (London: Penguin, 2000), 209.
- 14 For example, see A.O. Scott, "A Fresh Look Back at Right Now," *New York Times* (21 May 2010); *Slate Culture Gabfest*, 26 May 2010, <<http://www.slate.com/id/2259791>>, (viewed 26 May 2010).