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Biography as History

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BIOGRAPHY AS HISTORY

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It is an honour for me to have been asked to contribute a paper on this occasion, by an Association for which I have so much respect and before members whose work I know and admire. It is especially a pleasure to speak on biography in a university which by its annual award of a medal has done much to make "popular" biography almost respectable. I presume I am here both as a publisher who has had a hand in launching some notable biographies and as the writer of one biography. Your committee probably reasoned that if in these capacities I had not thought about the subject it was time I did. If nothing else, I am as a result rather like the Presbyterian who, dying and finding himself in purgatory, cried out that he didna ken it would be like this. And the guid Lord in his infinite maircy looked down and said, "well, ye ken the noo."

Mesdames et Messieurs, nécessairement je parlerai ici seulement des biographies écrites ou traduites en anglais. Je regrette infiniment que je ne sais pas lire d'autres, et je n'oserais pas discuter ni l'un ni l'autre en français. Je vous en demande pardon, mais mon sujet est assez compliqué pour moi, même en anglais.

Originally I was asked to speak on "Biography as History" and — in spite of the change of title in the programme, which is my fault — that is the subject which I shall at least open. Those of you who have read the existing literature on biography must have been reminded of the blind men describing the elephant: it is like a rope, it is like a wall, it is very like a tree. You will remember that "each was partly in the right and all were in the wrong". Biography seems to me bounded by certain powerful conventions, few of which are rigid. It can assume many shapes, therefore, but it cannot be changed fundamentally and still remain biography. There are few other generalizations about biography that haven't to be qualified at once. There is one that takes a lead from the old American frontier attitude to the Indians: the only good subject for biography is a dead one. But when we have accepted this we have the whole of the Elysian Fields in which to dig.

Our topic seems to ask at once : Biography by whom ? History for whom ? While I don't propose to follow those questions far I do call your attention to them. They are sharp enough in a world that may interest me more than it does you, or may seem more real to me. I believe it is normal that "history" to most of you implies a certain level of reading and contemplation; the level, in fact, on which you live

and work; the level on which many historians write for and talk to each other; the level on which too few people can follow you.

May I remind you that history is a national — indeed an international — forest reserve in which all are free to hunt. However much you would repudiate the role, you are the tycoons in that wood. You hunt with the best guides and the best equipment. But everyone shares in the results of your hunting; and if what you bring back does not satisfy the needs of the unskilled and the ill-equipped they will invade the wood, and, by methods however little approved or unsporting, will bring back what they lack. For the game of that forest is an essential element in the diet on which national consciousness, cohesion, and maturity are fed. And these wants will be satisfied, for better or worse.

I may appear to begin with a digression, and I don't intend to pursue it.

Esentially my topic seems to confront us with two main questions. The first is : how far are biographical writings useful in historical studies ? The second : how far is the writing of biography appropriate work for historians ? Presumably you will begin by thinking better of biography if it is written by historians — even though some may not think better of historians for having written it. That remark is meant only to remind us that there is a clash between the practices of biography and historiography; and the historian who writes biography may have to compromise some principles if he is to succeed in his avocation.

Our attitude on both these questions in Canada has been affected a good deal in the past ten or twelve years by the number of valuable biographies we have had from the pens of our historians. We have not been able to develop or support in Canada any tradition of the man of letters, those who in other countries have supplied much of their biography. Owing to our peculiar market conditions most of our books are written by professors or housewives, and it has followed that our biographies would come from academic historians or remain unwritten for a long time. As it is we have been uniquely fortunate in our biographers. If our historians have, as I think, given up a good deal for this accomplishment, I hope they may have a lively sense of the results being of great value, both to those who write and to those who read Canadian history — including some who have never really read it before.

The modern historian's rooted distrust of biography has, appropriately, historic justifications. Biography was an ancient river that had cut its own haphazard channel, and was for a long time perhaps more attractive than valuable. Considering the number of its practitioners it developed surprisingly few controls as it moved through the fields of literature, of history, and sometimes — it must be admitted — of fiction. One of the first attempts to define it in modern times came in 1911 from

Sir Sidney Lee, then editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*. In his *Principles of Biography* he said : "The historical method is as harmful to biography as the method of moral edification. History encroaches on the biographer's province to the prejudice of his art." And again, "It is the art of the biographer sternly to subordinate his scenery to his actors." A few years later, speaking as president of the English Association, he said : "The historical bias is calculated to repress unduly the element of personality which biographers exist to transmit... A writer will never achieve the true biographic aim if he seeks to serve at once two literary masters, History as well as Biography."

Though no one nowadays would agree with the tone or the extent of Lee's strictures, the problem he indicated was real enough — and is today. The struggle of the biographer when he comes to write his book, when all his research is done and he has now to cast it into good form, is a struggle to serve two masters. I would not call them history and biography; of course he is trying to serve biography, and it is in that attempt that he struggles, and must sometimes choose between the claims of history and of literature.

To many, Lee's principles must have seemed to rule the field until the late 1920s, when it appears someone declared biography a distressed area. For in 1928 we find André Maurois delivering the Clark Lectures at Cambridge on "Aspects of Biography" and Harold Nicholson delivering the Hogarth Lectures on "The Development of English Biography". Maurois, though he recognized and approved a move towards more carefully researched biography, rejected completely for both biography and history any suggestion that they could ever become a science rather than an art. He did not see the future biography as being very different from the then accepted form. "Whatever forms biography may assume in the future, it will always be a difficult form of art. We demand of it the scrupulosity of science and the enchantment of art, the perceptible truth of the novel and the learned falsehoods of history. Much prudence and tact are required to concoct this unstable mixture... A well-written life is a much rarer thing than a well-spent one." Of history he said in passing : "History is not an accumulation of facts, but the relation of them... Facts relating to the past, if they are collected without art, are compilations, and compilations, no doubt, may be useful, but they are no more history than butter, eggs, salt and herbs are an omelette."

Harold Nicholson agreed with Maurois's view of biography as a literary art but he had far less confidence in its future. He foresaw an increasing scientific accretion in biography which would in the end prove destructive of the literary interest. "The former", he said, "will insist not only on the facts, but on all the facts; the latter demands a partial or artificial representation of the facts. The scientific interest, as it develops, will become insatiable; no synthetic power, no genius for

representation will be able to keep pace." He was referring not merely to scientific methods of research but to the grafting of medical, psychological, sociological, and other studies in depth onto the form of biography. He recognized that the results might be interesting, but the product would be something quite different and would no longer be literature.

Phillip Guedella, too, was writing about biography in the year 1928. The introduction to his volume of the Palmerston-Gladstone correspondence took the form of an essay on biography. It seemed that everyone was taking an interest in a form that was either gravely ill, or disturbingly lively. If there was a single reason for all this stir we may guess at it in two words : Lytton Strachey. *Eminent Victorians* in 1918 and *Queen Victoria* in 1921 had streamed like rockets across the heavy post-war sky. Biography as an assertion of life was perhaps a welcome answer to four years of death. In the 1920s it seemed the only people not reading biography were those many engaged in the writing of it. But it was not just any biography; above all it was not the biography of respectful commemoration. Bad imitations of Strachey leapt from every press so that Guedella spoke bitterly of "an unchivalrous age which appears to derive unlimited enjoyment from gay onslaughts upon the unprotected dead".

Whatever the lecturers of 1928 meant, they did not prepare us for a little pamphlet called *Biography* written for the National Book League in 1947. Its author was G. M. Trevelyan and its first sentence was : "Biography is a method of writing history; it professes to be more limited in outlook and scope than the history of events at large, and it is often though not always more one-sided; but it has the advantage of being more personal, human and intimate." This is not all the Master of Trinity said in this essay, which doubtless was stated bluntly for the general reader; but nowhere did he seek to withdraw even a little from the position he had taken up. In the light of our own recent experience in Canadian biography we would probably agree in saying that Lee was wrong, but are we prepared as a result to say that Trevelyan was right ? I think we still face a dilemma, for though we have had some superb biographies, which are indeed a method and a very acceptable method of writing history, there are still many failures which lend support to Sir Sidney Lee. Moreover we can, after a fashion, accept Trevelyan's statement without contradicting Lee's. A bad biography may still be said to be a method of writing history, perhaps fairly useful history, though presumably not quite what the author set out to do. The point is that biography is a form with a convention that remains accepted because it has not been successfully challenged. The form has changed, has taken on the disciplines of historical accuracy, has enlarged its scope — so that "life and times of" is as rightly biography as "life of", provided only that it is well done; so that it is possible to say "This is a useful book but a bad biography", or "This is a good biography but

unsatisfactory history", if the narrative form has limited the information. But, "This is good biography and bad history" is a contradiction.

Whether Lee was right or not his statement has a warning for our day which is not the less important for our changes in methods and attitudes. When he spoke, early in this century, both history and biography were in process of change. History was being led towards science and biography was showing a measure of conformity. It is possible that Lee in 1911 felt called upon to fight a delaying action.

About the turn of the century Logan Pearsall Smith migrated from the family business in the States to become a man of letters in England. Early in his career there he started gathering materials for a biography of Sir Henry Wotton, one-time Provost of Eton, poet, and ambassador. In a volume of memoirs entitled *Unforgotten Years* he says : "I soon discovered that distinguished biographers preferred to make use of printed sources rather than to pursue their researches among unpublished papers. I found that since [Izaac] Walton's biography at least seven sketches, portraits and lives of Wotton have been written by scholars of distinction including Adolphus Ward and Sir Sidney Lee, but that none of these had looked at his dispatches, of which at least five hundred were preserved unread in the Record Office, or at his letters to be found in the British Museum."

This suggests a school of biographers who had come on a new method, with all the delight of small boys discovering that they can ride their bicycles without holding onto the handlebars : "Look Dad. No documents."

It seems that at least there was a time when historians moving towards more scientific history were right to distrust biography; and when biography, whatever else it was, was not a method of writing history that anyone could approve. One cannot now imagine a serious biographer — whether trained as an historian or not — leaving any available channel undredged for sources. The change from 1907 to 1947 has produced an attitude that biographers of the last century would not easily believe in. Yet the change does not wholly answer our questions. For if history is a science, then biography is not history — and will never be. That isn't to say that in serious biography anyone should condone inaccuracy, or that biography has nothing to contribute to historical studies. It is simply that biography's highest requirement is to present the living image, the re-creation of a man, and this may demand the exclusion of much historically useful information that would clog the narrative or otherwise interfere with that purpose. It may also require the inclusion of much that is historically trivial, in the process of making the narrative live. For if it does not live it is not biography. The biographical form has its roots deep in literature, and we have yet to discover that it can flourish in any other soil.

To many historians it will seem that the biography I approve is under-researched and over-written. But I talked about the deliberate exclusion of information. It is one thing to exclude facts and quite another to be unaware of them. The biographer who would produce a convincing likeness must know everything he possibly can — however seemingly trivial — about his subject. Then, out of the great heap of crude ore he has mined, he must smelt the pure metal that is to his purpose, and out of it shape the likeness that will persuade us of its truth to life. Have I to an extent described also the process of writing history ? I presume I have, but I have not at the same time convinced myself or you that biography and history occupy the same room; difficulties remain. Let me suggest an example. I believe that David Cecil's *The Young Melbourne* has been rightly praised as a fine example of the art of biography, though as history I think it is not wholly satisfactory. It is a moving and intensely interesting account of an historical figure, set against a lightly but carefully sketched background of the Regency period in England. It gives a surprising insight into the times without telling us a great deal about them. It gives great depth of understanding of the character of a public man while telling us almost nothing of his public life. What has the bewitching and tragically foolish Lady Caroline Lamb to do with early-nineteenth-century England — she who occupies about half this book ? Almost nothing. But she had a great deal to do with the making, and almost the breaking, of a future prime minister. Is this to the purpose of history ? I believe many of you would say that it is; yet I also believe that few historians could have written this book, and fewer still would have attempted it in this way. I wonder why ?

The answer may lie in the historian's unwillingness to recognize both the opportunities and the limitations of the biographical form. It can do some things supremely well, and others it should not attempt; it cannot encompass all the materials of history. History takes all time and all place for its province; not that all periods of history are equally important, but none defy being written about except as source material may be limited. Yet, not all people are fit subjects for biography — not even all the people who have shaped history. History has to concern itself with material whether it is of general interest or not. Biography does not have to, indeed should not — and that is perhaps enough to make it suspect. Because, what do we mean by "general interest" ? The highly personal aspect of the selection of topic, the highly personal point of view, are enough to make the scholar wary. The necessity to provide interest is obviously full of traps: the danger of heightening a scene and thus shading its truth; the danger of over-simplifying a character or his motives, when character and motives are seldom simple.

The very notion that some prominent men and women are fit subjects for biography and others are not is enough, of itself, to make

historians uneasy about the process. If only we had the money and the documents and the Ph.D. students, mightn't we have biographies of everyone of the slightest consequence ? I'm sure the very question horrifies you as it would any publisher. But let us be of good cheer; the answer is "no". It is true that a book of sorts, perhaps a useful book, can be put together on anyone who has left enough records — immortality, after all, results from voluminous documents left behind — but it will seldom be a biography. And the non-biographies that masquerade as the real thing help to discredit a useful and attractive form.

Sidney Lee insisted that character and exploits "jointly constitute biographic personality". The exploit might range "from mere talk, as in the case of Johnson, to empire building and military conquest as in the case of Julius Caesar and Napoleon". The French have an expression, "Les hommes heureux n'ont pas d'histoire", and one could add, "et souvent les hommes malheureux non plus".

Even when a fit subject, by Lee's or any other definition, is found, by an historian of acknowledged literary talents, a good biography is still not bound to follow. The writer may recognize the essential qualities in his subject, but if he himself lacks sympathy for it the result must be in doubt. One of the questions a publisher has to answer most frequently is : "Would so and so be a good subject for biography ?" The only possible answer is, "You tell me. How much have you learned about him ? What new insight do you bring to the task ? With what grace can you present it ? And, above all, how much do you care ?"

To some it will seem that I insist too much on the literary task, the function of providing a good and convincing narrative with a lasting form. But this alone is what will widen and lengthen the life of the book, and carry it out of that area in which research scholars write only for each other. And this requirement, kept firmly in view by all, could often save the graduate student from dreaming that in completing his thesis on so and so's years as Minister of Education in Keewatin he has almost finished a biography; a little touching up, an anecdote or two, and the job is done. Too often, of course, it is. A thesis on a obscure but potentially interesting figure or period finesses some publisher out of his judgment and one more unreadable book is added to the production of what with reason and despair is referred to as "the biography factory".

For this, of course, the publishers have largely themselves to blame; it is a truism of publishing that a good thesis is a bad book, and in no field is this truer than in that of biography. With the optimism that is the essential qualification for publishing they continue to try to prove themselves wrong, without succeeding. In doing so they probably mislead many young scholars into thinking themselves writers, and confirm them in patterns of thought and expression that inhibit creative work. It is

hard counsel, but the best thing to be done with a thesis, when it has earned its degree, is to put it aside for a year or two to see if its interest holds up. But, no, persuaded that this bad book will be followed by a good one — which is brave but illogical — the publisher, the thesis-director, and their protégé join hands and go down like lemmings to their doom. It is a wasteful and harmful process, for what goes under-water with them, to be quenched for a time if not drowned, is literary history and biography. I don't mind anyone deciding against literary history, if that is a conscious decision. What I mind is the inability to distinguish — in biography and in history — between facts strung together and a body of information taken hold of, with due regard for accuracy, and still given form. We know people who seem able, at the same time, to serve literature and history — but only on a comparatively narrow front. Our great triumphs have been in the field of political biography and we need much else. In other areas the struggle to serve two masters is sharp and continuous. The brilliant American biographer Catherine Drinker Bowen has two stories in her book *Adventures of a Biographer* that illustrates aspects of the problem. In the first she recalls going to a distinguished professor of history for help. "Two chapters of a biography that I was working on would not come round; a scene which by historical right should be thrilling lay flat on my pages and dead, though I had tried writing it half a dozen ways... Had I plenty of data, well authenticated ? the professor asked. When I said yes, first-rate material and more than I could use, the professor shrugged and inquired what I was worried about. 'Go home', he said, 'and write it from your cards' ".

"*Write it from my cards.* This scholar, who himself had published books of history, and who knew so much that I could never know — was he suggesting that I set up those five-by-eight cards on the desk and deliberately transpose them from A to Z ? Did he mean I should forget historical 'plot' and story, forget the reader, too, and the hard exciting fact that written history is communication ?"

Again, when Mrs. Bowen was writing her biography of John Adams, she met a professor working on the same topic. He was on a sabbatical leave travelling from library to library in search of holograph letters and manuscripts. Catherine Bowen had just come from Braintree, Massachusetts, and was full of excitement at having seen the house where John Adams was born and the one next door, to which he had moved when he was married.

" 'What luck,' I told the professor, 'what extraordinary unequalled luck for us biographers, that those Adams houses still stand!' Had the professor seen John Adams' beaver hat and the red wool cloak he wore, riding circuit ? Fire-engine red it was, and must have covered him to

the boots. And the attic room that John Adams slept in as a boy ... Sitting on John's bed I could touch the ceiling with my hand. From the front door downstairs to the stone wall by the road was only fifteen steps; I had paced it off. 'Professor,' I said, 'do you think the old Plymouth Road ran that close to the house in, say, 1745, when John Adams was ten years old ?'

"The professor shook his head. 'Haven't seen those houses,' he said, 'don't intend to. I never go to Boston, I hate the place !' "

At another time, puzzling over the gap between herself and the professors, she says : "Biased history is of course the worst of sins. What I asked for, what I missed in academic history, was not a bias toward events or nations but a point of view toward life, some hint that the writer belonged to the human race and had himself experienced passion, grief or disappointment."

These are extreme examples of opposing viewpoints. I do not believe that many academic biographers could remain so detached from their subject or so indifferent to its conventions that they would fail to look at any available ground relating to their topic; it is as much a primary document as any piece of paper or parchment. Nor do I believe that most consider the stringing together of facts to be writing history. Nor do I automatically assume that one who says biased history is the worst of sins is quite incapable of committing it.

I have talked only of biography and not of its related forms: journals, diaries, autobiographies, and memoirs. For our purposes these are sources, rather than well-defined literary forms. They are the historian's sources as well as the biographer's, and both will look at them sharply for internal evidence as to their reliability. One of the remarkable things in the informal debate about history and biography is that essentially their similarities of approach and of aspiration, within the conventions of their separate disciplines, are so great — we are talking here of responsible workers in both fields. You would find the biographer's weighing of a fact — whatever that means — as scrupulous as your own. You would find his standard of accuracy worthy of your respect. You would probably find his involvement in his subject more intense than yours; that may sometimes betray him, but equally it may provide him with insights that do not come so easily to the coolly detached.

In the end the argument over the values and weaknesses of biography as history seem to me little more than an aside in the continuing debate between — in whatever form — a scientific and a literary approach to history. Apart from the demands of art, biography with its necessarily narrow-angled lens will produce some distortion; but it is a distortion that is well understood and easily corrected; and the lens can bring out detail as well as provide the warmth of a burning-glass.

There is a wise and winning contribution to this debate in C. V. Wedgwood's book of essays, *Truth and Opinion.* Though not directed to biography, this statement in the essay "Literature and the Historian" seems to me to illuminate the discussion. She says:

"The reaction against literary history was not causeless. Scholars had some grounds for thinking that historians with a strong literary gift were betrayed at times into sacrificing exactitude of statement to beauty of language, to minimizing or enhancing the historic picture by the qualities of individual style. This is true. But the converse is not true. The historian who cultivates literary style can make mistakes, but there is no opposite guarantee that the historian with no literary style will make none. That is the great fallacy. Good writing is no guarantee of good scholarship; but neither is bad writing. The austere instinct which prompted the historians of fifty years ago to concentrate exclusively on discovery and regard the cultivation of writing as irrelevant was a wrong instinct. There have been scholars of great distinction and valuable influence, who were bad writers. But they are rare. The sense of form, the capacity to weigh and to use words correctly, the shaping of sentences, and the structure and presentation of a scene, a fact, or an exposition are the natural concomitants of the clear, inquiring, disciplined and imaginative mind which is needed for historical research."

In all this I have nowhere intended to suggest that good biography can ever be unassailable history — any more than good history can in our day be unassailable history. But good biography is not the more assailable by reason of its literary form. Truth in biography and in history is subject to much the same conflicts or deficiencies of evidence, and to that host of human failings that seem likely to outlast and outsmart the computer: unrecognized prejudice, inadequate capacity, failure of imagination and patience and nerves. Apart from these, biography may be more subject to error in the extent to which individuals remain even more mysterious than events. This risk seems to me offset by its greater reach, that quality referred to by Trevelyan of being "more personal, human and intimate". That is not to say that it is a greater or lesser accomplishment, only that it can do for history (if indeed they are separate and distinct) what history can hardly do for itself. It can more easily reach the reading public. It can awaken a taste for history, and bring you readers more prepared to make the effort to deepen their knowledge and broaden their perspectives. It can help to answer for you that maddening and largely uninformed cry that "Canadian history is dull". History, it seems to me, fights always on two fronts — or should : one is the battle to expand the bridgehead of truth; the other is a battle for attention, to communicate the truth as it appears. In both battles biography can be history's strongest ally.