



**Re-Thinking Biography**

**Gary Ianziti**

**School of Humanities and Human Services  
Queensland University of Technology**

**Paper presented to the Social Change in the 21<sup>st</sup>  
Century Conference**

**Centre for Social Change Research  
Queensland University of Technology  
21 November 2003**

Should biography have a place within a conference like the present one? Does biography have a legitimate role to play in humanities and social science research as conceived and practiced today, in the twenty-first century? Or is biography, as Bourdieu (1986: 69) once claimed, a cheat: “one of those common sense notions that have somehow managed to sneak their way into scientific discourse”?

There are at least three good reasons for adopting a dismissive attitude towards biography. First of all, biography can easily be seen as belonging more properly to the realm of literature. Biography has in fact long been recognized as an established literary genre. The first biographies were indeed works of literature. Biography still smacks very much of the literary. A great deal of biography deals with the lives of the great literary figures themselves, Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* being the obvious archetype in English. This literary pedigree leads to a second reason why biography need perhaps not detain the serious researcher: it so often retails more fiction than fact. Biographers are required to invent a good deal of what they relate (Lee, 2001: 55). No biographer can really enter the mind of his or her subject. Conjecture runs rife, and the biographer’s imagination is frequently called into play. Biographers are only too aware of their license, and often abuse it. A recent biography of former U.S. President Ronald Reagan is deliberately based on make-believe (Didion, 1999).

A third reason why we might wish to dismiss biography out of hand has to do with its focus on individuals. Unfashionably, in this day and age, biography tends to presuppose that individuals are coherent subjects endowed with a sense of purpose, and that they exercise some degree of control over their own lives and those of others. In

addition to which, traditional biography celebrates prominent individuals, usually white males drawn from the elite ranks of society. Biography thus not only lacks intellectual sophistication, it also regularly commits the unpardonable sins of race, class, and gender bias. Biography is—or at least was—closely associated with the “great man” theory of history, a notion spawned by the Romantics and perpetuated by the Victorians. The debunking tendency that set in with Bloomsbury is really only another side of the same coin. Praise and blame are the common currency of biography.

All of which strikes one as thoroughly unscholarly and unscientific. No wonder that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries more sophisticated epistemological models evolved and came to dominate humanities and social science research. One thinks immediately of Marxism, with its focus on the economic determinants of human and social behavior. In the field of history—formerly one of the strongholds of biography—the *Annales* School became highly influential (Burke, 1990). Its tendency to concentrate on long-term social, economic, and demographic trends left little room for individual lives (Diaz, 1983). Another major paradigm, Freudian psychology, was potentially more closely aligned with biography. Freud’s own experiments in biographical investigation, however, were unconvincing, as were those of his followers. In any case, the humanistic premises of Freudian psychology were soon challenged by Lacan and the Lacanians.

What space then is left for biography within contemporary modes of thought? Marxism has of course collapsed, forcing the *Annales* School to re-assess its traditional hostility to the history of individuals (Levi, 1989). Yet the intellectual landscape remains unfriendly to biography. Concepts such as globalization offer little or no scope for the

constructive human agent. Fashionable trends posit the death of the subject. The individual has all but vanished as a site for cutting-edge epistemological work. All of which suggests that Bourdieu may have been right: biography should be considered to be *passé*, a curious throwback, material for some occasional light reading of an entertaining kind.

But let us now turn around and discuss a few reasons why biography *should* be taken seriously by scholars. First of all there is the sheer fact of biography's survival. A trip to any bookshop will reveal that biography is alive and well with the reading public. After fiction, biography leads sales. The shelves bulge with everything from the lives of movie stars and contemporary politicians, to those of historical figures like Hitler and Churchill. True, the sheer fact of biography's market value may not be proof of its worth. But it does force us to take a closer look. What does it mean that for many general readers, the only book they may ever open on Nazi Germany will be Kershaw's *Hitler*? There has indeed been an interesting tendency recently for historians to return to the practice of writing history through biography. Bosworth's *Mussolini* is another case in point. What lies behind this phenomenon? Does it correspond to some new need to re-negotiate the relationships between individuals and events? Or is it merely market-driven? Readers after all, as A.J.P. Taylor (1977: 9) used to say, like a good story, and a good story must have a main character. Readers are also individuals. They relate well to stories about other individuals. Every teacher knows the old trick of perking up a lecture with biographical anecdotes. The television medium too knows how to cash in. TV news items frequently focus their stories on individual case studies. The process of immediate identification between the viewer and the viewed creates a powerful bond.

The point I am making is a relatively simple one: we are surrounded by the biographical mode of thinking and representing. Whether we like it or not, our Western culture is permeated with it. Perhaps this is one reason why biography simply refuses to go away and die. Over the past century or so individuals as actors, participants, and victims have been regularly chased from the scene of history, only to return again, stronger than ever. Perhaps it is time to consider the advantages inherent in thinking and working biographically. A conference such as the present one provides an opportunity to rethink some of the uses of biography. What follows is meant as a series of preliminary remarks about biography as a genre. It is hoped that giving some thought to this question might serve as a first step towards opening up some new possibilities for biographical investigation.

Thus far I have spoken of biography as if its definition could be taken for granted. But that of course is far from being the case. A basic component of any definition is that biography deals with the life of an individual (Momigliano, 1971: 11). This, however, does not tell us much. Autobiography for example also deals with individuals, yet it is clearly distinguishable from biography. Unlike biography indeed, autobiography is theoretically fashionable. As a self-generated text about the self, autobiography is rooted in claims to authenticity which transcend any process of verification. The writer's truth is just that: a personal narrative, not subject to negotiation. Biography, by way of contrast, operates on a different basis. Its claim to truth "does not consist in the authenticity of an inside view but in the consistency of the narrative and the explanatory power of the arguments" (Schlaeger, 1995: 59). Biography has been labeled a discourse of usurpation,

by virtue of the fact that its framework implies a distinct separation between the biographer and the subject.

The biographer's task is to tell the life of the subject. Yet questions can be asked regarding such a nebulous term as "life". Do we mean the public life or the private, for example? Public figures may well prefer to have their lives told from a purely public perspective. But the expectation of modern readers is that there will be some revelations regarding the private person: some suitably salacious material, for example, or some juicy gossip. Freud is often thought to be responsible for bringing biography into the bedroom. But the tendency to delve into the private sphere behind the public figure is much older and entrenched. The biographies of Suetonius invariably include copious scenes from the private lives of the Roman emperors (Townend, 1967: 83). This suggests that curiosity about what goes on behind closed doors is a staple feature of biography in any age. As a Renaissance writer put it: one should not attempt biography without a thorough knowledge of the subject's private life (Bruni, 1987: 61).

There is even a long-standing tradition of biography, which holds that the area of private life should provide the main focus, even when the subject happens to be a public figure. The authority for this view is Plutarch, whose *Parallel Lives* are really studies in character (Gossage, 1967: 54-55). Plutarch argued that biography was quite distinct from history in what it was supposed to achieve. Whereas history was written to give as full an account as possible of past events, biography was more about portraying an individual's character traits. Biography's mission was to study the man, and to show what he was really like. Plutarch reasoned that such questions were more likely to be answered by looking at the small details of everyday life, rather than at large historical events. Plutarch

thus showed more interest in how Julius Caesar tried to comb his hair over his bald patch, than in Caesar's campaigns against the Gauls. The latter was the stuff of history; the former of biography. Caesar's contrived hair-style betrayed his vanity. The man's inner make-up was revealed in a minor detail.

Biography thus turns upon a fundamental dilemma: is it concerned primarily with knowing an individual, or is it more about gaining an insight into the dynamics of social and historical events? To some extent, it is about both. Plutarch himself wrote biographies only of outstanding individuals. He was a master at showing how personal qualities interacted with structures to influence the outcome of events. Thus Caesar's vanity led to his assassination. Cicero's overweening ambition brought ruin not only to himself, but also to any faint hopes the Roman republic had of survival. Modern biographies too tend to try to pinpoint the connections between the personal idiosyncrasies of leaders, and the wider world of historical events (Kershaw, 1998: xxiv; Bosworth, 2002: 4-6).

Another aspect of biography that requires consideration is the position of the biographer vis-à-vis the subject. Writers like Suetonius and Plutarch were essentially scholars working with written sources on the lives of eminent men long since dead. The situation shifts dramatically if we think of biographers writing on living subjects. The author commissioned to write a biography of Kim Beazley is unlikely to delve very deeply into the man's personal life. A few platitudes about the brilliant student, his harmonious marriage and exemplary family life will suffice. Any connections drawn between the private sphere and the public man will show only the highest sense of civic duty bolstered by moral rectitude (FitzSimons, 1998). Biography of living subjects can of

course just as often sin through denigration, as in the recent case of a writer who appears to have deliberately set out to demolish the reputation (such as it is) of Bob Ellis. Ellis challenged the accuracy of the biography by compiling a list of some 200 errors contained therein. The biography was then withdrawn from circulation, though it has since resurfaced in another form (Warby, 2001).

Whether biography concerns subjects living or long since dead is thus a crucial question. So too is that of authorization. Biographies of living or recently deceased subjects are either authorized or not, this category being somewhat different again from the commissioned biography. Commissioned biography is that of the Beazley variety, where the author is a paid hack whose job it is to churn out an edifying portrait in support of a cause, in this case Beazley's prime ministerial ambitions. Commissioned biographers enjoy very little freedom; they work to a pattern and produce a highly predictable product. Authorized biographers are of a different breed. They generally take the initiative, gain access to the subject, or to the subject's papers. In any case, their task is facilitated by co-operation from within the inner circle. Clearly this situation can create a certain tension between the biographer and the subject, and/or the subject's heirs or followers. Blanche d'Alpuget (1982) was fairly candid in describing some of the limitations imposed upon her authorized biography of Bob Hawke. The authorized biographer does not enjoy total freedom, though he or she may have a higher degree of it than the commissioned biographer. Freest of all is the unauthorized biographer, though he or she works under another handicap: that of a lack of authorized access to papers and other sources of information. In his novel *The Aspern Papers* Henry James dramatized the dilemmas and difficulties of this question of access, with all its pitfalls and prizes.



The question of sources is of course crucial. Like historians, biographers are expected to carry out research, to compile and critically evaluate data, to build explanatory hypotheses, which can be confirmed or rejected on the basis of the evidence. It remains true, however, that whereas history is regulated by national and international bodies of associated professionals, operating within a framework of accepted standards, biography is practiced in a wider variety of contexts. The rules concerning what qualifies as acceptable history are to a large extent determined by the profession, working through refereed journals and recognized university presses. Sometimes biography is subject to the same rules; often it is not. The very popularity and marketability of biography assures its greater freedom from the constraints governing the academic field of history.

Let us try to be clear about this distinction. History too has its popular side, but even so it tends to be written by academics, or at least by academically trained and inclined professionals. Biography, on the other hand, is often produced by writers. There are people who can make a decent living by writing biographies. I like to call them “serial biographers”. Serial biographers churn out one biography after another. Jasper Ridley, for example, has published biographies of figures as diverse as Garibaldi (1974), Elizabeth I (1987), Tito (1994). Very few people, if anyone, can make a living by writing history. Biography is consequently less subject to professional regulation. There are biographies of high scholarly standard: Kershaw’s *Hitler* and Bosworth’s *Mussolini* have already been mentioned in this category. Other biographies—such as those of the serial biographers—rely to a much lesser degree on their critical apparatus. Because biography is so market driven, it often seeks above all to provide a good read. The entertainment

aspect may be said to be almost a requirement. Perhaps this is yet another clue to biography's relatively low prestige within history and the social sciences generally.

So far not much has been said about the “subject” of a biography. There are two components to every biography: the biographer, and the person whose biography is being written. English has no word to designate the latter: compare the French *le biographé*, for which the English equivalent might be “the biographied”. The professional affiliation of the “biographied” is very important. Some of the earliest biography we have from the Greeks is not about statesmen or prominent figures at all, but rather about philosophers and writers. Socrates, for example, was the subject of biographical writings not only by Plato but also by Xenophon (Madelénat, 1984: 38). Biography was an effective way of preserving and spreading the teachings of the early masters of thought. In the late Hellenistic period Diogenes Laertius collected an encyclopaedia of philosophical lore in his *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. In this work the lives of each of the prominent Greek philosophers were epitomized, their works listed, and their sayings recorded for posterity.

Diogenes Laertius reminds us that biography was and is still often written as a collection, by professional category, often for reference purposes. An offshoot of such group biography is national biography, a nineteenth-century innovation, which reflects nationalism and nation-building. *Who's Who* is a variant on this theme. A professional category that receives considerable attention from biography is that of artists. One of the first modern collections of biographies—along the lines established by Diogenes Laertius—is Vasari's sixteenth-century *Lives of the Artists*. Writers and artists continue to be prime subjects for biography in our own day. This is especially true in the English-

speaking world. Boswell's *Johnson* set the tone in the eighteenth century. Seldom before or since has any single individual been portrayed in such detail, warts and all. Boswell's *Johnson* is the recognized forerunner of much of the literary biography of today (Sisman, 2001). For some reason artists and writers are thought to have interesting lives, worth investigating down to the last detail. We seem to be eternally curious about individuals who possess extraordinary talents. Biography can be a way of accounting for a given individual's creative abilities.

Perhaps we can step back now and offer a few general comments. Biography has been with us for a very long time in the west, at least since the Greeks. At present it shows no signs of abating, despite what would appear to be an intellectual climate highly unfavorable to it. In considering biography we have seen that it is not a monolithic entity. It comes in many shapes and forms. The subjects of biography have traditionally been, and continue to be, prominent or extraordinary individuals. There is no real reason, however, why this must be so. Samuel Johnson's own famous dictum—in his essay on biography published in *The Rambler*, no. 60, 13 October 1750--should be noted in this regard: "I have often thought that here has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful" (Johnson, 1958: 84). The importance of this statement—in fact of the entire *Rambler* piece—has rightly been stressed by contemporary scholars (Rollyson, 2001). What Johnson is advocating is indeed an opening of the biographical project to a democratic, almost to an ethnographic perspective. Johnson himself was not averse to writing biographies of obscure or unsavory figures: he wrote for example a biography of his friend, the otherwise little-

known English poet Richard Savage, whose part-time activities included brawling, whoring and murder (Holmes, 1993).

The question of who gets their biography written has become a crucial one in our own time, largely because various movements have queried the logic of choice. The women's movement in particular has stressed the artificial nature of the biographical construct, seeing in it an arbitrary device for male dominance. Early in the twentieth century Virginia Woolf—whose father was none other than Sir Leslie Stephen, the Director of the English *Dictionary of National Biography*—contested the biographical model by writing *Orlando*, a sort of parody of biography as a peculiarly male fantasy. Such experiments no doubt contributed towards shaping the militant feminist preference for autobiography, a genre seen as freer from the constraints of convention (Parke, 1996: 31). Yet today biography has made something of a comeback even in feminist and post-feminist circles (Backscheider, 2001: 127-162).

Biography is thus a resilient genre, capable of infinite transformations. There seem to be no real grounds, epistemological or otherwise, for rejecting biography categorically. On the contrary, there are good reasons for extending the paradigm into new areas, along the lines of what has been suggested by certain ethnographers (Cresswell, 1998: 47-51; 111-115; 146-147; 204-207) and anthropologists (Wolcott, 1994: 61-102). One promising avenue might well be that of exploring individual experiences of social change. Historians like Renzo De Felice (1983: 50) have argued that biography is the best way to reconstruct the fabric of a specific social reality. De Felice is famous for his multi-volume biography of Mussolini. But his observation is applicable—via the dictum of Dr Johnson—to a much wider range of subjects. Within a

research perspective of this kind, life stories acquire the potential to become sites for the study of social change over time. This is especially true in the climate of accelerating change that is typical of recent decades. Used in this way, through what might be termed a combination of several disciplinary perspectives—history, ethnography, sociology--, biography can perhaps become an effective means for recapturing and understanding an important dimension of human and social experience.

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