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Introduction: biography and James VI's Scotland

The origins of this introductory essay, although not of the collection as a whole, lie in a workshop held at the University of Glasgow on 29 August 2014 entitled 'the strange death of Scottish biography', from a paper delivered on that occasion designed to provide the perspective of a 'critical friend' on biography as a genre. Since this essay introduces a collection of biographical studies which offer helpful new contributions to our understanding of Scotland in the reign of James VI, the remarks of a 'critical friend' might seem unnecessary. Nevertheless, biography both was and is a contested historical genre, which still invites sneering responses. In this context, it is helpful to commence with some remarks about biography's place within the discipline of history more broadly, before considering its position within early modern Scottish history.

Despite numerous high-quality studies of individual lives, biography 'remains the [historical] profession's unloved stepchild, occasionally but grudgingly let in at the door, but more often shut out with the riff-raff'.¹ Before uncovering some of the reasons why biography has been dismissed, it is helpful to briefly rehearse some of the obvious points in its defence. Although an ancient form of historical writing biography nevertheless continues to enjoy popularity, since biographies of both dead and live persons consistently top best seller lists. Popular appeal might be based on the charisma of a particular subject, or the minute but riveting details which a study of a single person is likely to uncover. An eager non-academic audience might go some way towards explaining the dismissal of the genre within the academy. However, biographies also offer more scholarly attractions. Ludmilla Jordanova has drawn attention to biography's ability to 'cut across arbitrary divisions', citing it as one of only two genres of historical writing which offer 'holistic history'.² Potentially the most helpful of the arbitrary divisions which biography has the potential to traverse for early modern Scottish history is its capacity to provide an alternative approaches to existing periodisation. This might seem counter-intuitive, since periodisation by reign or dynasty, in essence, by the death dates of monarchs, remains one of the most common ways of carving up the past, and biography itself is open to critiques on the grounds of its short-term perspective.³ However, selecting a subject with alternative birth and death dates offers the chance to explore a different type of periodisation which nonetheless retains a clear logic. As a helpful example of how this might work in practice, let us take James Hamilton, second earl of Arran and duke of Châtellherault, c.1519-1575, a biography of whom featured on Keith Brown's recent list of desiderata for the field.⁴ A

¹ David Nasaw, 'Historians and Biography', *American Historical Review* 114 (2009), pp. 573-578 at p. 573.

² Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2006), p. 41

³ For such critiques: Michael Hopkinson, 'Biography and Irish History' in A. Blackstone and E. Magennis (eds), *Political and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland 1750-1850* (Belfast, 2007), pp. 194-208 at p. 194.

⁴ Keith Brown, 'Early Modern Scottish History – A Survey' *SHR* XCII supplement 234, (2013), pp.5-24 at p. 23.

biographical study of Arran would provide us with insight into the life of someone whose eleven-year rule of Scotland was over double the length of, and more than twice as effective than, that of the biographer's darling Mary, Queen of Scots. More broadly still, the period 1514-1559 remains understudied, so a biography of Arran would mark a significant foray into uncharted territory.

However, properly framed and executed, a study of Arran's life, or even, if sources for his early life were lacking, his political career, could make a more profound methodological contribution by intervening in emerging debates surrounding periodisation and the appropriateness of the Reformation Rebellion as the marker between 'medieval' and 'early modern' Scotland.⁵ Any biographer of Arran would be forced to pass this chronological road block. A chapter might stop or start in 1559 or 1560 (although which of the two and when exactly the division would fall are in themselves provoking questions). However, the book as a whole would have to cross the 1560 break point, whilst covering parts of the reigns of James V and James VI, and the entirety of that of Mary, Queen of Scots. Such a study would have the potential to ask new questions of the period as a whole based on the fresh chronological perspective. Arran's brother-in-law and lifelong antagonist, James Douglas, earl of Morton (c.1516-1581) offers another case in point. Unlike Arran, Morton's regency has received specific attention in the form of G. R. Hewitt's *Scotland Under Morton*. Because this study focused on Morton's prime, the period between 1572 and 1581 when either as regent or as the senior member of the governing elite, rather than his life, it was not able to contribute to the wider questions of periodisation which a biography would have had the scope to address. The list could go on. Just adding the names of two more men William Keith, third earl Marshall (1510-81), and George Buchanan (1506-1582), however, is perhaps sufficient to raise a speculative possibility that during the late 1570s and early 1580s a generational shift took place in Scottish politics. The idea of a generational shift has proven influential in the context of England in the 1590s in offering an explanation for the changing political culture of the late Elizabethan regime.⁶ This is not intended to imply that Scottish historians should borrow this particular English model, or even to make the case that such a generational shift did indeed take place c.1575-81. After all, one could equally point to the three related assassinations of James Stewart, earl of Moray, Archbishop John Hamilton and Matthew Stewart, earl of Lennox, all of which took place in 1570-1, followed by the natural deaths of John Erskine, earl of Mar, in 1572 and Archibald Campbell, fifth earl of Argyll, in 1573, to claim that 1570-3 was also marked by considerable turnover amongst the Scottish elite. Either thesis would

⁵ For a stimulating contribution to these issues see: Mairi Cowan, 'In the Borderlands of Periodization with "The blythnes that hes bein": The medieval /early modern boundary in Scottish history', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 143 (2012), pp. 142-175.

⁶ J. A. Guy (ed.) *The reign of Elizabeth I: court and culture in the last decade* (Cambridge, 1995).

require more research to prove. Rather, this point is made to highlight the type of new perspectives that biographical studies, singly and collectively, could offer on the issue of periodisation.

Within such studies, as Jordanova's discussion of 'holistic history' acknowledges, biography also offers exciting possibilities for interdisciplinarity within the discipline: encompassing the many facets of an individual life could force investigation into the fields of political and gender history, gaining knowledge of educational systems and the laws of property and marriage, or understanding the economics of estate management and neo-Latin poetics alike, to name but a few. Specifically, in terms of the present volume, as McOmish demonstrates, understanding the life of Sir Thomas Craig requires not only an appreciation of his professional activities in relation to the law and an understanding of the kin and commercial networks of Edinburgh, but also a knowledge of astronomy and the community of astronomers of which he was a part. Moreover, it ought to be more widely acknowledged amongst those who remain sceptics about the genre that biography is one of the basic tools of the historical trade. Asking who an author was and why they might write, in other words, an awareness of their biography, is as any schoolchild can tell you, one of the fundamentals of source analysis.⁷ Beyond that, the current fashion for memory as a subject of historical study, and, before that, the trend for self-fashioning, means that an awareness of a person's actual life situation, and identifying and explaining gaps between the facts of a person's life and their self-image as projected to the world at large, is an increasingly prevalent historical concern for which the gathering of accurate biographical details is essential.

With that in mind, it is now time to turn to the scepticism surrounding biography in greater detail. Why is it that 'graduate students are warned away from writing biographies as their dissertations. Assistant professors are told to get tenure and promotion before taking on a biography'?⁸ David Nasaw, who introduced the 2009 biography-themed special edition of the *American Historical Review* made those observations in context of the academic job market in the United States, but they ring equally true on this side of the Atlantic, and have a venerable, and wide-ranging, pedigree.⁹ Four main criticisms of biography are rehearsed repeatedly. First, that as a genre, biography continues to ensure that dead white elite men (and occasional sexually attractive, romantically doomed, white elite women) dominate historical accounts. Clearly, biographies can only be written if sufficient source materials survive, and more source materials appertaining to the lives of individual elite males exist than other groups of people. Equally clearly, biography is not the only genre of historical writing constrained by precisely this balance within the sources. Therefore, this critique more properly relates to subject matter than to genre. As Margaret Sanderson's

⁷ Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingtoke, 2010), p. 25.

⁸ Nasaw, 'Historians and Biography', p. 573.

⁹ For an overview of this: Caine, *Biography and History*, pp. 11, 18-19.

biographies of the merchant and money-lender Janet Fockart, the tailor Patrick Nimmo, and other humble folk showed, life-studies of individual members of the lower orders are not only possible but can enhance our understandings of the communities in which these men and women lived, worked, and died.¹⁰ Indeed, the individuals considered in the following essays although of a slightly higher status than some of those discussed by Sanderson nevertheless are also drawn from outside the usual pool of biographical subjects. They range from those who hovered on the edges of the elite, but remained outside its absolute core, to those whose business placed them somewhere in those nebulous realms of the middling sort. The male nobles in this collection are Sir James MacDonald, a highland chief who remained at a distance from lowland society and Sir William Keith, a bastard son – a second bastard son at that – made good through perspicacity. Indeed, the example of a highland chieftain in this collection points up the shaking foundations upon which the critique of biography as privileging a certain sort of historical subject rests: MacDonald was a member of the elite of highland society, but highland society as a whole endured the spectrum of denigration to oppression. Although in a highland context MacDonald was a member of the elite, in the broader context of the Scottish elite he occupied a more marginal position. Moreover, these studies confirm biography's potential to move much further down the social scale. Notaries, one of whom is examined here, were certainly not 'elite' in any conventional sense, and do not usually receive biographies, although lawyers, one of whom we shall also meet, occasionally do. The fact that no study of a woman's life is included here is, of course, indicative of how much further there is still to go. Nevertheless, biographies of women are gradually growing in number, especially those of women who left an extensive body of written work behind them. Reflecting on the production of the first biographical dictionary of Scottish women, Sue Innes bluntly concluded that 'if you are a woman who wants to be remembered, write a book'.¹¹ Given the literary output and vast correspondence of the lawyer included here, Sir Thomas Craig, this advice might perhaps be extended to apply to other social groups and types of writing: if you want a biography, create and curate your own archive.

An observation made by Barbara Caine in another context also challenges the misapprehension that biography inherently favours elite white men. Caine observed the significance of biography as a form of historical writing for feminist and black histories during the periods when those fields were emerging disciplines, whilst emphasising such biographies were approached from a substantially different perspective to previous studies of 'great men'.¹² Indeed, whilst 'uncovering the life-stories of women forebearers' has been identified as a key motivating consideration of early

¹⁰ Margaret Sanderson, *Mary Stewart's People* (Edinburgh, 1987).

¹¹ Sue Innes, 'Reputations and Remembering: Work on the First Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women', *Scottish Studies Review* 6 (2005), pp. 101-11.

¹² Caine, *Biography and History*, p. 24.

women's history, the same concern to document individual lost lives is not so prominent in more recent areas of research, for instance, on the broader concepts of 'femininity' or 'masculinity'.¹³ A connection between biography and new fields of history could be explained as fulfilling a political need for role models, but it could equally arise from the lack of an established narrative or clear periodisation around which to structure studies, or the lack of a broader historiographical context in which to situate thematic approaches. When the boundaries of periodisation have not yet been established, an individual life provides clear bookends for a study.

Secondly, biography is identified as problematic when it takes a hagiographical approach, penned to justify and exalt an adored subject.¹⁴ This particular problem relates to the broader issue of historical intimacy. One of biography's defining features has been the sense of intimacy – either with subject in particular or period in general – which such studies are able to provoke.¹⁵ Again, properly examined, this is not a problem intrinsic to biography, but to any type of poor history, and even those who criticise the potential of biography to veer towards hagiography acknowledge that this is not an inevitable outcome.¹⁶ An author's need to get close to a subject, to get under their skin, perhaps, gives rise to a specific (and very sensibly-grounded) scepticism towards psychobiography, arising from the obvious fact that 'Neither historians nor biographers are usually trained professionals in the behavioural sciences'.¹⁷

Thirdly, critics raise concerns that in biographies individuals are unrealistically isolated from their family, society, profession or other appropriate context. The fourth criticism is closely related to this, namely, a scepticism surrounding what a study of a 'great man' (isolated, presumably, from his context), could tell us about a wider society or indeed historical change? Both these critiques are present, for instance, in the observation that biography concerns 'only one individual', or that biographical studies can be defined as works that take 'the individual as the only intellectual and analytical centre of the argument'.¹⁸ Clearly, good biographies could accomplish both, and a general pattern only has meaning if it is drawn from the type of individual studies that a biography can provide. This, of course, is not a novel point, since it lies implicitly behind Carlyle's remark that 'History...is the essence of innumerable biographies', and emerges more prominently in more recent

¹³ Lois W. Banner, 'Biography as History', *American Historical Review* 114 (2009), pp. 579-586 at p. 579.

¹⁴ Hopkinson, 'Biography and Irish History', pp.194, 196.

¹⁵ Barbara Caine, 'Biography and the question of historical distance', in M. S. Philips, B. Caine, and J. Audley-Thomas, *Rethinking Historical Distance* (Basingstoke, 2013). p. 65.

¹⁶ Hopkinson, 'Biography and Irish History', pp. 194, 196, 202-3.

¹⁷ Shirley A. Leckie, 'Biography Matters: Why Historians Need Well-Crafted Biographies More than Ever', in L. E. Ambrosius (ed.), *Writing Biography: Historians and their Craft* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 2004), pp.1-26 at p.3

¹⁸ Banner, 'Biography as History', at p.580; Judith M. Brown, 'Life Histories and the History of Modern South East Asia', *American Historical Review* 114 (2009), pp. 587-595, p.587.

efforts to show how one individual can expose the wider circumstances in which she or he lived.¹⁹ However, the idea that a biography can only tell us a limited story, about one person, is perhaps particularly worth pausing over in the context of Scottish history: whilst Caeldonophobic views are increasingly rare, outdated prejudices that the study of Scotland's past is somehow an antiquarian pursuit do occasionally resurface. Given this possible prejudice, Scottish historians who choose to write in a genre which itself is open to dismissal on the grounds of its narrowness or lack of broader relevance are potentially going to have to work doubly hard to convince cynics of the validity of their studies.

Let us now turn to biography in early modern Scottish history and the essays included in this volume. Of the 170 monographs on early modern Scotland published between 1993 and 2013 surveyed by Brown in the 2013 'state of the discipline' edition of the *Scottish Historical Review*, ten were either biographies or, to avoid being too weighed down by definitions, contained a strong biographical element.²⁰ This represents six per cent over the overall monograph output identified by Brown, which seems relatively healthy for any one genre. These healthy numbers seem to reflect a trend already identified in other fields including, for instance, French history and intellectual biography, that the turning away from biography during the 1970s and 1980s has been followed by a considerable revival of interest in biographical studies since the turn of the century.²¹ The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, in which many Scots featured, was certainly part of the wider biographical turn, likewise, the *Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*.²² Perhaps the present collection is a sign that early modern Scottish history is experiencing its own biographical turn. This biographical turn has coincided with, and may be related to, the increasing scholarly interest in life

¹⁹ Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous essays* (Philadelphia, 1845), p. 312; Caine, *Biography and History*, p. 3.

²⁰ Brown, 'Early Modern Scottish History', pp. 9-17. These are, in order of appearance in Brown: J. Cameron, *James V. The Personal Rule, 1528-1542* (East Linton, 1998); C. Edington, *Court and Culture in Renaissance Scotland. Sir David Lindsay of the Mount* (Amhurst, 1994); J. A. Guy, *My Heart is My Own: the Life of Mary Queen of Scots* (London, 2004). R. K. Marshall, *Queen Mary's Women: Female Relatives, Servants, Friends and Enemies of Mary Queen of Scots* (Edinburgh, 2006); K. P. Walton, *Catholic Queen, Protestant Patriarchy: Mary Queen of Scots and the Politics of Gender* (New York, 2006); J. E. A. Dawson, *The Politics of Religion in the Age of Mary, Queen of Scots. The Earl of Argyll and the Struggle for Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2002); A. I. MacInnes, *The British Confederate: Archibald Campbell, Marquess of Argyll, c.1607-1661* (Edinburgh, 2011); . M. Lee, *The Heiresses of Buccleuch. Marriage, Money and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (East Linton, 1996); R. C. Paterson, *King Lauderdale: the Life of John Maitland, Second Earl and Only Duke of Lauderdale* (East Linton, 2003). I would add to this list the surprisingly omitted: P. Ritchie, *Mary of Guise in Scotland, 1548-1560: a political career* (East Linton, 2002).

²¹ Liana Vardi, 'Rewriting the Lives of Eighteenth-Century Economists', *American Historical Review* 114 (2009), pp. 652-661, p. 652; M. H. Halcohen, 'Rediscovering Intellectual Biography - and Its Limits History of Political Economy' 39 (2007), pp. 9-39, p. 9; Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingstoke, 2010), p. 1.

²² Elizabeth L. Ewan, Sue Innes, Sian Reynolds and Rose Pipes (eds), *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women* (Edinburgh, 2005); See also the helpful introduction to the project: Sue Innes, 'Reputations and Remembering: Work on the First Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women', *Scottish Studies Review*, 6:1 (2005) 101-11.

writings which naturally encompasses explicitly autobiographical material. Just as biography has expanded as a genre to encompass new subjects, so the definition of 'life writing' has grown to allow the study of a wider range of individuals.²³ Although there has been some interest in Scottish life writings, to date in an early modern British Isles context this has been mainly directed towards early modern England, with a particular interest in early modern women's life writings.²⁴

What then do these essays reveal about the Scotland of James VI? Perhaps most strikingly, the Scots discussed in this volume emerge as firmly European, closely connected to the neighbouring countries of France, England and further afield. In this, they reflect the previous generation of Scots examined by Margaret Sanderson, whose biographies of men and women from throughout the social scale revealed the intimate connections they enjoyed with the continent, even down to the imported fabric from which their garments were sewn.²⁵ Since Sanderson wrote, of course, these wider continental links have become a growth research area, so it is unsurprising to see this concern emerge here. Most obviously, Miles Kerr-Peterson's subject, the courtier Sir William Keith, served as ambassador to England, developing intimate relations within the English court, to Flanders and to Venice, visiting Norway with James VI. Keith's forays south of the border and across the seas were, although more extensive than those of the other individuals discussed in this volume, hardly unique. Sir James MacDonald, as Ross Crawford reveals, travelled not only to Ireland but to exile communities in the Low Countries. The Glasgow notary Archibald Hegate likewise travelled for religious purposes, although his visit to Rome was not an exile. Hegate's travel, combined with his membership of a kin-network spanning both France and Scotland and contact with continental Jesuits, as Paul Goatman's study shows, likewise reveals a life lived in a network of close connections between Scotland and the outside world. The advocate Sir Thomas Craig's correspondence with the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe was, as David McOmish's examination reveals, part of a web of international intellectual connections which mirror those of Archibald Hegate's elder brother, William, a professor at the University of Poitiers.

The extent to which Scotland remained in a state of dynamic tension in the aftermath of religious schism is another area which obviously stands out. The dynamic tension which existed between the Catholic MacDonald and James VI offers an intriguing counterpart to the better-known

²³ Patrick Coleman, 'Introduction: life writing and the legitimation of the modern self', in P. Coleman, J. Lewis and J. Kowalik (eds), *Representation of the Self from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 1-15 at p. 1; M. M. Dowd and J.A.Eckerle, *Genre and Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2007), pp.2-4.

²⁴ G. D. Mullan, *Women's life writing in early modern Scotland: writing the Evangelical self, c.1670-c.1730* (Aldershot, 2003); G. D. Mullan, *Narratives of the Religious Self in Early Modern Scotland* (Farnham, 2010). For an overview of a number of recent works on England see: M. M. Dowd and J. A. Ekerle, 'Recent studies in early modern English life writing', *English Literary Renaissance* 40:1 (2010) pp. 132-162.

²⁵ Sanderson, *Mary Stewart's People*, p. 2.

friendship between this Protestant Prince and the Catholic earl of Huntly, highlighting shifts between de facto toleration, rebellion, and religious exile. This is reflected in the changing situation in Glasgow with the degree of religious tolerance extended within the city being dictated by shifts in crown policy – the sort of de facto toleration revealed here emerges equally in Craig’s life, where a prominent man of law maintained very close connections to a number of Catholic families. In this, the essays here contribute to broader emerging arguments that the Reformation in Scotland was not a swift conversion but a ‘gradual, complex’ process, which took many years before securing ‘Reformed success’.²⁶

Some, although not all, of these lives also speak to the still hotly contested subject of the growth of the Scottish state.²⁷ The power of the crown is clearly visible in the fact that Hegate responded to crown orders, not those of the Kirk, likewise in the fact that MacDonald witnessed the final death throes of the idea of the lordship of the Isles, and in Keith’s membership of a group of ‘new men’ working as a new layer between nobility and king, forging chains of connection from Edinburgh to Buchan. In all of these, central government’s ambition is clear – it is equally clear, however, is that this was not part of a co-ordinated programme. The extent to which these efforts enjoyed success is equally obscure. At a very simple level, taken together these essays demonstrate that imprisonment was only sporadically effective in late sixteenth-century Scotland: a high proportion of the individuals discussed in this volume spent part of their career as jailbirds who successfully flew the prison walls! Of course the bonds of kin and blood also ran through these studies alongside the presence of the muscular, albeit still aspirant, state. Categorically, however, these familial structures of influence were not an alternative to royal power: they overlapped, interacted and operated in tandem. Moreover, kinship’s influence appears here to be ambivalent. Whilst MacDonald’s kin occupied a major portion of his recorded activities, for instance, these relations were, often as not, fractured rather than fraternal. Likewise, family activity formed a constant background to Hegate’s business, but does not seem to have taken the foreground – arguably his circle was one of faith as much as blood. Interestingly, kinship seems to have emerged as a deciding factor only once Keith had begun to make his own way in the world. His family did not strategically place this low-value illegitimate son, and the great lords of his family only appreciated his potential once he himself had worked to establish a position.

To conclude, these studies together help to confirm broader emerging trends in early modern Scottish historiography, whilst offering insight into both individual lives and particular circumstances, ranging from those of international significance (such as Keith’s role in the

²⁶ John McCallum, *Reforming the Scottish Parish: the Reformation in Fife, 1560-1640* (2010), p. 10.

²⁷ For the most thorough examination of the state in this period: Julian Goodare, *State and Society in early-modern Scotland* (Oxford, 1999); Julian Goodare, *The Government of Scotland: 1560-1625* (Oxford, 2004).

negotiations surrounding the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots) to fine-grained new perspectives on fraught local contexts (such as the struggle for control of the religious predilections of the inhabitants of Glasgow). In the example of Keith's involvement in the circumstances which led to Mary, Queen of Scots execution the value of an approach closely focused on a particular life is amply demonstrated since it brings a new perspective missed by studies taking a broader approach. These are emphatically twenty-first century biographies, in both their eschewal of 'great men' for their subject matter, and, most of all, in their careful contextualisation of the individual in their broader circumstances which takes their interest far beyond that of an individual life.