BIOGRAPHY AND HISTORY: REFLECTIONS OF A BIOGRAPHER-HISTORIAN

ABSTRACT

"Biography, claims Peter Waite, is at the core of history." In this essay, the author demonstrates – and this through the sharing of some of his personal experiences as a biographer – that the personal is indeed thoroughly intertwined with the social and the political. Any historical account of great men and women must consider those moments and events in human life which induce the sometimes harsh, sometimes subtle changes in character, changes which then go on to alter the course of history. Waite convinces us that "one's preoccupation with the private man or woman" may be "an insidious delight," but it very well may justify the "invasion of privacy by flaunting the banner of historical truth."

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Much history is written and taught as if it were a set of abstractions, movements, forces, trends, conflicts. The epitome is the *Annales* school in France which likes computer studies of micro-biography, a kind of double helix, programming analyses vertically through two or three generations, or horizontally across a census. These are legitimate enough; the problem with them is their dehumanization of history, a surfeit of method for a minimum of life. Recent French critics have called it "l'émiettement de l'histoire," the crumbling away of history into separate, discrete bits, devoid of holistic meaning.

For there are no movements, no forces, no trends, none that is apart from men and women. They make the movements, the forces, the trends. They are society. They may behave differently as individuals, or pairs, or groups, or crowds; psychology and sociology try to answer such questions and history must take account of them. But there can be no history without men and women. Mostly they leave no records; the great challenge to the historian is to chronicle honestly those who do, with all the evidence one can gather, all the skill one can bring to bear. It's a great enterprise to try to recover something of the past, its charm, its brutality, certainly its character, long or newly gone.

Biographies make the very stuff and texture of history. Sometimes writing a biography is thought to be easy; there are no rules; biography is whatever those who do it think it is. It is much easier than writing fiction; it requires no invention, artistic or any other kind. The plot is made to order: the subject was born, educated, married, worked and died. Anyone can do biography.

In the English-speaking world there is probably a consensus of what a good biography ought to be. It ought to make sense of its subject. It ought to be written with Emerson's principle, that "words, when cut, should bleed." Most important of all, it ought to be a metamorphosis of the evidence, all the evidence. The private man or woman informs the public one. They explain each other. As to what evidence may be used, there is really no option: one must use all of it. Presiding over that use has to be historical discipline. You don't cook the evidence; you don't twist it; you don't invent it. Lytton Strachey has a delicious story in *Eminent Victorians* about General Gordon going into his tent with a Bible and a bottle of brandy, emerging visibly inspired by the latter. A very doubtful yarn that; Strachey thought it too good to omit. On the other hand, Strachey's description of the genre of biography he was trying to supplant has relevance:

> Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead–who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design ? They are as familiar as the cortege of the undertaker, and wear the same air of slow, funereal barbarism.[1]

Selection of evidence will tend to colour the result. J.A. Froude wrote a masterly life of Thomas Carlyle whom he knew well. In it Jane Carlyle is portrayed as a sensitive, misunderstood wife, dominated by an unfeeling husband. Elizabeth Drew, writing 40 years later, found Jane rather shrewish; Thomas Carlyle, the hard genius of the Froude portrait, was gentle and long-suffering under a good

deal of domestic provocation. Both authors had used genuine letters, none had cooked the quotations. What happened was selection, dictated in Froude's case by his being half in love with Jane Carlyle; Elizabeth Drew, 40 years distant from all that, was more attracted to Thomas.

The discovery of new evidence has its own delights. One of the great Fathers of Confederation was George Brown, a tall, raw-boned Free Kirk Scot, who in 1844 founded the *Toronto Globe*. He came to us graduate students of the early 1950s as an unlovely covenanter, whose vast energy was given mainly to querulousness and anti-Catholicism. His constructive role in the Confederation seemed best explained as aberration. Then in 1955 came the discovery in Scotland of the Brown Papers. Brown had long been a bachelor, but in 1862 when he was 41 he met and married Anne Nelson of the Edinburgh publishing house. Head over heels in love with her, Brown wrote his new wife constantly and from those marvellous letters emerged not just a more complete Brown, but because more complete, different: loving, cheerful, even friendly. Indeed one Canadian historian suggested that the famous portrait of the Fathers of Confederation should be improved to include the "Mother" of Confederation, Anne Nelson Brown, so much had George Brown's marriage done for his amiability, personal *and* political.[2]

Analogous questions arise with Mackenzie King's diary, which surfaced after his death in 1950. Written through the years 1893-1950, there are a million words of it. What should one do with some parts of it? Does the biographer belong in bedrooms? With diaries and letters one can get there. MacGregor Dawson, King's first official biographer, faced that problem. What should he do with King's night adventures in Toronto with late and accessible ladies? Or King's agonizing afterward? Dawson simply omitted any reference to such episodes. Anyone who knew Dawson knew he was not prudish; one has to recall the context of the late 1950s when a frank disclosure of King's nocturnal affairs would have been shocking. The times can determine not only what one *can* say, but what one can *want* to say. Honest as he was, Dawson therefore called his 1959 volume of Mackenzie King "a political biography." C.P. Stacey, 14 years later in *A Very Double Life*, was less prudish and was also writing with a fairly well-developed animus.[3]

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The problem is more serious when one is dealing with someone who has died recently, whose friends, relations, especially wives or husbands, are still around to judge or be deeply offended by the truth. William Allen White's advice to biographers was, "First, kill the widow !" That one ought not to seriously harm the living is a proposition right to assert. But what is harm ? Families do not always like to see family truth in cold print. The choice may be between keeping on good terms with the friends and relations of the subject and so failing one's duty, or taking the more ruthless position, risking anger and anguish in the belief that the honesty of the portrait is in the long run its own reward.

Perhaps one might illustrate from experience. The University of British Columbia wanted a biography of its famous President Larry MacKenzie (1944-1962). He was born in Nova Scotia in 1894 and died in Vancouver in 1986. He was very much alive in 1976 when the biography was being considered. When we met I said to him, "If UBC and you want hagiography, you won't get it from me. There are people who can do it but I'm not one. I would have to write you as I see the evidence." Larry was cheerful and irreverent. "I don't give a damn what you write."[4]

He had a huge run of papers, 200 feet of shelf space in the UBC Archives, and they comprehended both the public and the private man. Among them was a fat bundle of letters in an attractive square-cut hand, from a young woman whom he met when he was in Geneva in 1925-6. She was Mary Alice ("Polly") Duggan of New York, her father a professor of International Law. She was abroad perfecting her French and German. Polly was 22 years old, beautiful, brilliant. Her mind came at one like ringing steel. Larry was 31 years old, an age when love, like measles, starts to hit harder. Larry kept everything from her pen, even delicious late night notes. "I'm free tomorrow evening Friday, and you can have it all if you want. I *hope* you do." Or, "Larry dear–It's such a lovely night–Come & walk with me...whistle in the road next to the garden...My light will be off. Love P."[5] Ere long Larry offered marriage; to that Polly hesitated for an agonizing year, then said no. In 1928 she married someone else. As soon as he knew of her marriage, Larry, now a young professor of International Law at the University of Toronto, married Margaret Thomas. Larry and Polly each married others. Within a year Polly was regretting it. Perhaps they both were. It was not easy for Margaret Thomas either. One day, a year after they were married when Margaret was pregnant with their first child, she came across that bundle of Polly letters. Her letter chiding Larry is noble, in some ways devastating. "Why didn't you tell me about Polly?" she asked, "Now I know why you have not really loved me." *That* letter too is in Larry's unique archives.[6]

Larry and Polly continued corresponding for years and met from time to time. It was kept respectable but nothing could alter what they had had between them, an elegiac sense of Geneva, of *temps perdu*, of what might have been. Margaret had once read all Polly's letters; she knew they were in the UBC Archives. She did not like it. She did not much like me either. Larry didn't care. He was determined that his love for Polly would be remembered. For her part Polly was surprised and pained when she discovered she was to be mixed up in Larry's biography. She had

destroyed his letters to her; she thought Larry had destroyed hers. But he hadn't; he simply couldn't do it.

I needed her permission to publish any of her letters. She was adamant. "The truth of that love affair between Larry and me was, and is, my business and Larry's, not yours, and certainly not the public's. It is private and should stay private." I got around Polly's refusal in an odd way. Larry vividly remembered a late night meeting with Polly at a hotel in Dijon. She was distraught and in tears over the failure of some earlier love affair and he spent the night consoling her. It was an incident that said much about Larry's fundamental decency to say nothing of his self-control. I wanted that incident and had Larry's permission. Polly was revolted by the idea. She and I came to a *modus vivendi*: she would allow me to publish extracts from her notes and letters on one condition: that nothing be said of the Dijon story.[7]

But what is the biographer's duty? As I see it, it was to tell the truth, *coute que coute*. But how much of the truth? Did I have the right to cut into confidences, tenderness, sadness, for the sake of history or, to put another slant on it, to gratify some prurient taste of the public ? One answer could have been that Larry's private life had nothing to do with his career, with his professional work in International Law or his presidencies of University of New Brunswick or of UBC. By this argument biography need deal with personal life only insofar as essential to explain public actions. Is one's preoccupation with the private man or woman an insidious delight, justifying invasion of privacy by flaunting the banner of historical truth ? Was Polly right after all ?

There may be no final answer. It might depend on the man or woman. Larry was thought by some UBC colleagues to be largely devoid of emotion. Polly's opinion was quite different. Was it possible that the failed 1925-1927 love affair had numbed Larry emotionally? And how to get to the bottom of *that* ? One afternoon in Vancouver we'd been at his home talking; the house was quiet; Margaret was out. If ever I were to broach a truly awkward question it was now. "Look," I said to him, "tell me to go to hell and you won't answer this. But let me put it anyway. The result of the 1927 break-up between you and Polly was that, sturdy Pictou County Scot that you were, you took yourself in hand, battened down the hatches and drove your ship onward into the future, knowing you never could, never would, feel the same way about any other woman. Polly was everything. Isn't that what happened?"

Larry stared at me as if stunned. I had got well past his guard. The question had hit where it hurt. And it was such a splendid, such a glorious hurt! He didn't answer at once. Almost shyly in a low, husky voice, he said, "That's about it." The sadness of it caught one's breath.

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One of the more difficult things to discern in history, in biography, is this juxtaposition of appearance and reality. R.B. Bennett was a confident, clever, capable, tough prime minister. But in 1932 at age 62 he writes to Hazel Colville, the lady he had fallen in love with, "I really am just a poor weak emotional man, hungry for a sight of you." Was he so? A man in love at age 62 can be full of illusions. The world is full of illusions. Appearances are the most fertile source of any. And "the play of the contingent and the unforeseen" makes history into poker with deuces wild.[8]

Change is exceedingly awkward, whether induced by chance or design. We all change; on the outside we know we do; on the inside we may think we don't; that if our lives are multifarious, our perception of ourselves may seem roughly consistent. But we change all the time. Some know it. After the death of his Halifax-born wife in 1913, W.J. Alexander (1855-1944), Professor of English at Dalhousie and Toronto, wrote a memoir of Laura Morrow Alexander for their nine children:

> Our children are growing out of her knowledge; if she could come back she would feel the shock of change; we should have to explain things to her. All this is very sad to me. I read her letters & that old life seems so remote; I feel as if I were then another person. Memory is a terribly poor substitute for the actual...I do not care how much we value what we have, we have no measure to tell how much it means to us until it is lost.[9]

Henry James used to say that biography was nothing unless it portrayed the subject's growth and change, "since it was by these things they themselves lived."[10]

I had a dramatic illustration of change working on Larry MacKenzie. I had written a chapter describing the mature Larry MacKenzie, the UBC President 1944-1962. It was based on many interviews with him and with colleagues at UBC who had known him. I was pleased; so were the UBC people whom I'd asked to read it.Then, greatly daring, I sent it to Polly then in Ireland. "Who is it ?" she wrote, "I don't recognize him. It isn't the man I knew in Geneva in 1925 and 1926. *He* was quite different. He was diffident, uncertain, a man going places in the world perhaps, but without the guile and the vanity you have given him in this chapter." She was right. My portrait of Larry was drawn from the later years of his presidency and my own interviews with him 15 years further on. I may have portrayed UBC's MacKenzie of the 1940s and 1950s, but not Polly's of the 1920s.

Historical documents, letters, diaries, do not usually give any sense of this. A great biography should try to show

the evolving and lambent lights of memory, regret, joy, a sense perhaps elegiac of life passing. It is not easy. Evidence is found in little corners, in the interstices of other seemingly more important things. For example, Sir John Thompson's father left Waterford, Ireland in 1827 for North America, ending up in Halifax. He never returned to Ireland. He lived in Halifax for the rest of his life and died there in 1867. There is no evidence that he was not content and some that indeed he was. The answer turned up in a letter of Sir John Thompson's 22 years later. "I envy you, " wrote Sir John to James Gowan, "your visit to Waterford– a place which has a strong hold on my heart because of all the sadness I used to see in my father's face when he spoke of it."[11]

We have no option but to try to understand a man's or a woman's inner life. We can't of course and so must wear garments of uncertainty and humility, but we have to try. Mark Twain thinks we are fools. We can't know:

His real life is led in his head...His acts and his words are merely the visible thin crust of his world...The mass of him is hidden–it and its volcanic fires that toss and boil, and never rest, night nor day. These are his life, and they are not written, and cannot be written...Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of the man.[12]

Biographies are mere constructions, he said, like the 50-foot brontosaurus in the museum, put together from 600 barrels of plaster and nine old bones. But the nine old bones may be all we have got. We have to cherish them and make what we can of them. Desmond McCarthy in a perceptive sketch of Henry James shows what can be done with a remembered conversation:

> It occurred after a luncheon party of which he [Henry James] had been, as they say, "the life." We happened to be drinking our coffee together, when the rest of the party had moved on to the verandah. "What a charming picture they make," he said, with his great head aslant, "the women there with their embroidery, the..." There was nothing in his words, anybody might have spoken them; but in his attitude, in his voice, in his whole being at that moment, I divined such complete detachment, that I was startled into speaking out of myself. "I can't bear to look at life like that," I blurted out, "I want to be in everything. Perhaps that is why I cannot write, it makes me feel absolutely alone..." The effect of this confession upon him was instantaneous and surprising. He leant forward and grasped my arm excitedly. "Yes, it is solitude. If it runs after you and catches you, well and good. But for heaven's sake don't run after it... It is absolute solitude." And he got up hurriedly and joined the others.[13]

Great biography, Carlyle wrote of Boswell's *Johnson*, is a revocation of destiny; those who were dead are alive; they who were silent speak. Dr. Johnson talks, though the Mitre Tavern was blown up in 1940 and the wine glasses of his dining gone long before that.[14]

Biography is not on the periphery of history. It is in the very middle of it, in the midst of a multifarious, multitudinous, complex past. Biography is men and women in process of being. In German there is a phrase, perhaps Heidegger's, *das Gewordene als Werdendes*, "the having become toward becoming", as I clumsily render it. Biography is at the core of history, indeed a template of the way history happens. It also illustrates, be it asserted despite Tolstoy, the way that individuals make history.

Notes

[1] Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London 1934), viii.

[2] J.M.S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe* 2 vols. (Toronto 1959, 1963). Frank Underhill of the University of Toronto made the observation after the appearance of Careless' second volume on Brown.

[3] R. MacGregor Dawson, *William Lyon Mackenzie King 1874-1923, A Political Biography* (Toronto 1958); C.P. Stacey, *A Very Double Life* (Toronto 1976).

[4] The references to N.A.M. "Larry" MacKenzie are in PBW, *Lord of Point Grey* (Vancouver, 1987), passim.

[5] Ibid. 49; U.B.C. Archives, Norman Archibald MacRae MacKenzie (hereafter NAMM) Papers, 91/7, Polly to NAMM n.d., perhaps Jan. 1926.

[6] Ibid. 74/4, Margaret Thomas MacKenzie to NAMM, Mon. afternoon n.d. [May 1929], printed in *Lord of Point Grey* 67-68. I have here paraphrased the gist of Margaret's letter.

[7] PBW Archive, Halifax. I have compressed the substance of Polly's and my correspondence 1985-1988.

[8] McCord Museum Archives, McGill University, Hazel Colville Papers, R.B. Bennett to Hazel Colville, Sat. [27 Aug. 1932] quoted in PBW *The Loner: Three Sketches of the Personal Life and Ideas of R.B. Bennett 1870-1947* (Toronto 1992), 75. I owe these Bennett letters to the perceptiveness of Pamela Miller and her husband, Dean Carman Miller, of McGill.

The "play of the contingent.." is a famous phrase of H.A.L. Fisher, in the introduction to his History of Europe.

[9] University of Toronto Archives, W.J. Alexander Papers, "Reminiscences", 55.

[10] Leon Edel *Henry James, The Untried Years 1841-1870* (Philadelphia 1953) epigraph.

[11] National Archives, Sir James Gowan Papers, Thompson to Gowan, 30 May 1889.

[12] A.B. Paine, ed., *The Writings of Mark Twain* Vol. XXXVI, *Mark Twain's Autobiography* (New York, 1929), 2.

[13] Desmond McCarthy, "Henry James" in *Portraits* (London 1949), 154.

[14] Thomas Carlyle, "Boswell's Life of Johnson" in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (London, n.d.), IV, 82.