# BIOGRAPHIES IN THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

**ABSTRACT**

Jean Barman makes a case for using biography as a way to teach history to the young, because the genre emphasizes aspects of contemporary culture that youth respond to, such as our culture's infatuation with "personality." She outlines a variety of other advantages that the biographical genre possesses in terms of its utility and validity as a valuable source of historical knowledge.

"Why study the past?" she says. "It's dead and gone. Or, at least, it's old." Old is not good. As a society, we have come to value the young, the hip, the fashionable. We focus on personality, but want our personalities to conform to a fairly narrow set of values. Today's students cannot be faulted for accepting the images all around them as the way to think about their education. We are all complicit.

The dilemma is very real. We cannot pretend it does not exist. Over the past several years, Canadians have reached a consensus on the need for the young to be made more aware of their history and heritage, but we have yet to agree on how to bring this about. We will gain nothing, except for a disgruntled generation of young people, by forcing our view of Canada's history onto students through required courses and texts that respond to our criteria.

If we are to effect change, we must treat the young with respect rather than to impose our preferences on them. We need to explore ways to give meaning to the past that meet students on their own terms. One of these ways is through biographies.

The genre of biography has changed dramatically over the past several decades. Traditionally, biography was a print media recounting the lives of persons the dominant society considered to be important politically or socially. The genre has expanded in three directions. The first seeks to retrieving lives previously unrecognized or undervalued, as with women, persons of colour, and just plain folk. The second considers persons still alive with exploits of interest to others, being biographies-in-process, so to speak. The third disseminates these lives through a greater variety of forms. No longer only published texts, biographies turn up on television, often at a high quality. Almost all of us have watched CBC 'Life and Times' and A&E's 'Biography.' Biographies are also texts in process, as with family histories and genealogies on the web.

Biographies possess several kinds of utility for the teaching of history. First, they take advantage of the general interest in personality. Precisely because biographies are about individuals, they give credibility to the past. At the same time, biographies offer an entryway into larger issues of time and place. Every person's life occurs within a context. Third, because biographies are about life cycles, they permit us to broaden our interpretations of the past to encompass the young on the way to growing old. Fourth and very importantly, biographies possess the potential to return the past to the young.

### Biographies As Giving Credibility to the Past

All of us, old and young, have lives. However distinctive our personalities may be, our lives possess an inherent similarity. We are born, we live, we die. Our students may be convinced they will be forever young, but that does not diminish their awareness of middle and old age through observing their parents, grandparents, and–dare I add?–teachers.

Because biographies speak to individual lives, they possess a certain credibility. Be it a present – day celebrity whose rise to fame is chronicled on television or a prime minister whose career extends to hundreds of pages, their stories are joined by attention to the life cycle. We can relate to the sequence of events. We can identify with the elements of pathos and triumph that mark these lives, just as they do our own.

The conviction that biographies can give credibility to the past has been responsible for an impressive new series of books that do precisely that. When 'The Quest Library' was conceived half a dozen years ago, no one could have predicted its success. The premise was that, for all of the

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interest in multimedia, the young still like to sit down with a good book (and this before the Harry Potter phenomenon). XYZ Publishing of Montreal got it right.

The goal was to publish 24 biographies for young people, each in English and French, of Canadians whose lives have made a difference. Authors were to pay particular attention to giving their subject personality that extends across the life span. Subjects of the volumes appearing so far have combined key politicians like Wilfrid Laurier, William Lyon Mackenzie King, Tommy Douglas, and John Diefenbaker with such agents of change as Frederick Banting, Agnes McPhail, Nellie McClung, and Norman Bethune; public intellectuals like George Grant and Marshall McLuhan; and artists such as Pauline Johnson and Emily Carr. There's also been room for contentious coal mining magnate Robert Dunsmuir, explorers John Franklin and George Mercer Dawson, mountaineer Phyllis Munday, and hockey hero Jacques Plante. As uniformly positive reviews attest, biographies directed toward the young can be a powerful vehicle for giving credibility to the past.

Biographies do not just speak to individual lives, they raise larger issues. Among historians, it is very often the case that our interest in abstract themes and topics becomes so overgeneralized and overtheorized that the average reader, especially the young, simply tunes us out. Integration of the human element gives us a means to achieve our goals that also attracts readers to our texts. Where a person is at the centre, not only do concepts become more accessible, but the course of a human life may well lead into the byways of society, thought, and culture, and thereby to the identification of new themes and issues, which, if viewed in the abstract, might have been overlooked or dismissed as unimportant.

A biographical approach makes sense, not just because of the individual but for the light that person's character and life throws on the larger themes and issues of human existence and on the dynamics and structures of the society at the time. The temptation has been, in some traditional writing at least, to view persons deemed especially important, the Churchills and the Hitlers of the day, as transcending their settings. Structure and agency always interact. This interplay between them is acknowledged in the title of the CBC's 'Life and Times,' entering its eighth session in 2003.

One of the consequences of the turn toward social history has been to draw ordinary people into Canada's past. The emphasis heightens our understanding that all persons, however unimportant they might at first thought appear, reflect and affect larger contexts. I learned this lesson first hand from Jessie and Annie McQueen, daughters in an everyday Maritimes family, whose extensive correspondence will soon be made available on the web by the History Atlantica Project at the University of New Brunswick. Shortly after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1886, the McQueen sisters took the train west to British Columbia to teach. They brought with them not just their belongings, but a Scot Presbyterian rural upbringing consistent with the concept of Canada being expounded in the public domain by the leading men of the day.

Jessie and Annie McQueen were as powerful as their male counterparts, I argue in *Sojourning Sisters* (University of Toronto Press, 2003), in promoting a Canadian identity. Perhaps more so because their acts of kindness and gentle persuasion went largely unchallenged by those around them, Jessie and Annie's story is as much about the making of Canada and about British Columbia becoming part of a nation to which it had previously only nominally belonged, as it is about two individuals. Biographies, be they of persons considered important or not, can open up important themes in Canada's history.

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**Biographies As Returning the Young to the Past**

Biographies offer, thirdly, an opportunity to return the young to the past. We tend to forget that many of the feats we celebrate in Canada's history were accomplished in youth and young adulthood. Life cycles played themselves out differently in past times. Not only did most persons enter the work world much earlier, but they didn't live as long.

One way to return the young to the past it to treat the life cycle as a whole rather than to concentrate on a person's most senior accomplishments. It was not just men with their greater freedom of action historically, but women who often determined from a young age to make life on their own terms. Pauline Johnson was still in her early 20's when she began to perform across Ontario in the mid-1880s, Emily Carr 18 when she headed off from Victoria to art school in San Francisco in 1890. Agnes McPhail was only 31 when, in 1922, she got herself elected to Parliament from Manitoba.

Another way to return the young to the past is through focusing explicitly on that stage in the life cycle. In working with future teachers, I've very successfully

constructed an assignment around three British Columbia classics: Sing Lim, *West Coast Chinese Boy* (Tundra, 1979), Shizuye Takashima, *A Child in Prison Camp* (Tundra, 1971), and Shirley Sterling, *My Name is Seepeetza* (Groundwood, 1992). The books introduce three important aspects of Canada's history–racism toward immigrants from China, the detention of persons of Japanese descent during World War II, and the uses and abuses of residential schools–through the eyes of a child. Each of these books is a semi-fictionalized biography intended for children and young people that my students can take into their own classrooms as entryways to teaching about the past.

**Biographies As Returning the Past to the Young**

It is not sufficient to return the young to the past; we also need to return the past to the young. Just as we each have stories to tell, so do our students, both about themselves and their families and about persons of interest they have never met.

The expansion of biography as a genre makes it particularly accessible to students. They can interview family members on tape, a well-described strategy (see, for instance, Glenn Whitman, "Teaching Students How to Be Historians: An Oral History Project for the Secondary School Classroom," *History Teacher* 33, 4 [2000]: 469-81). Students can delve into context through historical and genealogical materials available on the web. Canada's Digital Collections Program funded by Industry Canada contains a wealth of excellent sites directed toward the young.

End products can be diverse. I recently had a student produce an excellent mini-video interrogating the meaning that the military service held for her father. With his permission, she filmed him attending a memorial service and talked to him at length about his experiences. She read extensively about the actions in which he participated. The end result incorporated photos and documents into a powerful interpretation of one segment of one man's life.

The process of returning the past to the young can be rewarding to them on several levels. As well as coming to understand the interplay of structure and agency in a person's life, they acquire basic research skills. Historian E.H. Carr perceptively observed four decades ago how facts "are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean, and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use – these two facts being, of course, determined by what kind of fish he wants to catch." Carr rightly concluded that, "by and large, the historian will get the kinds of facts he wants" (*What is History?*, 1961, p. 23). The choices that have to be made in retrieving a life, be it of a family member or celebrity, provide an excellent means for students to understand the full extent to which the past, as is the present, is continuously being constructed by all of us, themselves included.

Teaching and learning is a complex, subjective interaction. For all of biographies' strengths, they are not a panacea to teaching about the past. They have to be assessed by the same criteria we apply to all other materials. As we do so, we want to reflect on biographies' utility for giving credibility to the past, raising larger issues, returning the young to the past, and the past to the young.

