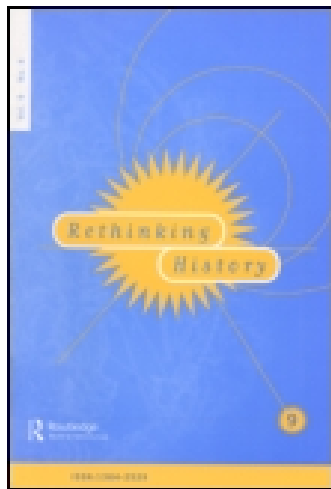


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History and Biography: An Editorial Comment

There is a theme insinuating itself through Volume 7 of *Rethinking History* – that of biography and history – but it is not dedicated exclusively to it. In the next three issues there are a number of articles that address the theme in all its variety, including biography, history and film, but there are also articles and various other features that do not. The reason is practical. Although the call for papers on biography and history in 2001 produced a huge interest, the trajectory between interest and publishable pieces was clearly not smooth. Fortunately, I hope you will agree the other articles in the volume continue to demonstrate the lively and essentially contested nature of the discipline of history. And I trust that David Cannadine’s recent editorial comment in his collection *What is History Now?* (which will be reviewed later in this volume) that ‘far too much history today is written in dismal prose or impenetrable jargon which can only be understood by a few *aficionados* and which fails utterly to reach a broader audience’ cannot possibly apply to our writers (Cannadine 2002: xi). Unfortunately, I think he did have Keith Jenkins and me in mind, as he did reference two of our books when he said it. Unhappily for him (if not for our devotees) both Professor Jenkins and myself do make appearances in this volume. Ho hum.

The full-strength Munslow is my editorial here while Jenkins makes an appearance down the line in issue 7.3, although he is critiqued in this volume but not, I think, by an *aficionado*. But now to business. Before writing this editorial I was concerned about its status. I felt the key theme of the volume required something more than a conventional introduction to this issue. Your editors (Robert Rosenstone and I) have written biographies and have commented on the nature of biography and history. We believe biography is a significant historical genre. Indeed, we tend to believe that it can help us to both unpack and extend the nature of the historical project. But how can it be done? What are the connections between biography and history? What can biography do for history and vice versa?

As we know, the linguistic or narrative turn has confronted history on several fronts. Among many other things it has challenged objective knowing. It has hesitated to accept the gift of transparent discourse, promoting instead the idea of textually generated meaning. It has questioned the surety of causal explanation founded on inference and contextualization. It has doubted the possibility of the distanced and unified knowing subject or self. It challenges correspondence and correlation theories of truth. It has challenged the separation of subject and object. It is sceptical, at a fundamental level, about the persistent appeal to the cognitive priority of content over form.

These challenges suggest to me that the connections between biography and history demand something of a focus on at least two of these areas: the knowledge-creating connection between content (the justified description

reality) and form (representation), and the nature of the subject–object dichotomy (Munslow 1997b: 118–20). Few historians refuse entirely to acknowledge that ‘the past’ is, to some extent, ‘figuratively turned into history’ although most still insist that the verification of evidence generates facts, and facts must equate with knowable reality. It may be helpful by way of general introduction to the theme of Volume 7, however, to run the argument that historians might benefit by emulating the biographer’s self-consciousness about the narratively constituted nature of what he or she does (Nadel 1984: viii).

Of course, a few historians have experimented by deploying biography as a creative form of historical knowing. In this they have effectively deprivileged (but not, of course, done away with) the empirical, by giving fresh emphasis to an intuitive sense of their own aesthetic functioning in the creation of historical knowledge (Nadel 1984: 7). Such self-conscious thinking may be found in the work of James Olney, Ira. B. Nadel, Robert Rosenstone, Steven Weiland, Carolyn Steedman, Luisa Passerini, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Edmund Morris and so on. These biographer-historians deploy history as a representational cultural activity. Indeed, it may not be too fanciful to argue that one possible future for the past is as an increasingly self-reflexive form of biography, perhaps even as a hybrid of the auto-biographical and the historical. This might produce a sort of historical impressionism where history is less a resemblance to than, as Frank Ankersmit (1994) has argued, a narrative substitution for the past.

Now, having said biography may be able to offer fresh aesthetic insights into writing-the-past-as-history, in fact most biographers (not necessarily all those whom we are publishing over the next year), like most historians, are still realists of some kind. While possessing a healthy scepticism about the testimony of evidence, they believe they can write narratives in which the word and the world have an affinity or correspondence. On the other hand, biography remains for many historians an abject form of history. In spite of its referential and verificational standards, biography usually does not satisfy the basic requirements of proper historical thinking. Biography is a kind of ‘history lite’ because it often fails to observe the two basic precepts I noted above.

In other words, the historian’s fear is that in biography objective fact can too often yield priority to the author’s vision of his or her subject (Nadel 1984: 77). Since the advent of the linguistic turn it has become a common argument that historical understanding is more than a sophisticated empiricism, that is, larded with theory. It is, rather, a cultural process mediated by the impositionist and presentist historian through his or her use of figurative language, emplotment decisions, entailments, arguments, cultural positioning, perception, ideology, gender, race and so on (Nadel

1984: 100). While theorists of biography such as Leon Edel agree with the empirical foundation of writing biography, maintaining that the biographer's imagination must 'adhere to the fact, so far as fact can be determined' (Edel 1984: 23), unlike his hard-core reconstructionist historian cousins, Edel recognizes the problem at the heart of the resemblance or correspondence model: How is our knowing both affected and effected by the form of its representation? In other words, Edel is grasping the problematic nature of the connections between subject and object as well as content and form.

For Edel, there are granite facts (taken to be fragments of knowable and discursively independent reality) which the author/historian has to locate in the most appropriate rhetorical form to create meaning. But, following the example of Virginia Woolf, Edel assumes all literary biographers still face the unavoidable struggle of writers working within realist forms of literature to find, as he says, the freedom of fancy (Edel 1984: 25). The issue is here clearly formulated by Edel – one of the most theoretically conservative of biography thinkers – how to devise a narrative best suited to the facts of past reality (Nadel 1984: 103)? Is *the* story to be found or *a* narrative to be imposed? Edel's rather obvious conclusion is that biographers can exercise their imagination but they cannot imagine the materials (Edel 1984: 32–3). From this perspective biography, like history, is a factual discipline dedicated to the pursuit of the truth of reality, and yet its meaning also depends on how the subject and object relationship structures the connection of content and form. A tricky problem?

In spite of Leon Edel's and Ira Nadel's reverence for the facts, the biographer's self-conscious choice of content and form thus remains perplexing for historians. In practice historians infer the connections between events through the evidence of human agency (i.e. people acting with purposive intentionality). This theory permits the 'discovery' of *the* narrative of the past. If you know the archive in which human agency is captured you can infer what happened and you can get *the* story straight (Gallie 1964: 105). But, as the theorist Paul Murray Kendall said over thirty years ago about biography – and perhaps it should be applied to history as well – it is a narrative composition and not the reproduction of the actual structure of events. It is a construction not a reconstruction (Kendall 1965: 25). Both biography and history share the same epistemological nature: both are substitution narratives for what once was.

What historians seem to have then is a choice. A choice between the rational action theory that is assumed to be the essence of proper history thinking and which reveals its given narrative form, and some kind of biographically inspired self-conscious history where form is chosen rather than tracked through the paper trail of a presumed knowable agent intentionality. The former assumes a correspondence of the historian's words and the

historical agent's deeds, whereas the latter can produce a speculative challenge to, if not a disintegration of, this connection. As Ira Nadel argues, through the power of figuration the meaning of the subject's life can be grasped in the symbolism of the plot. This can run the risk of producing the kind of prosopographic and psycho-social history of, for example, Luisa Passerini in her *Autobiography of a Generation, Italy 1968* (Passerini 1996). The scandalous nature of that particular exercise is confirmed when, in the Forward, Joan Scott says Passerini's use of oral history is not to collect facts and not to clarify what happened in the past.

In thus not confining itself to empiricist historical practice, biography compromises the correspondence theory of knowledge by throwing a plateful of discourse if not a pot full of post-structuralist theory into the face of the realist establishment. As Ira Nadel has said, in the twentieth century biography has reasserted its experimentalism, linking itself to fiction rather than to history. As such Passerini's historio-biographical experiment or Edmund Morris' playful biography-cum-history of Ronald Reagan celebrate narrative's inventive potentialities and the variety of representational systems (tropes and emplotments) available. Such works also reinforce the notion, associated with American philosopher William James, that truth is made not discovered and is incidental to what he called the 'mass of verification-experience'; that is, the facts (Nadel 1984: 185).

Now, if we choose to place form on a cognitive par with content, not only are we closer to denying the objectivity of the work of history accepting that every history refers to its author as much as its sources. We get closer to agreeing that it is the historian who 'trans-forms' the past into history through the filter of her own life in the present. The precise nature of this 'trans-formation', the 'creation-of-the-past-as-history-in-the-here-and-now' through the being-knowing connection of each historian is, of course, well understood. That we can readily classify history into several approaches (Marxist, ethnocultural, *Annales*, Freudian, quantitative, sociological) and that we can have several revisions of interpretations using the same evidence makes the continuing popularity of the myth of objectivity in historical explanation all the harder to explain (Green and Troup 1999). This is not, of course, the same as saying that all histories are equally fictitious or meaningless. But it is to say that equating facts with the truth is a dangerous over-simplification of both what is a fact and what is truth.

The formally contrived nature of biography resulting from the recognition that the process of representation is as real as the subject or content thus challenges the extent to which the-past-as-history may be regarded only as an act of objective discovery by the distanced and unified self. Since the Enlightenment and the advent of liberal humanism, Western society has believed that it has benefited from its investment in the realist model, with

knowledge being found in the evidence, as guided by the inference of the objective and distanced knowing self. The corollary is, of course, that the baleful effects of the intrusion of the self – of subjectivity – can of course be avoided through the strict application of empirical method.

All this, I would suggest, is always going to be more than a question of methodology. Unlike in science perhaps, historical method cannot obliterate the historian. As Brenda Marshall has it, the first intellectual principle of the moment is this rethinking of the objective knower (Marshall 1992: 10, 25). Martin Heidegger famously provided the basis for the critique of objectivist history by suggesting that the link between subject and object is not established at the level of knowledge creation. Heidegger argued that our being in the world is prior to knowledge. Before knowing, the human subject already exists (is thrown into) the given real world and all the historian's knowledge/theories, like those of the biographer and novelist, are framed by this, or pre-knowing state of existence. I read this as meaning that historians, in practice, search for and provide the form that best organizes the content of the past. It is what historians do. The measure of what we do then must not only be the data stream but also according to their own wants and the moral needs of their community.

The questioning of the subject and object distinction has in the past decade or so produced many examples of history cast in the form of biography: Robert A. Rosenstone (1988), my own intellectual group biography (1992), Natalie Zemon Davis (1995), Donna Merwick (1999) and, most infamously, Edmund Morris (1999). All of us have explored the collapse of the distanced subject and the subject–object polarity by choosing to experiment with form in the study of our subjects. The work of such author-historians suggests that historical understanding is ultimately the result of the being-in-the-world of both self and subject. This notion confronts the realist position that there must be a distance between subject and object, a distance bridged by the correspondence between the 'facts' and the form whether it be a particular kind of argument, emplotment or ideological position. Biographical experimentalism refuses the representationalist argument that artifice and rhetoric are conditions of presentation rather than research, and that historians in discovering the past are not making history.

Clearly, as important as the paper trail of evidence is the choice of the literary or representational effect within which we choose to cast the event, the life and the process. Arguably, E. P. Thompson's 'rescuing' of the poor stockinger and the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott from the condescension of posterity is the formal creation of an inspirational, wistful but ultimately tragicomic proletarian narrative. It is a matter of the historian's choice of his or her correspondence of chosen word and preferred world. The Thompsonian school, for example, has fostered the pursuit of the real by

equating it with lost lives discovered by the knowing historian for a humanist Marxist purpose (Thompson 1963: 13). It is perfectly legitimate to do this. Making history is about choices not givens, about anticipating the past rather than fondly imagining we can reconstruct it. The evidence quoted in history books is determined by the image of the past already possessed by the historian's own sense of what Shortland and Yeo call a disciplined subjectivity (Shortland and Yeo 1996: 34). In a way this responds to the question of historical truth. It is not to make the tracking down, as Richard Evans says, of the 'last scraps of paper' as the only way to do it, but to create a meaning more complex than the paper trail will allow (Shortland and Yeo 1996: 35).

It behoves the writer, therefore, as Carolyn Steedman has argued, to be upfront and to reveal to the reader that they are aware of what they are about (Steedman 1992: 162). This was, of course, the big sin of Morris who failed to tell the reader that he was deconstructing Reagan. In her 1992 book *Past Tenses* Steedman is candid, telling us what she wants from her biography of Margaret McMillan. She wants it to serve as 'an exploration of the Romantic variant of the form [of biography], in which the biographer seeks a shade of herself in the subject she delineates, in the pages of her book' (Steedman 1992: 163). This illustrates the self-conscious identification of the author with the content of the past through the creation of form.

As Robert Rosenstone has suggested, historical works are 'a record of a subjective encounter between human beings and the residues of the past' (Rosenstone 1988: xii). When that character called the historian enters into this performance of making history he or she will (should?) reflect on the problems of fashioning a narrative explanation, as much as on the gaps in the historical record or the technicalities of verification and colligation. In doing this we place history under the jurisdiction of literature because we are accepting that both operate in the sphere of the design and manufacture of narrative explanations where the conversation is between subject and object. What we end up with is the kind of 'authorised fiction' that Ira Nadel talks about – the imaginative re-presentation of detailed factualism based on the understanding of the biographer of how his or her subject, and for the historian events and processes existed (Nadel 1984: 205). The conclusion is that such biography and history may sacrifice detail and, perhaps, factual accuracy, but not meaning. I would endorse Nadel's conclusion on biography by applying it also to history, that the disclosure of the self is a moral precondition to understanding.

Perhaps Virginia Woolf's analysis of biography applies to history as well. Woolf suggested that biography lives on both sides of the fact-fiction divide. Biography is an impossible amalgam of fact and authored interpretation: granite and rainbow in her imperishable phrase. This view of biography is regularly restated: thirty years ago by Paul Murray Kendall, and again most

recently by Steven Weiland who, in his analysis of Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (Weiland 1999), argued that the biographer actively shapes his or her material. This is done so as to gain the effect of a plausible story that does not do injury to the verifiable available evidence.

Weiland, in his evaluation of Young-Bruehl's biography of Hannah Arendt, says, 'Finding a form to tell Arendt's story . . . means writing a biographical narrative responsive to the peculiarities of her intellectual style' (Weiland 1999: 370). The form also provides Young-Bruehl's signature as a biographer – her management of the rhetoric being demanded, as Weiland says 'by her intentions within a form' (Weiland 1999: 374). Once we reject content as always being anterior to form – as in Young-Bruehl's rhetorical intentions – then much useful intellectual and political space opens up before us for reconceptualizing history and extending its boundaries as a discipline.

The problem, it seems to me, is this: How do we configure past lives, events and processes meaningfully? Is the verification of the evidence of an event enough to demonstrate truthful history? Verifying evidence in order to represent an event is somewhat removed from knowing what it means. Perhaps what historians actually do is look forward to the past by actively creating its form for reasons that are both epistemological and ontological. In other words, to make it useful in the present by devising and experimenting with different rhetorical models by which we can narrate what we think is its meaning. Believing that empiricism is the *only* path to truth might be a limitation on making sense of the past rather than its foundation. Is content alone ever enough? Of course, it would be all too easy for the impositionist historian to twist and bend the lives of individuals in the past to a shape that satisfies her formalistic narrative and rhetorical requirements. But, by the same token, the empiricist commitment to referentiality and factualism does not mean the historian is not inventing and imposing a narrative form for the creation of meaning. History is and always has been about improvisation of form.

The articles that address biography in this volume illustrate the diversity in approaches that are available to historians today in their engagement with the biographical form. In this issue, for example, Judith Zinsser explores how the marquis du Châtelet's life offers novel epistemological opportunities for the historian. Zinsser approaches her subject's life within this anticipatory mode, indicating how the past can be interwoven legitimately with the present, and the effective bringing together of subject and author in the creation of a particular life history. Piers Smith's troping of Sultan Omar Ali Saffudin II of Brunei and his relationship with Sir James Brooke breaks out of conventional structures usually applied to the history of colonialism. Once again we have an innovative illustration of the anticipatory mode of historical thinking and practice.

Biographers are perhaps more ready to accept than most historians that objectivity may be logically and aesthetically impossible. As these two articles indicate, there is a strong self-consciousness that the author-historian-biographer creates explanations for their subject's lives rather than discover them – a meaning is given to the events of a subject's life rather than *the* meaning. This suggests that the locus of historical work is in the historian's authorial imagination as he or she generates the forms of explanation that determine the interpretation of the content of the past. Biography's connecting of subject and object and the prioritizing of form over content should always make us ready to confront our conventional realist approach to writing-the-past-as-history.

Also in this first issue of Volume 7 John Ibbett reflects upon the nature of the contribution of Keith Jenkins to our engagement with the past. He argues that Jenkins is mistaken in his appropriation of Nietzsche as an anti-realist and that epistemology is not yet ready to be declared dead and should therefore be buried. This is a timely reminder of the debates that Jenkins has stimulated in the past decade or so, especially given that Routledge has reissued his path-breaking book *Rethinking History* in their Classics series (with an interview with Jenkins and an Introduction by your UK editor). Sarvar V. Sherry Chand and Rita Kothari also explore British colonialism in the Indian province of Gujarat through the quasi-historical-cum-administrator's training manual text the *Ras Mala* of the nineteenth-century colonial administrator A. K. Forbes. Sherry Chand and Kothari take us beyond the text to explore how history was made within a colonial framework and how it may be appropriated today. Notions of imperialism and nationalism are central to Huw Griffiths' exploration of the figure of the ruin – the Picts' Wall [Hadrian's Wall] – in James VI's efforts to unite Scotland and England. In deploying this figure Griffiths attempts to examine how the concept of the spatial renders linear histories problematic and can undercut the very nature of the historical narrative itself. I hope you will agree that all the articles in this issue evidence the breadth of interests, vibrancy in approach and enthusiasm in execution that characterize our engagement with the past. And I feel sure none of them qualify as *aficionados*.

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