

Biography: Historical

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Cross-references:

See also: Biography and Society; Social Constructivism; Postmodernism; Ethics and Values; Gender Studies; Comparative Studies; Privacy: Legal Aspects; Prosopography (Collective Biography); Autobiography; Life Course in History; History and Literature; History and the Social Sciences; Antiquity; The Middle Ages; Enlightenment; Modernity in History.

Abstract:

This article defines the historical biography as encompassing both a reconstruction of a human life, and a representation of a human individual. It shows that the historical biography is a genre that verges on a series of genres and disciplines. The history of the historical biography reaches from antiquity to present days, and the genre is characterised by variety and diversity, both in historical outlook, medias, methodology, and in a cornucopia of categories and forms. Different aims, archetypes, and methodologies of the historical biography have developed the genre into a prism for a multitude of preoccupations, until 'the biographical turn' in history during the first decade of the 2000's augured the genre of the historical biography as an interdisciplinary analytic field in it's own right, placed in a battlefield of multifarious narrative forms.

Key Words:

Reconstruction of a life, representation of a life, one way of telling history, a genre of variety and diversity, a branch of historiography, the classical Hellenistic biography, hagiography, the secular chronicle of an individual life, the art of human portraiture, the modern life story, literary historical biography, life-work-and-times biography, life narrative, psycho-historical biography, prosopography, collective or relational biography, point of orientation in human life, prism biography, biographical turn in history, interdisciplinary genre, ethical accountability

Biography: Historical

Definition

Historical biography (from the Greek *historia*: inquiry, knowledge; *bios*: life; *grafein*: writing) is a reconstruction of a human life, and a representation of an historical individual.

Thus, the notion of biography encompasses more than a pure life depiction. It encompasses both the events of a life, the narrative of a life, and the interpretation of its characteristics. The historical biography represents one of many ways of telling history. Traditionally, biography places the individual at the center of the narrative, instead of larger analysis of dynamics, structures and events. As such, biography has been a controversial genre within the scholarly writing of history for centuries.

The historical biography is a genre characterised by variety and diversity, both in historical outlook, medias and methodology, and in a cornucopia of categories and forms. In terms of genre, historical biography verges on autobiography, literary biography, the traditional tale, the life story, and the biographical novel. In specialist professional terms, the historical biography verges psychology, sociology, anthropology, history and literature. In terms of protagonist, the historical biography is open to everyone and anyone, statesmen and farmers, generals and artists, philosophers and scientists, heroes and villains, women and men. As regards time-scale, historical biography has existed since the antiquity, and up to the present. All this makes it an extremely complex and deeply fascinating genre. In present times, the historical biography is a multimedia phenomenon from the highest academic publications in different disciplines to the popular journalist biography, and the electronic life stories of the entertainment industry. It diverges from fiction, but in its narrative form it shares genre with the modern novel, which has long since broken with linear narrative in recognition that the passage of real life is fragmented.

2000 years of the historical biography

Since antiquity Western historical biography has been regarded as a branch of historiography and has developed from being an ethical-humanistic genre to being a genre consisting of various methodologies, forms and styles within 21st-century specialised scholarship. As a genre, biography in the West is considered to have been established by the Greek Plutarch (45-120 AD), who published the comparative lives of Greek and Roman statesmen *Bioi Paralleloï*. This work, together with Tacitus' *De vita Agricolae* (AD 98), Diogenes Laërtius' biographies of Greek philosophers (3rd century AD), and Svetonius' *De Vita Caesarum* (AD 121) characterised what has been called the classical hellenistic biography, built upon the fundamental principles of ethics: the central figures were either commended for having fulfilled their duty or censured for falling into the trap of ambition or arrogance. The aim was didactic inspiring the general audience to become an ethical acting subject. Also the Christian gospels of the New Testament are seen as ideal biographies of antiquity. The classical biography-type was maintained throughout the Middle Ages. A sidelong con-

sideration must here be given to China's great historian Sima Qian, who very early in history developed a biographical form which belongs to a much later Western epoch: *Shiji* (145-85 BC). This work contains biographies, not just of eminent statesmen and soldiers, but also of individuals such as fortune-tellers, courtiers and murderers. A modern approach, in present Western terms, was demonstrated by Sima Qian's contemporary, the poet and literary historian Liu Xiang, whose work *Lienü zhuan* (78-79 BC) shows that female personalities in China were already at this stage considered worthy of biographical studies.

The Greek-Roman golden age of biography vanished with its empires, and in accordance with the requirements of the church and spiritual need, the Middle Ages saw the development of the martyr biography (e.g. John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, 1563), and the manifold lives of holy men and women, known as hagiographies. The purpose was didactic and the central character was presented as a model of Christian propriety and public virtue: God's creation was portrayed as an individual who, in the course of a lifetime, developed as a moral example to others, or whose destiny was first fulfilled in death. The borderline between biography and hagiography was broad during the Middle Ages. Christian funeral sermons with the focus on the devotional every day life belief in God included biographical life stories of men and women not belonging to the educated people of culture. Christianity and the Christian biography opened the door to the reception of the hagiographical tradition.

At the same time though, a non-hagiographic model was also used for biographies of princes and emperors, with Einhard's *Vita Caroli Magni* (829) frequently cited as being the most important. The secular approach to historical biography was introduced during the Italian Renaissance, a change which continued further afield from the 17th up to the 19th century. The decisive biographical innovation came from Italy with Francesco Petrarca's (1304-74) *De Viris Illustribus* and developed from Giovanni Boccaccio's (1313-75) sense for the specific, the classical times and the secular in *De Claris Mulieribus* and *Vita di Dante Alighieri*. Petrarca's and Boccaccio's glorification of brilliant individualities connected to the much later liberal individualism in society. Early women encyclopedias from Germany confirm this tendency. Biographical literature became that extensive during the 18th and the 19th century that *E M Ottinger's* 1854 bibliography of biographical literature was only rudimentary, even though it was wide-ranging.

From the end of the 18th century, J Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) is still singled out as the pioneering biography of the era, as it was based on empirical material in the form of letters, private papers, conversations, interviews and personal observation of Samuel Johnson's comportment. This was the first biography to construct a nuanced, candid personality focusing on the character of the protagonist. In the historical biography of the time, the history of human achievement was fundamentally the story of imposing male heroes. In the biographical discourse of the 19th century, also Thomas Carlyle's lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) have a paradigmatic position claiming "the History of the World" to be the biographies of great men. Thus claiming biography as a branch of history, employing similar processes of research and scholarship in the making of biography, he claimed historical biography as essentially the chronicle of an individual's life journey whereas Boswell and Johnson had claimed it an art of human portraiture. This difference of perception illustrates the eternal question on history versus biog-

raphy that has hung over historical biography from antiquity to the present days. But still, at the end of the 19th century, it was the exceptional (male) person and the developmental process which characterised the 'life-and-letters' biography. Even though ideas and people from the community at large were incorporated into the biographies via reference to letters, and via learned, illustrious and strange women, there was generally no trace of historical reflection on the individual and society nor any change of the skewed gender balance in the genre of historical biography. Here, the Russian GV Plekhanov was a pioneer introducing the issue of the dynamics between the individual personality and the society as a historical transformation factor with *The Role of The Personality in History* (1898). The impact of his work in Western historical biography seems to be limited.

The modern life story, as 20th-century historical biography has been called, came about as the result of the crisis for humanism, Christianity and rationalism which followed in the wake of Darwinism and psychoanalysis as developed during the 19th century. The modern life story in literary history was introduced with L Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), which came to play the same revolutionary role for historical biographers of all professions as Boswell had played for biography in the 18th and 19th centuries: the introduction of the artistic, interpretative biography, given form via selection, concentration and interpretation of the sources. The idea was to get behind the myth of the subject of the biography and pave the way for the writing of biographies of men *and* women. Another member of the famous Bloomsbury group, V Woolf, went even further in her book *The Art of Biography* (1939): Rather than attempting to escape the limitations of the genre as Strachey had, Woolf urged biographers to endorse them by taking the front position "testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions". The biographer's sense of truth had to be alive, because biography was "only at the beginning of its career; it has a long and active life before it, we may be sure – a life full of difficulty, danger, and hard work" (1939). Thus, both Strachey and Woolf positioned themselves as pioneers in the 20th century paradigm of *literary* historical biography. L Edel (1957) published the most influential post-war study of the biography, which he honed throughout his life's work under the motto: "A writer of lives is allowed the imagination of form but not of fact." (1984). Literary biography became a well-established genre in its own right. Within this genre, the post-modernists IB Nadel (1984), WH Epstein (1987) and P Bourdieu (1986) have sought for a poetics of biography by pointing out that definitive life-portraits are not to be found.

Biography could be "collective", too, involving a comparison of several lives or an analysis of a number of lives tighter, linked through a central theme, as Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, and in a modern understanding, P Rose's *Parallel Lives* (1983) on a number of famed English married couples in the nineteenth century, and LW Banner's *Intertwined Lives* on Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict (Banner 2003).

Biography as a Methodological Approach

In contrast, within the historical and sociological disciplines, the historical biography remained a methodology in understanding the significance of the historical individual and the subjective experience, rather than becoming a genre in itself. Nevertheless, the historical

biography vividly developed during the 20th century displaying a multitude of biographical methodologies. Furthermore, the number of published historical biographies increased. Most important was the emergence of the *life-work-and-times* biography, in which the individual was contextualized in the light of contemporary society. A characteristic of the 20th century historical biography was that male heads of state, with a few exceptions, still were the focus of interest throughout the century, in spite of the first and the second wave feminism of the 19th and 20th centuries. Another characteristic was that biographical critique and a theoretical debate on biography as a genre intensified at regular intervals without being carried out systematically. A new aspect was incorporated into the genre: demythologisation and unmasking of the protagonist: “Formerly we used to canonize our heroes; today we vulgarize them” (O Wilde). Finally, historical biography was influenced by both academics and artists. Thus, serious biographical literature covered the entire spectrum from not very accessible treatises to stylistically inviting reading.

As already mentioned, the sociological and historical professions regarded the biography critically throughout the century even though the publications of historical biographies were manifold (Possing 2005; Rosengren & Östling 2007; Klein 2009; Caine 2010). Historical-sociological biographers and literary biographers began to draw a little closer together after the 1930s. This drawing together continued throughout the rest of the century: literary-framed biography became more scholarly-framed and historical-, sociological-, anthropological- and natural science-framed biography became more literary-framed claiming that the more objective a biography the more lifeless and hollow it became (Kendall, 1965; Madélenat, 1984). The psycho-historical biography did not really establish a firm footing within the humanities and the social sciences, as did the life narratives growing into a paradigmatic trend of mixing autobiography and biography in literature and history at the turn of the millennium.

Sociologists have used historical biography as a methodology in an understanding of the significance of subjective experience. Pioneers in this respect were F Znaniecki & W Thomas (1918-20) who presented the individual and groups of individuals as both creative and created in social evolution, thus introducing prosopography. The life history perspective was followed up by the Italian sociologist F Ferrarotti (1983) who saw the individual as an active pivot in respect of the structures and history of society. Life histories have also been found interesting by late-20th-century anthropologists wishing to promote subjective experience as a factor in the creation of personal identity (Crapanzano, 1980; Loriga 1996). Anthropologists have considered biography to be a participant observer in a cross-cultural and cross-epochal dialogue with the historical subject.

The mentalities-historians influenced the historical biography, especially the French Annales-school, and its preoccupation with personification and its hermeneutic, mentalities-historical studies. In her innovative study of 16th-century *Martin Guerre* (1983), N Zemon Davis used new ideas, concepts and methodologies from anthropology, ethnography and literary criticism to examine the dilemma of truth and doubt in historical research. Perception of a central figure became the result of a communicative process between two cultures and two people, not an objective description. J-P Sartre's concept of interaction between the life lived and the written text inspired the development of the dialectic biography. In

Denmark and the Scandinavian countries, the historical figure within this tradition was interpreted as both the bearer of a cultural convention and a cultural agitator (Possing 1992; Klein 2009). Sociologists, ethnologists and historians have all used reminiscence, the oral-history tradition, interviews, and private papers as empirical source material via which to understand social action in a wider perspective as a confrontation with the positivist, Marxist and structuralist thinking which has starved the biography of life. The objective was a de-mythologisation of major figures: "A modern biographer may or may not choose to reveal the intimate, the amorous details of a life, but he must, if he is good at what he does, probe beneath its public, polished self." (Pachter 1979).

Nonetheless, academic historians were ambivalent about the genre of biography. It remained the professions' unloved stepchild (Nasaw 2007) og courtesan (Possing 2012), because many historians were skeptical of the capacity of biography to convey the kind of analytically sophisticated interpretation of the past that academics expected (Robert Schneider, quoted by Nasaw 2007). At the turn of the millennium, historians still characterized biography as a degraded form of historical writing.

The Budding Renaissance of Biography

In the light of a quarter-century's interest in social- and mentalities-history and historical narrative, the historical biography, with its focus on the individual above, and as part of community, class and social group, underwent a renaissance. The role of historical biography as a point of orientation in human life was one of several reasons for it's popularity as a genre at a time when belief in the great utopias disappeared with the end of the Grand Narratives: Historical biography became the prism for a multitude of preoccupations. The 1990s saw a desire for images of women and men as creative, reflective, doubting and determining individuals, and a wish to leave behind the tendency to reduce specific singularity to social regularity. More historians with G Levi (1989) in the lead expressed this need for open reflection by pointing out that, more than ever, the ambiguous biography was a central preoccupation for historians. The biography became a sanctuary for dramatic, old-fashioned narrative amidst a deconstructing and fragmented era. It facilitated reflection on the human ideal in the perspective of the flawed living individual, preventing biography to become eulogy.

The renaissance of biography was a manifestation of a genuine renewal of the genre, with its source in inspiration from advanced literature and the new gender studies, and in the critical question about the extent and manner in which history is created by people and how a life can be decoded. On the one hand, historical biography made a justifiable demand to set the agenda via a re-humanisation of the humanities, which meant that passion, irrationality and human idiosyncrasy were drawn into an understanding of an individual's life's work (Caine 2010; Hamilton 2007, 2008; Klein 2009). On the other hand, the genre's respectability was contested time and again, and still, it was not secured a serious, scholarly profile: Some maintained that biography choose them while they were engaged on other research. Ambivalence in relation to placing the biography as a genre within historiography seemed to be the result of an ongoing opposition to a consideration of single characters.

Individual lives, especially the private, were considered as irrelevant or inappropriate to the understanding of history, scholarship or art by the structuralist, positivist and postmodern anti-biographers.

But in spite of being left out in the cold, the genre imposed itself again and again. This was further illustrated by the reaction of post-modern and -structuralist critics such as Derrida, Foucault and Barthes, who called the historical biography 'impossible to use as reference', 'spurious', 'profit-mongering in intimacy' or, conversely, a thanatography - an account of a person's death. Bourdieu used the expression 'the biographical illusion' (1986), by which he meant that a life story had no direction and thus could not be construed in a chronological order. Against such criticism social constructivist historians stressed that a human individual had to be conceived as a part of the surrounding society, that biography did not represent a life as a continuum, but as a construction of many identities, and that historical biography could and should de- and reconstruct a life (Macey 1993; Margadent 2000). The biographical turn in history, literature, other sciences, the media, and in the entertainment industry became reality at the turn of the millennium.

The Biographical Turn

During the first decade of the 2000's, historical biography underwent a renewal: It exploded in a cornucopia of publications, and historians identified the biographical turn in history. Historical biography changed from an approach in history to becoming an inherently interdisciplinary and self-assertive genre calling itself the "new biography" (Margadent 2001). This was especially influenced by feminists, postmodernists, and race theorists. Feminists and postmodernist focused on the diversity and complexity of personalities, movements and institutions decrying "essentialism". Theorists of race focused on the marginalized black and Afro-American groups who had suffered oppression and discrimination raising broader issues on transnationalism in post-colonial studies. Already during the 20th century, historical biography as a field of interest had developed from a conscious mythologisation of prominent, historical figures to a critical, manifold storytelling of public, national, transnational, and anonymous historical lives.

In the light of the abundance of publications that pawed their ways during first decade of the second millenium, the biographical genre can be understood from two perspectives: *Firstly*, the fact that historical biography has been despised and looked upon with condescension, albeit in the international forum it is a two-thousand-year-old genre (Egeland 2000; Hamilton 2008; Banner 2007). Not gaining respect or dignity, paradoxically scholars and journalists have produced a cornucopia of biographical works during the last twenty years. Historical biography seems to be much appreciated by the general audience. It is like a courtesan, in constant demand and much visited, but taboo and referred to with disrespect by academic society. As the courtesan is visited by men, so too the biography has been preoccupied with men. Statesmen, kings, financiers, scientists, scholars and authors of the male sex have populated the genre, which has only within the last decade become properly accessible to women and ordinary, anonymous people (Larsson 2001; Banner 2003; Huismann, Ribberink, Soeting & Hornung 2012; Possing 2012). The well-known

gender imbalance of the historical biography is changing and has altered with the biographical turn in history. Still more historical biographies have female protagonists, or female biographers. This phenomenon was pioneered by authors and scholars with experience from the modern fields of women's history and gender studies (Moi 1994; Banner 2003; Benhabib 2003; Churchwell 2004; Larsson 2001; Hirdmann 2006; Possing 1992, 2007).

Secondly, historical biography underwent a major renaissance at the end of the twentieth century – in the Scandinavian countries, all over Europa, and in most of the western world. It exploded as part of the popular 'experience economy' and in the academic culture. Since the turn of the millennium, the spirit of our times has been coloured by "the biographical turn" (Hamilton 2008; Caine 2012) and "le retour de la biographie" (Klein 2009). This can be explained as an element of the individualistic or individualising zeitgeist following the demise of the Grand Narrative. In present days, there is hardly a conference or a symposium in the area of humanities and social sciences that does not have a session or a paper on the subject of biography. National and international networks of auto/biographical authors and scholars are blooming. Also autobiography and the myriad forms of life story / life narratives have exploded as a sphere of interest.

The parameter for the evaluation of a historical biography is most often the dialectical '*life-work-and-times*' biography with a balanced analysis of the individual situated in the larger context. Or with an analysis of the power structure and the dynamic interplay between the individual and the society. Most are based on archival material and some even on detective-like research. Some historical biographies skew the depiction perspective at the expense of historical analysis, others focus on more simple life depiction at the expense of analysis (Rosengren & Östling 2007; Banner 2009).

The historical biography can also be written as *a prism* in which the light of history is refracted and the perspective raises the central figure as representative of a time, a historical situation, a type, a social phenomenon or a culture. Or it can be written as *a collective or relational biography* comparing more lives as in the tradition of Strachey (1918), Rose (1983), and as seen in Banner (2003) or Anneke Ribberink's comparison of the prime ministers Margaret Thatcher and Gro Harlem Brundtland (Huisman et al 2012).

Challenges in the wake of the biographical turn

At the turn of the millennium the historical biography was in the process of redeveloping 'l'écriture historique', historical writing. After the biographical turn in history the challenge of the historical biography changed: Despite the biographical flood, there was no well-developed critical tradition. Neither universities nor schools of higher education offered specific training in the all-round study of biography: "Its ethics, like the history and theory behind it, thus go largely unaddressed, while at a practical level there are still relatively few courses offered to those who wish to write a biography, whether big or small. Would-be biographers are thus left largely to their own devices, scrabbling for advice and examples in every direction" the British biographer and historian Nigel Hamilton wrote in 2008. Biographers from Plutarch to Ian Kershaw, the biographer of Hitler (2008) have hard-won experiences in depicting real lives, and in representing their stories in the historical biographies.

Experiences from the reconstructions of human life, and the representations of historical individuals through two thousand years have shaped the biographical conventions: Traditionally, every biography is a life from cradle to grave, every biography has an intention, a plot, an agenda or a motive beyond that of telling a life, every biography is shaped by the biographical triangle (the relation between the biographer, the protagonist and the audience), and every biographer holds the fate of someone else in their hands. At the biographical turn in history, all these four conventions are challenged as well as being used by present historical biographers. The biographical turn not only happened because of the post-Freudian Western world's inclination to psycho-historical analysis. It also happened because the historical biography became part of the democratic project in an increasingly globalised community. Historical biography expresses interest in the individual, and its place in culture and society.

The new knowledge of the historical biography is to be found in *the interdisciplinary analytic field* known as biographical studies. This field distinguishes between the *genre*, this being the empirical narratives of individual lives as they can be read from antiquity to the present day, and *the academic discipline*, which this genre comprises. The biographical sphere is by its very nature interdisciplinary, because a single historical biography borders on many other genres, subjects and narrative traditions; it raises the issues of politics, social relations, economics, and culture, ancestry, kinship, family, sexuality, psychology, and friendship (Klein 2009).

Thus, the historical biography has turned into a interdisciplinary sphere and a genre, placed in a battlefield of multifarious narrative forms. Only lately, biographers have started a theoretical work of building bridges between types, intentions, methodologies and narrative techniques. Historical biography is in the frontline of tackling the unwieldy ethical accountability vis-à-vis an increasing public pressure on the right to invade the private lives of public personalities (King 2005; Baets 2009, 2010). And last, but not least, the historical biography is in the vanguard of understanding the influence of the inclusion of women in the public arena to 21st century changes in the genre that during the 20th century was called “the science of man” (Edel 1957; Huismann et al 2012).

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