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D. Bertaux

Biography: Historical

1. Definition and Parameters

Historical biography (from the Greek *grafein*: writing; *bios*: life; *historia*: inquiry, knowledge) is an individual, historical life in writing, written by someone from a later era. The historical biography as scholarly biography manifests a somewhat contradictory predicament inasmuch as biography places the individual at the center, whereas history focuses on common structures and events. Historical biography is a genre which is characterized by variety and diversity, both in historical outlook and methodology. This article will present the Western, historical biography. In terms of genre, historical biography verges on autobiography, literary biography, the traditional tale, and the biographical novel. In specialist professional terms, the historical biography verges on psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, and literature. In terms of subject, 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 first century AD and

up to the threshold of the second millennium. All this makes the genre both extremely complex and deeply fascinating. Historical biography diverges from popular biography's interest in the private lives of the famous, but shares the popular genre's interest for getting behind the myth. It diverges from fiction, but shares genre with the modern novel, which has long since broken with linear narrative in recognition that the passage of real life is fragmented.

2. Two Thousand Years of the Historical Biography: Changing Focus

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 twentieth-century specialized scholarship. As a genre, biography in the West is considered to have been established by the Greek Plutarch, who published the comparative lives of Greek and Roman statesmen *Bioi Parallelooi* (AD 125). This work, together with Tacitus' *De vita Agricolae* (AD 98) and Diogenes Laërtius' biographies of Greek philosophers (3rd century AD), characterized what has been called *the classical 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 classical biography-type from antiquity was maintained throughout the Middle Ages. A sidelong consideration must here be given to China's great historian Sima Qian, who, during the period of classical antiquity, developed a biographical form which belongs to a much later Western epoch: *Shiji* (185-45 BC). This work contains biographies, not just of eminent statesmen and soldiers, but also of individuals such as fortune-tellers, courtiers, and murderers. A completely modern approach, in today's terms, was demonstrated by Sima Qian's contemporary, the poet and literary historian Liu Xiang, whose work *Lienü zhuan* (79-78 BC) shows that female personalities in China were already at this stage considered worthy of biographical study.

In accordance with the requirements of the church and spiritual needs, the Middle Ages saw the development of the martyr biography (e.g. John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, 1563) or 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. This biographical model was also used for biographies of princes and emperors, with Einhard's *Vita Caroli*

Magni (829) frequently cited as the most important. But until twentieth-century medievalists began producing historical biographies, the Middle Ages essentially lay in biographical darkness. History, seen as the contemporary environment, was of no interest in the Middle Ages, unless contributing to an insight into the central figure's moral attributes.

The approach to historical biography changed during the Italian Renaissance, a change which continued further afield from the seventeenth up to the nineteenth century. This type of biography has been called *romantic-linear development history* and developed from Boccaccio's sense for the specific in *Vita di Dante Alighieri* (1354–5) to a glorification of brilliant individualities in connection with the much later liberal individualism in society. Biographical literature was so extensive in the nineteenth century that E. M. Ottinger's (1854) bibliography of biographical literature was only rudimentary, even though it was wide-ranging. From the turn of that century, James 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. In the historical biography of the time, the history of human achievement was fundamentally the story of imposing male heroes (e.g., Thomas Carlyle 1841). It was still the exceptional person and the developmental process which characterized the 'life-and-letters' biography at the end of the nineteenth century (e.g., Dilthey 1870, Grimm 1873). Even though ideas from the community at large were incorporated into the biographies via reference to letters, there was no trace of historical reflection on the individual and society.

The *modern life story*, as twentieth-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 it developed during the twentieth century. This category of biography displays the following characteristics: (a) a multitude of biographical methodologies evolved; (b) the number of published historical biographies increased; (c) historical-biographical literature as a genre became broader, with the emergence of the 'life-and-times' biography in which the individual is presented in the light of contemporary society; (d) male heads of state were, with a few exceptions, the focus of interest throughout the century; (e) biographical critique and the methodology debate intensified at regular intervals, but were not carried out systematically; (f) a new aspect was incorporated into the genre—demythologization, unmasking; (g) historical biography was influenced by both academics and artists. Serious biographical literature thus covered the entire spectrum from not very accessible treatises to stylistically inviting reading.

The sociological and historical professions regarded the biography critically throughout the century. As early as 1898, G. V. Plekhanov published a short tract in which he called to account the perception of the imposing personality as being the only driving force of history and at the same time proposed the dynamics between personality and society as historical transformation factor (Plekhanov 1898). He maintained that an imposing personality only had historical significance if the person in question was possessed of attributes which were necessary at that specific point in history and which gave historical impact to this particular talent. This observation has had profound repercussions for historians' development of the historical biography. Sociologists have used historical biography as methodology in a qualitative analysis of the significance of subjective experience for social reality. Pioneers in this respect were F. Znaniecki and W. Thomas (1918–20) who presented the individual as both creative and created in social evolution. This was followed up theoretically by the Italian sociologist Franco 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 twentieth-century anthropologists wishing to promote subjective experience as a factor in the creation of personal identity (e.g., Crapanzano 1980). Anthropologists have considered biography to be a participant observer in a crosscultural and cross-epochal dialogue with the historical subject. It was the mentalities-historians who 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 sixteenth-century *Martin Guerre* (1983), Natalie 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, as Giovanni Levi (1989) has also expressed it. Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of interaction between the life lived and the written text inspired the development of the dialectic biography. In Denmark, the historical figure within this tradition is interpreted as both the bearer of a cultural convention and a cultural agitator (Possing 1992). Sociologists, ethnologists, and historians have all used reminiscence, the oral-history tradition, and private papers as empirical source material through 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 has been to get behind the mythologization 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).

The modern life story in literary history was introduced with Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), which in the twentieth century came to play the same revolutionary role for historical biographers of all professions as Boswell had for biography in the eighteenth and nineteenth 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 it became possible to write biographies of both men and women. Leon 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' (Edel 1984). Owing to, among other factors, the achievement of Edel, literary biography became a well-established genre in its own right. Within this genre, the post-modernists Ira Bruce Nadel (1984) and William H. Epstein (1987) have sought for a poetics of biography by pointing out that definitive life portraits are not to be found.

3. *The Intellectual Position of the Historical Biography on the Eve of the New Millennium: Quest and Ambiguity*

Historical-sociological biographers and literary biographers began to draw a little closer together after the 1930s. This drawing together has continued throughout the rest of the century: literary-framed biography has become more scholarly-framed and historical-, sociological-, anthropological-, and natural science-framed biography has become more literary-framed in recognition that the more objective a biography is, the more lifeless and hollow it becomes (Kendall 1965, Madélenat 1984). On the other hand, the psycho-historical biography has not really established a firm footing within the humanities and the social sciences, primarily because it is generally based on extremely insubstantial source matter.

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 community, class, and social group, has undergone a renaissance. The role of historical biography as a point of orientation in human life could be one of several reasons for its popularity as a genre at a time when belief in the great utopias has disappeared: it has become the prism for a multitude of preoccupations. The 1990s have seen a desire for images of women and men as creative, reflective, doubting, and determining individuals; a desire to get away from the tendency to reduce specific singularity to social regularity. The French historian Giovanni Levi (1989) has expressed this need for open reflection by pointing out that, more than ever, the ambiguous biography is a central

preoccupation for historians. The biography is a sanctuary for dramatic, old-fashioned narrative amidst a deconstructing and fragmented era. It facilitates reflection on the human ideal and the flawed, so that biography does not become eulogy.

The renaissance of biography is a manifestation of a genuine renewal of the genre, with its source in inspiration from advanced literature such as the works of Proust and Joyce, 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 makes a justifiable demand to set the agenda via a rehumanization of the humanities, which means that passion, irrationality, and human idiosyncrasy are drawn into an understanding of an individual's life work. On the other hand, the genre's respectability is contested time and again, and it has not secured a serious, scholarly profile in those humanities occupied with historical change. Some maintain that biography chose them while they were engaged on other research. Ambivalence in relation to placing the biography within historiography would seem to be the result of opposition to a consideration of single characters. Individual lives, especially the private, are considered by some as irrelevant or inappropriate to the understanding of history, scholarship, or art, because the genius of these individuals has forced them to keep the world at a certain distance. Their significance, maintain the anti-biographers, is to be found in their work(s), not in their person.

That the genre gets left out in the cold, but has still imposed itself, is further illustrated by the reaction of postmodern and poststructuralist critics such as Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes, who have called the historical biography 'impossible to use as reference,' 'spurious,' 'a feature of the exercise of power,' 'profit-mongering in intimacy' or, conversely, a thanatography—an account of a person's death. Pierre Bourdieu has used the expression 'the biographical illusion' (1986), by which is meant that a life story has no direction and cannot be construed in a chronological order. A human individual, meanwhile, is not conceivable without the surrounding society and a biography does not need to present a life as a continuum. A biography can both de- and reconstruct a life. Historical biography will, in any case, easily create new myths in the process of demythologization. This situation is a quandary which historical biography will have to live with when it creates what could be called a kind of authentic fiction.

4. *The Interdisciplinary, Historical Biography: Need for Systematic, Methodical Reflection*

At the year 2000, the historical biography is inherently interdisciplinary. It has developed from a conscious mythologization of prominent, historical figures to a

critical humanization of both well-known and forgotten historical lives. Despite the abundance of publications, certain common features can be detected in historical biography of the 1990s:

The subjects of the great majority of biographies are men living in the twentieth century, most of them being politicians or scientists. Besides statesmen and princes, figures from earlier periods include religious leaders and pilgrims, intellectuals, philosophers and scientists, inventors, adventurers, lawyers, painters, composers, plus a queen or two, and a couple of early feminists.

The familiar gender-imbalance in historiography is pronounced in the historical-biographical genre: less than 4 percent of biographies reviewed in specialized journals have a woman as the central subject and less than 8 percent are written by female biographers.

The scholarly history community's parameter for the evaluation of a historical biography is still the 'life-and-times' model, some biographies having a great deal of 'life' in relation to 'times,' others having little. Most are based on archival material and some even on detective-like research. Some historical biographies skew the individual perspective at the expense of historical analysis, in others the person disappears. Generally, the relationship between the nomothetic and the idiographic is not erased in the historical biography, no more than it is in the rest of historiography.

The target readership for historical biography is often a broad public beyond the specialized forum.

Nevertheless, historical biography has not been the subject of systematic, theoretical-methodological discussion in professional journals in Europe and the USA during the 1990s. Only specialized history journals in the former East Germany have provided the framework for an independent biography-historical discussion. The content of the American journal *Biography: An Inter-disciplinary Quarterly*, which has been published since 1977, consists primarily of reviews. In the small Danish-language sphere, a castigation of the historical biography genre proceeded throughout the 1990s (*Historisk Tidsskrift*).

At the beginning of the new millennium a series of primary historical-biographical forms can be identified:

the classical historical biography, in which the perspective concentrates on the central figure's work and in which personalism is irrelevant (e.g., Young-Bruehl 1982).

the existential biography, where the subject is seen in his/her own creative context and the life and work as a coherent, existential whole; where the linear perspective is restored and the personal-public are inseparable (e.g., Söderquist 1998).

the historical biography as historical 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 or social phenomenon. This is often seen as a bridge-builder between research and exposition (e.g., Tuchman 1966, 1986).

the historical biography as a cultural reflector, where a popular culture is analyzed via an exceptional case, by means of which a singular personality can prove to reveal a representative aspect in the historical culture (e.g., Ginzburg 1976).

the historical life-and-times biography, where the portrait painted is colored by society's palette (e.g., Sklar 1973, Fox Keller 1983). In some French and a few Scandinavian biographies, this type has been expanded to:

the historical life-work-times biography, also known as 'the total' or 'the dialectical biography,' in which the dynamic interplay and power structure between the individual, the work and the surroundings becomes a driving force (e.g., Possing 1992, Nilsson 1994, Le Goff 1996).

relational biography, which focuses on the relationship between two or more central figures (e.g., Rose 1983, Haavet 1998).

the historiographical biography, which discusses all the others' ways of writing biographies of the same central figure (e.g., Rosenbaum 1998).

The same methodological criteria apply for the historical biography as for all other historical analysis. But greater caution and ethical awareness are required when writing the biography of a person than when analyzing a theory or a social movement. In other words, there is a difference between the critique of a collective process and that of an individual. The twenty-first century will not just need historical biographies of prominent men and (more) women. There will also be a need for biographies of the grand fiasco, the oddity, the ordinary normal citizen, and the profoundly unoriginal opportunist, because our knowledge of the mentalities of the past will thereby be deepened. The significance of biographical myth in the formation of national and supranational identities will be central to future historical research. Myths have not infrequently proved to be more creative in the view of history than have objective facts, and thus deserve historiographical treatment. The historical biography can redevelop '*l'écriture historique*,' historical writing. The fundamental question for historical biography in the twenty-first century will be if rehumanization of the humanities and social sciences is compatible with clear historical analysis.

See also: Biography and Society; History and Literature; History and the Social Sciences; Life Course in History; Life Course: Sociological Aspects.

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B. Posing

Biology's Influence on Sociology: Human Sociobiology

In their early development, sociology and evolutionary biology were complementary. Soon, however, biology was subject to certain controversial issues, and most sociologists became alienated from it. Then, starting a few decades ago, biological theory made compelling strides toward the study of social, including human, behavior. As a result, while sociologists' estrangement is still widespread, a small and growing number have been accepting the challenge. This article begins with a brief statement on the early relationship. It then highlights the following major stages in the growth of evolutionary biology in view of their special relevance to sociological theory: (a) the synthesis of Darwinian theory and genetic science and (b) sociobiology, or the study of evolution and behavior. Underscored are the theory of altruism, the fitness principle, and the theories of parental investment and sexual selection.

1. Evolutionary Biology and Sociology: The Early Stage

Both sciences are creatures of the nineteenth century. For several decades they were also mutually influential. For instance, The Division of Labor in Society, sociologist E. Durkheim's classic, argues in a Darwinian key that labor becomes more divided in large part 'because the struggle for existence [Darwin's concept] is more acute.' In the process, Durkheim produces a theory of solidarity that foreshadows the current theory of altruism. Likewise, in 1852 H. Spencer argued, again in Darwinian fashion, that the evolution of human society was a result of competition for scarce resources in which 'the more adapted [prevailed] over the less adapted.' In short, social evolution was the result of the 'survival of the fittest.'