

A Habit of Stories

A brief history of theories and writing about biography since the early twentieth century in this chapter considers how some academics, critics and biographers, Hermione Lee in particular, understand its development—although, as Lee has noted, it can be misleading to try and understand ways in which biography has altered as a tidy, linear progression.¹ On the one hand, some common trends emerge across the centuries as the genre evolves. On the other, the complexity in form, style, structure and medium for biography has changed and biographers have built on and challenged the work of their predecessors. This chapter also touches on the ways in which literary estates have questioned the authenticity of some biographies, and ends with a conversation with Clare Brant, Director of the Centre for Life-Writing Research at King's College, London, on some recent developments across life-writing.²

Lee suggests that western biography has its origins in “educational stories of remarkable men” (2009, 22), such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the life of the Assyrian king who ruled in about 2600 BC, and classical stories of public men “judged by their peers and posterity for their behaviour” (22):

The main events of classical lives are battles, conquests, victories in government and argument, dominance over the populace, the imparting of wisdom, influential deeds and sayings. (22)

Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, also known as *Plutarch's Lives*, is significant because it aims to reveal character as well as glorious exploits. American biographer Nigel Hamilton quotes from Plutarch, who is interested as much in the character of his subjects as in their public lives: "the most brilliant exploits often tell us nothing of the virtues and vices of the men who performed them" (2007, 26). Plutarch argues that "a chance remark or a joke may reveal far more of a man's character than the mere feat of winning battles in which thousands fall" (26). This dual focus can be seen in Roman life-writing, and it persists today:

the age-old tug of war between idealization and critical interpretation still characterized the biographical enterprise. Some Romans wanted to laud and worship ancestors and past figures ... Others found that this idealization could not square with their curiosity to know more about the psychology and real life experiences of an unidealized individual, the better to understand their own lives. (Hamilton 2007, 32)

Nevertheless, hagiography was "one of the dominant literary genres in Europe from Late Antiquity to the end of the Middle Ages" (Lee 2009, 25). Early collective lives of canonical figures are representative of biographies that continued to celebrate success and promote the lives of famous and powerful men.

In *The Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1568), Giorgio Vasari seeks to promote the work of artists, although he too argues that his book is designed to do more than celebrate the lives of the great and successful. He hopes that it will "keep the arts alive, or at least ... give them every possible encouragement. In this way, my good intentions and the work of outstanding men will, I hope, provide the arts with support ... they have been lacking hitherto" (1965, 47). An objective for biographers since the sixteenth century has been to play a key role in promoting the literature, arts and culture of a particular historical period, broadening understanding about the life and work of artistic and literary figures, and promoting the work of those who are forgotten or lost.

Lee notes that biographical writing has taken many forms across the centuries. In the seventeenth century, it covered a

wide, contemporaneous range of subjects—rulers, magistrates, worthies, artists, poets, churchmen, thinkers—and took many forms. There were

individual Lives, collective group Lives, biographical dictionaries, obituaries, “memoirs, diaries, epistolary collections, hagiographies, character sketches and royal lives”. Praise and eulogy were mixed with criticism and satire, universal types with curious individuals, formal rhetorical patterns with eccentric deviations. (2009, 34)

Izaak Walton in *Walton's Lives*, “written and much rewritten between 1640 and 1678, fused together a number of the available ways of thinking about ‘good men’” (Lee 2009, 34), including hagiography and portraiture. John Aubrey’s *Brief Lives*, four hundred or so biographical sketches dating from the late seventeenth century, were “a mixture of anecdotes, gossip, memories, and observations” (36). Lee suggests that biography continues to mix together the contradictory strains of “the epic and the absurd, legends and gossip, the elegiac and the anecdotal, gravity and foolishness” (2009, 38). In a 1683 essay introducing an edition of *Plutarch's Lives*, John Dryden suggests that “here you are led into the private Lodgings of the Heroe: you see him in his undress, and are made Familiar with his most private actions and conversations” (1683, 94). Dryden was interested in the character of his subjects and details about their private lives, including indiscretions. He places these day-to-day aspects of life within the wider reaches of history and philosophy:

there is also room reserv'd for the loftiness and gravity of general History, when the actions related shall require that manner of expression. But there is withal, a descent into minute circumstances, and trivial passages of life, which are natural to this way of writing. (94)

This is another early passage about the interdisciplinary nature of biography and its focus, at times, on the everyday. Tension between the promotion of exemplary lives based on significant historical events and an interest in the domestic, private and mundane in the lives of canonical or less famous biographical subjects can be seen in the work of a small number of writers throughout the genre’s history.

In the seventeenth century, the word ‘biography’ came into general use. It was John Dryden in 1683 who first referred to biography “as a collective noun” (Hamilton 2007, 81). However, Hamilton suggests that a definition of biography that focuses on written lives “did scant

justice to three thousand years of the depiction of real individuals, in every conceivable medium” (2007, 82). Lives have continued to this day to be reflected in many different forms. Recent trends on social media, including Twitter and blogs, written narratives about the lives of objects and places, and the role of fiction, film and performance are only a few of the alternative forms available for exploring lives.

Then, of course, came the eighteenth century and James Boswell’s canonical life of Samuel Johnson, published in 1791. Other ‘Great Men’ of the period had their sayings written down, but Lee notes that “Boswell was unusual in turning ‘ana’ [sayings] into a whole biographical narrative, while keeping the fragmentary quality of an anthology. He was pioneering as one of the first to publish private conversations so fully and candidly” (2009, 46). Underpinning his approach was an understanding of biography as a kind of ‘copartnership’. As Lee argues, “we want to see how the asexual but tender attachment between the biographer and his subject develops” (51) in this biography. Boswell describes what he means by copartnership when writing about a journey he undertook with Johnson to Scotland: “I looked on this tour to the Hebrides as a copartnership between Dr. Johnson and me. Each was to do all he could to promote its success” (1848, 360), which included entertaining local people on Skye. He believes that he was “fortunate enough frequently to draw ... [Johnson] forth to talk, when he would otherwise have been silent. The fountain was at times locked up, till I opened the spring” (360). In these scenes, Boswell becomes Johnson’s sidekick, in which it is the role of the travelling companion and biographer to get his subject talking. This suggests an image of Johnson’s biographical narrator also empowering him to speak in his own biography, almost bringing him to life and providing him with an opportunity to offer another performance that will impress his audience. An understanding of the nature of performance in biography is an aspect of the genre to which this book returns. Lee notes this feature in Boswell’s narrative, as Johnson becomes “the man of letters as epic hero” (2009, 51), and “Boswell gives Johnson spiritual victories, disciples, intellectual influence, and a good death” (52). This is more than a type of hagiography promoting the nature of a good life, because the “presentation of identity in the *Life* is complicated, subtle, and new” (52):

In the dance of conversation and copartnership between the two, the figures seem to move about, talk, and think in front of us, embodied and immediate, though so long vanished into the past. (Lee 2009, 52)

This sense of a biographical subject coming to life in biography, the influential role of the biographer and the nature of the conversation between biographer and subject are important aspects of contemporary biography. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century British biography is understood in this book as a conversation and copartnership in which the self-fashioned nature of a biographical subject and the character of the narrator are explored.

Boswell “believed—as Johnson did—that the point of life-writing was to be truthful and realistic ... Fidelity to the subject should not be a process of loyal concealment, but of accurate characterization” (Lee 2009, 46). According to Johnson, in a seminal essay published in *The Rambler* in 1750, “The Dignity and Usefulness of Biography”, a biographer must be careful if he is writing about someone he knows, in order to remain faithful to the facts—what Johnson calls “fidelity” (1888, 84)—and to avoid influences that might “tempt him to conceal, if not to invent” (84). Lee suggests that Boswell’s biography “reads like a realist novel of its time” (2009, 50), full of the performance of its leading character and comic scenes, “with Boswell as stage-manager” (49) directing the action and giving his own character as narrator a significant role. The performance of the narrator and the storytelling qualities of this biography are part of its strength. Boswell’s belief that biography should be truthful and realistic, and Lee’s comment about the performative nature of his writing, highlights one of the pervading tensions across the genre that troubles some historians and critics. When it is written as a nonfiction form, how can biography maintain the fidelity important to Johnson as well as the copartnership and conversational tone important to Boswell without jeopardising authenticity? Concerns about the form and style of biography inform debates about the genre across recent decades, as biographers explore whether to write cradle to grave narratives, or to experiment with chronology, focus on particular scenes or anecdotes in a life, make their own views as narrator clear, and balance what we know about someone’s life with what we think we know about their motives and feelings. Martin Stannard makes a distinction between the different approaches to biography by Boswell and Johnson, who wrote his own biography of the poet Richard Savage, *The Life of Richard Savage*

(1728), and the extent to which this can be traced in the work of contemporary biographers:

The Boswellian biographers, writing a form of fiction in which their ‘presence’ is crucial ... comfort us with the assumption that their hero or heroine is both ‘knowable’ and likeable ... The Johnsonian version is cooler. Here the biographer is equally in the position of persuasion, but rather more in the role of entertaining barrister than that of autobiographer or novelist. A certain distance is preserved. (1996, 39)

Romantic biographer Richard Holmes describes Boswell’s biography as a study of a friendship and in his view, “There are few experimental techniques that Boswell has not already tried” (2005, 367). For Holmes, “he is our prophet” (367). Other biographers adopt a more Johnsonian tone.

Adam Sisman argues that Boswell “deliberately downplayed his own role in selecting and shaping ... In organizing and shaping his material, Boswell aimed to create a unified and coherent narrative” (2006, 174) that communicated his vision of Johnson. This would be based, Boswell hoped, as much as possible on Johnson’s own voice: “Boswell planned to let Johnson speak for himself” (Sisman 2006, 171). In doing so, Sisman suggests that Boswell reinforced “the sense of dialogue between the two men” (172). Sisman sees Boswell as both a ventriloquist and a character himself in this biography.³ The storytelling ability of a biographer and the dialogues between biographers and their subjects are key themes in this reading of the genre.

Johnson and Boswell both believed, in common with Dryden, that it “was the ‘minute particulars’ that gave biography its usefulness” (Lee 2009, 46). Johnson comments in the essay for the *Rambler* in October 1750 that we “are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure” (1888, 81), and the “business of the biographer is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents, which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestick privacies, and display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside” (82). In his view, there are “many invisible circumstances which ... are more important than publick occurrences” (82), and anecdotes about these types of details are an essential part of contemporary British biography. Johnson is also interested in the

distinction between hagiography of exemplary public figures and biography about all sorts of different people:

there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. For ... there is such a uniformity in the state of man ... that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but it is common to human kind. (1888, 81)

Life-writing narratives about less canonical subjects has been a key trend in recent publishing. Johnson's perspective here emphasises that, in understanding something about the lives of others who lead more ordinary lives, we have an opportunity to learn about our everyday selves, and in doing so life-writing, including biography, becomes a genre in which public and private aspects of people's lives are central to the form, whether the subject is famous or not.

The Fortune of Francis Barber (2015) by Michael Bundock tells the story of Samuel Johnson's servant and the experience of black people in eighteenth century England. James Boswell knew Barber and draws on his experience for his biography of Johnson. We hear a rare example of Barber's own voice in Boswell, as noted in Bundock's biography:

Barber told James Boswell that "he lived with Dr. Johnson from 1752 to about 1757—when upon some difference he left him and served a Mr. Farren Apothecary in Cheapside for about two years." (2015, 71)

Bundock's biography is both a story about Barber's life and the friendship between Johnson and Barber, whose life has played a small part in narratives about Johnson. Bundock suggests that Barber's life "has a wider significance: it opens up a window" (6) to the forgotten lives of thousands of black Britons in the eighteenth century. We only know of Barber's life because of his connection with Johnson and, as a result, he "appears, at least passing, in many accounts of the period" (6). Bundock associates Barber's life with the places he lived and, in an image which resonates with Johnson's friendship with the poet Richard Savage and is discussed in Chap. 6, Bundock opens the biography with Johnson and Barber walking through London together: "On a summer's day in 1752, two conspicuously odd figures are making their way through the

hubbub and grime of London's Fleet Street ... these two stand out" (1). In Barber's case, this is because he is black.

Novelist Caryl Phillips has written about Francis Barber's life in *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2008), a book, as his title suggests, about three black men who come to Britain to live. His other subjects are twentieth century figures, Randolph Turpin, Britain's first black world-champion boxer, and David Oluwale, a Nigerian stowaway. This is a fictional narrative that recounts Barber's life through the voice of an unnamed fictional peer of Johnson's who, in this story, knew Barber when he was living with Samuel Johnson, attended Johnson's funeral with him and speaks to Barber shortly before he dies. The fictional narrator recounts Barber's fall into poverty despite a generous legacy from Johnson. The narrative draws attention to the extent to which Barber may have been exploited after Johnson's death. The fictional narrator has a conversation with Barber's impoverished wife in which she comments that "there were those who cheated us. Lots of them" (2008, 44). Barber is reported, in this fictional account, to say as he lies dying in a workhouse hospital:

My master provided me with many advantages yet I still find myself in these circumstances. I sincerely wish that he had used me differently ... Perhaps it would have been more profitable for me to have established for myself the limits of my abilities rather than having them blurred by kindness, dependence, and my own indolence. (2008, 58)

Johnson gave Barber opportunities to expand his education and to live in circumstances that were better than many of his peers, but Barber's identity was scripted by Johnson's expectations. Twice in his life, Barber ran away from Johnson but found himself back living with him. The type of liberty he experienced staying with Johnson was perhaps not the opportunity he needed to find the freedom of a life lived on his own terms. The voice of similar men and women can be heard in life-writing narratives from the eighteenth century, such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) by Olaudah Equiano, and from the nineteenth century, including *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) by Solomon Northup and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) by Frederick Douglass, but the voices of many black people from these periods remain hidden.

Biographers have been criticised for exposing too much about the lives of their subjects. William Godwin's memoir about his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, published five years after Boswell's biography, was widely criticised for revealing his wife's previous affair with Gilbert Imlay and the birth of their illegitimate child, Fanny. Australian biographer Barbara Caine notes that this public outcry "pointed to a new concern about the limits on what could be discussed in biography and the need for discretion, especially when it came to questions about personal and domestic life" (2010, 34). In the case of Godwin, his focus on Wollstonecraft's private life damaged his wife's reputation. In comparison, Caine suggests that Boswell omits "many aspects of ... [Johnson's] personal and emotional life" (33), in particular his relationships with women. Biographers walk a tightrope between revealing too little or too much about the personal and domestic aspects of a life and what we consider to be private today will be different in the future.⁴

Lee suggests that in the early part of the nineteenth century, as in the seventeenth century, life-writing took many forms, and that this connects with the experimental nature of recent autobiographical narratives and biographies:

Conversation, friendship, collaboration, quarrels; letters telling of personal feelings and encounters, of work in progress and political opinions; confessional narratives of addiction, love, and weakness; journals of domestic life; manuscripts circulating between small groups: early 19th-century literature was criss-crossed with a spider's web of life-writing. 'Self-fashioning' took many forms. (2009, 54)

She also notes that, "The emphasis in life-writing was on empathy" (55). Writing about biography became more significant during the nineteenth century. In another essay, Lee suggests that Thomas Carlyle, "was passionately interested in biography" (2005, 1):

[His] idea of life-writing as the creation of intimate links between the dead and living, his insistence on sympathy as the motivating force, his interest in the rescuing of lives, however obscure, from oblivion, and his belief in the power of small anecdotes and little details ... to bring a whole life home to us: all this still has value. (2005, 2)

In an early book about biography by James Field Stanfield, *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (1813), Elinor Shaffer identifies the same contemporary perspective that “biography should assist us in understanding human character” (2004, 115). Shaffer highlights G.H. Lewes’s biography of Goethe as a notable example of a biography that was sympathetic, although Lewes “did not mince words” (122). A concern with the nature of empathy, the role of anecdotes and hidden lives are features of late twentieth century biography.

According to Shaffer, the role of tone “in lulling, misleading, and smoothing over uncomfortable matters in biography as in autobiography became a major one in Victorian life-writing” (123). In the case of much nineteenth century biography, the tone is elegiac, eulogising and often hyperbolic. As Lee makes clear, these biographies are a form of memorial and the “impulses of sympathy and veneration that dominated much 19th-century biography often solidified into hagiography” (2009, 57). This mainly focused on the public, professional life of a biographical subject, written by an admirer or family member. For others, Lee argues, the genre was seen as representative of a low culture, as “journalistic intrusion, the beginnings of celebrity culture, and the ever more shaky dividing line between private and public, gave rise to debates uncannily like our own” (2009, 68).

A particular exception to the hagiography of the nineteenth century was J.A. Froude’s biography of Thomas Carlyle. He was widely condemned for highlighting the unhappiness of Carlyle’s marriage to his wife Jane.⁵ Other notable examples of less formulaic biographies from this period, include John Gibson Lockhart’s biography of his father-in-law, Sir Walter Scott, which exposes some of his failings, and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), which laid the foundations for the Brontë myth and the image of Charlotte as a victim of her circumstances and the constraining influence of her father. Gaskell’s biography shows Charlotte’s virtues but fails altogether to acknowledge her friendship with, and passion for, her married Belgian teacher, Monsieur Heger. For Shaffer, this biography “has all the qualities of a novel, the sustained building of suspense, the powerful empathy with the central character, the creation of a milieu in intimate detail; and it commands the complete absorption of the narrator, the character and the reader” (2004, 131). This is a biography that shares the passion of Boswell to offer a partisan and moving portrait, rather than a more measured portrayal.⁶

The development and popularity of Victorian hagiography gave an opportunity for the profession of biographer to grow. Lee argues that, by the end of the century, a “self-consciousness was developing about the practice of the craft” (2009, 71). She suggests that the dividing lines between the tomes of nineteenth century biography and the move to a more creative, less reverent form in the early twentieth century can be over-emphasised and that “Cultural shifts get over-simplified” (73). Nevertheless, the balance did change in this period as biography moved to use “fictional tactics, irony, parody, and caricature ... [and] biography aimed to uncover the inner self behind the public figure” (72). There are various strands in the development of biography at this point, including a more self-reflexive approach to its writing, new forms that challenge a life and times format, and the development of psychoanalytic approaches. Laura Marcus provides an overview of the characteristics of the ‘new biography’; in this period, there emerged

a new equality between biographer and subject, by contrast with the hero-worship and hagiography of Victorian eulogistic biography; brevity, selection, and an attention to form and unity traditionally associated with fiction rather than history; the discovery of central motifs in a life and of a ‘key’ to personality, so that single aspects of the self or details of the life and person came to stand for or to explain the whole; and a focus on character rather than events. (2004, 196)

Influential figures in the development of this ‘new biography’ in the early twentieth century were Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Harold Nicolson, Edmund Gosse and Desmond MacCarthy. Harold Nicolson makes a distinction between scientific and literary biography in *The Development of English Biography* (1927), and sees the future of imaginative literary biography in fiction, whilst what he calls scientific biography will focus on facts. A closer look at Nicolson’s approach identifies issues that remain at the heart of contemporary debates about the genre.

He argues that biography “must be a truthful record of an individual and composed as a work of art” (1959, 8). By truthful, he means, as did Johnson, that important facts about someone’s life should not be hidden, as was common in Victorian hagiography, and Nicolson goes on to argue that biography must also be “well constructed” (12). His description of what this means is Aristotelian in nature. In his definition of biography,

sympathy and pity will be stimulated, intricate associations will be evoked ... There must be result for the reader, an active and not merely a passive adjustment of sympathy; there must result for him an acquisition not of facts only but of experience; there must remain for him a definite mental impression, an altered attitude of mind. There must finally be a consciousness of creation. (13)

Nicolson is concerned if biography becomes hagiography or seeks to promote a particular theory, or if the biographer exhibits undue subjectivity, rather than detachment; although he comments that to a “certain extent a subjective attitude is desirable and inevitable” (10). Here lies one of the tensions that has haunted biography and its critics ever since. A biographer needs to come close to, but remain at a distance from, her subject to help re-create an authentic portrayal. Nicolson promotes Boswell as an ideal of biography, although his view that Johnson’s biographer “does not obtrude unnecessarily” (104) would perhaps not be a perspective shared by more recent critics. He makes a distinction between the kind of biography he is promoting and life and times biography, which, in his view, “is less a study of an individual than a study of history expressed in and through an individual” (140). Nicolson dismisses Gaskell’s *Charlotte Brontë* because it omits key facts about her life, is sentimental and falls “under the heading of historical fiction” (140). So, at this time, an influential view was that biography must not be too close to fiction. Nicolson describes modernist concerns about the generic boundaries of biography in terms that anticipate later debates about the balance between form and content in the genre and the omniscient presence of the biographer in some biographies. He argues that “the form of a biography is less important than its content” (144), but he thinks that there is a central problem of content versus form in biography: “it is on the rocks of this problem that [what he calls] pure biography is doomed to split” (144), into scientific or what he calls applied biography, and fictional forms. In his view, biography will develop in two directions—scientific biography “will insist ... on all the facts” (154), and is more like the life and times biography he describes, whilst literary biography “demands a partial or artificial representation of facts” (154) and will develop as fiction. This tension between documentary, scholarly biography and a more self-reflexive form marks an important moment in metanarratives about biography. If the genre is to move away from the hagiography of the nineteenth century, questions about subjectivity, the

role of the narrator, the use of material and facts, tone, style and form in the narrative are important. In future writing about the genre, applied biography is associated with the idea of biography as a form of scholarly chronicle or critical academic analysis, whilst Nicolson aligns a more self-reflexive literary form with fiction. As Chap. 3 illustrates, there has certainly been a significant growth in fictional biographies, or hybrid narratives that are closer to fiction.

Desmond MacCarthy famously suggests that the biographer “is an artist who is on oath, and anyone who knows anything about artists, knows that that is almost a contradiction in terms” (1953, 32). In his view, biography “is undoubtedly an art. But if it is an art, how are we to define it? I think the simplest way is to say that a biography must aim at being a truthful record of an individual life, composed as a work of art” (32). In doing so, “the biographer cannot invent those circumstances which might illustrate best the character he is depicting” (32). For the biographer,

All he can do is arrange facts as effectively as possible ... And yet he must impose some pattern on the disorder of life, or his book will only be a quarry from which some other man may be able some day to construct a building. (1953, 33)

Some biographies are rich and valuable quarries on which others draw for their less scholarly writing. Indeed, many popular biographers acknowledge the huge debt they owe to scholars from whose work they take significant knowledge and information. MacCarthy’s definition is very close indeed to Nicolson’s, which states that biography is “a truthful record of an individual and composed as a work of art” (1959, 8). However, there is clearly a crucial distinction between them. MacCarthy encourages the biographer to “*aim* at a truthful record” (my emphasis), a more pragmatic expectation. The suggestion that a biographer may arrange facts and impose a pattern on the disorder of a life is less prescriptive and perhaps more achievable. It accepts that biography is messy, fluid and open to different narrative strategies. Critics will continue to disagree with the patterns presented by individual biographers but that, MacCarthy might say, is inevitable. In *The Brontë Myth* (2001), a meta-biography about how the lives of the three sisters have been rewritten, Lucasta Miller brings this debate into the twenty-first century and argues that literary biography is “an amphibious art form, which ideally has *both*

to obey the constraints of evidence *and* to respond creatively to the challenge of making shape, form and meaning” (2002, 169).⁷ In this analysis, the form becomes one in which integrity is central and rigour will be open to debate, as it is in academic and many other forms of writing.

Caine comments that Virginia Woolf’s view about the importance of inner thoughts and emotions “has been a driving force in the writing of biography across the twentieth century” (2010, 40). In her seminal essay, “The Art of Biography” (1942), Woolf offers her own overview of biography’s development: “Interest in our selves and in other people’s selves is a late development of the human mind. Not until the eighteenth century in England did that curiosity express itself in writing the lives of private people. Only in the nineteenth century was biography fully grown and hugely prolific” (1967a, 221). She comments that “the art of biography is the most restricted of all the arts ... The novelist is free; the biographer is tied” (221) to the facts of the life she is writing about. Woolf argues that towards the end of the nineteenth century there was a change in attitudes to biography and the biographer “won a measure of freedom” (222):

Froude’s Carlyle is by no means a wax mask painted rosy red. And following Froude there was Sir Edmund Gosse, who dared to say that his own father was a fallible human being. And following Edmund Gosse in the early years of the [twentieth] century came Lytton Strachey. (222)

Edmund Gosse broke new ground. He describes his book about his relationship with his father, *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments* (1907), as “a struggle between two temperaments, two consciences and almost two epochs” (1989, 35), and he is keen to emphasise that it “is not an autobiography” (217). However, it is in part a study of “the consciousness of self” (55), and in writing this memoir about his difficult relationship with his father, Gosse found “a companion and a confidant in myself” (58). Gosse is keen to emphasise to his readers that his book “is scrupulously true” (33) and should be understood as having a wider relevance as a “*document*, as a record of educational and religious conditions which, having passed away, will never return” (33), and as not in any way fictional. His memoir is only ‘true’ from his point of view and it relies on his memories. Lee describes it as a novelistic memoir (2009, 75). Gosse’s book, as Caine suggests, “anticipated later developments in its criticism of Victorian values and assumptions, especially those

concerning the duties that children owed parents, however unreasonable parental demands might be" (2010, 39). Gosse not only draws attention to early twentieth century issues about the paternalism of family life and the influence of religion and the church, but, as he experiments with the form, he also explores the nature of authenticity in autobiographical narratives and memoirs.

Lytton Strachey's approach to biography in *Eminent Victorians* (1918), discussed further in a later chapter about the writing of Michael Holroyd, broached new ground not only in relation to the content of his lives, which challenged the paternalism of Victorian biography, but also in his narrative style and tone. Caine argues that Strachey offered "an example of a new approach to biography in the brevity of his treatment, his crisp literary style and his often ironic tone, but also in his open criticism and his interest in hidden and sometimes unconscious motives" (2010, 39). Marcus places Strachey's influence within the historical context of this period as "*Eminent Victorians* was perceived as the first text of postwar England, opening up to ridicule the workings of power and the blind submission to God and Country which had led to the mass slaughter of World War 1" (2004, 197). Strachey's purpose in *Eminent Victorians* (1918) is "to illustrate, rather than to explain" (1986, 9) the lives of: Cardinal Henry Manning, "an ecclesiastic" (9); Florence Nightingale, "a woman of action" (9) and "a rock in the angry ocean" (122); Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby School and "an educational authority" (9); and General Charles George Gordon, "a man of adventure" (9), who led armed forces in China and Sudan. His method is to "examine and elucidate certain fragments of the truth which took my fancy" (9). This contrasts with other forms of hagiography, which in his view include "ill-digested masses of material" (10), a slipshod style and a "tone of tedious panegyric" (10). He believes that the biographer must "maintain his own freedom of spirit" (10). There is a note of irony here as the biographer gives his perspective on selected facts—in other words, only those that he chooses to highlight. There is a wry tone throughout Strachey's book that is reflected in both his content and style.

Woolf makes a distinction between the short sketches in *Eminent Victorians* and Strachey's full-length biographies *Victoria* (1921) and *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History* (1928). She argues that the longer works throw "great light upon the nature of biography" (1967a, 223), and she shares some of Nicolson's concerns. Her perspective is that Strachey's biography of Victoria is successful and treats biography as a

craft, whilst his biography of Elizabeth I treats biography as an art and “flouted its limitations” (223). The Victoria biography “used to the full the biographer’s power of selection and relation, but ... kept strictly within the world of fact” (224); yet, in the biography of Elizabeth I, Strachey was “urged to invent” (225), particularly as facts are missing. As a result, Woolf is concerned that in this biography there is a “sense of vacancy and effort, of a tragedy that has no crisis, of characters that meet but do not clash” (225). Like her peers, Woolf argues that nonfiction biography must be based on verifiable facts because without them biography may be doomed to fail and the authentic picture of a biographical subject becomes merely the vision of the biographer. She famously wrote in another seminal essay about the genre, “The New Biography”, that

On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one. (1967b, 229)

She praises the granite-like qualities of Strachey’s biography of Victoria, whilst criticising the more fictional approach he takes in his biography of Elizabeth I. Woolf’s view of this tension in biography has been very influential, but it does perpetuate the idea that facts have an intrinsic granite-like quality, whilst many do not. Facts may reflect something that happened, but different people may well see an event or relationship from very different points of view.

Woolf’s Bloomsbury Group contemporary Desmond MacCarthy argues that Strachey should be understood as “an artist in biography” (1932, 90). In his view, for Strachey, “biography was interpretation, and therefore the record, not only of facts, but of the biographer’s deepest responses to them ... His preoccupation was with human nature itself, and only incidentally with the causes of events or of changes” (92). For MacCarthy, “what is most interesting from a biographical point of view, is precisely the interplay of the private and public life” (92), and he believes that Strachey covers both “the dramatic rhythm of certain lives” (98) and “the tone and aspect of their times” (98). As this book goes on to discuss, more recent biographers have also sought some kind of freedom to write versions of a life—focusing on human nature and imposing some pattern on the facts, writing in the context of wider historical

and cultural events, interweaving both public and private aspects of lives and sometimes taking a thematic approach, although without the harsh partisan style adopted in Strachey's debunking. It explores the extent to which some late twentieth century British biography can be understood as addressing the tension between granite and rainbow in longer biographical narratives and, in doing so, creating a form of the pure, or what will be called here personal biography, that Nicolson thought might be impossible, although not everyone will agree with the patterns and the connections they make. To varying degrees, they are in tune with MacCarthy's idea of the biographer as "an artist on oath", albeit that the tune is more passionately rendered in some biographies than others.

An interesting feature of Strachey's short life of Florence Nightingale is the extent to which it makes clear the importance of the role that colleagues played in her professional life. Biographies may be criticised for being too individualistic, focusing on the life of a single subject and excluding the significance of anyone else in that person's life. However, late twentieth and early twenty first century British biography pays more attention to the lives of others in the story of a biographical subject, or subjects, and this is touched on in Strachey's approach to Florence Nightingale. Sidney Herbert MP saw her almost daily for many years and had the power and influence that she needed: "he devoted the whole of his life with an unwavering conscientiousness to the public service" (Strachey 1986, 138) and was appointed Secretary of State at War several times between 1845 and 1859. Dr. John Sutherland was her private secretary for more than thirty years and "surrendered to her purposes literally the whole of his life" (141). These men and others helped Nightingale achieve some hard-earned reforms in health care for the army and were long-serving public servants. If one looks past the fiery woman portrayed in Strachey's sketch, one can also see a study of a towering crusader who had to work closely with others to achieve her ambitions, although in this vignette their lives are primarily seen as abutting on to her own and they are understood as servants to her aims. This is a picture of a woman known for her achievements and then beaten down in old age by the scourge of senility. In the later years of the twentieth century, the life of Florence Nightingale was linked to that of nurse Mary Seacole, voted the greatest black Briton in 2004 and whose first full-length biography, by Jane Robinson, *Mary Seacole: The Charismatic Black Nurse Who Became a Heroine of the Crimea*, was not published until 2005. Ron Ramdin notes, "Given that Victorian Britain was securely founded upon

a combination of race, class and colour, it was incredible that Mary got as far as she did" (2005, 123). Since her death, her life and achievements, particularly during the Crimean War, had been hidden for too long.

In addition to modernist writers and critics, the theories of Freud and the field of psychoanalysis have been influential in twentieth century biography, supporting the growth of a specialist category of biography: psychobiography. Marcus proposes that the "growing impact of psychological and psychoanalytical theories on literary creation and criticism clearly played a central role in shaping the 'new biography', and its emphases on identity rather than event or action" (2004, 205). Freud's essay, *Leonardo da Vinci, A Memory of His Childhood* (1910) was particularly influential. Later in the twentieth century, Leon Edel, biographer of Henry James, is an important figure in the development of this new biography. He believes that a study of a subject's unconscious, including their dreams, could enable the biographer "to recognize the existence of a series of possibilities" (1987, 63) in each subject. Edel calls his approach 'literary psychology', which is "the study of what literature expresses of the human being who creates it" (1982, 12), given that "a literary work is never impersonal" (12):

What literary psychology proposes is nothing less than the exploration of man's way of dreaming, thinking, imagining and behaving—and the exploration is conducted on the terrain of man's imaginative creations. (19)

In *Writing Lives* (1987), Edel proposes four principles for the new biography. The biographer must analyse "the manifestations of the unconscious as they are projected in conscious forms of action" (29); should not identify too closely with their subject, or "fall in love with them" (29); must look for deeper truths, for the private mythology of their subject (29); and must find an appropriate form for their biography, which need not be chronological (30). In the 1990s, psychiatrist Anthony Storr recommends to biographers that because "Writers are so notoriously prone to recurrent depression and to manic-depressive illness ... every aspiring literary biographer ought to know something about these conditions" (1995, 84). On the other hand, Malcolm Bowie reflects on Freud's approach and is concerned about the danger of reductive analysis in biography, including psychobiography, which Storr's approach implies. He warns that "Freud is at once a powerful critic of identification and a helpless victim of its seductions" (2004, 192) in his own biographical

writing. He debunks Freud's life of Da Vinci as "a fantasy of intellectual omnipotence and a series of all too falsifiable conjectures" (188) that produces "a perfectly disreputable biography of a great man" (188). In his view, it is a clear case of the biographer imposing a theory on his subject to suit his own purposes. As Lee makes clear, "Psycho-biography is out of fashion now", certainly in Britain (2009, 87), although it influenced much mid-twentieth century biography. Caine notes that "it is in the United States that there has been the deepest interest in linking psychoanalysis, biography and history. Discussion amongst both biographers and historians about the importance of psychoanalysis has continued up to the present" (2010, 95), whilst in Britain there remains considerable scepticism about its application to history and biography. This reflects a wider scepticism in British biography about the use of theory in the writing of lives.

Nevertheless, Lee comments that both modernist experiments and Freudian biography have "fed into a thriving, rich, popular Anglo-American tradition of professional biography in the mid to late 20th century. Large-scale, realistic, thoroughly historicized Lives were energized by strong characterization and description, humour, candour, and intimacy" (2009, 90). These biographies respond to modernist practice in their "belief in truth-telling, humour, and realism" (Lee 2009, 91), plus an interest in childhood, and "explorations of inner lives as much as public achievements" (91), and in a reluctance "(with a few notorious exceptions) to moralize, take sides, or cast blame" (91). Whether some are more open to the experimental approaches of Boswell and Strachey than others is a rich source of discussion for readers and critics alike. Lee distinguishes these from other more quarry-like contemporary biographies that are

solid, thoroughly researched professional and academic biographies of writers, artists, thinkers, politicians, scientists, and national leaders ... these monuments to hard work and careful investigation are not self-consciously crafted, but set down, as fully and as accurately as possible, a chronological account of a significant life. (91)

Here we perhaps have a definition that comes close to Nicolson's understanding of what he calls applied or scientific biography, more commonly known today as scholarly, documentary or chronicle biography. They are

an important source for popular re-creative biographies, other hybrid forms and biographical novels.

The tension between biography as an art or as a science is discussed by American Paul Murray Kendall in the mid-twentieth century. He draws on Woolf's metaphor about the nature of biography as a form which encompasses both granite and rainbow: "biography is an impossible amalgam: half rainbow, half stone. To exist at all, it must feed upon the truth of facts, and yet to exist on its highest level, it must pursue the truth of interpretation" (1985, first published 1965, xii), it must "build with stone instead of rainbow" (9). Kendall argues that the "highest biographical art is the concealment of the biographer" (12), which, surprisingly, he argues is the practice of Boswell. Biography is more than a record, but it is not a story, because in his view this suggests fiction. He proposes his own definition:

Considering that biography represents imagination limited by truth, facts raised to the power of revelation, I suggest that it may be defined as "the simulation, in words, of a man's life, from all that is known about that man". (15)

Kendall argues that biography "works through effects" (15) and is "an art with boundaries" (15), and that this puts limitations on how a life can be written when evidence is missing and a biographer is inclined to speculate. What Kendall calls the rhythm of a biography must be in tune with the pace of key moments in a life.⁸ He is an advocate of strict chronology: "Biographical time and novelistic time do not mix" (25), and "thematic groupings cannot be permitted" (26). In his view, a biographer can interpret a life, but he or she cannot do so outside the boundaries of the historical movement of a life; so, "the biographer cannot leap from his own time into his subject's time" (28). The boundaries that Kendall places around biography have been challenged and broken by late twentieth century biographers, who do write thematically and shift the rhythm of time in their writing, seeking to make connections between the past of the biographical subject, or subjects, and the present of the biographer. The tensions implicit in Nicolson's arguments have not been fully addressed by Kendall in 1965. He dismisses both literary storytelling, which makes some biography comparable to fiction, and the voice of the biographer, thereby overlooking the copartnership, collaboration and conversation inherent in such a dialogic discourse.

For American literary scholar Richard Altick, also in the mid-twentieth century, Johnson was the first important theorist of biography and “an able practitioner of the art” (1966, 46), as well as “the subject of the greatest biography” (46). He was the “first great advocate of personal, as opposed to public, biography” (48) in which the private life and the details of daily life are as important, or in some cases more important, than the professional or public life of a biographical subject. Altick’s use of the term personal biography is perhaps a more helpful alternative to Nicolson’s description of pure biography, and is referred to further in this book. It is hard to think of anything in life that might be described as pure, and certainly the life of any human being is unlikely to fit the bill. The biographers discussed in this book adhere to Dryden’s and Johnson’s view that by exploring both the public or professional and domestic or private lives of their subjects, looking for details and compelling anecdotes, a biographer might be able to say something important about someone’s life.

In 1986, American biographer Stephen Oates identifies three types of biography: the critical biography that adopts an academic approach, is intellectual, engages our minds not our hearts, and does not bring the biographical subject to life but instead engages “in critical discussion, not in art” (x); “the scholarly chronicle [which] is a straightforward recitation of acts” (x), read for information; and the ‘pure’ biography, identified by Nicolson. The critical biography may be concerned with the professional, publishing and social contexts that shaped an influential author’s writing. However, as boundaries between fiction and nonfiction are blurred in contemporary biography, it is becoming unnecessary to make such rigid distinctions between different types of biography. Nevertheless, a critical biography is less likely to be read by general readers than the more popular personal biography, and it is this wider market that many biographers, including academics, want to reach. Oates identifies the key characteristics of his version of pure biography, as the subject takes

the whole stage, with just enough historical backdrop for us to understand the subject in proper context. Functioning as “the hidden author,” to use Wayne Booth’s term, the pure biographer makes his subject come alive through graphic scenes, telling quotations, apt details, character development, interpersonal relationships, intellectual and emotional struggle, and

dramatic narrative sweep. To give a sense of life unfolding, the pure biographer is careful to tell his story sequentially, never topically. (1986, x)

The ‘pure’ biographer may have psychological insights, but he or she must not lapse into critical commentary or psychoanalytical speculation, and “hopes to engage our hearts as well as our minds” (xi). Reading such material is a cathartic experience, which encourages us, as readers, to come to our own conclusions about the lives we read about in biography. This type of biography humanises history and allows the reader to witness “another’s long journey through the vicissitudes of life” (xi), suffering personal dilemmas like our own. It may be a narrative that has literary qualities, without being about literary lives, and it could include biographies “that seek to illuminate universal truths about humankind through the sufferings and triumphs of a single human being” (xi). Oates’s book discusses the views of ten American biographers about the narrative art of biography. He identifies a number of essential characteristics on which they all agree:

the function of biography is to evoke and dramatize a life through novelistic techniques but not invention itself, and ... it should emerge from painstaking research ... and intimate familiarity with the places where the subject lived and died. All would agree that the writer of lives must be selective in his choice of details, must eschew psychological jargon and write “in the language of literature,” must let the subject “have the whole floor” and “speak in his own words and stance,” must present a portrait that is “dramatically and psychologically coherent” and that makes the subject live in a living world. (xiii)

There are points in this description that could apply to the biographies discussed in this book, which do use the rhetorical skills of literature, are based on extensive research and are often familiar with the places important to a biographical subject or subjects. Details about a life are carefully chosen, a pattern is imposed upon them within the biographical narrative and we can often hear the voice of the subject arising from the story being told. Views may vary about how much historical context is appropriate, and this will be determined by a range of factors, including the extent to which the life, or lives, in question are understood as representative of a wider group of peers and a particular historical moment, or not. However, other aspects of Oates’s analysis are not applicable to

contemporary biographies. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century British narrative nonfiction popular and personal biography does not offer a unified portrait of any one person, given that we are all made up of many different selves that we show to the world in different circumstances. Biography may be dramatically coherent but cannot offer a psychologically unified portrayal. In a biography, it may be possible to hear both the voice of the subject and that of the biographer, or at least the character of the biographer in conversation with his or her subject. The haunting presence of the biographical author in the narrative may well be important, as narrator, and in fact be something to celebrate. The biographer as author may offer a point of view and may speculate, particularly where evidence is missing, and can still leave it up to readers to make up their own minds about the available evidence and the version of a life, or lives, on offer in any particular biography. As Victoria Glendinning notes, biographers are often in the “lies and silences business” (49), and a biography may offer a counterfactual story about what might have happened in someone’s life. Finally, biographies are increasingly not told sequentially but take a thematic approach. This reader will not offer an alternative description or definition of recent British biography in response to Oates or Kendall. My readers are invited to develop their own, but they may find that each time they read a biography it will need to be amended.⁹

In a study of African biography, Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia is critical of Oates’s approach, arguing that “biographies are often a complex combination of life description, literary account, and historical analysis, and whose potential and appeal reside precisely in this multifaceted nature” (2007, 64). She is interested in cases of African historiography which, she argues, blend the forms of analytical and ‘pure’ biography described by Oates: “This synthesis reveals the dialectical connections between individual agency and historical process” (67). The time frame of any life or lives is much shorter than that of society or political history, and the life of any one family or professional network will also ebb and flow differently; so, in some biographies “biographical narrative demands a reconsideration of accepted chronologies and periodization” (69). In these types of biographies, Brizuela-Garcia describes the historical process “as organic as well as chronological in the sense that the links between the past and the present can be found outside the temporal line defined by historians, in the subtle attempts of individuals to establish meaningful connections to their own historical environment” (80). She

proposes a redefinition of agency that “does not necessarily depend on the notions of exceptionality or representativeness” (68); lives can be both “exceptional and representative, demonstrating that these notions are relative and should not be used a priori when it comes to defining or justifying a biographical account” (79). They are determined as much by internal motivation and individual needs as historical contexts. Brizuela-Garcia’s emphasis on the organic nature of history and lives helps to unfetter biographical narrative from rigid chronology and reductive definitions.

Biography increasingly places the lives of an individual or group within the wider context in which they lived. Caine proposes that

Richard Holmes, Victoria Glendinning, Michael Holroyd and Claire Tomalin, for example, all place their biographical subjects within their social and literary worlds with extreme skill, offering insights also into the ways in which added depth can be brought to their inner lives and emotional registers by an understanding of the wider world in which people lived. (2010, 117)

For Caine, recent developments suggest that an individual life has the capacity to both “show in detail the experiences and the impact of historical developments on a particular individual and, through this study, to gain a wider understanding of social and historical change” (2010, 123). A further important influence in recent biography has been the recognition that biography should be concerned with the lives of ordinary people and with minority voices. More lives are being written about non-canonical figures who are special in part because they are representative of a wider group or community. They are important because “they can illustrate how differences of wealth and power, of class and gender and of ethnicity and religion have affected historical experiences and understanding” (Caine 2010, 2). Moreover, a growing number of biographies have been concerned with group lives, such as those of scientists and industrialists, as well as families, friends and professional peers. Writing in 1981, American biographer Margot Peters believes this illustrates that success achieved by an individual is often “a composite effort” (1981, 43) involving a range of people, including overlooked figures in the life of someone famous. For Peters, group biography “sees that the course of human events depends less on individualism than upon the endless ramifications of human interaction, much of which is beyond control or even

consciousness” (44). More and more group biographies and biographies about relationships, friendships and hidden lives have been published over the last thirty years or so. Changes in biography have been part of the growing field of life-writing that, as Caine suggests, encourages “the notion that many, and indeed potentially all, lives are of interest and worth writing and reading about” (2010, 67), as Johnson suggested. The growth of biographies about women, hidden voices and group biography in the late twentieth century has significantly increased the range of people’s lives portrayed in biography, challenging the status of traditional single life biography. Chapter 3 brings the history of the genre up to date and discusses examples of biographies that are representative of these and other significant developments.

It is important to acknowledge the huge impact that feminism has had on the genre, as a discussion of Claire Tomalin’s work illustrates in a later chapter. Feminists in the late twentieth century challenged what they saw as a male dominated genre and envisaged the potential for biography, in partnership with autobiography and other forms of life-writing, to provide a voice for noncanonical subjects, including women, in their roles as both subject and biographer.¹⁰ In 1999, American biographer Paula Backscheider notes that there have been growing numbers of biographies published about the lives of women. Biography now considers ‘ordinary’, private and domestic aspects of people’s lives as important, and supports the recognition of the personal as political. These changes have led to the use of different types of evidence in life-writing, such as photographs, which can “highlight themes that might be overlooked” (1999, 155). One of the major shifts in biography achieved by feminist approaches has been a move away from a focus on professional and public careers, and a turn to the domestic and private in women’s lives, and of those around them. This refocusing came to be thought of in the 1990s as a revisioning of individuals’ lives and of history. For American biographer Linda Wagner-Martin, the “aim, of revising history—or at least women’s personal history—is shared by all biographers of women subjects” (1994, 162), as the lives of women are often hidden from view and constrained by repressive social conventions.

How biographers struggle to reconcile their writing with the expectations of a subject’s family and literary estate has been the basis of a number of complex and salutary tales about the life of a biographer. Perhaps two of the best known are Ian Hamilton’s experience of writing a biography of J.D. Salinger and the aftermath following the publication

of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes biographies.¹¹ *In Search of J.D. Salinger* (1988) is a metabiography about Hamilton's attempts to secure the agreement of Salinger to answer questions about his life and writing, and to publish an experimental biography.¹² Hamilton knew when he first approached Salinger that he would struggle to gain his agreement and he planned his biography, *J.D. Salinger: A Writing Life*, as a quest so that the anticipated rebuffs "would be as much part of the action as the triumphs ... The idea ... was to see what would happen if orthodox biographical procedures were to be applied to a subject who actively set himself to resist, and even to forestall, them" (1989, 4). He was interested in the idea of Salinger: "he was a fictional character, almost, and certainly a symbolic one" (7). Hamilton also makes a distinction between himself and the character of his biographer, "my sleuthing other self" (7). He grapples with the moral issues that dealing with a reluctant subject involves, whilst his "biographizing alter ego" (9) was "merely eager to get on with the job" (9). He writes about "we" throughout his book, tussling with his "companion" who is more unscrupulous. Hamilton also writes about Salinger's different selves, and how he found the author's letters to be performances depending on who he was writing to and why.¹³ Hamilton and his "companion" are primarily interested in "Salinger the writer" (133) and Hamilton reads Salinger's fictional self in his fiction. His character, Buddy Glass, "is presented as having almost everything in common with his author" (156). Hamilton hopes that his "invented biographer figure" (189), his own self-fashioning, would help to lure Salinger "into the open" (189) so that at the end of his biography "there might even be some sort of amusing confrontation, a final scene in which *he* would try to outsmart *us*" (189). Hamilton submitted his manuscript for his biography in 1985 and Salinger took objection to his use of quotations from unpublished letters. Legal action followed and Hamilton was unable to publish. *In Search* is a story about his quest to do so and the type of biography it might have been. Rather than the ghostly conversation that Hamilton had hoped for between the fictional character of Salinger and his biographer alter ego, he regrets that it is as "litigants or foes, in the law school textbooks, on the shelves of the Supreme Court, and in the minds of everyone who reads this, the 'legal' version of my book" (212) that their relationship will be remembered. Their conversation is available in a very different written narrative from the one for which he had hoped.¹⁴

The lives of Sylvia Plath and her husband Ted Hughes have been the subject of battles about authenticity and biographical entitlements since her suicide in 1963. Wagner-Martin has written about her struggles to deal with the constraints placed on her by the Plath estate.¹⁵ Janet Malcolm's *Silent Woman* (1994), about the literary and personal heritage of Sylvia Plath, suggests that the "transgressive nature of biography is rarely acknowledged, but it is the only explanation for biography's status as a popular genre" (1994, 9). Her book is a study of the myths surrounding Sylvia Plath and of Plath's biographers and the huge impact they had on the lives of her husband, Ted Hughes, and his sister and literary executor, Olwyn Hughes. It also becomes a study of the pitfalls of biography itself. Malcolm makes the case that, "Writing cannot be done in a state of desirelessness. The pose of fairmindedness, the charade of evenhandedness, the striking of an attitude of detachment can never be more than rhetorical ruses" (176). In Malcolm's view, it is not possible for a biographer to have an objective, detached perspective; the authenticity of biographical narrative is always open to question, except perhaps in the case of a rigorous scholarly chronicle that only focuses on presenting facts. The version of a life re-created by a biographer may be just wrong if facts are misused or mislaid, or are biased in such a way that would be considered inappropriate. The key challenge for any biography is to be accepted as an authentic and credible account of a life or lives at a particular point in time, based on rigorous research, an adherence to the facts, and bearing in mind the approach to storytelling taken by each biographer. The balance between the pattern of facts re-created and the nature of storytelling in popular biography will influence each portrayal.

Finally, storytelling is part of human existence and, according to Hanna Meretoja, "the role of narratives ... has both an epistemological and an ontological dimension" (2014, 6) concerning notions of subjectivity and identity within dialogic and relational social contexts:

storytelling is a creative, constructive and selective activity of foregrounding and connecting certain aspects of experiences and events while ignoring others; it is a process of producing meaningful order through *reinterpretation*, which does not necessarily have to be a matter of imposition. (19)

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise varying power relations in the ways in which the stories about people's lives are told and how this process will impact on different people's sense of themselves and their ability to influence their own lives. An understanding of biography as nonfiction storytelling reflects the perspective of a range of biographers since the late 1960s. American biographer Diane Middlebrook argues that "biography has never functioned simply as an arrangement of facts; it is a narrative, with a point of view" (1990, 159). She defines issues about authorship as an "awareness that both author and subject in a biography are hostages to the universes of discourse that inhabit them" (165). Not unlike his British peers, Martin Stannard believes that we "tell stories to try to make sense of our lives. We read stories for the same reason. The story of someone else's life, particularly that of a story-teller, is a self-reflexive exercise which should be acutely sensitive to the fragility of truth" (1998, 16). Claire Tomalin comments, "What you look for when you are thinking about a biography are the stories in somebody's life ... I think the impulse behind writing biography is the same as the impulse that lies behind most writing. It's the ability to see stories, to tell stories" (2004, 92 and 94). Lee's definition of biography as, "the story of a person told by someone else" (2009, 5), that is "a form of narrative, not just a presentation of facts" (5), is inclusive and could cover all sorts of forms. She qualifies this by adding that biography could be "the story of several lives ... [and] might tell the story of an animal or a thing rather than a person" (6). Examples of this type of biography are discussed in Chap. 3.

British biography is alert to questions about the nature of storytelling, the social nature of biography, feminism, the genealogical nature of history and the flexibility of form of which nonfiction narratives can make use. This can be seen in the work of Michael Holroyd, Hermione Lee, Richard Holmes and Claire Tomalin, whose writing embraces experimental and non-traditional approaches in their style and form. These biographies interrogate the nature of authorship and the habitat of storytelling, exploring the reading and writing life of both biographer and his or her subject. Jenny Uglow, in her 1993 biography of Elizabeth Gaskell, describes this habit:

Gaskell herself said she could never express herself so well as through stories ... Then ... I began to see storytelling less as a habit than a habitat, subject to its own evolutionary laws. Our ways of reading, like Gaskell's

writing, have their roots in the mental landscapes of our age ... we may accept 'the death of the author', but the habit of stories does not die. (x)

This habitat of storytelling is a useful way to sum up the huge range of life-writing that has emerged since the late twentieth century, whatever the subject matter or the form. Life-writing tells stories about real people but the form they take is increasingly varied.

Philip Holden offers a note of caution that "it is impossible to draw a line between texts that are primarily critical and scholarly in nature, and those that exploit narrative techniques fully to entertain an audience at the expense of scholarly accuracy" (2014, 924). There is certainly no attempt to draw such a rigid line here. Biographies have been and will continue to be written very differently and the genre is flexible, often confounding the law of genre. Some British biographers have taken on Nicolson's challenge to rescue pure or personal biography from oblivion, whilst others have written hybrid forms or opted for fiction, as Nicolson predicted. This is distinct from biography as a form of history or micro-history described by Nicolson as "a study of history expressed in and through an individual" (1959, 140).¹⁶ This book is most certainly not trying to be prescriptive about how biography has been written. Rather, it aims to highlight the distinct characteristics of each biographer's writing, and means to avoid any suggestion of a neat chronological development of the genre over the last fifty years given that discourse is inherently dialogic and in collaboration with both the past and the present. Echoes of Boswell and Johnson, Woolf and Strachey can be found in the work of their contemporary peers and they continue to be in conversation—with each other and with us as their readers.

Chapter 3 discusses examples of contemporary British biography that break some of the genre's more traditional conventions and has experimental characteristics. These hybrids and metabiographies have opened up conversations across different disciplines. As well as changes in the form of biographies, there has been a growth of academic interest in what has come to be called life-writing within British universities, one which encompasses, among others, biography, autobiography, journals, diaries, letters and memoirs. As Lee has noted, "the word 'biography' literally means 'life-writing'" (2009, 5) and biography, based on written narratives, has become part of a wider and more fluid understanding of form and subject matter within life-writing in British academic research and teaching. This growth is now based on an interdisciplinary approach

which includes oral history, film, drama and performance, new media, dance, and the study of the body, science and medicine, memory, place and objects. Specialist journals such as *Biography*, *Life Writing* and *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* now publish academic articles about life-writing. Other journals of interest are the *European Journal of Life Writing* and the *Journal of Medical Biography*. The *Lifewriting Annual: Biographical and Autobiographical Studies* publishes regular issues too. There have been developments both in the number of life-writing courses for practicing and aspiring biographers, including postgraduate courses at the University of East Anglia and the University of Buckingham, and in the development of life-writing centres within British universities, including the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing, the Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research at Sussex University, and the Centre for Life-Writing Research (CLWR) at King's College, London.

In a 2016 conversation, I discussed with Clare Brant, Director of the CLWR, some recent trends in life-writing. There are tremendous developments in digital life-writing, including blogs, Twitter and online platforms. The digital world is a very important place in the twenty-first century for writing about people's lives, and life for many is partly online. This is challenging notions about 'literature' and how we understand narrative. It both encourages global thinking and can give more focus to the local, from the perspective of communities and families. It also makes available more subjects and offers wider opportunities for research to larger numbers of people. There has been a huge growth of interest in the lives of migrants and displaced persons, as well as in genealogies, family history and the exploration of roots, for example in terms of black history and women's history.

In addition, life-writing is increasingly interested in the lives of people in relation both to visual life-writing, including portraits, advertising, biopics and film studies, and to places and different types of spaces, such as houses and graveyards and pilgrimages to specific sites. There is also an interest in how lives connect with nature, such as our relationship with rivers and the lives of objects. Oral history and audio versions of life-writing, including radio, also have a lot of potential to provide life-writing narratives. Biography can be modest as well as canonising and can offer vignettes or particular anecdotes, make the everyday more familiar, and show how fragmentary lives can be. There may be more biographies about biography, in other words, about how the lives of some people have been told at different times by different biographers

and what cultural and historical themes these can illustrate. The growth in biofiction and more inventive forms of biography continues.¹⁷

Finally, Brant and I discussed how the place of life-writing within higher education is growing, and how it is gaining a foothold in post-graduate teaching and becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, joining literary studies to other disciplines. In other disciplines, some scientists are being thought of as life-writers, for example by keeping diaries on their explorations. Life-writing has also helped to link literary studies with medical humanities, for instance in treating case histories as life narratives, or scientists' diaries as autobiography.

NOTES

1. Lee, *A Very Short Introduction*, 29.
2. The Centre for Life-Writing Research at King's College, London, was established in 2007, and is now part of the Arts & Humanities Research Institute. It enables experts and students to share research and exchange ideas with a wider audience. It works on all sorts of topics and periods covering a wide range of genres—biography, autobiography, autofiction, diaries and letters, memoirs, digital life-writing including social media, blogs, audio and video, the visual arts especially portraiture, poetry and medical narratives, including case histories.
3. Sisman, Adam, *Boswell's Presumptuous Task: Writing the Life of Dr. Johnson* (2006), xvii.
4. Several essays in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography* (2004), edited by Peter France and William St Clair, cover the history and development of biography in Antiquity, the Italian Renaissance, seventeenth century England and eighteenth century France, while others cover German and Russian literature and biography. Also see descriptions of the history of biography in Hughes, Kathryn, "Lives in Institutions" *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 25.2 (2010) and Brown, Andrew, *A Brief History of Biographies: From Plutarch to Celebs* (2001). Richard Altick (1966) offers his historical perspective from the mid-twentieth century. David Novarr provides an overview of theories about biography in *The Lines of Life: Theories of Biography, 1880–1970* (1986).
5. Elinor Shaffer gives an interesting overview of nineteenth century objections to Froude's biography much of which resonates with contemporary debates about the nature of historical authenticity (2004, 124–30).
6. Jenny Uglow also empathises with Gaskell and the lives of women "who find that ... they must rely on their own strength, not the illusory strength of father or husband. They have to learn to step out from the

shadow and speak and act for themselves” (1994, 25). In Uglow’s biography of Elizabeth Gaskell, her subject’s story resonates with women today as she makes connections that touch on our own experience:

From the beginning Gaskell’s stance was both radical and feminist, and she continued all her life to make use of these Gothic conventions to link the cruel repression of wives and daughters to the pressure of history and the patriarchal power of the aristocracy. (120)

Other biographies of women writers often cover the public world in which their subjects lived, their professional lives and the constraints placed upon them in their domestic and intimate lives.

7. In 2014, Miller reflects on her experience as a biographer. Miller’s hindsight twelve years after the publication of her group biography about the Brontës is written against the “broader backdrop of contemporary developments in life-writing” (2014, 255), which has moved “towards more experimental or interrogative forms” (256), and a move away “from traditional cradle-to-grave lives of much-written-about subjects” (256). She credits developments in life-writing from the 1980s with concerns about “the nature of narrative, ideology, subjectivity, textuality and hermeneutics” (256).
8. Kendall, *The Art of Biography*, 20.
9. Ben Pimlott offers another useful overview about the nature of popular biography: “Biography is itself. What a biography ought to be like is of course an unanswerable question, although biography in the modern sense operates within fairly tight rules—attention to accuracy, avoidance of suppressio veri most important among them, and a recognition that there is no such thing as a ‘true’ biography: however scrupulous the research, nobody has access to another’s soul, and the character on the page is the author’s unique creation. One aspect of the creativity is the subject-in-context ... far from underplaying social factors, the good biographer highlights them, to give added precision to the story. Good biography is flexible, making unexpected connections across periods of time” (2004, 169).
10. Catherine Parke distinguishes between majority and minority biographies, identifying several characteristics that make them different from each other: “(1) the subject being or not being a member of the dominant culture ...; (2) the author being or not being a member of the dominant culture; (3) the subject being or not being a conventional candidate for biography i.e. one whose importance and interest go without saying; (4) construction of the subject’s identity [is] different from majority biography, often with greater emphasis on group contexts in which the subject lived and worked; and (5) [in minority biography there is] implicit or

- explicit cross-examination of the manner, methods, and assumptions of majority biography” (2002, xvii).
11. Here are just a few other examples. David Lodge has written about Martin Stannard’s experience of writing a biography of Muriel Spark whilst she was alive in “A Tricky Undertaking”, an essay in *Lives in Writing* (2014). Also see Fiona MacCarthy’s experience of dealing with Eric Gill’s literary executor, Walter Shewring, in “Baptism by Fire” (*The Guardian* 24 July 2004). Nigel Hamilton comments that “Brenda Maddox was forced to omit large chunks of material from her print biography *Nore: the Real Life of Molly Bloom* at the behest of Joyce’s quixotic grandson Stephen” (2007, 247).
 12. Edward Saunders discusses differing definitions of metabiography in “Defining Metabiography in Historical Perspective: Between Biomyths and Documentary” in *Biography* 38.3 (2015): 325–342.
 13. Hamilton, *In Search of J.D. Salinger*, 68.
 14. Nigel Hamilton notes that in 1995 the European Union extended the period of copyright over any work to the author’s lifetime, plus seventy years “during which no biographer could quote more than a few lines of a published document, and even less from an unpublished letter, memo, or conversation without the express permission of the subject’s legal inheritors” (2007, 244), and “Congress then passed the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act (1998) to keep the United States in parallel with the European Union directive” (245). This is a restriction that has influenced subsequent biographies.
 15. See “Reflections on Writing the Plath Biography” by Linda Wagner-Martin, in *Literary Biography: Problems and Solutions* (1996), edited by Dale Salwak.
 16. For a recent historical approach to biography see Renders, Hans and Binne de Haan, eds, *Theoretical Discussions in Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory and Life Writing* (2014), and Renders, Hans, Binne de Haan and Jonne Harmsma, eds, *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History* (2017). They define what they describe as the biographical turn as “a methodological and theoretical turn” (2017, 3) that understands biographical research as part of scholarly historical methodology, particularly microhistory: “Biographical research complies with the research procedures of the microhistorian, which are based on the study of source materials and the principles of verifiability” (5). Its focus is on understanding the past and “shaping both current public and historical debates” (6).
 17. Just a few examples of biographical novels are *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bringing Up the Bodies* (2012) by Hilary Mantel, *The True History of the Kelly Gang* (2011) by Peter Carey, *Black Water* (1992) and *Blonde* (2000) by Joyce Carol Oates and *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) by Julia Alvarez.

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