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Article abstract

L'importance de la biographie en histoire tient du fait que, sans elle, il serait difficile d'établir des liens entre l'homme et l'événement; selon l'auteur, c'est là ce qui, en quelque sorte, définit notre discipline. Cependant, depuis les dernières années, à cause du progrès de certaines sciences sociales telles la psychologie et la sociologie, la distinction entre histoire et biographie s'est accrue grandement et la biographie en tant que genre s'est considérablement modifiée.

Ainsi, si l'on jette un coup d'oeil sur les années qui se sont écoulées depuis la deuxième guerre mondiale, l'on constate qu'au Canada français la biographie est passée d'un écrit à tendance hagiographique à une recherche fouillée et critique, puis, à une étude qui tente de plus en plus de camper un personnage dans son époque et son contexte social; de même, du côté du Canada anglais, on est passé d'une première étape où un héros ne pouvait avoir tort à une seconde où il vivait dans son époque mais sans perdre de sa stature pour finalement accéder à une troisième où sa personnalité et sa carrière étaient intégrées dans le temps.

Toutefois, à peine le biographe historien avait-il relevé le défi de l'intégration de son personnage dans une époque donnée qu'il était aux prises avec un nouveau défi, soit celui de la nouvelle tendance en littérature qui s'intéresse maintenant à une psycho-biographie toute concentrée sur la vie intérieure du sujet. Est-ce donc à dire que la biographie historique telle qu'on la connaît n'a plus sa place et qu'il lui faille trouver de nouvelles avenues ? Brown, pour sa part, estime que la biographie est un genre « en soi » qui a besoin de toutes les lumières que peuvent apporter tant la psychologie que la sociologie et l'histoire sociale; de plus, il considère que le biographe se doit de rapporter minutieusement et de façon la plus littéraire qui soit toutes les informations qu'il a pu glaner sur la vie tant privée que publique de son personnage. Sans la biographie, considère-t-il, il ne peut y avoir de « dialectique constante entre l'individu et la société« et cette dialectique est un élément essentiel dans toute recherche historique.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Biography in Canadian History

ROBERT CRAIG BROWN

One evening in the latter stages of the Great War, Newton Rowell and Robert Borden were speaking in a small village north of Ottawa. Rowell spoke first and, when Borden's time came, the audience had been worked into a thoroughly patriotic lather. Naturally enough, they expected another message of crusading zeal from the Prime Minister. For a moment it seemed that Borden would comply. "I want to speak to you this evening on a subject of the utmost national importance", he gravely began. Borden then spent several minutes explaining a recent increase in the tariff duties on sugar.

Now, I do not want you to take this little story too literally. But the eloquence of Desmond's Presidential Address a year ago will not soon be forgotten by those of us who were in Saskatoon. So, at this moment, I feel a bit like Borden must have felt that night. Some of you may now be expecting to hear me speak on a matter of compelling interest. I fear, instead, that my remarks will be rather like the explanation of sugar duties. My subject this afternoon is biography and its place in the writing of Canadian history. As you will see, I have some of the same protectionist sentiments about it that Borden had about the tariff.

As historians we regularly turn to biographies for character sketches to enliven our lectures, our essays, and our books. The analysis of the activities of men and women, of their hopes and of their fears, of their triumphs and of their failures, is what our craft is all about. Donald Creighton, whose work has influenced so much of our thinking about the writing of history and scholarly biography, once remarked that "the historian's first task is the elucidation of character."[1] That task is the fundamental requirement of biography and without biography we would be hard pressed to record the encounter between character and circumstance that defines our discipline. Today, many historians might not agree with Creighton's order of priorities and its implicit emphasis on biographical studies; but we all use biographies and need them.

Still, we are uneasy about this dependence, and more uncertain about the relationship between biography and history than Creighton was in 1947 when he wrote that "biography is a distinct and special brand of historical writing."[2] In one sense that is still true, at least for historians who write biography. In another

1 Donald Creighton, *Towards the Discovery of Canada* (Toronto, 1972), p. 19.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

sense, because of the continuing influence of social science, especially of sociology and psychology, on both biography and history, the distinction between the two has perceptibly sharpened in the last three decades. Life-studies, as our colleagues in literature call them, now take a multiplicity of forms in attempts at a more precise discovery of a subject's personality. And even in conventional biography the emphasis is shifting more and more towards extended analysis and portraiture of personality. At the same time, J.H. Hexter noted some years ago, ". . .historians are solemnly intent on the quest for underlying trends, basic patterns, significant correlation and deeper meanings."[3] Biography is becoming even more internal and individualistic; history more collective. In the contemporary family of historians the historical biographer is something like an eccentric cousin: a bit old-fashioned in his insistence that individuals can and do shape the historical process we evaluate and interpret in our work.

The search for a redefinition of the role of the individual in history, and of the relationships between biography and history, is clearest, I think, in the development since World War II of the writing of the history of French Canada. Here, as in English-Canadian historiography, the techniques used by scholarly biographers have closely followed the methods and shared the assumptions and purposes of writing history itself. Before World War II French-Canadian history had a decidedly hagiographic tone, buttressed by scores of biographical studies written, in Fernand Ouellet's phrase, "d'une façon édifiante."[4] Soon after the war, with the recognition of history as a distinct discipline in the universities of French Canada, and with the rapid professionalization of historical scholarship in Quebec,[5] the character of historical and biographical writing changed. Extreme selectivity in the presentation of evidence, so much a part of the hagiographic tradition, gave way, in Marcel Trudel's *Chiniquy*, to painstaking research and meticulous analysis of evidence. Guy Frégault, in his biography of Bigot, severed another tie with hagiography with his critical evaluation of his subject's career. Bigot, par exemple, fut "l'un des artisans de la défaite"; "le dernier intendant du Canada," a écrit Frégault, "participe à l'avilissement de son siècle."[6]

Several years later, in 1959, W.J. Eccles, whose work reflects a profound understanding of both traditions of Canadian historical scholarship, published *Frontenac: The Courtier Governor*. Because of the paucity of evidence about the greater portion of the governor's life, *Frontenac* could not be, as Eccles wrote, "a full scale biography."[7] Still, its frank critique of Frontenac's career and character made it the most revisionist biographical study of the period. Many readers were

3 J.H. Hexter, review of Wallace Notestein, *Four Worthies*, in *American Historical Review*, (hereafter *AHR*), LXIII (January 1958), p. 396.

4 Fernand Ouellet, "L'histoire sociale du Bas-Canada: bilan et perspectives de recherches", *Communications historiques*, (1970), p. 10.

5 See Marcel Trudel, "Les débuts de l'Institut d'histoire à l'université Laval", *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, XXVII (décembre 1973), pp. 397-402.

6 Cited in Robert Mandrou, "L'historiographie canadienne-française. Bilan et perspectives", *Canadian Historical Review*, (hereafter *CHR*), LI (March 1970), p. 11.

7 W.J. Eccles, *Frontenac: The Courtier Governor* (Toronto, 1959), p. v.

startled by Eccles' approach and a few reviewers were clearly dismayed. "The picture has such dark shadows that the reader inevitably inquires", one wrote, "'How could Parkman and other biographers and historians have been so misled?'"[8] Frégault, however, welcomed *Frontenac* as "un ouvrage qui comporte une grande part de biographie et une bonne part d'histoire du Canada."[9]

In 1970 Robert Mandrou echoed Frégault's point in an essay on the historiography of French Canada. *Frontenac* reflected the trends and met the demanding standards of both schools of historical writing. "M. Eccles", écrit-il, "réussit à donner non seulement un récit de la carrière de son héros, c'est-à-dire une biographie à la manière si caractéristique des historiens anglais. Mais encore, une évocation pertinente des problèmes essentiels posés aux administrateurs du Canada. . . ."[10] Eccles, like the other biographers of those years, among others, Careless, Kilbourn, and especially Creighton, had achieved that subtle and evocative blend of character and circumstance in his portrait of Frontenac's career which was "si caractéristique des historiens anglais." More than that, Frontenac had another utility for younger French-Canadian scholars. The life of an individual could facilitate "la découverte des structures de la société et . . . l'analyse des mouvements qui accompagnent ou précèdent les changements sociaux."[11]

In recent years the role of biography in French-Canadian historical writing has been made explicit. For Cameron Nish, the study of François-Etienne Cugnet was written to illustrate his subject as a "modèle" "bourgeois-gentilhomme."[12] Andrée Désilets, in her important biography of Langevin, declared that her purpose was "éclairer un visage dans sa vérité individuelle et, au-delà de ce visage, la physionomie d'une collectivité à une étape précise de son destin."[13] Biography then, could and should inform and enrich the study of the history of the society. But without a clear linkage to social history, biography is incomplete and its utility is vitiated.

Fernand Ouellet, whose portrait of Papineau in the *Dictionnaire biographique du Canada*[14] is among the most sensitive sketches of a person in our historical literature, made that argument in his Presidential Address to this association a decade ago. His particular reference was to the use of political biography in social

8 Grace Lee Nute, review of W.J. Eccles, *Frontenac: The Courtier Governor*, in *AHR*, LXV (January 1960), p. 371.

9 Guy Frégault, review of W.J. Eccles, *Frontenac: The Courtier Governor*, in *CHR*, XL (December 1959), p. 345.

10 Mandrou, "L'historiographie canadienne-française", *CHR*, (March 1970), p. 10.

11 Ouellet, "L'histoire sociale du Bas-Canada", *Communications historiques*, p. 3.

12 See Peter Moogk, review of Cameron Nish, *François-Etienne Cugnet, 1719-1751*, in *CHR*, LIX (June 1978), p. 222.

13 Andrée Désilets, *Hector-Louis Langevin, un père de la Confédération canadienne, 1826-1906* (Québec, 1969), p. 401.

14 Fernand Ouellet, "Louis-Joseph Papineau", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, X, *1871-1880* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 564-78. Also see Fernand Ouellet and André Lefort, "Denis-Benjamin Viger", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, IX, 1861-1870* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 807-16.

history, but I think he would agree that it is equally true of the biographies of men and women in the churches, in business, in labour relations, or any other endeavour.

> Il faudra sans doute multiplier les biographies d'hommes politiques influents, mais il faudra utiliser d'une façon plus systématique l'approche biographique comme instrument pour détecter les caractéristiques sociales des individus engagés à tous les échelons de la politique, pour évaluer leurs valeurs et leurs comportements. Ce type d'enquête met en évidence une sorte de dialectique constante entre l'individu et la société. . . .[15]

In English-Canadian historiography the redefinition of the relationships of biography to history has been more gradual. Rather than experiencing a sharp break with hagiographic assumptions and goals, the two crafts have steadily refined their techniques and purposes. The early biographies were tendentious and didactic tomes, unburdened by a respect for evidence, in which heroes and heroines could do no wrong. The innovative use of the life and times form of biography in O.D. Skelton's *Laurier* in 1921 was a refreshing departure from this "art of concealment"[16] so assiduously practised by earlier biographers. An official biography, *Laurier* was based on careful research and was scholarly in tone. The novelty of Skelton's approach was not in his portrait of Laurier, which was excessively respectful ("Mr. Laurier") and apologetic. Rather it was in the skilfully documented analysis of the political and economic obstacles confronting his hero throughout Laurier's career. Skelton's *Laurier* became something of a model for a generation of biographers of Canadian public men and women.

The problem with the model was that the skilful delineation of circumstance, reflecting new developments in historical and social science research, was not balanced by an equally sophisticated examination and portraiture of character. If the hero became more believable in this generation of biographies, it was because the environment in which he lived, the challenges which he faced, were sketched out with a new and convincing realism. So convincing, in fact, that the subjects of these biographies became, for some readers, depersonalized symbols of great historical causes. The most articulate critic of this development was Donald Creighton who pointedly argued that this "abstract and inhuman method of presentation" gave us one stylized life of Robert and Francis and Wilfrid Responsible Government.[17] Anyone, or any Liberal, could be squeezed into the mould, glazed with an appropriate constitutional crisis, fired, and taken out as another fragile dime-store figurine commemorating the triumph of self-government. History, he protested, "is made by living men and women, impelled by an endless variety of ideas and emotions."[18] The most persuasive way to demonstrate the axiom, and to challenge the scientism of contemporary historiography, was through biography, biography that centered upon the re-creation of the life of the subject. His

15 Ouellet, "L'histoire sociale du Bas-Canada", *Communications historiques*, p. 15.

16 See Robert Gittings, *The Nature of Biography* (Seattle, 1978), p. 35.

17 Creighton, *Towards the Discovery of Canada*, p. 199.

18 Cited in Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History. Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing: 1900-1970* (Toronto, 1976), p. 220.

own *Macdonald*, Carl Berger observes, "owed as much to techniques derived from romantic history and literature and music as it did to contemporary academic historiography. The most arresting feature of his two volumes was that an entire age and its political history were not merely ordered around Macdonald, but that readers saw the whole scene through his eyes alone."[19]

Creighton's *Macdonald*, like Skelton's *Laurier* a generation before, became the standard against which historical biographies would now be evaluated. But it was a model exceedingly difficult, perhaps impossible, to emulate. The greatness of the book rested upon Creighton's unique artistic talent and a shrewd choice of an unusually attractive, humane subject. Creighton's literary skill needs no elaboration here. But the other half of the equation, the choice of Macdonald as subject, is worth a few more words. Macdonald's time was right and his role in it was perfect for illustrating a great theme, a sweeping interpretation of Canadian history. The tragedy of Macdonald's private life lent itself to dramatic treatment, as did his public personality.[20] No other public figure, not George Brown or J.S. Woodsworth, not Arthur Meighen or Mackenzie King, not even William Lyon Mackenzie or Louis Riel — all subjects of fine biographies in these years — had quite the same proportions of timing and personality, triumph and tragedy, that called for the epic treatment Creighton gave to Macdonald.

Creighton, however, may have gone too far in his attempt to redress the balance between character and circumstance in historical biography. His ardent championship of Macdonald resulted, as Carl Berger puts it, in an "oversimplification of the complexity of political action."[21] Every biographer, of course, runs that risk if he or she is true to his or her subject. That is the bias of biography and I suspect that every historical biographer has been acutely conscious of it since the publication of *Macdonald*.

But awareness of the problem was also heightened in those years by an unprecedented expansion of graduate studies in Canadian history. A growing number of graduate students elaborated the complexity of historical circumstance in systematic examinations of political and diplomatic history and moved on to explorations in intellectual, labour, business, social, and women's history. Their work at once helped to dispel any lingering romantic notions about the role of man in history and stimulated the search for patterns and structures to rationalize our awareness of the historical process. A few, like Ramsay Cook, whose *Dafoe* is a remarkable analysis of the evolution of a man's public ideas and attitudes, began their work with a more limited form of life study. Others, like Blair Neatby and Michael Bliss, turned to biographies of a politician and a businessman after earlier studies in political and business history were completed. Their biographies of King and Flavelle are fine examples of the sustained appeal of carefully bal-

19 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

20 On Macdonald's character, see P.B. Waite, "Sir John A. Macdonald, The Man", in Harvey L. Dyck and H. Peter Krosby, eds., *Empire and Nations. Essays in Honour of Frederic H. Soward* (Toronto, 1969), pp. 36-53.

21 Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, p. 224.

anced historical biography at its best. Neither subject is given epic proportions though both men clearly thought of themselves as men of destiny. Both authors have convincingly integrated their subject's personalities with their careers and their times.

If, then, an attempt to redefine the relationship between biography and history has been made in recent French-Canadian historiography, English-Canadian historical writing has witnessed a gradual process of accommodation of the two crafts over several decades. Beyond a long standing, general complaint that biography has "dominated" in English-Canadian historiography, little has been written about the relationship between biography and history and it could be argued that the relationship will unfold as it is destined to do. That, I think, is a counsel of complacency. A few perceptive reviews of the biographies of King and Flavelle suggest that the accommodation has become more and more difficult to achieve. The reviewers, expressing concern about the ability of the *genre* of biography to fulfil the expectations of political and business historians,[22] are not merely carping about the "dominance" of biography in English-Canadian historical writing. Rather, they are expressing a legitimate concern about the utility of biography to the contemporary historian, a recognition, if you will, that a biography of Robert Borden will answer fewer questions for the historian in the 1980s than the biography of John A. Macdonald did for historians in the 1950s.

At the same time, another challenge to the historical biographer comes from our colleagues in literary studies. In literature a revival of interest in the biographical form of writing has developed into something akin to a sub-discipline replete with a generally accepted methodology. With a few notable exceptions both in Canada and abroad, scholars of literary biography argue that psychobiography is the most illuminating way to explore the life of a poet or novelist. But for the historical biographer, if the experience of our colleagues in the United States is any guide, psycho-biography is as full of problems as it is of promise.[23]

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22 See Christopher Armstrong, review of H. Blair Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King, III, 1932-1939, The Prism of Unity* (Toronto, 1976), in *CHR*, LIX (March 1978), pp. 103-5; and Douglas McCalla, review of Michael Bliss, *A Canadian Millionaire: The Life and Business Times of Sir Joseph Flavelle, Bart., 1859-1959* (Toronto, 1978), in *CHR*, LX (June 1979), pp. 228-9.

23 See James T. Patterson, "Politics, Personality and Psychohistory", *Reviews in American History*, (hereafter *RAH*), I (March 1973), pp. 59-64; and T. Harry Williams, "On the Couch at Monticello", *RAH*, II (December 1974), pp. 523-9, for discussions of the problems with psychobiography in relation to Bruce Mazlich, *In Search of Nixon* and Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*. For the promise of psychobiography, see chapter two, "The Fit in the Chair", in Erik A. Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York, 1962), pp. 23-48; and William B. Willcox, "The Psychiatrist, the Historian, and General Clinton: The Excitement of Historical Research", *Michigan Quarterly Review*, VI (Spring 1967), pp. 123-30. More generally, see the excellent discussions of the subject in John A. Garraty, *The Nature of Biography* (New York, 1964); Robert Gittings, *The Nature of Biography*; and James L. Clifford, *From Puzzles to Portraits, Problems of a Literary Biographer* (Chapel Hill, 1970).

Maria Tippett, in her biography of Emily Carr, demonstrates how rewarding the subtle use of psychological insight can be to the biographer. In similar fashion, Thomas Flanagan's "heuristic biography" has added yet another dimension to the complex personality of Louis Riel.[24] In Canadian historiography, however, few biographers have been tempted to use the methodology of psychobiography, perhaps in implicit recognition that the adoption of this particular technique to discover the interior life of a subject more often that not threatens to wrest the subject out of his or her historical context. That, in turn, widens the gap between the objectives of the biographer and the historian. Equally important is the observation of Robert Spiller, the historian of American literature, about Leon Edel's majestic five volume psycho-biography of Henry James. "If we can accept his premises and his method", Spiller wrote, "Edel's interpretation is magnificently enlightening and convincing. Cool reason suggests, however, that although this interpretation may be the truth and nothing but the truth, it surely is not the whole truth."[25]

I stand by the premise that the biographer's task is to attempt to understand and recreate the life of his subject in all its parts. Very few will achieve the whole truth. Most will need as much luck and insight as evidence to grasp the bits of truth that are revealed in the accessible aspects of their subjects' lives. Some will find the use of psychological techniques more rewarding than others. Even for those who do, it will not be enough. The biographer has an obligation to do more than evaluate his or her subject's inner life or to relate it to what he or she did.

Motivation, to belabour a truism, is only in part inspired and conditioned by a subject's conscious and subconscious drives. The biographer's subject lived in a society, interacted with other persons and with groups, was influenced by and may well have influenced, in turn, private and public institutions, participated as a producer and a consumer in an economic system, shared or rebelled against the cultural and political norms of his society. It is in this context, as an actor in the historical process, that the biographer's subject assumes significance for the historian. And, as enlightening as the use of psychological techniques may be to the biographer, for most historical figures the questions posed and the discoveries made by the social historian are likely to be far more useful and revealing than the science of psychology. Modern historical biography should not be written to satisfy the particular needs of the social historian. Nor is there a promising future for historical biography in the form of some contorted hybrid of biography and the monograph in social, political, economic, or cultural history. Biography must stand on its own. The biographer needs to use all the insight that can be gathered from psychology and from the whole compass of social history. But, in the end,

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24 The case for heuristic biography is argued by Flanagan in "The Lives of Louis Riel: Conventional, Psychiatric, and Heuristic Biography", a paper delivered to the Conference on Biography and Canadian Literature, Wilfrid Laurier University, 29 September 1979.

25 Robert E. Spiller, review of Leon Edel, *Henry James. The Treacherous Years, 1895-1901*, in *AHR*, LXX (February 1970), pp. 943-4.

his obligation remains what it has always been: to disclose with sympathy and candor, and with such literary grace as he can command, as much as he can discover of his subject's private and public life. Without historical biography there can be no historical "dialectique constante entre l'individu et la société." And that dialectic, after all, is an essential element not just of social history but of all historical inquiry.