

Biography as History

Roderick J. Barman

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Article abstract

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Biography as History

RODERICK J. BARMAN*

Abstract

Biography has been for the last fifty years the stepchild of history. Drawing on the author's personal experience as a biographer and a reader of biographies, the article considers the reasons why most historians avoid biography, examines the three unproductive forms of the genre or "no gos" to be avoided by would-be biographers, discusses the five caveats that should guide those writing biographies, and indicates the ways in which biography can be employed to advance our understanding of the past. Despite being a genre abounding in problems, biography is both viable and valuable, a useful but not a major weapon in the historian's arsenal.

Résumé

Depuis un demi-siècle, la biographie est l'enfant pauvre de l'histoire. L'auteur, puisant dans son expérience personnelle à titre de biographe et de lecteur de biographies, étudie ici les raisons pour lesquelles la plupart des historiens évitent ce genre historique. Il en analyse les trois formes stériles (ou embûches à éviter), énonce cinq bémols qui doivent guider les aspirants biographes et indique les façons dont la biographie peut servir à faire avancer nos connaissances sur le passé. En définitive, malgré ses nombreux écueils, la biographie est à la fois viable et valable; c'est un outil utile, mais pas de la plus grande envergure, dans la trousse de l'historien.

Biography is the stepchild of history. It is a genre that is suspect, that doesn't cut the mustard. Granted that plenty of historians, some of them eminent, have written biographies, the reality remains that most historians eschew biography. Many would be appalled to see their name on the title page of a biography, even though, and perhaps because, biography (along with military history) ranks first in popular appeal, as the shelves in *Chapters* or *Indigo* attest. The paradoxical position of biography invites investigation and explanation. As an historian, I have crossed the divide, publishing two well-received biogra-

* I would like to thank the three anonymous readers for their comments which greatly assisted me in revising the text from a conference paper to a full article. I am also grateful to Dr. Jean Barman and Dr. Emily Barman for their advice on several points in this work.

phies.¹ This paper, which draws on my personal experience as a biographer, considers the reasons why most historians avoid biography; examines the unproductive forms of the genre or “no gos” that would-be biographers must avoid; discusses the caveats that should guide the writers of biographies; and suggests some ways in which biography can advance our understanding of the past, surely the principal goal of history.

For me and, I suspect, for many other historians, biography acted in our early years as an entry way into the past. Learning about the lives of important individuals provided knowledge and understanding of particular historical periods. In England during my childhood, important persons were first and foremost Kings and Queens (the capitalization is deliberate and I can still, at the age of 74, reel off regnal dates: “1066 to 1087, 1087 to 1100,” and so forth), or heroes such as Sir Francis Drake and Lord Nelson. Biographies about these people were, as a rule, neither critical of their subjects nor profound in their analysis, but some fine studies were written. I still recall with pleasure Francis Hackett’s *Henry the Eighth* and Arthur Bryant’s three volumes on Samuel Pepys, although Bryant’s attempt to cast Pepys in a heroic mould (“The Saviour of the Navy”) was not even then particularly convincing.²

Adulthood, higher education, and careers should instill a deeper, more rounded, and, hopefully, more sophisticated perception of the past. In my own case, such a perception came quite slowly, in part because my undergraduate training in history at Cambridge University was so traditional. Typical was the remark by one lecturer that “Sir John Neale has been having an affair with Queen Elizabeth for the last twenty years but his wife does not seem to have noticed the fact.”³ The putdown indicates the central place that biography still held in British historiography in the late 1950s. Change was already under way. *Past and Present*, a harbinger of what was to come, had begun publication in 1952. By the time I finished my doctorate at the end of the 1960s, biography had not just fallen from grace, it had become the stepchild of history, a territory into which serious scholars did not venture.

The causes for the change were fourfold. Historical research became deeply influenced by the social sciences. Theory took first place and attention switched from individuals to structures, whether social, demographic, or economic. The second influence was Marxist theory with its emphasis on the dialectic, on the primacy of economic relations, and on the working class. Third were the civil rights, feminist, and peace movements all of which contested the prevailing orthodoxies and exalted the oppressed, the outsider, and the neglected. The past was no longer to be the monopoly of “dead white males.” The final cause for the decline and fall of biography stemmed from the perception that, in contrast to the new theoretical and structural approaches to the past, biography was uni-dimensional and simplistic, a genre worthy only of popular, that is, non-academic historians, who were all too often amateurs.

In my own case, my years as a graduate student and thereafter as an academic did not lead me into a total rejection of biography. To this day I continue to read and enjoy biographies as a relaxation. But graduate training made me aware that the attraction of history lies in grappling with the structures, the complexities, and the contradictions that make up the past. No biography could compare in originality and sophistication to E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, or to Peter Laslett's *The World We Have Lost*.⁴ What has made history so fascinating and rewarding for me has been investigating the commonalities in the past, such as social organization, modes of production, shared outlooks (*mentalités*), gender, high and low cultures, rather than the lives of individuals. My first book, *Brazil: The Forging of a Nation, 1798–1852*, sought to analyze and explain the factors that not only brought together Portugal's disparate 'New World' colonies into a single nation-state, but also kept that nation-state in existence in the face of powerful centrifugal forces.⁵ For clarity's sake as much as anything, I kept the number of individuals mentioned to a minimum, making them ancillary to the narrative and analysis.

Following the book's publication in 1988, I turned to writing a companion and follow-up volume, *Brazil: The Burdens of Nationhood, 1852–1910*. Here I encountered a formidable problem. In my researches and writing, I ran constantly and unavoidably into the figure of Pedro II, Brazil's second emperor, who ruled as a constitutional monarch from 1840 to 1889. Explaining his role and influence in the nation's affairs would consume so much space as to unbalance the entire study. Further, my study would have to take issue with the dominant interpretation of the emperor. A leading Brazilian historian had dismissed "the myth of the personal power (*poder pessoal*), the myth of the emperor as an abusive and authoritarian monarch." In her view "the emperor was rarely able to enforce his will. Imperial policies were actually controlled by the rural oligarchies."⁶ Most historians of Brazil, both Brazilian and North American, did not even condescend in their writings to mention the emperor, much less consider his role in public affairs. The only English-language biography, Mary Wilhelmine Williams' *Dom Pedro the Magnanimous*, published in 1937, was so laudatory, even obsequious, as to make its subject unbelievable and thus inconsequential.⁷ With the centenary of Pedro II's death in 1891 then rapidly approaching, I decided to write a short biography to coincide with the event.

A decade later and 500 printed pages in length, *Citizen Emperor: Pedro II and the Making of Brazil, 1825–1891* finally appeared.⁸ The book was very well received, although it certainly did not merit the hyperbolic assessment — "it approaches perfection in the biographer's art" — appearing in the *American Historical Review*. The long period of writing the text taught me much about biography as a genre of history and my subsequent experience has deepened my

understanding of the unproductive forms of biography, the “no gos” which are to be avoided and the caveats to be followed when undertaking a biography. The main “no gos” are threefold: first, what may be termed celebratory biography; second, psychobiography; and, third, what may be called narrative biography. The caveats are fivefold.

Celebratory biography has been the first and most common of the “no gos.” It focuses on the “great man” (and I use the term “great man” advisedly) across his life span, dwelling on his exceptional qualities, his outstanding character, his notable achievements, often in the face of difficulties and even adversity. The external world is the great man’s oyster; it exists for his use and his advantage. It is subordinate to him, exerting scant influence on him. The individual’s internal world, the factors that “make people tick” and drive their conduct, receive little or no attention. Personal life is either skirted or excluded. Indeed, in some studies that exclusion is deliberate, either to avoid anything sully the public image or on the grounds that private life is irrelevant to the public man. Such inhibitions did not necessarily entail superficiality in research or in treatment of public life. Winston Churchill’s biography of his ancestor, *Marlborough, His Life and Times*, ran to four volumes and Donald Creighton’s *John A. Macdonald* to two.⁹

Only rarely have the authors of celebratory biography chosen as their subjects those who were on the outside in terms of class, gender, or race. The exceptions are customarily individuals who have surmounted outsider status and achieved significance. Women who have done so include rulers such as Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Victoria, and others such as Florence Nightingale, who have been deemed heroes.¹⁰ In these studies, women are treated as if they were men with unusual characteristics. Jonathan Croall’s recent biography of the British stage and film personality Sybil Thorndike who was, admittedly, a larger-than-life character avoids any discussion of gender, specifically the challenges faced by females in the theatre world of the early twentieth century. As to the rags to riches saga, James A. Mackey’s *Little Boss: The Life of Andrew Carnegie* is exemplary of the poor boy who through the accumulation of wealth transcends his origins and becomes a great man.¹¹

The second pitfall can be identified as psychobiography, initiated a century ago by Sigmund Freud with his article “Leonardo da Vinci and A Memory of his Childhood” and made fashionable from the end of the 1950s by Erik Erikson’s *Young Man Luther; a Study in Psychoanalysis and History*.¹² The genre is still very much with us, although now undertaken by psychologists, among them William Todd Schultz, who defines psychobiography as “the analysis of historically significant lives through the use of psychological theory and research.”¹³ Here the focus is, in contrast to celebratory biography, on the individual’s inner personality, which governs and explains his public life. Psychoanalytical theory, usually Freudian, is used to discover to what “person-

ality type” the great man’s character conforms. The external world is simply that – external and ancillary, playing no significant role in the analysis. The individual analyzed is almost invariably a man driven by a personality disorder, one that makes him simultaneously successful and notorious. Typical of the genre is Bruce Mazlish’s *In Search of Nixon; a Psychohistorical Inquiry*.¹⁴ Psychobiography deals, just as much as celebratory biography does, with great men. Both of them privilege, if in different ways, the individual and his uniqueness. The subject of a psychobiography may be a villain, but he is still a great man.

While the third pitfall, narrative biography, differs in type from the first two, it constitutes no less of a danger.¹⁵ The pitfall lies in structure, in the author’s perception that the individual’s life is to be presented as a descriptive account of its course from birth, through adolescence, maturity, and old age, to death. In narrative biographies, the opening chapter focusing on childhood and adolescence is usually the most effective, in large part because the process of growing up imposes a certain dramatic unity on the text and the evidence to be considered is more restricted. Thereafter the narrative biography loses focus and thus insight. Incident follows incident in chronological order, detail is piled up upon detail with little or nothing to distinguish the important from the peripheral. No attempt is made to impose order or significance on what is recounted. Little or nothing is done to analyze and explain the subject’s character, what made him or her tick. The chapters, rather than being constructed around and to emphasize a theme or an insight, are not much more than containers for a collection of miscellaneous facts. It might be expected that novelists, whose craft involves the presentation of personality and the creation of drama, might avoid this particular pitfall, but such is not the case, as Margaret Drabble’s *Angus Wilson* and, even more so, Charles Foran’s *Mordecai: The Life & Times* attest.¹⁶ In the latter, the titles, such as “M.R. WAS HERE” and “An Old Jacket, Worn and Torn,” given to both the parts and the chapters are not only triumphs in irrelevance but indicative of the text’s lack of structure and coherence. On page 344, in the middle of a prolonged description of Richler’s reaction to his father’s death, we are informed that his brother asked him, as they sat *shiva*, why he drank so much: “If I don’t drink, I can’t write,” was the reply. There follow six sentences discussing the relationship between Richler’s drinking and his creativity, a key aspect of his life. But that is all. The narrative stream resumes with no further use of this insight, beyond constant factual references to drinking (and smoking, clearly also indispensable).

The writing of *Citizen Emperor: Pedro II and the Making of Brazil, 1825–1891* made me aware of the “no gos” that a biographer must avoid. It also taught me about the caveats, five in all, which the biographer must watch for. The first caveat is the need to place at the centre of the study “what makes peo-

ple tick,” that is, the dynamics of the individual’s personality. In other words, the historian becomes detective, reconstructing the character traits — the motivations, inhibitions, idiosyncrasies — which make up a particular individual. Such a reconstruction makes it possible to understand how an individual handled decision making. Accordingly, historical figures, instead of being merely flat and simplistic, become the rounded, complex personalities that they were in their own times. The natural objection to this first caveat is the comment “but this is in no way different from psychobiography!” The objection lacks force, since most biography eschews dependence on Freudian or other psychoanalytical theory and, in contrast to psychobiography, integrates the individual’s personal or character development into the larger setting in which she or he lived.¹⁷

The centrality of the first caveat, understanding “what makes people tick,” inexorably involves the second caveat, the feasibility of biographical study in light of the evidence available. There must be a sufficiency of material, both in quantity but even more in quality, on which to base an investigation. Important people do generally, but not invariably, leave behind far more records than do ordinary people, although many of the latter have generated, either directly (as in diaries and memoirs) or indirectly (as in police and judicial records), enough evidence for the biographer’s purpose. However, the resulting biography has to correspond, in its scope (article or book), to the quality of the evidence. Take the life of Sophie Morigeau, recently studied by Jean Barman. A woman of mixed indigenous and white descent, Sophie lived life on her own terms, flourishing as a trader and packer in the Eastern Rockies. Fascinating as Sophie was, insufficient evidence exists to justify anything longer than an article analyzing her character and her activities.¹⁸ In contrast, despite limited evidence about Rose Henderson’s character and life, Peter Campbell devotes almost 300 pages to her existence as a child advocate, peace activist, labour organizer, and socialist in Montreal and Toronto from about 1910 to her death in 1936.¹⁹ A study of half the length, omitting the digressions explaining what made her within the progressive movement “someone to forget rather than to remember,”²⁰ would have been more effective.

Biographers often face the related problem that the surviving evidence is thin or non-existent on crucial factors concerning their subjects’ character or conduct. The temptation is, especially when writing about ordinary people who lead unordinary lives, as Linda Colley did about Elizabeth Marsh, whose life spanned Jamaica, England, Minorca, Morocco, and India; or as Rusty Bittermann did about William Cooper who moved between Scotland, London, Prince Edward Island, and California, to supplement the evidence by imputing thought and action in accord with what the biographer deems to have been the attitudes and practices of the time.²¹ As Bittermann admits, no information exists as to where Cooper’s home port was during his years as a ship’s captain

from 1812 to 1827; but that fact does not inhibit the author from assuming that he lived in London and from stating that “Cooper would have become familiar with” and “would have come to know” different aspects of that city, which are then described.²² Similarly, on the basis of Elizabeth Marsh’s journal, with entries so factual and conventional as to be trite, kept during her travels in India during 1775 and 1776, Colley constructs a towering edifice of deduction about her subject’s attitudes and actions.²³ Such inferences strip agency from the subject of the biography because they rest on the assumption that, since most people believed this or acted thus at that moment of time, the individual under study cannot have thought and behaved otherwise.

The situation concerning evidence by no means always involves an insufficiency of material. If a plenitude of information exists about an individual, the biographer must be vigilant not to lose a sense of proportion. It is easy to become so engrossed in the individual’s character and actions that every detail is recounted to the reader. Such is the case with Foran’s *Mordecai*, even after vigorous pruning by the press’ editor.²⁴ *Citizen Emperor*, viewed in retrospect, would have profited from being more concise (perhaps one quarter shorter). I was too concerned at the time about producing an in-depth and, hopefully, definitive study of the man who ruled Brazil for almost half a century. Restraint and selectivity are essential. Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* which, with unsparring wit and consummate terseness, debunks the characters of four worthies, is exemplary of what can be done.²⁵

The second caveat is the necessity for distance between biographer and subject. Biographers have to be so intimately acquainted with the individuals they study that they may be said to get into bed with them, while simultaneously (to mix metaphors) remaining at arm’s length from them. Intimacy must not result in a loss of perspective and independence of judgement. It is possible to feel sympathy, even respect, for the individual, but identification is disastrous (hostility being perhaps yet more grievous).²⁶ The biographer must not conceive and present the individual studied in the terms that he or she desires. Lady Diana Cooper’s charms, formidable even in old age, so entranced Philip Ziegler that, as Clive James’s review of *Lady Diana Cooper* noted, “Ziegler has reason to consider himself astute, but he perhaps ruled out too soon the possibility that the queen of the put-on had spotted the ideal patsy.”²⁷

Linked to distance is motive, the third caveat. In undertaking the study, the biographer must strive, as far as possible, to avoid ulterior motive. Ideally, the historian sees a lacuna in the existing historiography and seeks to fill it. More realistically, the choice is made because the individual’s personality or achievements catches the biographer’s interest or serves to substantiate the biographer’s perception of the past. Two types of ulterior motive should, nonetheless, be avoided because they essentially show no respect for the individual’s character and actions. In the first case the individual selected is simply

a lay figure whose personality and achievements are subordinated to the author's interest in other topics. Peter Campbell's study of Rose Henderson seems to be most interested in discussing how and why her thought and actions diverged from what received scholarship deems to be correct. Typical is the observation: "Here Henderson appears to be the Victorian social crusader, riding to the rescue of young damsels in distress, exaggerating the threat and self-righteously providing the solution."²⁸

The second form of ulterior motive occurs when the author studies an individual perceived to be an exemplar, in order to inspire and to serve as a model for a specific audience. The individual thus serves both to legitimize a cause and to advance it. A principal problem with Sheila Rowbotham's study of Edward Carpenter, a pioneer advocate of sexual liberty in general and gay rights in particular, lies in her presentation of him as an exemplar whose thought was profound and exerted a potent influence on subsequent generations. E.M. Forster's evaluation, made in the aftermath of Carpenter's death, is much more in accord with the evidence: "Astonishing how he drains away . . . I suppose there was something there, but as one touches it it's gone."²⁹ The audience for whom the chosen individual is to constitute an exemplar can, I should add, be very small, in fact a single person, namely the author him or herself. In 1932, Duff Cooper published his biography *Talleyrand*. This study of a central figure in France of the Revolutionary, Napoleonic, and Bourbon periods, is elegantly written, incisive in approach, and frank in its handling of Talleyrand's personality and acts. However, for myself, on re-reading the work, I could only conclude that the book sprang from Cooper's desire, formed at the age of 28 (when "I determined to write something about Talleyrand before I died"), to emulate Talleyrand, his diplomatic triumphs, political skills, social eminence, and womanizing.³⁰ In other words, biography can serve as authorial wish fulfillment.

The final caveat in biography, the interaction between the individual and the larger world, is the one I want to stress. It was Donald Creighton who, equating biography with history, defined the latter as "the record of the encounter between character and circumstance," which raises a whole range of questions.³¹ What is the relationship between the individual and her or his surrounding environment? What autonomy does the individual possess in terms of character and action? To what degree does she or he possess agency, the ability to shape the surrounding world? To what extent does the external world form the individual and his or her personality so that, whatever the appearance of autonomy and agency, the conditioning in fact guides, and even controls, the individual's life? Much scholarship, among which the studies of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau stand out by reason of their sophistication and influence, has been devoted to elucidating these questions. For Bourdieu the larger world is composed of competitive "fields" with economic, social, politi-

cal, and cultural attributes, and “classes” co-exist with these fields. “Agents” (Bourdieu eschewing the concept of the individual) are formed by and act within a *habitus*, the mind set and behaviour patterns particular to a class, that an “agent,” unreflecting, absorbs and lives by. Michel de Certeau in his *The Practice of Everyday Life* equates the larger world with a congeries of self-perpetuating structures or institutions of power which employ “strategy” to ensure their survival. Through this larger world, which Certeau compares to the buildings, streets and byways of a metropolis, the individual learns to navigate her or his way and to use “tactics” to make the power structures work to his or her best advantage.³²

This last caveat became of prime importance to me as I wrote the text of *Citizen Emperor*. What influence did Pedro II possess on politics and also on public life in general? How did his first years of life and his exalted and isolated position shape his character and development? What impact, if any, did he have on the long-term — and for that matter the short-term — development of Brazil? The national scene — the structures, if you will — was favourable for Pedro II at the start of his reign. The 1824 constitution made the monarch the guardian of the political system, giving him sweeping powers. Political troubles during the 1830s discredited any alternative form of governance, and Pedro II’s upbringing made him the embodiment of the culture that the élites desired for their country. As an individual, in part due to a lonely childhood, the emperor had developed qualities — total self control, inexhaustible patience, iron will, great tolerance, and considerable guile — that fitted him well for his position. My study analyzes how the interaction between the environment and the individual unfolded, each influencing and changing the other. The very qualities that at first assured the emperor of success as a ruler contributed, along with changing economic and cultural factors, to modifying the structure and to making the monarchy dispensable. The consequence was the overthrow of Pedro II in November 1889 in favour of a republic.

Writing a biography of Brazil’s second monarch raised in my mind the final and crucial question to be considered here: what role does biography play in history, specifically in advancing our understanding of the past? Studying an individual within her or his contemporary setting does, I would argue, provide an entry way to understanding the structures — social, cultural, political, and economic — of the period in which he or she lived. Biography can provide the means for analyzing the dominant structures and discourses, as I came to appreciate when in the Royal Archives at Windsor I read the diaries of the longest-reigning British monarch. The text was so engrossing that I could not stop. “But this is so Victorian!,” I exclaimed. Then I paused and chided myself. Of course the text was the quintessence of the Victorian, the writer being no other than Queen Victoria. The individual personified and, it could be argued, did much to shape the era. Indeed, in his tribute to the Queen, Lord Salisbury

observed: "I have said for years that when I knew what the Queen thought I knew pretty certainly what view her subjects would take, and especially the middle classes of her subjects."³³

History involves, however, much more than identifying and analyzing dominant structures and discourses or recording the achievements of the successful. No society is harmonious; it always contains competing structures and incompatible discourses. It is the subordinate structures and the unorthodox discourses that were for long neglected in historical scholarship (unless they eventually transmuted into dominance). The injustice of this neglect E.P. Thompson pointed out in a much quoted passage:

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'Utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not.³⁴

The evidence relating to unorthodox discourses and subordinate structures of the past is often scanty, diverse, and difficult to handle when studied in the abstract. By studying the life of an individual who grew up in or adopted and often flourished in an environment substantially at odds with the dominant discourses and structures, the historian gains a window into the complexities of a particular era and so an appreciation of the realities of thought and action for that individual or the larger group of people of whom he or she was part. Obviously, the biographical approach does not and cannot supplant the standard bird's eye view of the past, but it can correct, supplement, and enrich that view.

Not all those who existed outside of the dominant structures and discourses were necessarily poor and oppressed. Edward Carpenter was the child of privilege, the grandson of an admiral. In the early 1870s, a Cambridge don in holy orders, he could have become tutor to the sons of the future Edward VII. On his 80th birthday in 1924, he received an album of congratulations signed by the ministers in Ramsay MacDonald's first cabinet.³⁵ From the mid-1870s until his death in 1929, Carpenter was a high minded, indefatigable advocate in speech and writing simultaneously of socialism, sexual liberation, anti-colonialism, women's rights, vegetarianism, Eastern mysticism (proto-New Ageism), nudism, the simple life (proto-environmentalism), and rational dress (including popularizing sandals).³⁶ Since Carpenter played (thanks in good part to his never being less than a gentleman) a central role in all these causes, his life both encapsulates and permits the study of a whole range of unorthodox discourses and their development over several decades, something that would be too diverse for treatment in a standard historical approach.

The utility of the biographic approach for the study of subordinate structures and counter discourses is apparent from Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840*.³⁷ Dominating McCalman's study is the figure of Robert Wedderburn. Born in the early 1760s, offspring of a physician and plantation owner in Jamaica and of Rosanna, a slave woman, Wedderburn escaped from the constricted life of a freedman in Jamaica by enlisting in the Royal Navy. Settled in England, he spent the rest of his life in unflinching warfare with the political, religious, racial, and social conventions of his day. His struggles generated endless pamphlets, court cases, and surveillance reports by government agents. McCalman's study draws on a wide range of other materials but, were those on Wedderburn excluded, the book would be quite thin and uninteresting.³⁸ It is Wedderburn who provides the focus for the discussion of the various strands of radical counter-culture and underworld in Regency England. Indeed, it can be argued that recasting the book as a formal biography of Wedderburn would have resulted in a more dynamic and focused study.

The utility of biography as the means of analyzing and understanding individuals and of groups whose views and conduct do not conform to what posterity, having knowledge of subsequent developments, deems to be their best interest, was made clear to me when I came to write my second biography. Because *Citizen Emperor* was well received, winning a major scholarly prize, I was commissioned to write a biography of Pedro II's daughter and heir to the throne, Princess Isabel.³⁹ She served as regent for her father three times during his travels abroad, but the military coup of 15 November 1889, which overthrew the monarchy, sent her into lifelong exile. The princess is celebrated for her role in the abolition of slavery in Brazil on 13 May 1888, being termed *A Redentora* (The Redemptress). Otherwise she has been simultaneously unknown and disliked — dismissed as ugly, stupid, a religious fanatic, and — worst of all — a woman. Only three biographies of Princess Isabel, all in Portuguese, existed when I accepted the commission and all three were of the celebratory type mentioned earlier.⁴⁰

Using the research materials I had gathered for my study of her father, I wrote a first and in retrospect unsatisfactory draft. Then I went to Brazil where I gained access to all of Princess Isabel's personal correspondence, from childhood to old age.⁴¹ The letters showed that the princess, while not stupid, was utterly without guile. She wrote what she felt and thought in the moment. The correspondence provided a clear picture of her character. More importantly, it revealed to me what it was to be a woman at that time and how women of that era interacted within a world created by men, dominated by men, and serving men's interests. I had previously read a good deal of scholarship on gender but always as an outsider. Now I returned to it with a fresh vision and I used that vision to write what is simultaneously a life history and, as the book's subtitle

Gender and Power in the Nineteenth Century indicates, a study of the interaction between women and the public sphere a century and a half ago.

Princess Isabel of Brazil conforms to the first and the last of the five caveats previously discussed. It provides a systematic, in-depth analysis of the princess' personality and the influence of her personality on her life. It also provides a window onto the larger structures of gender and politics of that era. Additionally, and much more controversially, it provides a case study of how individuals and their specific environment did not necessarily conform to the dominant historical interpretations — interpretations that are often metanarratives — of the period in which they lived. Princess Isabel was married off at the age of 18 to a man chosen by her father whom she had first met six weeks before the wedding. Her first pregnancy ended, thanks to the incompetence of her male doctors, in a labour lasting 50 hours and a still birth. Despite this experience, the princess had no choice but to become pregnant again, to provide a son for eventual succession to the throne. During the delivery, that son suffered damage to his left shoulder that left his arm unusable for life. Isabel gave birth to two more sons, both deliveries being prolonged and difficult.

These experiences might have been expected to make the princess rebel against the prevailing gender relations and to work for women's rights. The opposite occurred. She sought and found consolation and security within traditional femininity, embracing Ultramontane Catholicism. The centre of her life was not the public sphere to which her birth destined her, but rather the church and family life. She had no taste for state affairs, which she perceived to be her father's prerogative, and she showed no talent for public relations. In this respect, the monarchy's overthrow and her exile from Brazil, much as she resented the latter, were a blessing in disguise. Princess Isabel spent the rest of her life in France, devoting herself to religious duties and to good works.

Not surprisingly, the reception of my second biography has been mixed, some reviewers praising it, others disliking its treatment of gender. One instructor told me that "my students love it and hate it. 'How could any man understand so well what it is like being a woman?' they say, 'but how could a woman behave in that way?'" or words to that effect.⁴² The students' reaction is understandable. The book is written against the grain of what the dominant historiography postulates about women in the Western World in the last century and a half.

Biography has been, for a half century or more, the stepchild of history. As this paper has tried to show, biography does not warrant that status. The genre can be employed to advance our understanding of the past, particularly to elucidate the relationship between the individual and the larger world and to study individuals (and thus groups) whose actions and beliefs do not, in various ways, conform to the dominant discourses and structures or, more precisely, what posterity postulates those to have been. That said, biography can make no claim to

be central. It is a useful, but not essential. As my discussion of the three “no gos” and the five caveats indicates, biography is a genre abounding in problems. It must be employed with much caution. It can all too easily privilege the individual, narrate rather than analyze, and provide an outlet for authorial ego. Nonetheless, biography is both viable and valuable.

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RODERICK J. BARMAN is Professor Emeritus, Department of History, University of British Columbia. An expert on nineteenth century Brazil, he has published three books and numerous articles.

RODERICK J. BARMAN est professeur émérite au Département d’histoire de l’Université de Colombie-Britannique. Il est expert dans le domaine de l’histoire du XIX^e siècle brésilien et a publié trois livres et de nombreux articles.

Endnotes:

- 1 Roderick J. Barman, *Citizen Emperor: Pedro II and the Making of Brazil, 1825–1891* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); and *ibid.*, *Princess Isabel of Brazil: Gender and Power in the Nineteenth Century* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002). The latter has been translated into Portuguese, *Princesa Isabel do Brasil: gênero e poder no século XIX* (São Paulo: UNESP, 2005).
- 2 Francis Hackett, *Henry the Eighth* (New York: H. Liveright, 1929); and Arthur Bryant, *Samuel Pepys: the Man in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933); *ibid.*, *Samuel Pepys: The Years of Peril* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935); *ibid.*, *Samuel Pepys: The Saviour of the Navy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938). Neither author was an academic historian.
- 3 The occasion (in 1956 or 1957) I vividly recall and also the lecturer’s delight in his *bon mot* and its reception, but his name escapes me. The reference was to Sir John E. Neale, *Queen Elizabeth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), and his subsequent studies of the Elizabethan age.
- 4 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963); and Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London: Methuen, 1965).
- 5 Roderick J. Barman, *Brazil: The Forging of a Nation, 1798–1852* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
- 6 Emilia Viotti da Costa, *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 216. A new edition, with significantly a chapter added on gender, appeared in 2000.
- 7 Mary Wilhelmine Williams, *Dom Pedro the Magnanimous, Brazil’s Second Emperor* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937).
- 8 Barman, *Citizen Emperor*.
- 9 Winston S. Churchill, *Marlborough, His Life and Times*, 4 vols. (London: George G. Harrap, 1933–1938); and Donald G. Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1952); *ibid.*, *John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955). In both these works, the flaws and frailties of the heroes while admitted are explained or smoothed away. The real problem in both cases lies in the author’s lack of distance from his subject.
- 10 Starting with Sarah A. Southall Tooley, *The Life of Florence Nightingale* (London: S.H. Bousfield, 1905), almost 60 biographies in English have been published. Studies of her

thought and other aspects of her life are also numerous, not to mention foreign language biographies.

- 11 Jonathan Croall, *Sybil Thorndike: A Star of Life* (London: Haus Books, 2008); and James A. Mackay, *Little Boss: The Life of Andrew Carnegie* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1997).
- 12 Sigmund Freud, "Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 11, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 59–137; and Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958).
- 13 Schultz continues, "Its aim is to understand persons, and to uncover the private motives behind public acts, whether those acts involve the making of art or the creation of scientific theories, or the adoption of political decisions." "Psychobiography is not biography, although all psychobiographies make use of biographical data," because "biography is about the WHAT, psychobiographies are about the WHY, the question of motives." See <<http://www.psychobiography.com/>> (viewed 30 June 2010) maintained by William Todd Schultz, who has edited *Handbook of Psychobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Alan C. Elms, *Uncovering Lives: The Uneasy Alliance of Biography and Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), concedes that the (for him correctable) weaknesses of the genre are "theoretical narrowness," "methodological looseness," "passion for pathography," and "explanatory reductionism," 9.
- 14 Bruce Mazlish, *In search of Nixon: A Psychohistorical Inquiry* (New York: Basic Books, 1972). Mazlish subsequently published *James and John Stuart Mill: Father and Son in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), and *Kissinger: The European Mind in American Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1976). Mazlish then moved on to other genres of scholarship.
- 15 I was uncertain of the applicability of this term until, at the British Columbian National Award for Non-Fiction Literature ceremony held on 31 January 2011, Charles Foran, whose *Mordecai: His Life & Times* (Toronto: Random House, 2010) was on the short list for the prize, described his biography as "a narrative."
- 16 Margaret Drabble, *Angus Wilson: A Biography* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1995); Foran, *Mordecai*. What probably influenced the authors' approaches was the fact that, at the time of writing the respective biographies, Wilson's partner, Tony Garrett, and Richler's widow, Florence Mann Richler, were both alive and indispensable sources of information.
- 17 I originally included in the introduction to *Citizen Emperor* the sentence, "This is not a psychological biography," by which I meant that it was not a psychobiography. In the final text I struck the words out, because I had come to appreciate that a biography can incorporate psychological analysis without becoming a psychobiography.
- 18 Jean Barman, "Sophie Morigeau, Free Trader, Free Woman," in *Recollecting: Lives of Aboriginal Women of the Canadian Northwest and Borderlands*, eds. Sarah Carter and Patricia McCormack (Edmonton: Alberta University Press, 2011), 175–95. In a personal communication with the author (25 January 2011), Barman informed me that she had pushed the available evidence as far as (and perhaps beyond) she could.
- 19 Peter Campbell, *Rose Henderson: A Woman for the People* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010). Henderson apparently lived a conventional life until widowed in January 1904.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 276.
- 21 Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007); and Rusty Bittermann, *Sailor's Hope: The Life and Times of William Cooper, Agrarian Radical in an Age of Revolution* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).
- 22 Bittermann, *Sailor's Hope*, 31, 35.
- 23 Colley, *Ordeal*, 185–229. The characteristics of the journal can be judged from the facsimile page reproduced on page 188.

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- 24 At the British Columbian National Award for Non-Fiction Literature ceremony held on 31 January 2011, Foran in his speech thanked his editor at Random House for editing down a sprawling manuscript.
- 25 Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians: Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr. Arnold, General Gordon* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1918).
- 26 Hostility is usually counterproductive, defeating the biographer's intent; witness the negative reception of Richard Aldington, *Lawrence of Arabia: An Inquiry* (London: Collins, 1955).
- 27 Philip Ziegler, *Lady Diana Cooper* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981); and review in the *London Review of Books*, 18 February 1982, and in <<http://www.clivejames.com/snakecharmers/diana-cooper>> (viewed 30 June 2010). Lady Diana Cooper did not die until 1986.
- 28 Campbell, *Rose Henderson*, 201.
- 29 Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (London: Verso, 2008). The author's evaluation is on pages 454–55, while E.M. Forster's comment in his *Commonplace Book* is given on page 440.
- 30 Duff Cooper, *Talleyrand* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932). The biography was well received and has been reissued at least three times by different publishers. On the motivation for the book, see Duff Cooper, *Old Men Forget* (London: Hart Davis, 1953), 168, 179.
- 31 Donald Creighton, *Towards the Discovery of Canada: Selected Essays* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972), 19. In fairness to Creighton, the passage preceding this statement should be quoted: "The historian's first task is the elucidation of character; but characters — human beings — are not totally free and independent. They have a definite and significant position in time and space. The historian's second task is the re-creation of the circumstances — the situations, problems, opportunities, and difficulties — which confront his characters. He must make clear and vivid the setting in which they are compelled to act."
- 32 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
- 33 Passage in *Hansard*, 25 January 1901, cited in Andrew Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (London: Orion Books, 2000), 795.
- 34 Thompson, *Working Class*, 12–13.
- 35 Rowbotham, *Carpenter*, 32, 425.
- 36 The only counter-discourse of the period that Carpenter did not embrace would seem to have been pacifism, although from 1915 onwards he did oppose the war.
- 37 Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- 38 Wedderburn figures in McCalman, *Underworld*, 2–3, 43–4, 51–63, 69–72, 124–51, 158–62, 189–97, together with other single page references.
- 39 The commissioning press was Scholarly Resources, now an imprint of Rowman and Littlefield.
- 40 Pedro Calmon, *A princesa Isabel "a redentora"* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1940); Hermes Vieira, *A princesa Isabel no centenário abolicionista do Brasil* (São Paulo: São Paulo Editora, 1941); and Lourenço Luiz Lacombe, *Isabel a princesa redentora biografia baseada em documentos ineditos* (Petrópolis: Instituto Histórico de Petrópolis, 1989).
- 41 I must once again acknowledge with gratitude the kindness of the late D. Pedro Gastão d'Orléans e Bragança, Princess Isabel's grandson, in giving me free access to the family archive. It could be added that while Princess Isabel's letters to her parents are, as would be expected, written in Portuguese, she wrote to her husband, Gaston d'Orléans, Comte d'Eu, almost exclusively in French.
- 42 This brief conversation took place at an American Historical Association convention shortly after the book's publication. As I recall, the remark was made by a professor at a university in Florida.