

Introduction

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Writing the Lives of People and Things, AD 500-1700

Ed. Robert F.W. Smith and Gemma L. Watson
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Introduction

Robert F.W. Smith and Gemma L. Watson

This is a volume of essays which are biographical in nature. Already, some readers' eyebrows might be raised. Biography, it is often thought, needs defending, at least when attempted by academics. The disparaging attitudes of many in academia towards biography, the tendency to regard it as an 'unloved stepchild' to be 'shut outside with the riffraff', and the gloom that some biographers feel about the future of the method, have been surveyed by writers such as David Nasaw and Anne Chisolm.¹ Ray Monk, a successful biographer of Oppenheimer, Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell, even put on a conference at the University of Southampton in 2012 which seriously posed the question 'Can Biography Survive?', and while many of the conference delegates were optimistic about the future of biography, it was generally quite a cautious optimism.

As the micro-historian Giovanni Levi has written, 'doubts about even the possibility of biography are a recurring factor'.² Given that biography has been practised since ancient times, and that biographical works such as Plutarch's *Lives* and Boswell's *Life of Johnson* are acknowledged to be among the classics of literature, this may seem absurd. On reflection, though, it is easy to understand why it is the case. As C.S. Lewis observed,

most of the experiences in 'the past as it really was' were instantly forgotten by the subject himself. Of the small percentage he remembered (and never remembered with perfect accuracy) a smaller percentage was ever communicated even to his closest

¹ David Nasaw, 'Introduction', *The American Historical Review* 114, no.3 (2009): 573–8. doi: 10.1086/ahr.114.3.662; Anne Chisolm, 'Has Biography Had Its Day?', *Lady Margaret Hall: The Brown Book* 2010 (2010): 20–27.

² Giovanni Levi, 'The Uses of Biography', in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches From History, Microhistory and Life Writing*, ed. Hans Renders and Binne De Haan (Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 63.

intimates; of this, a smaller percentage still was ever recorded; of the recorded fraction only another fraction has ever reached posterity.³

In this he was making a point that many others have made: that the past is largely unknowable. At first glance this would indeed seem to be a formidable obstacle to the practice of biography.

In reality, however, this problem is no more insuperable for the life-writer than for the person living. Clearly we should make no pretence of ‘completeness’ in our biographies, but it is still possible to make true statements (and false ones) about the past, as Lewis would have acknowledged. A good analogy is the atom. We look around the room and see the desk, the chair, the stuffing from a shredded cushion scattered over the floor, the dog looking guiltily up at us from his basket. We would never imagine, if we did not know, that the chair, the desk, the cushion, the dog, are constructed from billions of atoms, each of which is 99.9 per cent empty space. And not knowing it would not prevent us from describing or drawing them in such a way as to make them comprehensible at the level of human reality. Even if 99.9 per cent of the history of a human life is unknowable to us, we can still make useful and meaningful statements about it.

This essay collection is predicated upon the belief that writing biography is still an important and valuable enterprise for academic writers about the past. Thomas Carlyle’s famous aphorism, that ‘history is the essence of innumerable biographies’, may be a bit of a cliché nowadays, as one writer on Carlyle, Ann Rigney, has cautioned us.⁴ But that only points to its perennial usefulness and the fact that Carlyle’s maxim still has something to tell us. For one thing, as Rigney also argues, it cautions us against subordinating individuals to overarching meta-narratives, to societal forces or preconceived notions. Especially when dealing with periods of pronounced ideological conflict, such as the period of English history from the Reformation to the Civil War, the process of thematic history-writing has an inevitable tendency to set up opposed paradigms, imputing a polarisation between individuals and interests which

³ C.S. Lewis, ‘Historicism’, in *Fern-seeds and Elephants*, ed. Walter Hooper (Glasgow: Fontana, 1975), 55.

⁴ Ann Rigney, ‘The Multiple Histories of Thomas Carlyle’, in *Victorian Keats and Romantic Carlyle: The Fusions and Confusions of Literary Periods*, ed. C.C. Barfoot (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), 194.

was not really so distinctive as it seems. It is here that biography comes into its own, because it allows us to understand the actual procedure of life, which is invariably messy and complicated, and often not a matter of easy ideological definitions.

Carlyle's dictum encapsulates a fundamental truth: that history is not merely a chart of impersonal forces outworking through time, but a story of human lives which intersect, individuals who interact with one another. Since human lives are the medium in which history takes place, it follows that, as human lives are inevitably experienced chronologically, historical biography remains a useful primary means of understanding the reality of history as it was lived. There is also a view – which we share – that the ability to write medieval and Renaissance lives in any depth is a rare enough privilege that it should be done whenever possible. Furthermore, as the early modern historian Robert Tittler has remarked, 'the unheralded events and people of an age often convey the tenor of the times just as usefully as the great and famous'.⁵ In our view, there are no medieval or Renaissance subjects whatsoever who are unsuitable for biographisation.

There is one important theoretical question in medieval studies which it is essential to address in a book of this nature. As David Nasaw argues, 'the historian as biographer proceeds from the premise that individuals are situated but not imprisoned in social structures and discursive regimes'.⁶ But it used to be doubted whether 'individuals' even existed in the Middle Ages; if they did not and were in fact 'discovered' only in the Renaissance then this would seem to be a significant impediment to writing biographical studies of medieval people, as many of the contributors to this volume do. However, during the revisionist era of historiography the 'revolt of the medievalists' led by David Morris and Caroline Walker Bynum pushed back the discovery of the individual by several centuries, and there is really no reason why we should continue to assume with Burckhardt and his followers that the individual ever went

⁵ Robert Tittler, *Townspeople and Nation: English Urban Experiences 1540–1640* (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 121–2.

⁶ David Nasaw, 'Introduction': 577.

away.⁷ This is a theory which has never been adequately proven, and relies heavily on lack of evidence. David Morris himself, in his revolutionary work, conceded that the surviving examples of tenth-century poetry ‘indicate that tenth-century man was not a stranger to delicate and private feelings’, and admitted that there may have been much more early medieval lyric poetry than has survived.⁸ Morris amassed significant evidence that, during the high Middle Ages, people significantly developed their capacity to *express* individuality in sophisticated ways that we, today, can respond to; but the idea that this constituted a sea-change in the way they *regarded* themselves does not follow. The attitude of this collection is that, while the practical difficulty (in terms of the availability of sources) of writing the lives of medieval individuals may be greater than for early modern individuals, the theoretical difficulty is no greater.

Historians have become increasingly interested in groups of individuals.⁹ The resulting prosopographical studies have been a self-conscious attempt to turn away from a tendency to focus on cradle-to-grave studies of major figures.¹⁰ This is not to say that studies of major figures are no longer useful; at the other end of the scale from prosopography, the combination of micro-historical approaches with biography is proving fruitful. Two excellent books on Shakespeare, Charles Nicholl’s *The Lodger*, and James Shapiro’s *1599*, demonstrate the value of this approach, showing how the intensive study of one particular period in an individual life can result in a sense of immersion in a time and place, even when only traces remain in the documentary record. At its best, biography (along with prosopography) offers an unparalleled medium in which to make the transition from the particular to the universal,

⁷ C. Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); C.W. Bynum, ‘Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31 (1980), 1–17.

⁸ Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*, 33.

⁹ See, for example, the recent essay collection of Averil Cameron (ed.), *Fifty Years of Prosopography: The Later Roman Empire, Byzantium and Beyond*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); K.S.B. Keats-Rohan (ed.), *Prosopography Approaches and Applications: A Handbook*, (Oxford: Unit for Prosopographical Research, 2007).

¹⁰ David Bates, Julia Crick and Sarah Hamilton (eds), *Writing Medieval Biography, 750–1250* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006), 9.

illuminating both in the process.¹¹ Biography, therefore, is no longer just the chronological narrative of an individual's life gained from the study of the documentary record, but encompasses wider concerns and uses a variety of different forms of evidence and interdisciplinary methodologies.

Biography is inherently interdisciplinary. Individual lives cannot be neatly bracketed within the confines of one discipline. Their traces may have been left to us in a variety of different ways other than the diaries and letters that are the standard fare of biographers: for instance in objects they created, owned, used and modified, places they lived in and visited, art and music they made, or literature they wrote. As a result, it makes sense that any analysis of a life takes this evidential multiplicity into consideration and adopts appropriate methodologies. Taking an interdisciplinary approach also enables biographers to overcome, to some extent, fragmentary evidence (something that is a particular problem for biographers of the medieval and early modern periods), allowing for an analysis of other types of evidence other than the traditional written sources. Many of this volume's contributors (Martin, Watson, Draper, Byng, Aldred, Pells, Kirk) have shown how inter/multi-disciplinary approaches can be harnessed to great effect with methodologies that look at objects, buildings or books/texts as objects in their biographies. This analysis of 'alternative' types of evidence has led them to have fresh insights and perspectives into historical lives, places, events and periods.

Neither is this volume solely concerned with the lives of human beings; it also encompasses the lives of things. Object biography considers the relationship between people and things, and has been used as a theoretical tool in social science, anthropology and archaeology for the past thirty years.¹² Its premise is that objects do not just provide a stage setting for human action, but are integral to it. Objects are

¹¹ Charles Nicholl, *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street* (London: Penguin Books, 2008); James Shapiro, *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

¹² Examples include Arjun Appadura (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadura (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Story of People's Lives* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

invested with meaning through the social interactions they are caught up in. These meanings change and are renegotiated through the life of an object. The purpose of an object biography is to illuminate that process by deconstructing the object's 'life' from manufacture to disposal, tracing its changing uses and meanings.¹³ However, this theoretical approach has seldom been adopted within medieval archaeology. Rare examples include Chris Gerrard's paper on three objects found 'out of context' during fieldwork at Shapwick, Somerset, and Roberta Gilchrist's examination of medieval heirlooms.¹⁴ Object biography is also discussed by Gilchrist in her study of the medieval life course, by Eleanor Standley in her work on medieval and early modern dress accessories, and by Richard Kelleher in a paper on the re-use of coins in medieval England and Wales.¹⁵ Toby Martin adds to this short list in the present volume with his object biographical analysis of dress and identity in Anglo-Saxon England.

Nevertheless, a recent conference on *The Lives of Objects*, held at Wolfson College, Oxford, in September 2013, highlighted a continuing interest in object biography and its application to disciplines outside archaeology and anthropology. The increasing concern with the physicality of manuscripts and books has also meant an awareness of and interest in the 'lives' of these forms of material culture. For instance, the *Centre for Material Texts* was founded in 2009 at the University of Cambridge, its purpose to foster research into the physical forms of texts and the ways those forms have interacted with literary cultures and historical contexts. The Ashgate monograph series *Material Readings in Early Modern*

¹³ Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, 'The Cultural Biography of Objects', *World Archaeology*, 31 (1999): 169–78.

¹⁴ Christopher Gerrard, 'Not All Archaeology is Rubbish: The Exclusive Life Histories of Three Artefacts from Shapwick, Somerset', in *People and Places: Essays in Honour of Mick Aston*, ed. Michael Costen (Oxford: Oxbow, 2007); Roberta Gilchrist, 'The Materiality of Medieval Heirlooms: From Sacred to Biographical Objects', in *Mobility, Meaning and Transformation of Things: Shifting Contexts of Material Culture Through Time and Space*, ed. H.P. Hahn and H. Weiss (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013).

¹⁵ Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012); Eleanor R. Standley, *Trinkets and Charms: The Use, Meaning and Significance of Dress Accessories 1300–1700*, Oxford University School of Archaeology Monograph 78 (Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2013); Richard Kelleher, 'The Re-Use of Coins in Medieval England and Wales c. 1050–1550: An Introductory Survey', *Yorkshire Numismatist*, 4 (2012): 183–200.

Culture also provides a vehicle for studies considering the material forms of texts as part of investigations into early modern culture.

The contributors to this collection each have their own specialisms, their own disciplinary backgrounds, their own theories and attitudes. This collection is not an ideological monolith in that respect – the various essays within may come from different historiographical perspectives – and, on the grounds that diversity of thought is usually a strength, we do not feel that the collection as a whole suffers from it. What we do all have in common is a belief in biography as a valid method of writing about the past; a belief that, as Anne Chisolm has argued, ‘biography has not had its day, and indeed never will while writers and readers remain interested in the ramifications of human behaviour, the interaction of character and behaviour and the delicate intricacies of the human heart’.¹⁶

The genesis of this collection dates back to the conference *Writing the Lives of People and Things, AD 500–1700*, which took place at Chawton House Library in March 2012. The conference brought together postgraduate students and early-career academics from across the humanities disciplines to discuss their research and their approaches to biography. Biography was also the theme of the 2013 Reuter Lecture and Masterclass hosted by the University of Southampton’s *Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Culture*. The majority of the contributors to this collection gave papers to one or other of these events. Both the events themselves and this present volume demonstrate that biography is far from dead within academia, and is not seen by the next generation of academics as an inferior form of history or an ‘unloved stepchild’. Instead, biography has a bright multi-disciplinary future.

Part I of this volume, ‘Rescuing Forgotten Lives’, contains research which will be new to almost all readers. Katherine Weikert examines the relevance of biography to the study of female hostageships in medieval England by reconstructing the elusive life and interesting times of Alice de Huntingfield. In rescuing the forgotten life of this hostage, wife and widow, we are given a new perspective on an unknown number of women who slip past the historical record and thus the historian’s view. Next,

¹⁶ Anne Chisolm, ‘Has Biography Had Its Day?’: 27.

Kitrina Bevan explores prosopography as an approach to the study of legal professionals by focusing on medieval scriveners. She applies a prosopographical methodology showing how it can be used as an innovative interdisciplinary research method to reveal some of the ways in which scriveners expressed their individual and group identities through the written word, and successfully demonstrates that there is much for us to learn about scriveners from the very documents that they produced. Robert F.W. Smith's study of the Renaissance scholar John Harmar in Chapter 3 deploys unpublished manuscript sources to supplement the well-known facts of Harmar's public career with a comprehensive new narrative locating Harmar's life in the context of the communal life of Winchester College.

Part II, 'The Lives of Objects and Their Owners', contains four chapters featuring biographical approaches to material culture. Toby Martin's chapter applies the principles of object biography to demonstrate how the lives of objects intertwine with the lives and deaths of their owners, and even lives of nations. Martin examines the evidence for women's dress in the Anglian region of what was to become England in the fifth and sixth centuries, particularly focusing on the cruciform brooch. He argues that this type of brooch was a means by which a shared ethnic identity was displayed and constructed using biographical mechanisms. A large part of the value of these brooches stemmed from the way they were obtained at specific stages during the life courses of particular women. These brooches can also be seen as objects whose perceived value and authenticity lay in their own biographies. In Chapter 5 Gemma Watson combines archaeological with contemporary documentary evidence to write the microhistory of the little-known medieval herald, Roger Machado. She argues for the necessity of interdisciplinary research when looking at individual lives, as they touch on so many different aspects of the past.

Biographical uses of art are an important theme in Part II. In Chapter 6 Helen Draper shows how objects can become enmeshed in biography by examining the seventeenth-century artist Mary Beale's use of 'seen' and 'made' objects, including paintings, as a means of self-representation. Draper discusses Beale's exploration of likeness and identity as expressed in the painted and written objects she made, and concludes by demonstrating how Mary used such objects to manipulate her reputation and to further her career. Draper also describes how Mary's intimate circle of friends worked together to promote her

respectable, and commercial, public persona. Draper shows how Beale's artistic reputation could have been informed by the objects she saw and the things she read. In the final chapter of the section, Yolana Wassersug examines how Shakespeare depicted characters undertaking biographical readings of portraits on the stage in *Hamlet*, situating her chapter within the context of post-Reformation visual culture in England. Wassersug asks how Shakespeare's Hamlet can learn about a person simply by looking at his or her face, and how far biography can be gleaned from a two-dimensional image. She posits that the Reformation was a period during which imagery in domestic spaces was highly meaningful, and could be used to inspire contemplative thought. She suggests that it was not uncommon to use portraits as interpretive tools rather than mere decoration in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, and that when viewed with a careful and discerning eye, portraits can give a biographer insight into the interior life of their subject.

Part III, 'The Life of the Book', also pertains to material culture, this time the materiality of books and its biographical applications. Inspired by the Renaissance conception of the Three Ages of Man (as famously depicted by Titian in his painting of the same name), the three chapters in this section survey three 'ages' of the book: printing, reading (and annotation), and gathering into a collection. First of all, taking the largely neglected William White as a case study, Natalie Aldred strives towards a prosopography of an important early modern group, the printers, using the material output of White's printing house as a biographical source. Aldred shows how object (book) history informs and enriches our understanding of early modern printers, and as such, feeds into a wider discussion on the value and usefulness of non-traditional primary material in the reconstruction of historical lives. Aldred argues that although bibliographical studies are limited to the printers and typesetters involved, the results that they yield are rewarding biographically. As in the case of her case study, William White, such studies can be used to identify their role as trade printer or publisher, their economy of page setting and the productivity of their printing house. In addition, bibliographical studies of the texts that they printed can identify the size of the printing house and a minimum number of presses that they used.

Next, Ismini Pells, in a chapter that follows the best principles of the ‘new biography’ as expounded by Lois Banner, discusses the life of a seventeenth-century soldier, Philip Skippon, via his annotations to his Bible.¹⁷ She looks at how Skippon’s Bible helps us to reconstruct his personal religious ideology, how this religious ideology may have influenced Skippon’s decision to pursue a military career in continental Europe and his personal worship and military conduct once he was there, and how his military experiences impacted upon his ideological development. Lastly, Maria Kirk writes the joint lives of a collection of early modern books and their collector – namely the Petworth House plays and Algernon Percy, the 10th Earl of Northumberland. Kirk’s chapter demonstrates how much can be understood from the books themselves, about the way they interacted with the world around them at the time of their printing and purchase, what scars and signs they bear of their varied and multiple pasts, and what we can learn about how and why these pasts converged to form the current collection.

Part IV features two essays in group biography. Gabriel Byng and Kathryn Maude each seek to write the lives of collective institutions, specifically selected parishes in medieval England and a monastic community. Combining prosopography, architectural history and literary techniques, Byng offers a bold new historical methodology for understanding medieval parish communities by working towards a distilled ‘ideal’ biography of parish church patrons in East Anglia. Maude’s subject is Wilton Abbey, a Benedictine convent in Wiltshire. Rather than attempting to tell the story of individual nuns at Wilton Abbey, her chapter develops a collective biography of Wilton Abbey by focusing on it as a place and the interactions that people have with that place. Importantly, Maude strives to correct a potential deficiency of the move back to biography among medieval historians, arguing that privileging individuals in communities such as Wilton Abbey isolates biographical subjects from their true, communal form of life.

In the last Part, ‘Representing Lives’, two contributors engage directly with the element of artifice which is present in all life-writing. The richness and diversity of medieval European religious expression, and the attempts of religious authorities to control and channel it in the face of individual and communal

¹⁷ L.W. Banner ‘Biography as History’, *The American Historical Review*, 114: 3 (2009): 579–86.

manifestations of that diversity, are the themes of this section. In a chapter which should significantly reframe scholarship on the Franciscans and the Poor Clares, Kirsty Day interrogates the early *vita* of St Clare of Assisi, arguing that both the medieval authors of these texts and, just as pertinently, modern scholars who have used them, have represented the life of Clare in a way which unduly privileges androcentric, Franciscan conceptions of religious life. By contrast, self-representation is the theme of the final chapter, which examines Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* alongside Margery Kempe's autobiographical *Book*. Justin Byron-Davies analyses the strategies which medieval female religious could employ to avoid the negative consequences of contravening Church orthodoxy whilst still conveying a personal vision in writings which were themselves intimate 'revelations' of self.

In his Foreword to this volume, Charles Nicholl quotes Dr Johnson, who esteemed biography 'as giving us what comes near to ourselves', and argues that his words are a riposte to those who hasten to read the last rites over the biographical genre.¹⁸ Both scrupulously researched and humanly compelling, Nicholl's own works in the field of early modern biography have for more than one of the contributors to this collection been an inspiration, an example, and a spur to join in.¹⁹ It is surely because of the powerful appeal of works like these, and of the stories they tell, that many of us have pursued a scholarly interest in the past at all. A.L. Rowse wrote movingly in *The Use of History* about the sudden transports the historian may experience: 'those moments when time falls away from us ... [and] our feeling for that man who has been dead for centuries is the feeling for ourselves'.²⁰ It is this feeling which keeps us coming back to the past. If future generations of students are to tread the same path that we and the other contributors to this volume have followed, we must make sure that there is always room in academia for histories which 'come near to ourselves'. It is in that hope and spirit that we offer up this collection of studies.

¹⁸ James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* (London: Heineman, 1936), 55.

¹⁹ For example: Charles Nicholl, *A Cup of News: The Life of Thomas Nashe* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984); *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Vintage Books, 2002); *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street* (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

²⁰ A.L. Rowse, *The Use of History* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946), 57.