

## INTRODUCTION

### (RE)NEGOTIATING VICTORIAN BIOGRAPHY: SUBVERSION AND APPROPRIATION IN LATE VICTORIAN AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY LIFE WRITING

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When the Victorians inherited the genre of auto/biography, it had already passed through many hands. From Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and early lives of the saints to the seminal 1791 *Life of Samuel Johnson* by James Boswell, there was a strong sense of an existing, linear tradition. At least, that is how it was perceived by early twentieth-century critics like Harold Nicolson who, in writing that the Victorian period saw the death of the Boswell model as 'people reverted with relief to the old, unworthy origins of English biography' (125), reinforced the idea that the form went through a series of evolutions that stemmed from the same, well-established branch of literary history. Setting aside for a minute the resonances with Boswell in much later biographies like John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens* (1872–74) or James Anthony Froude's controversial *Life of Carlyle* (1882–84) that serve to complicate Nicolson's assertion, or the focus on biographies written by and about men to the exclusion of the wide range of life writing produced by women (as many of the articles in this special issue can attest), it is important to address the blinkered perception of biography as one easily-definable genre.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives us three very slightly, but significantly, different definitions of 'biography'. The first describes the simple process of 'recording the events and circumstances of another person's life, esp. for publication' dating from 1671 as a type of historical writing, before evolving into a genre of its own. The second definition specifies that this is a 'historical or public figure' and a 'themed narrative history' rather than a merely chronological one, dating this usage from 1726. By 1806 there is an even greater sense of unity: biography is a 'personal history; the events or circumstances of a person's life, viewed collectively' (*OED Online*). This unity hints at a moral purpose for biography that is perhaps one of the most enduring tropes of life writing, but it is striking to note that the nineteenth-century definition does not require the figure to be a particularly 'worthy'

subject, suggesting a more democratised approach. At the same time, it is equally important that these definitions supplemented, rather than replaced, one another. Each of these forms of biography existed concurrently, providing a diverse landscape of different forms of life writing, as the articles in this special issue show: there are autobiographies of nineteenth-century figures that were unpublished; the boundary between biography and fiction is a fluid one; and the person whose life is being told may not have existed in the first place.

Renegotiating Victorian biography, then, is an act of subversion not only present in the nineteenth- or twentieth-century biographer, but in the modern reader. This reader, in engaging with the discourse, introduces preconceptions shaped by more than just the perceived biographical ‘tradition’; he or she brings ideas influenced by changing expectations about the nature and requirements of biography. For late nineteenth-century writers and readers, negotiating Victorian biography entailed interacting with latent ideas about the purpose and form of the genre. For the three-volume *Life and Letters*, Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* was an undeniably important model, and often a yardstick by which to measure success. However, fictional styles, in particular autobiografiction, were also shaping biography, and other forms of life writing were developing in the form of the memoir, shorter reminiscences and articles, and memorials to celebrity figures.<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century, in the hands of the Modernists, renegotiating Victorian biography meant stripping away the reticence and respect inherent in a certain kind of Victorian hagiography: key figures like Lytton Strachey and Edmund Gosse took centre stage as readers, critics and writers, imploring biographers ‘to be as indiscreet as possible within the boundaries of good taste and kind feeling’ (Gosse 323).

The late twentieth and early twenty-first century has seen an increased focus on uncovering ‘hidden’ lives and rediscovering the marginalised: Regenia Gagnier’s *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832–1920* (1991), Mary Jane Corbett’s *Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian Women’s Autobiographies* (1992) and Juliette Atkinson’s *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century ‘Hidden’ Lives* (2010) expose a wealth of material that had previously been neglected, and would not have fitted comfortably into Nicolson’s models of hagiographic or Boswellian biography. At the same time, Victorian forms, perceived as so outdated and restrictive to the Modernists, have found a place in twentieth- and twenty-first century literature in surprising ways: from the neo-Victorian *Flashman Papers*, as discussed in Matthew Croft’s article, to the reflection of the fictional

episodes of Sims Reeves' autobiography, described in Anna Maria Barry's paper, that can be found in Bret Easton Ellis' 2005 *Lunar Park*, in which a semi-fictionalised Ellis finds himself living in a haunted house.

One possible future for the study of Victorian life writing lies in the collaborative *Writing Lives* research project, developed by Helen Rogers, Claire Lynch, David Vincent, David Mayall and John Herson. The forthcoming *Archive of Working-Class Writing Online* will create an online resource for memoirs written by British working class writers since 1700, as well as encouraging new kinds of life writing in response, and facilitate a move towards recognising the democratised biography hinted at in the term's shifting definitions. Already, works like Julie-Marie Strange's *Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865–1914* are using these kinds of auto/biographies in innovative ways to change what we know about everyday life in the Victorian era. The landscape of Victorian biography, dominated at one time by a strong sense of the importance of tradition, has passed through more hands than its early critics may have realised; and overlooked lives and marginalised voices, such as those explored in this special issue, look to have an increasingly broad reach in the future of biographical studies.

### **The Rise and Fall of Victorian Biography**

The articles in this issue have been reworked from papers presented at 'The Rise and Fall of Victorian Biography', a one-day conference held at the University of Hull in July 2014. The broad range of auto/biographical themes demonstrated in this edition is indicative of the original, diverse research that was presented, and seeks to revisit, re-examine and revise significant examples of life writing penned throughout the long nineteenth century. This issue has been inclusive of literary output that is not, at first glance, synonymous with the genre. The articles take readers away from the monolithic idea of biography, and introduce scholars to a variety of subjects, ranging from opera singers to spiritualists, Neo-Victorian anti-heroes to emerging queer identities. Conclusively, all articles seek to analyse and demonstrate how identity is conveyed, life writing acting as a self-forged window into past ideals, movements and projected (self) consciousness.

The articles in this issue have been deliberately placed in relation to the period the author was referencing. Although Janine Hatter's opening paper focuses on an autobiography written in the twentieth century, Mary Elizabeth Braddon propels readers back in time with her

reminiscences of childhood, retreating into the sanctuary of the 1830s in attempt to escape from the looming militarism of the early twentieth century. Rather than focus on the contemporary context, this issue allows Braddon to transport us on an intimate journey, opening the collection at the dawn of the Victorian period with a socio-historical analysis of the past, entwined with significant insight into early childhood psychology and development. The second article in this issue maintains the theme of temporal inconsistency, exploring Fraser's neo-Victorian *Flashman* (1969) at the time the narrative was set, 1849–50. Matthew Crofts' analysis asks readers to reconsider Victorian attitudes towards military masculinity, Fraser deconstructing the manly, moral doctrines that were integral to the fabric of Victorian gender identity, and instead offering a revisionist account of muscular Christianity.

In a similar fashion to Braddon, Edmund Gosse also penned his prolific autobiographical work, *Father and Son* (1907), in the early twentieth century: his memories, however, dwell upon his early life between 1849–70. Kathy Rees, working with both literature and artwork, traces the significance of his own parental dynamics, the article suggesting that Gosse deliberately manipulated the autobiographical genre through his purposeful use of visual media. Continuing with the theme of constructed identity, the following article spans the mid-late century careers of two male opera singers, Sims Reeves and Charles Santley, whose written reflections on their vibrant operatic profession also forges their identity as significant Victorian biographers. Anna Maria Barry discusses the importance of their literary memoirs in relation to nationhood and celebrity, re-establishing their legacy alongside their contemporary female counterparts.

The subsequent article pushes the professional, celebrity figure into the latter half of the nineteenth century, Jamie Spears exploring the careers of three female spiritualists: Madame Elizabeth d'Esperance, Annie Besant and Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. By conducting a feminist reading of their autobiographical works, the article suggests that spiritualism became an authoritative mechanism where women could gain power, notoriety and, most importantly, a voice. The issue finishes with a strengthening of this feminist voice, the final article tracing the progressive lesbian identities of the Smallhythe *ménage*, Ricketts proposing that refashioning historical, female figures was an important facet of constructing and performing early Edwardian queer selfhood.

To draw this introduction to a close, we would like to thank the general editor of *Peer English*, Ben Parsons, for the opportunity to edit this special issue. We are also very grateful for the assistance of the University of Hull Roberts Fund and the Department of English at the

University of Hull for the generous support that allowed the conference to take place. A final round of thanks is owed to this issue's contributors for their tireless efforts in producing these fantastic articles. We hope that your reading of this issue is every bit as enjoyable as it was for us to listen to, and learn from, them at the conference.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens is a key example of this; memorials to Dickens are extensively catalogued in Duane DeVries' *Biographical Studies*, volume 2, section 2, part 12 of *General Studies of Charles Dickens and His Writings and Collected Editions of His Works: An Annotated Bibliography* (2004). These include women's memorial volumes, Christmas memorials and religious memorials written by people who do not otherwise consider themselves authors.

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