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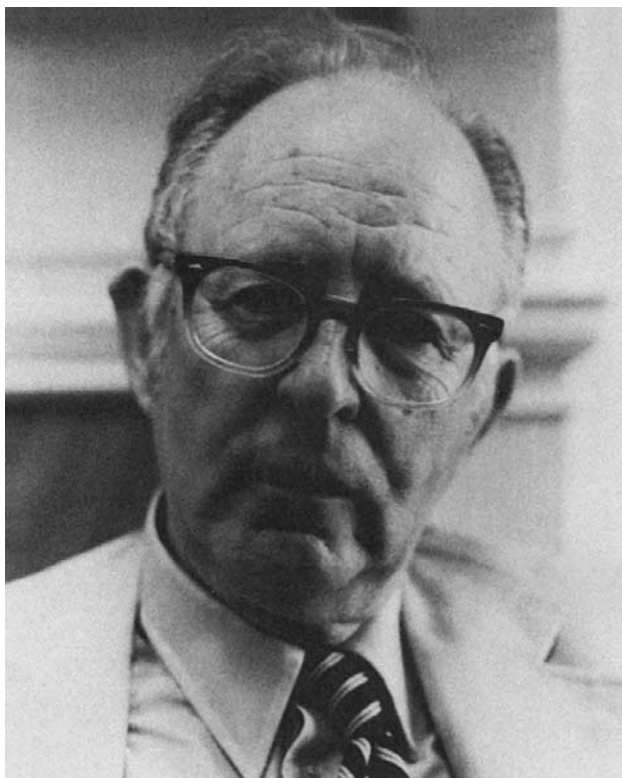
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Jerome Hamilton Buckley

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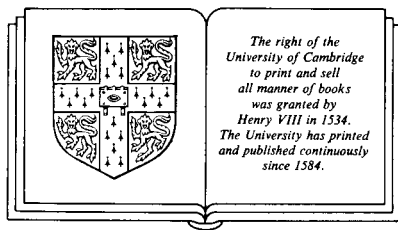
# *Nineteenth-Century Lives*

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*Essays presented to*  
JEROME HAMILTON BUCKLEY

*Edited by*  
Laurence S. Lockridge,  
John Maynard, and  
Donald D. Stone

*Bibliography compiled by*  
David M. Staines



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## *Jerome Hamilton Buckley*

To read Tennyson or Dickens seriously in the late 1930s and early 40s was, Jerome Hamilton Buckley recalls, “a matter of perversity.” He began to focus his attention on the Victorians while a graduate student, at a time when nineteenth-century literature was under a cloud. “Few . . . can fully appreciate,” one of the contributors to this volume, Richard D. Altick, has noted, “how recently, and from how low a starting point, this particular branch of English literary study rose.” That Victorian studies have risen so vigorously is owing, in good measure, to the dedication, scholarship, and inspiring influence of Jerome Buckley.

Canadian by birth, he took his undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto, studying Elizabethan literature with Northrop Frye and Shakespeare with Edward John Pratt. As a young critic and poet, Buckley reviewed new works by Virginia Woolf and Robinson Jeffers, and won a prize for an essay entitled “New Techniques in Contemporary Fiction.” He had chosen, by happy coincidence, to study at Victoria College, the most literary of the Toronto colleges; and things Victorian would increasingly matter to him when, like many Canadian literary students of this century, he chose Harvard Graduate School. His essay on the Ruskin–Whistler trial won the Ruskin Prize. A seminar with Howard Mumford Jones on Victorian critics stimulated Buckley’s interest in William Ernest Henley. In his second year at Harvard, he studied with Robert Frost, whose publisher David Nutt had also been Henley’s publisher, and who encouraged his students’ interest in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century

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poets. Buckley's dissertation on Henley eventually became his first book, *William Ernest Henley: A Study in the Counter-Decadence of the 'Nineties* (1945), which received strong critical attention.

With the publication in 1951 of *The Victorian Temper*, Buckley's reputation as a leading Victorianist was firmly established. The book has remained, for four decades, the most incisive introduction to the study of Victorian culture. His next work of Victorianist revaluation, *Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet* (1960), reestablished Tennyson's reputation for modern literary studies. Buckley's books have tended to follow a pattern wherein the study of a particular figure leads to a work of cultural synthesis. Upon completing the study of Tennyson, he turned to the challenging topic of time in the nineteenth century. Always a philosophical reader of literature, Buckley, in *The Triumph of Time* (1966), investigated the conflict of personal with public time. Thereafter, he focused on the temporal growth of the individual in time, as reflected in the genre of the *Bildungsroman* (*Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, 1974). This standard work led, in turn, to the comprehensive study of literary autobiography. *The Turning Key: Autobiography and the Subjective Impulse since 1800* (1984). In addition to authoring so many of the seminal books in Victorian studies, Buckley has found time to oversee anthologies, editions, and secondary source books in the field.

His teaching career has taken him from the University of Wisconsin (1942–54) to Columbia (1952–53, 1954–61), and finally to Harvard (1961–), where he was named Gurney Professor of English Literature in 1975. (Douglas Bush, his predecessor as Gurney Professor, welcomed Buckley to Harvard "with open arms . . . filled with theses.") He has guest-lectured from Hawaii to Norway, and has won honours that include the Christian Gauss Award of Phi Beta Kappa and two John Simon Guggenheim Fellowships.

Jerome Buckley is known to his literally hundreds of former students now in the profession as Jerry. It is a nickname never used without affection. We were not surprised to find that everyone shared our own sense of love and gratitude to such a

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caring mentor and friend. All spoke of the same generous person through the differing perspectives of their own relationships with him. One would speak of his good nature – how he approved and encouraged, even to the point of a supportive kind of intellectual indulgence. Another marveled at his freedom from possessiveness, his ability to allow growth, even to revel in others' growth. He has a humility, only too rare in our profession, that allows him to focus on students' needs and to tease out strengths in them. Another noted how Jerry took him into account and responded to him personally and to the interests he had. He would actually listen, talk, and then listen *again*. Another noted how he never stints in any personal favor or professional obligation. His grace, speed, and efficiency are remarkable, his readings of others' work responsible, incisive, helpful. For his students, his magisterial scholarship became a permanent possession through his personal presence. Victorian England continues to be, one person said for us all, the one Jerry taught us. Another told us he always starts a major new project by drawing once again on Jerry's reserve of indulgence and discussing it thoroughly with him.

In all our discussions, Jerry's comic spirit, his sense of fun kept coming up. He is damned funny, one said; like some Victorians he loves he has a genuine eccentricity in his humor. Many recalled his wonderful performances in taking on the personalities of writers he discussed. Who can forget how Jerry *became* Dickens, or how he sang or danced to make his points or did that outrageous Trabb's boy: "Don't know ya."

The hospitality of Jerry and his wife, Elizabeth Adams Buckley, who is also an educator, was much on our minds. Former students from other countries recalled Jerry and Elizabeth's very welcome Thanksgiving spreads. They regularly invited students to their home, one recalled, and didn't seem to make social distinctions between students, young professors, and senior colleagues. Wisconsin when Jerry was there, Columbia with Jerry, the days of the Harvard Victorians, MLA dinners, or more exotic international conferences, all came alive once again to former students and colleagues as they remembered the friendship and warmth of Jerry and Elizabeth. We know students and friends everywhere join our distinguished contri-

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JEROME HAMILTON BUCKLEY

butors who delight, as we do, in celebrating Jerry Buckley as a remarkable man and scholar. We dedicate this volume to him with great intellectual respect and deep affection.

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## Preface

A principal question raised in these essays is what it means to narrate a life. Drawing largely on nineteenth-century texts, the ten contributors explore boundaries of fact and fiction. They tend to see a merging of biography, autobiography, and the novel within the broader genre of narrative – a merging which can be understood from a purely theoretical perspective but which has also been increasingly witnessed in modern literary history. Margaret Atwood, J. Hillis Miller, and Phyllis Rose frame the discussion most generally. Atwood writes: “The biographer, like the novelist, is a constructor of narratives; it’s just that the ground rules are a little different.” Determining what these ground rules are in their difference is a recurring interest in these original essays, which otherwise range from the trope of prosopoeia to grandmother’s diary to the life of Darwin.

Several contributors consider the fictional, figurative, and mythic components of biographical form. Carl Woodring calls *The Prelude* a *Bildungsroman* in verse, a form in which the poet can ironically achieve a greater “sincerity” because he is not tied to a standard of literal fact. Within this form Wordsworth cannot strictly lie about the facts of his own life. As a graduate student, Atwood was taught *The Prelude* as an autobiographical text and felt “squirmly” about how gossipy minutiae of a life might subvert our sense of literary value. She then recognized that biographies are only stories of lives, with no privileged authority to fix a life forever or exhaust the truth about it.

Nineteenth-century writers often merge categories of fact and fiction through indirection, or even in violation of their

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expressed intent, as scrutiny of rhetorical figures can reveal. Miller is most extreme in his claims for the inevitably figurative nature of autobiography. He takes the morbid trope of prosopopoeia – the summoning of the mask of the dead – to be its mastertrope. In *Praeterita* Ruskin attempts to dis sever himself from tropes, in keeping with his attack on the “pathetic fallacy.” In his Preface he presents himself as a harmless drudge, an archivist who eschews any attempt to give a shaped life under the illusion of a coherent “I” laid out in purposeful narrative. If Wordsworth disavows the generic expectations of autobiography by swerving toward the novelist, Ruskin disavows them by swerving toward the mere chronicler. Miller presents some textual evidence that Ruskin himself employs prosopopoeia.

Like Ruskin, Darwin sets himself up as a dispassionate, objective narrator, who, as John Rosenberg observes, does not attempt a novelistic unity of narration. He gives us mere “recollections” instead of autobiography. In a discontinuous narrative he collects moments of his earlier life as specimens for disinterested analysis. Rosenberg finds the “grand organizing metaphor of autobiography” to be the journey, which Darwin enacted in his own literal voyage on the *Beagle*. Other “ancient archetypes” inform Darwin’s ostensibly detached and objective writings: the Book of Genesis is naturalized in *The Origin of Species*; the primal Edenic transgression is repeated in his account of stealing apples from his father’s orchard as a young boy.

Norman Kelvin thinks Morris’s life, like Darwin’s, enacts a metaphor, derived in his case from the structures of his own art. Just as the often violent narrative content of Morris’s painting finds containment and “rest” in a decorative frame, so his career as a political activist makes up the violent narrative content to which his career as a designer provides a frame – a ratio reversed when Morris becomes so passionately committed to his art and “Morris & Co.” that politics is displaced to the frame. This instrumental metaphor for reading the patterns of Morris’s life is, in one sense, Kelvin’s, but he thinks it is also Morris’s – a metaphor consubstantial with the life because embedded in Morris’s own artistic constructions.

That biography *ought* to be enhanced by the tropes of fiction is

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argued by Richard Altick and by Rose, who suggest the grounds on which literary value judgments can be made. Altick finds that in many nineteenth-century art biographies there is a fear of fictionalizing – combined with an “indiscriminate inclusiveness” of fact – which makes the majority of these deservedly neglected. Only in a biography such as Gilchrist’s of William Blake, where the more discriminating and artful conventions of literary biography come into play, does one find a production that answers to our sense of literary value. Rose, in turn, believes we are now at a period when biographers are effecting a “mimetic shift” in aspiring without apology to the condition of the novel. Biographers should break away from their naive worship, she argues, of “fact.” Nor should they necessarily write biographies on the artistic model of fictions from the past. She notes that biographer Justin Kaplan narrates a basic discontinuity in Walt Whitman’s life; he declines to structure this biography on the convention of strict temporal sequence; and he employs more than a single narrative point of view. Rose implies that the novelistic paradigm for biographers might more appropriately be the experimental than the conventional novel.

The novel has of course already found a renewed vitality in turning, contrariwise, toward journalistic fact, as in the novels of Capote and Mailer. This development has its precedents. Margaret Stetz describes the aggressive violation of boundaries of fact and fiction in the guilt-ridden novels of the 1890s, in which novelists portray the contemporary reader-as-avenger transported into their own fictions. Altick notes the irony that Thackeray’s novel *The Newcomes* tells us more about the world of contemporary art than the art biographies themselves. Interestingly, Rose thinks contemporary novelists may be seeking “to regain the amplitude and solidity of the Victorian novel.”

Whether one considers the novel or the biography, these observations relate to the nature and professed power of the narrator. Miller argues the presumption of the biographical narrator; he links Ruskin’s seeming self-effacement to his tacit recognition that only God can grant himself the power of summoning the dead. Ruskin necessarily goes on being God in spite of his professed humility. Atwood agrees: although biographers are telling only stories of lives, they imitate God in



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attempting to subsume all “possible incarnations” of a person “in one form”; the biographer’s “peculiar art is to raise the dead.” Woodring remarks that Wordsworth “looking into a poet’s mind is an Adam observing beings that need names.” But he also remarks on poetic indeterminacy, seen in Wordsworth’s sense that there are limits to “the utmost that we can know.” The Blind Beggar chastens divine emulation in *The Prelude*. Wordsworth invites the reader to join him in constructing a self out of his poem. Down the scale of professed power, we find Darwin, who amiably situates himself counter to the dramatic situation of prosopopoeia. Hardly a god summoning the dead back to life, he calls himself “a dead man in another world looking back at my life.”

As in the novel, the role played by the biographer-as-narrator may be determined less by the given rules of the genre than by how particular biographers choose to present themselves. Whether they are living gods who summon back the dead, or dead persons who summon back the living, may be a matter of compositional choice. Some might present themselves as “nobodies” in Robert Kiely’s third sense of the term: persons “of no importance or authority,” self-effacing whether writing of themselves or, more likely, of some other person. Or they might present themselves as nobodies in Kiely’s second sense – disembodied spooks or spirits, rather like Darwin. Rousseau, of course, chooses a different voice in *The Confessions*: “I have bared my secret soul as Thou thyself hast seen it, Eternal Being!” He declares his enterprise to be without precedent, and his own life to be “different” from all others.

Most of the contributors raise questions about the formal qualities of biography. Yet the more traditional search for fact and discovery necessarily preoccupies many of the contributors. Morton Cohen confronts a textual lacuna in the evidence of Lewis Carroll’s life, and is confident that, with some sleuthing and a bit of good luck, he can ascertain what the facts are. The sleuthing motive is seen in Miller, who discovers a contradiction that betrays Ruskin’s own pathetic fallacy. Though well aware of the mythic resonance of Darwin’s writings, Rosenberg sets out to ascertain what the case was – for instance in Darwin’s relationship with his father, who has been thought by earlier biogra-

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phers to have been a largely negative force in his son's career. Some aspects of a life are, as he says, "rooted in fact." And Altick can tell us confidently when a biography such as Walter Thornbury's *Life of J. M. W. Turner* resembles a bad novel in its hyperbole and distortions of fact and character.

If a biographer were convinced, before all investigation began, of the wholesale fictionality of biography, one wonders what the compelling motive for "investigation" would continue to be. Though they do not agree on the nature of biography, perhaps all our contributors would agree that it retains some connection with finding out things about a person, in addition to "doing things with words."

### *Acknowledgments*

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