

# 1 Reading life writing

- What is life writing?
- Which biographers are important?
- What ideas and conventions affect the writing of biography?
- How do autobiography and autobiographical fiction differ from biography?

## Modern biography

Richard Holmes, who made his name with a mould-breaking life of Shelley, marks the beginning of his career as a professional biographer from the day his bank bounced a cheque that he had inadvertently dated '1772'. Most biographers would identify with this immersion, so deep that it makes the past seem more real than the present.

Holmes' approach to biography is literally to follow in his subject's footsteps: to sit where Shelley sat when he composed his poems, to camp where Robert Louis Stevenson camped while he was writing *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*. Other biographers – even deeply scholarly ones – talk of being 'haunted' by their subject, so that they feel they are being nudged by them in a certain direction from beyond the grave.

Writing a biography is a huge commitment. Michael Holroyd took nearly ten years to complete his life of Lytton Strachey and this is not an unusually long period. The **literary biographer** is searching for clues and evidence from an author or poet's life that will illuminate their work. How did Virginia Woolf's relationship with her parents affect the way she wrote her novels and to what extent are some of her characters reflections of them? How did living through the First World War and the Spanish Civil War mould her views on pacifism? As part of their search, biographers must immerse themselves in the subject's writing, their life history and the times in which they lived.

Biographers can become so obsessed with their task that they unwittingly adopt the speech patterns of their subject or go to extreme lengths to verify a footnote. Several writers of fiction have used this phenomenon as a central theme of their novels. A.S. Byatt in *Possession: A Romance* and Carol Shields in *Mary Swann* both examine the obsession of the literary biographer, while Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* looks at how difficult it can be to pin down even the most banal facts associated with a writer.

But biography is only part of the picture. The biographer – and reader – can learn much about an author and their work from a whole range of writing

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that includes autobiography, memoirs, journals, letters and autobiographical fiction, poetry and non-fiction. This often tangled web of versions of the same story is frequently referred to as life writing. Hermione Lee, for example, has described Virginia Woolf's essay, *A Room of One's Own*, as a 'disguised economic autobiography' because it draws on her personal experience as a girl who missed out on university when family funds were used to educate her brothers. The essay is just one clue to Woolf's life; her novels, diaries, journalism and letters provide others, as do similar sources from people who knew her – friends, family, colleagues, fellow authors. Life writing is never about just one life.

## Sources

As well as the range of sources, the biographer may also face a huge difference in the *number* of documents he or she can consult. Anyone writing about Shakespeare will have very few indisputable facts to play with. Even his date of birth is open to question – was it 23 April, or the day before? George Bernard Shaw, by comparison, wrote ten letters every day of his adult life. When Michael Holroyd was researching his life, he began to feel that Shaw, who had shorthand and secretaries at his disposal, could write more in a day than Holroyd could read.

The biographer may have to contend with family and friends who are keen to protect the reputation of a writer, either by drip-feeding the release of documents such as diaries or journals or by allowing limited use of work still in copyright. Worse still, from the biographer's point of view, is the deliberate destruction of letters or other vital documents. The smell of burning **primary sources** lingers over the story of many literary biographies. Charles Dickens made two big bonfires of his papers and committed a multiple offence by hurling correspondence from Tennyson, Thackeray and Wilkie Collins into the flames. Thomas Hardy, Henry James and Samuel Johnson each burnt papers that biographers would have loved to have got their hands on, and Mary Taylor destroyed a cache of letters from her friend, Charlotte Brontë.

Modern biographers are a particularly nosy bunch, driven to examine a writer's private life in the greatest of details. No peccadillo or private eccentricity remains unexposed in the search for insight into a writer's work. Victorian biographers, by comparison, mainly sought to present sanitised lives that confirmed their own moral code. Many great writers have had their foibles tucked away from view by 19th-century biographers, only for later biographers to expose them to public glare.

Much of the excitement for the modern biographer – and his or her reader – is the detective work used to unmask the true author. Take for example, *Queen Mab*, widely regarded as Shelley's first major poem. Never fully satisfied with the work, he continued to tinker with it – even after publication. Today it is possible to glimpse something of Shelley's creative process in the trail of corrections he made

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in his own handwriting in a first edition that he left with his landlord in Marlow. The book had several subsequent owners, including the forger H. Buxton Forman and the composer Jerome Kern, until Carl Pforzheimer bought it for his collection (now owned by the New York Public Library). The poem, together with various scribbled and sketches, can be seen at: [www.nypl.org/research/chss/spe/rbk/mab.html](http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/spe/rbk/mab.html) or in *Shelley and His Circle*, vol. IV, pages 514–568.

Whether the biographer faces a tottering pile of documents or a few scraps of paper, each presents dilemmas of what to include and what to leave out. As Hermione Lee, whose subjects include Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton and Willa Cather, says, ‘Biography is a process of making up, or making over.’ How biographers approach their sources will depend on many factors, including their own personal interests and the age in which they are writing and its preoccupations.

- ▶ Draw up a list of your favourite writers. What do you know about each and where does that information come from? How reliable is each source? Does your knowledge of the author affect the way you read their work? Have you ever been surprised by something you’ve read about a writer?

## The influence of early biographers

### Plutarch

Greek and Roman writers such as Xenophon, Suetonius, Tacitus and Pliny were the first to show an interest in life writing and to provide a model for early English biographers. Plutarch’s *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* was particularly influential.

Plutarch (c. 50–125 AD) was born in Chaeronea in Greece. He studied mathematics and philosophy in Athens. As an adult he held municipal posts and ran a school which specialised in ethics and philosophy. He was also a priest at the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Although he was proud of his Greek heritage, he respected the Roman imperial system and was well connected within its highest echelons; he may even have known the emperors Trajan and Hadrian.

He is thought to have written as many as two hundred and twenty-seven works: *Moralia* (moral essays), essays on politics and a series of parallel biographies – probably written towards the end of his life. In *Lives* Plutarch teams up pairs of public figures, such as soldiers and politicians – one Roman, one Greek – whose characters and careers are similar. Although modern editions usually divide *Lives* into two series, Plutarch viewed each pair, such as Dion, the soldier and intermittent ruler of Syracuse (at that time part of the Greek empire), and Brutus, the politician who plotted against Julius Caesar, or Alexander and Caesar, as one entity. Typically, each begins with an introduction explaining why they have been

placed together. The biographies follow, usually the Greek first, and end with a comparison.

Plutarch draws on a range of sources, some of them unashamedly gossipy, and, unlike previous histories, his approach is warm and often anecdotal. As he says in 'Alexander':

I am not writing history but biography, and the most outstanding exploits do not always have the property of revealing the goodness or badness of the agent; often in fact, a casual action, the odd phrase, or a jest reveals character better than battles involving the loss of thousands upon thousands of lives, huge troop movements, and whole cities besieged ... I must be allowed to devote more time to those aspects which indicate a person's mind and to use these to portray the life of each of my subjects.

(from the introduction to *Roman Lives*, Oxford World Classics)

He uses sources that the modern biographer would instantly recognise: letters, public documents, conversations with friends. Plutarch's readers are expected to find the *Lives* morally uplifting as they assess the choices taken by each subject.

Plutarch influenced several centuries of thinkers including the French writer and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and the German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). The poet John Dryden, who edited a new translation of *Lives*, first published in 1683–1686, praised him for revealing the home lives of great men. But by the early 19th century Plutarch's influence had started to slip as the **Romantic Movement** placed greater emphasis on passion, rather than control. However, Plutarch's parallel biographies and range of sources anticipate the modern biographer's preoccupation with a new way of presenting a life.

- ▶ Look at the extract from Plutarch (Part 3, page 97). From this piece what attributes would you say were important to Plutarch?

### Shakespeare and the *Lives*

Sir Thomas North translated the *Lives* into English in 1579, and Shakespeare drew heavily on it as an historical source for his Roman plays and as inspiration for other works. Richard Field, who was at school with Shakespeare, published a revised edition in 1595 and James Shapiro, a 21st-century biographer of Shakespeare, believes that Shakespeare 'thumbed through a copy' searching for names to use in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'By late 1598 he had begun to read the *Lives* in earnest.' In his book *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (2006), Shapiro argues that Plutarch's influence is evident in *Henry the Fifth* – not only in the way in which Henry is compared to another great soldier, Alexander the Great,

but, much more importantly, in Shakespeare's efforts to convey the interior life of his characters.

Shapiro describes how in 1599 the playwright 'buried' himself in North's translation when planning *Julius Caesar*, rather than using the Roman historian, Tacitus (AD 56–c.120). Shapiro points out the risk that Shakespeare was taking in tackling the subject of political assassination at a time when Elizabeth I faced many threats from at home and abroad:

At the same time, his choice of working through Plutarch – who had been largely overlooked as a source by London's professional playwrights – was a careful and canny one. He knew, as did everyone else who was within earshot of the court, that Queen Elizabeth herself had been absorbed in translating Plutarch ('On Curiosity') just a few months earlier. Even as Tacitus leaned towards republicanism, Plutarch was at heart a monarchist. And, it's worth noting, Shakespeare named his play after Caesar (who only appears in a few scenes, and except for his ghost is gone midway through the play), rather than Brutus, hero to republicans, who occupies centre-stage throughout. (from 1599)

### Izaak Walton and the Restoration

Izaak Walton (1593–1683) was strongly influenced by Plutarch and his eagerness to stress the positive aspects of his subjects' lives. Walton is best remembered for his book on the joys and tactics of fishing, *The Compleat Angler* (1653), but he also wrote five biographies – mainly of clerics.

Although Walton received little formal education, he read widely and developed intellectual interests, fostered through his friendships with men such as John Donne who was vicar of a church close to where Walton lived in London and who shared his love of fishing. Walton wrote 'An Elegie' to accompany a posthumous collection of Donne's poetry and a biographical piece for inclusion in a book of Donne's sermons that he later revised and enlarged.

Walton's sympathy for the Royalist cause and his religious beliefs are reflected in his choice of subjects. He wrote biographies of the provost of Eton, Sir Henry Wotton; the Elizabethan theologian, Richard Hooker; the poet George Herbert and Bishop Sanderson. He also responded to requests for information from John Aubrey who was researching the lives of the famous. Here, for instance, Aubrey inserts a comment from Walton about the playwright Ben Jonson (1572/3–1637):

My Lord of Winton told me, he told him he was (in his long  
 retyrement, and sicknes, when he saw him, which was often)  
 much afflickted, that hee had profain'd the Scripture, in his playes;  
 and lamented it with horror; yet, that at that time of his long  
 retyrement, his pentions (so much as came yn) was given to a woman

that govern'd him, with whome he livd and dyed nere the Abie in  
 Westminster; and that nether he nor she tooke much care fore next  
 weike, and wood be sure not to want Wine; of which he usually tooke  
 too much before he went to bed, if not oftner and soner.

(from *Brief Lives* by John Aubrey)

- Can you detect evidence of Walton's own sympathies in this extract?

### John Aubrey

Both Walton and Aubrey (1626–1697) were writing at a time of great political and religious turmoil, and it may have been the destruction of so many historical artefacts and the transformation of institutions – most obviously the monarchy and church – that compelled them to record history that might otherwise have been lost.

Like Walton, Aubrey was extremely well-connected. He had struck up friendships at Trinity College, Oxford and while studying law at the Middle Temple; he also had useful family connections. Today he might be described as a 'good networker', a talent that proved extremely useful when his father's debts and various lawsuits left him penniless and reliant on the hospitality of friends. His friendship with men such as the 17th-century architect, Sir Christopher Wren, and the philosopher Thomas Hobbes were also helpful when he started to collaborate with the reclusive antiquarian, Anthony Wood, who was working on a history of Oxford University. This *History* was later developed into *Athenae et Fasti Oxonienses*, a hybrid of biography and bibliography, which was published in 1691–1692.

Aubrey's research went far beyond Wood's remit and resulted in biographical sketches of some of the leading men – and a few women – of his age that were eventually deposited in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. These sketches remained largely unknown until 1761 when a scholar spotted their reference to poets including Shakespeare and Milton. The first selection of what was to become known as *Brief Lives* was published in 1813 but it was not until 1898 that an accurate transcript of Aubrey's manuscripts appeared. Even then, this edition failed to acknowledge that Aubrey's apparently haphazard structure was in fact following a format prescribed for the *Athenae*. His occasional bawdiness (as in this extract from the life of Sir Walter Raleigh) also failed to endear him to Victorian editors who **bowdlerised** his work.

He loved a wench well: and one time getting-up one of the Maids of Honour against a tree in a Wood, who seemed at first boarding to be something fearfull of her honour, and modest, cried, 'Sweet Sir Walter what doe you meane? Will you undoe me? Nay sweet Sir Walter! Sweet Sir Walter: Sir Walter!'

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Aubrey's later reputation was dented by his interest in the supernatural: the only book published in his lifetime was *Miscellanies* (1696), a collection of papers on the occult. In his defence, he lived at a time when interest in magic still had a legitimate place on the scientific spectrum and he was one of the original fellows of the Royal Society, founded in 1660 for the study of science.

He gathered information for *Brief Lives* from a range of sources, including public monuments, pamphlets and written requests from people who knew his subjects. He left a trail of notes revealing his particular system of working. Ellipses (...) show a piece of information was either unknown or had already been printed and he cites sources (for example, 'Vide [see] Memorandum') or 'quaere' [enquire] or 'quaere plus de hoc' if something should be checked or expanded. So, for example, Milton is about the same height as the author but this requires the qualification: 'Quaere quot [how many] feet I am high; response, of middle stature.' He suggests who to approach for verification and in some cases the subjects themselves check the material. *Brief Lives* is not without errors – Sir Edward Shirburne, for example, wrongly states that it was Ben Jonson who killed fellow playwright Christopher Marlowe, rather than the actor Spencer.

Aubrey's eclectic interests, including archaeology, folklore, astrology and whether it was possible to read a person's character by their physiognomy, helped him to write vivid, intimate descriptions. Milton's complexion, for example, was 'so faire, they called him the Lady of Christ's-college'. Aubrey's use of anecdote foreshadows the stylistic approach of James Boswell (1740–1795), although he is much more concise than Boswell. His first hand accounts put the reader within touching distance of some of the greatest writers in the English language.

- ▶ Read the extract from Aubrey's life of Shakespeare (Part 3, page 78). What advantage did Aubrey have over modern biographers and how is this demonstrated in the extract? How do his style and his attitude to sources compare with other biographical extracts in Part 3?

## The biographer as friend

### Samuel Johnson

Today Dr Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) is most often remembered for two things: his Dictionary, which was published in 1755, and his friendship with the Scottish lawyer and writer, James Boswell (1740–1795) which led to the publication of *The Life of Samuel Johnson* in 1791, a work frequently claimed as the first great biography. But Johnson contributed as much to the **genre** as a biographer as he did as a biographical subject.

His *An Account of the Life of Mr Richard Savage, Son of the Earl Rivers* was published in 1744, while Johnson was a penniless and struggling writer. Indeed,

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it was this state of destitution which drew him to his subject, who had fallen on equally hard times. Much of the inspiration and material for Johnson's subsequent biography were gleaned from night-time walks around London with his poet friend, when both were too poor to take refuge at an inn. While later biographers tried to follow in the footsteps of their subject, Johnson and Savage walked side by side.

At first glance the two seem very different. Savage was in his forties (his date of birth was one of several disputed facts about him) when he first met Johnson, who was twenty-nine. Savage claimed to be the illegitimate son of the late Earl Rivers and Countess Macclesfield and spent much of his life fighting for his birthright. Johnson was a schoolmaster who had left his wife at home in Lichfield, in the Midlands, to try to make his literary name in London. He was awkward in company, scarred by childhood scrofula and prone to depression. Savage, by comparison, was witty and dashing and very good at extracting money from his literary patrons. He had been convicted of killing a man in a brothel near Charing Cross – for which he received a royal pardon – and published a bestselling poem, 'The Bastard', in 1728.

When Savage died in a debtors' prison in Bristol in 1743, Johnson, who had already written several short biographical essays, immediately decided to write a biography of his friend. He announced publicly that he would defend Savage's reputation and his partisanship is clear from the start of his biography:

To these mournful narratives, I am about to add the life of Richard Savage, a man whose writings entitle him to an eminent rank in the classes of learning, and whose misfortunes claim a degree of compassion, not always due to the unhappy, as they were often the consequences of the crime of others, rather than his own.

(from *Johnson on Savage*, ed. Richard Holmes, *Classic Biographies* series, 2002)

The book, which ran to forty-five thousand words, was Johnson's first full-length biography and his first about a contemporary subject. It was also, in many ways, a 'first' in the history of biography. Although Johnson is clearly sympathetic to Savage's plight, his account breaks away from the **tradition** of pious medieval **hagiographies**. And, unlike Boswell's biography and William Godwin's memoir (1798) of his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft (author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*), Johnson avoids giving himself a prominent part in the narrative.

Richard Holmes, in his book *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage* (1993), says that Johnson's life of Savage made it possible for the biographer to

... take obscure, failed and damaged lives, and make them intensely moving and revealing. Biography was an act of imaginative friendship, and depended on moral intelligence and human sympathy. Biography had become a new kind of narrative about the mysteries of the human heart.



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Johnson's penetrating psychological insights went much deeper than anything offered by 17th-century writers of biographical compilations or his contemporaries' preference for tittle-tattle and anecdote. His approach has a greater dramatic range and depth than previous biographies and draws on Savage's poetry, essays and letters in a way that helps to make the book more authoritative. Although it would be anachronistic to suggest that the stress Johnson puts on Savage's childhood and adolescence is **Freudian**, he is nevertheless the first biographer to attempt a psychological assessment of his subject.

The book's immediate and huge success helped Johnson to secure a generous advance for his *Dictionary*. Although he did not attempt another biography like *Savage*, he defended his approach in three essays. In 'On the Dignity and Usefulness of Biography' (*The Rambler* No 60, 1750) he argues for the importance of a psychological understanding of the biographical subject, saying:

More knowledge may be gained of a man's real character, by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree, and ended with his funeral.

(from *Johnson on Savage, Classic Biographies*)

## James Boswell

Johnson and James Boswell offer another unlikely pairing. As a young adult Boswell spent much of his time trying to escape the plans laid down for him by his strict Scottish father, a lawyer and landowner who wanted his son to follow his own profession. Boswell tried many careers, but liked best the coffee house culture of London where he could be rowdy and lascivious. He was also a compulsive journal keeper.

He had already started to make copious and detailed notes about Johnson before he eventually met him on 16 May 1763. Johnson was thirty-one years his senior and famously anti-Scottish. After an initial coolness they became firm friends, and met frequently over the next few years when Boswell visited London and when they travelled together in the Hebrides (the subject of a book published in 1785). Boswell used their meetings to interview his friend, although he was too busy with other subjects to start writing a biography. Boswell published his first successful book, about Corsica, in 1768, but it seems that it was not until 1775 that he began to talk seriously about a biography.

It was only when Johnson died in 1784 and Boswell was asked to prepare a book of his quotations that he realised that this would not do him justice. He began work on a biography, supplementing his own journal notes with interviews from people who had known Johnson. It was an agonisingly slow process, during which time Boswell had the irritation of seeing – as so often happens when a famous person dies – a clutch of rival biographies appear ahead of his, including one by another close friend of Johnson's, Mrs Henry Thrale (later Mrs Piozzi).

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Boswell's biography in 1791 was not given anything more than favourable reviews until 1831, when both Thomas Macaulay and Thomas Carlyle wrote enthusiastically about the book's vivid portrayal of 18th-century life. Since then it has been recognised as a landmark in biography – indeed, probably the first great biography.

Detractors have criticised Boswell for his failure to tell the truth about elements of Johnson's life, most notably his marriage to Tetty, a much older widow, his relationships with other women, his tendency to eat and drink to excess and his sometimes coarse language. Boswell has been accused of inflating his relationship with Johnson as a way of furthering his own literary ambitions. Certainly, they spent much less time together than Boswell would like his reader to think and they did not meet until Johnson was fifty-three. Another legitimate criticism is that Boswell's biography is skewed towards the last twenty years of Johnson's life and is excessively long.

But what sets the biography apart is Boswell's depiction of Johnson's inner, depressive self, as counterbalanced by the liveliness of his life in the tavern and coffee house. The tension between the two gives the book a novelistic depth and an insight into the human condition.

## Victorian biography: the biographer as guardian

Like Boswell and Johnson before them, several Victorian biographers chose close friends as their subjects. John Forster (1812–1876) wrote a three-volume biography of Charles Dickens who made him his literary executor. Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) produced a life of his close friend, John Sterling (1806–1844) and James Froude (1818–1894) startled readers with his frank description of the Carlyles' unhappy marriage in his biographies of the author.

But the *Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)*, which was first published in 1885, is more typical of the Victorian approach to biography, with its emphasis on the public lives of great men. Sir Leslie Stephen was its first editor and his daughter, Virginia Woolf, later wrote of the 'draperies and decencies' of Victorian biography that it represented ('New Biography', 30 October 1927, *New York Herald Tribune*).

Victorian biographies were usually monuments to virtue in which any doubts about a subject's morality were airbrushed out of the narrative. The families and friends of writers such as Jane Austen, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Charles Dickens, for example, jealously guarded their reputation. These guardians of a particular image only released material they felt was in keeping with a preconceived image and made it available only to a vetted biographer; to avoid the wrong impression many sources were simply destroyed.