CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66090-8 - Principles of Biography: The Leslie Stephen Lecture Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 13 May 1911
Sir Sidney Lee
Excerpt
More information

PRINCIPLES OF BIOGRAPHY

I

I APPRECIATE very highly the honour which the electors have done me in conferring on me the office of Leslie Stephen Lecturer in this University. A word of respectful admiration seems due to the liberality of the electors in bestowing this dignity for the second time in succession on a graduate of the sister University.

I propose to deal broadly with a very familiar ambition—the ambition to record in written words, on the printed page, the career of a man or woman. My design is to consider in the first place the essential quality of the theme which justly merits biographic effort, and in the second place to discuss the methods of presentment which are likely to serve the true purpose of biography

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66090-8 - Principles of Biography: The Leslie Stephen Lecture Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 13 May 1911
Sir Sidney Lee
Excerpt
More information

to best effect. Some paths which the biographer should avoid will also call for notice. I hope to suggest causes of success or failure in the practice of biography.

II

It is outside my scope to deal in any detail with the biography of particular persons. But I think I may without impropriety venture at the outset on a few words about the man in whose memory this lectureship has been founded, and whose name it bears. I am conscious that I lack many of the qualifications which my two predecessors in this honourable office enjoyed. But I believe I may without immodesty claim one advantage in this post, which neither of them shared with me. Leslie Stephen was the master under whom I served my literary apprenticeship and it was as his pupil that I grew to be his colleague and his friend. He gave me my earliest lessons in the writing of biography, and in speaking of its principles I am guided by his teaching.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66090-8 - Principles of Biography: The Leslie Stephen Lecture Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 13 May 1911
Sir Sidney Lee
Excerpt
More information

I am expressing views coloured by the experience for which he trained me.

There still happily survive members of this University and literary friends in London who knew Leslie Stephen in days far earlier than those of my first acquaintance with him. Compared with the companions of his youth or early middle age I have small right to speak of him. My association with him only concerned the last twenty-one years of his life. Yet I may plead that outside the ranks of his family I owe him debts of knowledge and encouragement which have not, I think, been excelled.

Stephen belonged to a notable generation, a generation the heroes of which seem to have been cast in a larger mould than those of my own. Stephen was the affectionate disciple of Darwin, the admiring acquaintance of Tennyson, the frequent but rather critical companion of Froude, the close friend of Henry Sidgwick, of George Meredith, of James Russell Lowell. He was personally known to Browning, Ruskin,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66090-8 - Principles of Biography: The Leslie Stephen Lecture Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 13 May 1911
Sir Sidney Lee
Excerpt
More information

Fitzgerald and Carlyle. With such men as these he would be the first to disclaim equality, but he belonged to their orbit.

It was Stephen's habit to depreciate himself, and to underestimate the regard in which others held him. His qualities did not make for wide popularity. He did not seek what Tennyson calls "the blare and blaze of fame." Yet he established a reputation which his greatest coevals acknowledged—a reputation which came of the virility and perspicuity of his work in ethics, in literary criticism, and above all in biography.

Justly may the University claim some share in his fame. To Cambridge Stephen owed mainly the greatest blessing of life—health, as well as a large stock of his intellectual equipment. In Stephen's case Cambridge made of a weakly boy an athletic man. His training as an undergraduate turned him into an athlete in body no less than in mind. Not that his physical health was ever obtrusively robust, but the physical exercise of his undergraduate days, in which he engaged with a wholly spontaneous zeal,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66090-8 - Principles of Biography: The Leslie Stephen Lecture Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 13 May 1911
Sir Sidney Lee
Excerpt
More information

clearly helped him to measure a span of life exceeding the psalmist's three score years and ten. Even more notable is the influence which this place exerted on his intellectual temper. The ideal of dry common sense, which dominated thought here in his youthful days, was his guiding star through life. He was always impatient of rhetoric, of sentimentality, of floridity in life or literature. His virtues as man and writer were somewhat of the Spartan kind. It was his life here in youth and early middle age that chiefly bred the terseness, the frankness, the dialectical adroitness which give his literary work its savour. Although he severed his connection with his University before he was forty, and though to some extent his sympathies with Cambridge afterwards decayed, its beneficent influences were never obliterated in him.

To the world at large as years advanced he seemed reserved and melancholy. I have heard him groan for hours together over the verbosity and blindness of bio-

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66090-8 - Principles of Biography: The Leslie Stephen Lecture Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 13 May 1911
Sir Sidney Lee
Excerpt
More information

graphers. But his seasons of depression, save in sickness, were passing moods. No man found richer solace than he in the early friendships which he formed in his University. His enthusiasm for his college while undergraduate, fellow and tutor, always kept alive happy memories, which helped to assuage sorrow, as I can testify from some evenings spent with him, when heavy domestic grief bowed down his spirit. "I love the sleepy river," he said in his last days, "not even the Alpine scenery is dearer to me."

Often a gladiator wielding unsparingly the sword of plain speech against orthodox beliefs, he dealt his strokes fairly and squarely and few of his adversaries cherished lasting resentment. Wary of enthusiasm and impatient of insincerity or incompetence, he admired without reserve all greatness in deed or thought. Every honest endeavour won his sympathy. His tenderness of heart was without any uncharitable leaven. There was always abundance of affectionate interest in those with whom he worked. Notably in

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66090-8 - Principles of Biography: The Leslie Stephen Lecture Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 13 May 1911
Sir Sidney Lee
Excerpt
More information

his case is the style of the author the character of the man. "I think," wrote Robert Louis Stevenson, "it is always wholesome to read Leslie Stephen." The dictum is in too minor a key to sound the whole truth, but it is the unpretending sort of language which Stephen would have appreciated about himself, especially from such a quarter.

III

Biography exists to satisfy a natural instinct in man—the commemorative instinct—the universal desire to keep alive the memories of those who by character and exploits have distinguished themselves from the mass of mankind. Art, pictorial, plastic, monumental art, competes with biography in preserving memories of buried humanity. But Jacques Amyot, the great prose writer of the French Renaissance—Amyot who, by his French translation of the works of Plutarch, first made the Greek master of biography an influence on modern thought

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66090-8 - Principles of Biography: The Leslie Stephen Lecture Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 13 May 1911
Sir Sidney Lee
Excerpt
More information

and conduct—wrote these wise words on the relative values of biography and art as means of commemorating men's characters and achievements: "There is neither picture, nor image of marble, nor arch of triumph, nor pillar, nor sumptuous sepulchre, can match the durableness of an eloquent biography, furnished with the qualities which it ought to have." "Furnished with the qualities which it ought to have"—there is the problem which we are met to face. Biography is not so imposing to the general eye as pyramids and mausoleums, statues and columns, portraits and memorial foundations, but it is the *safest* way, as Thomas Fuller wrote, to protect a memory from oblivion. Plutarch, Tacitus and Suetonius' biographical memorials of distinguished men have worn better than the more substantial tributes of art to their heroes' fame.

The aim of biography is, in general terms, to hand down to a future age the history of individual men or women, to transmit enduringly their character and exploits.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66090-8 - Principles of Biography: The Leslie Stephen Lecture Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 13 May 1911
Sir Sidney Lee
Excerpt
More information

Character and exploits are for biographical purposes inseparable. Character which does not translate itself into exploit is for the biographer a mere phantasm. The exploit may range from mere talk, as in the case of Johnson, to empire-building and military conquest, as in the case of Julius Caesar or Napoleon. But character and exploit jointly constitute biographic personality. Biography aims at satisfying the commemorative instinct by exercise of its power to transmit personality.

The biographic aim implies two constant and obvious conditions. Firstly, the subject-matter, the character and achievement out of which the biography is to be woven, must be capable of moving the interest of posterity. Secondly, the manner or style of the record should be of a texture which is calculated to endure, to outlive the fashion or taste of the hour. In other words, biography depends for its successful accomplishment on the two elements of fit matter and fit manner, of fit theme and fit treatment.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-66090-8 - Principles of Biography: The Leslie Stephen Lecture Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 13 May 1911
Sir Sidney Lee
Excerpt
More information

Good treatment will not compensate for a bad theme, nor will a good theme compensate for bad treatment. Theme and treatment must both answer equally a call of permanent distinction. There are cases in which a good subject is found in combination with a bad form. That indeed is no uncommon experience. In the result, the commemorative instinct remains unsatisfied and biography fails to perform its function. The converse association of a bad theme with good treatment, of bad matter with good manner, is rarer, and may kindle some literary interest, although not an interest of biographic concern. For the life of a nonentity or a mediocrity, however skilfully contrived, conflicts with primary biographic principles. Unless subject-matter and style be both of a commensurate sufficiency, biography lacks "the qualities which it ought to have," the qualities which ensure permanence, the qualities which satisfy the commemorative instinct.

What constitutes fitness in a biographic

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org