



BOOK REVIEWS

Caine, Barbara: *Biography and History*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. ISBN 978-14039-8726-6, 152 pp.

As an experienced practitioner of the genre, and as the author of collective biographies of the Strachey family and the sisters of Beatrice Webb, as well as numerous books related to feminist concerns, Barbara Caine is well aware that, as she observes in the opening sentence of this book: "So great is the current interest in biography, not only amongst general readers but also amongst academics working in a number of different disciplines that many scholars now talk of a 'biographical turn' in the humanities and social sciences" (1). In this book it would appear that she has the unenviable task of providing both a guide for the reader who is new to the field – and, judging from the glossary, on which, more later, new to much else – and a survey for those more familiar with the two fields referred to in her title, namely, biography and history.

The book is divided into five main chapters, along with a short introduction and conclusion. In her introduction Caine lays stress upon the fact that biography as a developing discipline, with an increasingly imposing presence within academia, has focused to a greater degree than hitherto upon the lives of "ordinary" rather than "prominent" individuals and, in more recent times, upon groups of such individuals and their relation to broader processes occurring in a given culture and society. The first chapter, entitled "Historians and the Question of Biography," considers the way in which history, the hitherto dominant sibling of the two, has become increasingly responsive to the smaller-scale, individualistic concerns of its troublesomely anti-authoritarian and self-focused little sister. The chapter returns to ancient times in order to chart the development of significant patterns and relationships between history and biography, making good use of a suggestive title – in this case, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. Biography can be used not merely to chart the deeds of great men in respectful fashion, but to show the character revealed in their private lives. This tendency is furthered in modern biography, as Caine goes on to indicate in her second chapter, "A History of Biography," where she provides her own reading of the significance of the relevant writings of Samuel Johnson and James Boswell in relation to the field. The emphasis here is on the precise use to which detailed research into the everyday private life of the subject is put. Boswell's biography of Johnson is seen as provoking a partial backlash despite the fact that much potentially embarrassing detail, such as Johnson's plan to marry again after the death of his wife, was omitted. Caine goes on, however, to show that a new wave of the inclusion of potentially scandalous detail soon appeared with biographers who had no personal acquaintance with the object of their research. Elizabeth Gaskell's disclosure of the intimate details of the Brontës' family life, while not intended to be shocking, still managed to get her into legal troubles which forced her both to provide an apology and to rewrite the book. J. A. Froude's biography of Thomas Carlyle, though authorized by the great man who was himself the preeminent author of biographies of great men, was received with even greater outrage by his family as well as much of the literary establishment.

These earlier developments provide a motivating background for the more aggressively “anti-establishment” turn represented most notoriously by Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* and taken in interestingly experimental directions by writers closely acquainted with him, notably Virginia Woolf in *Orlando* and related writings. Strachey’s concern with the biographer’s right to “lay bare the facts of the case as he understands them” (as quoted on p. 40) and Woolf’s desire, to combine, in Cain’s words: “the hard granite of factual truth with the inner light of personality”, are seen as characteristic of what was known at the time as “the new biography” (40). This development occurs at about the same time as the rise of psychoanalysis as a significant element in the interpretation of personality, and Cain provides an initial treatment of its relation to and influence on the practice of biography before returning to it in more detail in a later chapter, entitled “Interpreting and Constructing Lives.” Here it is seen as a means for the biographer of distancing themselves from the temptation to be overwhelmed by the presence of a subject with what appears to be an exceptionally strong character. As on many occasions in her book, Cain makes deft use of a particularly relevant case study – in this instance, Leon Edel’s approach to Henry James in his five-volume study of a writer often referred to as “The Master.” Edel represents a generation of biographers subsequent to the satirically provocative precisions of Strachey, but his appreciation of current psychoanalytical perspectives affords him what he views as a healthy degree of scepticism when attempting to assess the precise nature of James’s psychological make-up. Cain is keen at this point to draw attention to the possible limitations of psychoanalytically derived readings of biographical subjects (while making it clear that Edel was by no means a slave to such perspectives) by emphasizing the male-oriented nature of Edel’s and, by implication, Freud’s approach. What she does not do (perhaps understandably, given the limited space in which she is required to operate) is question the psychological peculiarities of the whole psychoanalytic enterprise, with its emphasis on repressed sexual difficulties. This is a strategy which itself has been interrogated by a variety of cultural historians with widely differing outlooks, from Jacques le Rider to Paul Carter, who show how Freud’s approach to human psychology is itself symptomatic of social and cultural repressions stemming from his own anxieties as part of an exceptionally creative but negatively perceived Jewish minority in the already deeply anti-Semitic Vienna of his day. Instead, Cain focuses, as the title of her chapter indicates, on the way in which both biographers and autobiographers construct selves and subjectivities which are open to interpretation from an equally varied range of perspectives.

The first of the two chapters preceding that which discusses the interpretation and construction of lives concerns itself with encyclopaedic registers of the great and the good as typified by the project which occupied a great portion of the life of Virginia Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen. Coverage of the British *National Dictionary of Biography*, for which Stephen was the first editor, is included in a chapter entitled “Collective Biography.” Again we are taken back to Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* as an example of an early prototype of this approach, though as Cain rightly observes, the real modern precedent is Pierre Bayle, whose work anticipates that of the encyclopaedists of the eighteenth century and which is part of an intellectual and sometimes physically brutal war between the forces of anti-authoritarian and, as perceived by their opponents, substantially “atheistic” intellectuals, inspired to a greater or lesser degree and in different ways, by the pervasive influence of Baruch Spinoza, the ultimate anti-establishment figure of the eighteenth century, even though his posthumously published *Ethics* had appeared not long after the middle of the seventeenth. Cain focuses on Bayle from the perspective of national collective biographies, but perhaps more attention might have been paid to the libertarian and emancipatory nature of these earlier forms and their connection to more recent forms of biographical practice. Her own focus, which again is understandable given her own interests, is on the relative exclusion of women from such collective forms; this is, of course, a hugely significant field but one which tends to the exclusion of other, substantially important considerations.

The fourth chapter of Cain’s survey concerns itself with the development and implications of work included under the term “life writing,” a simple Anglicization of the original term, derived from ancient Greek, but one which seeks to interrogate and broaden the boundaries and conventions of modern biography and autobiography. A number of helpful observations relating to the context of the adoption of the new term are provided, including the time of its first appearance, in the 1970s,

the chronological cradle of much radically emancipatory, as well as controversial, thinking in terms of academic practices. In terms of form and content, the inclusion of more prosaic and everyday forms of written expression as worthy of serious study in their own right and in connection with the use of the same forms by networks of individuals writing at the same time, and often about the same things, is highlighted; these include: “diaries, memoirs, letters, autobiography and biography but also travel writing and indeed any other form of writing which involves a construction of the self” (69). The chapter also concerns itself with issues pertaining to what is termed “auto/biography,” where decisions relating to a particular focus on the subject in given examples of the genre, what is explicitly stated and what is communicated by silent implication, are discussed at thoughtful length. As with the other chapters, this includes examination of relations between history and auto/biography and a final section devoted to consideration of historians’ own autobiographies which often include reflections on their own approaches to the writing of history. Again, Caine provides her own history of how this is not simply a recent phenomenon, looking back to such works as Edward Gibbons’s *Memoirs* as precedents for more contemporary forms of historiographical self-reflection.

A final major chapter, entitled “Changing Biographical Practices,” begins by observing how, in terms of form, nothing has really changed and that the traditional two-volume biography is still standard fare for contemporary readerships, though even in this sphere, choice of subject matter provides evidence that substantial alterations to traditional practices have occurred. Again, the emphasis here is on the hitherto marginalized and on groups of individuals connected by common concerns, and further reference to Virginia Woolf is made as an early innovator in this respect. Woolf is at the heart of Caine’s subsequent concern with questions pertaining to gendered assumptions in the fields of both biography and history, though particularly the former, but the significance of history returns as she considers relations between biography and microhistory, where it is often unproductive to make any rigid distinction between two fields which so clearly and considerably overlap. Here, as elsewhere, Caine both provides examples of the kinds of text she has in mind and pursues a helpfully extended discussion of the nature of their relevance to the points she wishes to pursue.

The chapter closes with a discussion of the relation of the individual to the wider world in which they are situated. If history traditionally takes as its starting point that wider world, zooming in where necessary to focus on the significance of a particular individual, biography traditionally starts from the other end, beginning with the individual. Caine’s own choice of representative biographies in this respect are those dealing with political figures such as Hitler and Mussolini (though also Nehru) on the one hand, and the scientist Charles Darwin, on the other. Comparing Alan Bullock’s *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (1952) and Ian Kershaw’s *Hitler: A Biography* (2008), she contrasts the emphasis of Bullock’s relatively early study (Hitler had only been dead for seven years), which emphasizes the significance of Hitler’s charismatic authority, with Kershaw’s insistence on showing the need for providing a thorough historical context to show how what he sees as an “unperson” could emerge to be such an influential figure. The connection between these politicians, whether horrific or positive in terms of their influence, and that of Charles Darwin, is that of influential individuals who can be better understood as individuals by providing sufficient historical context. This is a fair enough point, though having read Kershaw’s huge study, one of the impressions I gained as a reader, was that Hitler had been made into an “unperson” in the sense that he seemed to almost disappear from view as an individual in the vast swathes of historical detail contextualizing his recorded thoughts and actions; the term “unperson” itself, has a disturbingly totalitarian, Orwellian ring to it. One of the obvious justifications for historical and biographical studies of this kind, it might be argued, is to help to ensure that we learn the “lessons of history” and try to avoid the reoccurrence of such figures and catastrophes, but the danger might be that too much detail allows the biographical baby to be thrown out with the historically contextualising bathwater, particularly in a case where the external causes of the rise of the Nazis are as significant as those elements internally peculiar to the development of German society in the inter-war period.

A similar contrast is provided with two studies of Charles Darwin; here the chronological contrast is more extensive, beginning with Leonard Huxley’s 1921 biography of Darwin and that by Janet Browne, published in 1995. Huxley is argued to have explained Darwin’s influence in terms of his individual genius, while Browne relates it to the nexus of ideas about evolution occurring in

Victorian society as well as his own ability to make use of his own social connections. The point which Caine seems to want to make at this stage is the more recent emphasis on the possibility that even 'great' individuals are ordinary rather than extraordinary and, like everyone else, a product of their times. In this sense, she and the writers she discusses seem to be going back to the beginnings of cultural studies in Britain, whether with primarily literary or historical preoccupations, as with Raymond Williams ("Culture is Ordinary") or E. P. Thompson and his massive study *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), which begins with the a detailed case-study of the simultaneous battle for literacy and political rights among the more radical elements of the English working classes and the fear of anarchy it provoked among their superiors. The subjects of almost all of these biographical studies are, of course, famous men, though Caine begins the section with a discussion of biographical approaches to Eleanor Roosevelt.

The conclusion to the book is brief, essentially emphasizing the way in which biography has become more popular as it seeks to underline the significance of what traditionally have been regarded as marginal individuals and groups, the most notable of these being women. Caine does, however, make another claim, which again relates to cultural studies and to popular culture when she asserts that: "Biography is the major literary form in which academics can reach general audiences," and goes on to say that "Biography as a form is so popular that it now extends beyond the human and the animate to embrace the inanimate and the conceptual. Thus one can now read biographies of continents ... of foodstuffs and cuisines, and even of mathematical equations ..." (123–24). This is no doubt true and, as Caine points out, is a question of "marketing departments who see it as a more enticing label for general readers than 'history'" (124). Caine, again understandably, given the fact that she is providing a general introduction not a critical study, looks to the positive side of this development. At the same time, there is a tendency, evident in numerous aspects of cultural studies, to follow the market in order to get published and show that individuals and institutions are paying their way, regardless of the critical quality of their studies; perhaps a section on the perils of popularity might not have been such a bad idea.

Finally, a more substantially critical comment, which partly relates to the observation just made. As a reader of this study, while impressed by the obvious competence of its author and her ability to analyse and exemplify large areas of relevant discourse with a broad range of indicative examples, discussed and analysed in comparative detail as opposed to being merely mentioned, the occasional appearance of words in bold type which refer one to a glossary of twenty-one terms was thoroughly irritating. A sixteen-word definition of "gender," which distinguishes it from "sex," is provided, but one of "sexuality," which also occurs in the text, is not. The definition provided for "interiority" was shorter and thoroughly questionable. Someone who is interested and educated enough to read this book would almost certainly know what "feminism" was, even if their definition does not precisely accord with that of the author. The glossary provided appeared, to this reader at least, to be far more frustrating than helpful and amounted to a gimmicky hodge-podge. If one is going to provide a "popular" or "easy to read" study-guide for readers who can't be bothered to use a dictionary or the internet then a little more thought needs to be devoted to the enterprise.

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