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**Theoretical Discussions
of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life
Writing** ed. by Hans Renders, Binne de Haan (review)

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REVIEWS

Hans Renders and Binne de Haan, eds. *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*. With a Foreword by Nigel Hamilton. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2013. 456 pp. ISBN 978-0773440920, \$159.00.

This is an unusually comprehensive study of biography divided into four sections: Historiography of Biographical Studies, Biography and History, Biography and Microhistory, and Biography and Life Writing. In addition, Nigel Hamilton contributes a foreword that decries the way biography has become a “volleyball, punched between History and Language and Literature faculties”—a situation that is even worse, I think, than he suggests—and several appendices dealing with “Sex in Biography,” “The Personal in the Political Biography,” “The Biographical Method,” “Why Genealogy and Biography Are Not Kin,” and a final bid by Nigel Hamilton for “A Nobel Prize for Biography.”

In their introduction, Hans Renders and Binne de Haan define their terms, insisting that biography is the “study of an individual” and “Life Writing is biographical research in the broadest sense”—so broad, in fact, that Renders and de Haan seem quite skeptical of its agenda, which too often, in their view, centers on uncritical use of autobiography and tendentious efforts to correct the historical record by including the voices of various minorities that have been underrepresented in biography and history. Curiously, Renders and de Haan provide no definition of “micro-history,” and this seems rather telling, since the section devoted to this subject is by far the weakest—not only because the plethora of definitions is bewildering but also because the turgid and fussy style of the essays is off-putting.

Theoretical Discussions of Biography includes eight contributors in addition to the editors: Nigel Hamilton is a well-known biographer, whose work includes books about John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton, and a short history of biography. Richard D. Brown has published several books in early American history as well as microhistorical studies for the *New England Quarterly*; Carlo Ginzburg is a notable microhistorian whose book *The Cheese and the Worms* is cited several times in this volume; Marlene Kadar has published extensively in the field of life writing, including coediting *ARIEL: Life Writing*

in *International Contexts* (2008); Giovanni Levi has published several micro-historical monographs, such as *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist*; Sabrina Loriga specializes in the relationship between history and biography, as exemplified in *Le Petit x. De la biographie à l'histoire* (2010); Matt Peltonen, a social historian, has contributed articles on historiography and social science methodology to *History and Theory*, *Max Weber Studies*, and *Scandinavian Economic History Review*; Hans Renders, who has published many articles about biography in international journals, is chair of History and Theory of Biography and director of the Biography Institute, both at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, and is assisted by Binne de Haan, a Ph.D candidate at the Biography Institute. His thesis “analyzes the relationship between Biography and Historiography in the past three decades.”

What this grouping of scholars suggests is that Renders and de Haan have broken out of the Anglo-American sphere of biography studies that tends to dominate publications in English. Indeed, Renders alone contributes nine of the twenty pieces in this book. His range of reference is impressive, as the titles of his articles suggest: “Towards Traditions and Nations,” “Roots of Biography: From Journalism to Pulp to Scholarly Based Non-Fiction,” “Contemporary Values of Life: Biographical Dictionaries in the Nineteenth Century,” “The Limits of Representativeness: Biography, Life Writing and Microhistory,” “Biography in Academia and the Critical Frontier in Life Writing: Where Biography Shifts into Life Writing,” “The Personal in Political Biography,” “The Biographical Method,” and “Why Genealogy and Biography Are Not Kin.” When “The Eclipse of Biography in Life Writing” by Binne de Haan is added to the Renders list of articles, virtually half of this anthology contains within it a monograph with a set of convictions: 1. Life writing has dangerously diluted the role biography has to play as a critical contributor to an understanding of history. 2. Biographers can profit from the methods of microhistorians. 3. Biographers must cease thinking of themselves as literary stylists on a par with novelists, and realize that as vital as biography remains it cannot be a sustaining work of literature but is, instead, like the discipline of history, a form of knowledge that is constantly rewritten and superseded by subsequent generations of writers who will ask new questions about biographical subjects and thus make virtually nugatory the biographies of earlier ages.

Conviction 1: Life writing, according to Renders and de Haan, actually disarms the critical examination of evidence by too often relying on autobiographies that may be politically correct (this term, by the way, is never used by the editors) but that inevitably skew an understanding of both individual lives and history because the life writer is primarily engaged in amplifying and supporting the voice of the subject, thus eschewing the skeptical, analytical

aspects of research and interpretation. In effect, the life writer has gone too far toward empathizing with his or her subject. Even worse, the popularity of life writing has crowded out biography as a subject for academic discourse, de Haan asserts:

In the first twenty years of *Biography*, book reviews concerned biographies and biography-related studies. The first volumes of *Biography* contained a few reviews of autobiographies, autobiographical studies and “other” books, books not directly related to biography and autobiography. From the nineties on, however, the number of reviews of “other” books drastically increased. These books being reviewed dealt with oral history, gender, memoirs, Holocaust testimonials, disability-trauma, Post-colonial Studies and the American Civil War.

De Haan concedes that theoretical discussions of biography continue to appear in *Biography*, but only about 30 percent of the articles published between 2006 and 2011 “dealt with biography.” The *Journal of Historical Biography* has remedied part of the problem, although, de Haan notes, this publication “appears to be exclusively orientated toward biography as a form of history.” Well, not quite. For example, I published a work of “biographical criticism” in *The Journal of Historical Biography* that cannot be construed as taking a historical approach.

Conviction 2: Microhistory, at least as featured in this volume, includes individual works that may excite and edify biographers, but as a form of biography it is hard to see why it receives so much attention here. The very term seems a bit of an academic dodge. What does it mean, really? It can mean concentrating on a village that is somehow a microcosm of history or of the history of individuals. It can mean exploring the life of an obscure individual who, lo and behold! is actually representative of his culture. It can, in short, focus on the part to illuminate the whole. What is new about that? Some of the elaborations of microhistory in this book are simply tedious and repetitious. Individual works stand out, like Richard Cobb’s books about individuals and communities in France, but to categorize these quirky, idiosyncratic, if brilliant efforts as a genre or subgenre that demands study seems overblown.

Conviction 3: Renders is right. Most biographies will bite the dust. But so will most novels. The classics of biography, like other classics of literature, remain readable and ought to be taught more than they are. Not just Boswell, but Froude on Carlyle, Southey on Lord Nelson, Sir Thomas More on Richard III, the Venerable Bede on Saint Cuthbert, and of course Plutarch, to mention just a few of biography’s all stars. Even a biographer like Leon Edel, whose use of psychology dates his work in some ways, has embedded a literary sensibility in his narrative that I suspect will remain of interest to readers so

long as biography and Henry James are of interest. That so many biographers fall short of producing enduring works of art does not seem dispositive. My great regret, in fact, is that biography is not taught as a subject in academic departments, because the absence of biography in syllabi and curricula simply reinforces the erroneous conclusion that the genre is not worth teaching.

Because Renders is so grounded in history, he suggests the “umbrella question of every biographer is: does our knowledge of the personal life of a certain individual add anything to the understanding of his public achievements?” He does make exceptions for biographies of wives and children of famous figures, explaining James Joyce, for example, “by means of his daughter.” But if biography is the study of an individual’s life, and if that description is sufficient, then what makes biography, at its core, important is that the story of that individual’s life is of intrinsic, not merely historical, interest. It is the person in his or her personhood that demands the biographer’s attention. I once heard a biographer say he was not going to relate his subject’s love affairs because those affairs had no impact on his subject’s writing. That, for me, is a possible way to write a biography, but not the only way. In fact, writing biography by strict criteria of what is important in an historical sense is dehumanizing. Like Leon Edel, I would argue a place for biography alongside the psychological novel. Indeed many such works of fiction have been written as biographies.

To take issue with Renders, however, is not to discount his perceptive and wide-ranging contributions to an understanding of biography and biographical method. Only a scholar with formidable learning could have assembled an anthology that is so challenging on so many aspects of biography. Especially valuable is Render’s argument that there is, in fact, no “theory” that has to be applied to biography. On this score he quotes Klaas van Berkel’s comment in *E. J. Dijksterhuis. Ein biografie* (1996): “It is sometimes asked what the method of biography is, but that is a completely misplaced question. Biography *has* no method, but *is* a method.”

Carl Rollyson