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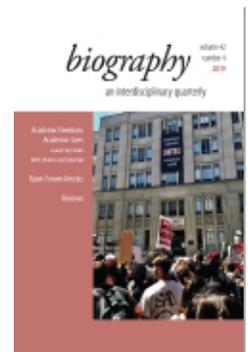
The Biographical Turn: Lives in History ed. by Hans Renders,
Binne de Haan, and Jonne Harmsma (review)

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The Biographical Turn: Lives in History

Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, and Jonne Harmsma, editors

Routledge, 2017, xv + 222 pp. ISBN 978-1138939714, \$49.95 paperback.

This important book opens and closes with articles by biographers known to the general reader: Nigel Hamilton, a former journalist, and Debby Applegate, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author of popular history. Fourteen intervening chapters show how the tools of journalism and new ideas of the self have changed the writing of biography—thereby changing our understanding of individual identity, collective lives, and the pursuit of history. The volume's editors introduce this "biographical turn" as a recently accepted method of research affecting not only the fields of history and biography studies but all humanistic fields. They write, "The worn-out question [of] whether biography is an art or a science has been supplanted by a more profound inquiry into its position within the academic landscape" (4). With that terrain comes academic dispute about the "place" of biographical studies vis-à-vis the field of life writing. Altogether, the volume brings readers up to date with an old form of writing having a feisty renaissance.

Hamilton's opening piece demonstrates how he, trained as an historian, came to influence the field via journalistic techniques when doing biography. He charts this shift with his autobiographical account of writing sagas of three "great men": Bernard Law Montgomery, John F. Kennedy, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Hamilton reveals that he did not set out with a revisionist agenda for doing either history or biography in these projects. Rather, motivated by "a biographer's intense curiosity" (25), his intensive research led him to breach the walls of accepted professional historians' ideas on how to do a biography, and it altered historical understanding of these figures. But even as he discovered the "corrective turn" offered by

biography (21), he also found that his personal “justification shifted—organically, one might say” (23).

Subsequent chapters articulate the theoretical and methodological implications of this “biographical turn”—situating human experience as a starting point of historical interpretation. Each article contributes to the dismantling of former techniques and assumptions by applying the corrective of an individual account. This “bottom-up perspective” can complicate grand narratives by showing the subtleties of human motivation and existence. Thus, these pieces revive the old idea of human agency in history, albeit far from the “great man” theory of old.

Historians like to chart change, and their concept of time itself has changed over, well, time. Sabina Loriga, a contributor to earlier related volumes, explores how a concept of the plurality of time has evolved over the past two centuries to allow what is now called microhistory to flourish. Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980), about a sixteenth-century miller, broadened the notion of the individual person to include those of lower social status and raised the idea (articulated later by Edoardo Grendi) of the “normal exception.” This set off a series of new biographies showing a way for historians “to infiltrate the interstices or cracks in social institutions” (38). A new understanding of the role of the individual emerged, she claims, “envisioned *simultaneously* as a unique case and as a metaphor” (39). Loriga ends with a warning to guard against notions of greater personal agency in past times than was possible. Further, Icelandic scholar Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon argues that by reducing the field of study to a smaller scale, it is possible to uncover the scope of action available to an individual within that society—which is what we really want to know about the past. This biographical turn, along with other studies of the “self,” challenges what had been historians’ presumed “objective” perspective. In fact, the “subjective” approach has extended to historians (and biographers) themselves.

Kaarle Wirta uses microhistory to execute a biographical turn in early modern Atlantic history. He cites the life and career of Henrich Carloff (d. 1677), a Rostock-born entrepreneur who worked for competing Swedish, Dutch, and Danish companies trading slaves and other goods in present-day Ghana, and operated in a small international circle of entrepreneurs, royalty, and power brokers. Carloff’s career illustrates what Wirta claims cannot be shown by the mere study of company records. As Matti Peltonen might assert, Carloff is the “*exceptional typical*” that sheds light on the larger world of Atlantic trade (124). Carloff and his fellow entrepreneurs had unusual social capital that transcended business or government boundaries, ones that don’t show up if we are looking for “capitalism,” or similar abstractions or corporate structures. The ultimate goal, says Wirta, is to rediscover the role of agency in the Atlantic, along with the social underpinnings of entrepreneurship.

Enny de Bruijn continues attention to microhistory in her chapter on religion and empathy in early modern biography. Using the life and times of Reyner van Dorth (1542–1601), De Bruijn demonstrates how the Reformation and

humanism affected the Netherlands in the late sixteenth century. Scrutinizing this nobleman's legal documents over time allows speculation on his intellectual development—a new sense of guilt that seems unmistakably Protestant as he took an unusual action for his class position by marrying his maidservant in late life, thereby legitimizing their three sons. Understanding such a shift requires the right kind of empathy, built through familiarity with events and documents as well as any extant grand narrative. In the case of Van Dorth, one must imagine adding divine judgment to the unwritten codes and laws for human behavior. A new and more personal form of spirituality was emerging and the code of noble behavior was changing as well, with more emphasis on “religious honour” (136).

The question of subjectivity leads Binne de Haan to the elephant in the room regarding biography's “neighbouring genres” (53)—reliability. De Haan is particularly concerned about biofiction, literature with a protagonist named after an actual historical figure. He reminds readers that historians have the “ambition to genuinely and truthfully grasp and transmit history and historical actors based on a connective understanding derive[d] from extensive archival research and presented with narrative audacity” (53). But informed fictionalizing? While troublesome to many scholars, the biofictioneer's filling in of and extrapolating from evidence may explain why many readers prefer biofiction over “straight” history.

Such questions are precisely what makes biography suspect within academia. By nature interdisciplinary, biography does not fit neatly into any one academic field. So, it gets lobbed back and forth from trench to trench. According to De Haan, what is needed is “a clear academic infrastructure” to ensure rigor and the field's credibility (54). Which takes us to the boundary between fiction and nonfiction. Joanny Moulin asserts, “The biographical turn in literature and literary studies revolves around the notion of a *life effect*, that interrogates the articulation between fiction and non-fiction” (68). The novel, he reports, is undergoing “biographisation,” while literary studies searches for theory of biography (68). After reviewing French twentieth-century literary theory, Moulin restates Hayden White's theory of the historical imagination, and thus the similarities between historiography and literature.

Christian Klein also references Hayden White's work in “Biography as a Concept of Thought,” writing that White established the “significance of certain plot structures and models” as the basis for “fact-based narratives” (83). While historians compile material, usually events, into what White called a “chronicle,” the biographer provides them with a structure, or story line, and even questions the meaning of narrative within an overriding plot line called history. Various narrative formulae can be accessed, often from historical stories, to provide both structure and meaning, and can reveal culturally-established narratives. Here Klein offers his “biography as a concept of thought.” This happens in the interchange between lived lives and their “mediated representation” (85). The resulting “textual construct” (84) allows readers to assume a connection between a mediated representation and real life, on which to pattern our own thoughts and behaviors. One becomes an

academic or artist or politician, for example, by acting in a certain way to establish credibility in that role. Biographical studies provides an academic methodology for this inquiry, even while being part of this knowledge.

Hans Renders and Sjoerd van Faasen's "Biographies as Multipliers" examines the life patterns of artists and intellectuals before and during World War I to complicate the common belief that "just before the outbreak of the First World War, intellectuals and artists were pacifists" (91). Using the life of Theo Van Doesburg and other artists, Renders and Van Faasen chart the complex historical factors that led some, but certainly not all, pre-WWI artists through the war and into later careers. These life stories offer nuance to our understanding of received history.

Jonne Harmsma's "Honest Politics" essay further complicates history. Seeking to "put flesh on the bones of economic expertise" (104), he charts the rise of the "economic expert" in the early twentieth century, when economics came to be seen as a value-neutral science. He uses the career of Dutch economist/politician Jelle Zilstra (1918–2001) to examine the "impartial" stance claimed by positivist economics. Zilstra, who was very religious, was able to create "a new political reality of scientific allure" (108). Harmsma succeeds in showing that economics is actually a very human affair.

Lindie Koorts, biographer of the South African apartheid leader D. F. Malan, ponders the challenges of writing about Afrikaans-speakers, given their connection to apartheid and the country's habitual "great man" approach to politics and biography. When apartheid ended in 1990, Afrikaners lost their grand national narrative and accompanying biographical narratives. Luckily, memoirs and other forms of nonfiction about Afrikaans-speakers filled the gap. Texts from this broader genre allowed Afrikaners to see themselves as people with a conscience "who had a place in the new dispensation" (151). It also enabled Koorts to publish a biography with critical reflection on a complicated and uncomfortable history.

Hans Renders's "Biography is Not a Selfie: Authorisation as the Creeping Transition from Autobiography to Biography" decries the recent trend of popular biographies actually being disguised autobiographies created with help from a professional writer. Calling such productions "authorised" further hoodwinks readers into thinking the volume is more credible than a biography created by a detached observer.

Partly in response to Hans Renders, academic trench warfare appears in Craig Howes's "What Are We Turning From? Research and Ideology in Biography and Life Writing." Elsewhere, Renders had charged that the journal *Biography's* engagement with broad forms of life writing meant a lessening of rigorous scholarship in general. Moreover, the Biographers International Organization (BIO) wondered whether by including memoir, autobiography, and other forms of life writing under its aegis, the Center for Biographical Research at the University of Hawai'i was living up to its name and the quarterly's stated purpose. The question became whether biography belongs within a larger category called life writing or is a separate endeavor of equal, if not higher order. Howes responds with a magisterial summary

of the center's and journal's histories and contributions—a catalog of the explosive growth of the forms and field of life writing. Bearing a flag with a Venn diagram, Howes reiterates the expansive founding vision of George Simson, who aimed to reflect and chart growth in the field of biography within life writing. Howes sees biographical studies as limited to the “third person,” while this and other publications examine autobiography, cultural critique, historicism, identity politics, and other iterations of life writing. He suggests, “A turn to the biographical need not require the embrace, or the total rejection, of fellow travelers” (174).

Speaking of controversy, Carl Rollyson tackles directly the issue of biography's low position within academe. Rollyson traces the long history of biography vs. “scholarship.” One factor of this debate, he says, is that some scholars consider journalistic techniques, such as personal interviews of persons who knew the biographical subject, to be “messy,” while paper and other records are stable. Biography's interdisciplinarity has also been another impediment to respectability. Ultimately, though, Rollyson claims the problem of biography is that it is by nature transgressive. There is hope, however, as publish or perish imperatives may help academics reestablish links to the field.

Interdisciplinarity and the general reading public resurface in the final essay. Like Hamilton, Debby Applegate found that her 2006 biography on Henry Ward Beecher (1813–1887), whose “Gospel of Love” became a public commodity in the nineteenth century, resonated with a contemporary public rediscovering the power of religion in cultural life. Applegate transformed her PhD dissertation into a biography illuminating America's religious culture wars of the nineteenth century. Beecher's fall from grace through a sex scandal after having established the first megachurch only boosted his public following. As a public intellectual, his life and behavior was a topic of conversation from the highest to lowest rungs of American society. The tale of Henry Ward Beecher's life encompasses many cultural factors, and Applegate explores the many obscure, often unstated connections between private experiences and public actions that make up cultural attitudes.

This volume has an excellent comprehensive index and bibliography—definitely worth comment these days. Sometimes one is aware that some texts have been translated, but in general these essays' calls for a theoretical infrastructure and their debates over which and how to employ them make this an enlightening read.

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