

## **Mark McKenna review of Hans Renders and David Veltman, eds, *Different Lives: Global Perspectives on Biography in Public Cultures and Societies***

(Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020), 294 pp., HB €132.00, \$159.00,  
ISBN 9789004428126 (print), ISBN 9789004434974 (e-book)

To read biography offers the chance to imagine another life—a life that we can never live—one in which the choices we make appear clear, and the arc of our lives is visible. With the passing of time and the advantage of distance and hindsight, biography necessarily becomes something other than life itself: a tale shaped by someone else—typically a tenacious author with their own designs—pieced together from whatever can be found of whatever has been left behind. It is a perilous business.

As a one-time biographer and devotee of the genre, I read biographies constantly. Aside from learning more about the subject, I am keen to discover how another biographer has ‘done it’. Have they told the life chronologically, thematically, or found another way entirely? How have they shaped the life? Are some parts of the subject’s life more brightly lit than others? If so, why? Does the biographer give the reader a deeper understanding of place, time and historical context? Have they had access to all the sources? How have they dealt with previous biographies of their subject, or their subject’s autobiographical writings if they exist? Then there is the subject’s private and public life: where does the weight fall? How has the author handled the ethical dilemmas that inevitably arise? Is the biographer present in the narrative? If so, to what extent? And finally, what steps are traceable in that delicate dance between author and subject?

The choices made by biographers are too many to enumerate, yet all too often, they remain invisible to the reader, and to reviewers. So many reviews of biographies do little more than summarise the subject’s life, perhaps offering a brief remark about the quality of the biographer’s prose, but otherwise remaining oblivious to crucial questions of method and structure. It is as if the biographer had conjured the life out of thin air or, like some lonely monastic scribe, dutifully compiled a chronicle for posterity.

The popularity of biography today is undeniable. In bookshops, memoir, autobiography and biography dominate the non-fiction shelves. The boom in life writing—or what Richard Holmes has neatly dubbed the ‘biographic vision’—has, since the 1980s, ‘steadily established itself both as a source of genuine knowledge

and of popular human drama'(1). In the academy, traditional academic disdain for the genre is largely at an end, although it is still possible to find sceptics lurking in university corridors who refuse to believe the war is over.

Over the last five decades, universities and private institutions have established centres devoted exclusively to the study of biography, often with an explicit brief to document the lives of 'the nation'; academic journals have emerged devoted exclusively to life writing in its myriad forms, while government and philanthropic funding has been provided to support a range of fellowships and prizes for biography. Interest in biography—from readers and publishers, and public and private institutions—has never been greater, a fact borne out by the publication of *Different Lives: Global Perspectives on Biography in Public Cultures and Societies*, an edited collection of essays that grew out of a three-day international conference in 2018, in Groningen, Holland.

As editor Hans Renders makes clear, *Different Lives* attempts to explore 'national traditions in biography' by asking a range of pertinent questions. 'What is the state of the art [of biography]' in countries ranging from Europe to North America, to the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific? 'What are the main themes and questions that biographers pose in different countries?' What role does biography play in their respective public domains? And how have their national historiographies been informed by biography? (3)

While there have been a number of introductory and survey texts on biography published in the last decade (including Renders's and Nigel Hamilton's *The ABC of Modern Biography*, Amsterdam University Press, 2018) no other book has explored different national 'traditions' of biographical writing in this much detail, nor with such an eclectic span: Holland, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Iceland, Iran, China, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, the United States, Denmark and the Czech Republic.

The range of contributors to *Different Lives* is testament to biography's newfound prestige within the academy. Most work within universities as professors of literature or history, while a handful occupy prestigious positions in research centres devoted explicitly to the study of biography. Renders, for example, is professor in the history and theory of biography at the University of Groningen, where his co-editor, David Veltman, is a PhD student; Liu Jialin is director of the Centre for Life Writing at Jiao Tong University in Shanghai, and Melanie Nolan is professor of history and the director of the National Centre of Biography at The Australian National University in Canberra. Consequently, *Different Lives* is a scholarly perspective that provides a valuable screenshot of the state of critical, archive-based biography today.

In Richard Holmes's brief introduction, he notes that every country has 'its own quite distinctive history of biographical forms', and their enormous diversity quickly becomes apparent (1). In Iran, as Sahar Vahdati Hosseini explains, even by the time of the 1979 revolution, 'biography had not found a genuine place as a valuable

resource for understanding Iran's society', and little has changed since (140). Political biographies, by far the dominant form of biography in Iran, are narrowly conceived as a collection of facts about birth, life and death. The iron grip of 'Islamic patriarchy' forbids the discussion of many social, cultural and political issues. 'Womanhood', 'a controversial subject, is one of biography's taboos in Iran', while private life remains hidden (142). Kerry Brown describes similar constraints in communist China, especially during the late twentieth century, when cultural and political restrictions inhibited the growth of critical biography, and hagiographic accounts of the lives of communist leaders prevailed (86–98). More recently, however, as Liu Jialin writes, the modernisation of China's economy and growing academic interest in biography (not only in China but the Asia Pacific more broadly) 'endow biography with more possibilities than ever before' (229).

Even within national boundaries there is rarely a singular biographical tradition. In China, and many other countries where a strong collective ethos prevails (whether for political, religious or other reasons), Western modes of expression that celebrate individuality have little purchase. Despite this diversity of experience, the editors' decision to deploy national boundaries as their key comparative analytical framework succeeds in revealing common biases and distortions of national memory.

In his impressive chapter on Iceland, where biography has long been one of the most fashionable literary forms in the nation's popular lore, Sigurdur Gylfi Magnusson walks through Reykjavik's public spaces and parks, observing that the statues, almost without exception, are of 'people whose biographies have been written'. 'The statues and the biographies', he notes, 'go hand in hand'. They're mostly about men, while the small number of statues of female figures ... depict 'an image of "Woman" rather than a specific woman' (174). Melanie Nolan finds similar 'gender and racial imbalances persist' in the writing of Australian biography (117), as does Maria Jesus Gonzalez in her incisive chapter on biography in Spain, in which she chastises 'The Spanish Dictionary of National Biography' (2012), for its 'paltry' representation of women, who made up only 9 per cent of entries (78).

Throughout so many countries in the modern era, biography has been conscripted to serve national mythology and nation-building. In South Africa, as Lindie Koorts demonstrates, the nature of biographical writing mirrored inequalities of power, with the majority of archives collected before the fall of apartheid in 1994 reflecting 'the preoccupations of a white state and white elite' (42). Although histories and biographies of the marginalised and oppressed now 'dominate research priorities' in the republic, until quite recently, quips Koorts, it seemed that 'the great white men of yesteryear' had simply been replaced by 'the great black men' of today. Either way, 'masculine heroics' reigned (47).

In nations such as Italy and Spain, (and no doubt others where the influence of the Catholic Church has been strong, such as Portugal, Ireland, and many in Central and South America), critical biography was marginalised because it appeared to elevate

human agency above the will of God, thereby threatening the power of the Church. As Gonzalez politely puts it, the Church's grip on community mores in Spain had long resulted in a 'smaller output of quality [biographical] products', a category that presumably excludes the lives of the saints (69).

The thorny relationship between critical, scholarly biography and so-called popular biography runs through the entire collection of essays. In his chapter on biography in New Zealand, historian Doug Munro points to the growing professionalisation and respectability of biography within the academy, yet he also remarks that 'the perception of a dichotomy between "academic history" and popularization' remains (153). In Canada, Daniel Meister notes the 'reticence' of some academic publishers to publish biography unless it engages with existing literature. Biographies are still deemed 'unsuitable for history dissertations' and less likely to be grounds 'for academic promotion or tenure'. 'Interesting life stories of interesting individuals', Meister concludes, 'aren't necessarily seen as serious scholarship' (22, 33). Surveying biography in Italy, Yannick Gouchan argues that 'the biographer is ... not really taken seriously [by scholars], because he is often a journalist and not a historian' (134). In a similar vein, Jana Wohlmuth Markupova takes a dim view of most biographies published in the Czech republic today, many of them written, she laments, by 'non-historians', such as friends of the subject, freelance writers or journalists, and which almost always display 'a general lack of theoretical reflection' (190–91, 194).

Time and again, academic suspicion of popular biography rests on the questionable assumption that compelling biographical narrative is inherently inferior—the natural antithesis of scholarly analysis. Too many scholars wrongly assume, as Elsbeth Etty rightly maintains in her reflections on biography in the Netherlands, that 'readability' is cause for concern (212). Academics envy the sales and notoriety of many popular biographers at the same time as they rarely stoop to read them and remain scornful of their lack of scholarly rigour. Meanwhile, popular biographers look across the moat to the bevy of salaried academics who, they frequently point out, have never had to make a living through the power of their pen alone.

More than any other genre, biography is caught in the cross-fire that constantly erupts from these well-worn trenches. Perhaps it might be helpful to pay attention to Joanna Cymbrykiewicz's explanation for the boom in Danish biography since the late twentieth century, which, she argues, 'coincides with the universally observed longing for acknowledgement and recognition of a concrete human existence, as juxtaposed against "impersonal, events-oriented historiography"' (197).

Writers can easily fall into the trap of prosecuting turf wars: novelists claiming unique insight for fiction alone, historians insisting that only well-researched scholarly history allows us to understand the past, and biographers arguing that biography can protect democracy from the post-truth nightmare of populist politics and even provide the

biographer, as Nigel Hamilton strangely claims, with ‘spiritual fulfilment’ (20). If I was President Donald Trump’s biographer, the road to spiritual fulfilment would be long and hard.

At the same time, we should be wary of being too certain about what readers of biography want, or how they will respond. Carl Rollyson, in his fascinating overview of modern presidential biographies in the United States, argues that ‘readers come to [biography] wishing to know about the subject, not the biographer’ (110). Yet over the last few years, I have read several outstanding biographies in which the author is very much present in the narrative. Through the power and skill of their writing, they have made me want to learn more about them, as well as their subjects.

Many authors in *Different Lives* point to biography’s capacity to promote empathy, cultural diversity and a better understanding of difference, echoing Samuel Johnson’s remark that biography places us:

for a time, in the condition of him whose fortune we contemplate, so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever motions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

Yet biography’s potential to promote empathy is surely true of all literature, as Susan Sontag reflected many years ago: ‘If literature has engaged me as a project, first as a reader and then as a writer, it is as an extension of my sympathies to other selves ... other territories of concern’.<sup>2</sup>

For biographers and their readers, *Different Lives*, with its important critical coverage of sometimes starkly different national traditions and many varied perspectives on biography, is a salutary reminder of the dangers of making overly definitive statements about what biography should or should not be. Biography, of course, is too diverse to be confined, and it is expanding quickly in evermore exciting and creative directions. The Nobel Prize–winning work of the Belarus journalist Svetlana Alexievich is just one example. Her deft curation of a vast cacophony of voices and personal experience has transformed our understanding of everyday life in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras.

The ‘biography police’, if there are any left patrolling the streets, should hang up their uniforms. Nor should we make overly ambitious claims for the genre. Perhaps the only way to be completely true to our biographical subjects is to acknowledge the limits of biography.

1 Johnson quoted in Peter Parker, ‘The Evolution of Biography’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 May 2006.

2 Susan Sontag, ‘The Conscience of Words’, *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 2007), 147.

This text is taken from *Australian Journal of Biography and History*:  
*No. 7, 2023*, published 2023 by ANU Press, The Australian National  
University, Canberra, Australia.