Federation University ResearchOnline

<https://researchonline.federation.edu.au>

Copyright Notice

© 2020. This manuscript version is made available under the CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Hamilton, H. M. (2020). Balance in writing a life: Some issues in biography. *Collegian (Royal College of Nursing, Australia)*, 27(6), 585–588.

Which has been published in final form at:
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.colegn.2020.07.001>

BALANCE IN WRITING A LIFE: SOME ISSUES IN BIOGRAPHY

Abstract

Background: Biographers aim to create a balanced interpretation of an individual life, both in the narrative of the life and the portrayal of the circumstances in which it was lived.

Problem and method: Some factors, drawn from the writings of experienced biographers, that may distort balance in the account of a life are identified and considered in this article.

Findings: The findings relate to: biographical evidence - the quality, adequacy and accessibility of records; a biographer's relationship with the protagonist - maintaining distance from the protagonist, keeping the life in perspective and selecting an appropriate approach; ethical and privacy issues - dealing with private or intimate matters.

Conclusion: Partiality in the form of prejudice or bias and inaccuracy to the point of being untruthful, are threats to creating a balanced narrative. The credibility of a biography depends upon its honesty.

Key words: biography, evidence, ethics, privacy.

Summary of relevance

Problem: Achieving balanced biographical accounts of individual lives, that is, those that are fair and accurate.

What is already known: Biography is based on a rigorous review and analysis of authentic sources to reveal insights into both the character of the individual and the context in which the life was lived. There are no theories as to how to write biography and there are diverse ways to approach the task.

What this paper adds: Identification and discussion of key issues that may detract from the credibility of a biographical account.

Author: Helen M Hamilton

PhD candidate

School of Arts

Federation University, Ballarat Campus.

PO Box 663, Ballarat, VIC 3353.

Correspondence:

Helen M Hamilton

Email helenham@bigpond.com

Background

Biographies have been written since ancient times, reflecting a perpetual interest in subjective human experience; they are also a way of telling history for the story of a life cannot be separated from the conditions under which it is lived. Social, cultural and political circumstances are part of living and shape subjective consciousness and knowledge of the world. Complex contemporary situations and decision making may be critically analysed and decision making informed through the perspective of historical knowledge. As well as learning from the past and providing insights into the present, the relevance of biographies to Nursing lies in strengthening the profession's collective identity which may have social and political value in the way the profession is perceived by nurses themselves as well as by governments, other bodies and the general public. The personal stories of individuals become part of the collective identity of the group in the way that Florence Nightingale's has become. A profession's collective identity is seen to be an essential foundation for the larger understanding of itself and its place in society (Tosh, 1987, p.1 and p.3). Biographies offer an opportunity to study alternative views of events and situations that may alter mainstream understandings of the past as the biographies of Lucy Osburn (Godden 2006) and Gwen Burbidge (Godden 2011) illustrate.

Biography may be defined as '... a story about and an interpretation of a life... a depiction of a historically real, lived life of a central character... told by somebody else...' (Possing 2017, p.22). In the nineteenth century, according to British historian Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), there was a view that history

could be explained by the lives of exceptional individuals whose superior talents and abilities effected change. The 'great man theory' of history was refuted by the beginning of the twentieth century by those who argued the importance of the social context in influencing individual actions and the focus of history shifted to the forces that shape civilizations. Contemporary historians, therefore, tend to dismiss the influence that individuals may have on events, partly because they mistrust biographic method but also because they study, not individuals, but such things as the structures and processes of political or economic systems that shape and change societies and civilizations. Historian John Tosh (2015), however, concedes that '...the motives of individuals have some part to play in explaining historical events.' (p.56, italics in original). The motives of individuals like Stalin or Hitler, for example, would seem to be highly relevant to understanding their actions and different visions for the domination and subjection of peoples.

Biographies have been written about villains as well as heroes but nineteenth century biographies tended to be about great men, statesmen, politicians or public leaders in other spheres. These works adopted a respectful and admiring manner that showed the protagonists to be faultless and noble in their lives; Florence Nightingale, for example, was portrayed as saintly and righteous in an early biography (Mathieson 1913). This unrealistic approach was set aside early in the twentieth century in favour of a 'warts and all' narrative that shows protagonists as human beings with frailties and faults as well as admirable traits. The scope of potential candidates for biographies broadened and became more democratic from this time; subsequently a wider range of individuals who had made their mark were included in the canon, re-creating for communities an understanding of their people and their past (Backscheider 1999). For this reason, as Possing (2017) comments, '...writing and reading biography is a legitimate and necessary way in which to generate knowledge and insight.' (p.147). The challenge for biographers, as Backscheider points out, is to know what they are talking about and to 'tell it accurately, fairly and with comprehension of related contexts'. (1999, p.10). Some issues in meeting this challenge are discussed in this article. The directions in Backscheider's comment form the basis of the discussion that follows, which is in two parts, 'telling it accurately' and 'telling it fairly'.

DISCUSSION – 'TELLING IT ACCURATELY'

Accuracy in this context means 'truthfulness'. In biographical writing this means that the narrative is based on evidence and it is 'true' to what is known.

Issues with biographical evidence

Two core issues for biographers are suggested in Virginia Wolfe's often quoted question, made at the time she agreed to take on the task of writing the biography of her friend, the painter and art critic Roger Fry, 'How can one make a life out of Six Cardboard boxes full of tailor's bills, love letters and old picture post cards?' (Woolf, 1980, p.134). One issue is the quality and quantity of the records, that is, the biographical material available and accessible about the person to be written about. The other issue is the fact that biographers, in the same way as historians, are bound by evidence from records for '... biography resides in facts and is bound by them' and biographers are not engaged in writing fiction (Edel 1981, p.5.). Writing biography is circumscribed by the necessity of basing the narrative on facts; as Edel asserts a biographer must not imagine his materials. Virginia Woolf's comment speaks to the craft, or perhaps the art of biography as it is considered to be by some, referring to the writing skills of the best biographers who present entertaining and lively narratives, underpinned by the necessary scholarship that makes them 'accurate' in the sense of being truthful and therefore credible.

The range and quality of records and access to them are major issues for biographers and one considered before projects start. By range is meant the extent to which materials exist over the life span, typically some parts will be well documented, less so in others and none at all in some parts. Quality refers to the physical state of the records and also to their completeness, comprehensiveness, relevance and provenance. Lastly the records need to be readily available to the biographer. A writer may be granted privileged access to papers by

either the protagonists themselves or their families. In order to write the biography of Australian writer Patrick White, David Marr was granted this privilege, even being given access to White's medical records (Marr 2016). Access may be blocked by caveats, for copyright reasons or by executors of literary estates. Evidence for the protagonist's activities - dates, places, events - is foundational information and may often be acquired from minutes, reports or institutional records. That this material is usually written for corporate or legal purposes is an issue for biographers as little of the core elements to reconstruct a person - their objectives, activities or purposes - are revealed from these sources. More fruitful may be in-house minutes of internal institutional committees or those of organisations, associations or social clubs, with which the protagonist was known to have been involved, as well as articles and publications authored by the protagonist and recorded film or sound interviews. Personal records of protagonists themselves, comprising such items as diaries, journals or correspondence are more likely to reveal a person's emotions, inner thoughts and ideas that may be linked to their public decisions and actions, offering the possibility of explanatory insights into motivation or a deeper understanding of relationships in the protagonist's life.

Biographers cast a wide net in the hunt for sources, wishing to capture as much of a life as they can and to develop the narrative on as complete a base as possible. The search will lead to archives some locally accessible, some distant or in another country, some in public and some in private hands. It has been estimated that eighty per cent of a biographer's time is taken up in searching sources. Original material in the protagonist's own voice is the key primary source sought, but secondary sources, that record observations or perceptions of the protagonists or provide accounts of interactions with them, are particularly important. Other sources, when they supplement or provide alternative perspectives on the protagonist's activities, may not only confirm what happened but also provide a deeper understanding of events and circumstances than can be gained from the protagonist alone.

Managing data

Large amounts of evidence bring logistical problems for the author in the time needed to read and absorb the material and also in cataloguing and filing to make the collection accessible. Problems of a different kind present when there is little or no information. When there are gaps in the records, or no records at all, means a lack of direct evidence to account for a protagonist's activities. In these situations biographers draw conclusions on the basis of what they already know about the situation and the protagonist, made credible by logical reasoning (Rotberg 2010, p.310). To speculate or make up a narrative compromises the veracity of the work and is not to be done.

Evaluation of sources

As evidence is the foundation for interpreting a life an essential process to be undertaken is a critical evaluation of source material. Some of the questions asked to evaluate the material include: Who created the document, when, where and for what purpose? Where does the document fit in relation to its context? What is known of the author/s? How credible are they and is the information important, is it accurate? Does the information support or refute information known from elsewhere or is it new? In reviewing the position of history in a postmodern world Kalela (2012) examines 'interpretation' and offers two criteria by which to evaluate it - first, soundness of knowledge and second, meaningfulness of the findings (pp.41-44). The first refers to the impeccability of reasoning, the cogency of interpretation and the plausibility of description. The second refers to truthfulness, fruitfulness and any lessons of the study, that is, what may be gained from it. The two criteria may offer helpful guidance for biographical writing and for evaluating the finished work.

DISCUSSION – 'TELLING IT FAIRLY'

Fairness in this context means impartiality. In biographical writing this means that the writer has been open-minded in reviewing evidence and non-judgmental in selecting what to tell or biased to a preconceived view of

the protagonist.

Biographer's relationship with the protagonist

Authors of biography frequently use the word 'subject', a word that carries a range of connotations, to refer to the individual they have chosen to write about. Another word some biographers use is 'protagonist', deemed to be a more accurate depiction. Possing (2017) uses it as means of keeping distance between the writer and the biographee (p.116). The word, when used in literature, means the central character in a drama or a principal actor. Notwithstanding the allusion to Shakespeare's metaphor of life being a stage, seeing individuals as characters and principal actors in their own lives is apposite in the biographical context, for it may help authors to keep in mind that they are writing about real people, rather than artefacts or objects, who are due careful, conscientious and honest consideration.

Keeping a balanced perspective

Biographers become deeply engaged with their protagonists but Edel's first principle advises maintaining a degree of distance from them to avoid becoming emotionally involved (1981 p.9). To provide fair and truthful accounts of a protagonist's life a detached perspective avoids becoming partial and losing the necessary nonjudgmental stance. As Possing (2017) observes '... no good biography can be written by someone who is in love with and deeply admires their protagonist, and it would be even worse were it written in sheer hate.' (p.107).

Identification

Edel's second principle warns biographers '...not to be taken over by their subjects...' (1981 p.9). Identifying too closely with a protagonist is to be avoided for biographers may write their own experiences into protagonists' stories, rather than from evidence of protagonists' experiences, thus distorting the veracity of the narrative. The aim is to be close enough to gain a comprehensive understanding of the person but detached enough to avoid telling the writer's story and not the protagonist's.

Biographer's presence

Some biographers see the intrusion of the biographer's voice in the narrative as an unnecessary distraction, taking the reader's attention away from the central character – the protagonist, whose life it is (Edel 1981, Marr 2016). While the biographer's voice is not to be heard in the narrative, she or he is present everywhere in the work. The biographer's task is to select and interpret evidence to create a cohesive narrative of the life through which readers come to understand the individual in their contemporary sociocultural context. In doing this, at every step, the biographer makes decisions that influence the narrative. Nadel (2014) neatly sums up the role of the presence of the biographer in the following '...a biography turns the life of a historical person into a meaningful and fully integrated whole that is constructed by the biographer through his or her selection composition of individual motifs and elements. It is the biographer who decides on beginning and endings ... about what he tells and what he chooses not to tell.' (Nadel cited in Depkat 2014, p.40). The main points of interest for biographers are to seek to understand the individual's engagement and interaction in the social environment of their times - what influenced them in their day and how and by what means, did they influence the social context in which they lived.

Biographical approach

Biographers usually choose to write about an individual, '...who has moved something beyond their personal lives, has created something new or left deep tracks...' (Possing, 2017, p.28). Often the choice is made because the writer finds the person interesting and may share interests with them, or someone is chosen because the contribution of their life's work has been overlooked. It was Virginia Woolf who wrote 'My God, how does one write a biography...' (Woolf 1938, p.21). Possing (2017) notes that '...a biography is a story and an interpretation of a life, both a way in which to write history, and a way in which to characterise a specific historical individual...' (p.28), but, in answer to Virginia's query, there is no single way of writing one – there are multiple

approaches. However, Edel (1981, pp. 8-9) offers some principles as does Possing, (2017, p.113) and Backscheider some guiding questions (1999, p.68) among others.

As the basis for interpretation how best to explore a life is carefully considered by biographers. Choosing an appropriate biographical approach to present a life is an early decision for biographers, one made after a preliminary investigation of the life to be portrayed has been carried out to inform the choice and to establish the availability of records. Two common approaches are firstly, those biographies that focus on the protagonists' personalities to interpret their lives – an interior approach. Secondly, those biographies that take an exterior approach, described by Possing (2017) as 'life and times' method (p.81). In this approach the individual's life is explored in the social and historical context in which it was lived and their interactions, influences and actions in response to the circumstances are studied for what they reveal of the individual's character and their social circumstances.

Those biographers who use an interior approach seek to provide a psychological interpretation of their protagonist lives. They aim to create a personality portrait the purpose of which is '...to reach an understanding of the character and the deeper strata working as motive and compass of a well-known individual' (Possing 2017, p.76). A rich trove of personal records is essential to achieve such a deep understanding and explanation of a person's life. The psychoanalytic approach seeks to understand a protagonist's inner self and motivations, to the extent that this is possible, as known, not from clinical psychoanalysis, but from the protagonist's 'fancies, thoughts and dreams' (Edel 1981, p.8). The psychoanalytic approach promises access to a protagonist's emotional life; it may also be the means of exploring the relationship between childhood and adult life. Using this approach Judy Brett, in her exploration of Sir Robert Menzies' political success, was able to argue that it originated in Menzies' ambivalent relationship with his father's authority (J. Brett in R. Holmes 1995). In this approach the biographer seeks to identify analyse and describe self-delusions, rationalisations and attitudes as observable forms of the unconscious, seen in conscious form (Edel 1981, p.9). The prospect of having their inner lives exposed and analysed by biographers causes some potential protagonists to take measures to avoid this happening; in the past some destroyed their papers, as Dickens and Freud, for example, are reported to have done; tight controls were set on the literary estates of others, such as occurred to the poet T.S Eliot's papers.

A 'life and times' style of biography involves a detailed description of the historical, social and cultural context of the time in which the protagonist lived. This is necessary in order to explore the context's influence on the protagonist's actions, aims, goals and outlook and also to understand the protagonist's impact on the circumstances in which their lives were lived. Biographers who take this approach would agree with William Dilthey that 'We can only understand a person in the context of his own age in terms of the historical forces that have shaped him.' (Dilthey cited by Phillips in R. Holmes 1995, p.4). Judith Godden adopts this approach in her account of Gwen Burbidge's life as a nurse and the challenges she faced in trying to reform nursing and nursing education in particular. Gwen Burbidge is revealed in her interactions and struggles with the issues of her day. Insight into the person as well as the circumstances is well illustrated in Godden's account of Lucy Osburn's struggles to establish Nightingale principles in Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century. (Godden, 2006). As a detailed description of the sociocultural context is necessary in this style of biography, finding the balance between the life and the context becomes an issue. The biographer judges how much historical background material is necessary for a reader to appreciate the interrelationship of the life with the times (Phillips, 1995).

Biographers' comprehension of context

Biographers themselves, as well as their protagonists, are shaped by the cultural assumptions of the social milieu in which they are immersed and may not be aware of the influence these exert on the decisions they make in the process of writing the life. These influences may become clear to them, however, as they tease out the impact of cultural assumptions of the protagonist's era on her or his life (Backscheider 1991). In writing

the text biographers become alert to their own cultural assumptions and endeavour not to read the past through those lenses rather than seeing the past in its own terms.

An essential part of biography is a clear and accurate description and analysis of the social forces at play in the protagonist's era, such as dominant ideologies, extant values and norms, power structures and influences, as well as issues related to the protagonists' social characteristics such as class and gender. The protagonist's struggles and relationships with these phenomena is the substance of the life and a protagonist's responses and reactions provides the biographer with intimations of their personality and character. Accuracy in descriptions of the context in which the life was lived, therefore, are pertinent and an important element in the interpretation of the life.

Ethical and privacy issues

An issue that has no easy answer for biographers is the extent to which they reveal personal information about the private lives of the people they write about. The scope and depth of biographical research and the close scrutiny of material may reveal information of a deeply personal nature. Material of this nature presents an ethical challenge for biographers; the reputation and social standing of the individual, particularly if they are still alive, has to be weighed against the commitment to write an honest, accurate, non-judgemental account.

In trying to find a balance between respecting a person's privacy and the people's right to know, the nature of the private knowledge may be considered against contemporary norms and values (Hageman, 2015). At one time, for example, illegitimate birth, homosexuality and extramarital affairs were matters of social disgrace and worse, but would be unlikely to irreparably damage a reputation in today's world. Biographers are divided on this issue, between those reluctant to suppress or withhold evidence and say 'Yes, tell all' and those who are more circumspect. The latter make a judgment about the significance of the information relative to their interpretation of the character and justify including or excluding intensely private information on this basis. This matter raises a larger question as to when a biographer should have consent from the person or his family to write the biography.

As well as the moral aspects of the problem there are legal implications too that Possing writes about. She notes that families have sued biographers because they believed that their relative to have been 'gratuitously compromised' in the work (2017, p.128). Referring to Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that makes it clear that everyone has the right to privacy, Possing argues, actioning this right in practice is not always straight forward due to changing ideas of privacy and blurring of boundaries between public and private lives in a digital world (2017, p.129). Biographers are entirely dependent on the veracity of their evidence as a defence should they be legally challenged.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed issues relevant to achieving the biographer's aim of presenting a balanced account, one that is fair and accurate, of the life they have chosen to write about. Partiality in the form of prejudice or bias and inaccuracy to the point of being untruthful, are threats to creating a balanced narrative. The credibility of a biography depends upon its honesty.

The potential for readers to learn from the lives and experiences of those who led in the past, not only from their actions, but also for what they tell us of the times and the historical processes that shaped their lives and made sense of them, speaks to the larger role of biography and underscores the necessity for accuracy and fairness, in other words, balanced writing. The tension between a person's life circumstances and their capacity to act, modify them and effect change to suit their own purposes is the fascination of biographical writing.

References

- Backscheider, P., (1999). *Reflections on Biography*. New York. Oxford University Press.
- Brett, Judy. (1995). "Robert Menzies: Psychobiography and the Public Man" in R. Holmes, ed. *Tracing Past Lives*. Melbourne. History Institute of Victoria.
- Depkat, V., (2014). "The Challenges of Biography: European-American Reflections". *Bulletin of the GHI* (German Historical Institute). Fall, 39-47.
- Edel, L., (1981). "Keynote address: Biography and the Science of Man" in Friedson, ed. *New Directions in Biographical Research: Essays by Phylliss Auty, Michael Holroyd, Noel Manganyi, Gabriel Mark, Sholki Sacki*. University of Hawaii. Biographical Research Center. (1981).
- Godden, J. (2006). *Lucy Osburn, A Lady displaced. Florence Nightingale's Envoy to Australia*. Sydney. Sydney University Press.
- Godden, J. (2011). *Australia's Controversial Matron. Gwen Burbidge and Nursing Reform*. Sydney Australia. The College of Nursing.
- Hagemann, G., (2015). *Biography*. The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee.
<https://www.etikkom.no/en/library/introduction/methods-and-approaches/biography/>
 Accessed January 2020.
- Kalela, J., (2012). *Making history. The Historian and Uses of the Past*. Basingstoke, England. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marr, D., (2016). *Here I stand*. Transcript of the Seymour Biography Lecture. National Library of Australia. <https://www.nla.gov.au/seymour-lecture> Accessed November 2019.
- Mathieson A. (1913). *Florence Nightingale*. Accessed April 2020.
https://openlibrary.org/books/OL6582468M/Florence_Nightingale
- Nadel, I. (1984). *Biography as Fiction, Fact and Form*. London, Klien Hanbuche Biographie, 199-219.
- Phillips, W., (1995). "Historians, Biography and History" in R. Holmes, ed. *Tracing Past Lives*. Melbourne. History Institute of Victoria.
- Posing, B. (2017). *Understanding Biographies: On Biographies in History and Stories in Biography*. Denmark, University Press of Southern Denmark.
- Rotberg, R., (2010). *Biography and Historiography: Mutual Evidentiary and Interdisciplinary Conditions*. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*. 40(3), 305-324.
- Tosh, J., (2015). *The Pursuit of History*. (6th ed.). Abingdon, England. Routledge.
- Woolf, V. (1975). *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, eds. Nigel Nicholson and Janet Trautmann. New York. Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich. 6:27.
- Woolf, V. (1980). *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol 4: 1936-1941. London. The Hogarth Press. 134.