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VICTORIAN BIOGRAPHY

— *Reconsidered* —

A Study of Nineteenth-Century 'Hidden' Lives



JULIETTE ATKINSON

VICTORIAN BIOGRAPHY RECONSIDERED

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'Hidden' Lives*

JULIETTE ATKINSON

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For my parents

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Introduction

I

This book is, in many ways, about discovery and rehabilitation. It is concerned with the attempts of Victorian biographers to draw attention to hidden or neglected lives. It is also a reassessment of a genre that has been alternately pilloried and ignored.

Victorian biography—unlike its favoured sibling, autobiography—has found few champions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In 1901, Edmund Gosse lamented that ‘we in England bury our dead under the monstrous catafalque of two volumes (crown octavo), and go forth refreshed’.¹ Harold Nicolson, writing in 1927, was particularly vociferous in his denunciation. ‘The nineteenth-century biographers’, he argues in *The Development of English Biography*, ‘were particularly incapable of evolving any conception of their own function,’ and religious earnestness was ‘responsible for the catastrophic failure of Victorian biography’.² The same year, Virginia Woolf described Victorian biography as ‘a parti-coloured, hybrid, monstrous birth’. In 1939, she returned to the attack: ‘the majority of Victorian biographies are like the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey, that were carried in funeral processions through the street—effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin’.³ More recently, Richard Altick has portrayed biography as ‘the literary emblem par excellence of Victorianism, a product faithful to the old era’s habit of misapplied and exaggerated hero-worship, with all its attendant hypocrisy and evasiveness.’⁴ Although a few lone voices have sought to mount a defence of the beleaguered genre, a broad consensus remains that

¹ Edmund Gosse, ‘The Custom of Biography’, *Anglo-Saxon Review*, 8 (March 1901), p. 195.

² Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1927), pp. 111, 139.

³ Virginia Woolf, ‘The New Biography’ (1927), in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), p. 474; Virginia Woolf, ‘The Art of Biography’, in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, ed. by Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 145.

⁴ Richard Altick, *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 289.

Victorian biographies are wordy hagiographical tomes penned by whitewashing amateurs.

When Gosse queried the value of Britain's 'big-biography habit', he noted as a further cause for displeasure the fact that 'the man may have lived a life obscure, austere, sequestered; but society absolutely demands some public decency when all is over. There must be a pall, two volumes of biography, and a few wreaths of elegant white flowers.'⁵ Gosse recorded the period's indiscriminating approach to biography: anyone, however ordinary or unknown, could find themselves the subject of those dreaded two volumes. Gosse's observation, however, was gradually superseded by the belief that not only were Victorian biographers inartistic and pious, but they were also elitist. Carlyle emerges as a leading culprit. Studies often comment in passing on 'Carlyle and his contemporaries, who saw history as the collective biography of great men'⁶ or 'Carlyle, that proponent of the biographies of great men'.⁷ Another offender is Leslie Stephen, who critics enjoy contrasting with Virginia Woolf. As Lyndall Gordon wrote in 2005, 'there are untapped possibilities in Virginia Woolf, who resisted the public highway from pedigree to grave, as practised by her father, Leslie Stephen, founding editor of the *DNB*. She's alert to the "invisible presences" of the dead who break through the limits of the lifespan.'⁸

It was Virginia Woolf herself who, in her 1939 essay 'The Art of Biography', wrote:

the question now inevitably asks itself, whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography—the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what smallness? We must revise our standards of merit and set up new heroes for our admiration.⁹

Woolf's democratic approach to biography does not seek to abolish the category of 'heroes' but simply asks for the boundaries determining who can be labelled a 'hero' to be redrawn. This call for more attention to be given to failed and humble lives has, in the last few decades, been heeded. There is currently an appetite for biographies of 'obscure' men and women—the wives and mistresses of Great Men (illustrated by Claire Tomalin's influential 1990 biography of Ellen Ternan, *The Invisible Woman*), histories of 'ordinary' lives (such as *Our Hidden Lives* (2004), edited by Simon Garfield and based on the Mass Observa-

⁵ Gosse, 'The Custom of Biography', p. 195.

⁶ Mary Jean Corbett, *Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian Women's Autobiographies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 98.

⁷ Alison Booth, *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 107.

⁸ Lyndall Gordon, 'Telling Lives', *Guardian* (29 January 2005), p. 7.

⁹ Woolf, 'The Art of Biography', p. 150.

tion Project begun in 1937), and accounts of individuals somehow airbrushed from the history books (such as Angus Hawkins's recent *The Forgotten Prime Minister: The 14th Earl of Derby*, 2007–8). Such (re)discoveries have often been portrayed as a healthy antidote to the obsession of past biographers—more often than not Victorians—with great men.

This book was born out of a feeling of bewilderment that the Victorians, who had written so powerfully about hidden lives in their novels, their poetry, their journalism, and even their autobiographies, should have become so narrow in their choice of subject matter when it came to biography. In fact, as the following pages argue, Victorian biographers *were* interested in hidden lives, the lives of failures, and the lives of humble men and women. Long before the 'new biographers' of the 1930s and 'micro-historians' of the 1970s, not only did they publish lives of men and women who by all accounts were not 'Great', but they did so at a rate that took many critics by surprise.

II

A study of Victorian biographies of hidden lives poses numerous problems of definition. Biographers and critics employed various terms to describe these subjects: 'hidden' but also 'obscure', 'second-rate', 'mediocre', 'forgotten', and 'neglected' were all used. The term 'hidden', used flexibly here, has the advantage of avoiding the judgement of value implicit in 'second-rate' and 'mediocre', and, unlike the words 'forgotten' and 'neglected', does not imply that the subjects may once have been more illustrious. It is important to bear in mind that obscurity is a relative rather than a stable category, and that the ranks of the 'hidden' could be said to include individuals of local but not national importance, men or women who were once famous but whose renown had dissipated, or those who had never received any kind of public notice. The line between fame and obscurity is impossible to draw with any precision. However, what all of the biographies considered below have in common, and what has determined their selection, is that their authors explicitly describe their subject in contrast with the idea of fame. To some extent, the lives are therefore defined negatively, as simply 'not great'. Yet many biographers placed a far more positive accent on this category, and perceived these lives as an area offering new biographical possibilities.

The biographies discussed in this book were published during Queen Victoria's reign, though the majority appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. An opening date for this trend would be a highly artificial one, as isolated works with comparable characteristics can be identified well before the beginning of the Victorian period, and there does not appear to have been one biography that launched the trend. The closing date of 1901 is a more accurate one, as it marks the completion of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, that Victorian monument so frequently taken as the epitome of the

'patriarchal biographical tradition',¹⁰ but which in fact placed hidden lives at its heart.

An exhaustive survey of Victorian biographies dealing with hidden lives has not been attempted. The fluidity of the 'hidden' makes this unfeasible. Many subjects now forgotten or whom we would classify as second-rate were admired by their biographers as luminaries of their age. Other biographers were unconcerned about the obscurity of their subject and were content to rehearse the facts of their life. Biographers that reflect on their choice of subject and address the consequences of commemorating the life of an unknown subject, a mediocrity, or a failed life have been favoured. The study deals with single-subject biographies because they magnify the issues surrounding hidden lives, including the difficulty of gathering sufficient material for an extensive narrative, and the reasons that might compel a biographer to single out an individual unknown by the general public for sustained attention.¹¹ The unusual extent to which the editors of the *DNB* considered questions of inclusion and the function of hidden lives makes the dictionary an important exception to this rule.

A more overwhelming obstacle to an exhaustive study is the sheer number of biographies published at this time. In 1880 alone, for example, the *Publishers' Circular* estimated that 363 biographies and histories appeared,¹² and many of these were the two-volume 'ill-digested masses of material'¹³ so vigorously attacked by Lytton Strachey. A balance has therefore been sought between outstanding and less stimulating but perhaps more representative works. In order to bring out significant trends and concerns, types of biographical subjects on which many works were published—such as working-class naturalists and young men who died before achieving greatness—have been privileged, as have biographies that display literary sophistication.

A major category has, however, been deliberately excluded: that of domestic biography. Domestic biography occupied a significant—and, many would contend, an excessive—portion of the biographical market. Many of the lives of unknown men and women published during this period were penned by mourning siblings, parents, children, and spouses. There are at least two reasons for dealing with such works separately. The first is one of quality. The ranks of

¹⁰ Peter France, 'From Eulogy to Biography: the French Academic *Eloge*', in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. by Peter France and William St Clair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 87.

¹¹ A number of recent studies have explored collective biography and prosopography, including Alison Booth, 'Fighting for Lives in the ODNB; or, Taking Prosopography Personally', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 10.2 (Winter 2005), pp. 267–79; Alison Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Sybil Oldfield, *Collective Biography of Women in Britain, 1550–1900: A Select Annotated Bibliography* (London: Mansell, 1999).

¹² 'English Literature in 1880', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 44 (March 1881), p. 96.

¹³ Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1918), p. viii.

biographers include a fair share of amateurs, but this proportion increases exponentially with domestic biographers, many of whom only wrote one work in their lifetime. The second, more important, reason is that the motivations for writing these works were usually very different from those of a non-domestic biographer. The desire to pay tribute to a beloved relative, or the endeavour to publicize the achievements of an individual in order to increase the status of surviving family members, raise specific questions, many of which are considered in Christopher Tolley's *Domestic Biography* (1997).¹⁴ It was often the case that these biographers were unconcerned with the inglorious nature of their subject or, for the more doting authors, oblivious of it altogether. This book is concerned with what may have prompted writers who did not have the incentive of personal relations, and were often already well-established themselves, to take up the cause of a little-known man or woman to whom they were not related. What determined the biographer's choice of subject, how did he or she justify it, and what did the writer hope would result from using the public genre of biography to celebrate a previously neglected existence?

A first clue can perhaps be found in the general background of these hidden lives. The subjects of these biographers are all contemporaries or near-contemporaries—and, in a few cases, subjects who were still alive. Full-length biographies of historical subjects who had been overlooked were still comparatively rare during the Victorian period. Scholars and antiquarians showed their interest in earlier lives by publishing pre-nineteenth-century (often female) autobiographies, including writings by Margaret Cavendish and Lady Fanshawe, as Linda H. Peterson has noted.¹⁵ Biographical vignettes of such subjects, however, were usually confined to short passages in larger historical works, or entries in biographical dictionaries. There were practical reasons for the biographers' preference for more recent subjects: whereas autobiographers, however ancient, had left documents behind, the biographer of a non-canonical subject had to deal with the substantial problem of the lack of written material. Contemporary subjects often provided the advantage of surviving friends and relatives. There is another explanation, however, for this choice of subjects. As the following chapters seek to demonstrate, biographers used their inglorious subjects to address questions about their age in a way that has been more commonly identified as a feature of Victorian novels. Practitioners of the genre sought to present themselves as cultural authorities providing a commentary on contemporary society and their own role within it.

¹⁴ See also Julie F. Codell, *The Victorian Artist: Artists' Lifewritings in Britain, ca. 1870–1910* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Linda H. Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1999), pp. 3–4.

III

Biography has never received the sustained critical attention given to fiction, poetry, or drama, and even within the area of life-writing the genre has attracted far less interest than autobiography. Studies of biography have generally belonged to one of four categories. The first contains historical overviews. In such works—of which Nicolson's *The Development of English Biography* is a representative example—critics tend to move swiftly from Plutarch to Boswell, glide over the nineteenth century, and pause to salute the achievements of the 'new biographers' of the 1920s and 1930s. Other, often more productive, histories have taken a narrower focus. Donald Stauffer's work on eighteenth-century biography, A. O. J. Cockshut's selective but useful account of Victorian biography, and Ruth Hoberman's study of early twentieth-century 'new biographers', are all important works. Richard Altick's *Lives and Letters* (1965), a history of literary biography, remains perhaps the key reference among histories of the sub-genre.¹⁶ Biographies of hidden subjects make only a minor appearance, if at all, in the analysis these studies give of the Victorian period's biographical publications.

A second category consists of biographers' accounts of their craft. Many of the lions of twentieth-century biography, such as Leon Edel, Richard Ellmann and Michael Holroyd, have published such accounts. More recently, Mark Bostridge's collection *Lives for Sale* (2004) brought together essays by some of the most important contemporary biographers, including Hermione Lee and Claire Tomalin, and redressed the masculine bias of most studies. Such discussions of biography are frequently witty and anecdotal, with reminiscences of recalcitrant relatives, discovered manuscripts, and the type of analysis of the biographer's relationship with his subject that Richard Holmes is especially associated with. Though lively, these studies tend to privilege two aspects of biography—the challenges of archival research and the biographer's relation with his subject—to the exclusion of others.¹⁷

Whereas these autobiographical accounts of biography largely avoid theoretical discussions of the genre, the third group of studies is preoccupied almost entirely with addressing the generic questions posed by biography: is biography an art or a

¹⁶ Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, Donald Stauffer, *The Art of Biography in Eighteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941); A. O. J., Cockshut, *Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Collins, 1974); Ruth Hoberman, *Modernizing Lives: Experiments in Biography, 1918–1939* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987); Altick, *Lives and Letters*.

¹⁷ Leon Edel, *Literary Biography* (London: Indiana University Press, 1957); Richard Ellmann, *Golden Codgers: Biographical Speculations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); Michael Holroyd, *Works on Paper: The Craft of Biography and Autobiography* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002); Mark Bostridge (ed.), *Lives for Sale: Biographers' Tales* (London: Continuum, 2004); Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985).

craft? is there such a thing as truth in biography? how should a biographer structure his work? Ira Bruce Nadel's *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (1984) and William Epstein's studies are significant examples of these, and supply the most sophisticated theoretical approaches. Such works demonstrated that biography could benefit from close readings and stressed the complexity of the genre.¹⁸

Though this book owes something to all of these, it is with the fourth and most recent category that it aligns itself. In the last ten years, critics have considered the social role of biography and the manner in which the genre articulates, or responds to, contemporary concerns. Victorian biography has proved a stimulating place of investigation. David Amigoni's *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* (1993) provides an important reminder that Victorian biographies were not 'a seamless field' but 'the products of ideologically antagonistic intellectuals'.¹⁹ By discussing the way in which biographers participated in contemporary debates including those surrounding the professionalization of the man of letters and the development of history as a discipline, Amigoni shows that Victorian biographies, rather than being amateurish homages of little worth to anyone but the subject's grieving family, played a key part in negotiating ideas of culture and the canon. The role of auto/biography in constructing ideas of masculinity has been expertly probed by Trev Broughton in the influential *Men of Letters, Writing Lives* (1999). Like Amigoni, Broughton seeks to re-establish the cultural influence of Victorian biographers, who not only absorbed but also shaped contemporary ideas of gender. This book shares her conviction that Victorian life-writing functioned 'as a social and cultural activity rather than exclusively as a literary event'.²⁰ Studies that have considered how specific social groups, such as painters or the Clapham Sect, used biography to consolidate their power in the public sphere, confirm this notion.²¹ Together, these studies have powerfully demonstrated that Victorian biography is a highly profitable, and too often neglected, place of inquiry that sheds important light on the key preoccupations of the age.

Studies of Victorian autobiography, far more numerous, have also provided valuable insights for the study of hidden lives. Regenia Gagnier's groundbreaking *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832–1920* (1991) has influenced this book in many ways, notably in the attention it pays to a diverse range of marginal voices and the way in which their autobiographies recast some of

¹⁸ Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984); William H. Epstein, *Recognizing Biography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); William H. Epstein (ed.), *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ David Amigoni, *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 3. Judith North's *The Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Romantic Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) was not published in time to be discussed here.

²⁰ Trev Lynn Broughton, *Men of Letters, Writing Lives: Masculinity and Literary Auto/Biography in the Late Victorian Period* (London: Routledge 1999), p. 12.

²¹ See Codell, *The Victorian Artist* and Tolley, *Domestic Biography*.

the major trends of traditional self-writing. Feminist studies have been predominant in reconsidering canonical autobiographies and unearthing new ones. Recent attempts to resist a uniform approach to female autobiography and embrace instead the diversity of women's life-writing have proved particularly helpful. In *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography* (1999), Linda H. Peterson has encouraged re-examining 'the argument about a separate (and singular) tradition of women's life writing'.²² Following this pointer, attention is paid here to the specific issues raised by women's biography, but these are also considered as an extension of discussions that existed in biographies by and about male subjects.

Moving away from discussions of femininity to a complementary analysis of masculinity, Martin Danahay's exploration of representations of male autonomy in Victorian autobiographies in *A Community of One* (1999) makes for a provocative contrast with the conclusions of this study of biography. There are areas of overlap between the two—for example, the paradoxes of the Victorian 'sages' who expressed the desire to repress the self yet found ways of writing masked autobiography is also a strong feature of the biographies considered here. Whereas the autobiographies discussed by Danahay reveal how the hidden (principally female) influences that enabled these men's work are repeatedly silenced, these biographies pay a loud homage to the hidden, often feminine or feminized, influences that allowed the nation to progress and the more successful men of letters to prosper. The condition for this homage, however, is that following their public tribute the lives return to obscurity.

Studies of Victorian life-writing have tended to group autobiography and biography together—often very effectively—based on the argument that many works of nineteenth-century auto/biography were hybrids. However, despite the parallels between the two genres, this study maintains a more rigid distinction between them. Nineteenth-century biographers possessed an awareness of the opportunities provided by their use of the genre that were unavailable to autobiographers. For example, writers wary of the self-publicizing aspects of autobiography could find a way to project their concerns and anxieties in what appeared to be a more acceptable form. More significantly, the issues surrounding the biographer's choice of an 'obscure' subject has no real equivalence in autobiography, and deserve to be examined separately.

IV

This book aims to demonstrate the existence of a rich Victorian biographical trend that resisted the contemporary preoccupation with the lives of famous men. In doing so, it hopes to bolster recent claims that Victorian biography, still

²² Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography*, p. 2.

largely untapped, deserves to be mined for insights about the social and literary culture of the nineteenth century. The diversity of Victorian biography is exhibited in works that are now barely read, if at all, and which deserve further inquiry and, in some cases, perhaps even new editions. Analysis of the genre continues to focus, with few exceptions, on the same works: Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) and Froude's *Life of Carlyle* (1882–4), the latter being alluring due to the scandal surrounding it that seems to break the monotony of Victorian Lives and Letters. Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859) is evoked as a Victorian bestseller expressing a largely questionable social theory. The 'English Men of Letters' series edited by John Morley together with Leslie Stephen's and Sidney Lee's *Dictionary of National Biography* are esteemed for manifesting the canonizing powers of biography and giving insights into the professionalization of the man of letters.

There are many other works, however, that combine the appeal of a complex subject and a thoughtful biographer, such as the life of John Duncan, an eccentric Scottish weaver who maintained a passion for natural science, the biography of John Sterling, loved by some of the luminaries of the age but who died before he was able to make his mark on the public, or Annie Keary, a writer of domestic novels and children's fiction who, born among Brontësque surroundings, went on to engage in feminist activities. Biography is usually seen as a public genre that consolidates public reputations. Yet the relationship between the biographer, the subject, and the reader is recast when the subject is deliberately removed from the shadows, and the biographer is in many cases more famous and influential than his or her subject.

To uncover the hidden face of Victorian biography is also to give an atypical portrait of Thomas Carlyle. In his 2006 collection *Life Writing and Victorian Culture*, David Amigoni reflects that 'Carlyle continues to merit a surprisingly important place in the study of Victorian life writing', partly because, continually 're-cast', his legacy is 'open to multiple cultural appropriations'.²³ Carlyle's centrality to Victorian biography and the fact that his readers could respond to his works in a highly selective fashion are both reaffirmed here. Thomas Carlyle is best known as the vigorous proponent of hero-worship who was responsible for keeping the nineteenth-century obsession with great men alive. Although it is possible to find ample evidence for this vision of the Chelsea Sage, countless Victorians took away something quite different from his writings, and his early works in particular. An astonishing number of writers who decided to go against the biographical grain by publishing the lives of unknown or unsuccessful men and women either openly declared Carlyle as their influence or were associated with him through work or friendship. The narratives discussed in the following pages place him firmly at the heart of Victorian biography.

²³ David Amigoni (ed.), *Life Writing and Victorian Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 19.

Given the comparative paucity of studies devoted to Victorian biography, it is necessary to provide a rapid overview of the genre during this period in order to identify the position that biographies of hidden subjects held within it. The first chapter, accordingly, considers the evolution and status of the genre in the nineteenth century, before introducing the rise of a new kind of biographical subject and the influences—biographical, poetical, and fictional—that contributed to it.

The second chapter gives closer scrutiny to the Victorian fascination with 'hero-worship' and in doing so breaks down the frequent amalgamation between hero-worshipping biographies and the lives of famous men. Rather than reject the idea of heroism outright, biographers of unknown men and women were more interested in snubbing contemporary ideas of fame and investigating the boundaries between the public and the private. Ian Ousby has written, with reference to nineteenth-century fiction, that the Victorians were 'not rejecting heroism but redefining it; instead of dropping the word from their vocabulary, they use it with an almost obsessive frequency . . . They make heroism over to their own needs'.²⁴ The endless articles and essays devoted to untangling the definition of a 'hero' demonstrate that the word and what it represented were indeed extremely unstable. This instability meant that space was created for a whole range of individuals to whom the label 'heroic' could be applied. The two most influential biographers of the Victorian period—Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Smiles—were greatly interested in exploiting the flexibility of the term in order to put forward new ideas of historical and biographical writing.

Chapter 3 begins to take a closer look at these hidden lives by focusing on the biographies of men who were loosely defined as 'working class'. A survey of these works begs the question of whether biographers who paid them unprecedented attention were acting in the interests of social equality or of social harmony. Two biographies, Samuel Smiles's *Life of a Scotch Naturalist* (1876) and *The Life of John Duncan* (1883) by William Jolly bring to the fore the paradoxes involved in writing the life of a 'hidden' man and the different discourses that biographers drew on to entice an audience, including those of tourism and philanthropy. Biography is presented as a genre capable of participating in dialogues about literary realism on an equal footing with the works of poets, novelists, and historians. However, the biographers are less concerned with exposing the details of working-class life than with mediating an encounter between the subject and the reader and in testing the ways in which the public responds to representations of humble lives.

Chapter 4 explores the lives of charismatic men who somehow failed to achieve greatness, which formed something of a Victorian fascination. These are 'obscure' lives in a different way than working-class men and women—the

²⁴ Ian Ousby, 'Carlyle, Thackeray, and Victorian Heroism', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 12 (1982), pp. 152–3.

subjects were roughly on the same social footing as their biographers—but by the time of their deaths they had failed to make a lasting impact on the public. Such tributes include the masterpiece of Victorian biography that is Thomas Carlyle's *The Life of John Sterling* (1851) and Margaret Oliphant's 1862 biography of the preacher Edward Irving. Rather than simply define their subjects negatively as 'not great', the biographers put forward an aesthetic of failure that recasts these men in a heroic mould. Once more, the specifics of the subjects' lives seem less important than the response they provoke, this time in the biographer. The private influence that these men wielded on those around them is valued more than public achievements, and, strikingly, the public genre of biography itself is reconfigured as a place of intimacy—to some extent, it is the biographers who 'hide' the lives of their subjects. This strategy reveals a deep-seated wariness of the public and its ability to determine the worth of an individual, which affects the subjects and their biographers in equal measure.

Wariness of public judgement is also visible in biographies of minor women writers, to which the fifth chapter is devoted. These biographies bring to the fore some of the anxieties traditionally associated with women's life-writing of the period, including the fear that any departure from the domestic sphere would be condemned as transgressive. However, placing these works alongside contemporary biographies of obscure or mediocre male lives reveals that gender forms only one aspect of the biographers' engagement with ideas of obscurity and privacy. Many biographers saw the omnipresent application of the label 'quiet and uneventful' to female lives as an opportunity rather than a restriction. The biographers of the writers Annie Keary and Charlotte Tucker, for example, deliberately distance their subjects from traditional ideas of fame and 'greatness' and embrace the freedom that is gained with being hidden from the public eye. In 2004, Kathryn Hughes commented that 'the biography shelves are weighed down with the stories of women who went to sea, murdered their husbands, dressed up as men or otherwise behaved in ways likely to offend or intrigue. For the woman who just got by, doing mostly what she was told, but sometimes wondering if there wasn't something more, there is little popular desire.'²⁵ Yet the latter category is precisely what interested Victorian biographers and their readers.

Many Romantic poets also saw obscurity as something to be welcomed rather than a hindrance: to be neglected during their lifetime and championed by a posthumous audience was a token of their enduring worth. Victorian biographers found themselves among this posthumous audience, and relished the chance to demonstrate their cultural influence by taking up the cause of poets who had not been given the fame they seemingly deserved. The sixth chapter considers three of them. Richard Monckton Milnes—now remembered

²⁵ Kathryn Hughes, 'The people that time forgot', *Guardian* (11 December 2004), p. 34.

principally as a collector of pornography and the one-time suitor of Florence Nightingale, but then a statesman and influential literary patron—took up John Keats. The case for William Blake was made by Thomas Carlyle's neighbours Anne and Alexander Gilchrist, and Carlyle's irksome amanuensis Frederick Martin plumped for John Clare. Each of the three biographers envisaged biography as a genre that can heal rifts between the individual and the community. The biographers repeatedly couch their attempts to rescue reputations within a broader discourse on the health of the nation and use their subject's obscurity to make a broader statement about the public's responsibility towards writers. Surprisingly, they do not ask the public to revise their appraisal of these poets by engaging critically with their works, but request instead a far more emotional investment with the three men in a manner that recalls other biographies of hidden lives.

Chapter 7 departs from single-subject works to consider the crowning achievement of Victorian biography: the *Dictionary of National Biography*, a monumental venture that swallowed up the lives of its two editors Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee. The *DNB* brings together the many different strands of nineteenth-century biography. Stephen fought for the inclusion of numerous obscure and second-rate lives in the dictionary. In his accompanying essays, he defended this move by advocating their imaginative potential. However, once more, these hidden lives demonstrate functions that go beyond the evocative details of individual existences. Recognizing the hidden influences and efforts that contribute to the national good is envisaged as an act of collective generosity. In addition, Stephen brings to the fore a further aspect of these biographies that lurks within many of the works considered in the previous chapters: the hidden labour that preoccupies him the most is intellectual work. At a time when the status of the Victorian man of letters was giving way to a kind of professionalism that threatened their existence, Stephen draws attention to the quasi-heroic quality of the kind of inglorious intellectual work with which he had become so closely associated.

A brief discussion of Virginia Woolf's interest in biographies of hidden lives concludes this book. Many of Woolf's ideas on 'obscure lives' had already been circulating several decades earlier. Her greatest innovation did not lie in calling for more attention to be paid to the 'obscure', but in ascribing a more militant and feminist role to the biographers who resurrected them. The relationship between nineteenth- and twentieth-century biography should be reconsidered in terms of dialogue rather than of rupture: the Victorians laid the foundations for a type of biographical writing that Woolf picked up and remoulded, and which continues to gain in popularity today.

Though Victorian biographies of hidden lives are diverse—and each chapter has tried to stay alert to the particularities of the texts—three ongoing strands emerge. The first is that these works display a wariness of the public sphere, and the public's ability to act as an arbiter of worth. The germ for this wariness was

planted in the Romantic period when, as Leo Braudy notes, 'an increasingly fame-choked world was beginning to reach out for solace and value to anonymity and neglect as emblems of true worth'.²⁶ During the Victorian period, this disdain for fame meant that the hidden, private, sphere was often embraced as a place of respite from the tainted public sphere.

A suspicion that the new reading public was unable properly to assess true literary worth also affected biographers, who, not so keen to welcome contemporary neglect, were encouraged to prove their cultural importance. Choosing an 'obscure' subject inflated the importance of the biographer. A biographer always acts as a mediator between his subject and the reader. However, whereas a biography of a 'great' man implies an act of homage, the biography of an 'obscure' man involves an act of patronage. Many biographers used this platform to address the nation as a whole and remind them of their duty towards artists, the poor, or the neglected. The fact that so many biographers justified their activities by drawing upon acknowledged contemporary 'sages' suggests that they conceived of their role in a similar light. At the same time, they use the lives of individuals who made a limited impact on the public sphere to ponder their own influence and importance as men and women of letters. To a significant extent, biographies of hidden lives are therefore as much about the biographer as they are about the subject.

A final crucial feature of this significant biographical trend is that their foremost function is not, as might be expected, to confer fame and perhaps even immortality on previously unknown men and women. Though this is sometimes an aspect of the works (notably in the lives of Romantic poets), in most cases biographers showed a distinct lack of concern with fame, and even attempted to shield their subjects from sustained public scrutiny altogether. The predominant impulse in these works is not a canonizing one. Nor are these lives valued for their ability to transgress or disrupt the grand narrative of progress. On the contrary, these biographies are above all recognitions of the hidden influences that sustain the nation. As Ruskin wrote in 1883, 'the lives we need to have written for us are of the people whom the world has not thought of,—far less heard of,—who are yet doing the most of its work, and of whom we may learn how it can best be done.'²⁷ Long-term remembrance is not the principal preoccupation of these biographers. They are above all determined to stimulate a feeling of gratitude towards the 'obscure', even if this involved employing a genre so closely identified with public visibility.

²⁶ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 425.

²⁷ John Ruskin, 'Preface', in Francesca Alexander, *The Story of Ida* (London: George Allen, 1883), pp. iv–v.

1

The Many Faces of Victorian Biography

That the Victorian period was the Age of the Novel has been asserted in countless critical overviews of the nineteenth century.¹ Yet for many Victorian men and women of letters the nineteenth century was almost as strikingly the Age of Biography. Critics usually agreed that biography was one of the most ancient forms of literature. Margaret Oliphant described it as ‘one of the oldest in the world—if not the first, at least a very early form of literary composition’.² George Smith, ten years after he launched the *Dictionary of National Biography*, concurred that from ‘the Book of Exodus down to the Biographical Dictionary, literature has been mainly preoccupied with biography’.³ Despite this, it seemed to many readers and writers that the genre had developed an unprecedented importance in their own time, to such an extent that Robert Goodbrand felt able to declare in 1870 that ‘until within the last hundred years there has been no idea of biography at all. It is a modern attainment’.⁴ ‘Biography is a branch of literary art to which the present generation devotes itself’, was the remark of one critic in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1879.⁵ A writer in the *Quarterly Review* noted in 1884 that ‘though for the last half-century pure fiction has been in the ascendant, the popularity of biography, if not relatively yet absolutely, seems to be continually increasing’.⁶ Five years later, a survey of ‘The Literature and Language of the Age’ in the *Edinburgh Review* led to the judgement that Biography ‘is at this moment the most popular form of literature’. Indeed, Henry Reeve pursues, ‘it is a curious characteristic of the literature of the day that biography preponderates to an enormous extent over every other branch of composition.’⁷

It is difficult to verify such statements. Of all literary genres, the boundaries of biography are perhaps the hardest to define. If one includes within the category

¹ See, for example, Francis O’Gorman (ed.), *The Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 1.

² Margaret Oliphant, ‘The Ethics of Biography’, *Contemporary Review*, 44 (July–December 1883), p. 76.

³ [George Smith], ‘On Biography and Biographies’, *Temple Bar*, 94 (April 1892), p. 579.

⁴ Robert Goodbrand, ‘A Suggestion for a New Kind of Biography’, *Contemporary Review*, 14 (April 1870), p. 20.

⁵ [Unsigned], ‘Studies in Biography’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 20 (August 1879), p. 255.

⁶ [Richard Copley Christie], ‘Biographical Dictionaries’, *Quarterly Review*, 157 (January 1884), p. 187.

⁷ [Henry Reeve], ‘The Literature and Language of the Age’, *Edinburgh Review*, 169 (April 1889), p. 329.

the countless pamphlets, tracts loosely based on individual lives, religious biographies and saints' lives, memorial sketches of philanthropists, tradesmen, or local worthies, and commemorations of cherished parents, siblings, and friends written and printed uniquely for private circulation, the number of biographies circulating in the Victorian age is indeed astounding. Gathering precise statistics of the genre is beset by further difficulties. Biographical titles often resemble the titles of novels. In the common case of anonymous and often amateurish works, a consultation of the title is often insufficient to determine whether a work is a heavily fictionalized life based on fact or a fictional narrative made to resemble a biography. A further ambiguity regarding the extent of the involvement of a biographer poses more problems. Some biographers uninhibitedly stated their authorship on the title page. Others, often though not always prompted by modesty, presented themselves as editors of a subject's diaries, personal musings, and letters. The nature of the narrative written to connect these autobiographical writings varies from one biography to another, and many biographers who labelled themselves editors went far beyond the duties of selection, arrangement, and annotation. A definitive catalogue of Victorian biography is therefore simply impossible.

Some guidance on the significance of the genre during the years of Queen Victoria's reign can be gained from library records and the *Publishers' Circular*, though their authors regularly seem baffled by the task facing them. Biography is at times given its own category, at others listed alongside history, and sometimes grouped with geography, travel, and history. In the first half of the nineteenth century, according to the *Bibliotheca Londinensis*, this latter category accounted for approximately 17.3 per cent of publications, behind religious books (which comprised one-fifth of all books published), and slightly ahead of fiction and juvenile works.⁸ By 1900, however, novels easily overtook biographies. The *Publishers' Circular* for that year lists 2,109 books works of fiction and juvenile literature⁹ against 716 historical and biographical publications, while theology's share of the market was rapidly dropping, with 708 works. Whatever the impressions of critics, biography's ascendancy over fiction receded during the century, though the rate of publication remained high.

Publishing firms tended to specialize in certain areas of biography. Unsurprisingly, major companies such as John Murray, Longmans, Routledge, or Richard Bentley published the 'great lives': political, historical, and literary biographies of renowned individuals. Though highbrow in their ambitions, they also attracted the popular biographers read by all classes of society such as Samuel Smiles. Publishers such as Simpkin Marshall developed a sound reputation as suppliers of religious biographies. Other firms shied from obvious subjects and focused instead on commemorating the lives of less renowned individuals, who were usually near

⁸ *Bibliotheca Londinensis* (London: T. H. Hodgson, 1848).

⁹ 'English Literature in 1900', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 64 (March 1901), pp. 138–40.

contemporaries. Many authors of domestic biographies sent them their memorials. James Nisbet and Hamilton, Adams, were significant publishers of these works, with the latter honouring Scottish subjects in particular. These were generally cheap productions, short and clumsily written. At first glance, it appears that humble, inglorious lives were directed at less educated readers, which implies that there was a counter-culture of biography in which more humble readers were presented with subjects that seemed less distant from them. Yet this apparent division makes it more intriguing when major publishing houses did take on obscure subjects.

In terms of popularity, biography could hold its own against fiction. Many achieved bestseller status, though they are now almost all forgotten. William Brock's 1858 *A Biographical Sketch of Sir Henry Havelock* sold 46,000 copies. (In comparison, *David Copperfield*, published in 1850, sold 25,000.) Smiles's *Life of George Stephenson* (1857) reached roughly identical sales as, for example, Kingsley's *Westward Ho!*, published two years earlier. It was not rare for evangelical biographies to sell thousands of copies.¹⁰ For all the scandals that frequently surrounded biographies, the genre was essentially respectable and one in which many of the key figures of the age were widely read. Charlotte Brontë recommended to a friend that she read 'Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Southey's *Life of Nelson*, Lockhart's *Life of Burns*, Moore's *Life of Sheridan*, Moore's *Life of Byron*, Wolfe's *Remains*'.¹¹ Dickens praised John Forster's *Life and Adventures of Oliver Goldsmith* (1848) to its author in extravagant terms, declaring: 'I don't believe that any book was ever written, or anything ever done or said, half so conducive to the dignity and honour of literature' as his biography.¹² G. H. Lewes wept over Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*.¹³ Suddenly, biography seemed everywhere and was almost impossible to ignore.

The fact that critics recognized the importance of biography in the literary market made the failings of the genre even more dismaying. Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, and many of the other early twentieth-century biographers lambasted their Victorian forebears for the shoddy composition of 'those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead'.¹⁴ It is rarely noted that the Victorians were often equally quick to condemn the weaknesses of the works loading their shelves. In 1832, Thomas Carlyle found it 'lamentable, that so few genuinely good *Biographies* have yet been accumulated in

¹⁰ See Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Charlotte Brontë, in Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (London: Smith, Elder, 1857), I, 140. All further references are to this edition.

¹² Charles Dickens to John Forster, 22 April 1848, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by his sister-in-law [Georgina Hogarth] and his eldest daughter [Mamie Dickens] (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1879), I, 220.

¹³ George Henry Lewes to Elizabeth Gaskell, 15 April 1857, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by G. S. Haight (London: Yale University Press, 1954), II, 316.

¹⁴ Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, p. viii.

Literature'.¹⁵ He was not the only one. Two years later, a *Gentleman's Magazine* writer wrote that 'it is an age of biography; but of biography that is written without talent, published without demand, and perused without instruction'.¹⁶ Towards the end of the century, a writer in *Blackwood's* deplored the 'useless repetition and provoking redundancy' of so many works.¹⁷ Such harsh criticisms were somewhat mitigated by a general agreement that of all the literary genres none was 'so difficult to do well'.¹⁸ Yet, for an age that produced biographies in unprecedented numbers, it was disgruntling for many writers to agree that no biography published in the nineteenth century could rival Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791). (Southey's *Life of Nelson* (1813), which followed a very different model, was the pre-1830 biography that came the closest to undisputed success.) Throughout the nineteenth century, biographers faced the awkward position of writing in a genre whose popularity and generally agreed social importance were as marked as its widespread denunciation.

Though many of the criticisms were justified, numerous biographies published during the period stand out. It is worth pausing on the most notorious and successful of them, since these lives of famous men, and a handful of famous women, constituted the tradition that biographers of the 'obscure' worked within but also against.

THREE PHASES OF VICTORIAN BIOGRAPHY

Victorian biography responded to the changing preoccupations of the times, and three broad movements in the genre can be identified. Unsurprisingly, biographers of the 1830s and 1840s dealt with the Romantic men of letters who had recently passed away. Biography had not yet settled down into the much-caricatured two-volume life and letters formula. Instead, writers tended to produce hybrid works, part-biography, part-autobiography, part-memoir, which resembled the kind of impressionistic sketches that Hazlitt was renowned for. De Quincey issued his *Recollections of the Lake Poets* between 1834 and 1840; the Countess of Blessington recorded conversations with Lord Byron (1832). (Such works continued to appear much later, such as Thomas Jefferson Hogg's *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* and Edward John Trelawny's *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*, both published in 1858.)

Two works on Romantic writers drew particular attention and became references for later nineteenth-century biographers. The first was Thomas Moore's 1830 *Life and Letters of Lord Byron*, one of the period's most important literary events. Rumours had never ceased to circulate around the author of *Don Juan*, and were

¹⁵ Thomas Carlyle, 'Biography', *Fraser's Magazine*, 5 (April 1832), p. 260.

¹⁶ Anon, 'Review of New Publications', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 2 n.s. (July–December 1834), p. 499.

¹⁷ [A. Innes Shand], 'Contemporary Literature', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 125 (April 1879), p. 482.

¹⁸ George Saintsbury, 'Some Great Biographies', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 66 (June 1892), p. 97.

exacerbated when John Cam Hobhouse (later Lord Broughton) famously destroyed the poet's memoirs. Moore, Byron's friend and literary executor, and a popular poet in his own right, had read the memoirs and did not deem them particularly shocking—he protested over, though he did not prevent, the incineration of the papers. Regardless of his relaxed assessment of the documents, those who picked up Moore's *Life* for shocking revelations were disappointed, and found not only that the letters selected for inclusion had been censored but that the overall tone of the work was highly protective of its subject. Moore's *Life and Letters of Lord Byron* was important for the way in which it both manipulated and shook off scandal. It was also undoubtedly vivid and eloquent—Thomas Macaulay described it as 'among the best specimens of English prose which our age has produced'¹⁹—and demonstrated that critics of biography need not despair entirely.

John Gibson Lockhart's *Life of Scott* was a very different work. Published in seven volumes between 1837 and 1838, with a ten-volume edition issued the following year, the biography combined a monumental form with a lively tone that relied heavily on a cavalier attitude to facts and a Boswellian appreciation of its subject. In reviewing 'Some Great Biographies', George Saintsbury labelled Lockhart 'the prince of all biographers, past, present and to come'. Strict accuracy with regards to sources had not gained the importance that it would some decades later, and critics agreed with Saintsbury that the power of the biography lay in 'the unmatched combination of excellence in the selection and editing with excellence in the connecting narrative'.²⁰ Carlyle more timidly lauded the 'workmanlike' quality of the effort, though he regretted that Lockhart did not appear to have a 'very elevated' concept of what that work was.²¹ Nevertheless, if Moore's work was commended as an example of the biographical memoir, Lockhart's achievement was spoken highly of for embodying a perfect equilibrium between the biographer's and the subject's voice.

Both of these works influenced discussions of nineteenth-century biography, though they were in many ways examples of Romantic biography both in content—as the works of Romantic writers reflecting on the legacy of a dying age—and in style, with their Boswellian aspects. Arthur Penrhyn Stanley's *Life of Arnold* (1844) seems to mark a turning point of the genre and presents more recognizably Victorian concerns. Stanley invented little but used a eulogizing tone and lengthy death-scene in a manner that resonated with a new generation of readers. The work is far from perfect, and points towards the more excessive examples of Victorian hagiography that would be produced later. However, Stanley's most influential act, as A. O. J. Cockshut has compellingly argued,

¹⁹ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Moore's Life of Byron', *Critical and Historical Essays Contributed to the Edinburgh Review* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1874), p. 141.

²⁰ Saintsbury, 'Some Great Biographies', pp. 99–102.

²¹ Thomas Carlyle, 'Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott', *London and Westminster Review*, 28 (January 1838), p. 296.

was to create a new kind of hero.²² Thomas Arnold is not the statesman found in classical biography nor the popular actor or writer of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century biography. This commemoration of a schoolmaster (however illustrious) opened the door to thousands of memoirs of middle and upper-middle class heroes, whose value lay in their moral authority.

Mid-century Victorian biography has faced the harshest criticisms. In his highly partisan history of English biography, Harold Nicolson stated that it was not 'necessary to trace in any detail the developments of English biography between 1838 and 1882, between the date of Lockhart's *Scott* and that of Froude's *Carlyle*'—a sentiment echoed by many of the early twentieth-century 'new biographers'.²³ In fact, those years were among the most creative and influential in the history of biography. During these years, Thomas Carlyle put into practice his theory of biography in the superb *Life of John Sterling* (1851) and Elizabeth Gaskell wrote the first significant biography of a woman by another woman with her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). In doing so, both demonstrated that biography could aspire to the highest standards of literary art. This was also a time when new types of biography were being produced.

Biographies that celebrated new kinds of heroes began to multiply. As the 1851 Great Exhibition demonstrated British industrial, imperial, and economic supremacy, so did representatives of these successes crowd library shelves. Imperial military power was glorified in the lives of 'Christian soldiers'. Sir Henry Havelock, a general who fought during the 1857 Indian Mutiny, recaptured Cawnpore and died after the end of the siege of Lucknow, was the subject of several biographies. An 1858 sketch by William Brock and a full-length biography by the erudite Oriental scholar John Clark Marshman, published in 1860, were bestsellers. These lives were exemplary and stressed the domestic as well as the professional worth of their subjects. A writer for *The Times* felt that 'the middle classes of this country may well be proud of such men as these, born and bred in their ranks . . . , proud of men who were noble without high birth'.²⁴ Popular editions were printed to further disseminate these ideals. It was the content rather than the style of these works that stood out, though Marshman's biography is a sophisticated work that remains highly readable. Such biographies formed, as Graham Dawson demonstrates, 'a new tradition of exemplary imperial masculinity which remained at the heart of the British national imaginary right up to 1914'.²⁵ Missionary biographies, and in particular the life of David Livingstone, mirrored these in many ways.²⁶

²² Cockshut, *Truth to Life*, pp. 89–91.

²³ Nicolson, *English Biography*, p. 125.

²⁴ [Unsigned, untitled article on soldiers in the Indian Empire], *The Times* (14 November 1857), p. 6.

²⁵ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 83.

²⁶ See Clare Pettitt, *Dr Livingstone, I Presume? Missionaries, Journalists, Explorers and Empire* (London: Profile Books, 2007).

Industrial biography provided a domestic counterpart to these imperial heroes. Samuel Smiles's *Life of George Stephenson* (1857) sold thousands of copies, and was enjoyed by a wide range of readers from working men through schoolchildren to businessmen. Again, in Smiles's work, professional success and private virtue went hand in hand, and the definition of a 'hero' was further extended. Smiles was also responsible for the enormous expansion, if not the creation, of self-help biography. George Lillie Craik's *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties* (1831–2) was an early example of a collection of sketches of individuals who demonstrated the value of perseverance, hard work, and moral virtue. Craik's work was highly influential at a time when working men's institutes were burgeoning. Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859), however, appeared at a time of national self-confidence that made it appear as a perfect representative of what could be achieved through individual strength. Again, the work was immensely popular and had sold a quarter of a million copies by the time of Smiles's death in 1904. Smiles's models were taken from all classes of society, from humble shoemakers to national leaders, and reached beyond British borders. Countless works of collective biographies were published on the Smiles model until the end of the century, and a new type of popular biography was born.

The mid-century also witnessed the beginning of academic and professional biography. A number of biographers turned their attention to important historical, literary, or philosophical figures, conscientiously collected sources, widened their research to the period during which the subject lived in order to question the influence of contemporary mores on an individual life and sought to provide scholarly accounts of major figures. Thomas Carlyle, who had tested his historical method with a life of Cromwell (1845), launched the first volume of his epic biography of Frederick the Great in 1859. David Masson began his six-tome life of Milton 'in connection with the history of his own time', which was published between 1859 and 1880. The work is stilted and dry, though admirable in its scholarly attempt. James Spedding attempted to combine scholarship and readability in *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon* (1861–72), though again the work lacks energy. (Mark Pattison's life of Casaubon, published in 1875, achieved the balance better.) Though it is easy to quarrel with many of the aspects of the biographies published during these years, they laid the ground for many significant later works. Too rapidly condemned as unwieldy and pious, mid-Victorian biography in fact revised the boundaries of the genre and originated the types of biography that remain current today.

As the century drew to its close, biography both confirmed the mood of national confidence and submitted it to sceptical scrutiny. Major figures of the Victorian age began to pass away, and with their decease came a chance to assess the age they had embodied. The last three decades of the nineteenth century witnessed important biographies of major Victorians, a trend initiated perhaps by John Forster's *Life of Dickens* (1872–4), introduced as 'the most popular

novelist of the century'.²⁷ Dickens had made a large bonfire of private papers before his death, and, though his future biographer knew of the most intimate secrets of his life (including the existence of his mistress Ellen Ternan), Forster produced a work that was both engaging and discreet. Forster was much ridiculed for exaggerating his own importance in Dickens's life; another reproach was that little insight is given into Dickens's inner life, beyond the previously unpublished autobiographical sketch of his childhood that Forster included. In spite of this, the work is a polished biography by an experienced biographer, and the fame of its subject was sufficient to allow it to sell in thousands of copies. George Otto Trevelyan's biography of his uncle, the eminent historian Macaulay (1876), is a more accomplished portrait of a major Victorian. Though critics might complain of the over-delicacy of certain biographers including Forster and Macaulay, it is highly questionable whether warts-and-all portraits of such popular figures would have met with a graceful reception.

This was put to the test with James Anthony Froude's four-volume biography of Thomas Carlyle, published as *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of his Life* (1882) and *Thomas Carlyle: A History of his Life in London, 1834–1881* (1884), which originated the biggest biographical scandal of the century. Froude was a faithful disciple of the Chelsea Sage, and had already braved controversy with his novel *The Nemesis of Faith* (1848), widely condemned as heretical. It was Carlyle himself who presented a shocked Froude with reminiscences of his wife that he had written after her death in which he lamented his harsh treatment of her, and who consulted him as to their eventual publication. Carlyle later wavered in his assent that Froude write his biography, though an agreement was finally given. The outrage expressed upon Froude's publication of the *Reminiscences* a month after Carlyle's death in 1881 only intensified once the full-length biography began to appear the following year. Where Froude had sought to convey pathos and tragedy, the public saw betrayal and indecency. A hint that Carlyle may have been impotent, which Froude asserted Carlyle had claimed to him, broke new boundaries in Victorian standards of privacy. Readers ignored the sheer power of the work and depicted Froude as a traitor.²⁸

It is important, however, to temper this depiction of an outraged Victorian public. One response to the Froude scandal was a renewal of biographical censorship. Cross's memoir of his wife George Eliot (1885), written in the wake of the scandal, was as dry, pious, and decent as anyone could wish. So much so, in fact, that Gladstone quipped that 'it is not a Life at all—it is a Reticence, in three volumes'.²⁹ The reception of Hallam Tennyson's 1897

²⁷ John Forster, *The Life of Dickens* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872), 1, 1.

²⁸ See Ian Hamilton, *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* (London: Pimlico, 1992).

²⁹ Quoted in E. F. Benson, *As We Were: A Victorian Peep-Show* (London: Longmans and Co., 1930), p. 111.

biography of his father was equally tepid. The scandal surrounding Froude's life of Carlyle was unprecedented, but the maligned biographer had his supporters as well as his attackers. The age may not have been prepared for an all-too-human portrait, but neither was it content with excessive piety.

The scholarly biographies that multiplied at the close of the century stayed clear of such controversies and attempted to give fair and concise portraits of significant subjects. Biography was increasingly used as a canonizing tool that could assess the accomplishments of an age through the depiction of its most significant individuals. The English Men of Letters, the Twelve English Statesmen, or the Eminent Women series are the most accomplished of the series that made such evaluations in single-subject volumes. Collective biographies expressed similar aims, with works such as *Pioneer Women in Victoria's Reign* (1897) and *Men and Women of the Time* (1899). (As more women participated in the kind of activities that were deemed of sufficient significance for biographical commemoration, such as nursing, missionary work, or teaching, they appeared more frequently as subjects.) This reached its apogee with Leslie Stephen's and Sidney Lee's monumental *Dictionary of National Biography* (1882–1901). The *DNB* reflected the gradual broadening of biographical subjects that had occurred throughout the period. Though in many ways it stands as the final monument of Victorian life-writing before the 'new biographers' arrived with their iconoclastic ambitions, a strong case can be made for the dictionary as a bridge between two different periods in the history of biography.

It is almost impossible to draw conclusions from such a diverse history. A number of generalizations, however, form a useful background to the discussion of the parallel tradition of biography that thrived during the period. Firstly, in the vast majority of cases (excluding, naturally, historical biography) the biographer was a writer who had enjoyed personal contact with his subject. Most nineteenth-century biographers followed the Johnsonian (and Boswellian) precept that such personal knowledge formed the precondition for a successful biography. (It was also this, rather than excessive piety, that made it so difficult for biographers to either wish or dare to depict their subjects in a potentially unflattering light.) Secondly, it was generally accepted that the biographer was a man of lesser talent who wrote the life of a more famous and greater man. John Forster, for example, was notorious as a man of letters, but in no way comparable to Dickens, and even Elizabeth Gaskell did not reach the fame (nor, it could be argued, the genius) of Charlotte Brontë. Finally, biography, like history and unlike fiction, depended on available material. It is often claimed, with justification, that the subjects chosen by biographers reflect the preoccupations of the age. That lives of soldiers, statesmen, or writers were published in their hundreds and sold in their thousands rather than commemorations of housewives does provide a commentary on occupations that were deemed of public interest. Yet it is also the case that famous subjects choose their biography more than their biography chooses them. Biographies of Dickens, Carlyle, and George Eliot appeared at

the time that they did simply because that was when these subjects died, and their fame made it an almost natural consequence. Such comments state the obvious. Yet, with biographies of obscure subjects, they no longer hold true.

DEBATES SURROUNDING VICTORIAN BIOGRAPHY

Despite the diversity of nineteenth-century biography, many of the contemporary articles that appeared about the genre were preoccupied with at least one of three issues: its claims to being an art or a craft, the didactic potential of biography, and the ethical questions raised by a genre that brought private matters to public light. That these issues had drawn attention from the inception of biography did not lessen the vigour with which they were addressed. As they fed into the reception of both lives of great men and biographies that worked against this trend, they are worth briefly considering.

Nineteenth-century biography was caught in the midst of a process of self-definition. At the beginning of the century, the consensus was that biography formed a sub-category of history. By the end of the century, there were more critics prepared to define it as a distinct literary genre. Yet the demarcation between history and literature was far more complex than a matter of fact versus fiction. For the Victorians, biography and history were closely entangled: Carlyle's statement that history is the 'essence of innumerable biographies' became a commonplace.³⁰ In spite of this, identifying biography as a form of history was all the more difficult as history itself seemed an unstable category. Biography had been identified as a form of history since antiquity. In the mid-eighteenth century, Roger North proposed that the 'same ingredients that are usually brought to adorn fiction may come forward' in historical and biographical writing, such as a careful 'choice of words, charming periods, inventions of figures, interspersions of sentences, and facetious expressions'.³¹ Romantic writers followed these pointers. As L. Kochan has explored, Romantic historians argued for the primacy of 'imagination and constructiveness before analysis and criticism'.³² Their influence endured. Reviewers of Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837) or Macaulay's *History of England* (1849–55) noted with varying degrees of gratification the parallels between these works and fiction, drama, or poetry. Matters had evolved so far in 1831 that William Wordsworth wrote in the context of a commentary on Currie's *Life of Burns* (1800) that 'biography, though differing in some essentials from works of fiction, is nevertheless, like

³⁰ Carlyle, 'Biography', p. 253.

³¹ Roger North, 'General Preface' to *Life of the Lord Keeper North*, unpublished; quoted in James L. Clifford (ed.), *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism, 1560–1960* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 27–37.

³² L. Kochan, 'The Internal Vision: Sympathy', in *The Romantic Movement*, ed. by Anthony Thorlby (London: Longmans, 1966), p. 90.

them, an *art*.³³ Long before Virginia Woolf wondered whether biography was an art or a craft, the question was being asked.

Yet biographers themselves were uncertain. The labels 'edited by' and 'by' were often used interchangeably on title pages. Many contented themselves with assembling scraps of letters and diaries with the justification that they were editing a posthumous autobiography. Countless bulky volumes were presented to the public with the assurance that the subject was 'speaking for himself'. An enduring trend was to minimize the presence of the biographer within the work as far as possible, as if his cultural legitimacy was not yet ascertained. As a correlative, it was often assumed early in the century that if a biography was good it was simply because the subject was an interesting one. The changes in Boswell's fortunes during the nineteenth century are perhaps the best indicator of the evolving reputation of the biographer. For Macaulay and Carlyle, as for many others, the *Life of Johnson* was a 'very great work' even though Boswell being 'one of the smallest men that ever lived'.³⁴ Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the judgement was reversed: it was agreed that Boswell possessed 'no ordinary literary skill' and the 'supremacy of Boswell's art' was accepted.³⁵ Such comments arrived at a time when critics were less forgiving with biographers who forwent the tasks of selection, compression, and skilful narration. The biographer was no longer expected to hide in the shadows.

Indeed, as the century progressed, biography was encouraged to forge its own identity, distinct from either fiction or history. One reason for this was that historians such as William Stubbs sought to champion history as an academic discipline and promoted a more professional attitude to historical research. This process involved distinguishing historical writing from the more popular and sometimes less reputable genre of biography. Biography could assist academic disciplines by providing concise guides to key writers and thinkers (as with the English Men of Letters series), but it was increasingly understood that biography had a different role to play within the literary market. The notion of biography's distinct identity had so far progressed by 1892 that the respected critic George Saintsbury published an article analysing 'Some Great Biographies', which was an important step in establishing a canon of key biographical achievements. This evolution also meant that biographers could assert their cultural importance.

Debates surrounding biography's didactic potential were as ancient as those concerning its generic definition. From Plutarch's *Lives* (c. 50–125 AD) to Samuel Johnson, the ability of biography to teach by example was constantly reaffirmed. The Victorians cherished this aspect of the genre perhaps above any

³³ William Wordsworth, *A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns*, in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, Volume III* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 121.

³⁴ Macaulay, 'Croker's Edition of Boswell's Life of Johnson', *Critical and Historical Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1874), p. 170.

³⁵ Saintsbury, 'Some Great Biographies', pp. 98–9.

other. The majority of biographies published during the period are exemplary. The title of George Jacob Holyoake's essay *The Value of Biography in the Formation of Individual Character* (1845) gives some idea of the confidence felt in the genre. Contemporary novels, which can be a useful indicator of cultural trends, are full of characters learning from biography. The heroine of Mary Shelley's *Falkner* (1837) 'read biography, and speedily found models for herself, whereby she measured her own thoughts and conducts, rectifying her defects, and aiming at that honour and generosity which made her heart beat and cheeks glow, when narrated of others'.³⁶ In Bulwer Lytton's *The Caxtons* (1849), the hero's father urges him: 'diet yourself well on biography, the biography of good and great men', and thrusts a copy of the *Life of the Reverend Robert Hall* into his hands.³⁷ The didactic content could be religious, with exhortations to lead a pious life, or secular, as in Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help*. The potential power wielded by such works was such that biographies aimed at working-class readers were very cautious in the ideals they promoted and made a careful distinction between self-improvement and social improvement.³⁸ Whatever the differences between these works, exemplary biography was pervasive, and the belief in the emulative power of biography was rarely questioned.

Not only the content but the form itself of biography held a didactic role. Biographers and critics frequently argued that, though the genre borrowed techniques from fiction, biography could subdue dangerous female imaginative flights. At a time when fiction was being produced in increasing amounts with ever-more thrilling tales of romance or mystery, biography was lauded as a safer alternative. The editor of *Women of Worth* (1859) takes this line in the work's preface, which insists that woman 'should be a student of the real'.³⁹ Indeed, it was deemed that women of letters were best suited to write biography as well as read it, since 'the general bent of the female mind . . . is to be influenced in its opinions, and swayed in its conduct, by individual man, rather than general ideas'.⁴⁰ Naturally, the respectable façade of biography meant that, as with religious tracts, the wildest tales could be told under a cover of facts. Many of these works, such as Emma Pitman's *Heroines of the Mission Field* (1880), provide ample excitement. In Charles Reade's *Hard Cash* (1863), the pious Jane Hardie laments the 'rage' for 'fiction under a thin disguise of religious biography'.⁴¹ Mrs Linnet, in George Eliot's 'Janet's Repentance' (1857), skips the more didactic passages of her religious books, and, 'on taking up the biography of a celebrated

³⁶ Mary Shelley, *Falkner: A Novel* (London: William Pickering 1996), p. 39.

³⁷ Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, *The Caxtons: A Family Picture* (London: George Routledge, 1874), p. 233.

³⁸ See Chapter 3.

³⁹ [Anonymous], *Women of Worth* (London: James Hogg and Son, 1859), p. 10.

⁴⁰ [Alison Archibald], 'Biography', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 69 (January 1851), p. 43.

⁴¹ Charles Reade, *Hard Cash* (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1863), II, 177.

preacher, she immediately turned to the end to see what disease he died of'.⁴² It is hard to believe that her conduct was unusual.

On the whole, however, readers and critics expected biographers to provide some form of guidance. However sparse the biographer's commentary within a work, readers clung to the device of a final chapter, or couple of paragraphs, in which the biographer would summarize the lessons of the life just depicted and deliver a verdict on the subject. Allan Cunningham judged that Boswell's *Life of Johnson* was damaged by the omission of such a final judgement since 'every one forms a mental character according to his abilities or prejudices, and nothing is fixed or defined'.⁴³ The reader's analytical competence is distrusted as strongly as the biographer's judgement is valued. Such views expressed the underlying conviction that each life possessed a meaning. In *The Uses of Biography: Romantic, Philosophic, and Didactic* (1852), one of the few Victorian works devoted to the theory of biography, the didactic biographer Edwin Paxton Hood reflected that 'a ruling passion, or a ruling principle, governs each [life]; it is sometimes thickly overlaid with the biographer's style, and wrapped around with bandaging words; but even through all it may be detected'.⁴⁴ Hood incongruously depicts biography as organizing itself despite the biographer, who is suffered as an unfortunate necessity. Where Cunningham overvalues the biographer's unifying voice, Hood fears its interference. Yet both affirm the existence of a solid meaning even though this solidity was threatened by other interpretative forces.

At stake in these discussions was the authority of the biographer. Critics were rarely satisfied with the biographer's stance. In biographies such as Thomas Moore's *Life and Letters of Lord Byron* that let the subject speak for himself, readers eagerly tried to read between the lines. In works where the biographer's interpretation was clearly put forward, as in Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, the biographer was accused of bias. As different accounts of the same life were published, including the many biographies of Byron, biographies made different claims to the truth. It became apparent that the meaning imposed on a life was not fixed but was instead a matter of opinion.

A solution to this difficulty lay in a rather different didactic role open to biography. Biography's capacity to teach could be safeguarded if the genre was reconfigured in a more secular fashion. Thomas Carlyle provided a strong expression of the ability of biography to stimulate human empathy: 'How inexpressibly comfortable to know our fellow-creature; to see into him, understand his goings forth . . . nay, not only to see him, but even to see out of him, to view the world altogether as he views it'.⁴⁵ Carlyle brings together the

⁴² George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 212.

⁴³ Allan Cunningham, 'Biographical and Critical History of the Literature of the Last Fifty Years', *The Athenaeum*, 320 (14 December 1833), p. 851.

⁴⁴ Edwin Paxton Hood, *On the Uses of Biography: Romantic, Philosophic and Didactic* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1852), p. 92.

⁴⁵ Carlyle, 'Biography', p. 253.

Enlightenment idea that 'the proper study of mankind is man' with a more Romantic notion of empathy as expressed, for example, in Hazlitt's conceptualization of the imagination as a moral agent.⁴⁶ Biography could, as such, participate in contemporary discussions circulating in fictional and philosophical works on how to balance individual desires with communal responsibilities and often echoed the language of religious humanism, though it is perhaps paradoxical that a genre that focuses so insistently on individuals should promote altruism and the community.

The current tendency to minimize the distance between autobiography and biography has further downplayed the extent to which biography depicted itself as a counter-force to contemporary self-obsession. Carlyle believed in the ideal of a 'state of healthy unconsciousness', and he was not the only Victorian to be deeply suspicious of the autobiographical impulse.⁴⁷ (The fact that so many biographies were heavily reliant on autobiographical material went unremarked.) Robert Goodbrand described autobiography as a stepping-stone 'before men could learn how to look at their fellow-man with an interest that terminates simply in himself'.⁴⁸ Edwin Paxton Hood went further and argued that autobiography, unlike biography, had an 'egotistical' veneer. Indeed, biography could treat unhealthy self-consciousness and give the reader an occasion to purge psychological conflict, since 'lives, studied in a right spirit, present to us the varieties of mind-disease, the mode of treatment, the causes of the morbid termination, and the cure'.⁴⁹ Biography, for Hood, builds character through a release of morbidity achieved by understanding other human beings. Biography could also be used as a civic tool. The events of the French Revolution had demonstrated a further way in which excessive focus on the individual could threaten social structures. Biography appeared as a safer alternative to autobiography: it distinguished individual achievements but with communal objectives in mind. Such anxieties lay behind James Bryce Brown's declaration, in his 1870 address *On the Uses of Biography*, that studying great lives such as that of William Pitt improves the mind in a manner which contributes 'to make England truly great, more respected abroad, and happier and more united at home'.⁵⁰ The circulation of biography took on the nature of a patriotic duty.

It is a further paradox of biography that a genre considered so morally uplifting was also condemned as morally despicable. Suspicions regarding the indecency of its methods and motives gathered momentum towards the end of

⁴⁶ See William Hazlitt, *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998).

⁴⁷ Thomas Carlyle, 'Characteristics', in *A Carlyle Reader*, ed. by G. B. Tennyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 72.

⁴⁸ Goodbrand, 'A Suggestion', pp. 20–1.

⁴⁹ Hood, *On The Uses of Biography*, pp. 118–19.

⁵⁰ James Bryce Brown, *On the Uses of Biography* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1871), p. 7.

the seventeenth century. Thomas Sprat, himself a biographer, felt that private letters should not be published, as there men undressed their souls, 'and in that negligent habit, they may be fit to be seen by one or two in a chamber, but not to go abroad in the streets'.⁵¹ Such language endured well into the nineteenth century (and, indeed, beyond). During the Victorian period, wariness of biography on ethical grounds increased in the 1850s, which witnessed a steep rise in biographical publications. By the 1870s, it was far more common to encounter, in essays and journal articles, the defence of a less inhibited form of biography, until the Froude scandal renewed attacks on the unscrupulous biographer.

For many, ethical ambiguity was the price to pay for an artistically powerful biography. Carlyle was not the only writer to mock the 'Damocles' sword of *Respectability* that hung over the genre.⁵² Reviewers were forced to accept that the success of Boswell's *The Life of Johnson* depended largely on a willingness to reproduce in print private conversations and to depict the subject's flaws. One anonymous reviewer remarked that 'the secret of Boswell's success in some degree defies and eludes detection; while some of the conditions to which it is most obviously due are such as few men would care to accept. They would object to discarding delicacy and reserve'.⁵³ The more readable the biography, the more disreputable it often seemed. Indeed, the closer biography came to its avowed aim—that of bringing a man back to life—the closer it provoked an unlawful *frisson*—that of raising the dead. The question then became how to manage the remains.

Legal language was used to discuss the rights of the biographer and his subject long before the nineteenth century. Joseph Addison created an influential portrait of the criminal biographer in a 1716 issue of *The Freeholder*. Addison denounced those 'Grub-street biographers' who awaited the death of potential subjects 'to make a Penny of him' and described their practices as 'licentious'.⁵⁴ Echoes of Addison are present in Henry James's famous portrayal of such a 'publishing scoundrel' in *The Aspern Papers* (1888),⁵⁵ and indeed in later works including William Golding's *The Paper Men* (1984) and A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* (2001). What changed since Addison was that the biographer was no longer considered a masked outlaw but a public figure who wielded an undeniable power that he was expected to exercise responsibly. To this was added a new legal context regarding the rightful ownership of a life, as copyright laws were defined with increasing care. Margaret Oliphant gave careful consideration

⁵¹ Thomas Sprat, 'An Account of the Life and Writings of Mr. Abraham Cowley', in *Abraham Cowley: Poetry and prose. With Thomas Sprat's Life and observations by Dryden, Addison, Johnson and others* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), p. xxx.

⁵² Carlyle, 'Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott', p. 299.

⁵³ [Innes A. Shand], 'Contemporary Literature', p. 491.

⁵⁴ Joseph Addison, *The Freeholder* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 195.

⁵⁵ Henry James, 'The Aspern Papers', in *The Complete Tales of Henry James: Volume 6, 1884–1888* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963), p. 363.

to 'The Ethics of Biography' in 1883, and compared the biographer to a barrister who 'must violate no law of testimony, and call no unfair witnesses'.⁵⁶ Legal language was used indiscriminately to discuss the genre, as it was uncertain whether the biographer was acting as judge, lawyer, detective, or even criminal—often, indeed, he seemed to be all four.

Yet even these fears concerning the proper use of biographical materials provoked less anxiety than the consequences of the rise of biography on social intercourse. William Edmonstoune Aytoun's article 'Modern Biography' (1849) is the most striking example of biography's newfound capacity to breed paranoia. Aytoun was notorious for his humorous essays in *Blackwood's*, and the article displays his traditional brand of comic exaggeration, yet is also representative of the contemporary mood. Aytoun trembled at the thought that an unsuspected biographer could 'be perpetually watching you in the shape of a pretended friend'. A general climate of suspicion would disrupt natural behaviour. The expansion of biography meant that suddenly everyone was a potential biographer and a potential subject, which in turn threatened the careful separation of public and private spheres: 'The waiter with the bandy-legs, who hands round the negus-tray at a blue-stocking coterie, is in all probability a leading contributor to a fifth-rate periodical.'⁵⁷ The biographer can 'read' those around him but is himself unreadable. This was all the more disturbing since, as Richard Sennett describes in *The Fall of Public Man* (1977), the age placed extensive 'faith in immediate appearances as a guide to inner feeling'.⁵⁸ Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833–4) argued that 'all visible things are emblems'. At a time when clothes seemed 'unspeakably significant', the consequences of disguise were troubling.⁵⁹ (Aytoun's vision also contains more than a dash of class anxiety.) Biography turned every individual's acts into possible artefacts to be read, while the biographer betrayed the rules of social legibility by remaining invisible.

Biographical paranoia could create a dangerously artificial society. Charles Allston Collins, in his less humorous article 'Biography at a Discount', blames 'indiscriminate biographizing' for undermining sincerity in social exchanges. Individuals who suspected that they might become the subject of a written commemoration 'would act accordingly' with 'an eye to those terrible two volumes'. Collins picks up Thomas Sprat's description of the pleasant informality of letter writing. Whereas 'we should, in our letters, appear full-dressed when we have to do with strangers or acquaintances, but in dressing-gown and pantouffles to our friends', biography creates 'self-consciousness and pains-taking'.⁶⁰ Biography, far from being concerned solely with how lives were written, could modify the way in which lives were lived.

⁵⁶ Oliphant, 'The Ethics of Biography', p. 87.

⁵⁷ W. E. Aytoun, 'Modern Biography', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 65 (February 1849), p. 221.

⁵⁸ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 153.

⁵⁹ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (London: University of California Press, 2000), p. 55.

⁶⁰ Charles Allston Collins, 'Biography at a Discount', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 10 (June 1864), p. 160.

Discordant positions existed. For Holyoake, biography, on the contrary, served as a tool to strip off social disguises and pretensions. Holyoake believed that 'we live in a community of artifice. We can study few persons who are not clothed in appearances, not easily penetrated. But it is different with the dead—their characters are formed, the veil is removed, and the picture can be contemplated . . . the scaffolding is down for the building is reared.'⁶¹ Holyoake places little faith in 'unspeakably significant' clothes and appearances. Society is a place of illusion whereas biography is an act of revelation. The image of the building highlights the safe and public aspects of biography. Holyoake, who was an atheist, embraces biography as an institution that provides a point of stability in an otherwise unstable world. Greater suspicion of biography is expressed by those critics who held faith in social intercourse; it is for the more sceptical individuals that biography provides a welcome place to study the real nature of man. Biographers themselves were interested in the consequences of the genre on social exchanges. The widening range of subjects biographers were turning to gave a new urgency to these matters.

THE RISE OF THE 'OBSCURE' SUBJECT

Of the biographies cited above, which are commonly used to sketch the development of Victorian biography, the subjects are all famous individuals who made their mark on the public. They are the 'great men' (and the few 'great women') so insistently identified with the nineteenth century. Yet they are only half the story of Victorian biography.

From the 1830s, reviewers began to note a startling growth in the publication of biographies of subjects with little or no claim to fame. Alongside the traditional lives of monarchs, politicians, military leaders, and writers, appeared biographies of missionaries, clergymen, surgeons, doctors, schoolmasters, ploughmen, temperance workers, shoemakers, and failed artists of varying degrees of fame, fortune, and ability. They included biographies of men but also lives of women. Working-class men did not publish biographies of other working lives, but workers were commemorated by men of letters higher in the social scale and, even more frequently, by clergymen—Evangelical preachers and Quakers were particularly prolific. The category as a whole is extremely diverse.

It is difficult to provide precise numbers of these works, since many of them were short sketches and pamphlets, and many were circulated only locally or within a network of family and friends. A few further generalizations can still be made. Most biographies published during the Victorian period narrated the lives of men and women who had died within the period, or only shortly before. Lives

⁶¹ George Jacob Holyoake, *The Value of Biography in the Formation of Individual Character* (London: J. Watson, 1845), p. 3.

of historical figures were, of course, written in significant numbers, but these were usually subsumed under the category of 'history' and bear little resemblance to the full-length accounts of more contemporary subjects. This generalization holds particularly true for biographies of hidden lives. The more obvious reason for this is a practical one: documents regarding obscure individuals from earlier centuries had rarely been preserved, and biographers could not rely on the oral accounts so useful in compiling accounts of hidden lives. A second reason for the preponderance of contemporary subjects is that biographers used narratives of hidden lives in a self-reflexive manner. As the following chapters should make apparent, this group of biographies became a safe means for vastly disparate individuals to write about themselves, their society, and their anxieties, through their contemporaries.

Many of these works possess all the outward characteristics of the more traditional Victorian biographies. Like hero-worshipping biographies they give credit to morality, temperance, and hard work, and frequently seek to inspire a desire for emulation among their readers. However, these biographies are explicitly defined against the contemporary fashion for biographies of 'Great', or famous, men. However diverse the subjects, what unites them is the biographer's insistence on the subject's neglect by the public, whether he had once reached a degree of recognition or whether he had never achieved any fame whatsoever.

Critics varied greatly in the extent to which they welcomed this trend. In 1833, Allan Cunningham complained that 'men about whom the world had no solicitude, have come into the market with their "Life and Times", and we have been deluged with accounts of writings that were never read, and of books published but to be forgotten.'⁶² A more vociferous condemnation of such developments was expressed by Alexander Nicolson, author of the article 'Biography Gone Mad' (1856). Innumerable men of the noblest character, Nicolson argues, have lived in obscurity, yet 'some of the best men that ever lived were those whose lives had fewest incidents', and are therefore unsuited for a full-length commemoration. 'The biography of a respectable mediocrity is, it may be safely said, among the least interesting or useful of literary performances.'⁶³ In 1864, Charles Allston Collins felt—erroneously—that the trend was expiring. He looked back at the last twenty or thirty years when 'we used to write biographies about everybody. A man concerning whom there really was nothing whatever to tell... used formerly to be biographized in two large volumes, with a portrait-frontispiece in the first'.⁶⁴ In fact, such biographies were, if anything, increasing. The *Dictionary of National Biography*, which

⁶² Cunningham, 'Biographical and Critical History of the Literature of the Last Fifty Years', p. 851.

⁶³ [Alexander Nicolson], 'Biography Gone Mad', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 79 (March 1856), p. 285.

⁶⁴ Collins, 'Biography at a Discount', p. 158.

included a wide spectrum of minor subjects, confirmed the importance of biographical subjects whose principal attraction did not lie in their fame.

Unbridled life-writing became a target of mockery in Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* (1888–9), which opens with George Pooter's declaration: 'Why should I not publish my diary? I have often seen reminiscences of people I have never heard of, and I fail to see—because I do not happen to be a "Somebody"—why my diary should not be interesting.'⁶⁵ Grossmith's satire was *too* effective, as Pooter's diary does make interesting reading, and suggests the gossipy delight to be found in equivalent factual accounts. Indeed, the increase in autobiographies of inglorious subjects formed a parallel trend. John Gibson Lockhart complained as early as 1827 about 'the mania for this garbage of Confessions, and Recollections, and Reminiscences, and Aniliana'.⁶⁶ A key difference, however, is that whereas the publication of an autobiography by a 'nobody' depended only on the goodwill of a publisher, the introduction of a hidden life to the public sphere in biographical form depended on the coordination of many more factors, from the existence of material on this private life to the curiosity of a biographer. Biographers in these cases took on the unusual role of patron to their unknown subjects.

Critics alluded to these subjects in vague terms: they are labelled 'obscure', 'unknown', or 'mediocrities'. Discussions of the topic rarely defined precisely which biographies were being considered, or whether the entire range of biographies of the 'obscure' was being addressed. Some of the strongest attacks of the trend were aimed at domestic biographies. The lively author of 'Biography Gone Mad' was particularly incensed by the latter: 'The number is perfectly sickening of bereaved husbands, sons, and fathers, who practice this strange alchemy on the penitential tears and devout breathings, the sick-bed utterances and dying ejaculations of sainted wives, mothers, and babes.'⁶⁷ The attack is not entirely unjustified. Though there are numerous examples of highly accomplished domestic biography,⁶⁸ bereaved family members who had never written for the public before felt justified in commemorating their loved ones in pious sketches or drawn-out chapters. Another category was professional biography—lives of doctors, lawyers, or scholars who had completed a fine, though not necessarily a great, career. Compiled by fellow-workers, they share many of the same self-congratulatory and pious qualities of domestic biography.

For many critics, the argument against this new trend of biography was limited to repeated assertions that the principle interest of biography was founded on a natural attraction to 'illustrious men'.⁶⁹ Johnson's life was deemed 'worth

⁶⁵ George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 7.

⁶⁶ [J. G. Lockhart, attrib.], 'Autobiography', *Quarterly Review*, 35 (January–March 1827), p. 164.

⁶⁷ [Nicolson], 'Biography Gone Mad', p. 286.

⁶⁸ See Tolley, *Domestic Biography*.

⁶⁹ [Archibald], 'Biography', p. 41.

writing';⁷⁰ a biography of Thomas Campbell was 'right and proper'.⁷¹ Traditional biography involved a 'judicious and discriminating selection of character'.⁷² To record the life of a local pastor of interest only to his 'bereaved congregation'⁷³ was to flout all rules of proportion. Many critics failed to perceive the interest of a biography distinguishing a man whose achievements were few, and it is fair to say that many of these biographies are indeed monotonous.

The appearance of these works further destabilized the biographical genre since it was often unclear what outcome the biographer expected from the commemoration: did he seek enduring fame for his subject, or simply a temporary recognition? Much of the literature on biography since classical times had been devoted to the genre's ability to secure immortality for its subjects. A biography could perpetuate the image of an illustrious man in a way that, according to Plutarch, 'neither picture, nor image of marble, nor arch of triumph, nor pillar, nor sumptuous sepulchre' could do.⁷⁴ It was understood, however, that this applied to men who had already gained fame through their actions. There lurked behind the critics' scepticism unease with the fact that a genre could be used to create rather than confirm a reputation. It seemed no longer essential to achieve great things to achieve such commemoration, but simply to have stimulated the whim of a biographer. The seeming randomness with which subjects were selected for commemoration and possible fame conferred on the biographer an almost divine role.

Yet there were also many critics ready to applaud biographers who recognized obscure men and women. The assumption that hidden lives were uneventful was often rejected, as was the belief that the uneventful was necessarily uninteresting. A *Blackwood's* writer felt that 'the life of some very obscure individual may supply admirable matter for the reality of romance'.⁷⁵ Variations on the phrase 'the romance of real life' were abundantly used by biographers to justify their endeavours. The words underline the paradox that it is often necessary to allude to the fictional in order to perceive that reality has its interest. This was an important justification for the trend, and it was closely linked to parallel developments in fiction, discussed in more depth below.

Part of this was tied to the biographers' conviction that there was a thirst among the public to find role models not only among the great and often remote figures of history but also among individuals who might well have been their neighbours or friends. Traditional biography risked widening the chasm between illustrious subjects and far less illustrious readers. Lives of more humble subjects

⁷⁰ Thomas Carlyle, 'Boswell's Life of Johnson', *Fraser's Magazine*, 5 (May 1832), p. 392.

⁷¹ Aytoun, 'Modern Biography', p. 224.

⁷² [Archibald], 'Biography', p. 42.

⁷³ [Nicolson], 'Biography Gone Mad', p. 285.

⁷⁴ 'Amyot to the Readers', *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. by Thomas North (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1908), 1, 8.

⁷⁵ [Innes A. Shand], 'Contemporary Literature', p. 485.

could often mimic the readers' own environment and reflect their experience. Indeed, in the case of biographies of local worthies—devoted preachers or benevolent doctors—the work often did function as a communal autobiography by portraying a closely knit network.

The accumulation of biographies of humble men and women could provide individuals with a sense of purpose. Edwin Paxton Hood pauses in *The Uses of Biography* to insist that 'there is greatness concealed as well as exhibited—there is the greatness of the unknown and obscure, as well as the well known and celebrated. Over the achievements of most men, we are compelled to drop the pall, or time drops it for us.' Though he is principally concerned with great men, Hood maintains the idea that 'every life has some central lesson, and this might be obtained, distilled, and presented to the reader'.⁷⁶ Hood enacted this idea in his own works of collective biographies that included several obscure lives alongside more famous ones.⁷⁷ One of the running strands in his discussions of the obscure is that this hidden greatness formed the backbone of the nation. To uncover these lives was also to pay tribute to the masses labouring in darkness. As he writes in *Genius and Industry: The Achievements of Mind Among the Cottages* (1851), 'Industry has made England almost a self-subsistent nation . . . Genius is the Inventive Brain of our world, relying however altogether upon humbler powers, and more simple labourers, for the giving value and meaning to its dreams and designs.'⁷⁸ This view was widely shared by fellow biographers of hidden lives.

LAYING THE GROUND FOR BIOGRAPHIES OF 'HIDDEN' LIVES

Victorian biographers were, of course, not the first writers to draw attention to hidden lives. Earlier biographers and poets had laid the ground for such investigations that also filtered down into nineteenth-century fiction and historiography. Yet whereas the representation of the ordinary and unheroic has been given considerable attention in Romantic and Victorian poetry, novels, and history, the contributions to this trend made by biographical writing have attracted little notice.

Biographies of obscure lives did not begin with the Victorians: the eighteenth century witnessed the proliferation of biographies of subjects whom it would be hard to classify as 'great'. Donald Stauffer considers some of these in *The Art of Biography in Eighteenth Century England* (1941), and quotes from a biographer

⁷⁶ Hood, *The Uses of Biography*, p. 92.

⁷⁷ See Brian Maidment, 'Popular Exemplary Biography in the Nineteenth Century: Edwin Paxton Hood and his Books', *Prose Studies*, 7 (September 1984), pp. 148–67.

⁷⁸ Edwin Paxton Hood, *Genius and Industry: The Achievements of Mind Among the Cottages* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1851), pp. 19–24.

writing in 1770 that there was already 'at least as great a fondness for lowering exalted characters as there is for raising obscure ones'.⁷⁹ The differences between this trend and later, Victorian, biographies of 'obscure' characters are instructive. Two of the most popular types of subjects with eighteenth-century readers were actresses, whether famous or not, and criminals, with varying degrees of notoriety. Biographies of actresses fell out of favour during the nineteenth century to such an extent that one critic was able to state in 1861 that 'curiosity about the denizens of the stage has completely died out'.⁸⁰ Lives of criminals found greater favour in the nineteenth century, which saw endless reprints of *The Newgate Calendar* and its offshoots in the cheap press. The Victorians, however, published very few full-scale biographies of relatively minor criminals. The most enduring eighteenth-century biographical trend was an appreciation of eccentric lives and a curiosity regarding poets from humble life, both of which nineteenth-century biographers were more interested in considering at length. Most significantly of all, eighteenth-century biographers and critics seemed comparatively uninterested in discussing the social role of obscure lives—unlike with the Victorians, these works were usually read simply because they were interesting. With the Romantics came what Stauffer describes as a 'democratic' spirit that prepared the way for later biographies of inglorious subjects, and a greater desire to look at the place of the obscure in society.⁸¹ The Victorians were the first, however, to publish them in such numbers and, more importantly, to pay such close scrutiny to both their literary and social potential.

The eighteenth century also produced the most important biographical influence on Victorian hidden lives: Samuel Johnson. It was Johnson more than any other biographer who first gave expression to the worth of obscure lives. In a 1750 issue of *The Rambler*, he famously wrote:

I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful . . . The scholar who passed his life among his books, the merchant who conducted only his own affairs, the priest, whose sphere of action was not extended beyond that of duty, are considered as no proper objects of public regard . . . But this notion arises from false measures of excellence and dignity, and must be eradicated by considering, that in the esteem of uncorrupted reason, what is of most use is of most value.⁸²

Numerous Victorian biographers quote, or allude to, these words. Here, Johnson places the emphasis on the didactic potential of biography, which fits into the wider eighteenth-century humanist impulse. Biography can reassert a common humanity.

⁷⁹ Thomas Martyn, 'Life of John Martyn', *Dissertations upon the Aeneids* (1770), p. ii; quoted in Stauffer, *The Art of Biography*, p. 133.

⁸⁰ [James White], 'Biographia Dramatica', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 89 (February 1861) p. 219.

⁸¹ Stauffer, *The Art of Biography*, p. 456.

⁸² Samuel Johnson, 'The Dignity and Usefulness of Biography', *Yale Edition of Johnson: The Rambler* (London: Yale University Press, 1969), pp. 318–23.

The examples that Johnson provides focus roughly on what would later be defined as the middle classes: scholars and merchants. The passage does not seek to champion humble labourers, though it does not exclude that possibility.

Almost unwittingly, the passage also taps into one of the difficulties of the topic. Johnson's depiction of the scholar, merchant, and priest intimates a deliberate isolation from the public sphere ('among his books', 'his own affairs'). They are also defined not by their morals or character but by their active contribution to society. Public regard has ignored them even as they have ignored public regard. It is not biography's role to alter the status of these subjects, but simply to readjust public opinion on hidden labour. This is an important idea that runs through many of the later biographies, and culminates in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

One of the consequent difficulties for the biographer is that of finding a balance between the particularity of the subject and the way in which he or she was representative of other hidden lives. Johnson's commemorative poem of his friend, 'On the Death of Dr. Robert Lever' (1783), seeks this equilibrium.⁸³ The form and language of the poem, hymn-like, mirror the self-effacing qualities of the doctor ('obscurely wise', 'the power of art without the show'). Lever is mourned as an individual, but the poem also reflects on a more general human condition of quiet toil and gentle decay ('as on we toil from day to day . . . our social comforts drop away'). Part of the value of the humble life lies in its ability to evoke this common humanity. In his essays, Johnson continually draws attention to overlooked lives. In his *Life of Pope* (1781) he praises Pope's poem 'On Mrs. Corbet, who died of a cancer in her breast', before commenting: 'of such a character, which the dull overlook and the gay despise, it was fit that the value should be made known and the dignity established'.⁸⁴ He repeatedly evokes the idea that paying tribute to humble lives ennoble the public that deigns to notice them.

'On the Death of Dr. Robert Lever' also presents a greater talent paying tribute to a lesser one—a pattern that is reproduced in many full-length biographies of humble subjects. Johnson complimented George III by declaring that 'it is the privilege of real greatness not to be afraid of diminution by condescending to the notice of little things'.⁸⁵ The phrase alludes to the virtues of patronage, which is often implicit in the biographical commemoration of obscure lives. Johnson's full-length *The Life of Savage* (1744) is not, strictly, the life of an 'obscure' person—Savage had gained notoriety through his poetic efforts but, above all, through the scandal surrounding his parentage. The biography is, however, the

⁸³ Samuel Johnson, 'On the Death of Dr. Robert Lever', *The Poems of Samuel Johnson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 232–5.

⁸⁴ Samuel Johnson, 'Pope', *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; With Critical Observations on Their Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 86–7.

⁸⁵ Samuel Johnson, in *Samuel Johnson's Prefaces and Dedications*, ed. by Allen T. Hazen (London: Kennikat Press, 1973), p. 3.

life of a failure, sympathetically although honestly told by a friend. As traditional modes of patronage diminished, the biographer took on the power to confer status and, in some cases, absolution, on the subjects he deemed fit. Johnson provided an important sanction to explore similar lives for biographers, who often pointed to him as an example to support their own project.

Poetry was often a more fitting mode for celebrating forgotten or hidden lives than biography, if only because there was often simply not enough material to build a full-length narrative. One poem is alluded to by nineteenth-century biographers of 'obscure' lives more than any other: Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (1751)—coincidentally the only poem by Gray that Samuel Johnson enjoyed. One stanza was particularly influential:

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor.⁸⁶

It became almost a convention to quote a phrase from this much anthologized poem as an engaging epigraph: 'destiny obscure', 'mute, inglorious Miltons' and, most popular of all, 'the short and simple annals of the poor.' The biographers saw an easy parallel between their endeavours and the poet's contemplation of unknown lives, but did not engage with the poem any further. Had they done so, they would have found further parallels between Gray's elegy and their own project. The attitude of the poem's narrator towards the poor is an ambiguous one. On the one hand, the reader is invited to admire their 'useful toil', and to consider that 'many a gem of the purest ray' lies in the 'dark unfathomed caves' of the ocean. The buried gem, which also echoes the common image of the 'diamond in the rough', was one that religious biographers responded to. On the other hand, the narrator does not argue that the poor would have benefited from greater fame during their life. What at first seems like a neglect of talent becomes a precious resource protected from the dangers of public life such as 'shame', 'Luxury and Pride'.

The poem's wariness of the public sphere—the 'madding crowd's ignoble strife'—is reflected in a number of biographies. It is an incongruous aspect of these works that a genre ostensibly used to bring private lives before the public eye repeatedly expresses a profound suspicion of the public. Biographers of humble life also tended to draw attention to hidden labour while urging the benefits of a condition of obscurity. Significantly, the idea in Gray's poem that human potential is wasted due to the lack of educational opportunities ('Knowledge to their eyes her ample page | Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll') is not picked up by the biographers. In Victorian biographies of humble men the

⁸⁶ Thomas Gray, 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Slater, and Jon Stallworthy (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), pp. 609–12.

subject's value is affirmed in spite of their poverty, and questions of politics or social conditioning are sidelined.

The poem contains the same tension between display and concealment that runs throughout biographies of hidden lives. All act as a form of posthumous compensation for the subject's neglect, an alternative to the more official (though insubstantial) means of recognition that are 'heraldry, the pomp of power', the 'storied urn or animated bust'. Yet it is unclear how far the reader is desired to engage with the obscure life, whether of the labourer or of the unknown youth at the close of the poem. The epitaph, which evokes a 'youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown', bids the reader 'no father seek his merits to disclose'. Once again, it is the act of paying tribute to such lives—to give the 'passing tribute of a sigh'—that is important, rather than the posthumous recognition of the subject. The emphasis is on reversing the mockery and disdain of 'Ambition' and 'Grandeur' and on the act of homage, rather than on the life itself, which, in the poem, remains elusive.

Joshua Scodel's *The English Poetic Epitaph* (1991) offers an in-depth analysis of the poetic tradition out of which Gray's poem was born, and pays close attention to the development of epitaphs on obscure subjects. Scodel argues that until the mid-eighteenth century, there were few epitaphs written on the lives of servants. This began to change when the increasing independence of servants turned them 'into cultural ideals tinged with nostalgia for older, more stable days. Because a servant was a member of his master's household, a kind master's epitaph upon a servant devoted unto death provided the most compelling literary representation of a paternalist order that was being increasingly undermined by social change.'⁸⁷ Since, in Victorian biography, the lives of humble individuals were almost always written by their social superiors, such commemorations also risked becoming closely involved with notions of class control and national stability rather than a subversive desire to overthrow the cultural hold of great men.

Though at first glance more democratic in its impulse, later, Romantic, poetry was often equally fraught in its representation of the 'obscure'. It is hard to imagine that Victorian lives of unknown weavers or labourers could have developed without the existence of Romantic poetry, and that of Wordsworth in particular. Wordsworth had defended the idea that there was poetry to be found in 'situations from common life', and to be expressed in 'language really used by men'.⁸⁸ The Romantic spirit was essential to the development of biographies of 'obscure' lives, from the belief in the possibilities of the individual to a reverence for the hidden beauties of nature. Though fewer biographers quote Wordsworth than Gray, he was nevertheless a significant influence on their works, whether overtly expressed or implicit.

⁸⁷ Joshua Scodel, *The English Poetic Epitaph: Commemoration and Conflict from Jonson to Wordsworth* (New York and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 369.

⁸⁸ William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *Romanticism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 357.

There are simply too many obscure, humble, and hidden lives in Wordsworth's poetry and essays to include in an overview such as this. However, two recurring ideas in Wordsworth's treatment of such hidden lives find a place in Victorian biographies. The first is the importance of the emotional response to such lives. In one of the 'Lucy' poems, 'She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways', for example, Wordsworth describes one who 'lived unknown', 'A Maid whom there were none to praise | . . . Half hidden from the eye!'. The poem depicts the expanse between public insignificance and private importance, with its conclusion: 'she is in her grave, and, oh, | The difference to me!'⁸⁹ The final image of the poem is of one individual's response to the hidden life rather than the substance of that life itself. It is the recognition of that life by another that gives it both its importance and its meaning. Similarly, in 'A Poet's Epitaph', Wordsworth dwells on a series of readers, including a statesman and lawyer, who need to learn how to love adequately before they can benefit from the grave of the unnamed poet of the title. A central idea in the poem is that the epitaph was not created to acclaim the buried individual but to elicit emotions in those who come across it. As Wordsworth wrote in his first of the *Essays upon Epitaphs* (1810), a significant role of the epitaph is that of contributing to 'the common benefit of the living'.⁹⁰

This focus on the benefits of commemoration to the living is a recurring trope in Victorian biographies. Biographers, naturally, often aspired to acquire greater recognition for their little-known subjects. At least as important, however, was the ability to use biography for 'the common benefit of the living'. Whereas readers of great lives were expected to learn valuable lessons in perseverance and hard work, biographers of lesser-known individuals frequently expressed the desire that their readers should gain a sense of gratitude towards the hidden men and women who contributed to the nation. This could, in turn, produce a roundabout way of urging the reader to esteem their own efforts towards the communal good, however small.

There is, however, a major difference between Wordsworth's choice of obscure lives and those of Victorian biographers. Wordsworth's attraction to the subject of vagrants and beggars is well known. The later biographers, however, had no such interest. On the contrary, one of the strongest links uniting these highly diverse works is the theme of work. (The notable exception concerns lives of young men who died before they were able to fulfil the expectations held of them.) To a significant extent, Victorian biographies of hidden lives are homages to hidden labour. The feeling of gratitude stimulated in the reader is one that is therefore far more closely related to ideas of national prosperity than Wordsworth's poems on hidden lives.

⁸⁹ William Wordsworth, 'She dwelt among th' untrodden ways', *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, p. 327.

⁹⁰ William Wordsworth, 'Essay Upon Epitaphs', in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), II, 53.

A second recurring theme in Wordsworth's treatment of hidden lives is his uncertainty about the wisdom of troubling their peaceful obscurity. In a number of poems, Wordsworth expresses a suspicion that oral commemoration, within the deceased's community, may be more worthwhile than a written tribute. In 'The Brothers', for example, a man reproaches a minister with the claim that their epitaph-free churchyard means that his community is 'heedless of the past'. The minister retorts that 'we have no need of names and epitaphs; | We talk about the dead by our firesides'.⁹¹ As Scodel notes, a comparable encounter occurs in *The Excursion* (1814) when the narrator is also made to realize that 'dalesmen trust | The lingering gleam of their departed lives | To oral record, and the silent heart; | Depositories faithful and more kind | Than fondest epitaph'.⁹² Wordsworth's preference for oral tributes seems as much an appreciation of rural traditions as a sense that the more grandiose inscriptions on a tomb or monument might be unsuited for the lives they seek to recall, and would expose them to a world beyond their close-knit community which might not possess the necessary tools to understand them. This hesitation is again characteristic of later biographies of similar lives, which fear the possibility that biography might act as a disruptive force and reveal anxieties about the encounter of their local, protected subject with a wider audience. The form of the biographical genre—much longer and intrusive than a churchyard epitaph—amplified the dilemma.

During the Victorian period itself, biographers might have felt that they were engaging in the same issues as those of their fiction-writing counterparts. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847–8), subtitled *A Novel Without a Hero*, provides an apt illustration of the attempts by fiction writers to correct the period's parallel fascination with heroes and hero-worship. Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1894–5) is a later, equally salient example. Critics such as Mario Praz, in *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction* (1956), have long explained the development of the novel in the nineteenth century as, in part, stimulated by the growth of a middle-class. Written in their image, novels had less cause to deal with the adventures of monarchs and their courts. In addition, the central part played by women in the genre's development meant that previously overlooked characters and topics had gained interest. The Victorian novel's engagement with the unheroic and the everyday has been extensively scrutinized and does not need to be rehearsed here.⁹³ This context is worth recalling principally to highlight the fact that biographers were not working in isolation but alongside novelists.

⁹¹ William Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, p. 337.

⁹² William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940–54), v, 205.

⁹³ See, for example, Laurie Langbauer, *Novels of Everyday Life: The Series in English Fiction, 1850–1930* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1999); Mario Praz, *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

If Samuel Johnson formed a key biographical influence, and both Gray and Wordsworth presented important poetical models, then George Eliot is the novelist with the most affinities with contemporary biographers seeking to commemorate hidden lives. Eliot does not simply represent such individuals: her novels include reflections on the moral purpose of esteeming obscure lives more than those of her contemporary novelists. Her vision does not focus solely on humble subjects from rural backgrounds but also encompasses middle-class lives, such as the scholars and merchants of Johnson's biographical essay. In *The Quest for Anonymity* (1997) Henry Alley traces the theme of hidden heroism in Eliot's novels, and summarizes her conviction that 'heroism, unseen heroism, results when an inner faith causes the woman or man to trust in "the wider vision of results," even when individual success seems lost'.⁹⁴ What Eliot seeks to question, therefore, is not the existence of heroism itself, but the fame that so often accompanies it.

The famous conclusion of *Middlemarch* (1871–2) is the culminating point of a lengthy fictional reflection on 'unhistoric' lives that began with *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857). The narrator declares that Dorothea's

full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on un-historic acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who live faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.⁹⁵

Eliot cannot entirely avoid a tone of regret in this otherwise stirring finale, which the idea of Dorothea's 'spent' energies coupled with an image of broken strength introduces. Nonetheless, the passage acts as a powerful tribute to hidden lives. Whereas Eliot stressed that 'the world' benefits from hidden labour and generosity, many biographers applied the idea more narrowly to the 'growing good' of the nation, and reinterpreted the idea in a more patriotic light. Interestingly, the narrator's direct address to the reader would seem to place him or her at a remove from lives such as Dorothea's, in order to stimulate the reader's recognition of these efforts. To label the reader directly as living an equally 'hidden' life might risk alienating them, yet, given that Eliot's subject is not a rural figure as in much of Wordsworth's figure but the respectable, middle-class Dorothea, it is likely that most readers—unlike the famous novelist—would belong to the same category as her. This would also have been true of those reading biographies of 'obscure' lives, who could find in the exaltation of hidden labour an oblique tribute to their own quiet endeavours.

The conflict contained in Eliot's conclusion is that while the narrator laments the social and gender conventions that prevent Dorotheas from carving out a

⁹⁴ Henry Alley, *The Quest for Anonymity* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997), pp. 18–19.

⁹⁵ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 825.

more public role for themselves, she also sees the importance of certain individuals remaining hidden. Not only the work is being applauded here, but also its inconspicuous nature, emphasized by the word 'faithfully' which paints such unobtrusive dedication in moral tones. (The word is obviously significant: in *Felix Holt* (1866), the eponymous hero proposes 'a monument to the faithful who were not famous, who are precious as the continuity of the sunbeams is precious, though some of them fall unseen and on barrenness'.)⁹⁶ Many biographers painted the quiet obscurity of their subjects in equally laudatory terms and worried, either during the creation of their works or afterwards, about the possible disruption of a social equilibrium provoked by inviting members of the public to flock towards 'unvisited tombs'. Samuel Smiles, Thomas Carlyle, and Leslie Stephen are some of the many biographers preoccupied with finding an equilibrium between commemoration and oblivion.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the vast majority of biographies of 'obscure' lives appeared after George Eliot began to publish her novels. The principal ideas that biographers took from Eliot, beyond a further justification for recognizing hidden lives, were that hidden lives benefited the nation and that recognizing their endeavours developed the faculty of empathy and, consequently, was of moral benefit. One biographer boiled these lessons down to a more traditional substance. The collective biography *Women of Worth* (1859) quotes a large passage from *Adam Bede*, published that year, without naming its author. The editor encourages readers to learn that

fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions . . . There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my every-day fellows.⁹⁷

In the novel, this passage occurs in the context of a broader discussion of the representation of commonplace life, and dwells in particular on Dutch painting.⁹⁸ However, the writer in *Women of Worth* has omitted all artistic considerations. Eliot's words are twisted to express a far more simple moral prescription. Oddly, the editor concludes that the lessons of the passage are 'be quiet' and 'be cheerful'. The preface had previously downplayed the importance of 'the great and titled' and sought instead to 'draw lessons from more commonplace people', and to 'show something of the poetry and charm of every-day life'. An initial desire to participate in the reverence for 'every-day life' is dissipated through the ensuing vignettes, which are narrowly didactic and formulaic. Notwithstanding such (mis)interpretations, Eliot remained an important inspiration.

⁹⁶ George Eliot, *Felix Holt* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 161.

⁹⁷ [Anon.], *Women of Worth*, pp. v–vi.

⁹⁸ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 165–6.

Several reviewers praised Eliot's novels by comparing them to biography. *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) was complimented as being 'like a reminiscence of real life' and 'in style so truthful that we seem to be reading an actual biography'.⁹⁹ Though Eliot's reviewer seems naive (no nineteenth-century biography even closely resembles *Scenes* in either style or content), such comparisons gave the biographers more encouragement to pursue similar ideas. Nor was Eliot the only novelist to prompt, or seek, such comparisons. Earlier, Elizabeth Gaskell had referred to *Mary Barton* (1848) as a 'fictitious biography', using a quotation from Carlyle.¹⁰⁰ That admiration for novels was often expressed by a comparison to biographies, whereas successful biographies were complimented as having the vigour of a fictional work is a sign of the confusion surrounding what function each genre was expected to have.

In fact, biographers and novelists shared many of the paradoxes involved in representing 'common' lives. The word 'common' itself could refer to either ordinary or a social category—the masses. George Eliot and the biographers who responded to her faced the difficulty of singling out particular individuals from the masses. 'Hidden lives' is a group defined by the invisibility of its members. To target members of that group disrupts the entire category, and affirms that individuals rather than groups shape history. The claim to uncover the romance of common life is also oxymoronic: it advertises the interest of the ordinary and proceeds to focus on what, within the ordinary, has the most literary potential. As Alison Booth writes, 'artistic greatness, at least, seems antithetical to the run-of-the-mill, much as heroism would seem by definition out-of-the-ordinary'.¹⁰¹ Eliot struggles in her works to maintain an emphasis on the commonplace, which is continually disrupted by singular characters (almost all the principal characters in *Middlemarch*, for example, are described as somehow unconventional). Biographers faced comparable difficulties in reconciling the ordinary and representative qualities of their subject with the demands of narrative.

The development of the novel and its focus on the unheroic and the everyday has been attributed in part to the increase of women of letters. Women writers were also responsible for challenging historiographical standards. In his 1870 memoir of his aunt Jane Austen, James Edward Austen-Leigh underscores the parallel between cultural history and women's lives when he writes that 'there may be little things, but time gives a certain importance to trifles . . . The most ordinary articles of domestic life are looked on with some interest, if they are brought to light after being long buried.'¹⁰² In *Gender, Genre, and Victorian Historical Writing* (1998), Rohan Maitzen explored in depth the consequences

⁹⁹ [Unsigned review], *Atlantic Monthly*, 1 (May 1858), p. 892; [Unsigned review], *Saturday Review*, 5 (29 May 1858), pp. 566–7.

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p. 5, from Carlyle, 'Biography', p. 255.

¹⁰¹ Alison Booth, *Greatness Engendered*, p. 108.

¹⁰² James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (London: Richard Bentley, 1870), p. 13.

for female writers such as Agnes Strickland and Julia Kavanagh of the shift in historical priorities that occurred in the nineteenth century. Her study reveals that some of the more critical responses to this new approach to history-writing mimic the dismissive remarks made about biographies of hidden lives. Such detractors feared that the new emphasis on historical detail would create a distorted view of the nation. Margaret Oliphant, for example, felt that 'little weight can be attached to the chronicle in which a graceful individual act holds equal place with a national revolution; and the fashion of a coronation robe is of quite as much importance as the framing of a law'.¹⁰³ As Maitzen stresses, Oliphant uses feminine imagery to stress the need for appropriate subordination in such accounts, so that the notion of unobtrusive historical detail becomes a gendered one.

This more inclusive approach to historiography had further implications for the representation of gender. By stressing the displacement of interest from the 'outward' to the 'inward', 'trifles', and the 'ordinary', Austen-Leigh also exhibits the period's increasing fascination with the 'private' over the 'public'. While one implication of this was that biographies of women could find a ready audience, it also meant that biographies of hidden male lives held certain affinities with representations of femininity. The separate spheres ideology argued that female influence was felt in private, and that the woman's role was to provide the moral and emotional support necessary to their male companions, so that these could carry out their work in the public sphere. Yet the manner in which 'obscure' men were celebrated by their biographers was almost identical: they were praised for their quiet influence, the support they gave to more famous men, and they were encouraged to persevere in obscurity rather than seek greater glory. Indeed, biographies of hidden lives mean that traditional accounts of the separate spheres ideology should be extended to account for the representation of these unknown men.

Male historiographers, of course, also had a key role in expanding the boundaries of biographies, and became increasingly keen to voice their take on the respective influence of 'great men' and the 'anonymous masses' on history and the nation. Historiography was the literary sphere that struggled the most vigorously to identify the genuine importance of great men, and the argument continued to rage throughout the century. The Whig historian Macaulay's *History of England* (1848–55) heralded the coming of age of social history.¹⁰⁴ Macaulay supported his research with a wide range of primary material including tracts and ballads, local legends, and popular culture, and drew on a wide range of historical subjects. He played a key part in circulating the idea that historical research should concern itself with those 'noiseless revolutions' whose 'progress is rarely indicated by what historians are pleased to call important

¹⁰³ Rohan Maitzen, *Gender, Genre, and Historical Writing* (London: Garland Publishing, 1998), p. 24; [Margaret Oliphant], 'Modern Light Literature—History', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 78 (October 1855), p. 439.

¹⁰⁴ See J. R. Hale, *The Evolution of British Historiography: From Bacon to Namier* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

events'.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, developments in sociology and statistical research lent further interest to 'obscure' subjects. Henry Mayhew's investigations into 'London Labour and the London Poor' (1849–50) most vividly demonstrated the potential impact of such inquiries through his accumulation of what he called 'street biographies'.¹⁰⁶ Later writers continued to fight for a more democratic approach to the writing of history. As John Sherren Brewer wrote in 1871, 'historians have sometimes been laughed at for their almost exclusive affection for heroes, kings, and demi-gods', but it 'has become a fashion of late to insist upon social and economical questions, the rate of wages, the prices of food, the distribution of wealth'.¹⁰⁷ This would necessarily have an impact on the individuals who became the focus of historical investigations. In his *Short History of the English People*, published 1874, the historian John Richard Green stated that, instead of 'conventional figures of military and political history', he had 'had to find a place for figures little heeded in common history—the figures of the missionary, the poet, the printer, the merchant, and the philosopher'.¹⁰⁸ The works of both Macaulay and Green became bestsellers, which demonstrates the readiness of the public to accept these more inclusive projects.¹⁰⁹

At the same time, a number of writers continued to plead for the importance of 'great men' and 'heroes'. Thomas Arnold envisioned history as 'the arena for the gradual perfecting of the human race', and supported the view that such perfection rested on the shoulders of 'great men' who would lead it forward.¹¹⁰ Froude declared that 'the object of history is to discover and make visible illustrious characters, and pay them ungrudging honour'.¹¹¹ Stubbs asserted that the historian's role was to establish 'some definite idea of the characters of the great men of the period he is employed upon'.¹¹² As the words 'hero' and 'great' were subjected to countless debates, it is important to look at the manner in which they were employed more closely and, in particular, how they were approached by the most influential biographer of the nineteenth century: Thomas Carlyle.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'History', *The Miscellaneous Writings of Lord Macaulay* (London: Longmans, Green, 1865), p. 127.

¹⁰⁶ See Anne Humphreys, *Travels into the Poor Man's Country: The Work of Henry Mayhew* (Sussex: Caliban Books, 1977).

¹⁰⁷ Rohan Maitzen, *Gender, Genre, and Victorian Historical Writing*, p. 19.

¹⁰⁸ John Richard Green, *A Short History of the English People* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1874), p. vi.

¹⁰⁹ Anthony Brundage, *The People's Historian: John Richard Green and the Writing of History in Victorian England* (London: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 75.

¹¹⁰ Rosemary Jann, *The Art and Science of Victorian History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985), pp. 12–13.

¹¹¹ James Anthony Froude, 'Inaugural Lecture', *Longman's Magazine*, 21 (December 1892), p. 162.

¹¹² William Stubbs, *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi Benedicti Abbatis* (London: Longman and Co., 1867), II, p. viii.

2

Victorian Hero-Worship

Walter Houghton identified 'hero worship' as one of the thirteen defining characteristics of the Victorian 'frame of mind'. Nowhere was this 'nineteenth-century phenomenon'¹ more powerfully displayed than during the funeral of the Duke of Wellington. On 18 November 1852, an estimated million and a half men and women gathered to watch the procession. A journalist for the *Illustrated London News* reported that 'the hero is entombed, and the voice of his contemporaries has spoken his apotheosis', before concluding that 'no Caesar ever approached such deeds as these; and all Greek and Roman fame are but small and mean compared with the pure fame of the great Duke of Wellington!'² Alfred Tennyson responded on the same day with an 'Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington', in which he proclaimed 'honor, honor, honor, honor to him, | Eternal honor to his name'. Tennyson insisted that 'we have a voice, with which to pay the debt | Of boundless love and reverence and regret | To those great men who fought'.³

Writers as diverse as Ruskin, Disraeli, Kingsley, Mill, and Yonge exalted great men in essays, novels, and biographies. Journalists regularly took the public's pulse to determine which public figures were currently in vogue. In 1864, a writer for the *Aberdeen Journal* noted that 'we are all enthusiastic for Garibaldi just now. Why not? The picturesque old soldier comes upon us like one of King Arthur's knights . . . It is something to be wakened into the ardour of a genuine enthusiasm now and then.'⁴ Writing in the *Newcastle Courant* in 1881, another writer insisted that 'the national instinct of gratitude . . . is sound and irrepressible' and listed the many 'heroes' to have emerged from wars fought by English soldiers in the nineteenth century.⁵ Hero-worship pervaded Victorian culture to the extent that it provoked a satirical response from *Punch*, which jokingly advertised a 'Universal Hero-worship Company', 'by operation of which the liability of each shareholder will be limited to the amount of cheers, or other

¹ Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 305.

² *The Illustrated London News* (20 November 1852), p. 429.

³ Alfred Tennyson, 'Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington' (1852), in *Selected Poems*, ed. Aidan Day (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 282.

⁴ Unsigned, 'The Penalty of Greatness', *Aberdeen Journal* (20 April 1864), p. 8.

⁵ Unsigned, 'Fighting their battles o'er again', *Newcastle Courant* (11 February 1881), p. 6.

manifestations of enthusiasm (including banners, dinners, subscriptions to memorials, andc.) invested.⁶

Biographies, unsurprisingly, offered one of the most appropriate means of engaging in this cultural obsession. The titles of collective biographies give particularly strong evidence of the national preoccupation with hero-worship. They include the standard short sketches of famous historical and Victorian men, such as *Glimpses of Great Men* (1853) and *The Great Triumphs of Great Men* (1875), but also volumes honouring specific professions (*Great Works by Great Men: the story of famous engineers and their triumphs*, 1896), the achievements of women (*Heroines of our Time*, 1860) and even the lives of the relatives of famous men (*The Mothers of Great Men*, 1859, *Great Men's Sons*, 1895). Popular subjects included Alfred the Great, Luther, Newton, Shakespeare, Nelson, and of course Wellington. The similarity of these titles glosses over the fact that 'hero-worship' could accommodate a wide range of meanings and roles. Among its simpler functions, lives of great men afforded a fair amount of entertainment. Lives of famous men were popular in much the same way as twentieth-century celebrity biographies. Faith in the power of biographies to prompt emulation in its readers provided a second attraction, and meant that the lives of great men were often reduced to lessons about hard work and perseverance.

Hero-worship was also invested with more lofty purposes. Venerating great men provided a means of reaffirming faith in the individual at a time when scientific advances and the successive blows dealt to religious institutions threatened to reduce human action to a set of impersonal laws. Le Quesne argues that the 'utilitarian account of morals' circulated by Enlightenment thinkers that 'deprecated emotion and enthusiasm' were seen to be dangerous, and even a cause of the French Revolution.⁷ Hero-worship enabled the recovery of this healthy enthusiasm. For some of the many individuals whose religious faith had been shaken, hero-worship offered an alternative form of worship. Frederic Harrison took the lead in introducing in England the ideas of the French Positivist Auguste Comte, which Thomas Huxley described as 'Catholicism minus Christianity'.⁸ Harrison's *New Calendar of Great Men* (1892) 'condensed biographies of all 538 persons thus selected as types of the general advancement of civilisation'⁹ with, according to Comtean principles, months renamed in honour of the greatest of these men, including Dante and Gutenberg. The pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood carried out a related endeavour at their first meeting, when Dante Gabriel Rossetti presented the group with a document declaring 'that the following list of Immortals constitutes the whole of our Creed'.¹⁰ After

⁶ Unsigned, 'Universal Hero-Worship', *Punch*, 46 (4 June 1864), p. 236.

⁷ A. L. Le Quesne, 'Carlyle', *Victorian Thinkers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 12.

⁸ T. H. Huxley, 'On the Physical Basis of Life', *Fortnightly Review*, 5 (1 February 1869), p. 141.

⁹ Frederic Harrison, *The New Calendar of Great Men* (London: Macmillan, 1892), p. v.

¹⁰ Quoted by William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: Macmillan, 1905), I, 159.

some pressure from William Holman Hunt, Jesus was elected to head the list instead of Shakespeare—Rossetti's candidate.

Alternatively, for more religious writers, hero-worship could draw attention towards altruism and away from the mercantile spirit of the age. Charlotte Yonge strove to use hero-worship this way in her *Book of Golden Deeds* (1864), in which she declares that 'the spirit of heroism' involves 'such entire absorption in others that self is not so much renounced as forgotten; the object of which is not to win promotion, wealth, or success, but simple duty, mercy and loving-kindness'.¹¹ In the hands of the Christian Socialists (endorsed by Charles Kingsley and F. D. Maurice) it was interpreted as a call for the educated classes to assume their responsibilities as leaders of the poor. In effect, hero-worship could be appealed to in order to justify an astonishing range of ideals.

The flexibility of the term went further. Recent criticism has underplayed the extent to which Victorian hero-worship prompted disagreement. While there was a broad consensus that the nation would benefit from worshipping great men, there was a distinct lack of agreement about who the great men were. The publication in 1841 of Thomas Carlyle's lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* stimulated attempts by other men and women to share their own definition of heroism. Newspapers and periodicals frequently reported lectures on the topic. When William Linwood, a clergyman and Oxford academic, gave a lecture in 1842 on 'Great Men: their characteristics, influence and destiny', articles appeared in leading Christian publications to assess his conclusions. Linwood had proposed that great men could be identified through 'the force and depth of their intellects, and the thorough vigor of their sympathies . . . their reverence for human nature, and faith in the omnipotence and durability of truth'.¹² The *Christian Reformer* felt that Linwood should have added humility and simplicity as essential attributes; the *Christian Pioneer* regretted that he had 'omitted the main-spring, and only sure foundation of the character of a truly great man,—faith, trust, hope in God, our heavenly Father'.¹³ In the late 1840s, Frederic Myers, a well-respected clergyman and the father of the psychic researcher Frederic William Henry Myers, offered his parishioners refreshments and lectures 'on Great Men'. In the published version, he asks: 'But who is a Great Man?' He proposed that it is 'one who has done such works as none other man had done before him; who has in any way considerably exalted the standard of excellence which he found existing; who has heightened for us our idea of the capabilities of common nature.'¹⁴ Myers's talks on Martin

¹¹ Charlotte Yonge, *A Book of Golden Deeds* (London: Macmillan, 1864), p. v.

¹² 'English Sermons on Dr. Channing's Death', *Christian Pioneer*, 17 (1843), p. 180. See William Linwood, *Great Men: their characteristics, influence and destiny: a Lecture Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. E. W. Channing, D. D., Delivered Nov. 20, 1842* (London: J. Green, 1843).

¹³ [Unsigned], 'Mr W. Linwood and the Eclectic Review', *Christian Reformer*, 6 n.s. (January–December 1850), p. 254; [unsigned], *Christian Pioneer*, 17, (1843), p. 180.

¹⁴ Frederic Myers, *Lectures on Great Men* (London: James Nisbet, 1857), pp. 1–2.

Luther, Oliver Cromwell, and George Washington, among others, were published to great acclaim and went into several editions.

Even the most ardent practitioners of hero-worship admitted bewilderment as to the direction that their admiration should take. Carlyle's disciple James Anthony Froude published an article in response to Emerson's *Representative Men* (1850). Confused by Emerson's choice of idols, he asks 'has Mr. Emerson any similar clear idea of great men or good man? If so, where is he? what is he? It is desirable that we should know... What is that supreme type of character which is in itself good or great, unqualified with any farther *differentia*? Is there any such?'¹⁵ The following year, the Methodist William Arthur lectured before the YMCA at its London headquarters in Exeter Hall, on the Strand. Before a large audience, the Wesleyan missionary announced that 'our business to-night will be to inquire, What is a hero? What kind of hero we ought to hold in the first esteem? And in what light we ordinary mortals ought to regard heroes generally?'¹⁶ Where Frederic Myers had divided heroes into 'Men of Thought' and 'Men of Action', William Arthur proposes another distinction, between the 'Hero-Prodigy' and the 'Hero-Magnanimous'.¹⁷ What constituted a great or heroic man had still not been resolved by 1887, when the Tractarian publication the *Monthly Packet* launched a debate on whether 'hero-worship is injurious, either to the worshipper or the worshipped'. Papers flooded in from readers. Uncertainty extended to the nature of the worship as well as the quality of the hero: 'I define hero-worship as an enthusiastic admiration for real or supposed goodness in another, *free from the personal elements* of love, or family affection, or hope of *reciprocity*, therefore as truly felt for the dead as for the living.' The editor applauded the definition but preferred to 'substitute the word 'superiority' for 'goodness' and added that at its heart, such worship involves 'the upward look to a being higher than the looker'.¹⁸ Walter Houghton stressed 'the Victorian tendency to think of men in two categories, heroes and ordinary mortals';¹⁹ it appears, however, that the Victorians were reluctant to define the line separating the two in such clear terms.

The words 'great' and 'hero' were often used interchangeably, bringing greater confusion to the idea. Moreover, naïve associations between greatness and goodness added yet another element of haziness to definitions, as writers attempted to assess whether greatness could exist in morally ambiguous public

¹⁵ James Anthony Froude, 'Representative Men' (1850), reprinted in *Short Studies on Great Subjects* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1868), p. 385.

¹⁶ William Arthur, 'Heroes', in *Select Lectures: comprising some of the more valuable lectures delivered before the Young Men's Christian Association*, ed. by D. W. Clark (Cincinnati: L. Swormstedt and A. Poe, 1856), p. 289.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

¹⁸ 'Chelsea China', 'Debatable Ground: Is hero-worship injurious, either to the worshipper or the worshipped?', *Monthly Packet*, issue 82 (1 October 1887), p. 390.

¹⁹ Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 306.

figures. (Frederic Harrison admits that many of his 538 worthies displayed 'abundant shortcomings and failings'.)²⁰ Nineteenth-century writers maintained usage of the classical notion of the hero as demi-god, or mediator between man and god, which could easily mutate into the prosaic idea of a man 'of renown supposed to be deified on account of great and noble deeds'.²¹ Some definitions underscored physical prowess, whereas others privileged virtue and moral courage. Hero-worship was in fact a profoundly unstable concept.

The flexibility of the terms 'hero' and 'hero-worship' meant that there were opportunities to celebrate new kinds of heroes, as did the belief that great men could be emulated by their worshippers. Froude's frustration with Emerson's *Representative Men* was in large part due to the fact that Emerson provided few ways for readers to follow in the paths of the great men described. Froude lamented that 'we have no pattern great men, no biographies, no history, which are of real service to us', and envisions a work that could be handed to young men with the instruction: 'Read that; there is a man—such a man as you ought to be; read it; meditate on it; see what he was, and how he made himself what he was, and try and be yourself like him.'²² Frederic Myers also had little time for men of rare intellectual abilities, and looked instead for 'Imitable Great Men'.²³ If famous great men could be emulated by unknown men, then the ranks of potential heroes stretched out infinitesimally.

Religion played a significant role in extending the range of possible heroes. Many clergymen and Christian writers expressed unease with the association of hero-worship with fame, fortune, and earthly concerns. A poem aimed at children published in *Pick-me-up* makes this apparent. Entitled 'Hero Worship', the poem warns that 'there are many heroes treading | This world's up and down; | Have you eyes to see a king, love, | When he wears no crown?'²⁴ The aim of the writer is, of course, to redirect the worship of earthly heroes towards Jesus. It is not surprising, therefore, that so many clergymen were responsible for turning their audience's attention to hidden lives. William Arthur provides a strong illustration of this. For Arthur, 'the index of true heroism [is] the *sacrifice of self for the good of others*'. According to this precept, 'there may be many a hero with a heart as great as Carey or Columbus, whose deeds lie, and will lie unknown . . . Go into the obscure districts where our city missionaries are labouring; go into our ragged schools; go into many a hidden home of misery and sin close by our own doors; and there you will find them bravely toiling.' Interestingly, Arthur discourages the public from setting out 'on a serious errand, to "discover" all

²⁰ Frederic Harrison, *The New Calendar of Great Men: Biographies of the 558 Worthies of All Ages and Nations in the Positivist Calendar of Auguste Comte* (London: Macmillan, 1892), p. vi.

²¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'Hero'.

²² Froude, 'Representative Men', p. 389.

²³ Myers, *Lectures on Great Men*, p. 1.

²⁴ Anon, 'Hero Worship', *Girl's Own Paper*, 38 (18 September 1880), p. 602.

these hidden Hampdens, mute Miltons, and correct Cromwells, who are flourishing inappropriately in our farmsteads',²⁵ and asks them instead to work at developing their own virtue and wisdom. Indeed, turning towards the unknown and the self-sacrificing for a more meaningful kind of public worship presents a number of paradoxes, not least that the uncomplaining, discrete nature of such heroes forms an integral part of their worth.

Such reflections were not reserved for members of the Church. In the later half of the nineteenth century, Thomas Wemyss Reid, editor of the *Leeds Mercury* and a popular biographer, reflected that

those whom the world sees fit to select as its heroes; those upon whom crosses and titles and swords of honour and the acclamations of the crowd are lavished so abundantly, are not, after all, so heroic as some of the people who go through life almost unnoticed, filling entirely subordinate places in the opinions of their neighbours, and uncheered by any of those pleasant recognitions of personal service with which the successful soldier is rewarded. After all, both in the story-books and in real life, the heroes are simply the people who succeed... Not in the more striking acts of self-sacrifice only, nor in those higher walks of life in which great Generals figure, but in 'the daily round, the common task,' may we find that truest kind of heroism which consists in bearing rather than in doing, in suffering rather than succeeding.²⁶

Reid targets in particular the excessive public veneration of martial prowess, though he is unnerved by the wide range of individuals who were worshipped simply for having come to the public attention. Indeed, a burgeoning cult of celebrity meant that fame could further destabilize popular notions of who could be labelled great or heroic. Like William Arthur, the writer favours quiet heroism. His use of John Keble's 1827 hymn praising 'the daily round, the common task' (although misquoted—Keble talked of the 'trivial round') further stresses that heroism can involve the banal rather than the exceptional. Reid's unease with the cult of individualism is indicated through the repeated use of the word 'succeed'. Heroism is reconfigured in a strangely passive fashion, through quiet endurance rather than action. The invitation to pay homage to new kinds of 'heroes' was taken up by numerous biographers, as titles such as *The Heroines of Domestic Life* (1861) reveal.

It is important to remember, therefore, that the numerous biographies of 'hidden' or 'obscure' lives published during the Victorian period did not constitute a straightforward rejection of nineteenth-century hero-worship. Many of the unknown or unsuccessful men and women discussed in the following chapters were given heroic attributes by their biographers—above all those of endurance and perseverance. However, their biographers were also interested in resisting the

²⁵ Arthur, 'Heroes', pp. 299, 309.

²⁶ [Thomas Wemyss Reid], 'Heroes, by a rambling philosopher', *Leeds Mercury* (11 October 1879), p. 1.

amalgamation of heroism and success, and of fame and greatness. They complicated ideas of individualism and questioned the canonizing powers of the public sphere. In *Heroic Reputations and Exemplary Lives* (2000), Geoffrey Cubitt proposes a working definition of heroism: 'a hero is any man or woman whose existence, whether in his or her own lifetime or later, is endowed by others, not just with a high degree of fame and honour, but with a special allocation of imputed meaning and symbolic significance—that not only raises them above others in public esteem but makes them the object of some kind of collective emotional investment'.²⁷ Biographers strove to provoke a similar 'collective emotional investment', which they translated roughly into a communal expression of gratitude for hidden labour, through the representation of men and, in some cases, women, who had attained neither fame nor honour. Perhaps surprisingly, one of the most important influences behind these works was the Victorian advocate of hero-worship Thomas Carlyle.

THE INFLUENCE OF THOMAS CARLYLE

Emerging from the Second World War, J. Salwyn Schapiro described Thomas Carlyle as a 'prophet with a sinister message for our generation. His views on social and political problems... are revealed to be those of a fascist in their essential implication'.²⁸ The 1960s saw a few attempts to re-evaluate the Chelsea Sage, but even Carlyle's admirers timidly expressed the 'hope that Carlyle, in the nineteen thirties, would have seen through the humbug of Mussolini and Hitler, but we cannot really be sure'.²⁹ Such judgements were based in part on Carlyle's doctrine of hero-worship. Carlyle added considerably to, although he did not create, the public's interest in heroes. What has not been sufficiently stated, however, is that Carlyle in fact advocated two seemingly contradictory, and equally influential, stances. His admiration for the 'superior natures'³⁰ of great men—the Cromwells, the Shakespeares—is complemented by an equally powerful reverence for hidden lives. By giving importance to the latter, Carlyle inspired countless contemporary biographers to pay homage to 'silent men'.

In 1840, an audience averaging three hundred, which 'chiefly consisted of persons of rank and wealth'³¹ and included Samuel Wilberforce, John Stuart Mill, G. H. Lewes, and Robert Browning gathered to hear six lectures given on

²⁷ Geoffrey Cubitt, 'Introduction', in *Heroic Reputations and Exemplary Lives*, ed. by Geoffrey Cubitt and Allen Warren (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 3.

²⁸ J. Salwyn Schapiro, 'Thomas Carlyle, Prophet of Fascism', *Journal of Modern History*, 17.2 (June 1945), p. 97.

²⁹ Carl Niemeyer, 'Introduction', in *Thomas Carlyle: On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, ed. by Carl Niemeyer (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. xi. All further references are to this edition.

³⁰ Carlyle, 'Boswell's Life of Johnson', p. 391.

³¹ James Grant, *Portraits of Public Characters* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1841), II, 153.

The Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History. Terrified of public speaking yet having forgone written notes, Carlyle began the series with a discussion of Scandinavian gods in 'The Hero as Divinity' before moving on to the 'Hero as Prophet' (Mahomet), 'The Hero as Poet' (Dante and Shakespeare), 'The Hero as Priest' (Luther and Knox), 'The Hero as Man of Letters' (Johnson, Rousseau, and Burns) and, finally, 'The Hero as King' (Cromwell and Napoleon). According to the Quaker Caroline Fox, he launched into the lectures 'in a rather low nervous voice, with a broad Scotch accent, but it soon grew firm, and shrank not abashed from its great task'.³² Impressed with the popularity of the series, Carlyle published an amplified version of the lectures the following year.

Broadly summarized, the lectures argue that heroes are the leaders who, through their sincerity, earnestness and—often, although not always—military prowess, succeed in bringing forth the historical and social changes which, slowly gathering, would not have come to such rapid fruition but for them. The hero acts as a kind of mediator between god and man, carrying out a providential decree ('men of letters', for example, 'are a perpetual Priesthood, from age to age, teaching all men that a God is still present in their life'). Of at least equal importance to the hero's capacity to effect historical changes is his ability to stimulate a sense of wonder ('worship is transcendent wonder; wonder for which there is now no limit or measure'—the words 'wonder' and 'wonderful' occur thirty-two times in *On Heroes*).³³ Carlyle intimates that it is the act of worship, rather than the recipient of the wonder, which is the most important factor of hero-worship, as it is the act of worshipping which breeds in men the spirit of transcendence that brings about social change. Finding an object to reverence is also a means of escaping the confining materialism and scepticism of the age. Hero-worship could redirect attention away from material success and towards chivalry and nobility.

The lectures gathered as many admirers as it did detractors. Societies around England used Carlyle's well-known phrase that the 'history is but the Biography of great men' to launch enthusiastic discussions about great men. At the same time, men such as Thomas Huxley looked 'upon hero worship as no better than any other idolatry, and upon the attitude of mind of the hero-worshipper as essentially immoral'. Carlyle's friend Edward Fitzgerald attended the lectures and found the book 'perfectly insane', and Ruskin, who did not attend, gathered from skimmed reviews that the work seemed 'absolute bombast'.³⁴ The Victorian age has become

³² Caroline Fox, quoted by Rosemary Ashton, *Thomas and Jane Carlyle: Portrait of a Marriage* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2001), p. 214.

³³ Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 135.

³⁴ Thomas Huxley to Charles Kingsley, 8 November 1866, in *The Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*, ed. by Leonard Huxley, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1903), 1, 407; Edward Fitzgerald to Frederic Tennyson, 21 March 1841, in *The Letters and Literary Remains of Edward Fitzgerald*, ed. by W. Aldis Wright, 7 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1902), 1, 100; John Ruskin to W. H. Harrison, 6 June 1841, in *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin*, ed. by George Allan Cate (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), p. 2.

so closely associated with hero-worship that it is easy to forget the vigorous opposition with which Carlyle's ideas were received by so many; rather than an undisputed philosophy, 'hero-worship' was a hotly contested notion. Three recurring issues surrounding the work are of particular interest in the context of Victorian biography: the question of defining the hero, the function of the worshipper, and, finally, the role of the anonymous masses.

Eric Bentley laments that 'imprecision is a characteristic of Carlyle's terminology', and indeed *On Heroes* has produced diametrically opposite readings. Whereas, for example, Bentley argues that a Carlylean hero 'is a pattern for other to imitate', Cubitt states that the heroes are 'there to be worshipped and followed rather than to be emulated'.³⁵ This debate was already alive during Carlyle's lifetime. William Thomson, who would later become Archbishop of York, reviewed the second edition of the published lectures. Though he stressed Carlyle's immense importance to his contemporaries, he lamented—in a comparable manner to Froude's critique of Emerson's 'representative men'—that Carlyle left his audience in the dark as to how they could carry out his vision: 'they are not told what a hero is; nor how to know one if they meet him; nor how they are to become heroes; nor how to admire the heroic in others'.³⁶ Thomson's criticism, not without foundation, was reiterated by many others.

Carlyle could be accused of having fuelled this uncertainty two years earlier in his review of Lockhart's biography of Sir Walter Scott. The opening pages of the review deploy different concepts of 'greatness' at an alarming rate. The words 'distinguished', 'famed', 'great', 'noted' and 'notable', 'popularity', 'considerable man', 'hero', succeed one another with little attempt at definition. Eventually, Carlyle abandons the task of separating the terms, and concludes that 'into the question of whether Scott was a great man or not, we do not propose to enter deeply. It is, as too usual, a question about words.' Submitting Scott's life to further scrutiny, Carlyle suspects that he was not 'great', yet concludes that, however, 'Scott was a genuine man, which itself is a great matter'!³⁷ To find the theory of hero-worship reduced to a 'question about words' is both disconcerting and liberating.

Thomson's reproach also overlooks a central part of Carlyle's vision, which was that, crucially, heroism was not limited to a few but potentially encompassed everyone: 'If Hero mean *sincere man*, why may not every one of us be a Hero?', Carlyle asked. He added that there 'needs no great soul to make a hero', and made it clear that a privileged social status was irrelevant in creating them, as many of Carlyle's heroes emanated—like Carlyle himself—from humble backgrounds.³⁸

³⁵ Eric Bentley, *The Cult of the Superman: A Study of the Idea of Heroism in Carlyle and Nietzsche, with notes on other hero-worshippers of modern times* (London: Robert Hale, 1947), pp. 18–20; Cubitt, 'Introduction', p. 15.

³⁶ [William Thomson], 'On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History', *Christian Remembrancer*, 6 (August 1843), p. 126.

³⁷ [Thomas Carlyle], 'Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott', pp. 293–302, pp. 295–6.

³⁸ Carlyle, *On Heroes*, pp. 109, 124.

If numerous biographers stuck rigidly to Carlyle's surface representation of the hero by saluting illustrious great men, others found license in this broader definition to bring to light hidden achievements.

Critics who saw Carlyle's great men at an immeasurable distance from the rest of the population were more likely to find fault with Carlyle's idea of hero-worshipping. Two American readers represent the opposite stances that were voiced: Henry David Thoreau applauded 'such intimate and living, such loyal and generous sympathy with the heroes of history, not one in one age only, but forty in forty ages . . . These eulogies have the glow and warmth of friendship. There is sympathy not with mere fames, and formless, incredible things, but with kindred men.'³⁹ Conversely, Edgar Allan Poe scorned: 'that man is no man who stands in awe of his fellow-man . . . It is needless to say, that sympathy and worship are antagonistic.'⁴⁰ Poe squirmed at the notion of slavish idolatry, whereas Thoreau saw in the act of worshipping a more egalitarian mode of paying tribute.

Poe's assessment of Carlyle cannot be easily dismissed. *On Heroes* undoubtedly contains numerous statements that upholds hierarchies, such as the claim in 'The Hero as Divinity' that 'we all love great men; love, venerate and bow down submissive before great men . . . Ah, does not every true man feel that he is himself made higher by doing reverence to what is really above him?'⁴¹ Yet Thoreau appears to have come closer to Carlyle's analysis of the role of the worshipper. For Carlyle, such worshippers partook of heroic qualities themselves, since through their admiration and support they also helped to bring about historical progress. In 1849, the Congregational minister Robert Vaughan fleshed out Poe's complaints by declaring: 'We protest, once for all, against this idolatry of great men . . . We hold it be the great duty of every true friend of his species to diminish the power of great men as far as possible, by endeavouring to diffuse as much greatness as may be through society at large.'⁴² Yet this is extremely close to what Carlyle was arguing.

Readers who interpreted Carlyle's representation of hero-worship in the light of his later, more autocratic writings, tended to pay less attention to the importance of hidden lives in *On Heroes* and Carlyle's early writings. Joseph Reed's assertion that Carlyle felt the 'necessity that a great biography have a great subject' needs to be considerably modified.⁴³ As Rosenberg has vigorously argued in *The Seventh Hero*, Carlyle worked hard to demonstrate that 'the hero's actions were shaped and conditioned by the world around him' and, in doing so, he

³⁹ H. D. Thoreau, 'Thomas Carlyle and his works', *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature and Art*, 30 (1847), p. 244.

⁴⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, quoted in *The Critical Heritage: Thomas Carlyle*, ed. by Jules Paul Seigel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 303.

⁴¹ Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 14.

⁴² [Robert Vaughan], 'Thomas Carlyle', *British Quarterly Review*, 10 (August 1849), p. 36.

⁴³ Joseph W. Reed, *English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century, 1801-1838* (London: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 72.

'made sure that his hero theory was at all points compatible with his awareness of the role the masses of anonymous men play in history'.⁴⁴ One of the most powerful moments in *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* occurs when Carlyle breaks from his discussion of Cromwell to exclaim:

Ah yes, I will say again: The great *silent* men! Looking round on the noisy inanity of the world, words with little meaning, actions with little worth, one loves to reflect on the great Empire of *Silence*. The noble silent men, scattered here and there, each in his department; silently thinking, silently working, whom no Morning Newspaper makes mention of! They are the salt of the Earth. A country that has none or few of these is in a bad way.⁴⁵

Carlyle's choice of the newspaper as an organ of public recognition is perhaps surprising, as the morning newspaper in itself suggests a disposable, temporary record. It serves to evoke, however, a frenzied, preoccupied public unable to find the time to pause before essentials.

The passage is a tribute to the hidden lives without whom the actions of single heroes would be ineffective. By presenting such lives within the context of national boundaries, Carlyle appeals to the reader's sense of patriotism. The passage intriguingly mirrors an excerpt from Wordsworth's 1814 poem *The Excursion*. In the latter, the poet pauses to consider 'men endowed with highest gifts' who want 'the accomplishment of verse'; they are 'favored Beings, | All but a scattered few' who 'go the grave, unthought of'. Wordsworth adds: 'Strongest minds | Are often those of whom the noisy world | Hears least'.⁴⁶ Wordsworth and Carlyle share an attraction to silence (for Carlyle, silence 'alone is great; all else is small') and the 'scattered' talents unrecognized by the superficial 'world'. Their difference, however, is telling. Wordsworth is interested in what these natures are, whereas Carlyle is more preoccupied with what they do.

The final sentence is a curious one, since it states the obvious fact that countries are unavoidably composed predominantly of men and women who are not famous or acknowledged in the 'Morning Newspaper'. The phrase indicates that these 'noble silent men' are neither the great men of the public sphere nor the anonymous citizens of a nation but something in between. They are a vague, undefined category, working with particular vigour for the common good yet with no desire for recognition, like the Therasas hailed in the conclusion of *Middlemarch*. The influence of this passage on Victorian biography was immense, and its ambiguities are replicated in numerous works.

In the context of a discussion of Carlyle's fascination with the gaps and the unknowable in history, Ann Rigney convincingly argues that 'this promotion of nameless artisans and peasants above the "big names" of history places the

⁴⁴ Philip Rosenberg, *The Seventh Hero: Thomas Carlyle and the Theory of Radical Activism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 191–3.

⁴⁵ Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 192.

⁴⁶ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, pp. 42–3.

Carlyle of these early essays in a Romantic tradition which gives pride of place to the history of “ordinary” people located par excellence in the cultural domain or experience of everyday life’.⁴⁷ Such passages in Carlyle’s works reflect developments in contemporary historiography, which indeed he helped to bring about. Thomas Babington Macaulay scorned hero-worshippers such as James Boswell who ‘was always laying himself at the feet of some eminent man, and begging to be spit upon and trampled on’.⁴⁸ Yet Carlyle’s historical writings also show him to be in sympathy with Macaulay’s privileging of ‘noiseless revolutions’—the very stress on silence is in itself a recurrent Carlylean theme.

This key passage of *On Heroes* was not the first time that Carlyle had drawn attention to hidden lives. In the 1830 essay ‘On History’ he had asked readers to ‘look with reverence into the dark, untenanted places of the past, where, in formless oblivion, our chief benefactors . . . lie entombed’. In the essay, he maintained that ‘the inventions and traditions, the daily habits that regulate and support our existence, are the work not of Dracos and Hampdens, but of Phoenician mariners, of Italian masons and Saxon metallurgists . . . and all the long-forgotten train of artists and artisans, who from the first have been jointly teaching us how to think and how to act’.⁴⁹ In the essay, Carlyle is clearly far more intrigued by the ‘nameless boor who first hammered out for himself an iron spade’ than by monarchs, politicians, or even warriors. In ‘On History’ as in *On Heroes*, it is not sufficient that the biographical subjects be obscure to be interesting; they are above all workers and active participants in the communal good. This emphasis distinguishes Carlyle from Wordsworth, for example, whose interest in hidden lives encompasses beggars, and brings him closer to both Samuel Johnson and George Eliot, who also tend to equate the value of hidden lives with the value of hidden contributions to the collective good.

Carlyle was also one of the first historians and biographers to stress not only the social importance of these lives but also their artistic potential. Carlyle had always been interested in blurring the boundaries between non-fiction and fictional forms. In 1833, he wrote to John Stuart Mill that the French Revolution was ‘the grand Poem of our Time’; the following year, he wrote to his brother about the ‘Epic Poem of the Revolution’ he was working on. Carlyle returned to such language in *The French Revolution* (1837) to describe hidden lives: ‘Miserablest mortals, doomed for picking pockets, have a whole five-act Tragedy in them, in that dumb pain, as they go to the gallows, unregarded’.⁵⁰ ‘Tragedy’,

⁴⁷ Ann Rigney, ‘The untenanted places of the past: Thomas Carlyle and the Varieties of Historical Ignorance’, *History and Theory*, 35.3 (October 1996), p. 345.

⁴⁸ Macaulay, ‘Croker’s Edition of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*’, p. 166.

⁴⁹ Thomas Carlyle, ‘On History’, in *A Carlyle Reader*, p. 58.

⁵⁰ Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, 29 September 1833, *The Carlyle Letters Online* (CLO) 2007. <<http://carlyleletters.org>> (accessed 9 May 2010); Thomas Carlyle to John A. Carlyle, 21 September 1834, CLO; Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), II, 232.

here, is partly shorthand for intensity. The reader is asked to recognize that humble lives contain their share of intensity and pathos, and is also made aware of the narratives stored up in such existences.

Though such passages show Carlyle's concern with lower-class individuals, they justify a wide range of biographical subjects. In his 1838 essay on Lockhart's 'Life of Scott', Carlyle again borrowed from literary terms to describe historical and biographical works: 'For there is no heroic poem in the world but is at bottom a biography, the life of a man; also, it may be said, there is no life of a man, faithfully recorded, but is a heroic poem of its sort, rhymed or unrhymed.'⁵¹ 'Poetry', for Carlyle, often referred not to literary productions but to the imaginative leap that enabled one to perceive the Ideal glimmering through the Real. Alongside this emphasis on magnitude, stressed by the language of drama in general and tragedy in particular, lies a powerful equalizing gesture. Beggars are included in a literary form normally reserved (according to Aristotelian tenets) for Kings. Paying literary attention to obscure subjects becomes a means of redressing the balance between the two, something that biographies challenging notions of heroism would exploit.

Historical and artistic impulses are united in Carlyle's most extensive reflection on biography, which appears in the 1832 essay 'Biography' published in *Fraser's Magazine*. The essay summarizes many of Carlyle's ideas on the genre, including the closeness of historical and biographical writing ('Of History . . . is not the whole purport biographic?'), and the use of biography as means of overcoming morbid self-consciousness ('Looking with the eyes of every new neighbour, he can discern a new world different for each; feeling with the heart of every neighbour, he lives with every neighbour's life, even as with his own').⁵²

At the heart of the essay are two examples used to clarify the unique powers of biography. Crucially, both examples focus on 'hidden lives': a peasant who sheltered Charles I, and a prostitute briefly encountered by Johnson and Boswell. In the first example, Carlyle pauses to consider a detail in Clarendon's *History of the Great Rebellion* (1707), and refers the reader to

that insignificant-looking passage, where Charles, after the battle of Worcester, glides down, with Squire Careless, from the Royal Oak, at nightfall, being hungry . . . 'before morning they came to a poor cottage, the owner whereof being a Roman Catholic was known to Careless.' . . . Singular enough when we will think of it! This then was a genuine flesh-and-blood Rustic of the year 1651: he did actually swallow bread and butter-milk (not having ale and bacon), and do field-labour . . . How comes it, that he alone of all the British rustics who tilled and lived along with him, on whom the blessed sun on that same 'fifth day of September' was shining, should have chanced to rise on us; that this poor pair of clouted Shoes, out of the million hides that have been tanned, and cut, and worn, should still subsist, and hang visibly together? We see him but for a moment; for one

⁵¹ Carlyle, 'Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott', p. 297.

⁵² Carlyle, 'Biography', pp. 254, 253.

moment, the blanket of the Night is rent asunder, so that we behold and see, and then closes over him—for ever.⁵³

The passage shows Carlyle straining to express the process by which a hidden life has momentarily broken through into the present. The unexpected eruption of the past into the present together with the movement between detail ('clouted Shoes') and immensity ('the blanket of Night') astonishes him. As so often in descriptions of similar lives, a contrast is built between expectations ('insignificant-looking') and reality, infinitely rich if one knows where to look. The facts that intrigue Carlyle are those associated with social history: food, the weather, and clothes. The unpredictability of the encounter with this 'genuine flesh-and-blood Rustic' also brings to the fore the difficulties facing historians of such individuals: Carlyle did not go in search of the peasant, but stumbled across him by 'chance'. Carlyle maintains a strong awareness throughout of the vast expanses of history that will necessarily remain unknowable.

In the same essay, Carlyle goes on to offer a different example of the powerful appeal of hidden lives in biographical and historical narratives. Here, he is inspired by Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson:

There is no need that the personages on the scene be a King and Clown; that the scene be the Forest of the Royal Oak, 'on the borders of Staffordshire:' need only that the scene lie on this old firm Earth of ours, where we also have so surprisingly arrived; that the personages be *men*, and *seen* with the eyes of a man . . . Boswell relates this in itself smallest and poorest of occurrences: 'As we walked along the Strand to-night, arm in arm, a woman of the town accosted us in the usual enticing manner. "No, no, my girl," said Johnson; "it won't do." He, however, did not treat her with harshness; and we talked of the wretched life of such women.' Strange power of *Reality*! Not even this poorest of occurrences, but now, after seventy years are come and gone, has a meaning for us. Do but consider that it is *true*; that it did in very deed occur! . . . No high Calista, that ever issued from Story-teller's brain, will impress us more deeply than this meanest of the mean; and for good reason: That *she* issued from the Maker of Men.⁵⁴

The passage is unusual among Carlyle's works in drawing attention both to a female life and to a more questionable form of 'work'. However, the extract follows a structure equivalent to the earlier one. It begins with an attempt at overturning common historical and biographical hierarchies by moving away from monarchs and towards mankind as a whole. This is coupled with an expression of astonishment ('singular', 'surprising'). The same belief in wonder and awe that was evoked to describe the merits of hero-worship is used here to respond to individuals of whom almost nothing is known. As before, it is the factual quality of the episode that entrances Carlyle: 'he did actually swallow bread' becomes 'it did in very deed occur!'

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 257–8.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 258.

Both passages are not simply tributes to the power of hidden lives but also descriptions of a reading experience. This makes Carlyle here less of an active figure, unearthing obscure historical lives and facts, and more of an enthusiastic responder to a pre-existing text. In other words, the capacity to have an emotional, and almost mystic, reaction to such biographical and historical accounts is at least as important as the specifics of the biographical subject. That this is one of Carlyle's arguments becomes manifest later in the essay, when he announces that to write or respond to such scenes, it is necessary '*to have an open loving heart*' (259). The phrase gains even more significance when placed alongside the wide range of biographies of hidden lives produced in the nineteenth century, in which biographers continually appeal to their readers to respond to their subjects with generosity and gratitude.

In both cases the example of a hidden life is a brief one, as befits an existence of which very little is known. This in turn raises the question of whether any more substantial testimony of these existences could be achieved. Carlyle made a first attempt at fleshing out such portraits in *Past and Present* (1843), in which he contemplates 'the quantity of done and forgotten work that lies silent in this world', and presents the reader with a lengthy account of Abbot Samson.⁵⁵ The twelfth-century abbot, who came to Carlyle's attention through the republication of a chronicle by the monk Jocelin of Brakelond, is a classic example of Carlyle's vision of heroism: a man of action, 'taciturn', and profoundly sincere. (As Bertrand Russell commented, Brother Samson—like so many of Carlyle's heroes—was in fact also 'an unscrupulous ruffian'.)⁵⁶ The portrait provides another illustration of Carlyle's argument that heroism and obscurity are by no means antithetical. The two come together in the Gospel of work:

To our antiquarian interest in poor Jocelin and his Convent, where the whole aspect of existence, the whole dialect, of thought, of speech, of activity, is so obsolete, strange, long-vanished, there now superadds itself a mild glow of human interest for Abbot Samson; a real pleasure, as at sight of man's work, especially of governing, which is man's highest work, done *well*.⁵⁷

The passage once more ties together the various threads of Carlyle's reflections on obscure heroes: their evanescent quality, the celebration of hidden work, and the importance of the reader's intellectual but also emotional response to the subject.

Forming only a fraction of a longer work, however, the portrait of Abbot Samson does not possess the more canonical status and challenging aspects of a full-length biography. Eight years later, Carlyle tested his ideas on biography in a very different work. *The Life of John Sterling* (1851), the most powerful Victorian

⁵⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. by Chris R. Vanden Bossche, Joel J. Brattina, and D. J. Trela (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2005), p. 133.

⁵⁶ Bertrand Russell, 'The Ancestry of Fascism', in *In Praise of Idleness* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 62.

⁵⁷ Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p. 90.

biography of an 'inglorious' life, pulls together the various threads of Carlyle's thoughts on biographies of hidden lives: it argues that any life can possess historical and social interest and, by applying a tragic framework to structure the life of a man who, superficially, seemed to have achieved very little, it asserts the artistic potential of unprepossessing subjects. It is also a remarkably intimate document recording the author's regrets and sense of loss.

There is a final layer to Carlyle's reflections on humble and hidden lives that merits consideration: the ability of hidden lives to absorb the biographer's autobiographical concerns. Recent criticism has shown a particular interest in the tortured relationship Victorian Sages had with notions of masculinity and autobiography. Carlyle's insistent pronouncements on the dangers of introspection—most famously in 'Characteristics' (1831) where he warns that 'self-contemplation... is infallibly the symptom of disease'⁵⁸—have made him a particularly fruitful subject of inquiry. Critics such as Trev Lynn Broughton have expertly teased out the anxieties at the heart of his stance on life-writing, and the many contradictions of a writer who condemned autobiography yet wrote his *Reminiscences* and used many of his biographical sketches to explore deeply personal experiences. Kenneth Marc Harris has written that Carlyle 'wanted everyone to recognize and follow great men not for the glory of the hero but to overcome the paralysis of withdrawing into oneself. Hero worship, like heroism, was for Carlyle an expression of self-denial'.⁵⁹

However, if hero-worship enabled Carlyle to stress the importance of 'self-denial', the commemoration of hidden lives established a greater space for autobiographical impulses. The numerous gaps in the biographies of lesser-known individuals, the fact that, unlike great men, they were not considered public property, the haphazard manner in which they came to light, and the parallel between the idea of the 'hidden' and notions of privacy meant that biographies of such men or women could provide opportunities for masked autobiography.

Carlyle's portraits of inglorious, hard-working men hold many similarities with that of his father, the stonemason James Carlyle, who he commemorated in his *Reminiscences* (1881). Carlyle's mind was focused on biography in January 1832, when he was reading Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. He began his article 'Biography' on 21 January, three days before learning of his father's death. The memoir of his father, published posthumously, was penned the following day, in a spontaneous outburst, and soon afterwards Carlyle completed the article for *Fraser's*. Without lapsing into psychological hypotheses, therefore, it is possible to suggest that Carlyle's vision of biography, and the place occupied by hidden lives within it, were influenced by his vision of his father.

⁵⁸ Carlyle, 'Characteristics', *A Carlyle Reader*, p. 73.

⁵⁹ Kenneth Marc Harris, 'Transcendental Biography: Carlyle and Emerson', in *Studies in Biography*, ed. by Daniel Aaron (London: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 99.

Indeed, Carlyle deliberately inscribes this humble life in a broader context by stating that

this is one of the cases belonging to that class, 'the lives of remarkable men,' in which it has been said, 'paper and ink should least of all be spared.' I call a man remarkable who becomes a true workman in this vineyard of the Highest. Be his work that of palace building and kingdom founding, or only of delving and ditching, to me it is no matter, or *next to none*.⁶⁰

Carlyle is once more bent on challenging contemporary biographical standards. His choice of label—'remarkable men' rather than 'great men' or 'heroes'—is significant, as it enables him to offer a flexible definition of what makes a man 'remarkable'. The word itself is ambiguous, denoting either that a man is unusual in some capacity or that he is simply worthy of notice. Carlyle plays on this ambiguity by expecting the reader to understand the first definition before slipping into the second. The passage ends with another contrast between great and small (from 'palace building' to 'delving and ditching'), which echoes statements made in 'Biography' and includes James Carlyle within a similar category of quiet workers.

As with these workers, Carlyle writes of his father that 'a portion of this planet bears beneficent traces of his strong hand and strong head'. The word 'beneficent' creates yet another link with Carlyle's 'silent benefactors'. Like Carlyle's heroes, famous or unknown, James is above all a worker. In opening with an account of 'James Carlyle, of Ecclefechan, Mason', the work draws attention to the subject's humble credentials, as does Carlyle's later description of him as his 'peasant father'. Indeed, the poor are associated with a particular strength as 'such is the mis-education of these days, it is only among those that are called the uneducated classes—those educated by experience—that you can look for a Man'.⁶¹ The idealization of working-class men formed an important part of the Victorian gospel of work, and went hand in hand with a dismissal of aristocratic men, who were often depicted in effeminate terms. Paying homage to hidden workers also entailed a reaffirmation of the importance of virility for the health of society.

The passage above also underscores the subjectivity of notions of greatness. While revising biographical standards, Carlyle insistently brings in his personal perspective: the words 'I call' and 'to me' invest this defence of hidden work with intimate reflections. Indeed, the reminiscence as a whole is as much autobiographical as it is biographical. The sketch enables Carlyle to work through his feelings for his father ('from earliest years I had the example of a real Man of God's own making continually before me[.] Let me learn of *him*'). The sketch is not only an act of commemoration but also an exercise in comparison ('I seem to

⁶⁰ Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. by James Anthony Froude, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1881), 1, 7. Further references are to this edition, unless otherwise stated.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 15.

myself only the continuation and second volume of my father.’)⁶² Carlyle was not the only biographer to use obscure or even failed lives to work through personal anxieties regarding his own success and status.

George Eliot wrote in 1855 that ‘there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle’s writings’.⁶³ Carlyle’s enormous impact on Victorian biography has been insufficiently realized. The majority of the biographers discussed in the following chapters acknowledged his influence on their work, or were closely connected to him. Frederick Martin, John Clare’s biographer, served briefly as Carlyle’s amanuensis. Alexander Gilchrist, the biographer of William Blake, was Carlyle’s immediate neighbour in Chelsea, enthused over *The Life of John Sterling* with his wife, and absorbed the Sage’s style and concerns in his biographical writing. Elizabeth Gaskell had Carlyle in mind while preparing her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, and wished to ‘make a vol: about the size of Carlyle’s Life of Sterling’.⁶⁴ Leslie Stephen also used the work as a model for his lives of Henry Fawcett (1885) and James Fitzjames Stephen (1895). These biographers were particularly impressed by the form and style of Carlyle’s biographical masterpiece, which presented such a valuable alternative to the period’s three-volume commemorative tomes.

At least as many writers were influenced by Carlyle’s interest in valuable biographical subjects. Of course, a large number of admirers chose to focus on that part of his works that dealt with famous men. Frederic Myers’s *Lectures on Great Men* included sketches of the Carlylean heroes Martin Luther and Oliver Cromwell. Meredith Jones’s 1866 collection *Biographies of Great Men* also show Carlyle’s influence through the choice of Dante, Luther, Cromwell, Napoleon, and Mehemet Ali among its subjects. In 1860, John Clark Marshman published his best-selling biography of Major-General Sir Henry Havelock, which helped to crystallize the Victorian fascination with the ‘Christian soldier’ through his strong faith and surrounding officers who became known as ‘Havelock’s saints’. In the concluding pages of the biography, which, as so often in Victorian life-writing, summarized the character of the subject, Marshman invites his readers to interpret his hero in the following light: ‘He was, in Carlyle’s phrase, an “earnest man,” and he possessed, in a singular degree, the power of communicating his own earnestness to others. His enthusiasm infected all those under him, and there was no danger his men would not encounter when animated by the clear tones of his voice or a glance of his eagle eye.’⁶⁵ Havelock is presented as possessing the traditional Carlylean qualities of steadfastness, strength (implied

⁶² Ibid., pp. 15, 65.

⁶³ [George Eliot], [review of Thomas Ballantyne’s *Passages Selected from the Writings of Thomas Carlyle: With a Biographical Memoir*], *The Leader*, 6 (27 October 1855), pp. 1034.

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell to George Smith, October [?] 1855, in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by J. A. V. Chapple and A. Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 372.

⁶⁵ John Clark Marshman, *Memoirs of Major-General Sir Henry Havelock, K.C.B.* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), p. 448.

through the regal imagery of the eagle) and, most importantly, the ability to stimulate worship in others. The passage offers a representative example of how Carlyle's idea of the hero as a 'great man' filtered through into biographies of the nineteenth century.

Those who identified Carlyle erroneously with the exclusive worship of famous men sometimes reproached him for his limited vision in biographies seeking to carve a new niche. In 1868, for example, the Reverend Henry Woodcock opened his biography of an unknown hero, a brave foreman named John Ellerthorpe who repeatedly saved men and women from drowning, with a long quotation from Gladstone, who dismissed Carlyle's definition of the hero. Gladstone insisted that Carlyle was mistaken in describing Napoleon I as a hero, since 'a hero was a man who must have ends beyond himself'—a definition with which the clergyman-biographer wholeheartedly assents and, ironically, which Carlyle would have done too.⁶⁶ For a small number of biographers, therefore, Carlyle's named served to advertise the originality of their own tribute to unknown heroes.

However, for those nineteenth-century thinkers, biographers, and writers who could not give whole-hearted assent to the worship of powerful leaders, there was also the possibility of extracting from Carlyle's work an encouragement to uncover and pay homage to less illustrious lives. Carlyle's homage to the 'noble silent men' in *On Heroes* became an extremely popular quotation in Victorian anthologies and, more importantly, became a motivation for biographers interested in a new form of biography. Biographers retained from the phrase its praise of labour and the sense that the nation's health depends on such hidden work. It is used, for example, by the biographer William Jolly to introduce his life of a humble weaver and botanist in *The Life of John Duncan* (1883) and to introduce the autobiography of Joseph Gutteridge, a ribbon weaver, in *Lights and Shadows in the Life of an Artisan* (1893). Carlyle's diverse commemorations of hidden lives also palpably influenced the pre-Raphaelite poet-painter William Bell Scott's 1850 biography of his brother David Scott, an acquaintance of Thomas Carlyle and an artist who died before he could achieve fame and fortune. Carlyle's ideas on hidden lives also form a guiding principle of Jessie Anderson's 1894 biography of an unsuccessful Scottish poet, Lewis Morrison-Grant, who went through what the biographer describes as 'Carlylean periods' and whose 'heroism and unfulfilled promise' is illustrated by Morrison-Grant's unpublished notes on Carlyle and 'the Hero unknown'.⁶⁷ Both strands of Carlyle's reflections on biography had an impact on another major Victorian biographer: Samuel Smiles.

⁶⁶ Rev. Henry Woodcock, *The Hero of the Humber; Or, the History of the Late Mr. John Ellerthorpe* (London: S. W. Partridge, 1880), p. v.

⁶⁷ Jessie Annie Anderson, *Lewis Morrison-Grant: His Life, Letters, and Last Poems* (Paisley and London: Alexander Gardner, 1894), pp. 115, 292.

SAMUEL SMILES

On 18 July 1849, Jane Welsh Carlyle wrote to her husband about 'a gentleman who dined at Forster's yesterday and claimed acquaintance with me on the strength of his vivid recollection of my "*white veil* at Haddington" (having lived exactly at the bottom of our entry!—his Father keeping a china-shop)'.⁶⁸ This gentleman was Samuel Smiles, then Secretary of the Leeds railway and a decade away from fame.

Along with that of Carlyle, Smiles is the name most commonly associated with Victorian biography. In terms of sales, Smiles was the most successful nineteenth-century biographer. His famous *Self-Help* (1859), which collects biographical vignettes of hard-working individuals from all walks of life but principally from the poorer stratum of society, sold 20,000 copies in its first year and 258,000 by 1905. Born in Scotland in 1812, into a modest Calvinist family, Smiles initially worked as a surgeon and general practitioner. Following a foreign tour in 1838 he joined the radical newspaper the *Leeds Times* in 1838 as editor, and authored numerous articles, though his radicalism did not outlast the 1840s. A stint as secretary for the new Thirsk Railway line led to his taking a strong interest in engineering, which in turn resulted in his first biography, a life of George Stephenson (1857), and his later *Lives of the Engineers* (1861–2) and *Industrial Biography* (1863). His biographies commend perseverance, self-denial, and independence. During the early stages of his career he earned the respect of legions of working-class men seeking inspiration and middle-class men imbued with the spirit of entrepreneurship who seem to have formed the bulk of his readership. He also attracted more illustrious readers, including George Eliot who admired his *Life of Stephenson* (1857)⁶⁹ and John Ruskin, who wrote to Smiles to congratulate him for his *Life of a Scotch Naturalist* (1876).

The works of Carlyle and Smiles contain numerous similarities that can be partly attributed to the parallels in their personal backgrounds. Tim Travers has usefully summarized some points of comparison: 'both had rejected an early Calvinism, both attacked the prevalent worship of money, both felt the mechanical tendencies of the age, both took a deep interest in history . . . both thought of biography as history, both felt there was a value to work beyond rational reward, and perhaps most important both held that there was a serious and moral purpose to life.'⁷⁰ Like Carlyle, Smiles spiritualized work as a force enabling man to control his environment although, as Asa Briggs describes, 'where Carlyle

⁶⁸ Jane Carlyle to Thomas Carlyle, 18 July 1849, *CLO*.

⁶⁹ See Davi Moldstad, 'George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Smiles's *Life of George Stephenson*', *English Language Notes*, 14 (March 1977), pp. 189–92.

⁷⁰ Tim Travers, *Samuel Smiles and the Victorian Work Ethic* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1987), p. 165.

thundered, Samuel Smiles warned and pleaded. What Carlyle prophesied, Smiles turned into homilies.⁷¹

Smiles acknowledged Carlyle's widespread influence in *Brief Biographies* (1860), of which one chapter is devoted to Carlyle. The portrait begins by insisting that 'no one will deny the great influence which Carlyle has exercised upon thoughtful minds during the last twenty years'. The sketch is a largely sympathetic one that seeks to weigh the contemporary caricatures of Carlyle as 'the Jeremiah of modern days'⁷² against a calmer, more mystic version of the Chelsea Sage.

Carlyle also influenced Smiles's vision of biography. In *Character* (1871), Smiles alludes to the traditional, hero-worshipping aspect of Carlyle when he recalls the latter's statement that 'University History is, at bottom, but the history of Great Men'. His later volume *Thrift* (1875) opens with another quotation from Carlyle: 'Not what I have, but what I do is my kingdom'. This emphasis on action hints at their shared uncertainty about the merits of literature and, consequently, of biography too. Carlyle's admiration for the hard-working values embodied by his father also led to insecurities regarding his own, less manual, occupations. For Smiles, 'a man perfects himself by work more than by reading,—that it is life rather than literature, action rather than study, and character rather than biography, which tend perpetually to renovate mankind'.⁷³ Yet biography remained an invaluable prompt in pushing individuals towards action.

Smiles did not invent the self-help ideology which made him famous but disseminated it in such a way that it filtered through into much of the biographical (and non-biographical) literature of the time. Carlyle had previously used the expression on several occasions and Smiles also drew on Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' (1841). Smiles's most significant predecessor, however, was the *Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties* (1830–1), written by another didactic Scotch writer and friend of the Carlyles, George Lillie Craik, and published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. The SDUK was founded in 1826 and sought to promote the education of the lower middle classes and working classes through academic and didactic publications. Along with societies such as the Mechanics' Institute, the SDUK responded to the emergence of a new type of working class and the increase of literacy. Success was mixed, however, as the Society's publications became increasingly financially unprofitable and it finally collapsed in 1848. One of the reasons why Smiles succeeded where the SDUK ultimately failed was the contemporary context. Smiles's works began to appear in the 1850s, when the Great Exhibition of 1851 had brought a new sense of the British confidence and supremacy that Smiles's biographies and collective biographies, with their industrial bias, mirrored.

⁷¹ Asa Briggs, *Victorian People* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 125.

⁷² Samuel Smiles, 'Thomas Carlyle', *Brief Biographies* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861), p. 270.

⁷³ Samuel Smiles, *Character* (London: John Murray, 1876), p. 22; Samuel Smiles, *Thrift* (London: John Murray, 1875), p. 1; Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (London: John Murray, 1859), p. 6.

Smiles read Craik's two-volume work of collective biography several times and 'knew its many striking passages almost by heart'.⁷⁴ The work, which was frequently reprinted, compiled short sketches of over fifty predominantly famous men as diverse as John Milton, Isaac Newton, and Benjamin Franklin. Craik set out to 'show how the most unpropitious circumstances have been unable to conquer an ardent desire for the acquisition of knowledge'.⁷⁵ (A later volume, published in 1847, followed the same pattern with female examples but did not achieve the popularity of its predecessor; nor did Smiles feel encouraged to include female examples in his own compendium of self-help vignettes.)⁷⁶ Smiles agreed with Craik's faith in self-reliance and dedication, his focus on personal improvement rather than material gain, and his trust in biography as a motivational tool.

Smiles lived long enough to see himself become outdated. After his death in 1904, Virginia Woolf poked fun in a draft of *Orlando* (1928), at 'the writers who managed to write without a trace of it: the Smiles, the Tupperes, the Smiths, the Prossers, the Hemans, their names are legion: and all forgotten now'.⁷⁷ His unshakeable faith in qualities such as perseverance and early rising as the recipe for an enriching life seemed increasingly irrelevant as new ways of analysing class relations developed. The language of self-control and the emphasis on the individual rather than the community in his work convey the fact that he envisioned self-help as an alternative to political struggles. Smiles regarded with suspicion the ability of state intervention to improve society; he shared with most mid-century thinkers a conviction that answers to social problems were best approached in terms of changes in individual behaviour, which in turn helps to explain the importance he ascribed to biography.⁷⁸

During his lifetime, Smiles's widespread popularity was dented by accusations that he encouraged materialism, a criticism that he angrily rejected. Smiles insisted that he advocated neither the pursuit of wealth nor the quest for a higher social status. His exaltation of work partook rather of the contemporary worship of work as an instrument of individual and social good, which in itself took many forms. He did not encourage workers to abandon their class, but instead felt that each worker had a role that it was his duty and destiny to play out within his class. By the time he wrote his best-seller, Smiles had rejected his early radicalism and regarded the recent Chartist movement with distaste, though he remained acutely aware of the hardships of a working-class life. His declarations on the practical results of self-help are often confused. He stated that 'want of sympathy

⁷⁴ See Travers, *Samuel Smiles*, p. 171.

⁷⁵ G. L. Craik, *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties: Illustrated by Anecdotes*, 2 vols. (London: Nattali and Bond, 1830–1), 1, 1.

⁷⁶ See G. L. Craik, *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties, illustrated by Female Examples* (London: C. Cox, 1847).

⁷⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, ed. by Rachel Bowlby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 338.

⁷⁸ See Josephine Guy, *The Victorian Social-Problem Novel* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996).

pervades all classes—the poor, the working, the middle, and the upper classes. There are many social gaps between them, which cannot yet be crossed.’⁷⁹ The ‘yet’ is misleading. Smiles did not believe that the working-classes should move up in society. Rather, self-help would create a nobler and more moral working class. This belief in individual potential combined with an enduring belief in distinct social classes means that Smiles is unclear regarding the part of free will and determinism in individual destinies. The heroes of his biographies succeed both with the help of, and despite, the environment into which they are born.

Importantly, Samuel Smiles, who devoted much of his work to the more traditional Victorian hero-worship of great and famous men, also had a significant impact in extending the boundaries of what could be deemed a worthy biographical subject. For Smiles as for Carlyle, interest in hidden lives was in fact the more specific celebration of hidden work. Smiles’s championing of industrial workers recalls Froude’s earlier appeal that, as Walter Houghton summarizes, the age needed ‘a whole series of biographies of lawyers, merchants, landlords, workmen, each of whom is the type of his profession at its best . . . In short, a new pantheon, men of the people transformed into pure heroes, should take the place of the old and old-fashioned one with its kings and knights and Christian martyrs.’⁸⁰ It is easy to forget, however, the extent to which Smiles’s work was groundbreaking. Smiles himself was extremely proud of having opened the doors to a new kind of biographical writing: he wrote to Richard Cobden that his lives of engineers and inventors had opened ‘up a new field of biography—hitherto neglected’.⁸¹ Although many of the engineers and inventors Smiles focused on, such as Stephenson, were famous, it was not common practice to pay sustained attention to industrial, middle-class achievements until the second half of the nineteenth century.

Smiles’s collective biography *Industrial Biography: Iron Workers and Tool Makers* (1863) is a particularly powerful example of his attempt to challenge biographical standards. The work begins with a quote from Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843) on its title page stating that ‘the true epic of our time is, not *Arms and the Man*, but *Tools and the Man*—an infinitely wider kind of Epic’. The choice of epigraph is significant, not only because it further demonstrates Carlyle’s influence on Smiles’s theory of work and biography, but also because it begs for a revision of contemporary standards of greatness, and in doing so draws on literary terms. In his preface, Smiles reiterates that this class of biography ‘has not yet received its due share of attention’. He goes on to quote at length from nameless but ‘distinguished living mechanic’:

⁷⁹ Smiles, *Thrift*, p. 180.

⁸⁰ Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 318.

⁸¹ Samuel Smiles to Richard Cobden, 6 November 1863, Cobden Papers, West Sussex Record Office, quoted by Travers, *Samuel Smiles*, p. 258.

Kings, warriors, and statesmen have heretofore monopolized not only the pages of history, but almost those of biography. Surely some niche ought to be found for the Mechanic, without whose skill and labor society, as it is, could not exist. I do not begrudge destructive heroes their fame, but the constructive ones ought not to be forgotten; and there *is* a heroism of skill and toil belonging to the latter class, worthy of as grateful record,—less perilous and romantic, it may be, than that of the other, but not the less full of the results of human energy, bravery, and character. The lot of labor is indeed often a dull one; and it is doing a public service to endeavor to lighten it up by records of the struggles and triumphs of our more illustrious workers, and the results of their labours in the cause of human advancement.⁸²

The passage rehearses many of the arguments used to undermine the supremacy of great men and make a claim for a new kind of biographical subject. As so often, this claim is built on the recognition of hidden labour that goes towards building society. The 'Mechanic', like Carlyle, seeks to stimulate the more generous feelings of the nation: the word 'grateful' implies that there are moral values at stake in the recognition of such lives. In an interesting development, it is also the biographers of little-known workers who contribute through their own unglamorous labour by providing a 'public service'. By following this idea to its conclusion, therefore, Smiles can also hope to present himself as a public benefactor, which in turn enables him to resolve his anxieties about the inefficacy of biography. This is made all the more possible as, in an almost contradictory move, Smiles has chosen not to name this 'distinguished' mechanic so that it is Smiles who remains in control of the project rather than the anonymous source. This manoeuvre provides another indication that it was less the details of individual obscure men that interested biographers and readers, but what they represented: namely, the importance of hidden labour.

Although most of Smiles's biographical subjects in this work as in others were famous men, he also found space for lesser-known individuals whom he perceived to be 'forgotten public benefactors'. This focus on forgotten men is not present in Craik's *The Pursuit of Knowledge*, but appears to have been Smiles's contribution to the genre of collective self-help biography. In *Industrial Biography*, he draws attention to Andrew Yarranton, of whom he writes that 'his name and his writings have been alike nearly forgotten; and, though Bishop Watson declared of him that he deserved to have a statue erected to his memory as a great public benefactor, we do not know that he was so much as honoured with a tombstone'. Smiles's indignation is again coupled with his sense of providing a national service, sanctioned by the highest religious authorities. Smiles also introduces us to Henry Cort, 'all but forgotten', and the Mancunian Richard Roberts, who 'has helped others in their difficulties, but forgotten himself'. Smiles also argues in the work that neglect of such nation-building contributions

⁸² Samuel Smiles, *Industrial Biography: Iron Workers and Tool Makers* (London: John Murray, 1863), pp. iii–iv.

is a particularly British weakness. In a later passage, he draws attention to Benjamin Huntsman and finds it 'remarkable that a French writer should have been among the first to direct public attention to the merits of this inventor, . . . showing the neglect which men of this class have heretofore received at home, and the much greater esteem in which they are held by scientific foreigners'.⁸³ Paying homage to such benefactors therefore becomes not only a virtue but a patriotic responsibility.

Smiles's most famous work, *Self-Help*, drew from a wider pool of subjects and shows his prior interest in hidden work. The first chapter begins with the famous quote from John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) that 'the worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing'.⁸⁴ Smiles did not include the rest of the statement, in which Mill stresses that 'a State, which dwarfs its men . . . will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished', though in later editions he headed the second chapter with a quotation by Arthur Helps that declared: 'Deduct all that men of the humbler classes have done for England in the way of inventions only, and see where she would have been but for them'.⁸⁵ This idea was key to the development of biographies of hidden lives. If the humblest individual possessed the capability of contributing to the national welfare to such a strong degree, then paying close attention to humbler lives could no longer be dismissed as a trivial activity but instead could be lauded as one of national regeneration.

Such statements by Carlyle, Smiles, Mill, and Helps raised a difficulty for biographers, in that it is the accumulation of individual efforts that add up to national vigour. Singling out a hidden life for particular attention risked making the representative seem exceptional, and threatened to expose the heroically silent to the corroding effect of the public glare. Collective biographies could try to resolve these difficulties by multiplying short sketches of obscure lives, which together provided an image of the elevation of society as a whole. Biographers of single-subject lives of obscure men, as the following chapters illustrate, were faced with the difficulty of justifying the seemingly arbitrary elevation of their subject from the ranks of the anonymous. Smiles attempted to forge a compromise between the representative and the exceptional by collapsing the distance between heroism and everyday acts and capacities. Smiles's works repeatedly embrace the ordinary. He argues that 'greatness' is but a 'comparative' quality that can be over-estimated, as 'very few have the opportunity of being great'. Of more value to the nation is that 'each man can act his part honestly and honourably'.⁸⁶ His recognition in *Self-Help* that 'our progress has also been

⁸³ Smiles, *Industrial Biography*, pp. 76, 128, 273, 103.

⁸⁴ Smiles, *Self-Help*, p. 1.

⁸⁵ John Stuart Mill, 'On Liberty', in *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 128; Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (London: John Murray, 1866), p. 27.

⁸⁶ Smiles, *Character*, p. 2.

owing to multitudes of smaller and unknown men' meant that he partly rectified in his works the fact that 'many are the lives of men unwritten, which have nevertheless as powerfully influenced civilization and progress as the more fortunate Great whose names are recorded in biography'.⁸⁷

What takes precedence for Smiles is not genius but character, the 'crown and glory of life' which 'secures all the honour without the jealousies of fame', and which is something to which all can aspire. He insists that 'the greatest results in life are usually attained by simple means, and the exercise of ordinary qualities' and, as A. O. J. Cockshut writes, 'one of his favourite themes is that industry will make good deficiencies of talent'.⁸⁸ Smiles stopped short of dwelling on the lives of failures; he stated in the preface of later editions of *Self-Help* that there was 'no reason why Failure should not have its Plutarch, except that a record of mere failure would probably be found excessively depressing as well as uninstructional reading'.⁸⁹ (In 1880, William Henry Davenport Adams took up the idea and published a volume about *Wrecked Lives; or Men who have failed*, though failure there is measured in terms of lapses in Christianity, and includes transgressors such as Thomas Wolsey and Thomas Chatterton!)

It is tempting to see in Smiles's objections to Victorian notions of heroism and greatness at least a dash of autobiographical projection and wish-fulfilment. Smiles, like Carlyle, came from a humble background and, like many of his subjects, he had made the transition from comparative poverty to resounding success through hard work. His concern that England tended to lionize the wrong kind of heroes can be seen as an anxiety about his own impact and legacy. His descriptions of his biographical subjects frequently mirror comments made in his private documents. In 1880, he was made a Chevalier of Saint Maurice and Saint Lazarus in Italy, and scowled over the English law that prevented him from using the title in his native country. His bitter statement to his son-in-law that 'we honour men who kill not men who save' reiterates comments made in his preface to *Industrial Biography* and the appeal to the nation to remember 'constructive' heroes rather than simply 'destructive' ones. Again, mirroring his complaint that his subject Benjamin Huntsman was far more popular abroad than in his native country, he commented sadly in 1889 that 'I am much better known in Italy than at home; indeed, I have received more recognition there from the King and Queen down to the humblest of their subjects than in my own country'.⁹⁰ Indeed, it was, as Tim Travers states, 'a long-standing complaint with Smiles, dating back to the early 1830s, that men of intellect had been ignored in Britain'.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Smiles, *Self-Help*, p. 4.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 314, 46; Cockshut, *Truth to Life*, p. 111.

⁸⁹ Smiles, *Self-Help* (London: John Murray, 1866), p. vi.

⁹⁰ Samuel Smiles to Jack Hartree, 21 January 1890, quoted in Travers, *Samuel Smiles*, p. 257; Samuel Smiles, *Autobiography* (London: John Murray, 1905), pp. 409–10.

⁹¹ Travers, *Samuel Smiles*, p. 257.

There are obvious dangers in extrapolating an argument about Victorian biography from the personal disappointments of one of its leading practitioners. However, not only are the similarities between Smiles's personal complaints and biographical sketches arresting, but they are replicated in numerous relationships between biographers and their obscure subjects. The unease of numerous Victorian writers towards autobiographical writing due to its self-indulgence and the manner in which it collapsed public and private boundaries has often been explored. The fact that novels provided a means of writing personal narratives without risking the exposure and dangers of autobiography has been given attention. Biographies, and biographies of hidden lives in particular, also deserve to be scrutinized for their insights into anxieties about the role of the writer in Victorian England. The obscure status of a subject could and did give biographers rare license to explore public but also personal issues about success, posterity, and the nation's treatment of its benefactors.

If Smiles held doubts about his personal impact and the cultural influence of English men of letters, he found a way of resolving them in the full-length biography of the humble shoemaker and naturalist Thomas Edward, which he published in 1876. Victorian accounts of working-class men illustrate some of the many issues raised by this expansion of biographical boundaries. While paying tribute to labour that is all the more valuable for being hidden, the biographers used the genre to test the artistic potential of the genre they were working in and to gage their own influence as social mediators.

3

‘The Simple Annals of the Poor’: Biographies of Humble Men

On 30 July 1900, the Lord Mayor of London oversaw the inauguration of Postman’s Park, a small patch of land between Angel Street and Little Britain Street. Visitors to the park, which still exists, could find shelter from the rain and read the small Royal Doulton tablets commemorating everyday heroes. Postman’s Park was the result of George Frederick Watts’s determination to pay homage to the kind of heroic deeds that found their way into local newspapers before being promptly forgotten.

Watts had first aired his project, aimed at celebrating the Queen’s Jubilee, in an 1887 letter to *The Times*. There, he argued that ‘it would surely be of national interest to collect a complete record of the stories of heroism in everyday life’ since ‘the material prosperity of a nation is not an abiding possession: the deeds of its people are’.¹ When his appeal was ignored, Watts set about gathering funds and scouring newspapers for suitable candidates in order to create this monument to ‘forgotten heroes’ himself. Unsurprisingly, he retreated from his initial ambition of providing a ‘complete record’ of everyday heroism, and instead began the project with four commemorative tablets, to which more were added later. The first four tablets commemorated the lives—or, more accurately, the deaths—of Thomas Griffin, a fitter’s labourer who ‘in a boiler explosion at a Battersea sugar refinery was fatally scalded in returning to search for his mate’ together with Walter Peart and Harry Dean, the driver and fireman of the Windsor express who, ‘while being scalded and burnt sacrificed their lives in saving the train’. Alongside them are commemorations of Mary Rogers, stewardess of the *Stella*, ‘self sacrificed by giving up her life belt and voluntarily going down in the sinking ship’ and George Stephen Funnell, a police constable who died in a fire after having rescued a barmaid. Forty-nine tiles, including tributes to young, heroic children were later added, many after Watts’s death.

A number of awards were set up during the nineteenth century to reward acts of civilian bravery, such as the Albert Medal, introduced in 1866. What

¹ G. F. Watts, ‘Another Jubilee Suggestion’, *The Times* (5 September 1887), p. 14.

distinguishes Watts's project from them is his ambition to give heroic civilians a more permanently visible and public tribute. For Watts, the emphasis was less on rewarding heroes and their families than on prompting feelings of patriotism. The accumulation of tablets was intended to provoke a sense of the 'grand and honourable feature of the national character'.² Paradoxically, therefore, a project that intended to give greater visibility to 'forgotten' men and women went on to subsume these individuals within a greater, national perspective.

Although the organization set up to carry out the project was initially called the 'Humble Heroes Memorial Committee', Watts did not wish to make working-class lives the focus of the memorial. He demanded that the title of the Committee should be changed to 'Heroic Self Sacrifice Memoriam Committee' and, when interviewed on the question of social status, he replied that the tablets 'should not be limited to any class'.³ Journalists, however, were keen to portray the park as a recognition of working-class heroism. In 1898 the *Pall Mall Gazette* reported that the park would commemorate 'humble heroes and heroines' and establish a 'People's Westminster Abbey'.⁴ The *Gazette* observed the completion of the project in 1900, and reiterated that it contained records of 'heroes and heroines in the humbler walks of life'.⁵

Postman's Park represents a high point in the century's interest in everyday heroism. This fascination peaked towards the end of the Victorian period, when numerous works of collective biographies devoted to everyday heroism appeared, including *Working-Men Heroes: a roll of heroic actions in humble life* (1879), Laura Lane's *Heroes of every-day life* (1888)—which quotes Watts as an inspiration—and the anonymous collection *Everyday Heroes: stories of bravery during the Queen's reign* (1889). In such works, the terms 'working-class', 'humble', and 'everyday' are all used extremely flexibly; the label 'working-class' in particular was divorced from any precise political or social definition. Readers would have understood such terms simply to mean that the subjects moved in the lower ranks of society.

Interest in humble lives was not confined to acts of extraordinary bravery and violent deaths. Working-class subjects were also rated for possessing particular virtues such as perseverance and endurance in Smilesian works such as Edwin Paxton Hood's self-descriptive *Genius and Industry: The Achievements of Mind Among the Cottages* (1851) and Matthew Davenport Hill's *Our Exemplars: Rich and Poor* (1861). Few would have disagreed with Lord Brougham's declaration that 'there is much to be learnt from the history of those who have neither

² *Daily Mail* (7 July 1898), quoted in John Price, "'Heroism in everyday life': The Watts Memorial for Heroic Self Sacrifice", *History Workshop Journal*, 63.1 (Spring 2007), p. 263.

³ See Price, 'Heroism in everyday life', pp. 273–4.

⁴ 'Occasional Notes', *Pall Mall Gazette* (29 September 1898), p. 2.

⁵ 'Top of the Morning: Memorial Tablets to Humble Heroes', *Pall Mall Gazette* (9 July 1900), p. 8.

gained any renown, nor attained brilliant position, nor even displayed rare capacity'.⁶ Such works were comparatively easy to assemble from newspaper cuttings and sermons, and the brevity of the sketches meant that little research was required. Often padded out with extensive commentaries on the virtues illustrated by the life, their didactic intent was immediately apparent and, like Watts's memorial, often overshadowed the particularities of the lives represented within them.

Full-length biographies of subjects from humble life posed different challenges and raised other questions. Numerous studies have drawn attention to the increase of working-class autobiographies written and often published throughout the nineteenth century.⁷ The rise of radicalism and the increase of literacy are two of the factors that led working-class men (and, in smaller numbers, women) to recount their lives. At the same time as these workers set out to narrate their own experiences, middle-class writers were also paying them greater attention. Regenia Gagnier's pioneering study of working-class autobiographies divides these middle-class representations into three categories: the classic realist novel, sociological writings, and late-Victorian fiction. Although Gagnier evokes the journalistic and sociological investigations of Henry Mayhew, George Sims, and James Greenwood, she does not discuss biographies of working-class subjects, although they possess unusual characteristics.

By and large, working-class writers during the Victorian period do not seem to have written biographies about each other beyond short sketches printed in local or radical newspapers. The full-length accounts that were published were almost exclusively the product of either clergymen or middle-class writers. Though they share some of the themes of their autobiographical counterparts, such as self-help, the differences are significant. Most glaringly, whereas only an estimated third of the autobiographies were published by noteworthy publishing houses, with the rest appearing in local publications or remaining in manuscript, biographies of the poorer members of society were aimed at a wider readership. The greater education of the writers naturally reinforced the sense that these were more polished narratives. The most important difference, however, is one of literary authority. As Gagnier writes,

for working-class autobiographers, subjectivity—being a significant agent worthy of the regard of others, a human subject as well as an individuated 'ego', distinct from others—

⁶ Lord Brougham, 'Preface', in *Our Exemplars, Poor and Rich*, ed. by Matthew Davenport Hill (London: Cassell, Petter and Galpin, 1861), p. xiii.

⁷ See John Burnett, *Annals of Labour: Autobiographies of British Working-Class People, 1820–1920* (London: Indiana University Press, 1974); Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); W. Matthews, *British Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography of British Autobiographies published or written before 1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955); David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London: Europa Publications Limited, 1981).

was not a given. In conditions of long working hours, crowded housing, and inadequate light, it was difficult enough for workers to contemplate themselves, but they had also to justify themselves as writers worthy of the attention of others.⁸

Middle-class biographers, on the contrary, repeatedly made the decision to single out certain working-class men for special attention. Though they sometimes felt impelled to justify their choice of subject, they were more often keen to market their work as a bold riposte to biographers of great men. Both kinds of works display an uneasy tension between the representative and the atypical. In the biographies, however, the subject had possessed far less influence, if any, over the process by which he had been taken from obscurity to the public sphere.

This was made startlingly apparent in two late-Victorian biographies of humble men: Smiles's 1876 biography of a shoemaker-naturalist, and a life of another amateur scientist, the weaver John Duncan, published in 1883 by William Jolly. Together, they reveal that while the biographers saw their work as complementing contemporary investigations of humble life in other literary genres, they attached immense importance to their ability to control their subject and mediate his encounter with the reading public. A glimpse at earlier lives of working-class subjects underscores some of the many paradoxes of their undertaking.

BIOGRAPHIES OF HUMBLE SUBJECTS: AN OVERVIEW

By far the most common form of working-class biography was the conversion narrative. The majority are sketchy, sermon-like narratives that are hard to distinguish from the pervasive didactic tracts distributed to the poor. Like these tracts, they include fictional tales made to resemble real-life accounts and factual narratives with a strong bias towards the sensational. Numerous biographers claim as their inspiration Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', the impact of which has already been remarked. The first semi-biographical work to draw explicitly on Gray's poem was *Moral annals of the poor, and middle ranks of society, in various situations of good and bad conduct*, published by the abolitionist Bishop of Salisbury Thomas Burgess in 1793. The 'annals of the poor' here are reduced to sketches of three or four sentences, in which certain virtues are illustrated. One representative anecdote is that of 'Mr Marchant, the artist, [who] meeting a very distressed female in the street, and intending to give the unhappy object half-a-crown, by mistake, gave her two guineas and sixpence. In about two hours after, he returned, much alarmed at his mistake, but the poor woman acknowledged what she had received, and cheerfully [sic] restored the money.' Only some of the humble subjects are named, and no further facts about their lives are given. The work does not seek to uncover

⁸ Gagnier, *Subjectivities*, p. 42.

hidden lives but to illustrate moral principles, and profits of the work went towards supporting local Sunday Schools. Intriguingly, however, the work shows signs of uncertainty regarding the appropriate readership. The 'Advertisement' stresses that the preface is 'of course, addressed, not to children and the common people, but to other readers, who will accept the instances of heroism there mentioned, as appropriated to *their* perusal'. In the preface the author repeatedly alludes to the poor as 'them'. The book itself, however, is intended as an 'appropriate instruction for the Poor'.⁹ The issue of who biographies of working-class men were aimed at remained ambiguous during the nineteenth century.

The Reverend Legh Richmond's *The Annals of the Poor* (1814) proved a far more popular biographical incarnation of Gray's poem. Legh Richmond was the rector of Turvey, in Bedfordshire, and a friend of both William Wilberforce and Hannah More. His collection of short narratives sketching out the conversions of humble subjects began as an account of the servant Elizabeth Wallbridge that was first published in the *Christian Guardian* in 1809. Richmond's account of Elizabeth's conversion to a pious life at the age of twenty-six, only five years before her death, captured the public imagination. An estimated two million copies were printed in English by the time of its author's death in 1827, and it was translated into numerous languages. Both cheap and pricier editions were published to cater for the diverse readership.

It is difficult now to recapture the impact made by this work, with its simple narrative and heavy-handed didacticism. Though it was somewhat unusual in its choice of a female subject, it provided a model for later religious biographies of the poor in several ways. Richmond expressed his conviction that 'if we want to see religion in its most simple and pure character, we must look for it among the poor of this world'.¹⁰ Didactic biographers were quick to pick up this hint, and sought to combine the dramatic power of the saint's life with the intensity of a sermon. Later biographers also followed Richmond's lead in ignoring the realities of working-class life in favour of illustrating the growth of piety. They borrowed his use of an autobiographical frame in which the writer (usually a clergyman) narrates his discovery of, and encounter with, the subject—a narrative device that recalls many Romantic poems published at this time, not least those in which Wordsworth makes comparably unexpected encounters with humble individuals. The biographers also maintained Richmond's episodic style of narration that privileges key spiritual moments rather than the concrete facts of the subject's life, and tried their hand at passages of descriptive scenery, which Gary Kelly has termed 'Romantic Evangelicalism'.¹¹ (For example, *The Cornish*

⁹ Thomas Burgess, *Moral Annals of the Poor, and Middle Ranks of Society, in various situations of good and bad conduct* (Durham: L. Pennington, 1793), pp. 2, iv, vi.

¹⁰ [Legh Richmond], *The Annals of the Poor* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1828), p. 2.

¹¹ Gary Kelly, 'Romantic Evangelicalism: Religion, Social Conflict, and Literary Form in Legh Richmond's *Annals of the Poor*,' *English Studies in Canada*, 16 (June 1990), p. 165.

Wrestler (1877), a short conversion narrative, begins with a detailed description of the 'wild romantic grandeur' of the subject's childhood environment.) So widespread was Richmond's influence that it is uncertain whether, when later biographers mentioned the 'annals of the poor', they were alluding to Gray or Richmond.

The work of Richmond and his imitators, however, avoided the difficulties of writing a full-length account of a man or woman living in humble circumstances. During the 1830s, the Methodist writer James Everett displayed a more ambitious approach to working-class biography. Everett was born in 1784 into a humble Northumberland family. In his youth, he began an apprenticeship to a flax dresser and grocer before his religious conversion in 1803 opened up a new career for him as a Wesleyan preacher. Everett became a highly controversial figure among Wesleyans. When Jabez Bunting, the leader of the Wesleyans, became the target of forthright attacks in anonymous 'Fly Sheets' published in the 1840s, the Wesleyan Conference accused the outspoken Everett of being the author. His expulsion in 1849 led to an enormous schism within the movement and the creation of two new groups: the Wesleyan Congregationalist church, and the United Methodist Free Church, of which Everett himself became the first president in 1857.

It was this highly colourful character who wrote some of the most sophisticated biographies of working-class men published in the first half of the nineteenth century. *The Village Blacksmith; or, Piety and Usefulness Exemplified in a Memoir of the Life of Samuel Hick, Late of Micklefield, Yorkshire* (1831) narrates the life of a blacksmith (1758–1829) who gained some local notoriety as an itinerant Wesleyan preacher. The work gives evidence of Everett's fiery character in footnotes, scattered throughout, that settle scores with the Wesleyan Convention and repudiate accusations pointed at him and his writings. Either because or in spite of these outbursts, the biography was a marked success. By 1869, the work had sold thirty-six thousand copies, and it reached its eighteenth edition a decade later.

Later editions of the biography included Longfellow's famous 1841 poem 'The Village Blacksmith' before the first chapter. Both poem and biography draw their inspiration from sermons, represent a nostalgic idea of work, and cannot resist appending a more general moral. Edgar Allan Poe's response to the poem is an apt illustration of the tensions at the heart of the biographies. For Poe, the poem displayed 'the beauty of simple-mindedness as a genuine thesis; and this thesis is inimitably handled until the concluding stanza, where the spirit of legitimate poesy is aggrieved in the pointed antithetical deduction of a *moral* from what has gone before'.¹² Countless biographers set out to demonstrate the 'poetry of poverty', and ended up rehearsing platitudes on the merits of hard

¹² Edgar Allan Poe, 'Review of New Books', *Graham's Magazine*, 20 (April 1842), p. 250.

work and piety. Everett's biography shares the tendency of similar works to lapse into allegory and abstract language and to strain in padding out a sparse story into a full-length narrative. However, the addition of Longfellow's poem underscores the manner in which contemporary biographers felt that their work shared the same kind of social and literary preoccupations of poets and novelists. Everett, who later became a bookseller, harboured genuine literary ambitions, and did not see his works solely as extended sermons. He maintained relations with the 'Corn Law Rhymer' Ebenezer Elliott and the Scottish poet James Montgomery (whose biography he later co-wrote). Through them, he succeeded in meeting Robert Southey, who found Everett 'a remarkable man'.¹³

What elevates *The Village Blacksmith* from most contemporary biographies of working-class subjects is Everett's awareness of the complex role of the biographer. Everett uses the preface to disparage biographies that either depreciate or overrate their subjects. In contrast, he claims to have 'taken up the character of Samuel Hick as it *was*, not as he *wished* it, nor as it *ought* to be; and has *left* the man as he *found* him—in the rough, and unadorned'.¹⁴ Throughout the work, Everett takes pleasure in pointing out where he is departing from common life-writing conventions, such as by giving an early description of Samuel Hick instead of resorting to the 'usual biographical mode' that consists of unveiling the subject 'at the close of his work, in the exhibition of a summary sketch of character' (59–60).

The biographer's claims to present his subject to the public 'in the rough' are, however, immediately contradicted by Everett himself. The biographer boldly admits that Samuel Hick placed in his hands, some time before his death, 'some papers, with a solemn injunction to prepare them for publication'. The 'pledge' was given, although, the litigious-minded biographer hastens to add, 'without the specification of *time*, on either side, for its fulfilment'. Everett, upon surveying the material, found it 'broken', 'thrown together', and 'unfit' for most readers; he 'purposely delayed' fulfilling his promise despite Hick's growing impatience, and succeeded in procrastinating until the subject's death gave him greater freedom to mould the work as he wished. The biographer felt that the autobiographical jottings required 'another language' entirely (vi). Everett's assumptions about Hick's unsuitability as an autobiographer seem all the more curious given that Hick had achieved local fame as an influential and impassioned public speaker. This battle of wills, won by the biographer, points forward to the even greater struggle that occurred between Samuel Smiles and his working-class subject, Thomas Edward. These tensions are important in demonstrating that biographies

¹³ Robert Southey to Rev. John Miller, 21 July 1838, in *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. by Rev. Charles Cuthbert Southey (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1855), p. 558.

¹⁴ James Everett, *The Village Blacksmith; or, Piety and Usefulness Exemplified in a Memoir of the Life of Samuel Hick, Late of Mickfield, Yorkshire* (London: Hamilton, Adams, 1831), p. vii. All further references are to this edition.

of such subjects were not considered in the same way as the autobiographies that were being increasingly published at this time. Though some subjects may have seen their biographer as a kindly patron who would oversee the publication of their life-story, a number of biographers seem to have held very different ideas about their role.

One reason for this may lie in the manner in which Everett, and other biographers of working-class subjects, deal with social and political issues. Though Everett himself arose from a humble background and could have been expected to express political views with the same forthrightness as he did his religious ones, *The Village Blacksmith* circulates a picture of a markedly unthreatening working-class man. Samuel Hick does not disrupt social boundaries: he respects his superiors ('I am privileged with getting into the company of gentlemen, and I never let these opportunities slip', 78), is a keen tax-payer ('no man was more ready to pay the taxes imposed by Government than himself', 84), and a fervent patriot ('never did a subject in any realm pour out with greater sincerity and fervour the prayer—"God save the King"', 117). Everett works hard to demonstrate that his subject's (modest) social advancement does not subvert traditional hierarchies.

The biographer does not plead for greater educational or social opportunities for his subject. On the contrary, he notes approvingly that Samuel was 'untaught in the *school* of this world: *art* would have been lost upon him; he was one upon whom education and polished society . . . could never have had their full effect; he seemed forged by Nature, as well as designed by Providence, for the forge' (64). The biographer plays with the reader's desire to see the subject as the type of humble man, common in Romantic poetry, who delights in his simple environment. The invocation of Providence informs the reader that there is no question here of class transgression: individuals are born into the classes for which they are best suited. The circular nature of the phrase ('forged by Nature [. . .] for the forge') creates a sense of inevitability that is experienced not as a constraint but as stability. The passage reassures middle-class readers while encouraging working-class readers to look to their own natural resources. Everett insists that the biography demonstrates 'that every man, woman, and child, can do something—can do *much*' and that 'one word of pious counsel . . . may extend to eternity' (256). The sphere of influence, however, concerns the heavens rather than the world below.

The closest James Everett came to including ideas more in keeping with the contemporary spirit of reform was in his later biography *The Wall's End Miner* (1835). The work begins as a traditional religious biography of its subject, William Crister (1799–1835), a Northumberland miner who worked in his local pit from the age of seven. Crister modified his wayward lifestyle after undergoing a conversion and began to participate in the Methodist lecturing circuit. The biography abruptly changes, however, when it describes the mining accident that took place at the Wall's End Colliery on 18 June 1835 and took the

life of Crister along with 102 other men. Everett abandons the conventional narrative of a religious working man to describe, with great power, the community's response to the catastrophe. This change also occurs as the work slips from biography to autobiography: the Northumberland-born Everett draws on his own journal entries and memories of the event. Though Everett places far more emphasis on the Methodist victims of the accident, he also lists the names of the victims and their roles in the mine before presenting a table of accidents in English coal mines, which combined offer a remarkable social document. It is significant that the biographer feels able to relax his tone and produce a more sustained social commentary when he is no longer carefully framing his working-class subject.

Everett was not alone in struggling to reconcile his wish to portray working-class life with anxieties regarding the political implications of such a project. Numerous Victorian biographers of working-class subjects prefaced their work with a confident declaration of their own innovative venture. One boldly dedicated his narrative in 1858 'To the Working Men of England' and hoped that the biography would compensate for the abundant 'lives of eminent men [that] are now often published' in which the poorer classes could not find their own experiences reflected. Another biographer lamented in 1866 that the poor do not yet have their 'Representative Men' commemorated in '*extended memoirs*'. He calls for more accounts of subjects 'who have *lived and died as Working Men in the humbler walks of life*' and believes that his work is one of the 'very few *more extended*' examples of these.¹⁵ Cecilia Lucy Brightwell's work of collective biography *Heroes of the Laboratory and the Workshop* (1859) was also aimed at—or as the biographer writes 'offered to'—working men. Existing working-class autobiographies, writes Brightwell, are rarely 'to be met with, especially in a form suited for general reading'. The phrase advertises the novelty of Brightwell's own work; it also blurs the identity of the intended readers. Brightwell makes it clear that her volume has been written 'in such a manner as to interest those who may find the life-histories of men of their own class', but then goes on to destabilize this readership by adding that such men deserve 'the respect and gratitude of mankind'.¹⁶ On the one hand, therefore, the biographers present themselves as writers generously bestowing their services to circulate stories of working-class endeavour among other members of that class. On the other hand, they express a desire to gather a diverse readership, lured by the assurance of an atypical narrative.

¹⁵ Rev. S. Allen Windle, *The Christian Workman, Being a Memoir of John Bentley* (London: Wertheim, Macintosh and Hunt, 1868), p. 5; W. Davis Tyack, *The Miner of Perranzabuloe; Or, Simple Records of a Good Man's Life* (London: Hamilton, Adams, 1866), p. vii.

¹⁶ Cecilia Lucy Brightwell, *Heroes of the Laboratory and the Workshop* (London: Routledge, Warnes and Routledge, 1859), p. vi.

Repeatedly, however, announcements of originality are followed by disappointingly conventional narratives. The heralding of a truthful account of working-class life gives way to spiritual reflections and episodic illustrations of working-class piety as if the biographer had sought to lure in the reader, whether working class or middle class, with the false promise of social insight. The biographers' claims to participate in a new kind of working-class biography are belied by the fact that the writers present their subjects in almost identical terms as gems hidden beneath a 'plain and rustic garb',¹⁷ an image that owes more to the Bible than to Chartism. Most biographers went further in downplaying radical ideas than Everett—who remains respectful of the working classes—by striving to turn their religious working men into gentleman workers. They repeatedly distance their pious subject from a community that is described as rough and small-minded by giving them gentlemanly qualities. One biographer describes the language of his pious miner as 'singularly pure, for one whose advantages had been so few'; another expostulates on his collier's 'gentle manners, almost amounting to refinement'.¹⁸ This privileged status offers no material benefits: the reward is the act of commemoration made by the biographer. By singling out individual men from among their community for this 'privilege', the biographers perpetuate the rift between the subject and his environment.

Such divisions were maintained in a later offshoot of working-class biography: temperance biographies. These works, which formed a large share of the exemplary biographical literature produced in the second half of the nineteenth century, usually combined a religious frame with Smilesian self-help ideas. (Though the temperance movement became active in the 1830s, roughly in tandem with the SDUK, the issue was aired with unprecedented vigour in the years leading up to and from the 1872 Intoxicating Liquor Licensing Bill that limited the opening hours of drinking places.) As alcoholism was commonly identified as a working-class problem, these works are more directly aimed at humble readers.

Perhaps surprisingly, therefore, these works frequently show their subject gaining distance from their unpolished community, such as one drunkard-turned-temperance-lecturer who stands apart from his 'rough, drunken mining district'.¹⁹ Moreover, these later works clearly voice their disdain for working-class politics. One biographer unequivocally labels Chartism as 'dangerous' and its leaders as frustrated individuals with 'peculiar ideas as to the rights of property' and for whom 'the Gospel of Jesus Christ was a thing unknown'. Radicalism, the biographer argues, increases social division since it is formulated by men

¹⁷ John Barfoot, *Piety Beyond the Plough; Or, Observations on the Life and Character of Mr. George Warren* (London: Richard Davies, 1864), p. 7.

¹⁸ Tyack, *The Miner of Perranzabuloe*, p. 9; [Elizabeth Andrews], *The Good Master; Or, Light in a Dark Place* (London: Morgan and Chase, 1865), p. 6.

¹⁹ J. A. Hammerton, *Trial and Triumph: A Life and its Lessons: Being a Biographical Sketch of Robert Dransfield* (London: Hay Nisbet, 1892), p. 47.

'unsoftened by the love that binds rich and poor in one bond of brotherhood'.²⁰ Another biographer warns his readers of the dangers of aspiring to an aristocratic lifestyle by describing the tragedy and ruin brought about by an upper-class youth who leads a group of humble villagers into a twenty-four hour drinking session. Much like Everett who eagerly flaunts his subject's patriotic sentiments, these later writers seize upon any indication that their working-class man frowned upon radicalism. The reformed temperance lecturer dismisses his participating in the 1841 Plug Riots as an 'amusing' and foolish display of immaturity.²¹ It is hard to ascertain what a working-class reader would have made of the biographers' obvious distaste for working-class communities and politics.

Significantly, whether by becoming Methodist preachers or temperance lecturers, these working-class men *had* succeeded in detaching themselves to some extent from their former humble circumstances. The very act of lecturing provides a visual image of the contrast between the individual and the anonymous mass to which he used to belong. On the one hand, these biographies presented working-class men as valuable subjects for a non-fiction work and, in the better examples, shone some light on their lives and concerns. On the other hand, the biographies could have the effect of further isolating the subject from his environment. However, it was these works, with their obvious failings and contradictions, that paved the way for the more sophisticated biographies of humble men that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century.

TWO HUMBLE NATURALISTS: THOMAS EDWARD AND JOHN DUNCAN

Samuel Smiles's *Life of a Scotch Naturalist* (1876) and William Jolly's *The Life of John Duncan, Scotch Weaver and Botanist* (1883) are the most accomplished biographies of previously obscure working-class men published in the nineteenth century.²² Unlike earlier examples, these were published by the major publishing firms John Murray and Kegan Paul, Trench, and, more unusually still, one of them was penned by a best-selling writer. Ranging from four hundred to over five hundred pages, they were also considerably longer than the usual lives of comparable subjects, and Smiles's biography held the additional appeal of containing numerous illustrations. In appearance, these works more closely

²⁰ [Harriet Carson], *From the Loom to the Lawyer's Gown; Or, Self Help that was not all for Self, Being Incidents in the Life of Mr. Mark Knowles, Barrister-at-Law* (London: S. W. Partridge, 1884; repr. 1892), pp. 15–17.

²¹ Hammerton, *Trial and Triumph*, p. 37.

²² Samuel Smiles, *Life of a Scotch Naturalist: Thomas Edward, Associate of the Linnean Society* (London: John Murray, 1876); William Jolly, *The Life of John Duncan, Scotch Weaver and Botanist* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1883). All further references are to these editions. In 1878, Samuel Smiles published *Robert Dick, Baker of Thurso, Geologist and Botanist*, which is extremely similar to his earlier life of a humble naturalist, although its biographical subject is somewhat less complex. For these reasons, a discussion of *Robert Dick* is not given at length here, although readers interested in the theme of working-class scientists are encouraged to consult the work.

resembled the contemporary lives of great men than the slim, unattractive productions of clergymen or temperance advocates. Consequently, they were received differently: they were reviewed in the leading contemporary periodicals, they provoked a considerable amount of public interest, and they made a far stronger bid for a wide readership.

Samuel Smiles has already been introduced. Of his fellow biographer, William Jolly, comparatively little is known. Jolly spent his childhood in Pollokshields, in the Southside of Glasgow. His work as an Inspector of Schools gave him the necessary insight to publish works on education, including a study of the phrenologist George Combe (1879), the teaching of geography (1887), and a discussion of Ruskin's educational precepts (1894). Like many men of his generation, he entertained a passion for natural science. In 1871 he became a member of the British Association for the Advancement of Science and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He also co-ran the Milport Marine Biological Stations, acted as the first President of the Inverness Scientific Society and Field Club, and in 1885 became Vice-President of the Geological Society of Glasgow. Jolly can be glimpsed most vividly through his close friendship with the Glaswegian academic John Stuart Blackie. Blackie portrayed Jolly as the character 'Hilarius' in *Altavona: fact and fiction from my life in the Highlands* (1882). There, he appears as a passionate geologist and *bon vivant*, 'wallow[ing] in sensuous delight' as he feasts on oatcakes, Cheddar, and port wine. Hilarius's reluctance to appear as a 'sour' Presbyterian²³ is reflected in his biography of John Duncan, in which he presents his subject's illegitimate birth in a matter-of-fact tone that contradicts the enduring belief that Victorian biographies were relentlessly prudish. Jolly's own enthusiastic voice appears in a surviving letter to Blackie, in which he invites the professor to join him for a 'quiet but unique holiday' in the Hebrides with the pleasing prospect of being 'tossed on the brave billions of the open sea in the light but strong boats of the good fishermen there'.²⁴ Jolly's appreciation for natural science went hand in hand with his fascination with Scottish culture and his Romantic appreciation of the Highlands, which are prevalent in his biographies of Flora Macdonald and of Burns.

The subjects chosen by Smiles and Jolly followed similar trajectories. From his early childhood, spent at Kettle, Fife, and Aberdeen, Thomas Edward (1814–86) was obsessed with natural science. His schoolmasters expelled him for misbehaviour and, after short stints in a tobacco factory, as a shoemaker's apprentice, and as a militiaman, Edward finally settled down as a shoemaker. His free time was entirely devoted to the solitary pursuit of science, which enabled him to amass a considerable collection of specimens. Emboldened by his local success in

²³ John Stuart Blackie, *Altavona: fact and fiction from my life in the Highlands* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1882), p. 120.

²⁴ William Jolly to Professor John Stuart Blackie, 1875. Professor J. S. Blackie Letters 1873–5. NLS. MS. 2631. f. 297.

attracting visitors to observe his collections, he set up an exhibition in Aberdeen in 1846, which failed and caused him to fall into debt. Supported by his wife, who had the care of their ten children, Edward pursued his explorations even though he was continually beset by difficulties, such as a severe illness that afflicted him in the late 1850s. It was at this time that he came to the notice of Samuel Smiles, who was scouring newspapers for anecdotes of hard-working men overcoming difficulties for his famous *Self-Help* (1859). The previous year, a two-page sketch of Edward had appeared in the educational *Chambers's Journal*. It is likely that Smiles first heard of the naturalist either there or in a brief description of Edward made by the Director General of the Geological Society Sir Roderick Murchison before the British Association Meeting in Leeds in September 1858.²⁵ (Murchison also dwelt on Robert Dick, a baker-naturalist, whose biography Smiles went on to write after Edward's in 1878.) In *Self-Help*, Smiles announces that 'a profound naturalist has been discovered in the person of a shoemaker at Banff, named Thomas Edwards [sic], who, while maintaining himself by his trade, has devoted his leisure to the study of nature science'.²⁶

Smiles's short notice in the bestselling *Self-Help* led a number of local clergymen and scientists to take interest in Edward, who felt sufficiently encouraged to publish short accounts of his discoveries in local periodicals. These led to his election as an associate of the prestigious Linnean Society of London in 1866, and afforded him a membership of the Aberdeen Natural History Society. In 1873, the botanist James Cash included a short account of Edward's life in the self-help book *Where there's a will there's a way!* (1873). Three years later, Smiles followed up his earlier sketch with a full-length biography, which gave Edward unprecedented public attention.

John Duncan (1794–1881), the illegitimate son of a Drumlithie soldier and weaver, was raised by his mother. Unlike Edward, Duncan missed school altogether, and developed an appreciation for botany while working as a herdboy and ploughman. He became apprenticed to a violent weaver, whose wife secretly taught him to read, though he would only learn to write in his thirties. Duncan married in 1818, and separated from his wife six years later after discovering her adultery; he was forced to move repeatedly across Scotland as she pursued him for money until her death in the later 1840s. Duncan found some consolation for his domestic troubles through a close friendship with the gardener and amateur naturalist Charles Black, who would later mention his naturalist friend to William Jolly. Duncan's botanical efforts were extraordinary: he collected specimens from over two-thirds of British flora. At the same time, his poverty steadily increased until he was classed as a pauper by his parish. Jolly writes of his subject that 'few have passed through life whose real character and pursuits were more hidden from their contemporaries than this scientific weaver' (327). Both

²⁵ 'Story of a rural naturalist', *Chambers's Journal* (31 July 1858), pp. 79–80.

²⁶ Smiles, *Self-Help*, pp. 9–10.

biographers, whose first encounter with their subjects was therefore mediated, benefited from a relationship with a living subject whom they visited and corresponded with (although John Duncan died before the publication of his biography), which removed the most considerable obstacle involved in writing the life of an 'obscure' subject.

Together, the biographies reveal two preoccupations that reach beyond the immediate interest provided by such compelling subjects. The first is that the choice of a hidden life enabled the biographers to present their work on a level with more prestigious literary genres that shared their interests, and thus to underscore their own cultural importance. The second is that the biographers were anxious to mediate and even control the relationship between the public and the previously unknown subject, and tried hard to maintain their subjects within the roles that they have provided for them. The biographies provide two of the most visible struggles to resolve the paradox involved in paying public tribute to a life that is valued for being obscure.

The biographers' choice of humble subjects who were also amateur scientists was not an innocent one. Amateur scientists made good working-class subjects for many reasons. Firstly, efforts made for the education of working-class men by societies such as the SDUK focused heavily on scientific learning, which provided a cheap and accessible way of putting into practice the concept of self-help. Anne Secord, who has led the way in uncovering the nineteenth-century phenomenon of amateur working-class scientists,²⁷ has shown that these men did not harbour any ambitions to become famous naturalists or to transcend their class through their activities. Though at least one working man, Hugh Miller, had made the transition from stonemason to fame with the publication of the geological study *The Old Red Sandstone* (1841), the vast majority laboured in obscurity. Working-class naturalists became popular subjects in collective self-help biographies; they were rare enough to function as a powerful exemplar for readers, yet common enough to offer an attainable self-help ideal.

Naturalists presented interesting working-class subjects for the additional reason that they often held singularly complex relationships with middle- or upper-class scientists. During the mid-nineteenth-century, the passion for natural science had overtaken not only working-class men but society at large. In *The Heyday of Natural History* (1980) Lynn Barber paints a lively picture of men, women, and children from various social spheres scampering across fields and along the seashore in search of rare plants and shells. (One of the most famous of these enthusiasts was George Eliot, who helped George Henry Lewes with the

²⁷ See Anne Secord, "'Be what you would seem to be': Samuel Smiles, Thomas Edward, and the Making of a Working-Class Scientific Hero", *Science in Context*, 16.1–2 (2003), pp. 147–73; Anne Secord, 'Corresponding Interests: Artisans and Gentlemen in Nineteenth-Century Natural History', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 27 (1994), pp. 383–408; Anne Secord, 'Science in the Pub: Artisan Botanists in Early Nineteenth-Century Lancashire', *History of Science*, 32 (1994), pp. 269–315.

preparation of his popular *Seaside Studies*, published in 1858.) This shared endeavour to collect and analyse specimens led numerous artisan naturalists to correspond with wealthier naturalists through the common language of science. Gentlemen scientists could give their humble counterparts their knowledge, better resources, and access to learned societies and museums, while the artisans could supply precious specimens missing from their collections. Samuel Smiles's later biography of a baker-naturalist, *Robert Dick, Baker of Thurso, Geologist and Botanist* contains many accounts of such encounters, including a particularly lively incident during which the baker demonstrated geological phenomenon to Sir Roderick Murchison using large handfuls of flour.²⁸ A reviewer of Jolly's life of John Duncan enthusiastically declared that amateur science was the most 'effective means of obliterating the asperities of class distinctions'.²⁹ However, the excitement with which biographers pointed to such moments of contact between rich and poor drew attention to, rather than obliterated, the discrepancy in social stations.

Indeed, working-class naturalists needed to prove their worth in terms of self-help ideals in order to participate in such exchanges. Secord notes that, in their initial letters to gentlemen scientists, artisans provided biographical details that emphasized their self-taught background and difficult circumstances.³⁰ The gentlemen expected a certain amount of deference, but also seem to have relished the notion that their correspondents conformed to the type of individual that had made *Self-Help* so popular. They also needed to be reassured that their correspondents were not seeking to gain profit from their pursuit of science, but held only disinterested motives: there was no question of the artisan leaving his humble sphere. This relationship is an appropriate image for the connection between the middle-class reader of biographies and their humble subjects.

The widespread interest in amateur science also meant that biographers could aspire to a wide-ranging readership, even though by the late nineteenth-century naturalism had become a more professionalized activity. Smiles's omnipresence on the shelves of working men's clubs would have enticed readers from the lower ranks of society. Handsomely illustrated and bound, the work could—and did—also attract wealthier readers. Indeed, Thomas Edward was faced with the awkward situation of barely being able to afford his own biography. He wrote to Smiles that 'on reconsideration, and seeing that the price is high, I now think one will do for us all here and if any of my daughters who are married want [a] copy let their husband buy one'.³¹ The publishers eventually issued a cheaper edition of the work. The genesis of William Jolly's biography as a succession of sketches in the journal *Nature* also meant that the readership cannot easily be

²⁸ Smiles, *Robert Dick, Baker of Thurso, Geologist and Botanist* p. 272.

²⁹ [Unsigned], 'A Weaver and Botanist', *The Times* (4 April 1883), p. 5.

³⁰ Secord, 'Corresponding Interests', p. 396.

³¹ Thomas Edward to Samuel Smiles, 13 November 1876. *British Library*, Correspondence and papers of and concerning Thomas Edward. MSS. Add. 71084–6. Hereafter referred to as Thomas Edward, *BL*, MSS.

identified. William Jolly attempts to smooth over this potential diversity by addressing the 'nation', rich and poor: 'To some of these elements it may be well and wise for us, as a nation, once more to return' (29).

The Sage-like tone employed by Jolly was partly inspired by his admiration for John Ruskin, which Smiles shared. Ruskin maintained the Victorian ardour for amateur science in the later nineteenth century through the textbooks *Love's Meinie* (1873–81), *Prosperina* (1875–6), and *Deucalion* (1875–83), which respectively tackled the subjects of ornithology, botany, and geology. Smiles was closely acquainted with the works of Ruskin, who he refers to in *Self-Help*. Ruskin in turn read Smiles's *Life of a Scotch Naturalist* and congratulated him on a work which he believed would find its ways to 'the hearts of its readers.'³² (Thomas Edward even makes a brief appearance in *Fors Clavigera* to illustrate the benefits of childhood interest in nature.)³³ William Jolly, who became President of the Glasgow Ruskin Society in 1879, was an even greater admirer of Ruskin. In his study *Ruskin on Education* (1894), he supported Ruskin's arguments for a greater interaction between children and the natural world, which he had earlier explored in his biography of John Duncan. Jolly's admiration for Ruskin's precepts leads him to conclude the biography with an impassioned plea for the teaching of natural history: 'why have we no clear vision?', he asks, before answering 'chiefly because our eyes have never been opened to see such things' (505). The belief that society has not been trained to see certain aspects of the world closely mirrors Jolly's language on Duncan himself.

Indeed, the final appeal of subjects like Edward and Duncan was the unique compatibility between their status and their occupation. In *Self-Help*, Smiles wrote of Edward having been 'discovered', much in the same way as Edward went about unearthing scientific specimens. Jolly makes this comparison even more evident by quoting John Duncan's friend Jack Black, who describes John as 'my human protoplasm, man in his least complex form' (482). Two years earlier, Jolly had begun to consider the relationship between the biographer and the scientist in his short biographical sketch *Burns at Mossgiel, with reminiscences of the Poet by his herd-boy*. The biographer stakes the originality of his work on the use of the testimony of a humble boy who knew the poet, and lays out his concept of the work:

It is a study of the old story in connection with a new and marked personality; a new crystallization of old particles round a fresh and peculiar nucleus, which influences not only the form but the colouring of the aggregate; a new looking at the old sun, with a new object glass, which may reveal somewhat more of its character and constituents.³⁴

³² John Ruskin to Samuel Smiles, 15 April 1877, quoted in Secord, "Be what you would seem to be", p. 157.

³³ John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera: Letters LXXIII to XCVI* (London: George Allen, 1906), p. 56.

³⁴ William Jolly, *Robert Burns at Mossgiel, with reminiscences of the Poet by his herd-boy* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1881), prefatory material.

The biographer is presented as a scientist, trying out a new formula made of disparate elements, and in the process potentially revolutionizing the study of mankind. This scientific language implies rather dangerously that the biographer can get close to certain truths about his subject. Moreover, the biographer is free to use his instruments as he wishes in order to achieve results. In the study of Burns, Jolly valued the hidden life as a means of gathering new information on the 'old sun', the famous poet. The relationship between biographer and subject would necessarily change when the instrument, the 'object glass', became the focus of attention.

BIOGRAPHY AND THE REALIST DEBATE

Samuel Smiles and William Jolly both seek to inscribe their work within a literary tradition that explores hidden lives. Smiles claims Samuel Johnson as his inspiration; for Jolly, it is Thomas Carlyle. Before the title page of John Duncan's life, the reader is presented with the famous passage from *On Heroes* (1841) dedicated to 'the noble silent men scattered here and there each in his department; whom no Morning Newspaper makes mention of!'³⁵ Jolly, keen to give weight to his project, draws on a further influence by noting that he aims to 'add another worthy name to the long roll of honourable examples of "the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties"' (vi). The phrase nods to the educational efforts of G. L. Craik, the SDUK, and also Smiles. In addition, John Duncan is deemed to form 'a noteworthy chapter in "the simple annals of the poor", of plain living, high thinking, and earnest working' (vi). The quotation provides yet another example of how far the expression had permeated biographical literature by the end of the nineteenth century.

For Samuel Smiles,

the history of the humblest human life is a tale of marvels. Dr. Johnson said that there was not a man in the street whose biography might not be made interesting, provided he could narrate something of his experiences of life, his trials, his difficulties, his successes, and his failures.

I use these words as an introduction to the following biography of my 'man in the street'. (xxi)

Smiles makes Johnson's statement his own: the idea of the 'man in the street' is not Johnson's phrase (his statement was that 'there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful').³⁶ This misquote suggests that Smiles recalled Johnson's essay on biography from memory, and that the passage, like the 'annals of the poor', had become well known. The

³⁵ Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 192

³⁶ Johnson, 'The Dignity and Usefulness of Biography', pp. 318–23.

choice of words remains curious (all the more so given the emphatically rural background of Edward's story). The idea of men in the streets signals less a political image than at the social investigations of Mayhew's 'street biographies'.

Versions of this phrase recur in both biographies of hidden lives and realist novels with an equivalent focus on the everyday. Elizabeth Gaskell presents *Mary Barton* (1848) (which contains its own working-class scientist in the form of Job Legh) as an attempt to reveal the 'romance' of 'some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town'. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), George Eliot asks readers to consider those 'whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day'. C. L. Brightwell's *Heroes of the Laboratory and the Workshop* (1859) is a work of collective biography that celebrates the achievements of eminent men who began in humble circumstances. The work was written in response to an episode in Brightwell's life when she was 'walking in the suburbs of the city', and proffered a book to a passing working man. As the man accepted the gift, Brightwell was 'struck with the strange contrast between his broad, labour-stained palm and my own slight fingers, which nearly touched his, and I experienced a feeling of peculiar and deep interest as I looked upon the working-man, with whom I was thus, for a single instant only, brought in contact'.³⁷ The thrill experienced by the writer is prompted by both class and gender concerns. Brightwell expresses no disgust or fear of the hard-working hand, but on the contrary the *frisson* on a usually illicit contact. She does not seek to claim equality between herself and the anonymous man but on the contrary insists upon the gap dividing them, reinforced by the notion of her looking 'upon' him, as if he were an object of contemplation. As in many similar passages, Brightwell underscores the temporary nature of the encounter: 'a single instant only'. The elusive quality of the encounter is a substantial part of its appeal; there is no indication that Brightwell wishes to establish a more enduring link with the working-class subject. The episode recalls the passage in Carlyle's essay 'Biography' where Boswell and Johnson encounter a prostitute in the street. Biography is like the street in which individuals from vastly different social spheres find a safe and temporary place to meet.

William Jolly also used this image in his *Life of John Duncan*. Halfway through, Jolly interrupts his narrative to reflect on his biographical project. In particular, he considers

the urgent need that exists of having the things of everyday life interpreted to the mass of men. Familiarity not only breeds contempt of even the greatest elements that surround and support them, but shuts their eyes to their nature and importance. It thus becomes one of the functions of science, to interpret to the blind the true beauty and dignity of the commonest objects they hourly use, as working under universal law; of education, to

³⁷ Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, p. 218; George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 172; Brightwell, *Heroes of the Laboratory and the Workshop*, p. v.

teach the real character and relations of common things; of religion, to show that there is nothing 'common or unclean,' as under the Great Father's love; and of poetry,

'To clothe the palpable and familiar
With golden exhalations of the dawn.'

Not less is there the same need of interpreting to the great majority of mankind, the men and women they daily meet in the house, on the highway, or at the market. (326-7)

Jolly makes the problem of ignoring 'common' lives a more universal one by bringing them into 'the house' as well as on the streets. This emphasis means that Jolly's interest is less in drawing attention to men and women who the readers do not know, but in stressing the interest of individuals that they are aware of but disregard. Jolly stakes a huge claim for the social importance of biography on the same grounds as science, education, religion, and poetry. The parallel with science's ability to confer dignity on 'the commonest objects' seems particularly appropriate for biographies of unknown scientists, although the word 'dignity' is a more morally loaded word than those usually associated with scientific inquiry. Jolly is interested in establishing the value of hidden lives in moral terms, but is at least as keen to establish the cultural importance of biography on the same grounds as other contemporary disciplines.

More than Smiles, Jolly uses his biography of a humble scientist to participate in the realist debate concerning the difficult reconciliation of everyday life with the demands of artistic representation. Of the four kinds of discourse Jolly presents, the most problematic is his comparison of biography with poetry. Whereas the other discourses seek merely to establish the value of the 'common', the quotation from Coleridge's translation of Schiller's *The Death of Wallenstein* (1800) implies an embellishment of the familiar. The relationship between the non-fictional form of biography and the 'embellishing' potential of poetry is a fraught one that pushes the biography in a somewhat different direction.

Indeed, the two biographies have as much in common with Victorian discussions about fictional realism as they do with Romantic representations of humble life. The recurrent word used by Jolly to describe the efforts of scientists, poets, and biographers is that of an 'interpreter' mediating between the public and a hidden life. Significantly, he uses the same word to describe William Wordsworth, who he presents earlier in the biography as 'the greatest interpreter of the higher influences of nature on man the world has yet seen' (278). Wordsworthian echoes are everywhere in *The Life of John Duncan*: Jolly compares himself to Wordsworth, but also creates parallels between John Duncan and Wordsworth's characters ("old times were breathing there", with him, as with Wordsworth's Roman matron in humble life' (68); he is compared to 'Wordsworth's Wanderer', 407), or even Wordsworth himself ("The whole style of the man . . . forcibly suggest his likeness in this respect to Wordsworth, as given in his admirable poem on "Personal Talk," much of which expresses very happily the feelings and habits of the botanist as well as of the poet', 311).

Samuel Smiles also writes of his subject that 'he was as solitary as Wordsworth's Wanderer' (*SN*, 91). As Anne Secord reveals, Smiles commonly referred to his biography of Edward under the title 'The Shrimper', a label that recalls poems such as Wordsworth's 'Leech Gatherer'.³⁸ Just as George Eliot used Wordsworth as an inspiration for *her* account of a humble weaver, *Silas Marner* (1861), so did Jolly and Smiles. Such allusions confirm that biographers looked not only to fellow practitioners and historians for inspiration but also saw their works as belonging to a broader literary tradition invested in humble lives in which they played an important part.

Smiles's handling of his sources for the biography further reveals his desire to position Thomas Edward somewhere between the realist, social approach of the Victorians and a Romantic concern with inspiration. Smiles analyses the origins of Edward's scientific passion in terms evocative of genius:

He said, 'I suppose it must have originated in the same internal impulse which prompted me to catch those flies in the window. This unseen something—this double being, or call it what you will—inherent in us all, whether used for good or evil, which stimulated the unconscious babe to get at, no doubt, the first living animals he had ever seen, at length grew in the man into an irresistible and unconquerable passion, and engendered in him an insatiable longing for, and earnest desire to be always amongst such things'. (4)

This account, presented as autobiographical, was taken from a sketch that Edward had sent Smiles. Edward's original words are tellingly different:

And I believe it will be found to proceed from the selfsame quarter from which the impulse emanated that prompted me when only about four months old to leap from my mothers' arms in the vain endeavour to get at some flies creeping on a window near to which she stood and which would in all probability have proved fatal had it not been for my long dress to which she clutched and thereby saved me from falling to the ground. It is this that made me a Naturalist. This unseen, yet never the less present, something which stimulated the unconscious babe to get at no doubt the first living animals it had ever seen which has grown in the man into an irresistable [sic] and unconquerable passion and has goaded him on whether he would or would not and which has engendered in him an insatiable craving to be ever amongst Nature's handworks [sic].³⁹

Smiles is less interested in Edward's self-dramatizing account than in the fumbings of the unconscious. His anecdote is secularized, and privileges a Romantic account of inspiration. To Edward's impression that his talents would 'be found to *proceed* from the selfsame quarter from which the *impulse* emanated', Smiles substitutes the words that 'it must have *originated* in the same *internal* impulse which prompted' him [my italics]. Such terms provide a stronger accent on Romantic childhood impressions than the more methodical 'proceed'. The passion is stronger in Smiles's version: the frustrated attempt to catch flies is

³⁸ Secord, "Be what you would seem to be", p. 154.

³⁹ Thomas Edward's Narrative of his Life. *BL*, MS. Add. 71084, pp. 151–2.

fulfilled. The 'double being', which echoes the Romantic doppelgänger, is the biographer's addition, as is the 'earnest' desire, that most Victorian indicator of sincerity. Smiles makes the passage a metaphor of the human condition ('inherent in us all'), raised to the grander level of 'good or evil'. He sets the scene for an aetiology of genius which runs through the biography and overlaps with a more socially aware narrative in which questions of education, religion, and work are used to interpret Edward. The tension is mirrored in the style that sets Romantic inspiration against the social consciousness of Victorian realism, while tropes of Romantic autobiography are layered on to the conventions of Victorian exemplary biography. Individuality, not 'the common', is being privileged.

Both biographies represent individual achievement in a manner that combines Romantic ideas of the self's solitary relationship with nature with a more specifically Victorian account of self-development. Thomas Edward and John Duncan are subjects who would usually have been given a brief notice in a work of collective biography—as indeed at first they were. The act of making them the focus of a single-subject biography is in itself unusual, and isolates them from their community. Indeed, these biographies work against the twentieth-century critical consensus that working-class writing tends to privilege the communal over the individual. William Jolly, more than Smiles, is interested in Duncan's community. Yet here again the friendships, and in particular Duncan's relationship with his closest friend, Charles Black, are recounted in heightened language:

In his silent, self-contained, and comparatively solitary existence, this union with one man . . . to whom he tendered the worship of his deepest heart, was . . . dearer and better to him than wife and child . . . All this reads like a bit of old romance or a passage from a modern novel, though it was but the literal truth. It recalls, at least, in no mean degree, the world-famous friendships between men celebrated in history and poetry. (*JD*, 491)

The combination of solitary genius and intense male friendship carries Romantic overtones, as does the language that Jolly uses throughout to depict the friendship ('a momentary lightning flash', a 'beatific effect', *JD*, 491). Despite the passage's brief distancing of the 'literal truth' from fiction ('old romance'), Jolly reaffirms the relationship between reality and fiction by emphasizing the friendship's parallels with fictional models and placing the words 'history' and 'poetry' on a level ground. However questionable this equivalence, the biographers insisted that their works drew from both traditions.

The realist representation of hidden lives is once more put under strain in the subjects' portraits included in the biographies. Reviewers greatly admired the images accompanying Smiles's biography drawn by George Reid, who also created the portrait of Edward that serves as the biography's frontispiece, and gained full membership of the Royal Scottish Academy the year after the work's publication. Reid, like Smiles, entered into a close relationship with Thomas Edward: he sent him gifts and visited both him and the regions the naturalist liked to explore. Reid's portrait of Edward raises questions of representation that

mirror discussions surrounding the idea of the picturesque in art. The picturesque movement had sparked disagreements on the authentic and the doctored at least since William Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye* (1782) and his followers' attempts to reshape landscapes in order to make them suitable for artistic representation. As painters became more extreme in their creation of 'the natural', demolishing buildings and carefully disheveling beggars, their faithfulness to nature was questioned. In volume four of *Modern Painters* (1856) Ruskin encouraged painters with little 'inventive power' to concentrate on factual reproductions (which approaches the biographer's scholarly role), while the 'inventive' artist could present a more subjective 'impression' (which mirrors a more Romantic conception of biography).⁴⁰

Thomas Edward, who believed that 'the pictures [sic] half the story', was eager to have his portrait included and sent his own photographs to Smiles. Keen that the portrait should be as accurate as possible, he pointed out discrepancies between reality and the photograph, and precipitately wrote that 'I forgot to mention in my last that the hair on the top of my head in both the larger photos is too white'.⁴¹ Unknown to Edward, Smiles wanted an engraving that was more artistic than factual. Smiles warned Reid that Edward 'wants a little brushing up before he gets his face painted,' and Reid asked the engraver, Paul Rajon, to accentuate Edward's pockmarks. Impressionism won over realism, and Smiles, ironically, declared that the finished portrait was 'the man himself'.⁴² When George Reid presented his picture *Puir Tam the Cobbler* at the Scottish Academy, it 'made a sensation'.⁴³ John Brown, an Edinburgh doctor and author of the popular story *Rab and his Friends*, wrote to Reid: 'What a nose! Buttressed like Ben Cruachan, and what nostrils! What an apparatus for smell! What frontal sinuses! What power of observation! . . . It will astonish Murray and the world, and if Smiles does his work half as well, you will all be immortal.'⁴⁴ Clearly, it was also the picturesque qualities of the portrait that drew in Brown and, he anticipated, the wider public, as the face became a rugged landscape in itself. Nowhere does the writer express an interest in the accuracy of the portrayal.

William Jolly's biography of Duncan also includes a portrait of the subject, by an unknown artist, which bears a curious resemblance to Hubert von Herkomer's 1879 portrait of John Ruskin, Jolly's 'hero'. (Indeed, Thomas Edward's portrait bears more than a passing resemblance to numerous images of Thomas Carlyle,

⁴⁰ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters: Volume IV: Of Mountain Beauty* (London: George Allen, 1897), pp. 19–21.

⁴¹ Thomas Edward to Samuel Smiles, 22 April 1875. Thomas Edward, *BL*, MSS.

⁴² Correspondence between Reid and Smiles, quoted in Secord, "'Be what you would seem to be'", pp. 150–1.

⁴³ See Aileen Smiles, *Samuel Smiles and his Surroundings* (London: Robert Hale Limited, 1956), p. 135.

⁴⁴ John Brown to George Reid, November 1876, *A Scottish Postbag: Eight Centuries of Scottish Letters*, ed. by George Bruce and Paul H. Scott (Edinburgh: The Saltire Society, 2002), p. 160.

and in particular G. F. Watt's 1868 portrait. Carlyle had grumbled over the latter, complaining that it made him look like 'a mad labourer'.⁴⁵ Jolly, a more self-conscious writer than Smiles, also includes *within* the biography a sequence of events that makes the wrangle over representation part of the work itself. Towards the end of the biography, Charles Black expresses a desire to own a photograph of his close friend John Duncan:

Charles had enjoined his brother to have John taken in his usual attire and style, with umbrella and bundle, as he used to see him in the old days at Whitehouse, so as to get as far as possible a realistic and speaking memento of the dear old man . . . But he did not bring the big blue 'tent;' and, in the wish to appear as genteel as possible on such an important occasion. (JD, 366)

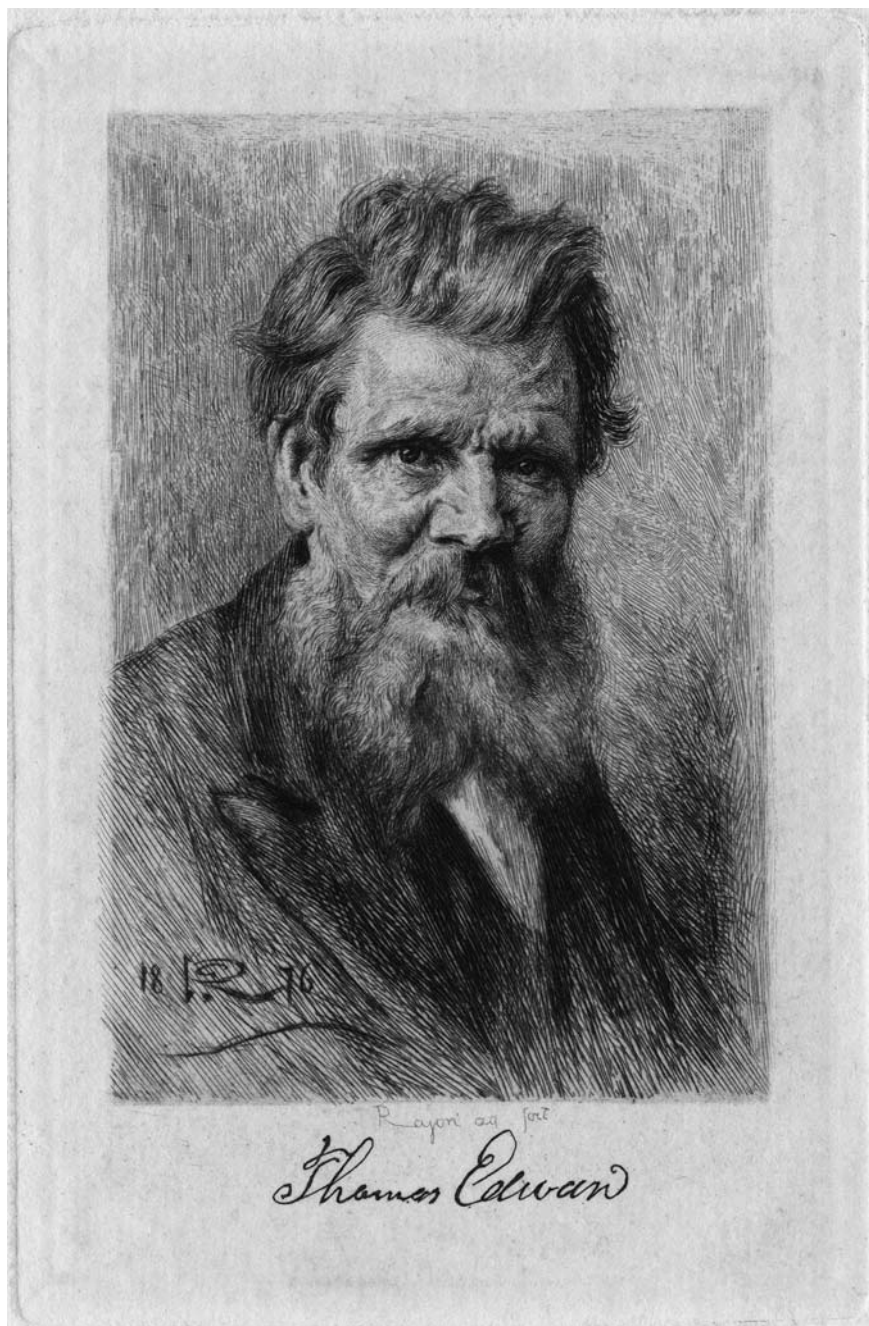
The subject cannot reconcile the idea of a 'realistic' John with his framed self. The scene which follows is an uncomfortable one, in which the suspicious John is handed various props in order to make him look as eccentric as he commonly did, a 'symbolic' John rather than the man as he appeared for the photograph. In the case of both Smiles and Jolly, the achievement of a visual recreation of the 'real' subject has been achieved at the expense of a degree of doctoring, and shows an immense concern for the public observing the subject, which threatens to become more important than the subject himself.

Both biographies begin by loudly championing the worth of the humble before becoming seduced by literary or artistic interpretations that make its appeal more apparent. The public is invited to consider a subject altogether more picturesque than the Carlylean and Johnsonian epigraphs at first indicate. In *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (1980), John Barrell argues that painters such as Gainsborough and Constable represented the poor in a manner that was acceptable to the art-purchasing public—sober, industrious, and submissive. In doing so, they were complicit in concealing some of violent social divisions present in contemporary society. This is, to a certain extent, true of these biographers. Their works also show a more active desire, however, to exploit the intense contemporary curiosity in the poor. It was not a case of pushing the poor aside, but of making the most of their picturesque potential.

BIOGRAPHY AS TOURISM

From its inception, the picturesque movement was closely associated with Scotland: William Gilpin toured Scotland in 1776, and his famous *Observations* laid great emphasis on the beauty of the Scottish Highlands. Samuel Smiles and

⁴⁵ Thomas Carlyle, quoted in *The Ashmolean Museum: Complete Illustrated Catalogue of Paintings*, ed. by Catherine Casley, Colin Harrison, and Jon Whiteley (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum Publications, 2004), p. 241.



1 'Thomas Edward', etching by Paul Adolphe Rajon, after Sir George Reid (1876)
© National Portrait Gallery, London.



2 'John Duncan', etching by unknown artist in William Jolly, *The Life of John Duncan* (1883).

William Jolly, both Scotchmen, make much of the Scottish backdrop to their narratives, which they announce in the titles of their works: *Life of A Scotch Naturalist* and *Life of John Duncan, Scotch Weaver and Botanist*. Stories of humble-born Scots would have evoked images of other, more eminent, self-taught Scottish men, the most of famous of whom is of course Robert Burns, ahead of James Hogg the 'Ettrick Shepherd' and the lesser-known John and Alexander Bethune, Robert Nicoll, Ellen Johnston the 'Factory Girl', and William Thorn, the author of *Rhymes and Recollections of a Handloom Weaver* (1844). Though England possessed its own working-class poets, such as Ebenezer Elliot, working-class erudition was a proud tradition in Scotland.⁴⁶ William Jolly demonstrated his own interest in Burns in his 1881 biography of the poet. For Jolly, paying tribute to Burns is a patriotic endeavour: its astonishingly powerful effects include 'broadening and refining national feeling', 'increasing the national love of nature', 'widening national sympathy' and, ambitiously, 'raising national manhood!'⁴⁷ Commemorating other, lesser-known, Scottish working-class heroes such as John Duncan could be seen to participate in a similar patriotic enterprise.

Nineteenth-century Scotland was particularly active in producing biographies of little-known subjects. Hamilton, Adams and Andrew Elliot, two of the leading publishers of such works, produced numerous accounts of Scottish lives, and of missionaries, ministers, and pious local worthies in particular. The proliferation of religious societies, particularly after the Disruption, meant that groups were eager to publicize the achievements of their members. It is also likely that a heavily religious society, traditionally more wary of novels, would be more inclined to turn to biography. The consequences of the Scottish Enlightenment also meant that an impressive number of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Scottish individuals had taken advantage of the public education system to overcome their humble origins and gain recognition in a range of disciplines.

Yet if the biographies of Thomas Edward and John Duncan participated in a patriotic vision of Scotland, they were also undoubtedly aimed at English readers. Indeed, the image of Scotland projected by both works perpetrated an English fascination with life across the border. By the late eighteenth century, it had become popular to visit Scotland. The Welsh naturalist Thomas Pennant had published a first account of his Scottish travels, *A Tour of Scotland in 1769*, in 1771. The following year, Joseph Banks toured Scotland and 'discovered' Fingal's Cave on the island of Staffa. In 1775 Samuel Johnson published his own *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, which was followed by James Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* a decade later. For the Victorians, the allure of Scotland was increased by its association with Queen Victoria and her

⁴⁶ See Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁴⁷ Jolly, *Burns at Mossiel*, p. 3.

description of Balmoral as her 'dear paradise',⁴⁸ but it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that travel to the Highlands became sufficiently cheap and rapid to attract a wider public. In 1861, Thomas Cook calculated that he had 'taken by special trains nearly 40,000 visitors to Scotland'.⁴⁹

The word 'tourist' appeared in the early 1800s, around the time when biographies began to explore more varied and, at times, unknown subjects. Travel-writers and biographers can be seen to share many qualities. Smiles's publisher John Murray wrote and published tourism handbooks, including a *Handbook for Travellers in Scotland* (1867). The handbook notes that 'there is a growing tendency amongst tourists to combine the picturesque and the scientific' and consequently recommends 'Geikie's "Scenery of Scotland", as a travelling companion, together with the geological sketch map compiled by him and Sir R. Murchison', and includes a long section on Scottish geology.⁵⁰ In addition to this, both tourists and readers of biography were drawn to Scotland as a place of rustic wildness replete with hidden beauties. This definition encompassed the country's inhabitants. Victorian travellers regularly arranged to visit the homes of Highlands and cottars as part of their tours.⁵¹ As Katherine Grenier argues, Scotland, like the humble naturalists, came to be seen as a 'space separate from ordinary social life which offered a counter to the negative consequences of the modern industrial world'.⁵² English tourists maintained this idea although they relied heavily on the railways and other products of industrialization to explore this seemingly untouched land.

Readers of *Life of a Scotch Naturalist* or *Life of John Duncan* could expect to have their appetite for the picturesque, the scientific, and the 'authentic' simultaneously satisfied. The word 'picturesque' recurs in the two biographies. Thomas Edward explored the bay of Gamrie, a 'picturesque indentation of the coast' (131), the 'picturesque' Dens (134) and the 'picturesque valley' near the bay of Aberdour (135). The word appears even more frequently in *The Life of John Duncan*, where it is used to describe anything from the 'picturesque ruins' near which Duncan was born to a 'picturesque state of life once prevalent in the country, but now seldom seen' (27), and the 'picturesque' region near the Benachie hills (77). The work even opens with an account of a scene that

⁴⁸ Queen Victoria, *Leaves from the Journal of our Life in the Highlands* (London: Smith, Elder, 1868), p. 158.

⁴⁹ Thomas Cook, *Cook's Scottish Tourist Practical Directory: A Guide to the Principle Tourist Routes, Conveyances, and Special Ticket Arrangements, sanctioned by Railway, Steamboat and Coach Companies, Commanding the Highland Excursion Traffic* (London: W. H. Smith and Son, 1861), p. 113.

⁵⁰ John Murray, *Handbook for Travellers in Scotland* (London: John Murray, 1867), p. xxi.

⁵¹ See John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold (eds.), *Imagining Scotland* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1995); Alastair J. Durie (ed.), *Scotland for the Holidays: Tourism in Scotland, c. 1780–1939* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2003).

⁵² Katherine Haldane Grenier, *Tourism and Identity in Scotland, 1770–1914: Creating Caledonia* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), p. 49.

contains 'pretty peeps for the painter' (1). As an ardent admirer of Ruskin, Jolly would have been acquainted with his association of the picturesque with the sublime and with the angular, the rugged, and the asymmetrical in mountainous regions. The two naturalists, who lived their lives among wild landscapes, might have seemed equally 'rough' and 'untamed'.⁵³

Smiles and Jolly frequently draw on the contemporary language of guide-books. In doing so they perpetuate a tradition of combining biography with picturesque descriptions that was used so influentially by Legh Richmond in his *Annals of the Poor* (1814). A product of Richmond's influence, the 1877 biographer of the miner Abraham Bastard went so far as to state in his introduction that 'in summer, here is one of the most interesting scenes the tourist can find on the North Coast of Cornwall'.⁵⁴ William Jolly opens his account with a lengthy description of the area where John Duncan was born that includes local knowledge ('the hamlet at the mouth of the Carron took its descriptive title from a mass of sandstone that once blocked the entrance to the harbour, called *Craig-ma-cair*, the rock of the seat or of the turn, meaning either in Gaelic', *JD*, 2) and historical background ('The old pier was then sufficient for the growing trade; the new harbour not being formed till 1812', *JD*, 3). Samuel Smiles makes the association between biography and tourism even plainer: he inserts maps of the areas covered by Thomas Edward with guidebook-style advice on interesting sights. He notes that 'the scenery in this neighbourhood can scarcely be equalled, even in Switzerland, though it is at present entirely unknown . . . The Banffshire side of Ben Macdhuil forms a magnificent precipice at 1500 feet' (*SN*, 137). The textbook style, the marshalling of facts, and the allusion to tourists who may have visited Switzerland envision a middle-class reader capable of affording such travels. The obscure state of the landscape ('comparatively unknown') parallels the interest afforded by the equally obscure biographical subject. As James Buzard writes of Victorian tourists, when 'valued signs . . . gathered from books, pictures, conversation, and other means of cultural preparation matched with scenes before them—they could feel they had achieved meaningful contact with what these places essentially were'.⁵⁵

The illustrations in *Life of a Scotch Naturalist*—thirty-one sketches and maps in total—are predominantly of landscapes rather than the subject himself. The work is far more heavily illustrated than was usual in biographies of great and obscure lives. The pictures, principally landscapes, portray undisturbed nature in which the presence of mankind is recalled, by a distant church steeple (1) or smoke from factory chimneys (42), which signals the tension between the wild and the homely, the foreign and the known. By constantly drawing back from

⁵³ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters: Of Mountain Beauty* (London: George Allen, 1883), p. 136.

⁵⁴ Tyack, *The Miner of Perranzabuloe*, p. 3.

⁵⁵ James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to 'Culture', 1800–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 10.

the text and focusing on a single scene, the reader is made to switch continuously between the wild expanse of nature described by Smiles, and the framed space drawing attention to its own picturesqueness—in the word's sense as the 'fitness to make a picture'.⁵⁶ The biographies of Edward and Duncan also include lexicons to the subjects' Scottish dialects, as the reader is given translations and pronunciation guides in footnotes, such as '*Cruive*, a pigstye' (*SN*, 5) or yet again 'Tough: 'pronounced *Tooch*, with the guttural *ch*' (*JD*, 124). (In Smiles's case, Edward had to explain the words first by letter.) The figure of the biographer as cultural mediator emerges once more.

Both biographies show the trace of their author's anxieties that the reader-as-tourist might not be the ideal recipient of the work. As Katherine Grenier writes in her study of Scottish tourism, scholars and participants 'differentiate between 'travel' and 'tourism'. 'Travellers' strike out on their own, seeing themselves as engaging in open-minded explorations of that which is foreign. Tourism, on the other hand, tends to keep the foreign at bay. Often reviled as superficial and perfunctory, 'tourists stay on the beaten path to see a pre-established canon of famous sites whose meaning is predetermined'.⁵⁷ The description replicates the tension in biography between the widespread acclaim of canonical great men and those writers and readers who upheld the value of less immediately appealing venues. Though Smiles and Jolly exploited the language of tourism, they also sought to attract sympathetic travellers.

These distinctions find their way into the works. In *Life of a Scotch Naturalist*, Smiles depicts the range of visitors who passed through Edward's failed scientific exhibition in Aberdeen. First introduced are those interested in profiting financially from their encounter with the naturalist ('stuffed-bird sellers, and persons who pestered him to buy nearly everything of a bestial kind, alive or dead', 158). The second group are the self-interested leisured classes, who make no effort to treat Edward's work with attention ('Several ladies called upon Edward to consult him about their favourite pets', 158). The working classes are dubious yet admiring of his achievements. ('They were working men themselves, and knew what they had to contend with, in the form . . . difficulties of all sorts', 166.) An anonymous visitor proves the only visitor genuinely interested in both man and work. These mimic Smiles's potential readers: working-class readers looking for exemplars, educated scientists, and the curious middle classes. The attitude of each is examined, which allows Smiles to make an implicit plea to the reader to accord genuine attention to the subject and his biography, which is not to be read as a manual for success or to be glanced over superficially but scrutinized carefully. The fact that the respectful, insightful visitor is kept anonymous provides a space for the reader to project himself. Again, the

⁵⁶ Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860* (London: Thames Hudson, 1987), p. 57.

⁵⁷ Grenier, *Tourism and Identity*, p. 4.

biographer teaches the reader how to read the work and how to be a good member of the public. In reward for this effort, the reader becomes endowed with a stronger sense of individuality and is distinguished from the superficial masses. He becomes a more enlightened tourist.

Jolly, in a work saturated with images of sight and perception, also creates a *mise-en-abîme* of the public gaze. In chapter 3, Duncan moves into Drumlithie for his work:

the thin, shy, uncouth-looking, friendless hero of our story entered the village early one morning at the beginning of the century . . . As he passed along the narrow street to the upper end of the village . . . he could observe through his sheepish eyes, under the projecting brows—which saw deeper and farther, however, than the casual observer might suspect—that numerous groups of weavers eyed him from the corners of the streets . . . His lank, ill-filled figure, his awkward stoop that bespoke bashfulness and toil . . . did not escape their critical gaze; and the question went quickly round who this ‘queer kind o’ creatur’ could be. (26)

The subject, who up until that point had been ‘John’ or ‘Johnnie’, becomes anonymous again, which expresses his lonely condition. By labelling him as the hero of ‘our story’, Jolly encourages the reader to side with him as he ventures down the foreign street. As Duncan enters Drumlithie, he looks out at the crowd, and the gazed and the gazers suddenly meet. The perspective then shifts to the observers, and we see John through their eyes as they dwell on his awkwardness. The reader has the alternative perspectives of the alienated subject, the sympathetic biographer, and the ‘critical’ neighbours. He is warned against being a ‘casual observer’—or superficial reader, and shown how a change in perspective can transmute an individual from a foreign to a familiar figure.

The idea of submitting the hidden life to public scrutiny is again re-enacted within the work, with renewed descriptions of Duncan walking through towns, alone or accompanied by his embarrassed friend. John Duncan drew ‘all eyes even in the city crowd’, ‘ogling glances’, ‘constant stares’, he and his friend ‘sallied forth into the public gaze’, ‘under the gaze of all folks’, and they were again ‘ogled at’ (359–63). What is conspicuous is that Duncan does not return the gaze, play up to it, or enjoy it, nor is he altered by it. This both confirms his worth (unlike that of his embarrassed friend, who acts as a useful point of comparison) and reassures the reader that bringing the biographical subject out of darkness and into the light will not pervert him. Significantly, this ‘public gaze’ is depicted in a predominantly negative way: it is a superficial gaze, which does not look beneath the surface. The unquestioning crowd ‘shuts their eyes’ to what surrounds them daily, and are ‘blind’ to common objects. Men such as Duncan have been ‘viewed in a false light’ due to the crowd’s inability to ‘look beneath the mere outer surface of things’ (326–7).

Grenier explains that ‘an ever-increasing number of visitors were attracted by the notion of Scotland, particularly the Highlands, as a realm of transcendence

and imagination which could revivify the prosaicness of everyday life. But their trips were made possible by the same modernization of nineteenth-century life which they hoped temporarily to avoid.⁵⁸ Biographers of hidden, rural subjects faced a similar dilemma: they and their readers were drawn to the idea of simple and picturesque subjects, yet bringing them to the attention of a superficial public threatened the very qualities that made them valuable in the first place.

BIOGRAPHY AS PHILANTHROPY

If Smiles and Jolly invited the reader to become a tourist, they assigned themselves a different role: that of a philanthropist. The biographies were either preceded (in Jolly's case) or followed (in Smiles's) by fundraising campaigns for the impoverished naturalists. Jolly had already drawn attention to John Duncan in a short biographical sketch published in *Good Words* in 1878. Three years later, the journal *Nature* felt that 'some of our readers may care to send a trifle to John Duncan' who had been 'compelled to accept parochial relief'.⁵⁹ Jolly took up the appeal in the same journal a week later, where he provided another sketch concluding that 'it is devoutly to be hoped that such a man will not be allowed to go down to his grave dishonoured and neglected'. A footnote encouraged readers to send their subscriptions to Jolly in Inverness.⁶⁰ By 5 May 1881, a sum of 322*l*.19*s*.10*d*. had been received. *Nature* credited Jolly with first drawing 'attention to the old man', leading to the 'present ample provision for his comfort', and congratulated itself that Duncan would now in all likelihood 'survive for some years to come'.⁶¹ Duncan in fact died three months later.

Throughout his writings, Jolly makes the connections between charity and biography apparent. In the biography itself, he notes that Duncan never dreamt 'of any compensation before he went, or after he was gone, by having his life interpreted to the world in a book' (328). For Duncan, the sudden influx of money following the biographer's incursion into his life must have felt little short of a divine intervention. This ability of the writer to have such an influence on the subject's life could not have occurred with more public lives and points to the issues of control lurking beneath biographies of more hidden lives. Like Smiles, Jolly did not intend that his humble subject should aspire to fame and fortune, but he counterbalances this by viewing his own role as that of a godlike, or at least philanthropic, figure distributing comfort to the meek.

⁵⁸ Grenier, *Tourism and Identity*, p. 9.

⁵⁹ Unsigned, 'Notes', *Nature*, 23 (13 January 1881), p. 252.

⁶⁰ William Jolly, 'John Duncan', *Nature*, 23 (20 January 1881), pp. 269–70.

⁶¹ Unsigned, 'John Duncan', *Nature*, 24 (5 May 1881), p. 6.

For Jolly, moreover, it was not simply the biographical subject but society as a whole that benefited from paying tribute to the overlooked. In *Robert Burns at Mossgiel*, published when campaigns for Duncan were underway, Jolly reflected on the importance of neglected individuals:

Such has often been the short sad story of many of earth's greater sons. Gifted with faculties other than those that win bread and give worldly success, they have been allowed to remain in obscurity and poverty, if not in want; and, not till bread was no longer needed, has the world awakened to a sense of the loss it has sustained. Then have followed regret, the sculptured stone, and hero-worship. But this after-glorifying of the greater dead is a beautiful feature in humanity, showing a true heart, a seeking for the higher and nobler beneath their seeming neglect, in the everyday hard and hardening race for power and pelf that seems the sum of its external history. It has an elevating and regenerating power, this apotheosis of her dead heroes and starved singers, which forms a large element in religion itself; and it will be a sad day for the world when this sentiment ceases to have the potent spell it has ever wielded over mankind.⁶²

Jolly's take on the neglect of talent is an unconventional one in that it is devoid of reproach towards the 'world' who allowed the deserving obscure to perish. He does not include an appeal to his countrymen to take better care of their deserving 'sons' during their lifetime—something that he would do with John Duncan. There is something unconvincing in Jolly's argument that post-mortem commemorations denote what Carlyle also sought through biography: a 'true heart'. However, Jolly joins numerous biographers of hidden men in asserting that it is less the contributions of the biographical subject that matter than the nation's emotional response to them. Paying tribute to visible but also, Jolly insists, hidden contributions is an act of social regeneration. Biography facilitates a collective act of generosity.

Despite turning his nose up at 'power and pelf', the biographer could also hope to gain rather more material benefits from bringing Duncan out of obscurity. The regular updates on Duncan's situation in the pages of *Nature* meant that when, two days after Duncan's death, it was announced that 'a memoir of the old man is now being written by Mr. Jolly, and will be anticipated with interest',⁶³ an audience had already been created. Whether a brilliant marketing strategy or genuine philanthropy, Jolly's canvassing for his subject adds a new dimension to the mediation between public and private, the audience and the subject. He intervened directly on behalf of the man, but also on behalf of the biographical subject.

Publicity and charity were also interwoven around Smiles's *Life of a Scotch Naturalist*. Smiles began to campaign for money to be given to Thomas Edward at the same time as the biography was published. In the 1882 edition of the work,

⁶² Jolly, *Robert Burns at Mossgiel*, pp. 1–2.

⁶³ [Unsigned], 'Notes', *Nature*, 24 (18 August 1881), p. 361.

Smiles explains that he asked Lord Beaconsfield to place Edward on the Civil List Fund and visited illustrious scientists including Richard Owen and Charles Darwin for support. On Christmas Day, 1876, the Prime Minister informed Edward that the Queen, who had 'been much interested in reading your Biography by Mr. Smiles', had granted him a pension of £50 per annum.⁶⁴ A review of the biography underlined the relationship between biography and philanthropy by concluding that purchasing the book would 'help to confer a substantial benefit upon Thomas Edward'.⁶⁵

However, like so many Victorian philanthropists, Smiles expected to gain in return for his efforts a certain control over the recipient of his generous attentions. One way in which biographers exercised control over their subjects was by editing their words as they desired. Smiles was by no means unusual in taking liberties with his sources; the obscurity of his subject, however, meant that there was less likelihood of his ever being corrected. As one essayist noted, for the lesser genius 'there is not much hope of rehabilitation'.⁶⁶

The preservation of Edward's letters to Smiles provides a rare opportunity to see the biographer at work. Smiles writes in his autobiography that Edward 'was not very expert at writing out his thoughts',⁶⁷ and is extremely frank about his role: 'I took up his tale, and made his case my own. I gathered together his random articles, and retold his stories afresh, and, I think, with increased interest. I imparted to them that which Edward did not possess, and which I did—some literary art' (350–1). One early episode, in which Edward's schoolmaster falsely accuses Edward of having brought in a centipede, thrashes, and expels him, is representative of Smiles's interventions. Edward described the master as follows:

This individual had a rather reddish nose and a pair of pimples on his face of the same hue and whenever he got into a rage as he often did it was observed that the protuberance got much brighter. On this occasion, I believe, for I did not notice this fact myself, this ornament grew ten times redder. Some of the boys liken the pimples to drops of blood.

(Thomas Edward's Narrative of His Life, *BL*, Add. 71084)

Smiles writes:

The master had a reddish nose, and a number of pimples on his face, which were of the same hue. When he got into a rage, it was observed that the protuberances became much brighter. On this occasion the organ became ten times redder than before. It was like Bardolph's lantern in the poop. Some of the boys likened his pimples to large dribblets of blood. (36)

⁶⁴ Samuel Smiles, *Life of a Scotch Naturalist* (London: John Murray, 1882), pp. vi–vii.

⁶⁵ Unsigned, 'Life of a Scotch Naturalist', *Nature*, 15 (22 February 1877), p. 351.

⁶⁶ [Unsigned], 'Studies in Biography', *Fraser's Magazine*, 596 (1879), p. 256.

⁶⁷ Smiles, *Autobiography*, p. 305. Smiles gives insufficient credit to Edward, whose writing is vivid and compelling.

The passage is magnified: the nose is not 'rather' reddish but decidedly reddish, the 'pair' of pimples become 'a number', and the 'drops' of blood become 'large dribblets'. The reference to Bardolph creates a distinctly more 'literary' scene, and relies on the reader being well versed in Shakespeare (Edward was not). Whereas Edward had relied on hearsay for the description, Smiles implies that it was observed by the boy, in a Dickensian moment of childish terror at grotesque adults. The master, built up as a far more impressive figure, stirs the reader's revulsion during rather than after the scene. Here, as in the biography as a whole, Smiles forges a more vivid, 'literary' life from raw materials. There is no awareness on the biographer's part that such alterations might betray the subject or biographical standards. It is taken for granted that the subject needs the biographer's more sophisticated intervention.

Not only, therefore, did Thomas Edward find himself catapulted into the public sphere, but he also witnessed the process of his life being made fit for public consumption. Edward experienced Smiles's beneficial albeit disruptive appearance into his life with both excitement and unease. Neither did Smiles take to Edward without reserve. In the biography, Smiles smoothes over the more stubborn facets of his subject's character, notably Edward's more vociferous complaints about his lack of rewards that are such a recurrent feature of his letters. The letters that Edward sent his biographer paint a moving picture in which the subject is eager to witness his accession to posterity but fears losing possession of his life. Edward frequently provided information before telling Smiles: 'it is you and you alone who must judge of these things'.⁶⁸ Once the biography was published, however, Edward reacted by sending Smiles an extensive list of errors that ought to be corrected.⁶⁹

Having realized the measure of his success, Edward began to fight for control of his life and decided to publish his own material, both autobiographical and scientific. Publishers, dubious, felt that the life-narrative was only acceptable with the mediation of a professional, recognized biographer. Edward sent a collection of his letters to David Douglas, editor of the *North British Review*, for publication and advice. Douglas thought the letters too personal, tried to dissuade him, and warned that 'should any money come to you out of the sales it would be at the expense of your well won reputation'.⁷⁰ Edward complained to Douglas that 'the facts stated have nothing at all to do with Mr Smiles neither do I wish them to have'.⁷¹ Smiles was horrified at Edward's sudden burst of independence, and exerted himself to prevent Edward from publishing in his own right. Hasty communications passed between Douglas, George Reid, and Smiles, in which

⁶⁸ Thomas Edward to Samuel Smiles, 12 January 1876. Thomas Edward, *BL*, MSS.

⁶⁹ Thomas Edward to Samuel Smiles, 4 and 6 December 1876. Thomas Edward, *BL*, MSS.

⁷⁰ David Douglas to Thomas Edward, 7 March 1878. *NLS*. MS. 1661.

⁷¹ Thomas Edward to David Douglas, 12 April 1878. *NLS*. MS. 1661.

they express the 'bother' of the whole affair.⁷² In 1878, Edward complained to David Douglas that 'Mr S. has no claim on me. It would surely therefore be very hard if I could not make public anything more merely because Mr S has done something in that way.'⁷³ A little later, he insists that 'I do not see that I have, or am intending to trespass on the rights of any.'⁷⁴ Smiles's niece and biographer, Aileen Smiles, later wrote that Edward became 'a little saucy';⁷⁵ Lynn Barber, in her account of Victorian natural science, describes him as 'repellent'.⁷⁶ This is unfair. The subjects could not have been prepared for the paradox that Smiles and Jolly made a bid for the importance of their subject while claiming that their value lay in their patient obscurity.

Smiles and Jolly signalled their control over the subject by writing chapters updating events since their first publication. Jolly's biography was an extended version of this, while Smiles traced the evolution of Edward's post-publication success in a new preface to an 1882 edition, completing the life in an 1889 edition of the work with a notice of Edward's death.⁷⁷ For Smiles and Jolly the life had become the property of the biographer. As the 'discoverers' of an obscure and interesting specimen of working-class life, they had taken control of the subject. This evolution reveals the extent to which biographies of working men were carefully managed and the emphasis that was placed on a mediation between the obscure workers and the reading public. The works are moulded as a space for the public to safely encounter individuals they would not otherwise have met.

This virtual encounter took on a fairy-tale quality when the biographers established a connection between their humble naturalists and Queen Victoria. The most illustrious contributor to the fund William Jolly set up for John Duncan was the Queen, who 'sent "the poor man" a donation of £10, as having been "interested in his story and work"' (*JD*, 425). John Duncan

was especially and proudly grateful for the Queen's gift, as presented to a poor, hidden man like him! To raise his spirits, I suggested the possibility of Her Majesty visiting him, as she had done others, not being very far distant while staying over the hill at Balmoral . . . 'Half a dizen years syne, I cu'd hae held discourse wi' her! But noo, noo it's ower late; it canna be!' Then, after a pause of sadness, he continued, with growing earnestness, 'Ah, but she's a nice 'umman, a very hyoom'le'umman, and has aye been sae, I believe. God bless'er!' (446-7)

The passage plays with ideas of distance and closeness. The subject's broad vernacular appears to increase the separation between the two. Yet this leads to

⁷² George Reid to David Douglas, 15 April 1878. *NLS*. MS. 1661.

⁷³ Thomas Edward to David Douglas, 17 April 1878. *NLS*. MS. 1661.

⁷⁴ Thomas Edward to David Douglas, 22 April 1878. *NLS*. MS. 1661.

⁷⁵ Aileen Smiles, *Samuel Smiles and his Surroundings*, p. 136.

⁷⁶ Lynn Barber, *The Heyday of Natural History, 1820-1870* (London: Cape, 1980), p. 34.

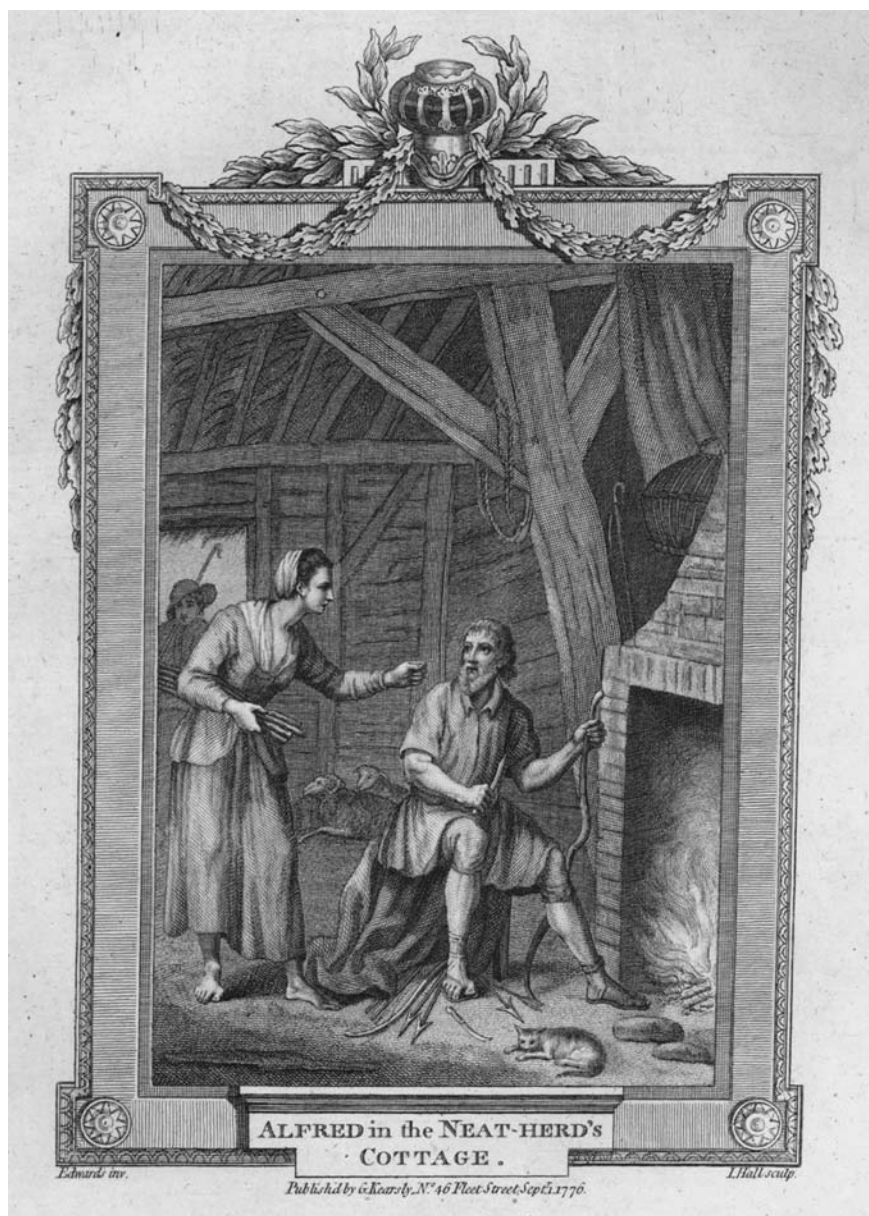
⁷⁷ Samuel Smiles, *Life of a Scotch Naturalist* (London: John Murray, 1897), p. xix.



3 'Thomas Edward, Naturalist and Cobbler', by Edward Linley Sambourne, printed in *Punch* (3 February 1877), p. 38. Reproduced with permission of Punch Ltd.

an odd reversal. The word 'hyoom'le', which Jolly explains in a footnote as meaning 'Humble, meaning that she did not stand upon her elevated rank in her intercourse with her subjects', and the use of the word 'woman', plays with the illusion of a natural, unhindered exchange between the 'hidden man' and the Queen. In Smiles's biography, the Queen's gift of a pension is also described at length in later editions of the work. Like Duncan, Edward wrote his thanks to the Queen, who described his letter as 'very beautiful and touching'.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Smiles, *Life of a Scotch Naturalist* (1882), p. vii.



4 'Alfred in the Neat-Herd's Cottage', print by John Hall, after Edward Edwards (1776)
© Trustees of the British Museum.

The fairy-tale dimension of such encounters was picked up by *Punch* in 1877 with a cartoon by Edward Linley Sambourne depicting Queen Victoria's post-biography visit to Edward's home. The cartoon plays with the idea of frames and containment. Queen and shoemaker are framed within a wreath inside the worker's home, and the jealous Banff population is symbolized by the figure inside the doorframe. The intrusion of outsiders threatens the exchange, just as the harmony of the wreath is threatened by escaping insects and butterflies. The picture conveys simultaneously the appeal of the scene and its precarious nature. Unsurprisingly, the first sentence of both Smiles's *Scotch Naturalist* and Jolly's *John Duncan* describes the biography as a 'tale' ('a tale of marvels', *SN*, v; 'the simple tale', *JD*, v). The juxtaposition of royalty and pauperism suggests that the obscure biographical subjects provided a space in which social fantasies could be played out.

The cartoon feeds into the popular narrative of the encounter between king and pauper. Shortly before the publication of Smiles's life of Edward, Queen Victoria had travelled incognito around Scotland, where she made a number of visits to cottagers. The Victorians also relished the most famous myth of such encounters between monarch and pauper: that of King Alfred who, taking refuge in a peasant's cottage, was scolded by the peasant's wife for allowing the bread to burn while she was occupied with other household duties. In the years leading to Smiles's biography, the episode was narrated in works including a best-selling biography of the King published by Thomas Hughes in 1869. Images had also been circulating since the late eighteenth century. The quasi-identical representation of Queen Victoria's visit to Edward and images of King Alfred's visit such as Edward Edward's representation indicate that the events surrounding Smiles's biography fed into the same fantasies.

The scene recalls yet another encounter between monarch and peasant: Carlyle's reflection on King Charles's stay inside a peasant's cottage in his 1832 essay 'Biography'. The differences between Carlyle's approach and that of Smiles and Sambourne are telling. Carlyle was fascinated by the details of the peasant's surroundings, such as the 'poor pair of clouted Shoes', whereas the cartoon relies on exaggeration and symbolism. Carlyle was intrigued by the representative quality of the 'rustic' and troubled by the effects of removing one rustic from his obscure background ('How comes it, that he alone of all the British rustics who tilled and lived along with him . . . should have chanced to rise on us?')⁷⁹ Smiles, Reid, and Sambourne, however, embraced the act of singling out one man from the ranks of the poor, and asserted vigorous control over their subject.

The biographies of Thomas Edward and John Duncan, and indeed earlier lives of working men, advertised themselves as innovative and worthy attempts to

⁷⁹ Carlyle, 'Biography', p. 258.

redress a biographical imbalance. However, the biographies emerge as an opportunity for the subject but above all for the biographer. The authors are less interested in penetrating the realities of a humble existence than in exploring the most appealing and acceptable manner of arranging a literary and in some cases even a physical encounter between their readers and their subject, which in the process confirms their own influence as men of letters. Regardless of their decision to write within the genre of biography, Smiles and Jolly both display a wariness of the effects that an unmediated exposure to the public sphere may have on their subject. They were not the only ones: biographies of unsuccessful men, which the next chapter explores, present a similar suspicion of the public.

4

'Tragic Failures' and 'Happy Mediocrity': Biographies of Unsuccessful Men

'Tis better to have fought and lost, | Than never to have fought at all.' The epigrammatic conclusion of Arthur Hugh Clough's poem 'Peschiera' (1854) made it a favourite quotation with the Victorians. Florence Nightingale, the sexologist Havelock Ellis, and the Dean of Westminster Arthur Penrhyn Stanley are some of the many to have used it in their letters and speeches.¹ The popularity of this phrase should alert us to the fact that, like hero-worship, the Victorian 'gospel of success' did not go unchallenged. Failure was, perhaps unsurprisingly, a significant preoccupation of an age fascinated with success. A failed life raises different implications from the life of an obscure working-class individual, the most obvious of which is that failure is not determined by class and can be accompanied by fame. Nevertheless, biographers found in the lives of men who had attempted but failed to achieve long-lasting eminence (for this category concerns only men) yet another way of countering the biographical trend of great lives.

Though some Victorian writers painted the misery of failure in all its degrading details (one thinks of Gissing's 1891 novel *New Grub Street*), others recast it in a more optimistic and fluid manner and refused to interpret 'failure' as simply the antithesis of success. The contributions of three writers—a critic, a poet, and a novelist—to the Victorian 'aesthetic of failure' shed valuable light on parallel attempts made by biographers to acclaim failed lives.

In his essay 'Ruskin's Aesthetic of Failure in *The Stones of Venice*', Francis O'Gorman reveals that, during the preparation of *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3), John Ruskin was troubled by the idea of failure. His father's response to his work was discouragingly sceptical, his marriage to Effie was, as we now know, disastrous, and he had increasing cause to doubt his worth as a critic in the face of

¹ The poem, written in 1850, contains obvious echoes of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, written the preceding year. Florence Nightingale, note to Benjamin Jowett, quoted in *Florence Nightingale on Society and Politics, Philosophy, Science, Education and Literature*, ed. by Lynn McDonald (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2003), v, 565; Havelock Ellis, 'Vae Victoribus!', *The Philosophy of Conflict and Other Essays in War-Time*, second series (London: Constable and Company, 1919), p. 32; A. P. Stanley, *Addresses and Sermons Delivered at St. Andrew's in 1872, 1875 and 1877* (London: Macmillan, 1877), p. 50.

public indifference. Ruskin's crisis of confidence was compounded by Thomas Carlyle's 'model of heroic literary masculinity', which made his own weaknesses more glaring in comparison. As O'Gorman proposes, Ruskin used *The Stones of Venice*—a work that moves from a city's 'Foundations' to its 'Fall'—to elaborate a defence of imperfection that would enable him to justify his own disappointments: 'such an aesthetic was what Ruskin needed to believe in himself'.²

Ruskin's 'aesthetic of failure' relies on his interpretation of evangelical doctrine and provides one of the foundations of his admiration for Gothic architecture. Ruskin stresses that Christianity recognizes 'the small things as well as the great, the individual value of every soul. But it not only recognizes its value; it confesses its imperfection, in only bestowing dignity upon the acknowledgement of unworthiness.' This passage from *The Stones of Venice* begins with the kind of broad statement that justified numerous biographies of hidden lives. Ruskin refines the idea, however, by dwelling on the importance of self-awareness within failure. This recognition of a fallen humanity and the valiant efforts made to overcome it offer evidence of piety, as they tend 'to God's greater glory'.³ Such a theory enables Ruskin to move a step further and present greatness and failure as inseparable. The idea that 'no great man ever stops working till he has reached his point of failure' is made into a 'law'.⁴ The religious justification for human weakness echoes biographies of 'fallen natures' in a number of ways. Equally important is the insight that Ruskin's bold defence of failure stemmed from a profound sense of insecurity. Art history enables the resolution of deeply personal issues, and becomes a kind of masked autobiographical discourse. Many biographers would attempt something similar.

Robert Browning had at least as many reasons as Ruskin for taking interest in the theme of failure. He received some critical approval for *Paracelsus* in 1835, but the disastrous reception of *Sordello* five years later made it abundantly clear that any ambitions of fame or critical applause he might have harboured would have to be drastically revised. Though he had legitimate reasons for hoping that *Men and Women* (1855) would succeed, reviewers remained unexpectedly and disappointingly severe. The same year, Browning responded to Ruskin's proffered advice with the declaration that 'I look on my own shortcomings too sorrowfully, try to remedy them too earnestly' but that he never felt 'other than disconcerted and apprehensive when the public, critics and all, begin to understand and approve me'.⁵ Approval finally did come, however—and was not unwelcome—with the publication of *The Ring and the Book* (1868–9).

² Francis O'Gorman, 'Ruskin's Aesthetic of Failure in *The Stones of Venice*', *Review of English Studies*, 55 (2004), pp. 376, 388.

³ John Ruskin, 'The Nature of Gothic', in *John Ruskin: Selected Writings*, ed. by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵ Robert Browning to John Ruskin, 10 December 1855, quoted in W. G. Collingswood, *The Life of John Ruskin* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), p. 166.

Like Ruskin, Browning shrugged off personal disappointments by elaborating an 'aesthetic of failure' in his poems and plays, which was also partly derived from his evangelical background. (In 'The Patriot', for example, the speaker finds reassurance in the idea that imperfection brings him closer to God: 'In triumphs, people have dropped down dead. | 'Paid by the world, what dost thou owe | Me?'—God might question; now instead, | 'Tis God shall repay: I am safer so'.)⁶ An astonishing number of his characters experience failure at some level, whether in love (as in 'The Statue and the Bust') or in art (such as 'Pictor Ignotus' or 'Andrea del Sarto'). Whereas some of these can blame their disappointments on their own moral or aesthetic cowardice, others are praised for having attempted great things. More value, of course, is given to those who fail in aiming higher, such as the speaker of *The Inn Album* (1875) who consoles himself with the thought: 'Better have failed in the high aim, as I | Than vulgarly in the low aim succeed.'⁷ The Victorian critic Edward Dowden contended that Browning repeatedly set out to 'wring a proud sense of triumph out of apparent failure'. In her study of Browning, K. M. Loudon stressed the autobiographical impulse behind Browning's aesthetic of failure by concluding that 'both in Art and in Life, there is room for "high failure," and that such failure, far from being worthless, has a value and a dignity all its own'.⁸ Browning's complex 'aesthetic of failure' deserves greater scrutiny than can be afforded here. It is worth stressing, however, that his emphasis upon the quiet heroism and courage present in perseverance in the face of failure finds a sympathetic response in a number of Victorian biographies.

If Robert Browning is the Victorian poet of failure, then George Eliot is its novelist. Though Eliot was also racked by the fear of failure (despite being infinitely more popular than either Ruskin or Browning), her 'aesthetic of failure' seems less informed by personal tribulations than by a deep-seated belief in the power of unostentatious contributions to the common good. The most sustained treatment of this idea is in *Middlemarch* (1871–2), which is, among other things, a study of the painful decline from ambition to failure. The novel begins with a reference to the 'Therasas' who 'found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion'. From the novel's opening, Eliot introduces the possibility

⁶ Robert Browning, 'The Patriot—an old story', in *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, ed. by Ian Jack and Robert Inglesfield (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), v, 192.

⁷ Robert Browning, 'The Inn Album', in *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, ed. by Ashby Blad Crowder (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995), xiii, 80.

⁸ Edward Dowden, *The Life of Robert Browning* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1914), p. 54; K. M. Loudon, *Browning's Sordello: A commentary* (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1906), p. 212.

of regarding failure in a tragi-heroic mode. The novel's study of failure is not confined to the area of female experience. Dorothea, but also Bulstrode, Lydgate, and Casaubon, present variations on the same theme. Bulstrode's failure is the most melodramatic, hinging as it does on a revelation of blackmail, which reveals that 'his life was after all a failure'. Lydgate's failure, brought about by compromise and cowardice, is of a very different kind. When he sets out upon his medical career, he is scornful of the 'middle-aged men' who 'meant to shape their own deeds and alter the world a little', yet come 'to be shapen after the average'; he does not 'mean to be one of those failures'. By the novel's conclusion, the doctor has 'gained an excellent practice' but 'always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do'. Casaubon's ineptitude is yet another variation on the theme. His failure is to some extent Dorothea's: having set out to forge a life as the amanuensis of a great man, she gradually stops 'struggling against the perception of facts' and begins to look 'steadily at her husband's failures, still more at his possible consciousness of failure'.⁹ Failure comes to seem like an inevitable human condition. Consequently, characters are no longer evaluated according to the level of their success but according to how they understand and respond to their own imperfections.

At the heart of the novel is an exchange between Dorothea and Will Ladislav that explores the value of failure. Piqued by Will's quick assessment of her unsuccessful marriage and Casaubon's academic ineptitude, Dorothea declares that 'failure after long perseverance is much grander than never to have a striving good enough to be called a failure'.¹⁰ Like Browning, Dorothea has a sense of the nobility of striving for noble and great ends, whatever the result. Her own limitations—pressures from both without and within—are compensated for by the fact that, as the finale of the novel announces, she has prepared the way for the greatness of others. The characters who struggle the most with their feelings of failure are the male characters. As Henry Alley writes in *The Quest for Anonymity: The Novels of George Eliot* (1997), Dorothea tempers 'Lydgate's masculine sense that his life is a failure because prestige and reputation have told him so'.¹¹ This raises the idea that the concept of a content form of failure, acting as a quiet and beneficial influence, is at least in part a gendered one. The fact that biographers of failed men often described their subjects in similar terms adds to the debate concerning the Victorians' troubled relationship with gendered roles.

In *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation* (1978), Alan Mintz argues that

biography is uninterested in the diffusive effects of an unhistorical life . . . Not so with the novel. The subjects of biographies and the characters of novels face the same points of pressure in their histories . . . Yet, whereas figures in biographies always seem to come

⁹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, pp. 3, 715, 821, 356.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹¹ Alley, *The Quest for Anonymity*, p. 122.

through and to secure achievements worthy of public discussion and description, figures in novels do not. They choose unwisely and become compromised and entrapped . . . The empathic complicity that is the ground for our identification with the failures of the novel world is, moreover, a different and more complex bond than the admiration we feel for the 'achievers' of biography.¹²

Mintz's account of the two genres ignores the fact that many biographers shared the interest of fiction-writers in men (for in this case the subjects are overwhelmingly male) who succumb to various pressures, 'choose unwisely', and become 'entrapped' in different ways.

The Victorians were particularly fascinated by the lives of charismatic men who had failed to live up to their potential and who, having died without securing immortality for themselves, had inspired ardent friendships. Arthur Hallam's death famously inspired Lord Tennyson's impassioned *In Memoriam* (1850). A handful of Victorian biographies deserve to be more widely known, not only for their artistry but for their contribution to this complex nineteenth-century trend. Thomas Carlyle's 1851 biography *The Life of John Sterling* and Margaret Oliphant's *The Life of Edward Irving* (1862) mirror the discussions of failure by Ruskin, Browning, and Eliot in many ways. These works test the boundaries between biographical and autobiographical writing by considering failure in highly personal and often self-reflexive ways. They depict failure as a sign of integrity and heroism. Finally, they also consider the notion of the failed life as a life of quiet influence, and in doing so they destabilize Victorian ideas of gender. Edward Verrall Lucas's 1893 life of the poet Bernard Barton is a very different work from the two earlier biographies—not least because of the subject himself, who did not die tragically young, but instead lived contentedly to the age of sixty-five. Here, the failure to achieve greatness is positively trumpeted; Barton's ability to contribute to his community through his personal attributes is considered far more valuable. Together, these works show once more that drawing attention to a subject that did not conform to the more traditional interpretation of a 'great man' did not involve trying to vouchsafe them increased fame. These works are far more interested in celebrating the power of 'hidden influences'.

THE LIFE OF JOHN STERLING (1851)

Dinah Birch writes that 'Carlyle is primarily interested in those whose active heroism, by whatever means, moves and shakes the world. Ruskin's approach to biography takes an inward, self-reflective, and often very much more sceptical

¹² Alan Mintz, *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 24.

turn. His exemplary lives often have as much to do with failure as with success.¹³ However, Thomas Carlyle's *The Life of John Sterling* (1851), the most powerful biography of what few contemporaries hesitated to call a failed life, partakes of the same impulses as Ruskin's.¹⁴

Sterling, born in 1806, vacillated between taking up the law, politics, the Church, and literature as his profession. In 1828, he began to run the *Athenaeum* with F. D. Maurice. His revolutionary interests found an outlet in General Torrijos's attempted 1829 coup in Spain, which ended in a disaster that Sterling was fortunate to escape through a timely marriage. An attempted emigration to the West Indies did not last long. Sterling, on his return, was ordained deacon, but abandoned the Church after six months. As his pulmonary complaints increased, he turned to literature and produced articles, poetry, tales, and a play, none of which won much recognition. His life, punctuated by trips to warmer climates, ended in 1844, when he was aged only thirty-eight. Carlyle first met Sterling at the offices of John Stuart Mill in 1835, and they became close friends. Carlyle saw in Sterling an example of the 'sincere man' who had the potential to be a hero, though he perceived Sterling's weaknesses—the faults of his works, his damaging indecisiveness.¹⁵ Carlyle was not the only illustrious writer to be charmed by Sterling's personality: John Stuart Mill admitted that he was 'more attached to him than I have ever been to any other man'.¹⁶

The Life of Sterling grew out of two impulses: the desire to experiment with biography and the determination to rehabilitate a friend. Three years earlier, Julius Charles Hare had published Sterling's essays and tales alongside a short memoir.¹⁷ Hare had tutored Sterling at Cambridge and encouraged him to enter the Church; his memoir is concerned with claiming the centrality of religion to Sterling's life. Sterling's friends were numerous in rejecting this. Encouraged by Sterling's brother Anthony, Carlyle set out to demonstrate that 'Artist not Saint was the real bent of his being' (164), and took as his central theme his friend's confused quest for a vocation: an image of the chaos of the times.

Thus, as Arthur Penrhyn Stanley wrote, 'his story, with hardly an incident worth recording, has had the singular fate of being told by two of the most gifted men of his time'.¹⁸ The work is a generically fluid narrative that slips from biography to autobiography and back again. It also contemplates the strained

¹³ Dinah Birch, 'Ruskin and Carlyle: Changing Forms of Biography in *Fors Clavigera*', in Cubitt and Warren, *Heroic Reputations*, p. 180.

¹⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of John Sterling* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1851). All further references are to this edition, which is henceforth referred to as *The Life of Sterling*.

¹⁵ Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 109.

¹⁶ John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. by John M. Robson (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 125.

¹⁷ Julius Charles Hare, *Essays and Tales by John Sterling, collected and edited, with a Memoir of his Life by Julius Charles Hare, M.A., Rector of Herstmonceux* (London: John W. Parker, 1848), 2 vols.

¹⁸ Arthur Stanley, quoted in Anne Kimball Tuell, *John Sterling: A Representative Victorian* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1941), p. 1.

relations between the man of letters and the public. The greatest originality of Carlyle's work lies in the way it paradoxically uses biography, that most publicizing of genres, as a means of rescuing a friend from distasteful public debate.

Before the theological controversy had even begun, Carlyle had expressed a desire to write such a biography. Narrating the life of a friend who was also a failure enabled him to test the ideas on the genre that he had begun to pronounce several years before, notably in the 1832 essay 'Biography'. 'Why, indeed, any life at all of such a man?' asked Hepworth Dixon in *The Athenaeum*, adding that 'neither as a writer nor as a thinker can the late Mr. Sterling be held to have taken rank.'¹⁹ Carlyle, rather than avoid the problematical nature of his choice of subject, places Sterling's failures squarely at the heart of the work. Readers are informed that Sterling's 'character was not supremely original; neither was his fate in the world wonderful. What he did was inconsiderable enough'. He even adds that Sterling's 'performance and real or seeming importance in this world was actually not of a kind to demand an express Biography' (7). The biographer signals clearly that the subject presents a contrast to traditional biographical great lives, but this lack of greatness is turned to positive account, as it releases new biographical prospects.

Reviewers did not pick up on the closeness of Carlyle's words in the biography to Samuel Johnson's almost exactly a century before. In 1750, Johnson famously wrote: 'I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. . . . We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by dangers, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure.'²⁰ Here is Carlyle, in the introduction to *The Life of Sterling*: 'I have remarked that a true delineation of the smallest man, and his scene of pilgrimage through life, is capable of interesting the greatest man; that all men are to an unspeakable degree brothers, each man's life a strange emblem of every man's' (10). Carlyle shared with Johnson a belief in biography's didactic powers. In 1848 he privately envisaged writing the 'picture of a gifted soul whom I knew and who was my friend. Might not many things withal be *taught* in the course of such a delineation?'²¹ There is a shift in Carlyle's passage, however, from what is useful to what is interesting. Empathy, more than instruction, is his concern. Didacticism and emotion were united in Johnson's *Life of Savage*, another biography of a 'failure', which often mirrors Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*. Both biographers were intimate friends with their subject, and there are strong echoes of Johnson's work as Carlyle and Sterling walk through London, the one condemned to poetic failure and an early death, the other destined for lionization.

¹⁹ [Hepworth Dixon review], *The Athenaeum*, 1088 (18 October 1851), p. 1088.

²⁰ Johnson, 'The Dignity and Usefulness of Biography', pp. 318–23.

²¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Journal*, 9 February 1848, quoted in James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London* (London: Longmans Green, 1884), I, 423.

Not content simply to acknowledge Sterling's failures, Carlyle elevates them to a heroic pitch. He draws extensively on classical tragedy to depict his friend, a young hero fighting a noble but vain battle against forces outside his control. He organizes the life of his subject into five acts, 'five swift flights, not for any high or low object in life, but for life itself' (176). The biographer functions as a tragic chorus, foreseeing but unable to alter events. As Carlyle describes Sterling's botched revolutionary attempts, the narrative is punctuated by the biographer's cries of 'Behold' (94) and 'Wo on it' (118). The manner in which Carlyle attempted to bring out the tragedy of the 'miserablest mortals' in *The French Revolution* has already been noted. His use of tragedy in the context of biography is worth unpicking a little further.

The Life of Sterling illustrates a recurrent feature in the depiction of inglorious subjects: the appeal to different literary genres. Most biographers declared their work's affinity to poetry—as with the appeals to Thomas Gray in lives of humble men, the evocation of Romantic poets in the lives of humble naturalists or the compiler of *Women of Worth* who called for sketches representing 'the poetry and charm of everyday life'.²² Yet in many cases the terms 'drama' and 'poetry' used by biographers and reviewers alike were simply shorthand for intensity of emotion and a vivid style. Reviewers praising Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (which was influenced by *The Life of Sterling*) evoked its 'pathos' and 'tragic interest', and described it alternatively as a 'poem-picture', a 'highly wrought drama', and 'like a novel'. George Eliot's plea to consider 'the poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy, lying in the experience of a human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes'²³ further illustrates that genres were summoned loosely. These parallels betray an underlying conviction that emotions are better stirred through fiction than so-called reality; the literary forms matter less than the expanse of human experience they point towards. (The danger is that the appeal to fictionality could distance the subject from the reader.) This applies in part to *The Life of Sterling*, with its skilful use of recurrent imagery (such as meteors, moonshine, and sunshine), which justifies William Henry Marquess's description of it as a 'heroic poem'.²⁴

However, it is tragedy in particular that Carlyle is drawn to here. In his lectures on Shakespearean tragedy, A. C. Bradley stresses that 'the saying that every death-bed is the scene of the fifth act of a tragedy has its meaning, but it would not be true if the word "tragedy" bore its dramatic sense'.²⁵ Yet Carlyle does use the word 'tragedy' in precisely such a dramatic manner, and structures his biography accordingly into acts, with a rise and fall, and the subject's fate precipitated by a

²² [Anon.], *Women of Worth*, p. v.

²³ See Chapter 5, p. 155; Eliot, 'The Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 42.

²⁴ William Henry Marquess, *Lives of the Poet: The First Century of Keats Biography* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985), p. 44.

²⁵ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 4.

kind of tragic flaw. Carlyle even pauses in the narrative to exclaim: 'Why, like a fated Orestes, is man so whipt by the Furies, and driven madly hither and thither, if it is not even that he may seek some shrine, and there make expiation and find deliverance?' (119)

George Eliot provides a close parallel of Carlyle's use of tragedy in her fiction, not only through such statements as that 'the pride and obstinacy of millers and other insignificant people . . . have their tragedy', but through her extensive use of Aristotelian notions of tragedy within her works.²⁶ In 'Notes on the Spanish Gypsy', Eliot's phrase 'The dire strife | Of poor Humanity's afflicted will, | Struggling in vain with ruthless destiny' has obvious echoes with Carlyle.²⁷ Both writers reshape tragedy as a more democratic form. Carlyle does not go as far in *The Life of Sterling* as to combine tragedy with the life of a peasant—his subject, though no aristocrat, is far less humble. Yet there is a similar impulse to expand the ranks of the heroic.

Part of the attraction of the tragic framework lay in the fact that Carlyle did not wish to limit his biography of John Sterling to a simple commemoration. Carlyle uses his grandiose framework to express certain truths about his epoch. For Carlyle, Sterling's failings make him a representative of the times. Sterling is referred to as 'this young man of the nineteenth century' (163) and his life is 'emblematic of that of his Time' (343). Carlyle moves continuously between the specifics of Sterling's life and 'this unexampled epoch' (44). It is, he argues, 'in the history of such vehement, far-shining and yet intrinsically light and volatile souls, missioned into this epoch to seek their way there, that we best see what a confused epoch it is' (138). The sentence establishes Sterling's heroism through the words 'missioned' and 'far-shining', yet the use of the plural alerts the reader to the more general significance of the subject's life. With characteristic vehemence, Carlyle depicts the age of which Sterling is an image: it is a 'mad world' (50), a 'waste-weltering epoch' (51) in which 'old spiritual highways and recognized paths to the Eternal' are 'torn up and flung in heaps' (126).

Sterling's 'representative' quality is confirmed by the fact that the battle between religion and literature around which his life is organized is mimicked in later biographies of unsuccessful poets. For example, Lewis Morrison-Grant, a Scotsman and aspiring poet who died at the age of twenty-one, was the subject of a moving though somewhat laboured narrative that records his wavering allegiance to the Church and poetry. The work, roughly the length of *The Life of Sterling*, depicts in tragic terms the subject's recurring illnesses, and takes as a core theme Morrison-Grant's search for a profession. The biography is also replete with references to Carlyle. Morrison-Grant added an essay on 'The Hero Unknown' to his copy of *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* that the biographer

²⁶ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 172.

²⁷ 'Notes on the Spanish Gypsy', in J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885), III, 44.

quotes: "The history of the world, the history of great men?" Nay, rather all that is worth recording of silent suffering and struggling ones, great or little outwardly to the world's view, but inwardly, indubitably great! Morrison-Grant is described as a 'voice in the wilderness'; his poetic sensitivity is seen to clash with the realities of Victorian life.²⁸

For Carlyle, the choice of literature by so many as an alternative to the old, vanished, refuge of the Church is a potent illustration of the confusion of the nineteenth century. With the undermining of the 'cramped, confused and indeed almost obsolete' professions of the Church, the Law, and Medicine, Literature had become the new, illusory, 'sanctuary':

Of all forms of public life, in the Talking Era, it was clear that only one completely suited Sterling,—the anarchic, nomadic, entirely aerial and unconditional one, called Literature . . . As many do, and ever more must do, in these our years and times. This is the chaotic haven of so many frustrate activities; where all manner of good gifts go up in far-seen smoke or conflagration. (58)

The depiction of 'Literature' refers back to images used earlier in the work to condemn Coleridge, the age's most famous 'Talker'; his 'moonshine' (81) matches literature's 'aerial' qualities. The imagery of smoke picks up the language of fire that runs throughout the biography and that, alongside images of water, light, and darkness, lends mythic proportions to Sterling's attempts to find his place in society. Carlyle's biography explores the consequences of Romantic depictions of the artist as a figure detached from society. To survive in an age of productivity, literature has to be redefined as a profession, yet Sterling is unable to adapt. The biography presents a division between seductive cultural institutions and the powerlessness of individuals trapped within them.

Carlyle's wariness of literature is well documented, from his attempts to dissuade the Brownings from writing poetry to his journal entry: 'Do I really love poetry? I sometimes fancy almost, not.'²⁹ Norma Clarke has dwelt on Carlyle's profound ambivalence regarding his own literary activities and his struggle to account for them as a valid and virile profession. As Clarke argues, 'Carlyle's personal sense of failure to pursue an honest calling, one that was immediately recognizable as worthy of the eldest son of a God-fearing family, led him to construct a social role for himself that corresponded more to Calvinist notions of the priesthood than to contemporary expectations about writers.'³⁰ It was in this way that his famous elevation of the man of letters to the ranks of

²⁸ Anderson, *Lewis Morrison-Grant*, pp. 292, 279.

²⁹ Thomas Carlyle, 'Notebook Entry', 3 December 1826, in *Two Note Books of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. by Charles Eliot Norton (New York: Grolier Club, 1878), p. 151.

³⁰ Norma Clarke, 'Strenuous Idleness: Thomas Carlyle and the Man of Letters as Hero', in *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, ed. by Michael Roper and John Tosh (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 40.

heroes was born. Clearly, these personal anxieties also fed into *The Life of Sterling* and helped to create the representation of Sterling as a tragic hero.

Such autobiographical input makes *The Life of Sterling* a generically unstable work. Carol T. Christ has contended that whereas women were discouraged from writing non-fiction prose, male writers embraced the form to assume 'the role of sage' and used it 'as the locus for an image of masculine heroism'.³¹ However, though there were far more male non-fiction writers, male writers were often as anguished as female writers about the validity of autobiography, and none more so than Carlyle himself who, in a journal entry for 10 October 1843, insisted that 'the world has no business with my life'.³² The phrase is an interesting one, since Carlyle does not here reject the business of introspection, or self-consciousness, as he does so vehemently in 'Characteristics'. Instead, the distrust is directed towards the public.

Despite these doubts, Carlyle flirted repeatedly with autobiography. *Sartor Resartus* (1833–4), for example, drew on personal experiences including his childhood and wavering faith. Judith van Oosterom has cited *Sartor Resartus* and Carlyle's *Reminiscences* as proof of the fact that though 'the memoir as a thinly disguised form of autobiography was more commonly seen in women writers of the period, at pains to hide a more direct and self-revelatory style of writing about themselves', it is also something that Carlyle practised and, in fact, found liberating in artistic and personal ways.³³ *The Life of Sterling*, which van Oosterom does not mention, should be added to the ranks of Carlyle's most self-revealing works. The biographical form acts as a buffer from the ungenerous eyes of the public.

Indeed, a striking feature of *The Life of Sterling* is its representation of the public. The failure of the 'new' profession of literature is partly blamed on the public it sets out to serve, which is depicted as anonymous, despising, and despised. In this, it has much in common with the public scorned by many Romantic poets. In 1818, for example, Keats wrote to Reynolds: 'I have not the slightest feel of humility towards the public... A Preface is written to the public—a thing I cannot help looking upon as an enemy, and which I cannot address without feelings of hostility... I cannot be subdued before them.'³⁴ As imagined by Keats, the public was also an anonymous group. Yet where Keats spoke as a defiant antagonist, often confident of his later rediscovery as an

³¹ Carol T. Christ, '“The Hero as Man of Letters”: Masculinity and Victorian Nonfiction Prose', in *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*, ed. Thais E. Morgan (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 25, 31.

³² Thomas Carlyle, 10 October 1843, quoted in Froude, *Thomas Carlyle*, I, 1.

³³ Judith van Oosterom, 'Unlikely Bedfellows: Thomas Carlyle and Margaret Oliphant as Vulnerable Autobiographers', in *Victorian Keats and Romantic Carlyle: The Fusions and Confusions of Literary Periods*, ed. by C. C. Barfoot (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), p. 248.

³⁴ Richard Monckton Milnes, *Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats*, 2 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1848), I, 120. All further references are to volume I of this edition.

important poet by a more refined audience, Sterling assumes no such stance. For Carlyle, referring to Sterling's literary failures, the poet 'submitted very patiently to the discouraging neglect with which it was received by the world: for indeed the 'Ye' said nothing audible, in the way of pardon or other doom' (255). Keats's insouciance has made way in Sterling to a state of humiliating dependence, with the public as a God-like figure dispensing humble aspirants to heaven or hell. Carlyle later uses the title of Sterling's poem *The Election* to compare the reading public with a political electorate, as the poet inquires 'of the public what its suffrage was' (279), with all the anxieties attendant upon the extension of the suffrage hinted at by the comparison.

Carlyle's response in *The Life of Sterling* to an uninterested or disapproving public in a 'dislocated age' is bold. He takes the genre of biography, traditionally concerned with publicity and with strengthening the bond between subject and readers through the mediating efforts of the biographer, and reformulates it as a private act of compensation for a disappointing public sphere.

Biography provides a means of conferring a unity upon a life which was torn apart by the chaos of the nineteenth century. Unlike the baggy compiled volumes of Victorian biography, the style and structure of the work is given almost unprecedented attention. The five acts are played out across the three parts of the work, the first of which ends on a note of depression, the second with hope, and the third with death. There is a careful interweaving of the language of heroism ('adventure', 'pilgrimage', 'ardent', 'noble') with the fleeting (moonshine, meteors, wandering, and flights). If Sterling himself failed as a writer, the biography is very much a 'literary' life.

Carlyle also reconciles the subject with himself. Throughout, Carlyle depicts Sterling as both childish and masculine. Sterling's childishness is predominantly invoked to pre-empt possible criticism ('if perceptibly or imperceptibly there is a touch of ostentation in him, blame it not; it is so innocent, so good and childlike', 61). The appellation serves to protect Sterling, yet in doing so risks distancing him by showing his frailty. To counter this, Carlyle brings in frequent affirmations of Sterling's 'manfulness' (299). As he determines to pursue his literary endeavours Sterling 'right manfully . . . walked his wild stern way towards the goal' (333). The unique moment during which these two aspects of the subject are united is when he is in the presence of his biographer. The two ride over Hampstead or wander down Regent Street, and 'Sterling was charming on such occasions: at once a child and a gifted man' (247). The passage suggests that the biographer is uniquely capable of conferring harmony on the life.

More importantly, however, the biographer rescues the subject from the vulgarities and indignities of the public sphere. Firstly, Carlyle acknowledges the theological dispute from which his own biography has sprung before dismissing it. The controversy led to Sterling's life being put on 'trial', at which Carlyle offered his own 'testimony'. Yet Sterling is gradually rescued from a distasteful public quarrel. Carlyle asks: 'What is he doing here in inquisitorial

sanbenito, with nothing but ghastly spectralities prowling round him, and inarticulately screeching and gibbering what they call their judgement on him!' (5). The immediate reference is to the friction surrounding Sterling's religious proclivities, with the reference to the garment worn by individuals accused by the Spanish inquisition, which changed in design according to whether the accused was penitent or impenitent. The passage contains wider echoes of the depiction of the public sphere in general.

It is not simply religious debate but any debate about Sterling that Carlyle condemns. Characteristically, he longs instead for the 'Supreme Silences, who alone can judge of it or him' (7). Inevitably, the biographer, involved in both a literary act and a counter-testimony to the interpretation of Sterling given by Hare, is hesitant, and notes his initial reluctance 'to trouble the reviewers, and greater or lesser public' (7) with his own biography. Indeed, as if to diminish his role as the facilitator in a transaction between Sterling and the public, he is masked behind the use of the present tense ('the young ardent soul that enters on this world with heroic purpose', 50), a stylistic device that he had used extensively in *The French Revolution*.

A second, important, gesture is that Carlyle does not request greater public recognition for his subject. Unlike Martin, in his life of John Clare, Milnes in his biography of John Keats, or Gilchrist in his study of William Blake,³⁵ the reading public is not asked to reconsider their negative judgement. Though he submits the idea that the public may have been slightly too severe on Sterling, Carlyle is comfortable with the notion that Sterling's literary efforts do not rank particularly high. The only reconsideration undertaken is his own, an entirely personal regret at having dismissed his friend's works so harshly: 'after ten years' space, I find it, with a touching mixture of pleasure and repentance, considerably better than it then seemed to me' (279). Unconventionally, it is the biographer, rather than the public, who must act as penitent. (This repentance creates a parallel with his guilty recollection of his marriage in his *Reminiscences*.) Certainly, Sterling's works do not possess the genius of Keats, Blake, or Clare. Yet biographers of far lesser talents did not shy from begging for the world's approval or announcing that widespread acclaim was simply a matter of time. Carlyle's stance is part of a more determined effort to protect Sterling from the public sphere that had treated him so roughly in his lifetime.

Most arrestingly of all, towards the close of the biography, Carlyle announces that Sterling's final 'stanzas of verse' to him shall be 'kept for myself alone', and are 'among my sacred possessions' (334). This is a startling rejection of the idea of the biographer as one who exposes, and entirely frustrates the reader's expectations of the function of biography. Carlyle's impulse is towards silence and secrecy, not display.

³⁵ See Chapter 6.

The biography becomes less a public defence than the enactment of a personal need. It has a chiasmic structure that creates a buffer between the subject and his public. The opening pages begin with an evocation of Carlyle's personal connection with Sterling before dwelling on the public clash that had unfortunately overshadowed his memory. In the final paragraphs, Carlyle again reflects on what the public has made of Sterling, before completing the work with a statement on his private relations with his friend. This last dimension is seen as infinitely more important: 'Nay, what of men or of the world? Here, visible to myself, for some while, was a brilliant human presence, distinguishable, honourable and lovable amid the dim common populations' (344). The biographer himself finds refuge from the 'dim common populations' through his subject. This fits in with Carlyle's broader belief that the purpose of biography, outlined most strongly in his essay 'Biography', is that of stimulating the 'loving Heart'.³⁶

Though Carlyle, who stressed the didactic potential of *The Life of Sterling*, felt that readers could achieve a meaningful bond with his subject, it is above all *his* heart that is stimulated through the process. George Eliot had immediately recognized that this was indeed 'a labour of love',³⁷ and readers were more affected by the depiction of a tender Carlyle than of his bruised friend. Carlyle's neighbours and fellow-biographers, Anne and Alexander Gilchrist, wrote to a friend that 'it is a book to vivify one's very heart, revealing to us as it does the tender, gentle, beautiful, loving and lovable nature of *him*'.³⁸ As Robert Keith Miller writes, the work 'is related to the Victorian celebration of personal feeling and devotion as a last resort in a world where ignorant armies clash by night. The primary impulse behind *Sterling*, like *In Memoriam*, is love'.³⁹ In Carlyle's poetical biography, as in Tennyson's biographical poetry, unease with the age is expressed through a personal act of grieving.

It is part of the power and indeed the paradox of the work that Carlyle uses a form dedicated to public display to create a work of intimacy in which the subject is gradually rescued from the public sphere and enclosed in a less unforgiving private relationship. A further paradox is that it was precisely the private relationship that stimulated the curiosity of readers. *The Life of Sterling* is the best Victorian example of the life of an inglorious subject being written by an infinitely more famous biographer. George Eliot remarked in her review that 'in a book of such parentage we care less about the subject than about its treatment'.⁴⁰ Hepworth Dixon, himself a biographer, agreed that 'probably nine out of every ten readers of this book will turn it over in the expectation of

³⁶ Carlyle, 'Biography', p. 259.

³⁷ [George Eliot], 'The Life of Sterling', *Westminster Review*, 62 (January 1852), pp. 247–9.

³⁸ Anne Gilchrist, quoted in *Anne Gilchrist: Her Life and Writings*, ed. by Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887), p. 36.

³⁹ Robert Keith Miller, *Carlyle's 'Life of John Sterling': A Study in Victorian Biography* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 50.

⁴⁰ [Eliot], 'The Life of Sterling', pp. 247–9.

meeting Mr. Carlyle rather than Mr. Sterling in its pages'.⁴¹ The fact that it was Carlyle writing the life of this unremarkable subject maintained the tension between exposition and concealment that runs throughout the work. Carlyle's presence ensured that John Sterling, finally, would be remembered neither as a brave failure nor as an emblem of the nineteenth century, but purely as the improbable subject of a masterly biography.

LIVES OF UNFULFILLED PROMISE

The Life of Sterling fed into a widespread Victorian fascination with charismatic young men cut off in the prime of life. John Sterling, Arthur Hallam, Charles Buller, and, as William Lubenow reveals in his study of the Cambridge Apostles, almost a dozen other Apostles died young.⁴² Their association with the more illustrious men of the group, which included Tennyson and Monckton Milnes, exacerbated their appeal. To some extent, these men shared the aura of the earlier Romantic poets who had met similarly early deaths. There was, however, a significant difference: though these men showed extensive potential, they never lived to fulfil expectations and were posthumously admired not for their works but for the friendships they inspired and the hidden influences they wielded.

In 1851, William Makepeace Thackeray used the publication of Carlyle's *Life of Sterling* to reflect on this trend in *The Leader*. 'Sterling's life', he reflects,

is the history of one of the high-mettled losers. The contemporaries of his youth expected the greatest things of him . . . Leaving their university for the great city, their young successors looked out after them from the academy, expectant till these great geniuses should begin to move the world. There came no news of any such revolutions. This man was not Prime Minister, nor that leader of the Opposition . . . But for circumstance, but for physical obstacle, a disease of the brain, or the heart, or the lungs—the want of a patron—too little money or too much—too fastidious and delicate a training and culture, perhaps—many of these greatest men whom the world knows nothing of, might have risen to command a reputation . . . instead of unknown monuments in obscure and solitary country churchyards.⁴³

Thackeray, who was never a formal member of the Apostles although he knew many of its members, was struck by a generation of wasted talent. Unlike Carlyle, he does not blame the failure of these men on the vicissitudes of the age but instead to a range of personal misfortunes. The predominant cause is, however,

⁴¹ [Dixon], *The Athenaeum*, p. 1088.

⁴² These include Henry Lusington, John Henry Pratt, Francis Balfour, John Hopkinson, Harry Goodhart, J. K. Stephen, Theodore Beck, Rupert Brooke, Ferenc Békassy, and Francis Bliss. See William C. Lubenow, *The Cambridge Apostles, 1820–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 80.

⁴³ [William Makepeace Thackeray], 'Carlyle on Sterling', *The Leader*, 2 (25 October 1851), p. 1021. See p. 130, n. 50, for more on the attribution of this article.

one of excessive delicacy, both physical and intellectual, which in turn brings to mind Carlyle's calls for a more robust approach to the problems of the times.

The attention Thackeray draws to a collective desire to see these men succeed partly explains why these 'underachievers' should have been maintained in the public eye through biographies and commemorative poems. The Apostles formed, to use Noel Annan's phrase, an 'intellectual aristocracy', which made them more likely to advertise each other's achievements, however small. At each death, fellow Apostles would rush to give their support or propose memorials, and these collective outpourings of grief would, as Lubenow reveals, strengthen the friendships of the surviving Apostles. Certainly, one of the reasons why these unsuccessful lives gained such prominence was the importance which members of the Apostles attached to the promotion of each other's works. A 1906 study of the group stresses that 'they were in all cases the first and strongest champions of each other's claims to public attention'.⁴⁴ As an added incentive, the act of commemorating the life of unsuccessful men of letters or artists also confirmed the far greater success of the surviving eulogist. Thackeray's reflections on his fellow Cambridge scholars reminds the reader of his own success, just as Carlyle's intervention on behalf of Sterling emphasizes even further his own cultural authority.

Clubbishness and the friendships forged at university are not enough, however, to account for the period's fascination with these men of unfulfilled promise. Carlyle, after all, had not formed part of the group, although he associated with many of its members. Other writers even less connected with the group were prompted to reflect on their aura: Samuel Smiles wrote a sketch of Sterling in *Brief Biographies* (1860), which opens with the statement that Sterling

seems to have been one of those beautiful natures that carry about with them a charm to captivate all beholders. They are full of young genius, full of promise, full of enthusiasm; and seem to be on the high road towards honor, fame, and glory, when suddenly their career is cut short by death, and their friends are left lamenting. Just such another character was Charles Pemberton,——a man of somewhat kindred genius to Sterling,——who had *done* comparatively little, but had excited great hopes among a circle of ardent friends and admirers.⁴⁵

Once more, Sterling is represented as belonging to a recognized contemporary 'type'. The public discussion of this type is, however, curious. It is surprising that Smiles, who placed such importance on work, should be interested in the lives of those who 'had *done* comparatively little'. That both Thackeray and Smiles should draw public attention to lives that had an impact only on an intimate 'circle' of relatives and acquaintances is equally intriguing. While Thackeray's language implies that he was part of this circle, Smiles's stance is that of an outsider

⁴⁴ Frances M. Brookfield, *The Cambridge 'Apostles'* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1906), p. 16.

⁴⁵ Smiles, *Brief Biographies*, p. 470.

looking in—Sterling ‘seems to have been’ a powerful influence, though not one that the biographer can pin down.

The broader appeal of such men lay partly in their almost intangible quality, and the way in which they were caught between the Romantic and Victorian periods. In a study pre-dating Carlyle’s biography, the American writer Henry Theodore Tuckerman alluded to Sterling as ‘a type of this class of men, singularly prevalent in this age’, whose particular talents no longer had a place in society: ‘that life, in its fragmentary issues, its alternations of labour and despondency, its moods of criticism and enthusiasm, hope and apathy, has in it a blended glory and wo, promise and failure, sadness and brilliancy, which although analogous to human life in general, involves, as it seems to us, a phase characteristic of the times’. Tuckerman goes on to explain that ‘while greater scope than ever before is now afforded talent, and unequalled opportunities for knowledge exist, earnestness of purpose seems to find no heritage or goal’. He adds that the mercantile age presents no ‘crusade for the soldier holy enough to sanction and consecrate his adventurous will and elicit his unswerving crusade’.⁴⁶

This language closely anticipates Carlyle’s own depiction of Sterling as a tragic warrior. Carlyle used similar language to describe other members of the group, notably his old pupil Charles Buller, who he commemorated in *The Examiner* in terms reminiscent of his descriptions of John Sterling (‘he has fallen, at this point of the march, an honourable soldier’).⁴⁷ That Sterling and his companions died from consumption (Sterling), apoplexy (Hallam), or typhus (Buller) did not prevent their contemporaries from seeing them as the sacrificial victims of an age in which old ideas of heroism had vanished. The imagery of youthfulness and illness that surrounds them becomes a symbol for the tragic ineffectiveness of men of letters in a more robust, industrial age.

The theme of unfulfilled expectations retained its hold on the public imagination beyond this generation of Apostles. Numerous later works depict equally charismatic young men—painters and writers—who died before they could accomplish any work of significance. They include an 1850 memoir of the poet-painter David Scott by his brother, John P. Seddon’s 1858 biography of his brother Thomas Seddon, William MacDuff’s *The Struggles of a Young Artist: Being a Memoir of David C. Gibson, by a Brother Artist* (1858), and the 1894 life of the consumptive poet Lewis Morrison-Grant.⁴⁸ (Many of the biographers and

⁴⁶ Henry Theodore Tuckerman, *Characteristics of Literature, Illustrated by the Genius of Distinguished Men* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1849), pp. 193, 196.

⁴⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *The Examiner* (2 December 1848); repr. Richard Herne Shepherd, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Carlyle*, 2 vols. (London: W. H. Allen, 1881), II, 41.

⁴⁸ *Memoir of David Scott* (1850) and *Memoir and Letters of the late Thomas Seddon, Artist* (1858) are both domestic biographies, but they offer interesting reflections on biographies of unsuccessful lives. William Bell Scott in particular picks up the themes of other unsuccessful lives, as he reflects: ‘Nor is it strange that a man invited by nature to a certain intellectual exertion, unsought-for and uncared-for by the age, called by his ambition to do great deeds in that walk, should by baffled and die’, p. 4. See Codell, *The Victorian Artist*, for more on biographies of young artists.

subjects were either acquaintances or admirers of Carlyle.) The works perpetuate an obsession with the battle between religion and literature and, above all, the difficult quest for a vocation in an alienating society. What remains of these men is a faith in their potential, and a recollection of the personal charm they wielded on those who knew them.

The influence wielded by fragile young men such as John Sterling deserves further attention. Why were the two major proponents of the Victorian 'Gospel of Work', Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Smiles, interested in the lives of those who produced so little? Of course, during their lifetime these men did strive to work, and may have produced much had they not died so young, but the choice of subject remains surprising. The passionate language employed to commemorate them, together with the cultural role that they are ascribed, destabilize notions of gender. Because the focus of the commemorations was not these men's work but the friendships they inspired, the language used to describe them strays from that commonly used to discuss male achievements, whether 'great' or 'hidden', in contemporary biographies. In her *Records of a Girlhood* (1878), Fanny Kemble described Arthur Hallam in the following terms: 'There was a gentleness and purity almost virginal in his voice, manner, and countenance; and the upper part of his face, his forehead and eyes (perhaps in readiness for his early translation), wore the angelic radiance that they still must wear in heaven.' It was not uncommon to describe men in this way; nevertheless, the accumulation of terms more evocative of femininity to depict these men is conspicuous. Kemble's account of John Sterling is similarly intriguing:

I think he must have been one of those persons in whom genius makes itself felt and acknowledged chiefly through the medium of personal intercourse; a not infrequent thing, I think, with women, and perhaps men, wanting the full vigor of normal health. I suppose it is some failure not so much in the power possessed as in the power of producing it in a less evanescent form than that of spoken words, and the looks that with such organizations are more than the words themselves [sic]. . . . Personal influence is the strongest and most subtle of powers, and Sterling impressed all who knew him as a man of undoubted genius; those who never knew him will perhaps always wonder why.⁴⁹

The passage's association of physical weakness and femininity makes an even stronger case for the gendered fluidity of these young men. Kemble stresses that Sterling's worth is also essentially a private one, confined to 'those who knew him', in a manner that recalls Smiles but also establishes a further connection to the realm of feminine influence. The fact that these young men—Sterling, Hallam, Buller, and many others—failed to make a strong impact on the public sphere in their own right relegates them to a certain extent to the private sphere usually reserved for women.

⁴⁹ Fanny Kemble, *Records of a Girlhood*, 3 vols. (New York: H. Holt, 1879), 1, 185–6.

Thackeray's article in *The Leader* provides the strongest illustration of the ambiguous relationship between biographers and this category of subjects. The article opens with the description of a man glancing up at the house once inhabited by 'friends or relatives', now departed. It continues:

It scarcely seems yesterday that your friends lived there—were smiling to you out of that window—on the other side of yonder door were hands outstretched to meet you, dear faces, the warmest welcome! You have perfectly in your memory the sound of the voices and laughter, the cheery figure round the table, the smiles of the children, the flavour of the wine . . . Where are they, the faces that look over that garden wall? Where are the flowers that bloomed last summer?

Thackeray's elegiac description of vanished friends—those failed lives that he goes on to describe in more depth—uses the kind of language more commonly associated with traditional accounts of the 'separate spheres'. The warm welcome, the domestic setting, the presence of children are all images frequently used to depict the gentle feminine influence reigning in the private sphere of the home. The manner in which Thackeray describes these men later in the article makes this even more plain: Buller was 'gentle' and 'loving'; Hallam was 'carrissimus, dulcissimus', and Sterling was, among other things, 'faithful, affectionate' and 'tender'. That Sterling is also described as 'manly' does little to displace the impression that the primary function of these men was to provide emotional support for, and stimulate feelings of love in, the more famous men who later went on to pay homage to them. As one reviewer wrote of Sterling, 'he had won the love of a noble soul'.⁵⁰ The importance critics attached to the portrayal of a loving Carlyle becomes even clearer when one considers their disappointment, upon reading his posthumous *Reminiscences*, to discover that his marital relationship had been far less tender.

Victorian ideas of work were closely related to their conception of gender and, as Carlyle's ambivalence shows, this alliance became particularly problematic for intellectuals who produced much of their labour in the domestic sphere. Critics such as Martin Danahay have valuably investigated ways in which the anxieties resulting from this blurring of boundaries were expressed. Even critics such as John Tosh who demonstrate a much stronger relationship between men and the domestic sphere have also underscored the resulting strains. Men who were seen to avoid work, such as aristocrats, were often painted in emasculating terms. What is striking here, however, is that the 'feminine' qualities of these men is embraced rather than explained away.

⁵⁰ [William Makepeace Thackeray], 'Carlyle on Sterling', *The Leader*, 2 (25 October 1851), p. 1021. K. J. Fielding mistakenly attributed a later article on *The Life of Sterling* published in *The Leader* (8 November 1851, pp. 1066–7) to Thackeray—an error which has since been perpetuated. Thackeray in fact published the earlier of the two notices, and later explained to Lady Ashburton that he had wanted to write 'about the feeling with w[hich] one reads' the biography and 'the friends of dear Youth' (W. M. Thackeray to Lady Ashburton, [?] November 1851. NLS. Acc 11388/97. General Correspondence of Louisa, Lady Ashburton). See also K. J. Fielding, 'Thackeray and "The Great Master of Craigenputtock": A New Review of "The Life of John Sterling"', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1999), pp. 307–14.

The argument that work mattered less than personal virtues and influence was one that was far more frequently used in biographies of women, as the following chapter shows. Reviewers traced how many of these men influenced their more successful friends: one critic in the *Gentleman's Magazine* felt that 'the influence exerted by the less robust upon the stronger mind may serve as a gauge to Sterling's general power' and 'would alone render the volume now under notice a psychological study of no ordinary worth'.⁵¹ It could also be stressed that such men often supported their friends in a more direct way: Hallam by writing his 'On Some Characteristics of Modern Poetry' (1831) and Sterling through his article on Carlyle in the October 1839 volume of the *London and Westminster Review*. Such accounts of intellectual influence are common.

Yet there was another interpretation of Sterling's 'influence'—and that of others such as Hallam—which gave more worth to emotional and moral qualities than intellectual ones. In a way that is reminiscent of Kemble and Thackeray, Samuel Smiles included a short passage on Sterling in *Self-Help*:

Contact with the good never fails to impart good, and we carry away with us some of the blessing, as travellers' garments retain the odor of the flowers and shrubs through which they have passed. Those who knew the late John Sterling intimately, have spoken of the beneficial influence which he exercised on all with whom he came into personal contact. Many owed to him their first awakening to a higher being; from him they learned what they were, and what they ought to be.⁵²

Smiles identifies Sterling's value in the diffusive effect of his personal virtues—the idea of good begetting good anticipates Eliot's description of the 'growing good of the world' achieved through the 'diffusive' effect of hidden lives. The word 'beneficial' is one of the recurrent terms used to describe hidden or failed lives during the nineteenth century, suggesting once more that it is less the particularities of that life that are important than the effect—more often than not a moral one—that they have on society. Indeed, as with the many examples of biographers and novelists who talked of passing by their humble subjects on the street, the encounter with Sterling and those of his type is shown here to be a temporary one, as the image of the traveller confirms. The biographers do not set out to banish the public's neglect of these men by increasing their fame, but to pay tribute to hidden influences—often the same influences that consolidated their own success.

THE LIFE OF EDWARD IRVING (1862)

Edward Irving, the subject of an 1862 biography by Margaret Oliphant, failed on a far grander scale than John Sterling. A writer for the *North American Review* felt

⁵¹ [Thackeray], 'Carlyle on Sterling', p. 1021; [Unsigned], 'Carlyle's Life of Sterling', *The Leader*, 2 (8 November 1851), p. 1066.

⁵² Smiles, *Self-Help*, p. 302. Gladstone gave a similar account of Arthur Hallam in *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 January 1898; repr. Gladstone, *Arthur Hallam* (Boston: P. Mason, 1898).

that 'in outward results his life was the saddest failure' but that 'the heroes of lost battles deserve a record'.⁵³ Oliphant's *The Life of Irving* offers a rare example of a successful female writer commemorating a male failure.⁵⁴ The biography takes a very similar approach to Carlyle's *The Life of Sterling* by depicting Irving's martyr-like heroism in the strongest terms, and blaming his fall at least in part on the unstable and superficial age. Like Carlyle, Oliphant uses the biography to explore highly personal feelings of loss and failure. Suspicious of the public sphere, she also carries out her defence of Irving through an appeal to more private emotions.

Edward Irving differs from John Sterling and many other victims of premature deaths in that he did reach a significant level of fame before sinking back into darkness. Irving (1792–1834) was born in Dumfriesshire and, after studying at Edinburgh, became close friends with Carlyle when both men worked in separate schools in Kirkcaldy. (Carlyle later discovered that Irving had won the affections of his wife Jane, whom he did not marry due to a former engagement.) After preparing for the ministry, Irving worked as Thomas Chalmers's assistant before accepting a position as minister of the Caledonian Chapel in Hatton Garden, which was then located in an unprepossessing London neighbourhood. Rumours about the new preacher's charisma, good looks (barring a squint), and unorthodox sermons rapidly circulated, and fashionable society began to make the trip into Bloomsbury to witness the phenomenon. When the Chapel could no longer accommodate the thousands of people requesting seats, the National Scotch Church, begun in 1824, was erected in Regent Square. By 1825, however, Irving's star had already waned as his audience redirected their attention to new curiosities and his controversial sermons began to lose him the support of influential Church members. The deaths of Irving's first two children in 1825 and 1827 consolidated his eccentric pre-millennialism; his fate was sealed when some of his parishioners began speaking in tongues, following similar manifestations in Scotland. Irving was expelled from his Church, tried for heresy in Scotland, and deposed. As a group of his remaining followers began to set up the Catholic Apostolic Church, his health deteriorated, and he died in 1834 aged forty-two.

By the time of his death, Irving had been forgotten by all but a handful of followers and friends. Writing in *Fraser's Magazine* in January 1835, Carlyle resumed his friend's career as 'mad extremes of flattery, followed by madder contumely, by indifference and neglect'.⁵⁵ In 1852, Washington Wilks, in a sketch of Irving written for the *Biographical Magazine*, could 'recollect scarce an

⁵³ Unsigned, 'The Life of Edward Irving', *North American Review*, 95 (October 1862), p. 293.

⁵⁴ Margaret Oliphant, *The Life of Edward Irving*, 2 vols. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1862). All further references are to this edition, which is henceforth referred to as the *The Life of Irving*.

⁵⁵ Thomas Carlyle, 'The Death of the Rev. Edward Irving', *Fraser's Magazine*, 11 (January 1835); repr. *A Carlyle Reader*, p. 113.

allusion in contemporary literature to the man who made so great a figure through the ten or twelve years of his public life'.⁵⁶ Wilks went on to publish a biography of Irving in 1854 (dedicated to Carlyle and F. D. Maurice), which is a sound though somewhat conventional work.⁵⁷ Despite his best efforts, when Margaret Oliphant's biography appeared in 1862, critics felt that they were encountering a 'striking and picturesque figure, whom our age, in the multiplicity of its distractions, had well nigh forgotten'.⁵⁸

Oliphant's biography began as an article in *Blackwood's Magazine*, published in 1858, which encouraged Irving's family to commission a full-sized work. Unlike with *The Life of Sterling*, the biographer, who was six when Irving died, did not know her subject personally. To compensate, she carried out extensive research, travelling across her native Scotland to interview those who had known him. (This research was also the occasion of the first of many visits to the Carlyles' home in Cheyne Row and the beginning of a close friendship with Jane Carlyle, Irving's early love.)

The Life of Irving was Oliphant's first biography. Oliphant was at least as conflicted as Carlyle regarding auto/biography. She defined autobiography as a 'terrible instrument of self-murder' yet wrote her own autobiography (albeit one that, like Carlyle's, was published posthumously). She also wrote biographies of, among others, Sheridan (1883), Thomas Chalmers (1893), and Queen Victoria (1890), even while harbouring misgivings about a genre employed by 'an age which scarcely permits a man to be cold in his grave before it turns forth from his old drawers and wardrobes such relics of his living personality as he may have left there'.⁵⁹ Oliphant expressed her doubts in 'The Ethics of Biography' (1883), written in reaction to Froude's infamous life of Carlyle; it was both as a friend of the Carlyles and as a practised biographer that she expressed her abhorrence. The essay is a measured production that dismisses both hero-worshipping and scandal-mongering, and calls for a more responsible form of biography.

A key element of the essay is Oliphant's claims for the enormous cultural authority wielded by the biographer. The latter's role, she asserts, is one of 'high trust and responsibility' since the biographer moulds the public ('permanent public opinion will be fixed, or at all events largely influenced, by the image he sets before it').⁶⁰ Oliphant goes on to make even grander claims:

A barrister who has to defend a man's character before the tribunals of law is not more bound to use legitimate means and approved testimony than the historian, to whom is

⁵⁶ Washington Wilks, 'Edward Irving', *Lives of the Illustrious: The Biographical Magazine*, 2 (1852), p. 311.

⁵⁷ See Washington Wilks, *Edward Irving: An Ecclesiastical and Literary Biography* (London: William Freeman, 1854).

⁵⁸ Unsigned, 'Mrs. Oliphant's *Life of Edward Irving*', *Edinburgh Review*, 116 (October 1862), p. 427.

⁵⁹ Margaret Oliphant, 'Harriet Martineau', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 121 (April 1871), p. 472; Oliphant, 'The Ethics of Biography', p. 77.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

absolutely committed the care of his reputation . . . The biographer is all the more deeply responsible, since, in his case, there is no authoritative voice to check his proceedings . . . There remain only his brethren, so to speak, of the bar, the competitors of his own profession, to object or restrain . . . The position of the biographer carries with it a power which is almost unrestrained, the kind of power which it is doubly tyrannous to use like a giant. Not even the pulpit is so entirely master . . . the biographer has a far more assured place, and if he is not restrained by the strictest limits of truth and honour, there is nothing else that can control him in heaven or earth.⁶¹

Oliphant is keen to present the biographer as a rival to the other exclusively masculine professions of the time: the lawyer and the clergyman. Indeed, not only does the biographer rival them in authority, but he surpasses them. Bearing in mind the anxieties of men such as Carlyle to present the role of a man of letters in sufficiently virile terms, Oliphant's decision to depict her own activity as a vigorous, manly profession seems bold.

Twenty-one years earlier, when Oliphant published her life of Irving, critics were already alert to questions of gender. The critic of the *Boston Review* could not resist mentioning the author's 'charming feminine grace', Thomas Espinelle Espin made a point of the biographer's gender ('To the lady the man she has to deal with was quite a hero'), and the *North British Review* critic rather ludicrously quipped that 'being a woman, Mrs Oliphant is, of course, a hero-worshipper'.⁶² These judgements appear all the more inappropriate since, although the biographer briefly refers to her role as a wife and mother in the text, there is no substantial difference in either content or style between Oliphant's biography and other contemporary lives of 'failures' authored by men.

Oliphant's *Life of Irving*, like *The Life of Sterling*, depicts the heroism of failure. The biographer asks us to admire the relentless efforts of her subject to overcome adversity, and represents his final downfall in eloquent terms. To Oliphant's disappointment, Carlyle did not find the biography of Irving a resounding success. In his *Reminiscences*, he finds that her 'delineation shows excellent diligence, loyalty, desire to be faithful, and indeed is full of beautiful sympathy and ingenuity; but nowhere else [than at the end] are the features of Irving or of his Environment and Life recognisably hit'.⁶³ Indeed, the work does not have the immediate emotional impact of *The Life of Sterling*: it is much longer, relies heavily on the extended quotation of diaries and letters that so many Victorian biographers favoured, and does not reflect Carlyle's desire to structure the work into three clear 'acts'. Yet at least one reviewer astutely noted the biography's 'very Carlylean style'.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Oliphant, 'The Ethics of Biography', pp. 87–8.

⁶² Unsigned, *Boston Review*, 3.14 (March 1863), p. 172; Thomas Espinelle Espin, 'Life of Edward Irving', *Critical Essays* (London: Rivingtons, 1864), p. 64; Unsigned, 'Edward Irving', *North British Review*, 37 (August–November 1862), p. 97.

⁶³ Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, I, 335.

⁶⁴ Espin, 'Life of Edward Irving', p. 64.

Oliphant certainly echoes Carlyle in her determination to interpret her subject's life as a tragedy. Irving's life is presented from the opening of the work as 'one of the noblest tragic chapters of individual life in the nineteenth century' (I, 16). Oliphant never lets the reader forget the conclusion of the work and encourages each of Irving's actions to be read in the light of his eventual fate. The word recurs: 'all that memorable tragic life that lay waiting for him among the multitudinous roofs was hid' (I, 149). The reader is repeatedly reminded of the gathering 'storm' (I, 108). Oliphant may also have taken her cue from Carlyle's 1835 article 'On the Death of Edward Irving', which begins by announcing that 'Edward Irving's warfare has closed', and argues that 'here once more, under thy own eyes, in this last decade, was enacted the old Tragedy, and has had its fifth-act now, of *The Messenger of Truth in the Age of Shams*'.⁶⁵

More striking still is the emphatic presentation of Irving as a warrior. In the context of Irving's life, the image naturally draws on that of the Christian warrior, yet it has even more affinities with Carlyle's representation of Sterling. As Irving prepares to leave Scotland for London, he begins 'painfully fitting and putting his armour together' and 'heard the trumpets of battle' (I, 142). Irving's field was 'to be that of a conqueror, and where, at last, like other kings and victors before him, he was to fall, dauntless but mortal, with the loss of all save honour' (I, 149). He perseveres with 'one blow after another ringing on his shield' (I, 183-4). Images of warfare continue to accumulate in the second volume. Surrounded in Christ-like imagery, Irving, 'not yet exhausted, stands in a pale glow of suffering and injured love, wounded in the house of his friends, with a hundred arrows in the heart which knows no defence against the assault of unkind words and averted looks' (II, 251). When he dies, it is as a 'martyr and saint' (II, 404).

Both Carlyle and Oliphant blame the fall of their subjects on outside forces—something that is more problematical regarding Irving, whose pride and stubbornness were at least as much to blame as the malice of his foes. In his article on Irving, Carlyle accusingly declared that 'Scotland sent him forth a Herculean man; our mad Babylon wore him and wasted him.'⁶⁶ Oliphant also stresses the chasm between Scotland and London: 'After the bridge of Sark and its moorland landscape, we see no more of travellers till they reappear in the bustle of London, where idylls have no existence' (I, 182). In contrast to his peaceful life in Scotland, Irving and his wife live in a 'much-disturbed dwelling-place, constantly assailed by visitors, and invaded by the agitations of the world' (I, 191).

Above all, Irving, like Sterling, is perceived as a soldier born in the wrong century. Describing Irving's longings to work as a missionary, Oliphant clarifies that this 'was not the modern type of missionary, going, laden with civilization and a printing press, to clear his little garden in the wilderness. It was the red-cross knight in that armour dented with the impress of many battle-fields' (I, 88).

⁶⁵ Carlyle, 'The Death of Irving', p. 113.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Reviewers assented whole-heartedly to this notion: they describe him as a 'Puritan of the old covenanting type' and compared him to 'a Dominick or a St Francis'. The idea was not new, as George Gilfillan had earlier compared Irving to 'the men of the Elizabethan period', and an anonymous writer lamented that 'there had been no such man since the days of John Knox'.⁶⁷ Again, Carlyle had also anticipated the idea that Irving was a man unsuited to the times in his essay, in which he depicts him as 'one of the noblest natures; a man of antique heroic nature, in questionable modern garniture, which he could not wear!'⁶⁸

Despite Oliphant's later criticism in 'The Ethics of Biography' of the 'disciple-biography' in which the biographer insistently defends the subject 'in all the conflicts that may rise around him, and defy the world on behalf of his hero',⁶⁹ critics could be forgiven for making similar claims of *The Life of Irving*. A critic for the *Christian Reformer* felt that the biographer 'assumes too much the position of an advocate'; the *Edinburgh Review* summarized Oliphant's perspective of the life as 'a great martyr-tragedy—a heroic self-sacrifice from beginning to end'.⁷⁰ Whereas Carlyle counterbalanced his claims for Sterling with a strong awareness of his subject's comparative mediocrity, Oliphant describes Irving's failures in unswervingly heroic terms.

What the reviewers did not observe, however, was that Oliphant had weaved far more intimate and personal touches into the biography. Once more, the biography of a failed life becomes the occasion to express intimate anxieties. The work does not so glaringly intermingle biography and autobiography as *The Life of Sterling*, but that it does so at all is surprising given that Oliphant had never had any personal interaction with her subject and that the work was commissioned rather than an unprompted manifestation of admiration. Oliphant is wary of presenting Irving to the world without the protective embrace of a more private emotion. The biography begins: 'To all who love the memory of Edward Irving: which the writer has found by much experiment to mean all who ever knew him', and closes with a reiteration that 'scarce any man who knew him can yet name, without a softened voice and a dimmed eye, the name of Edward Irving—true friend and tender heart—martyr and saint' (II, 404). Oliphant may again have had in mind the poignant conclusion of Carlyle's 1835 sketch, which ends with the author's declaration of love for his best friend ('Adieu, thou first Friend; adieu, while this confused Twilight of Existence lasts! Might we meet

⁶⁷ Unsigned, 'Life of Edward Irving', *Christian Reformer* 18 (1862), p. 403; Unsigned, 'Edward Irving', *North British Review*, p. 96; George Gilfillan, 'Edward Irving', *A Third Gallery of Portraits* (New York: Sheldon, Lamport and Blakeman, 1855), p. 62; Unsigned, 'The Rev. Edward Irving', *The Annual Biography and Obituary for the Year*, 20 (London: Longman, 1836), p. 138.

⁶⁸ Carlyle, 'The Death of Edward Irving', p. 113.

⁶⁹ Oliphant, 'The Ethics of Biography', p. 80.

⁷⁰ 'Life of Edward Irving', *Christian Reformer*, p. 386; 'Life of Edward Irving', *Edinburgh Review*, p. 428.

where Twilight has become day!').⁷¹ Yet these two statements of universal affection form a stark contrast with the pages they frame and the representation of a persecuted fallen man 'deserted' (II, 307) by all his friends.

In 'The Ethics of Biography', Oliphant had expressed her distaste for the public sphere, that 'great jury of the public', 'too irresponsible, too indifferent'.⁷² Oliphant's suspicions of the public are also reflected in her self-representation in her autobiography as 'very small, very obscure', 'rather a failure all round', 'a fat, little, commonplace woman, rather tongue-tied'.⁷³ The biographer may therefore have had at least two reasons to champion different values than those commonly agreed to signify a 'great' life. A further example of this wariness of the public appears at the end of the first volume, when Oliphant considers the dangerous effects of Irving's personal magnetism. Aware that this was the cause of his downfall, the biographer intervenes: 'even though it procured him trouble and suffering, I cannot find it in my heart to grudge Irving a gift so noble' (I, 420). The biographer does not appeal to the wider public for its mercy, but underscores her personal capacity to understand her subject. Aware that it was the excessive response of the public that caused Irving's fall, she uses the biography to envelop him in a protective and private embrace. Just as Carlyle refuses to share Sterling's last words to him, so does Oliphant shy from exposing the more intimate details of Irving's final days. As she cannot justify this by referring to a personal relationship with Irving, she projects this delicacy onto one of his acquaintances: 'Dr. Rainy, who attended him, informed me of various particulars in these last days; but indeed, so touched with tears, after nearly thirty years' interval, was even the physician's voice . . . that I cannot venture to record with any distinctness those heart-breaking details' (II, 399–400). The biographer could have omitted these details without alerting the reader to the fact that they are within her possession, but chooses to advertise instead the value of privacy that in turn increases the intimacy between biographer and subject.

Thinking back on her preparation for the work, Margaret Oliphant commented that when she interviewed Irving's old acquaintances, 'every one I saw on this subject displayed the utmost willingness to tell me all about themselves, with quite a secondary interest in Irving'.⁷⁴ Yet Oliphant herself was not entirely averse to bringing highly personal touches to her work. The expressions of intense grief that punctuates her autobiography were masked from the public during her lifetime, but attentive readers could have noticed in *The Life of Irving* an autobiographical undercurrent. Oliphant and Irving came from similar Scottish, Calvinist backgrounds, which may have encouraged her to identify so overtly with her subject. In the 'Preface', Oliphant writes: 'I hoped to get

⁷¹ Carlyle, 'The Death of Edward Irving', p. 116.

⁷² Oliphant, 'The Ethics of Biography', p. 88.

⁷³ Margaret Oliphant, *Autobiography*, ed. by Elisabeth Jay (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 53.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

personal consolation amid heavy troubles out of a life so full of great love, faith, and sorrow' (1, vii). These sorrows included the death of her second daughter, Marjorie Isabella, in 1855 and of her year-old son the same year, followed by the loss of her nine-week son Stephen Thomas in 1858. The phrase anticipates Carlyle's second, lengthier, portrait of Irving, in his *Reminiscences*, which Carlyle sensed was 'more about myself than him'. However, he felt that 'the writing of it *clears* my own insight into those past days . . . and calms and soothes me as I go on'.⁷⁵ Such statements go beyond the idea that the biographers found satisfaction in writing tributes to their loved ones; it also indicates the usefulness of biography as a means of expiating personal anxieties and insecurities.

Oliphant makes the reference to her personal loss clearer later in the volume, when she narrates the death of Irving's first child in 1825: 'The manner in which Irving himself announced this first interruption of his family happiness, with an elevation and ecstasy of grief which I do not doubt will go to the hearts of all who have suffered similar anguish, as indeed the writer can scarcely transcribe it without tears, will be seen by the following letter' (1, 245). The passage moves seamlessly from the biographical to the autobiographical. Oliphant begins in the detached tones of the biographer before encouraging readers to build a parallel between the subjects and themselves and finally making such a connection herself. Oliphant strives to maintain a point of stability throughout these transitions: she uses the personal ('I do not doubt') when discussing the reader yet switches to the impersonal ('the writers') when referring to herself, as if she is trying to keep both public and private in constant harmony. Three pages later, she concludes her description of this sombre episode in Irving's life with the note that 'those of us who know such days of darkness may take some courage from the sight' (1, 248). The use of the word 'us' is comparatively rare in works of contemporary biography, and places the biographer, emotionally, among her readers. Once again, after the death of another child, Oliphant reproduces in its entirety a journal in the form of letters that Irving wrote to his grieving wife. The biographer pauses to note the power of the letters, and adds, rather startlingly: 'I think few wives will read this record without envying Isabella Irving that hour of her anguish and consolation' (1, 375). This is yet another example of Oliphant asking her readers to bring Irving's life into the private sphere of their own lives through comparison. Implicitly, Oliphant places herself among the envious wives, and the self-revealing detail is all the more poignant when placed in the context of her own life: her husband had died three years earlier and abandoned her to a state of debt. Gradually, Oliphant gathers around her a community of fellow sufferers. The fickle public is distanced and in its stead the biographer creates a more private community prepared to respond to the subject emotionally rather than intellectually.

⁷⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. by K. J. Fielding and Ian Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 348.

These numerous biographies of charismatic failures express a profound distrust of the public, which is perceived as superficial, judgemental, and stern. The works trumpet instead the value of an emotional and generous engagement with the world. In the process, biography, so often used to expound the claims of its subjects to immortality, is used instead to protect the subject from prying eyes.

*BERNARD BARTON AND HIS FRIENDS: A RECORD
OF QUIET LIVES* (1893)

Not all biographies of men who never achieved greatness depict an anguished and heroic struggle to succeed in an inhospitable age. A significant number of works published principally towards the end of the Victorian period, very different to those considered above, gave a decidedly positive spin to the idea of the mediocre and put forward obscurity or neglect as something to be embraced—the 'happy mediocrity' praised by Benjamin Franklin and numerous Victorian poets and clergymen. In a manner comparable to Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, these men are seen as discreet and valuable influences on their communities. Most of these biographies deal with part-time poets, and their poems occupy only a small portion of the narratives. Their mediocrity is not quietly acknowledged but paraded as a sign that they had other, better, priorities. These works present yet another reaction to a turbulent age by openly privileging the private and the provincial as a safe haven against the race for fame and the turbulence of the metropolis.

By and large, these biographies are sketch-like and have neither the artistry nor the complexity of *The Life of Sterling* or *The Life of Irving*. The most successful is *Bernard Barton and His Friends: A Record of Quiet Lives* (1893), the first biography by the Charles Lamb scholar Edward Verall Lucas.⁷⁶ Bernard Barton (1784–1849) was a Quaker poet whose life had spanned both the Romantic and Victorian periods. He began work as a shopkeeper at the age of fourteen, before setting up as a coal and corn merchant. Following the death of his wife in childbirth after only a year of marriage, he worked as a tutor before settling as a clerk in Alexander's Bank in Woodbridge, Suffolk, where he remained until his death. Barton began writing as a form of distraction from the routine of the bank, which in turn brought him into contact with Charles Lamb. Barton's principal claim to fame was and remains the friendship he forged with Lamb, of which an extensive correspondence remains. He also enjoyed local notoriety as one of a group of friends who Edward FitzGerald dubbed the 'Wits of Woodbridge', and which, with FitzGerald, included George Crabbe and Thomas Churchyard. The

⁷⁶ Edward Verall Lucas, *Bernard Barton and His Friends: A Record of Quiet Lives* (London: Edward Hicks, Jr, 1893), p. 11. All further references are to this edition.

biographer uses the tranquillity of Barton's life—its 'wholesome sweetness' and 'serenity' (11)—to reconcile rather than condemn tensions between the poet and the public, readers and biography. Biography here is used as a harmonizing influence.

According to Lucas, poets should not live in alienation but on the contrary should play a significant social role. Lucas explicitly positions Barton's life and artistic temperament in opposition to the stereotype of the Romantic artist. The biographer warns the reader that

in the pages that follow he need look for none of those extremes or eccentricities that so often make biographies hardly less piquant than romance. He will find himself in the presence of a plain man, unselfish and undistinguished. . .

But the reader if he be wise will find ample compensation for the absence of spiced anecdote and all the brilliances which have come to be associated with the literary career in the insight he will gain into a contented mind. (28)

The passage is an important one that negotiates many of the tensions surrounding biographical expectations and the subject. The manner in which Lucas appeals to the reader to find interest in a 'plain' and 'undistinguished' man contains echoes of George Eliot's 'Amos Barton'. Obscurity, here, is not understood as a condition that needs to be redressed but is instead associated with moral worth. Indeed, the presentation of the biography has much in common with the biographies of working-class men that sought to stress the subject's contentedness of mind—although not always truthfully. Like the biographies of the naturalists, Barton's life offers 'charm and instruction' (11). The phrase reverberates in other contemporary biographies of 'undistinguished' local poets whose poetic endeavours occasion far less reverence than a life that can 'interest, edify, and encourage' or that 'can be held up as an example of honest and laborious endeavour in the service of others'.⁷⁷

This profound wariness of celebrity cults and the lionization of artists is somewhat ironic, given that these were at least partially fuelled by the genre of biography. Biography—and literary biography in particular—had become increasingly marked by scandal. There had always been objections to the investigation of the private lives of authors, but these intensified in the second half of the nineteenth century as the industry of literary tourism and indeed of biography developed. The publication of James Anthony Froude's four-volume 'warts and all' biography of Carlyle between 1882 and 1884 launched a controversy that lasted well into the next century. Lucas's life of Barton was published the same year as the publication of Flaubert's letters, which prompted Henry James to lament how the novelist had been 'dragged after death into the middle of the

⁷⁷ Thomas Ray, *The Aged Pilgrim and His Songs: Or, Memoir and Poetical Remains of the Rev. James Raban* (London: Ward, 1852), p. vi; Thomas Beggs, *Sketch of the Life and Labours of Mr. Alderman John Guest, F. S. A., of Rotherham* (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1881), p. vi.

marketplace'.⁷⁸ Lucas voices his own protest against a genre that could slip so easily from fact to the titillations of 'romance' (15). To counter such excesses, he strives to put forward a model of respectable literary biography. The publication of uneventful lives of contented authors can be seen as a reaction to the controversies surrounding the genre.

The minor poet serves, in Lucas's biography as in many works of this type, as a kind of mascot that provides an identity for communities. Place is central to these works: many of the titles stress the subject's provenance, such as *George Beattie, of Montrose* (1863) and *Sketch of the Life and Labours of Mr. Alderman John Guest, F. S. A., of Rotherham* (1881). In the biography of a minor clergyman-poet, the biographer rapidly notes that 'Olney in Buckinghamshire—where the memory of James Raban is still fragrant—is of itself by no means an interesting place; but as long as time shall continue, the name of Olney will be dear to the man of feeling, subdued and moulded according to religious truth.'⁷⁹ Their community, which they diligently serve, is depicted in nostalgic tones: the quaintness of Montrose during one subject's lifetime is contrasted by his biographer with the present ('We no longer see groups of respectable citizens gathered in the streets, not even in the smaller towns. The Age is unsocial'). Another writer honours men like his subject who 'devote themselves to works of local usefulness'.⁸⁰

The stress on community ties is particularly strong in the biography of Bernard Barton. Barton, whose 'poetry is to-day unknown' (169), serves as an emblem for his town, and defends the virtue of 'cheerfulness, simplicity and wholesome sweetness' in the midst of 'this hurried, incomplete day of ours' (11). Barton functions as part of the local mythology that helps to create continuity between past and present. He is 'the gentle bard of Woodbridge':

The people of Woodbridge felt the loss of their poet very deeply. Bernard Barton was so completely an integral part of the town, had so long 'radiated good humour' therein, that it seemed impossible to realise that no longer would he be seen standing in the bank doorway signalling greetings to his passing acquaintances, nor walking on Sunday mornings to the little meeting-house. (192)

The limitations of Barton's fame implicit in the possessive pronoun 'their' is rejoiced in rather than lamented by the biographer. It is not the poetry that is stressed, but his presence, and his role as a focal point of town life, symbolizing welcome and unity ('greetings', 'meeting-house'). During his lifetime, the townsfolk celebrated 'their poet' by naming a schooner after him. The biographer quotes a letter by Barton, in which he notes good-humouredly that 'the parties

⁷⁸ Henry James, in *Henry James: Selected Literary Criticism* (London: Heinemann, 1963), p. 139.

⁷⁹ Ray, *The Aged Pilgrim*, p. 4.

⁸⁰ Mr A. S. Cyrus, *George Beattie, of Montrose. A Poet, A Humourist, And a Man of Genius* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1863), pp. iii, 18; Beggs, *Mr. Alderman John Guest*, p. 3.

were not literary people, or great readers or lovers of verse; I am not sure that they ever read a page of mine. But I suppose that they thought a poet creditable, some how or other, to a poet' (39). The figure of the poet has retained some of its mystique, but this is divorced from the poetry itself. Frequently written by friends or acquaintances, these biographies are often works that enable small communities to write about one another. Individuals mentioned within the works frequently reappear in the list of subscribers. The poet is so far from being a figure of Romantic alienation and retreat that he acts as figure around which communities coalesce and local bonds are strengthened.

The fear of the corrosive effect of London in the biographies of Sterling and Irving has been noted. In *Bernard Barton*, the biographer notes that 'Barton was occasionally troubled by desires to exchange Woodbridge for London, but they soon passed, leaving him even better satisfied to spend and end his days in retirement' (37). London is seen as a dangerous and almost illicit temptation. To overcome the desire for London and the illusion of a glamorous literary society is to demonstrate the triumph of lasting worth over the superficial, and the communal over the selfish. The association of 'retirement' with the world outside London underlines the biography's privileging of the private and the hidden.

This emphasis on the local appears as another response to contemporary developments in literary biography. One consequence of rejecting the seductive appeal of London literary society is that the poet drastically reduces his chances of being retained in the literary canon. Barton's biography was published at a time when scholarly literary biographies with this canonizing intent were being increasingly written. In 1878, Macmillan began to publish their acclaimed 'English Men of Letters' series, edited by John Morley. The series was aimed at serving those 'whose leisure is scanty' yet who desired more information about 'the masters of our literature'.⁸¹ Samuel Johnson was the first subject. Other projects included the 'English Poets' series, begun in 1880 by T. Humphry Ward, and the 'Great Writers' series. With the inception of Leslie Stephen's *DNB* in 1882, efforts to construct a national heritage—literary but also, with Stephen's monumental effort, far broader—were endemic.

The effect of these canonizing works was to create an even larger category of subjects who found themselves excluded from the idea of national greatness. As these biographical series paid tribute to, more or less, the same men and women, it became even more apparent who was being ignored and the line between fame and obscurity became even sharper. The manner in which biographers of these minor poets passionately argue that the unglamorous, communal poet is more valuable than London-based men of letters introduces the idea that one consequence of these canonizing biographical series was that they exacerbated a tension

⁸¹ John Morley, quoted in Gillian Fenwick, 'Nourishing the Curiosity: Leslie Stephen and the English Men of Letters Series', *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 22.2 (1995), p. 95.

between the national and the local, as they tended to ignore the diversity of this nation and put forward a centrist, metropolitan vision. As the idea of the 'national' was being given greater publicity, the 'local' became a new category that had to be defended, just like 'hidden' lives.

Once more, the idea of biography as an 'intimate' form of writing is used to build this defence. Lucas collapses the distance between subject, reader, and biographer, and encourages the reader to feel like a member of Barton's private sphere. Given that Lucas was born nineteen years after Barton's death and therefore—like Oliphant—had no personal knowledge of his subject, the intimate tone he strikes is intriguing:

Let us suppose that the invitation is addressed to us. At the door our host greets us heartily with a warm hand-shake that does not loosen until he has drawn us well within his walls . . . He takes his own chair—one with spreading arms that welcome their owner as he welcomes us. We sit on the other side of the hearth. The conversation, enlivened with anecdote, touches rustic humours, the last new book from London, Woodbridge gossip, the letter just received from a distant correspondent. (50)

Lucas seems to justify the biographical genre's inevitable intrusions into the private sphere by making it appear as if it is the subject himself who draws in, and even coerces, his biographer and readers into his private sphere. The biographer disappears as the writer of the narrative and stands on equal footing with the reader; biographer and subject are by no means enemies but intimate friends. This effect is achieved through recourse to the cosy, informal tone that had become popular in journalistic accounts of interviews with famous writers, where an author discussed his work over a cup of tea. Bernard Barton was often described as having been a 'Household' poet (169). The term alludes to Barton's earlier moderate success, but also reinforces the sense that he represents the importance of the private and the domestic.

Lucas's biography is concerned with healing the divide between a poet and his audience. It resists the notion that, as Leo Braudy writes, 'coolness, evasion, and distance were becoming a vital part of the appeal made by the most successful public men' since the Romantics.⁸² It is also concerned with presenting the genre of literary biography itself in a more reassuring light. Biography, in the process, is no longer the formidable two-tome mausoleum enshrining great men or an aggressive intrusion into the subject's privacy, but a chatty, middlebrow genre that places great value upon accessibility—a fluid genre that can circulate easily through society and act as a binding force.

As part of his attempt to reconcile the poet and society, Lucas builds a case for the better integration of poetry in daily life. In doing so he draws on contemporary pleas for the democratization of poetry. Keble gave the title of poet not 'to him who publishes his verse with great popular acclaim, but rather to the man

⁸² Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*, p. 417.

who meditates the Muse at home for his own delectation and solace'.⁸³ Poetry becomes, with such a definition, divorced from its more narrow generic definitions, and evokes instead a way of life, with an implicit protest against contemporary materialism. Lucas's almost overly quaint and picturesque description of Woodbridge society, with its general good humour and sun-bathing pensioners, echoes the poetry of everyday life to be found, for example, around the citizens of Cranford. The poet has lost his status as a legislating figure to be worshipped from afar; instead, he appears as a familiar presence, woven into the texture of society.

Any suspicion that the poet might become 'tragically ineffectual' is removed. Lucas, like many of these biographers, pays tribute to core bourgeois Victorian values. While the subject takes pleasure in writing verse, he also contributes to the national wealth as a banker. (Other subjects include a poet-clergyman, a poet-alderman, and a poet-bookseller.) Accordingly, very little attention is given to the question of the poet's reception and his relationship with the public sphere. Chapter 6 will consider biographies in which the author acts as a patron for his subject and strives to win for him a wider audience and greater circulation. There is no such concern here. Like Carlyle, Lucas and his fellow biographers see the advantages of protecting their subjects from the more hostile public sphere and approve the poets' removal from the chaos and hypocrisy of literary society. (One biographer even considers with great scepticism the effects of the rise of the newspaper on healthy social intercourse.)⁸⁴ Unlike Carlyle, however, the works evoke the possibility of a snug and sheltered life, in which the poet has an integral part to play.

Where Lucas's representation (and that of his fellow-biographers) differs from that of George Eliot and the biographers she inspired is in his anti-intellectual stance. The biographer notes with approval that his subject wisely enjoyed 'familiar rather than majestic literature' (54). He appreciates that Barton's Woodbridge 'avoided harm from the torrents of *osophies* and *isms* which had beaten upon less fortunate districts of the country' (35). Again, 'it would not be surprising to find that in the sum of things the radiation of good humour in Woodbridge is of more importance than the composition (say) of many "Queen Mabs"' (47). Social harmony is prized above intellectual advances; the safe and familiar is prized above genius. This applause of mediocrity is present in many other biographies. One biographer urges his readers to avoid being 'too exacting' respecting his subject's verse. Another places greater emphasis on the subject's temperance work than on his writings.⁸⁵ To some extent, these poets are

⁸³ John Keble, *Keble's Lectures On Poetry, 1832-1841* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 1, 317.

⁸⁴ Cyrus, *George Beattie*, p. 18.

⁸⁵ Richard S. Blair, *A Memoir of Billy Durrant, Local Preacher, Bookseller, and Poet, compiled from his letters, journals, and poems* (London: Ralph Fenwick, 1884), p. 13; Beggs, *Mr. Alderman John Guest*.

represented as taking on, like Sterling and other men who achieved comparatively little, the feminine role of nurturing and preserving the private sphere. The insistence on the amateurism of these poets' literary efforts, the focus on the local, and the appreciation of their moral qualities are also features of biographies that commemorate minor women writers, which are considered in the following chapter.

The very different lives of 'tragic failures' and 'happy mediocrities' have in common a profound suspicion of the reading public—its relentless inhospitality, its inability to assess worth, and its corrosive effect on fragile individuals. Biographers of both types of works sought to compensate for the inadequacies of this public by reconfiguring the hidden influence of their subject on both society and themselves as something profoundly valuable. They used the genre of biography as a shield rather than a form of exposure. Biography also gave writers the chance to mask themselves by using the genre as a repository for their own regrets and anxieties. In the process of addressing the complex 'hidden' subjects, it is the genre of biography itself that is remoulded as a space of opportunity for both subject and author. This would also be the case for biographers of minor women writers.

5

‘Quiet and Uneventful’?: Female Literary Biography

‘We do not often hear of great women, as we do of great men. It is of good women that we mostly hear.’¹ Samuel Smiles made this observation in 1871, fourteen years after critics had anticipated that Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) would change the manner in which women’s lives were written, read, and discussed. Biographies of eminent women such as Queen Victoria, Elizabeth Fry, or George Eliot were, of course, published alongside lives of eminent men, although in smaller numbers. Yet a glance at the shelves of single-subject female biography until the later half of the nineteenth century confirms the imbalance Smiles noted. The eighteenth-century thirst for biographies of actresses and *chroniques scandaleuses* had largely subsided, and female biography generally took the form either of simple, pious sketches or of collective (and often didactic) biography. Accounts of female historical figures by writers such as Agnes Strickland and Julia Kavanagh were an important nineteenth-century development, but were condescendingly denied the status of history and given the more amateurish label of ‘memoirs’.² However, while Smiles dwells on the absence of a significant biographical tradition of ‘great’ female lives, he nudges the reader towards an existing tradition of less conspicuous women’s lives.

Biographers of female lives had at least two important issues to contend with: one with social and the other with practical implications. The practical difficulty was simply the paucity of material to draw on. Even those women who experienced successful public careers usually played out a large part of their life in private. Documents relating to their lives were less abundant, had not been preserved, or, when they had, were often replete with ‘domestic’ details. In 1859, Sarah Ellis compiled sketches of *The Mothers of Great Men*, but was forced to state that since it was agreed that ‘the finest elements of feminine goodness are retiring and unobtrusive in their nature . . . there may have been no record

¹ Samuel Smiles, *Character*, p. 43.

² See Maitzen, *Gender, Genre, and Victorian Historical Writing*.

kept'.³ Biographers were repeatedly presented with the challenge of constructing a narrative from a life containing much that appeared trivial. This was the case for both famous and obscure subjects. In his 1870 memoir of Jane Austen, James Edward Austen-Leigh lamented 'the extreme scantiness of the materials out of which it must be constructed'.⁴ One of the reasons for the disproportionate number of female collective biography over single-subject works is simply that it was difficult to pad out the narrative beyond a short sketch.

The second issue, which regards questions of feminine propriety, is more complex. The publication of female *autobiographies* provoked debates concerning the respectability of an intrusion into the public sphere by individuals who were generally expected to confine themselves to the private sphere. As Joanne Shattock writes, 'self-definition and self-exploration implied self-confidence, a sense of the writing self and the acknowledgement of a public role with which they were uncomfortable'.⁵ Women who embarked on this act of self-exposure—and many did—risked condemnations of immodesty.

Readers of Victorian female autobiographies have benefited from the enriching studies of critics such as, to name but a few, Sidonie Smith, Estelle Jelinek, Mary Corbett, and Shari Benstock, who have drawn attention to the ways in which women autobiographers wrestled with expectations of female behaviour. They have unearthed little-known texts and uncovered strategies used by autobiographers to negotiate these pressures, such as writing narratives in which they appear as part of a group. To a significant extent, however, these theories have been achieved by comparing the lives of lesser-known women with the contemporary autobiographies of famous men rather than male subjects as undistinguished as them. Mary Corbett, for example, argues for the interest and complexity of Camilla Crosland's *Landmarks of a Literary Life* (1893) by stating that

unlike Carlyle and his contemporaries, who saw history as the collective biography of great men, Crosland sees history happening in and through all individuals, each of whom has some story to tell . . . By conferring on everyone the potential capacity to tell life stories from particular points of view, Crosland suggests that the history of each individual, whether elite or obscure, has some value for readers. Like Virginia Woolf, who wrote forty years later about her longing to read 'the lives of the obscure,' Crosland invests the record of ordinary experience with a historical value; she calls for life histories that will edify and represent both high and low.⁶

³ Mrs [Sarah] Ellis, *The Mothers of Great Men* (London: Richard Bentley, 1859), p. 4.

⁴ Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir*, p. 229.

⁵ Joanne Shattock, 'Victorian Women as Writers and Readers of (Auto)biography', in *Mortal Pages, Literary Lives: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Autobiography*, ed. by Vincent Newey and Phillipp Shaw (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), p. 142.

⁶ Corbett, *Representing Femininity*, p. 98.

The preceding chapters have shown that 'Carlyle and his contemporaries' were extremely keen to celebrate 'both high and low', and that therefore such endeavours were not the female prerogative that it is often assumed to be.

Biographies of obscure women in fact share many similarities with biographies of obscure men in a way that destabilizes assumptions about women's life-writing. To name but two: biographers of both obscure men and women tended to stress the personal qualities of their subjects (such as John Sterling and Bernard Barton) rather than their (sparse) public achievements. Nor were biographers of women the only ones wary of giving public exposure to their subjects: Samuel Smiles was at least as keen to 'manage' his subject's intrusion into the public sphere. Of course, biographies of women described the activities of their subjects in a distinctive manner, which explains the inclusion of a separate chapter on women's lives here. However, they should be read as an extension of the narratives discussed in the surrounding chapters, rather than an entirely distinctive subgenre.

The tendency to discuss female biography and autobiography in tandem, while often productive and justified by the obvious parallels between the two genres, may also have smoothed over certain unique features of these works. Biography held a crucial advantage for women over autobiography. It offered the means to circumvent accusations of indecent exposure by providing an alluring compromise: the life a woman could be narrated through a mediator, thus dispelling allegations of the subject's improper self-exhibition. This did not entirely dispel the reticence of biographers, since the majority of such works were domestic biographies circulated privately. However, the fact that women in biographies seem to be commemorated almost despite themselves made the genre more acceptable, which in turn meant that a broad range of female behaviour could be, and was, exhibited. For the female biographer, the genre also held certain advantages: they could explore their own concerns and experiences without appearing to thrust themselves before the public gaze. Carlyle's *The Life of Sterling* has shown that the use of biography as a means of untangling personal emotions while avoiding the self-indulgence of autobiography was by no means a strategy reserved for female biographers and/or subjects.

Biographies of minor women writers exploit these opportunities with particular sophistication. Little-known women with other occupations, such as schoolmistresses and nurses, did have their lives acknowledged in full-length biographies, but only in comparatively isolated cases. An advantage of looking more closely at female literary biographies is that they were published in sufficient numbers to bring out recurrent patterns. Women writers also bring to the fore contemporary anxieties regarding the preservation of the separate spheres. Much has been written about the complications faced by the woman writer in the nineteenth century. Becoming a professional writer posed obvious challenges for women writers who were often accused of trespassing on traditional male terrain. At the same time, Margaret Oliphant felt justified in describing the nineteenth century as 'the age of

female novelists'.⁷ Women writers were by no means universally condemned as lacking in respectability, and the novel was an ideal outlet for the literary talents of women, who could draw on the domestic concerns of the female sphere for a genre profoundly interested in the private sphere. The rising number of works of collective biographies in the nineteenth century testifies to the growing desire (usually on the part of women, but also of men) to begin to take account of a significant female literary tradition.⁸

Two biographies of women writers reveal the largely unsuspected richness of Victorian female biography through both the appeal of the subject's lives and the sophistication of their biographers. The first is the 1882 biography of Annie Keary, a children's writer and domestic novelist who combined the duties of the traditional middle-class Victorian woman with travels to Egypt, and involvement with institutions for working-class women and the suffragette movement. This biography is the only work of domestic biography discussed in detail within this book: its author is Eliza Keary, Annie's sister and a writer herself. The justification for this exception is that the biographer made explicit attempts to distance the work from a traditional domestic biography, and tried to explore the potential of the genre in terms far more reminiscent of publications in which the biographer and subject are not related. The second work is the life of Charlotte Tucker, published in 1895. Tucker, unlike Annie, had achieved substantial fame as a children's writer during her lifetime but, by the time her biography appeared, had been largely forgotten by her early admirers. As a middle-aged woman, Tucker left England to work as a missionary in India, where she remained until her death. Her life was also penned by a fellow children's writer, Agnes Giberne. Both biographies perceive the 'hidden' life as a space of possibilities rather than something to be transgressed. They welcome the association made between women's lives and the everyday for the freedom it presents to both subject and biographer.

A survey of single-subject biographies of little-known women writers prompts an initial observation. The biographers shy from explicitly inscribing their efforts within the wider tradition of biography stretching from Samuel Johnson through Thomas Carlyle to Leslie Stephen that sought to redress the over-representation of great lives. This may have been simply because their reasons for tackling hidden lives were far more obvious and did not need the justification of illustrious authorities. Another explanation is that they do not make the same contrast between fame and obscurity present in biographies of 'hidden' men. Instead, biographers of famous women represented their subjects moving between the public and the private in a way that mirrors biographers of more obscure women. Both used the idea of 'obscurity' to their advantage. In order to

⁷ [Margaret Oliphant], 'Modern Novelists—Great and Small', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 77 (May 1855), p. 555.

⁸ See Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman*; Oldfield, *Collective Biography*.

understand how biographers of women may have manipulated the idea of the 'everyday' and the 'hidden', it is useful to pause first on the most influential Victorian biography of a female subject, Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857).

THE LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË (1857)

In an article on 'Women's Biographies', Sybil Oldfield declared that 'the writing of full-length biographies of individual women, in English, by women was inaugurated by Elizabeth Gaskell's testimony to Charlotte Brontë'.⁹ Although single-subject biographies of women by women were, in fact, written before Gaskell's narrative, the statement testifies to the groundbreaking effect of the work.¹⁰ The biography's first printing sold out rapidly. Two months later, in May 1857, clouds of controversy gathered, as (some justified) accusations of libel resulted from Gaskell's indiscretions concerning Branwell's tormented affair with a married woman and the identification of Cowan Bridge as the original for the appalling Lowood School in *Jane Eyre*. Public retractions and enforced revisions kept the work in the public eye. Margaret Oliphant felt that Gaskell had 'originated in her bewilderment . . . a new kind of biography'¹¹ and many agreed with Henry Fothergill Chorley when he could 'not recollect a life of a woman by a woman so well executed'.¹²

Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* remains the Victorian biography most frequently republished and discussed. The biography is included within a discussion of hidden lives because it prefigures later biographical depictions of the divided woman, torn between private and public life but also, more importantly, because it made a further contribution to women's life-writing which has, so far, attracted little notice. Gaskell presented readers with the almost oxymoronic construct of the simultaneously eminent and obscure woman.

Discussion of the biography upon its publication was instantly dominated by disputes over how far Gaskell's Brontë embodied or transgressed accepted models of feminine behaviour. The manner in which Gaskell used biography to prompt a public reassessment of her frequently maligned friend's works and, more importantly, character, has been extensively discussed. As numerous critics have stated, discussions of Brontë's novels in the biography take a decidedly

⁹ Sybil Oldfield, 'Women's Biographies', in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, ed. by Margaretta Jolly (London: Fitzroy Dearborn 2001), II, 949.

¹⁰ See, for example, Agnes Bulmer, *Mrs. Elizabeth Mortimer* (London: John Mason, 1836) and Anne Ross Collinson, *Memoir of Mrs. Agnes Bulmer* (London: J. G. and F. Rivington, 1837).

¹¹ Margaret Oliphant, 'The Sisters Brontë', in *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign* (London: Hirst and Blackett, 1897), p. 26.

¹² [Henry Fothergill Chorley], *The Athenaeum*, 1536 (4 April 1857), p. 427.

second place behind a depiction of Brontë's life that would make readers 'honour the woman'.¹³

Gaskell was neither the first nor the last biographer to weigh the claims of public achievement against those of traditional female virtues. Collective biographies provide numerous illustrations of similar attempts. *Memorable Women* (1854) presents 'examples of wives and mothers, who have done their duty under difficulties and temptations; and if in some cases genius has accompanied high moral endowments, we have all the more reason to be gratified by the picture of combined excellence of heart and mind'.¹⁴ Gaskell's desire to make Brontë 'the friend the daughter the sister the wife'¹⁵ known and admired is imitated in Emily Owen's *The Heroines of Domestic Life* (1861), which insists that 'feminine heroism comprehends those elements which make better wives, mothers, and daughters' and lists these characteristics as 'devotion, fidelity, piety, unselfishness, in their highest culmination'.¹⁶ Such works upheld the Victorian idea of the 'separate spheres', which saw women confined to the domestic sphere and serving as helpmeets to their more active male counterparts. Gaskell creates the impression that her portrait exists within this tradition. The word 'duty' resonates throughout: the feeling of 'Duty being paramount to pleasure... lay at the foundation of Charlotte's character' (I, 221).

Within this conventional frame, Gaskell suggests that the rigid application of standards of female submission can be questioned. The obsession with duty reveals Brontë's 'over-ascetic spirit, betokening a loss of healthy balance in either body or mind' (I, 152). Gaskell returns to the theme later in the work: 'I allude to the subject again here, in order that the reader may remember the gnawing, private cares, which she had to bury in her own heart; and the pain of which could only be smothered for a time under the diligent fulfilment of present duty' (I, 302). The heavy claims on the reader's attention ('we have seen', 'the reader may remember') seem superfluous, given the omnipresence of Gaskell's theme. This very insistence requests that the reader pay particular attention to the passage. The language is not that of quiet acceptance but of tortuous repression ('gnawing', 'bury', 'smothered'). The entire abnegation of the self is not cherished. Any woman who strictly followed the conduct books, Gaskell implies, obscures herself.

Indeed, one of Gaskell's most important contributions to female biography was to frame the life with a conventional account of female duty in such a

¹³ Elizabeth Gaskell to George Smith, 31 May 1855, reprinted in *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, p. 345.

¹⁴ Mrs Newton Crosland, *Memorable Women: The Story of Their Lives* (London: David Bogue, 1854), p. vii.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell to Ellen Nussey, 6 September 1855, reprinted in *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, p. 376.

¹⁶ Mrs [Emily] Owen, *The Heroines of Domestic Life* (London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1861), p. vii.

manner that hints of discontent could be included without exposing the biography to attacks of impropriety. With the exception of Harriet Martineau, who picked up on the underlying narrative of troubling self-sacrifice, critics saw Gaskell's Brontë as an exemplar of womanly virtue. For Charles Kingsley, hers was 'the picture of a valiant woman made perfect by sufferings';¹⁷ George Henry Lewes saw the work as being 'full of encouragement and healthy teaching, a lesson in duty and self-reliance'.¹⁸ *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* set a precedent for biographies of women that could convincingly be read in two very different ways.

Gaskell could not, and did not, ignore that part of her subject's life that had brought her renown. Many men, and indeed women, agreed with Robert Southey, who warned Brontë that 'literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it even as an accomplishment and a recreation' (I, 170). However, women were being increasingly accepted as part of the literary world. Gaskell, caught between the two judgements of the female writer, presents her novelist subject as divided. Gaskell insisted that 'the more she was known the more people would honour her as a woman, separate from her character as authoress'.¹⁹ She discusses this duality in an important passage that is echoed in later biographies of lesser-known women writers:

Henceforward Charlotte Brontë's existence becomes divided into two parallel currents—her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman. There were separate duties belonging to each character—not opposing each other; not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled. When a man becomes an author, it is probably merely a change of employment to him. He takes a portion of that time which has hitherto been devoted to some other study or pursuit . . . But no other can take up the quiet, regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother, as well as she whom God has appointed to fill that particular place: a woman's principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice . . . And yet she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents. She must not hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use and service of others. In an humble and faithful spirit must she labour to do what is not impossible, or God would not have set her to do it. (II, 49–50)

Brontë's assumption of a pseudonym allows Gaskell to emphasize these divisions. 'Currer Bell' was the writer's public name, and 'Charlotte Brontë' her private one. Yet the public pseudonym was precisely the name that enabled the writer to cling on to obscurity, while, by the time Gaskell published her biography, 'Charlotte Brontë', unmasked, was the name by which the author of *Jane Eyre*

¹⁷ Charles Kingsley to Elizabeth Gaskell, 4 August 1857, reprinted in *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, ed. by T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington (Oxford: Blackwell, 1932), IV, 222–3.

¹⁸ George Henry Lewes to Elizabeth Gaskell, 15 April 1857, in *The George Eliot Letters*, II, 316.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell to George Smith, 31 May 1855, reprinted in *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, p. 345.

had become known. The apparently clear separation that Gaskell projects onto her subject's life is in fact unstable, as public and private merge into one another.

At the same time, Gaskell accepts that Brontë's assumption of the two roles of woman and author divides her between the public and the private spheres, even as she is ambivalent regarding such a division of labour. Gaskell subtly manoeuvres so as to realign Brontë's more public activities with the private sphere. Just as the domestic responsibility must be accepted without choice, so is the writing of novels a matter of God-given duty. By alluding to the parable of the talents, the biographer removes the idea that Brontë's literary work sprang from self-indulgence. Just as a woman was meant to assume the role of nurturer, so does the literary activity become a feminized act of ministering ('use and service of others') set out by God. Female literary activity becomes acceptable through its redefinition as yet another feminine 'duty' and act of sacrifice ('must she labour').

The biographer does not question that woman's proper place is the home, yet there are indications of rebellion at the core of the text through an allusion to women's lack of choice and the greater flexibility of male careers. The allusion to God-given talents was usually employed to reaffirm women's belonging to the obscurity of the home and confinement to domestic duties. Yet Gaskell uses the parable to reject the idea of this obscurity: the talented woman must not 'shrink' nor 'hide'. The word 'napkin', a piece of domestic equipment, again alludes to women's traditional place in the home. It is also an item used to protect from soiling, or allows cleansing. In rejecting the use of the napkin, Gaskell gently releases the female novelist from domestic duties and denies that a woman who exposes herself to the public needs such cleansing.

Gaskell's solution to the dilemma of admiring the achievements of both woman and novelist is a surprising one: it is to create the paradoxical figure of the famous unknown. Gaskell, who quoted Brontë's own assertion that 'the most profound obscurity is infinitely preferable to vulgar notoriety',²⁰ works hard to transmute Brontë's fame into something more acceptable. Lives of great men frequently used a narrative structure that traced their subject's rise from obscurity to fame. Gaskell could have used such a structure, as Brontë was thrown into the limelight as a best-selling author following a secluded life. Instead, she chooses a more circular structure that maintains a simultaneous sense of Brontë's obscurity and fame. Theorists have often asserted that whereas male autobiography tends to be unified, linear, and preoccupied with the public, female autobiography favours the disjointed, the circular, and the domestic.²¹ Though this is by no

²⁰ Charlotte Brontë to unnamed correspondent, 3 May 1848, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, II, 45.

²¹ See Shari Benstock (ed.), *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writing* (London: Routledge, 1998); Estelle Jelinek, *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography from Antiquity to the Present Day* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), p. 53.

means always the case, the pattern is replicated here in Gaskell's effort to distance Brontë from a masculine narrative of achievement.

Gaskell is intrigued by the fine line between obscurity and fame for women from the first pages of the biography, where the epigraph taken from *Aurora Leigh* laments 'How dreary 'tis for women to sit still | On winter nights by solitary fires | And hear the nations praising them far off' (I, title page). Gaskell portrays Brontë as both famous and unknown ('the whole reading-world of England was in a ferment to discover the unknown author', II, 37; 'one and all are full of praise of this great, unknown genius', II, 38). She talks of the 'unknown author of "Shirley"' (II, 117), which, by the publication of that 1849 novel, Brontë no longer was. A visit to London during which she is fêted is followed by her resumption of 'her noiseless daily duties' (II, 137). During Brontë's lifetime, this retreat only further stoked the fire of public curiosity, and the anonymous author of *Jane Eyre* became famous, paradoxically, for being unknown. Within the biography itself, however, the description appears as a surprising attempt to satisfy both the status of the author and the demureness of the woman.

This depiction prompted some surprising responses. One anonymous reviewer asserted that "'the short and simple annals of the poor" apply to the uneventful history of this great artist's exoteric existence'.²² The quotation from Gray is entirely inappropriate to describe Brontë's achievements and the public recognition she gained. Yet the reviewer was correct in sensing that the contrast between great lives and 'obscure lives' did not hold for biographies of Victorian women. This aspect of the work evidently resonated with female readers. Anna Jameson found in the biography the depiction of a 'boundless sphere of feeling and intellect crammed into a silent existence',²³ even though 'silence' seems a strikingly inapt term for the voice behind *Jane Eyre*. Similarly, Oliphant experienced the biography as a 'plea for every woman dropped out of sight'.²⁴ That such a conclusion could be drawn from the biography of one of the most famous women of the nineteenth century is a testimony to Gaskell's dual portrayal. This pattern was used in other biographies of women writers. Anne Gilchrist, in her biography of Mary Lamb, states that 'on the whole Mary was a silent woman' near the end of a work devoted to demonstrating the extraordinary vividness of its subject's voice.²⁵ Women could also define themselves in this paradoxical fashion. Oliphant describes herself in her autobiography as 'very small, very obscure':²⁶ curious labels for a popular writer and the favourite novelist of Queen Victoria.

²² [Unsigned review], *Observer* (12 April 1857), p. 5.

²³ Quoted in Joanne Shattock, 'The Construction of the Woman Writer', in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1800–1900*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 19.

²⁴ Oliphant, 'The Sisters Brontë', p. 24.

²⁵ Anne Gilchrist, *Mary Lamb* (London: W. H. Allen, 1883), p. 293.

²⁶ Oliphant, *Autobiography*, p. 53.

Gaskell also succeeded in making Brontë's life seem both highly dramatic (as would suit a Great Life) and uneventful (as befits a woman). Some critics were dubious that any material of interest could be found in Brontë's life, as 'the lives of women, and especially of Englishwomen, are marked by little that can excite the attention of those who have never seen them in the domestic world which has been their only sphere of action'.²⁷ Others were taken aback by the intensity of the narrative. George Henry Lewes felt that 'fiction has nothing more wild, touching and heart-strengthening to place above it',²⁸ and a writer in the *National Magazine* called the work, evocatively, 'a strange poem-picture'.²⁹ The two strands are united by a reviewer in *The Spectator*, who finds that 'the actual poverty of incident that characterizes the life' coexists with 'the profound pathos, the tragic interest' stimulated by the work.³⁰ Gaskell had seemingly created something out of nothing.

If Gaskell, according to Oliphant, was 'bewildered' when creating her biography, so were her reviewers when reading it. The rapid succession of terms used to describe the work attests to this uncertainty. Poetry, the visual arts, the novel, and drama but, oddly, not biography, are all evoked. These references intimate that hidden lives had been deemed to belong to fictional forms. Reviewers seemed surprised to discover the flexibility of the biographical genre. James Fitzjames Stephen, Leslie Stephen's brother, found the biography 'like a novel, and the skilful arrangement of lights and shades and colours—the prominence of some objects and the evident suppression of others—leave on the mind the excitement of a highly wrought drama'.³¹ Stephen brings both strands together: the biographer's dual interest in revealing and obscuring ('lights and shades', 'prominence', and 'suppression'), and the sense that such depictions of womanhood were usually to be found in fiction. The effective representation of hidden lives was something that so far had been predominantly associated with fictional forms.

It is difficult to determine precisely how far Gaskell influenced later biographies of women. The scandal regarding Gaskell's indiscretions made it a problematic model. Moreover, the extraordinary nature of her subject—Brontë's life, genius, and surroundings—presented Gaskell with opportunities that few biographers could hope for. Though biographers often compared their subject to Charlotte Brontë in terms reminiscent of Gaskell,³² they avoided naming her as a direct biographical influence.³³ Biographies of women writers continued, like

²⁷ [Unsigned review], *Saturday Review* (4 April 1857), p. 313.

²⁸ George Henry Lewes to Elizabeth Gaskell, 15 April 1857, reprinted in *The George Eliot Letters*, II, 315.

²⁹ [Unsigned review], *National Magazine*, 2 (June 1857), pp. 76–8.

³⁰ [Unsigned review], *The Spectator*, 30 (Supplement, 4 April 1857), pp. 373–4.

³¹ [James Fitzjames Stephen], 'The License of Modern Novelists', *Edinburgh Review*, 106 (July 1857), p. 155.

³² See, for example, Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*.

³³ One female autobiographer who did closely follow the model was Mary Cholmondeley; see Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography*, pp. 173–98.

Gaskell, to demonstrate a strong preoccupation with the domestic, but it is difficult to ascertain whether this was out of a conscious choice to follow her lead, or because the limited choices available to women simply dictated that this should be their principal focus. Nor did all biographers imitate Gaskell, as the very different biographies of George Eliot published by Mathilde Blind (1883), J. W. Cross (1885), and Leslie Stephen (1902) indicate. The three works, which have been discussed in more depth elsewhere,³⁴ show that there was no simple evolution in the biographical representation of women from censured portraits to more complex ones, but instead an ongoing discussion about female representation.

Gaskell did, however, present two ideas that were picked up by almost all later biographies of minor women. She proved that a biography concerned with the domestic sphere could be at least as compelling as any public life of a great man. More significantly, she also demonstrated that the insistent association of female lives with the private and the obscure could be used to women's advantage by enabling the representation of complex and even contradictory behaviour under the cover of a conventional form of feminine modesty.

BIOGRAPHIES OF MINOR WOMEN WRITERS: A SURVEY

As Joanne Shattock states, 'comparatively few women writers were memorialized by full-scale biographies'.³⁵ Many successful women of letters—such as Julia Kavanagh and Charlotte Yonge—preferred to write collective female biographies, which gave them opportunities to participate in a process of canonization on a broader scale. When Anne Katherine Elwood wrote her *Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England* in 1843, she denied awareness 'of there being any published Biography of Literary Females of the past and present century'.³⁶ Many neglected female writers were reintroduced to the public through such means.

The small number of full-length biographies of minor female writers written for public circulation include biographies of Mary Sewell, a Quaker who penned didactic tales and whose invalid daughter wrote the famous *Black Beauty*, Susan Ferrier, a Scottish novelist and friend of Sir Walter Scott who abandoned literature upon converting to strict evangelicalism, and Caroline Leakey, a poet and novelist who travelled to Van Diemen's Land with her sister, wrote a female convict novel, and later set up a home in England for fallen women. Their

³⁴ See Shattock, 'The Construction of the Woman Writer', and Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*, esp. ch. 3, 'Versions of the Life: George Eliot and her Biographers'.

³⁵ Shattock, 'The Construction of the Woman Writer', p. 10.

³⁶ Mrs. [Anne Katherine] Elwood, *Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England, from the commencement of the last century* (London: Henry Colburn, 1843), I, v.

biographers were principally, though not exclusively, female. Indeed, a survey reveals few differences between male and female biographies of female subjects. Though women were more likely to write about other women, male writers did pick up the pen to commemorate female achievements, however minor, and often in broadly identical terms. The works appeared in the later decades of the nineteenth century, principally because the generation that witnessed a substantial rise in the numbers of Victorian women writers was beginning to pass away.

These works enrich an understanding of the representation of female writers in the period and probe assumptions about the limited nature of female biography. As in the biographies of more famous women writers, they are concerned with finding an adequate balance between individual and communal duties. The subjects' lack of substantial success as writers, however, means that ideas that could have been problematic in connection with famous women could be expressed more freely, since these women did not trespass on the public sphere to any significant degree. Accordingly, the biographers are extremely frank about the frustrations of domestic life even as they build a case for the social importance of the hidden and the uneventful.

Those who demurred at the thought of a woman writer objected not just to her intrusion of the public sphere but also to the idea that her imagination was being indulged in to an excessive degree. The effects of literary creation on the female mind were often wrangled over in journals and collective biographies. Whereas some such as the didactic writer G. L. Craik asserted that woman 'gained by her study and scholarship an increase both of happiness and usefulness', others including the collective biographer Catherine Hamilton warned that 'it is not among writers that the happiest women are generally found' but among those who 'require nothing but the calm recurrence of those peaceful home duties'.³⁷ The biographies reflect this nervousness by frequently downplaying the role that inspiration and ambition had on their subjects.

Literature is clearly valued by both subjects and biographers as a chance to escape a narrow domestic sphere. *Glimpses of a Hidden Life* (1887), the biography of the Irish Catholic writer Attie O'Brien, most colourfully depicts the restrictions of the unmarried woman's life: 'To work, to read—to read aloud for Grannie,—to give out the Rosary for the little household, to do some pious stitching—to wit, the scapulars,—to visit a few friends; such were the duties to which the girl was striving to tie down her hot, eager, passionate heart.'³⁸ Considering that women are often represented as having been forced to write about their desires 'in between the lines',³⁹ it is both surprising and refreshing to

³⁷ Craik, *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties, illustrated by Female Examples*, p. 357; Catherine Hamilton, *Women Writers: Their Works and Ways* (London: Ward, Lock, Bowden, 1892), p. v.

³⁸ Mrs Morgan John O'Connell, *Glimpses of a Hidden Life: Memories of Attie O'Brien* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1887), p. 20.

³⁹ See, for example, Corbett, *Representing Femininity*, p. 100.

encounter such a candid avowal of frustration. Though the biographer lays part of the blame for Attie's dissatisfaction on her 'passionate' nature, literature is welcomed as a means of relieving an oppressive state of inactivity. 'Heaven, in its mercy, sent her the consolation of work; by slow degrees she felt her way to the pen, and then her life became delightfully full and interesting.' Literature is deemed inferior to marriage but vastly preferable to 'a life of dreary monotony without either pleasure, variety, or congenial occupation'.⁴⁰ A less emphatic but equally telling phrase appears in the biography of Anna Sewell's mother, who took to writing because of 'the emptiness of her life' in her daughter's absence.⁴¹ The biographers have no qualms in representing the limitations of female lives.

Intriguingly, it is in biographies of religious poets, where Christian concerns are placed centre-stage, that the most unembarrassed depictions of literary creation occur. This is partly because the subjects are poets (and therefore in popular conception more 'inspired') whereas the others are predominantly novelists, but the main reason appears to be that the omnipresent religious concerns dispel fears that the poet was motivated by worldly ambition. One such poet, Emma Tatham, is unabashedly described by her (male) biographer as a 'young genius', who composes a 'lofty storm-song' when 'incapable of rest from intense enjoyment and irrepressible inspiration'.⁴² In *Glimpses of a Hidden Life* (1887), the biographer also makes allowance for Attie's 'fervid nature', 'vivid imagination', and the 'tumult of her heart', though no claims are made for any lasting literary talent.⁴³

At the same time, these same religious works offer the most vivid depictions of female depression. Emma Tatham sank into 'darkness and the deeps' and Attie O'Brien suffered nights of nervous unrest punctuated by 'horrible dreams'.⁴⁴ In both cases, this prompts for the biographers a comparison with 'great', canonical writers. Emma's biographer links her condition to the poetic temperament, 'common to most young poets', and forges a parallel with the temperaments of Byron and Shelley. The comparison indicates that the biographer does not attribute such misery to gender. Attie's biographer compares and contrasts her subject's life with that of George Eliot. Despite her bouts of depression, Attie is comforted by her faith, an attitude that is compared favourably against the 'profound melancholy' of Eliot.⁴⁵ Though the comparison is with another female author, it is again religion, rather than gender, that preoccupies the biographer. References to such famous writers are conspicuously absent from the biographies of more secular writers.

⁴⁰ O'Connell, *Glimpses of a Hidden Life*, pp. 1, 16.

⁴¹ Mrs [Mary] Bayly, *The Life and Letters of Mrs. Sewell* (London: James Nisbet, 1889), p. 131.

⁴² Benjamin Gregory, *Memoir of Emma Tatham* (London: Hamilton, 1859), p. 3.

⁴³ O'Connell, *Glimpses of a Hidden Life* pp. 4, 20.

⁴⁴ Gregory, *Memoir*, p. 54; O'Connell, *Glimpses of a Hidden Life*, p. 127.

⁴⁵ Gregory, *Memoir*, p. 49; O'Connell, *Glimpses of a Hidden Life*, p. 241.

Secular writers were far more rarely labelled 'geniuses'. A theme that unites the works is the biographer's casual admission that their subject's works were mediocre. One labels a poet's verses as 'unpretending'; another mockingly describes the writer as part of the 'scrawling sisterhood'.⁴⁶ Sidonie Smith has written that female literary attempts appeared more acceptable under such a label, and that numerous women were able to publish journals, letters, and diaries on the grounds that they were unpretending scribbles.⁴⁷ This strategy was all the more necessary since, as Corbett has explored, men were increasingly keen to develop the notion of literature as a profession, and therefore supported by the kind of institutions that excluded women.⁴⁸ The disdainful allusion to the 'sisterhood' intimates as much. However, it is dangerous to read too much into these confessions of mediocrity: after all, the majority of the women discussed in these biographies *were* unexceptional writers.

Moreover, these biographies are often content to note the relentless professionalism of these women, whose mediocrity was often the result not of gender but of having had to write for pecuniary gain. Another recurrent theme is that of the woman who took up literary work following her husband's financial failures. This was the case, for example, with Emma Marshall, whose 'pen was too busy till the last in fulfilling its strenuous engagements to allow her to indulge in any such literary recreation as writing reminiscences'.⁴⁹ The phrase implicitly defines the writer's activity as a masculine one: 'strenuous', in opposition to the feminine 'recreation'. There is no trace in the passage that the writer is to be reproached for taking up this masculine role. Intriguingly, autobiographical writing is associated with light literature. The biographer (who in this case was related to her subject) is less concerned with representing female literary activity as a dangerous one than with scorning trivial productions. Similarly, Mrs Sewell's biographer notes that 'it is said that every writer of fiction writes one story which contains his own. Mrs Sewell's personality was too much exhaled into that of others for her to do this.'⁵⁰ The choice of the pronoun 'his' indicates that such writers are identified as being masculine, and links literary self-indulgence with masculinity. Not only are these writers not condemned, but their work is seen as more profitable to others than that of their male counterparts.

This practical vision of literature, remote from considerations of inspiration, prohibits these women from accessing a nobler literary sphere. Instead, their productions present yet another means of contributing to the needs of the household, which middle-class women were used to managing efficiently. Gaskell

⁴⁶ Bayly, *Life and Letters*, p. 137; O'Connell, *Glimpses of a Hidden Life*, p. 101.

⁴⁷ See Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 42.

⁴⁸ Corbett, *Representing Femininity*, pp. 61–3.

⁴⁹ Beatrice Marshall, *Emma Marshall: a Biographical Sketch* (London: Seeley and Co., 1900), p. 61.

⁵⁰ Bayly, *Life and Letters*, p. 142.

defended Brontë's (far more controversial) novels by framing them within domestic language.⁵¹ Here, however, literature and domestic needs are united in a far more practical manner. The domestic language is not used to justify transgressive activities but to admire the resourcefulness of these women.

The division of duties between home and literary work did not have to be experienced as a personal struggle. Many of these accounts esteem women's ability to combine both domains. Balance and harmony are stressed beyond any other concerns. Rather than taking the woman novelist out of the home, the biographies reconfigure the domestic space as one in which individual and collective activities can be carried out together. Long before Virginia Woolf campaigned for a woman's right to 'a room of her own', these biographies deny the need for an isolated space. 'No special room in the house was appropriated for her writing. Generally she wrote at the dining-room table, clearing up her papers when it was laid for meals', writes one biographer.⁵² Female autobiographies also addressed this issue. Margaret Oliphant depicted her writing space as 'the little second drawing-room where all the (feminine) life of the house goes on; and I don't think I have ever had two hours undisturbed (except at night, when everybody is in bed) during my whole literary life. Miss Austen, I believe, wrote in the same way.'⁵³ As throughout her autobiography, Oliphant encourages the close union of the domestic and the literary in her life even as she laments it as the cause of what she deems her comparative mediocrity. The allusion to Jane Austen reveals a desire to create a feminine tradition recognizing female ingenuity even as it deplores the conditions that makes it necessary.

Oliphant, Linda Peterson argues, was weary of the younger generation of feminists who laid 'claim to the "professional" by excluding or separating it from the "domestic"'.⁵⁴ The biographies can be read in a similar light. Feminist critics have been keen to interpret representations of 'doubleness' in women's lives as a sign of constraint and repression,⁵⁵ yet these biographies show that it is not necessarily so. The subjects are women who, as one biographer describes, can both converse with the most illustrious individuals of the period and cook delicious bread.⁵⁶ These biographies maintain that, instead of the domestic sphere breaking into public life, it can be reshaped so that both private and communal needs can be more or less satisfied.

⁵¹ Linda Peterson has argued that female autobiographers such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna also perceived their literary endeavours as 'an extension of domestic labour'. See Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography*, p. 49.

⁵² Marshall, *Emma Marshall*, p. 290.

⁵³ Oliphant, *Autobiography*, p. 67.

⁵⁴ Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography*, p. 153.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Deborah Kaplan, 'Representing Two Cultures: Jane Austen's Letters', in *The Private Self*, ed. by Shari Benstock (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 212; Dorothy Mermin, *Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830-1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁵⁶ See Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist (ed.), *Anne Gilchrist: Her Life and Writings* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887), p. 80.

The reconciliation of personal desire and social duty is a central theme of biographies of obscure lives, whether male or female. Biography is used as a genre that has the unique ability to harmonize these two demands. As the narrative of an individual destiny, it celebrates the individual. As a third-person narrative that uses autobiographical writings but argues for the inadequacy (or undesirability) of extended introspection, it restores the importance of a perspective that goes beyond the self. Biographies of famous women attempted to achieve this but faced a greater difficulty in accounting for the importance of the domestic sphere in the life of a woman with a successful public career. Biographies of lesser talents depicted their subjects as being largely successful in reconciling these competing demands, and we are encouraged to applaud them for that success. Such a stance is in part adopted because the writer was deemed to have remained reassuringly obscure.

As so often in biographies of hidden lives, the biographers do not ask the public to reconsider their verdict on the subject's importance. Whereas Oliphant suspected that her work suffered as a result of her domestic responsibilities, these writers see the subject's mediocrity as a reassuring proof of their healthy lives. The hidden status of the subjects is approved and even willed by the biographers. The biographers work hard to create an impression of 'quiet'. Turning points and events are downplayed in favour of repetitive episodes of daily life. Dates are often occluded, so that it is frequently difficult to give an account of the life beyond the overall impression it provides. The biographers do not re-evaluate the subject's works and reputation: their critical neglect, they agree, is justified.

A comparison of these biographies with those discussed in the preceding chapter corroborates the notion that the dismissal of literary endeavours in favour of communal duties and personal value need not always be interpreted as a sign of female oppression. Biographers of minor women writers certainly rate their subjects' moral qualities above their literary ones: one writer 'was not extraordinarily gifted' but shone as a 'Christian lady',⁵⁷ another poet's 'heart and mind and fancy [were] very superior to anything she actually achieved with the pen'.⁵⁸ However, biographers of male writers of local fame were equally keen to demonstrate that their subjects had succeeded in balancing communal duties with their writing. Bernard Barton contributed to his local community as a banker in a manner not unlike these women who oversaw the financial health of their domestic sphere.

Mrs Sewell's biographer is one of the few biographers to acknowledge that most of her readers—male and female—would have led lives as uneventful and obscure as that of her subject:

⁵⁷ J. V. Bishop, *She Walked with God, And Was Not, for God took her: Memorials of Mrs. Bass* (London: William Mack, 1882), p. vii.

⁵⁸ O'Connell, *Glimpses of a Hidden Life*, p. 6. See also Edward Heneage Dering, *Memoirs of Georgiana, Lady Chatterton* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1878), pp. 304–5.

Does not the quiet, unobtrusive life of my dear friend largely represent, in its outward aspect, the kind of life lived by far the majority of our fellow-creatures? How few—how very few of us are born to any kind of distinction (I mean, in the eyes of the world), either in the way of surpassing talent, wonderful performances, or position! . . . May it not, after all, be a helpful thing to endeavour to show that this apparently monotonous mode of existence can be invested with a charm and a dignity all its own.

It is worth resisting the temptation to see such statements, and further claims that ‘perhaps Mrs Sewell’s greater success in life was in her personal work among the poor’ (viii), as further evidence of the period’s wariness of female writers. The biographer avoids the discussion of gendered roles and prefers the broader term ‘fellow-creatures’; there is no acknowledgement that men and women may have a different conception of ‘distinction’ and worldly ‘position’. Mary Bayly goes on to insist that

there are many poets who never in their lives write a line of poetry; the music that dwells within them manifests itself in the sweet and graceful actions of their lives, in the tones of the voice, in the readiness to discern and adopt the good and beautiful, from whatever source they may flow. These are the *élite* of the world, in whatever station they may be found.⁵⁹

The passage is a close paraphrase of Wordsworth’s *Excursion*: ‘Oh! many are the Poets that are sown | By Nature; men endowed with highest gifts . . . | Yet wanting the accomplishments of verse . . . Strongest | Are often those of whom the noisy world | Hears least’. The passage is therefore not simply a defence of the everyday, but an homage to the superior natures who remain undetected. Interestingly, therefore, the biographer creates a new hierarchy within the category of the obscure. Women such as her subject (but also men) may not reach the pinnacle of fame, but can constitute an unsuspected ‘élite’. Obscurity is therefore far from being a sign of disappointment: it is embraced as a token of superiority.

It is a distinctive feature of these works that, although a cursory glance at the writers’ lives reveals much drama and originality, the biographers almost unanimously describe their lives as uneventful. ‘A life so quiet and uneventful’, ‘I questioned if a life so quiet and uneventful could furnish sufficient material’, a ‘comparatively uneventful’ story, a ‘life as uneventful as any woman’s could be’.⁶⁰ This insistence dispels any possibility that they might have any affinity with the tumultuous life of Byron, the tortured existence of John Clare, or even the controversial choices of George Eliot. Nor were such phrases confined to obscure women writers. Jane Austen’s life was repeatedly described in similar terms; Maria Edgeworth stated that ‘as a woman, my life, wholly domestic,

⁵⁹ Bayly, *Life and Letters*, pp. vii–viii, 166.

⁶⁰ John A. Doyle, *Memoir and Correspondence of Susan Ferrier, 1782–1854* (London: John Murray, 1898), p. 7; Bayly, *Life and Letters*, p. v; Marshall, *Emma Marshall*, p. iv; O’Connell, *Glimpses of a Hidden Life*, p. 1.

cannot afford anything interesting to the world'.⁶¹ Alfred Miles describes Felicia Hemans's life as 'quiet and uneventful', Eliza Cook's as 'calm and uneventful', and even finds a compromise for the life of George Eliot, which he describes as 'uneventful but interesting'.⁶²

There seem to be two reasons for the persistent use of this label. Firstly, the reassuring description, which gestures towards conventional female behaviour, suggests that the phrase had become a convention that gave permission for the female life to be displayed—in effect, the obscurity was exaggerated in order to win greater freedom of representation. Of course, in some cases, these lives *were* uneventful. However, far fewer biographers of male writers felt the need to qualify a life regulated by periods of work, travels, and interactions with other contemporary writers as 'quiet and uneventful'. There is a strong sense in these works that lip service has to be paid to expectations of feminine behaviour before a more complex portrayal could be introduced.

The term also indicates that 'obscurity' was valued in a way that reached beyond gender considerations. The biographers distinguish between the more dreary aspects of domestic routines and the significance of their quiet contributions to society. The celebration of hidden lives can certainly be seen as a cynical strategy to preserve the status quo. However, there is no reason to disbelieve women such as Mrs Sewell who is quoted approvingly by her biographer as stating: 'I have always been so thankful to God for making me a woman . . . I have no ambition at all to get upon the world's platform and fight for its prizes. I love the quiet, spiritual work God has appointed for women.'⁶³ It is entirely possible that these women and their biographers built a sense of self-worth around the idea of their obscure influence on society on the same terms as local clergymen, aldermen, and bankers who also wrote in their free time.

MEMOIR OF ANNIE KEARY (1882)

Eliza Keary's *Memoir of Annie Keary* (1882) shares certain preoccupations with the works considered above.⁶⁴ The opening page nods to the conventions of female biography: Annie's life 'was a very quiet one, almost uneventful' (1). Her personal virtue is insistently stressed (the dominant word used to describe her is 'gentle') and it is made clear that her literary activities did not interfere with her domestic duties. However, Keary's biography surpasses most works of this

⁶¹ Quoted by Augustus J. C. Hare, 'Preface', in *The Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*, ed. by J. C. Hare (London: E. Arnold, 1894), p. v.

⁶² A. H. Miles, *The Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Sons, 1892–7), vii, 58, 271, 293.

⁶³ Bayly, *Life and Letters*, p. 122.

⁶⁴ By her sister [Eliza Keary], *Memoir of Annie Keary* (London: Macmillan, 1882). All further references are to this edition.

category in complexity and in its attempt to investigate the potential and limitations of a biography written by and about a female author. Critics, impressed by the work, admired its 'rare charm' and 'strange pathos'.⁶⁵ These compliments do not do justice to the sophistication of the work, in which the biographer—a militant feminist—deliberately exacerbates the 'quiet and uneventful' frame of her subject's life.

Annie Keary (1825–79) was raised in Yorkshire and then Clifton, near Bristol. The sixth of eight children, she entertained her siblings with wild tales from an early age. In spite of her partial deafness, she received a good education, and was encouraged by her parents to pursue her storytelling talents. Annie's engagement to a young man was, to her disappointment, broken off, and she never married. Instead, she devoted much of her life to taking care of her nephews and, later, her ailing parents. Having moved to London with her sister (and future biographer), she engaged in philanthropic activities and found the time to pen children's tales and poems, and a handful of novels for adults that achieved a small degree of popularity. *The Heroes of Asgard* (1857), a collection of Norse legends aimed at children that was co-written with Eliza, was a success and her exploration of Irish life, *Castle Daly* (1875), published four years before her death of breast cancer, was widely considered her best solitary achievement.

During and immediately after Annie's lifetime, Eliza Keary's own literary endeavours were overshadowed by those of her sister. Eliza used myth and fantasy to explore gender roles; ironically, her volume of poetry for adults, *Little Seal-Skin and Other Poems* (1874) has recently gained a little attention, while Annie rests firmly in obscurity.⁶⁶ Naomi Hetherington has found that the volume's 'finest pieces are remarkable for their feminist agenda and their experimentation with verse form'.⁶⁷ In the biography of her sister, Eliza was forced to abandon this framework for a more factual kind of writing, yet it is possible to detect ways in which she again manipulated notions of form to quietly submit provocative ideas.

The biography shows evidence of the influence of Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Parallels may have been prompted by the similarities in the subjects' lives: Annie was raised in an austere Yorkshire home by an Anglican minister of Irish ancestry. Like the Brontës, the Keary sisters built detailed imaginary worlds as children to escape the seclusion and tedium of their lives. Reviewers were quick to detect the likeness: one noted the circumstances in which 'Annie Keary, like the Brontës, developed her imagination'; another stated

⁶⁵ [Unsigned review], *The Athenaeum*, 2873 (18 November 1882), p. 654.

⁶⁶ Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow included her in their *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), and noted that 'most unusual for a woman writer of this period, many of the poems in *Little Seal-Skin* approach free verse', pp. 457–8.

⁶⁷ Naomi Hetherington, 'Eliza Keary', *Dictionary of Literary Biography. Volume 240: Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century British Women Poets*, ed. by William B. Thesing (Farmington Mills, Michigan: Gale Group, 2001), p. 113.

that Annie 'had a spice of the *perfidum ingenium*; but it was much more tempered than in any of the Brontë [sic] girls, with whom, of course, one cannot help comparing her'.⁶⁸ It is likely that the sisters, Brontë readers, were struck by the analogy during their lifetime. Annie Keary's 1876 novel *A York and a Lancaster Rose* even includes a scene in which a young girl secretly reads the forbidden novel *Jane Eyre* and becomes fascinated by the story of 'a clever little girl, who, like herself, was not a particular favourite with anyone, and who went one cold winter's day into an inner drawing-room and took a book'.⁶⁹

Eliza Keary, it appears, was also interested in Brontë's life. Alison Kershaw's remark that 'Gaskell both celebrates and mourns Brontë's life of dutiful solitude. Her challenge to the prevailing notion of the retiring selfless woman is by no means overt or subversively intended'⁷⁰ could easily be applied to Eliza. Keary echoes Gaskell's account of female creativity:

As long as any tale was upon the stocks, she lived in it, with a sort of double life, which kept her, as only imagination can keep people, from the narrowing effects of routine, or the roughening of little daily cares. Yet Annie never separated herself outwardly from any of these, nor grudged the time and thought that she was often called upon to give in carrying out housekeeping arrangements for her mother at times when the latter was laid aside and dependent upon a daughter's help. (85–6)

Keary is even more direct than Gaskell in defining the woman writer's life as a 'double' one. Writing does not distract Keary from 'daily cares', but preserves her from their unwanted effects. The biographer seems to deny the division implicit in 'double' (Annie 'never separated') that the word 'outwardly' reinforces. It is clear that Keary's desires and true self lie in her imagination, where she is called by her name, 'Annie', and not in the domestic circle, where she is a more generic 'daughter'. As with Gaskell, one has to look beneath the surface for evidence that the domestic ideal can be questioned.

Eliza Keary again uses Gaskell-like terms when she emphasizes that Annie's inventions and dreaming were always entirely impersonal; she never by any chance, I think, built a castle in the air about herself or her own future, as many young people are in the habit of doing; all thoughts of self were crowded out by an absorbing realisation of her own creations. It was with her, she used to say, as if she were watching the progress of one interminable tale, in which her own being bore no part, and over which her own will exercised no control; she just stood apart, and watched perpetually, like some Lady of Shalott, the passing and repassing of sweet shades, listening to their converse, waiting upon their actions, grieving at their sorrows, rejoicing in their joy. (40)

⁶⁸ Unsigned, 'Mémoir of Annie Keary', *The Athenaeum*, 2873 (18 November 1882), p. 654; Unsigned, 'The Reader', *The Graphic*, 703 (19 May 1883), p. 515.

⁶⁹ Annie Keary, *A York and Lancaster Rose* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1876), p. 170.

⁷⁰ Alison Kershaw, 'The Business of a Woman's Life: Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*', *Brontë Society Publications: Transactions*, 20 (1990), p. 18.

The passage avoids images of the writer carefully working on her writings. The posture assumed by the subject is a traditionally feminine one: 'listening', 'waiting on', 'grieving', and 'rejoicing'. This strong imagination does not threaten her womanly role but instead confirms her status as the ideal helpmeet. The stress on impersonality distances potential accusations of Romantic self-absorption.⁷¹ The depiction is, however, disturbing: there is the possibility of Bovaryesque absorption in such 'dreamings', and a *soupçon* of danger in the Tennysonian reference. Earlier, the biographer had defined her nature as 'unworldly' (2). Later, we are told that 'it never seemed to her as if she invented characters', and that the characters existed 'independently of her control' (85). This mirrors Gaskell's description of Charlotte Brontë who would wake 'and the progress of her tale lay clear and bright before her' as a kind of "possession" (as it were).⁷² In both cases, the female ideal of passivity comes dangerously close to schizophrenia in the biographer's struggle to distance the writer from a self-willed act of literary creation. At first glance, therefore, the biography seems closely modelled on Gaskell's strategy to represent a potentially problematic female existence.

The presence of the female biographer is as slippery as that of her subject. One of the biggest questions raised by the text is whether strategies to escape the self are indicative of unease regarding representations of femininity or, on the contrary, a fine-tuned awareness of the elusiveness of identity. Valerie Sanders has asserted that 'for centuries, women have been ashamed of writing about themselves, and yet have longed to recount the experiences that have shaped their lives'. During the Victorian period, she adds, 'women writers frequently pretended they were doing something other than telling the story of their lives: writing, for instance, autobiographical fiction, such as *Jane Eyre*, literary memoirs of other people, or reprinting entertaining selections from their letters'.⁷³ Yet the biographies considered throughout these chapters show that this slipperiness was not confined to women; gender may have exacerbated a biographer's desire to use her work autobiographically, but it was not the only factor.

The problem takes an unusual form in the *Memoir of Annie Keary*: as the subject's sister, the biographer had every reason to include herself in the work, yet her self-representation in the biography seems at first to confirm statements about women's fears of self-advertisement. Eliza sets out to erase her own presence from the work: the title page lists the author as 'her sister'. Eliza Keary studiously avoids overusing the first person pronoun after the introductory pages and retains the appellation 'sister' ('there were only three home children left—a baby brother, and Annie, and her youngest sister', 19) or includes herself

⁷¹ See also Bayly, *Life and Letters*, p. 142.

⁷² Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, II, 8.

⁷³ Valerie Sanders, "Fathers' Daughters": Three Victorian Anti-Feminist Woman Autobiographers', in *Mortal Pages, Literary Lives: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Autobiography*, ed. by Vincent Newey and Phillip Shaw (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), p. 153.

within a group ('we younger ones could thoroughly enter into those delights', 14). However, if the biographer's decision to downplay her presence was motivated by an awareness of gender expectations, at least one contemporary reviewer did not see the need for such timidity. An *Athenaeum* writer concluded a review of the work by stating that 'there is only one fault to find with the memoir, and that is that there is not enough mention of the writer. Miss Eliza Keary has studiously ignored the large part she herself played in her sister's life' and added that such 'self-effacement' was to be regretted.⁷⁴ If reviewers were ready to pooh-pooh excessive female coyness, was Eliza suffering from unjustified fears regarding female self-representation, or was her evasiveness the sign of a more deliberate biographical strategy?

Unlike many domestic biographers who threw themselves into the act of commemorating their departed family members almost as a matter of course, Eliza Keary thought long and hard about the form that her memoir should take. In July 1882, she wrote to the future publishers of the work, Macmillans. Eliza informed them:

I have shown the MS of the Memoir of my sister to one or two literary friends, in order to be guided by their judgement as well as by that of my nephews. Their concurrent opinion (my own also) is to the effect that any alteration in the character of the book would be a fatal mistake. The book is not intended as a life, but the study of an individuality which is of exceptional interest, and for the portrayal of which I have had, I think, exceptional advantage. I had scarcely even thought of calling it a Biography and might explain this my reason in the preface.⁷⁵

The letter is fairly typical of the biographer's subtle movements between self-effacement and confidence. The allusion to male opinions of the work may have been included more as a clever tactic to gain the editor's approval rather than as a sign of insecurity. Similarly, the writer's dismissal of the term 'biography' seems to indicate less the unease of a female author faced with a masculine genre than a desire to play with the boundaries of life-writing. The introductory paragraphs to the 'memoir' imitate this letter. On the opening page, she announces that 'the task before me is indeed rather to trace the growth of a character than to give the record of a life. I invite my readers to walk step by step with the subject of these pages; from gracious childhood, through peaceful useful prime, up to the sudden opening of that gate through which she passed from mortal sight' (1–2). The biographer makes her project appear the more complex one, and not unlike the most famous exploration of the 'growth' of a writer's mind: Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Eliza is interested in the many-faceted character rather than a more grounded 'record'.

⁷⁴ Unsigned, 'Memoir of Annie Keary', *The Athenaeum*, 2873 (18 November 1882), p. 655.

⁷⁵ Eliza Keary to George Macmillan, 9 July 1882. *BL*, Add. MS 54922.

The two sisters appear to have been fascinated by the genres of autobiography and biography, and were singularly alert to the issues surrounding the genres. Eliza Keary chose to include within the biography her subject's own thoughts on autobiography, which show an interest in genre more than gender. Annie wrote to a friend that

I think *real* autobiography must be the most difficult thing in the world to write. One cannot sit in judgement on the past till it is dead, yet, to write about it well, one must take up the dead body, and galvanise it into a semblance of life again. It is a sort of double labour, first to disengage one's self sufficiently from bygone events so as to be able to write of them justly, without morbid self-blame, or self-consciousness of any kind; then to live them over again with one's *present* self, and make them real and alive to the reader . . . There is no doubt about its being a far more useful as well as a greater thing to write a good autobiography than the best of novels. (124–5)

Annie then alluded to the two 'unconscious' (125) autobiographies she was currently reading: the journal of Eugénie de Guérin and the letters of Miss Cornwallis. The choice of these two works proves that Annie was aware that female autobiography made such issues particularly interesting. However, not only does her analysis of autobiography avoid focusing specifically on female life-writing, but the language of the 'double' and self-consciousness that is traditionally used to account for gendered life-writing is here used to discuss genre. The passage reveals that being able to 'disengage' from oneself and avoid 'self-consciousness' is not attributed to the nature of the female experience, but is seen as a desirable activity which makes it possible to convey the complexity of a human life.

The matter of evasiveness and gender becomes even more complex when the biography is placed in the context of the sisters' activities and other writings. The biography includes sophisticated discussions of gender and literature, but at no point in the work does Eliza reveal that both she and her sister were militant feminists. That a female biographer may have wished to downplay certain controversial activities in the life of her subject is easy to comprehend. Why a writer who had published provocative feminist works and engaged, with her subject, in feminist activities should gloss over them is more puzzling. The usual answer that she did so in order to maintain respectability does not go far enough.

After the sisters moved to London in 1854, Annie Keary spent large amounts of time working with Anglican nuns in the East End, where she was known as 'Sister Keary'; she also forged close ties with a school for unemployed female servants in Bessborough Gardens and continued to write to some of its inmates long after her departure from London. Her sister Eliza participated in some of these activities and lectured at the College for Working Women in Fitzroy Street. Of course, many middle-class women found an outlet for their energy in philanthropic activities. More unusually, however, the sisters were also associated with late-century feminist movements. In April 1868, Eliza was elected a

member of the London National Society for Women's Suffrage. Annie and Keary were two of the sixty-eight members of the Kensington Society, which met at 44, Phillimore Gardens in Kensington from 1865, and which counted Emily Davies, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, and Frances Power Cobbe among its members. They also attended the Pen and Pencil Club set up by Clementia Taylor that met at Aubrey House from 1864, and where petitions for women's suffrage were regularly organized.

A feminist leaflet published in 1879 included the following joint statement by Eliza and Annie on female suffrage:

It is because we think that not only women but the men themselves would be benefited by the association of the sexes of the acts of legislation that we wish to see the suffrage extended to women. Though it has been said that nothing is so like a man as a woman, it is not to be denied that the difference between them is a root difference and that neither is complete without the other—wherever they work together, they work better than apart. The household is ruled jointly by man and woman in practice if not in theory, and it seems to us that the very fact of their essential difference makes it, not desirable merely, but needful that the influence of both should be everywhere felt. Whom God hath joined together, let not conventionality and prejudice keep asunder.⁷⁶

This statement provides some answers regarding the choices made by the biographer. Given that the sisters remained unmarried, the insistence that 'neither is complete without the other' is something that both had disproved. The passage is no doubt not insincere, but also shows that the writers were willing to voice arguments that they knew would find favour with the public in order to introduce a more controversial idea—that if men and women share the duties of the household, why should they not share duties in other spheres?

The passage also shows that the sisters appreciated what made women unique. They expressed this conviction in other works. Though Annie Keary's fairly conventional publications left comparatively little space for feminist themes, she did think about the representation of women. The biography mentions that, when a friend sent her some sketches of French women of the Revolution for her opinion, Annie complimented the work but added:

Still, please try not to feel *quite* sure that self-reliance and courage cannot be womanly . . . I am only a little dissenting from what I see is in your mind about women. I always feel that women may be so much more yet than they have ever been; but they will not, if men continue to insist that they should *all* conform strictly to one type. (128)

Not only does Annie underline what makes women different, as in the feminist tract above, but she also insists keenly that femininity itself is infinitely varied.

⁷⁶ Annie and Eliza Keary, in *Opinions of Women on Women's Suffrage* (London: Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage, 1879), p. 7.

Annie's biographer presented a more explicitly feminist work to the public with *Little Seal-Skin*.⁷⁷ In the title poem, Eliza critiques women's confinement to the home by reformulating an Icelandic legend. As part of an annual ritual, a seawoman swims ashore with her companions and removes her sealskin. A fisherman finds the skin and, by hiding it, condemns the woman to remain on land, live as his wife and begin a family with him. After seven years, the fisherman can no longer bear the seawoman's intense misery and releases her. As Paul Ellis analyses, the poem exposes female domesticity 'as enslavement wrought by trickery and blackmail'.⁷⁸ Critics have often noted that myth and fantasy gave late nineteenth-century women writers a way of exploring potentially subversive ideas—Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' remains the most famous example. *Little Seal-Skin* reveals that Eliza was used to playing with genre and conventions in order to introduce more controversial ideas. By moving from poetic fantasy to biography, Eliza seemed to be working in a diametrically opposite mode, yet her intense awareness of genre suggests that she was once more using a seemingly 'safe' genre to express more subversive ideas.

The biographer makes it palpable, for example, that having to abandon literary ambitions for family commitments constituted a genuine sacrifice for her sister, rather than the usual extension of domestic duties:

She was asked again to take the charge of children, four little girls, cousins of hers . . . At the same time she knew that doing so would demand a certain amount of sacrifice. She felt that it would be her duty to suspend her literary work during the time that she should have them, and that this might involve its being resigned altogether, if the period of the charge should prove a long one. She did not hesitate on account of this—indeed she almost fancied that the sacrifice would be no sacrifice at all . . .

Yet when the moment came to make the final resolve, it did give her pain to make it. She came back from church one Sunday morning, and said, I have determined to give up all my own work. I have offered it up, and I feel much more sorry than I thought it possible that I could feel. While the children were with her Annie did not miss her writing; their lives and their characters occupied her thoughts, and teaching them taxed her energies fully. (135–6)

The first paragraph begins by seemingly downplaying the extent of the 'sacrifice', yet introduces the word three times. The language becomes grander ('final resolve') in the second part of the passage, where the solemnity is intensified by the religious framework. After having described Annie's feelings in the third person, the rare introduction of direct speech gives a greater force to this renunciation. Despite the reassuring final sentence, Annie finds apparent compensation in projecting onto the children the role of her fictional characters: the language used to describe them closely resembles that used to describe her

⁷⁷ Eliza Keary, *Little Seal-Skin and Other Poems* (London: George Bell and Son, 1874).

⁷⁸ Paul Ellis, 'Eliza Keary's "Little Seal-Skin and Other Poems" (1874)', *Victorian Poetry*, 40.4 (Winter 2002), p. 391.

novel-writing. Acceptance of female sacrifice and insinuations of rebellion are once more placed side by side.

The biographer concedes, however, that Annie found joy in these more domestic occupations. The work, like so many biographies before it, reveals that Annie did not enjoy a 'room of her own' in which to write. Annie, she elaborates,

made no claim or provision for conditions such as would have enabled her to write more easily, but might have caused inconveniences to the household, never so much as the taking of a room for herself even, or the demanding of hours of silence anywhere. . . . On the contrary, she used to settle herself to work in the midst of all sorts of difficulties, at the mother's bedside often, writing there during intervals of talk: or she would take her place with her MS. before her at the common table, where every one else was reading or working, or even talking, as the case might be. All this shows the happy side of her work. (86–7)

The biographer's final commentary gives a slightly too glib impression of jollity following a description that acknowledges the challenging nature of the arrangement. It is possible, however, to take Eliza Keary's joyful interpretation of Annie's energetic assumption of diverse duties seriously. As David Amigoni has claimed, many women writers queried the representation of male literary creation, produced in solitude, and found in this more communal, and even chaotic, environment a source of 'positive value'.⁷⁹ The biographer here does not shy from possible contradictions, but instead welcomes the possibility of illustrating the kind of complex female behaviour that Annie had described to her correspondent.

Eliza may have glossed over Annie's more overtly feminist activities out of a fear of provoking negative comments, and limited herself to a gentle critique of female constraints under the respectable cover of the biography. Yet it is hard to reconcile this notion with the image of the biographer that emerges from contemporary documents. As Rosemary VanArsdel reveals in her study of female writers and the *Macmillan's Magazine*, the Kearys were part of a wider coterie of successful female authors writing for the publishers in the 1860s and 1870s, which included the 'socially and politically active wave of the future'.⁸⁰ Many of these writers, such as Frances Power Cobbe, knew and supported each other. There is little reason to think that readers of Keary's biography would have shuddered at the thought of a woman juggling familial pressures and a literary career. There is equally little reason to think that the biographer—who tackled the topics of female oppression, the magnetism of Roman Catholicism, and even

⁷⁹ David Amigoni, 'Gendered Authorship, Literary Lionism, and the Virtues of Domesticity: Contesting Wordsworth's Fame in the Life Writings of Harriet Martineau and Thomas Carlyle', *Critical Survey*, 13.2 (Summer 2001), p. 37.

⁸⁰ Rosemary VanArsdel, 'Macmillan's Magazine and the Fair Sex: 1859–1874 (Part Two)', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 34.1 (Spring 2001), p. 2.

lesbianism in *Little Seal-Skin*—would have turned back on the interests that had shaped both her and Annie's lives.

A further decision made by the biographer contributes to the sense that Eliza Keary deliberately set out to exaggerate and embrace the 'obscure' and 'uneventful' elements of her sister's life not out of modesty but because the cloak of obscurity provided greater freedom for the subject and for the biographer. Annie's extensive (and uncontroversial) literary connections are also downplayed. The biography quickly passes over the Keary family's friendship with Charles Kingsley. Keary quotes a writer who described Annie 'presiding over little "pen-and-pencil" meetings in her own home, always appreciative of the literary efforts of others, warmly encouraging to beginners' (168), but refuses to reveal the identity of this fellow-writer. Eliza does not mention that this was the 'Pen and Pencil Club' attended by Edmund Gosse, Edward Carpenter, and Austin Dobson among others. (Arthur Munby recalled one meeting, focused on the theme of 'Suspense' and 'Witchcraft', during which 'a Miss Keary' delivered a particularly powerful story.)⁸¹ During her literary career, Annie also acted as an intermediary between Macmillans and a large number of aspiring writers, as her letters reveal. She had extensive connections with the literary world, and was intimate with some of its luminaries.

A large number of literary biographies of both men and women drew on the charisma of famous friends to bolster the appeal of their work. Theorists of female autobiography have stressed that women autobiographers were particularly keen to devote significant portions of their narratives to accounts of the famous individuals they had crossed paths with as a means of deflecting attention away from themselves. Yet Eliza Keary deliberately refuses to draw on this resource in her biography of Annie and does not share this information with her reader.

Stripping the biography of the elements that gave it the form of a traditional literary biography and that usually constituted the genre's appeal make this an atypical work. It was also something that Eliza Keary deliberately planned. Responding to Macmillan's appeal to make the work shorter, Eliza decided to diminish the literary portion of the life ('I have already taken out almost all the quotations from and references to my sister's published writings')⁸² and focus more on Annie's childhood and adolescence. Again, this was atypical at a time when most biographies were top-heavy and contained far more on the adult subject's achievements. During the revision of the work, Eliza's editor sent her a copy of the biography of his brother David Macmillan to guide her.⁸³ However,

⁸¹ Arthur Munby, quoted in Sally Mitchell, *Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian Feminist, Journalist, Reformer* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 152.

⁸² Eliza Keary to George Macmillan, 9 July 1882. Annie Keary, Correspondence with Macmillans, BL, MS.

⁸³ Ibid., 29 July 1882.

the biographer rejected the biographical form it presented. These accumulated decisions by the biographer all point to the fact that Eliza Keary was trying hard to shape a new kind of biography that would accommodate the complexity of the female experience. Keary did not remove from the biography those elements that would make it subversive. She removed from it those elements that made it a public life: the associations with famous men and women, the campaigns, her modest literary successes. Visibly, Annie's life was not the 'quiet and almost uneventful' existence advertised on the first page of the work. (The 'almost' becomes telling in hindsight.) The biographer repeatedly rejects opportunities to place her subject more firmly within the public sphere, and instead values the hidden, the obscure, as a place of diversity, freedom, and artistic opportunity.

Frances Mary Owen, who reviewed the biography, wrote that

the time has come in literature when it is no longer necessary to offer excuses for the publication of uneventful lives which contain no startling incident and no arresting facts. The interest of our own day, in fiction, poetry, and biography, has extended from the outward region of fact to the inward region of thought; and it only needs that a memoir shall truly delineate its subject, and that that subject shall have been in true relations to its human surroundings, to make it welcome.⁸⁴

The passage reads like a manifesto for Romantic literature rather than a definition of biography, which would seem at first glance to be the genre most concerned with 'incident' and 'facts'. The revolution in thought that altered fiction and poetry also modified life-writing and promised to democratize biographical subjects. The passage is filled with a sense of the possibilities of the genre, which is deemed capable of expounding truths and therefore of engaging with contemporary debates with a new seriousness and authority. Moreover, nowhere does Owen mention gender to defend this biographical trend. Keary's approach to the work has enabled her to take her place alongside more recognized literary genres.

A LADY OF ENGLAND (1895)

Agnes Giberne's biography of Charlotte Tucker, *A.L.O.E.* (1895), recalls earlier biographies of female writers, but is also another atypical work that deserves to be better known.⁸⁵ Like Keary, Giberne shows considerably less interest in the portion of Tucker's life that was, some years earlier, famous, and embraces instead the 'hidden' portion of the subject's life that is also where she experienced the greatest freedom. The work adds to the aesthetic of failure developed by

⁸⁴ F. M. Owen, 'Memoir of Annie Keary', *The Academy*, 552 (2 December 1882), p. 390.

⁸⁵ Agnes Giberne, *A Lady of England: The Life and Letters of Charlotte Maria Tucker* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1895). All further references are to this edition.

biographies of minor men and women by arguing that redirecting attention away from achievements and towards the essence of a character is empowering for individuals and women in particular.

Charlotte Maria Tucker (1821–93) was one of six children raised in London by the chairman of the East India Company Henry St George Tucker and his wife Jane, a relative of James Boswell. In her twenties, like Annie Keary, Tucker took care of her brother's family and attended to domestic duties while writing stories, poems, and plays in her spare time. Her father did not condone her writing, and she was only able to earn money from her publications after his death in 1851. At the age of fifty-four, she took the uncommon step of travelling independently to India to carry out missionary work. She remained in India until her death, and was buried there in an unmarked grave.

Charlotte Tucker was far more well known than Annie Keary during her lifetime, and therefore cannot so easily be classified as a 'hidden' life. Writing under different pseudonyms—the most common being 'A Lady of England'—Tucker published over a hundred works of children's fiction, and numerous titles for adults. Nevertheless, Tucker, like many children's writers, did not achieve anything like the critical applause of leading Victorian writers, male or female. As her biographer states, 'whether she ever could or would have made her mark in any of the higher walks of literature is a question which could only have been decided by actual experiment' (95). By the time the biography was published, she was being forgotten. Giberne stresses in the opening pages of her biography that 'her books, which were much read and appreciated in the youth of the present middle-aged generation, may to some extent have sunk into the background, as the works of successive story-tellers do in the majority of cases retire, each in turn' (3). At least one reviewer complained that 'a bulky volume of more than five hundred pages is out of all proportion to the importance of the subject'.⁸⁶ Moreover, if Tucker had once been comparatively well known as a writer, her work as a missionary remained almost entirely unknown.

A.L.O.E. is another biography in which one female author commemorated another. Tucker's biographer Agnes Giberne (1845–1939) was also a children's writer and a writer of evangelical tales and scientific textbooks, among which *Sun, Moon and Stars* (1879) was extremely well received. Giberne also had an equally close relationship with India, having been born in Belgaum in 1845. As with the Keary sisters, neither Giberne nor Tucker ever married, and both spent much of their lives tending to their relatives. Although Giberne was commissioned to write the biography by Tucker's family, she may easily have felt a natural sympathy with her subject.

A.L.O.E. has the additional interest of bridging two biographical sub-genres: literary biography and missionary biography. Though women had often

⁸⁶ 'Biographies', *Birmingham Daily Post*, issue 1168 (25 November 1895), p. 3.

accompanied their husbands, or, more rarely, their brothers, abroad at least since the early nineteenth century, it was not until the 1860s that the principal societies, the London Missionary Society and Church Missionary Society, began to engage single and married women in significant numbers as missionaries in their own right. Hundreds of women were sent abroad each year in spite of growing concerns that missionaries actually achieved very little in the way of conversions. Female missionary biographies consequently began to appear in increasing numbers.

Female missionary and literary biographies raised comparable questions. As with writers, the propriety of reaching beyond the domestic sphere was often questioned. It was common to believe that 'as the house is pre-eminently woman's kingdom, woman's world, so her first Home Mission-field is home'.⁸⁷ It was accepted that women might usefully engage in philanthropic endeavours near their homes, which could therefore be seen as an extension of traditional nurturing female roles. Foreign missionaries, however, were more problematic. As Deborah Kirkwood argues, missionary work 'began to appear as a real possibility to young women wishing to move out of the limited domestic sphere into more interesting employment which might involve travel and excitement, as well as religious fulfilment'.⁸⁸ Most biographers taking on such women as subjects struggled to account for the unconventional nature of their lives.

Biographers of female missionaries were as keen as literary biographers to downplay the excitement of a missionary life. The phrase 'quiet and uneventful' appears even more inappropriate to describe the lives of women who travelled in harsh conditions and encountered dangers in the shape of hostile men, animals, and harsh climates. Yet this all-pervasive label was retained—one such life is described as 'useful but most quiet and unpretending'; another biographer oxymoronically notes the subject's 'quiet daily life in this lonely East African wilderness'. Another advertises 'only a very quiet life, without much incident or adventure of any kind; so quiet that many may deem its details unworthy of print'. The woman in question had sailed for India at the age of twenty-four, learnt a number of Indian dialects, set up a girl's school, and drowned on the shipwrecked 'Roumania'.⁸⁹ The inappropriate nature of the label makes it

⁸⁷ John Macpherson, *Isabella Macpherson* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1890), pp. 113–15.

⁸⁸ Deborah Kirkwood, 'Protestant Missionary Women: Wives and Spinsters', in *Women and Missions: Past and Present*, ed. by Fiona Bowie (Oxford: Berg, 1993), p. 32.

⁸⁹ Robert Brewin, *Memoirs of Rebecca Wakefield, Wife of the Rev. T. Wakefield, United Methodist Free Churches Missionary in Eastern Africa* (London: Hamilton, Adams and Co., 1876), p. 4; [Anonymous], *In The Light: Brief Memorials of Elizabeth Phebe Seeley. By her sister* (London: The British Syrian Schools and Bible Mission, Seeley and Co., 1884), p. 1; Mrs George T. Rea, *A Broken Journey: Memoir of Mrs. Beatty, Wife of Rev. William Beatty, Indian Missionary, Lost in the S. S. 'Roumania', October 1892* (London: James Nesbit and Co., 1894), p. x.

apparent that, as with the biographies of writers, 'quiet and uneventful' projected an image of conventionality that could then be unsettled.

Agnes Giberne marks her awareness of this convention yet also finds ways of subverting it. The biographer employs these terms to excess in order to describe Tucker's earlier life when she was obliged to remain at home in England: 'quiet and uneventful' (112), years that 'passed quietly, with no stirring events' (138), a 'quiet home existence' (189), a 'quiet English existence' (174), a 'quiet English home' (513). Though the biographer never directly denounces traditional feminine etiquette, Giberne makes it clear that Tucker strained against this inaction. By confining the terms to the first half of the biography, Giberne intimates that such feminine behaviour is not innate but a social convention that can therefore be remoulded. The manner in which the terms become gradually amplified underlines this: from a quiet existence, to one that is quiet because of its association with the home and national conventions. This is characteristic of Giberne's approach throughout the biography.

Giberne shares a tendency with most biographers of women to counterbalance troubling statements about female behaviour with reassurance. In an early passage of the biography, she states that 'it would not appear that gentleness or sweetness were characteristics belonging to Charlotte. In her childhood and girlhood, though doubtless she *could* be both winning and tender to the few whom she intensely loved, yet it was impossible to describe her generally by any such adjectives . . . With all her liveliness, however, she was in no sense a madcap, being thoroughly a lady' (21). A similar passage appears shortly after, in which Giberne notes that Tucker was 'essentially independent; one who would of necessity think questions out for herself, and form her own opinions . . . But the very independence was of gradual growth; and side by side with it existed always a spirit of beautiful and reverent submission to her Father and Mother' (29). Clearly, Giberne does not advocate transgressive female conduct; she even insists that Tucker's behaviour is not meant to be imitated ('It is not for a moment to be implied that all hard toilers in life are bound to follow precisely here the example of A.L.O.E.', 118). Though such passages show a nervous awareness of proprieties, more often than not Tucker is described with unusual levity. As Giberne notes, 'a woman of fifty, who can lightly dance the gavotte, with springs which a child cannot emulate, is not quite an ordinary specimen of advancing years' (175).

What distinguishes the work from most contemporary biographies of women writers (and indeed missionaries) is Giberne's determination to make the most of her singular, gavotte-dancing subject to probe the conventions of female behaviour. Giberne tranquilly portrays female frustration in the face of inaction. The biography is liberally peppered with evidence of dissatisfaction: Tucker 'spoke of herself in old age as having been when young "subject to very low spirits"; or more strictly, she said that she would have been so subject, but for the counter-acting influences of "religion" and "work"' (66); 'one can well believe that the

self-restraint had to be severe in Charlotte's case, with her abounding energies, and her eager desire for usefulness' (114). Like so many women, Tucker placed 'home-duties' (117) before her career as an author and missionary, but she did so unwillingly: 'for her parents' sake she had dutifully held back . . . from much that she would fain have done' (174). When the death of her relatives means that her stable home, that symbol of the female sphere, is taken away from her, it is experienced as an immense liberation: 'But finding herself thus unfettered, the thought came up,— . . . Why not set an example to others who, like herself, might with advancing years be left free of ties?' (174). Loneliness is turned into an advantage, and the biographer carefully introduces such loaded words as 'unfettered' in a paragraph framed by the language of duty and exemplarity. Giberne makes explicit what other biographers imply.

Giberne enjoys testing the solidity of much-lauded feminine attributes. In a pivotal moment, Tucker realizes her own physical plainness. 'A wise resolution followed. Since she "could never be pretty," she determined that she "would try to be good, and to do all the good in the world that she could" (21–2). Tucker's conclusion at first confines her to simply another acceptable female role ('to be good') yet the addition of 'in the world' opens up much wider possibilities, and accrues greater meaning from the subject's later foreign activities. In a later example, the biographer remarks 'What is needless for one may be an absolute duty for another, who is in quite a different position' (68). The statement is uncontroversial; by stating that the heavily loaded notion of 'duty' is negotiable rather than binding, however, she opens up a space for diverse forms of female behaviour.

The biographer is aware that literature has a responsibility in circulating stereotypes that have contributed to the limited and limiting representation of women. She notes: 'We do read in certain little books, of a particular calibre, about angelic heroines who were invariably worshipped by everybody in their small world, without a single exception. This, however, is, to say the least, uncommon; and with one of Charlotte Tucker's strong personality it would be all but impossible' (160). As writers of didactic children's fiction, both Tucker and Giberne would have been well acquainted with this stereotype, which they could even have been reproached of sustaining. Within this critique, Giberne continues to tug against the narrow confines of female life. The passage is as much an attack on falsifying fictional works as on smallness—'little' books, a 'small' world. An association of smallness with femininity is resisted, with the subject emerging in contrast as atypically 'strong'. The biography—not a 'little' book but a robust volume published by the respectable Hodder and Stoughton—sets out to counter facile parallels between women and fragility.

Giberne also breaks down the assumption that female authorship could systematically be justified as an extension of domestic duties. This excuse may have worked for impoverished families, but not for the daughters of wealthier parents. Tucker 'was not writing for a livelihood, or even for the increased

comforts, whether of herself or of others dependent upon her; therefore it could not be placed in the front rank of home-duties . . . Writing was with her, as we have seen, not the main business of life, but merely an adjunct' (116). For Tucker, writing is experienced as way of using her boundless energy and, through her didactic tales, being useful in a small way; however, it is also seen as too passive an activity for one such as her. This idea was voiced in an earlier work by Clara Lucas Balfour, *Working Women of the Last Half Century* (1854), in which the author felt that 'there is for woman a wider usefulness and a higher life than that of contributor to her nation's literature'.⁹⁰

Though Giberne herself was also a writer, she seems to share this conviction and makes the decision to downplay her subject's literary career. Just as Eliza Keary diminishes her sister's role in public life, so does the biographer here represent that which made her subject comparatively famous as far less significant than the portion of her life that was hidden from public view. Her account of Tucker's publication, given the success of the latter, is almost harsh, with its acknowledgement that she 'might have reached a larger circle . . . if she had less anxiously pressed so very much didactic talk into her tales' (96). Though she attracts the reader via the title by which Tucker was known—A Lady of England—the biographer makes it evident that the subject only found fulfilment as a 'Lady of India' (175). Giberne does not snub her subject's public activities out of anxieties regarding the subversive nature of the female subject, since, if anything, an independent female missionary was even more questionable than an author, but because even authorship is represented as participating in the narrow domestic sphere.

Biographers of women writers frequently stressed that theirs was a divided life, stretched between public and private spheres. Charlotte Tucker's life offers a new take on this theme of doubleness, as her existence was divided into a first existence as an author, followed by a second existence as a missionary. Giberne presents this division as a source of opportunity rather than anxiety, and exacerbates the split by depicting it as a form of death followed by a rebirth. The beginning of Tucker's missionary experiences in India is preceded by the kind of character summary that usually concluded a Victorian biography after the subject's death. The biographer's solemn statement that 'so ended the fifty-four years of Charlotte Maria Tucker's English Life' (188) strongly echoes the funereal tones of the numerous biographies that concluded with a brief character sketch. The division is exacerbated as the subject has less need of the literary pseudonym that both advertised and obscured her—A.L.O.E.—as she goes abroad, and becomes 'Charlotte Tucker'. The all-important journey from the missionary's home to her land of employment creates a climactic moment in the biography

⁹⁰ Clara Lucas Balfour, *Working Women of the Last Half Century: The Lesson of their Lives* (London: W. F. G. Cash, 1854), p. 3.

and enables the subject's initial domestic sphere and later land of employment to appear uncontaminated by the other.⁹¹

The chapter serving as a transition between the first and second parts of the biography begins:

In the last few chapters we have had glimpses of Charlotte Tucker's life rather from within than from without; chiefly in reference to her successive losses, and her own feelings connected with those losses or with passing events. Now we will try to obtain a few glimpses of her, rather from without than from within; to see her as others saw her, not so much as she saw herself. (159)

The change in the subject's circumstance affects a change of biographical approach. Oddly, perhaps, the biographer seizes the chance to move away from the life seen from 'within'. This apparent distancing act makes sense in the context of the biographer's distaste for 'smallness'. The domestic sphere is connected to the kind of morbid self-consciousness that Carlyle warned against—a brooding nature that is underlined here by its association with 'successive losses'. The move outwards parallels therefore the subject's removal from the confining English domestic sphere and the embrace of otherness and the foreign. The division between the first and second parts of the biography further affects the tone of the work, as the presence of the biographer diminishes. This is a feature of most biographies of missionaries: because subjects went abroad, far more importance was placed on letter-writing, which take up a significant portion of the works, giving more voice to the subject. Giberne once more uses the occasion to make a point about female self-determination. The sharp shift between the biographer's voice in the first half and the strong voice of the subject in the second increases the impression that the departure from Britain acted as a release.

Unconventionally for biographers of women, Agnes Giberne is also fascinated by the theme of failure. This interest takes two forms in the biography: individual failures, and the failures of larger projects. Giberne shows no wariness in representing in full her subject's personal defects, and takes particular care to note where Tucker lacked in traditional feminine virtues. Tucker, we are told, was often irritating ('it is not claimed for Charlotte that everybody who crossed her path loved her', 160), blunt ('directness to a fault was . . . a leading characteristic of Charlotte all through life', 95), her 'resolute manner could be a trifle dictatorial' (160), she showed a 'marked deficiency' in 'the housekeeping line' and 'always had an intense dislike and dread of housekeeping' and, what is more, 'the gift of nursing was not hers' (162). Poor Tucker could also be tactless, and the biographer enjoys recounting an anecdote in which her subject energetically

⁹¹ Biographies of *male* missionaries often contained a similar pattern. Yet what is specific to biographies of female missionaries is that the structure imposed by the life enabled a unique commentary on femininity and domesticity.

strummed on her guitar, convinced that this would soothe her friend suffering from migraine.

Not only does Giberne indulge in this litany of defects; she also repeatedly draws attention to the fact that she is doing so, by asking the reader to consider her approach several times in the work. In one instance, she notes that 'it has to be remembered that A.L.O.E. was a many-sided and to some extent a complex nature. Hers was not a character to be lightly sketched in a dozen lines. Probably no character of any human being can be satisfactorily disposed of; and there are complexities in the very simplest nature' (159). Shortly after, the biographer adds: 'Nor need it be supposed that Charlotte Tucker was a being all light, with no shadows. She was thoroughly human. There were shadows of course,—what else could one expect?' (160), before insisting: 'She was not perfect,—who is?' (161). This pleading creates a sense that the biographer felt her objective approach to be somewhat unusual.

Giberne's repeated justifications for the portrayal of complex characters in biography may have been a response to the ongoing complaints regarding the 'mealy mouthed' nature of contemporary biography. There is a greater sense, however, that Giberne is making a more important point regarding female behaviour by portraying it as multi-faceted and imperfect. Her lengthy defence of personal failures matches Annie Keary's desire to see complex portrayals of women and her frustration that women should be seeing to 'all conform strictly to one type' (*AK*, 128). To a certain extent, the biography is a defence of failure, since to accord women the right to fail is to give them greater freedom.

This desire to expand the ways in which women could be represented is further displayed in the biographer's repeated comparisons between Tucker and male figures. She is compared to her brother Robert, a missionary whose 'example, long after, was closely copied by his sister' (106) and to Bishop French ('in some respects the two were much alike. There was in both, as Dr Weitbrecht has said, "a fiery impatience of difficulty or delay which sometimes led to mistakes", 430). Giberne even includes a description of Tucker by her doctor, who commented on her 'face of massive power; more like that of the Duke of Wellington than anything else... A strong, massive, determined, powerful face' (508). It was somewhat rare for women to be compared so unconcernedly with men. One notable exception was George Eliot, who during and after her lifetime was compared to a whole range of men including Savonarola, though this was usually done, with varying degrees of mean-spiritedness, to indicate her ugliness rather than to convey her force of personality.

Giberne allows her subject to partake of traditionally masculine qualities in yet a further way: by drawing on the image of the Christian Soldier. This is demonstrated from the opening pages of the biography, where Giberne describes Tucker's missionary activities as her 'buckling on her armour afresh, and of entering upon the toughest toil of all her busy life' (3). A little later, she notes Tucker's 'stern side', before adding that 'she was, as one says who knew her well,

a "born heroine" (27). Judith Rowbotham has argued that women missionaries in the second half of the nineteenth century 'were awarded a share, but not an equal share, in the terminology of heroism via similar biographical treatments'. However, in most cases, the female missionaries were shown to possess 'ordinary qualities practised to an extraordinary degree' that enabled them to act of as 'feminine icons'.⁹² This is not the case with Tucker, who is shown as lacking in most domestic talents. Giberne is simply not interested in rationalizing Tucker's choices in these terms.

Giberne's depiction of Tucker recalls the biographical strategies of Carlyle and Oliphant to represent their male subjects. Like John Sterling and Edward Irving, Tucker is depicted as a knight living in the wrong century. Tucker and her brother were 'of the stuff of which in former centuries martyrs would have been made' (28), and she 'was profoundly impressed with the sense of living, as she said, in the First Century, instead of the Nineteenth' (299). Though her heroic spirit only ends in failure (she succeeded in converting virtually no one to Christianity), this failure is justified as a noble one: 'the soldier who goes on a forlorn-hope expedition ranks higher in the minds of men than the soldier who remains in camp'. . . Even if, by any possibility, she were mistaken in that belief, she could not disobey. A soldier always instantly obeys what he *believes* to be the order given' (241). Giberne underlines her defence of failure by alluding to the perhaps greatest homage to military failure in Victorian literature: Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' ('When the "noble six hundred" of Balaclava were ordered to charge the Russian guns, they knew the uselessness of the act, the certainty of a blunder; but with that they had no concern', 190). The biographer displays no sense that such comparisons might have been inappropriate for a female subject.

In her preface, Giberne announces that 'the main question in the Life of Miss Tucker is, not so much what she *did* here or there, in England or in India, as what she *was*' (iii). Eliza Keary had also insisted that she was less interested in giving the 'record of a life' than the 'growth of a character'. In her study of female missionary biographies, Rowbotham notes that biographies 'aimed at female consumption' tended to concentrate 'on what they were rather than what they did' because they could not 'aspire to the active forms of greatness that characterised the men'.⁹³ This is no doubt one explanation for this emphasis.

In addition, however, this stress on character rather than action participates in the wider Victorian biographical trend that placed failure at the heart of the works and contended that personal influence was at least of equal value to eminent deeds. Giberne insists that 'results of what she did, still more of what she was, were visible enough to others,—but rather in the shape of a general and

⁹² Judith Rowbotham, "Soldiers of Christ"? Images of Female Missionaries in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain: Issues of Heroism and Martyrdom', *Gender and History*, 12.1 (April 2000), p. 83.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

widespread influence than in the shape of conversions directly due to her labours. The worth of any work can never be truly gauged by the amount of success which may appear to follow within a given time' (301–2). Giberne manages to reconcile the tragic heroism of failed lives such as Sterling's and Irving's with the beneficial influence of quiet lives such as Barton's and those of minor female writers. Obscurity has once more been turned to positive account, both for the biographers who put forward a defence of complexity in the representation of female lives, and for the subjects whose hidden contributions are prized despite of, and even because of, their apparent inefficiency. The public sphere is seen yet again as a place in which the subject cannot find fulfilment.

6

'Inheritors of Unfulfill'd Renown': Championing Romantic Poets

The life and death of Thomas Chatterton gave rise to one of the most enduring strands in the celebration of hidden lives: the posthumous recovery of a neglected genius. Years after Chatterton's friend Thomas Cary lamented the 'bright genius' immured 'in oblivion', Chatterton had become for the Romantics a symbol of the poet's frailty in an uncaring society. Wordsworth famously wrote of 'Chatterton, the marvellous Boy' in 'Resolution and Independence' (1807), and Keats developed an intense fascination for that 'dear child of sorrow' who he imagines 'among the stars | . . . Above the ingrate world and human fears'.¹ It was to Chatterton's memory that Keats dedicated *Endymion* (1818)—the poem, ironically, whose reception in the *Quarterly Review* was said to have precipitated Keats's own death and temporary neglect. Indeed, in 1821, Shelley brought Keats together with other 'inheritors of unfulfill'd renown', namely Chatterton, Sidney, and Lucan, in *Adonais*.

A recurrent theme in early tributes to Chatterton is that England was to blame for his cruel fate. In 1787, Edward Rushton published the poem *Neglected Genius: Or, Tributary Stanzas to the Memory of the Unfortunate Chatterton*, which includes the exclamation: 'Heavens! that a genius such as thine . . . | Should pour in these enlighten'd days, | On Britain's ear, such matchless lays, | Yet find on British ground neglect and woe'. Chatterton was also the subject of Coleridge's 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton', begun, according to the poet, at the age of thirteen. The poem also contains an emphatic denunciation of the country that abandoned him: 'Is this the land of liberal Hearts! | Is this the land, where Genius ne'er in vain | Pour'd forth her soul-enchancing strain? | . . . This ever can the generous Briton hear, | And starts not in the eye th'indignant Tear?'² The

¹ Thomas Cary, 'To the Memory of Mr. Thomas Chatterton, late of Bristol', in David Masson, *Chatterton: A Story of the Year 1770* (London: Macmillan, 1874), p. 259; William Wordsworth, 'Resolution and Independence' (1807), in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, p. 369; John Keats, 'To Chatterton', in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. by John Barnard (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 40.

² Edward Rushton, *Neglected Genius* (London: printed for J. Philips, 1787), p. 6; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton' (First Version), in *Coleridge: The Complete Poems*, ed. by William Keach (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 14.

fascination with neglected genius and indignation expressed towards a nation incapable of nurturing it come together in Victorian biographies of Romantic poets.

The development of literary biography in the nineteenth century sharpened the contrast between famous and neglected writers. Biographies of neglected writers could not appear until the genre of literary biography itself had taken a firm hold within contemporary culture. Before the eighteenth century, an author's life and character attracted comparatively little interest. The huge success of works such as Isaac D'Israeli's *An Essay on the Manners and Genius of the Literary Character* (1795)—with its combination of gossipy anecdotes and psychological analysis of the artistic temperament—illustrate how far this had changed by the end of the century. James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) confirmed the new fascination with the lives of authors. The Romantics approached this comparatively new genre with a mixture of enthusiasm and scepticism. Prominent writers such as William Godwin, Robert Southey, and Thomas De Quincey took to the genre, while others remained dubious. Wordsworth praised biography as 'an art', but argued that 'our business' is with authors' books: 'If their works be good, they contain within themselves all that is necessary to their being comprehended and relished.'³ Though the autobiographical impulse behind so much Romantic poetry seemed to license biographical investigations, Wordsworth insisted that biography was either redundant or risked drawing attention away from the work. Regardless of such warnings, biographies of famous writers flooded the nineteenth-century literary market and sold in their thousands.

The transformation of the writer's status from a comparatively private to a public one can be explained by elements that resonate strongly with the rising interest in hidden lives. As Richard Altick declares in *Lives and Letters*, it depended on 'the general shift of literary interest from external action to the inner spectacle of the mind and feelings'. Literary biography combined the appeal of 'the psychological novel and the confessional lyric'.⁴ It was this interest in inner lives rather than outward achievement that also facilitated the creation of biographies of hidden lives. Moreover, the Romantic cult of the individual and the claims made for the importance of the artist as a prophet-like man endowed with a heightened sensibility helped to create the figure of the author as an outsider contemplating society from a distance. The appeal of 'outsiders' again created a bridge for the consideration of other types of detached or alienated individuals.

³ Wordsworth, 'Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns', p. 122.

⁴ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, p. xi.

Unsurprisingly, it was also the Romantics who developed the paradoxical notion of the neglected poet. Writers were sceptical of the new reading public forming around them. In *The Frenzy of Renown*, Leo Braudy describes their growing 'mistrust of the new audience for its inability properly to read, interpret, and appreciate the dimensions of their genius'.⁵ Poets resented the fact that their recognition depended on such inadequate readers. In response, they developed the figure of the artist, exemplified by Chatterton, who is unappreciated in his lifetime only to be doted on by a later, more sophisticated, audience. Obscurity became a sign of literary value. The public had to be taught to appreciate its writers, or, as Wordsworth famously expressed it, the writer has 'the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed'.⁶

The Romantic literature of neglected genius and posthumous recognition is vast. It includes the poem 'Neglected Genius' (1812) by W. H. Ireland, which pastiches the style of various obscure 'geniuses' and denounces the 'shameful neglect which the Sons of Genius have experienced',⁷ Wordsworth's 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' (1815), and Richard Hengist Horne's *Exposition of the False Medium and Barriers Excluding Men of Genius from the Public* (1833). Shelley's phrase describing poets as 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world' is perhaps the most famous expression of this theme. Andrew Bennett's *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (1999) traces the ways in which Romantic writers imagined an ideal, posthumous, readership, that would recognize their true genius and guarantee their immortality. In *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine: Biography, Celebrity, Politics* (2005) David Higgins discusses the many contradictions at the heart of the 'culture of posterity', including the bitter claim by writers both great and small that contemporary society was incapable of discovering and preserving genius.

This chapter begins where these studies end. If the Romantics pledged their faith in the capacity of a future audience to recover them, it was the Victorians who were met with the challenge of fulfilling this pledge. The responsibility of sorting the Keatses from the W. H. Irelands was theirs. The nineteenth-century reception of individual Romantic poets has been given sustained attention. The fact that many Victorian biographers felt that it was their responsibility in particular to assess these claims has been largely overlooked. For the biographers, this was also a chance to assert their own cultural authority. They tend to represent themselves as a new kind of benevolent patron prepared to replace those vanished figures of support. The approach they take is very different from that of periodical reviews—after all, the myth continued, was it not a review that had killed Keats? They do not ask their readers to respond to their subjects in a

⁵ Braudy, *Frenzy of Renown*, p. 417.

⁶ William Wordsworth, 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, Volume III* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 80.

⁷ W. H. Ireland, *Neglected Genius: A Poem* (London: George Cowie and Co., 1812), p. xvii.

critical fashion, but to forge a more emotional bond with them, based on a generous impulse.

Three Victorian biographies of previously neglected geniuses deserve particular attention: Richard Monckton Milnes's 1848 biography of Keats, Alexander Gilchrist's life of William Blake (1863), and Frederick Martin's *The Life of John Clare* (1865). Intriguingly, all three biographers held close ties with Thomas Carlyle, whether simply as a friend (Richard Monckton Milnes), ardent admirer (Alexander Gilchrist), or amanuensis (Frederick Martin). Milnes and Gilchrist were also supported in their work by a second influential group: the pre-Raphaelites, who had a strong interest in drawing attention to neglected artists who they believed prefigured their own concerns. The biographers considered so far did not expect that their endeavours would bring widespread fame and posthumous success to their subjects. Yet this was not always the case. A number of biographers explicitly set out to use life-writing as a means of saving their subject from what they deemed unjustified neglect and to bring them into the canon.

Beyond the claims they make for the importance of their individual subjects, all three biographers share an interest in the idea of the neglected poets, which in turn leads them to consider the causes and consequences of the artist's alienation from society. Since the Romantics posited the existence of a future, sophisticated, audience, the Victorian biographers are invited to consider the nature of their own audience and the role it should play in rehabilitating obscure subjects. A common theme is the fragility of the artist and the consequent responsibility of the nation in protecting its literary heritage. The biographers each claim a role of great cultural importance, as mediators who can reconcile the neglected poet with his public and thereby heal rifts within society.

LIFE, LETTERS AND LITERARY REMAINS OF JOHN KEATS (1848)

'It is an appropriate convention to take R. M. Milnes's *Life, Letters and Literary Remains* as the dividing line between Keats's obscurity and his fame.'⁸ G. M. Matthews's statement is representative of many accounts of John Keats's ascension to the status of national treasure. Critics are fond of contrasting the lament of Keats's publisher, John Taylor, who declared, fourteen years after the poet's death, that 'the world cares nothing for him',⁹ with the public's (re)discovery, of the poet in the second half of the nineteenth century. Though Keats's reputation

⁸ G. M. Matthews, *Keats: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 31.

⁹ Quoted in Edmund Blunden (ed.), *Shelley and Keats as They Struck Their Contemporaries* (London: C. Beaumont, 1925), p. 82.

was slowly rising before Milnes's intervention, through the efforts of the pre-Raphaelites and the Cambridge Apostles (of which Milnes was a member), the biography undoubtedly precipitated Keats's re-evaluation as a poet of great national importance. Although the history of Keats's reputation, including the importance of Milnes's work, has already been given thorough consideration, Milnes's interest in the wider theme of literary neglect merits further scrutiny.¹⁰

That John Keats's existing admirers had to wait twenty-seven years after his death to read his biography was partly due to rivalries between the poet's friends. John Taylor announced his intention of writing a memoir four months after Keats's death; Leigh Hunt encouraged Keats's friend Charles Armitage Brown to write the life, while John Hamilton Reynolds and Charles Cowden Clarke also toyed with the idea. In the end, it was Leigh Hunt who provided a first sketch of the poet in his 1828 group biography *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*. However, the work was one of unresearched personal reminiscence that angered many of Keats's friends. The intervention of Richard Monckton Milnes meant that the first full-length biography would be neither a domestic biography nor a work of personal literary reminiscence but a more objective production.

In the final pages of the biography, Milnes states that Keats has gained his 'rightful place among the "inheritors of unfulfilled renown"' (II, 103). Milnes uses this phrase from *Adonais*, Shelley's 1821 tribute to Keats, without mentioning either Shelley's name or the phrase's source; instead, he relies on the public's sufficient knowledge of both Shelley and Keats to place the quotation. The biographer does not address the issue that if a poet has attracted a myth, however unflattering, he cannot be so very obscure. The 'famously neglected poet' having become a recognizable literary trope, Keats's neglect is used to increase his fame. The biography of Keats is an exercise in trying to reconcile the Romantic faith in (temporary) obscurity with the project of restoring a reputation. Milnes is as much concerned with obscurity as he is with fame, and uses Keats as a starting-point from which to lead into broader questions of literary neglect.

A decade after leaving Cambridge, in 1827, Richard Monckton Milnes was elected MP for Pontefract in West Yorkshire—a position he maintained until he was made Baron Houghton in 1863. In 1841, when he began working on Keats's biography, Milnes had already published works combining poetry, antiquarian research, and accounts of his travels in Greece and Italy. During the seven years that he took to complete the biography, he also published essays and a volume of poetry, *Palm Leaves* (1844), which met with little success. When the biography was published in 1848, therefore, Milnes had made a name for himself but knew that he would never be counted among the first ranks of poets.

Instead, he made a reputation for himself as a literary patron, of the kind that had almost entirely disappeared by the mid-nineteenth century. Disraeli once

¹⁰ See George H. Ford, *Keats and the Victorians: A Study of his Influence and Rise to Fame, 1821–1895* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944).

described Milnes as a 'Boswell without a Johnson',¹¹ but he was in fact far more interested in nurturing emerging or struggling talent. One aspiring writer appealed to Lord Houghton in 1864: 'Great men (in the literary sense, of course, I mean) are not so far as I can make out [as] kind as they used to be in showing interest towards young aspirants. You seem to stand *almost* alone in this respect.'¹² In his memoir of Milnes, Thomas Wemyss Reid writes that Milnes assumed 'to an increasing extent the task of protecting those men of genius and men of letters who were oppressed by adverse circumstances'. He goes on to note:

Did some enthusiast propose to erect a monument over the tomb of a neglected genius, it was to Milnes that he looked, not only for advice and patronage, but for pecuniary support. Was it a broken-down man of letters whose friends believed that fate had dealt hardly with him, and that he deserved something of his fellow men, it was to Milnes that they came to ask him to lay his case before the Prime Minister, or to beg him to put forth an appeal to the public benevolence.¹³

Such appeals included a request from the Radical poet Samuel Bamford, who sought Milnes's 'aid in procuring for him compensation from the nation which in former days had persecuted him for opinion's sake'.¹⁴ The language employed by Reid questions the validity of such projects even while he congratulates the generosity of spirit that prompted Milnes's involvement. He appears surrounded by 'enthusiasts' and men who 'believed' they had been mistreated, and their claims for attention appear somewhat dubious. For Henry Adams, Milnes was always interested in 'unearthing new coins and trying to give them currency'.¹⁵ The phrase hints at the futility of such efforts and intimates that such patrons were nevertheless aspiring to a position of national influence.

Milnes embodied an old-fashioned form of patronage. In the early nineteenth century, Dustin H. Griffin asserts, many still believed that 'authors somehow deserved to be supported by a grateful nation'; it was 'not until the middle of the nineteenth century that it was widely assumed that writers could—and should—support themselves by their own literary labors'.¹⁶ Milnes's labours, lasting well into the second half of the nineteenth century, show that even then ideas of patronage had not entirely vanished. Writing the biography of a writer who had died neglected created something of a compromise between old-fashioned

¹¹ Benjamin Disraeli, quoted in *Disraeli, Derby and the Conservative Party: Journals and Memoirs of Edward Henry, Lord Stanley, 1849–1869*, ed. by J. R. Vincent (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), p. 340.

¹² Roden Berkeley Wrothesley Noel to Monckton Milnes, 30 January 1864, quoted in Lubenow, *The Cambridge Apostles*, p. 222.

¹³ T. Wemyss Reid, *The Life, Letters, and Friendships of Richard Monckton Milnes*, 2 vols. (New York: Cassell, 1890), II, 37; II, 43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 44.

¹⁵ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York, 1931), p. 139.

¹⁶ Dustin H. Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England, 1650–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 271.

ideas of patronage and the development of new market forces. The posthumous nature of the work means that the biographer has not interfered in the initial reception of the poet. His later intervention is all the more disinterested and generous, and respects the Romantic poet's own desire that he be revived after his death.

Milnes unabashedly presents his biography of John Keats as an exercise in rehabilitation undertaken to 'claim for Keats an access to that inmost penetralium of Fame which is solely consecrated to original genius' (I, 94). He states clearly that his aim is that 'of vindicating the character and advancing the fame' of his subject (I, xi), and that in order to achieve this he carefully considered the 'procedure . . . most likely to raise the character of Keats in the estimation of those most capable of judging it' (I, xvi). As with William Jolly, who talks of using biography as 'compensation' (328) for the obscure scientist John Duncan, Milnes's role is 'as far as may be, to repair the injustice of destiny' (I, 3). Milnes's choice of words neatly encapsulates the uneasy distribution of power at work. On the one hand, a select audience is given the authority to 'judge' Keats's achievements; on the other hand, this audience is not presented with raw documents but with the product of a carefully thought-out 'procedure'.

Milnes's desire to open up the literary canon for Keats raises questions concerning the triangular relationship between the poet, the biographer, and the public. The biographer is confronted with the clash of two literary periods and their different conceptions of both poet and public. Milnes partially endorsed the Romantic idea that a more sophisticated posthumous audience could be educated to appreciate the neglected poet, and felt that appreciation of Keats depended on 'men of thought and sensibility' (II, 105). This, Milnes warns us, is the gravest 'lesson' that the 'tale' has to offer: 'he who deserves the higher reverence must himself convert the worshipper' (II, 107). Milnes is no longer concerned with Keats here but with the wider ramifications of his story. Milnes recalls Wordsworth's statement on the poet's task of '*creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed'.¹⁷ An *Athenaeum* reviewer of Milnes's *Life of Keats* echoed both men by stating that the heart of Keats's struggle lay 'in the necessity which original genius must experience of *creating* a task for its appreciation'.¹⁸ Milnes's heightened religious language and his implicit critique of a 'vulgar' public take a matter of artistic taste to a moral level. The biography is a test of Romantic notions of worthiness, but also as a test of the sophistication of the Victorian age.

Naturally, Keats is unable to convert worshippers 'himself'; this responsibility is handed over in part to a wider audience. As in so many of the biographies of neglected or obscure subjects, the biographer proposes that society can strengthen its moral worth by taking artists under its care. The lessons offered by the life of Keats 'are the lessons by which the sympathies of mankind must be interested, and their faculties educated, up to the love of such a character and the

¹⁷ Wordsworth, 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', p. 80.

¹⁸ [Unsigned review], *The Athenaeum*, 1085 (12 August 1848), p. 789.

comprehension of such an intelligence' (II, 107). When he alludes to Keats's friend, the neglected painter Benjamin Robert Haydon, Milnes declares that 'surely a man should not have been so left to perish, whose passion for lofty art, notwithstanding all discouragements, must have made him dear to artists, and whose capabilities were such as in any other country would have assured him at least competence and reputation—perhaps wealth and fame' (I, 26). The fate of Chatterton is similarly described as 'disgraceful to the age in which it occurred' (I, 12). Milnes's anger at contemporary neglect sits uneasily alongside the theory that posthumous fame is the only worthwhile indicator of genius. (This is all the more problematic since, as David Higgins has shown, Haydon was no timid artist banking on future glory but a shrewd self-promoter.)

Milnes helps the public revise their opinion of Keats—by collating, for example, previously unavailable material such as Keats's letters—but remains wary of relying uniquely on their astuteness. Instead, Milnes meets readers halfway and presents an image of Keats more acceptable to a mid nineteenth-century public. He downplays those aspects of the Romantic poets that later readers and critics disapproved of; Milnes's Keats is a Victorian Keats. He is no 'wayward, erratic genius, self-indulgent in conceits' (I, xvi). There is no mention of Fanny Brawne, no coarse humour, no cynicism. Keats had been scornfully derided as both effeminate (notably by Hazlitt, who saw in Keats a 'deficiency in masculine energy of style) and childish (Carlyle, for example, derided him as 'a miserable creature, hungering after sweets he can't get').¹⁹ Milnes rejects the accusation of effeminacy: his Keats led a 'plain, manly, practical life' (I, 74). However, he retains the image of the child, which had been such a large part of the attraction of the 'marvellous boy' Chatterton, by stressing in the final paragraphs of the work that 'in the life where here lies before us, as plainly as a child's, the action of the poetic faculty is clearly most visible' (II, 254). Later biographers of neglected Romantic poets also chose to stress the childish nature of their subject even as they affirm his masculinity: William Blake and John Clare were also described as children, as indeed was John Sterling by Carlyle. The image of the child was less problematic than that of the effeminate writer, and it suggested the need for a figure of authority to protect the poet, which biographers could variously interpret as being themselves or the nation.

Nevertheless, Milnes faced the further difficulty of building a case for a poet at a time when the importance of poetry itself was being tested. Bentham's declaration in 1825 that 'the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry'²⁰ famously expressed contemporary doubts over the contemporary impact of poetry. Milnes's biography was published three years before the 1851 Great Exhibition seemed to argue that industry was a

¹⁹ Recorded in *William Allingham's Diary*, ed. by H. Allingham and D. Radford (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p. 205.

²⁰ Jeremy Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward* (London: John and H. L. Hunt, 1825), p. 206.

better test of the nation's greatness than its poets. The biographer is all too aware that the private desires of an artist could sit uneasily alongside questions of public usefulness. When Keats questions his vocation as a surgeon, Milnes comments that his subject was 'in the midst of that sad conflict between the outer and inner worlds, which is too often, perhaps always in some degree, the Poet's heritage in life' (i, 15). To counter this, poetry is depicted throughout the biography in robust terms. The biographer insists that Keats succeeded in reconciling public and private spheres: 'poetry never weakened his action, and his simple, everyday habits never coarsened the beauty of the world within him' (i, 75). Milnes's defensive tone, and insistence that pursuing poetry did not lead to an unhealthy lifestyle, have much in common with biographies of women and working-class subjects that sought to reassure the public that private longings could be coupled with communal duties and need not threaten the harmony and productivity of the nation. The public is certainly educated through the work, but it is also public taste that dictated on what terms the subject would be welcomed.

Perhaps surprisingly, Milnes does not ask the public to reconsider their verdict on Keats by paying critical attention to his works. As the poet's 'literary remains' were published in a separate volume, the biographer spends little time analysing the works. More importantly, the claims he makes for these works are rather tepid. In the Preface, he expressed his profound personal admiration for the poems ('with the works of Keats I had always felt a strong poetical sympathy') but stresses that 'all that he had produced was rather a promise than an accomplishment' (i, ix). In the second volume, he repeats that Keats's works 'are rather the records of a poetic education than the accomplished work of the mature artist' (ii, 52). Milnes therefore sets out to change public opinion on Keats more through the use of emotional language on neglect than close analysis.

Samuel Phillips, who reviewed Milnes's biography in *The Times*, dwelt on the power of the biographer to mould public taste in order to prepare it to re-evaluate an artist. He declares:

It is the old story! We are again summoned to admire where once we despised . . . Our present task is a simple one. We cannot recal genius from the tomb to witness the final triumph of its long-suffering, and to console itself for its wrongs in the consciousness of our remorse. We may in the public market-place do justice to the citizen whom we ostracised in ignorance and hooted forth in folly.

Phillips initially seems to resent the intrusion of the sermonizing biographer, a judicial figure with the unbounded authority to 'summon' a culpable public. The readers are brought forward to demonstrate a collective act of repentance. The crime committed by the public appears to go beyond poetic taste by involving the fragmentation of a social contract: the mob-like hounding of a 'citizen'. Phillips goes on to claim that Keats 'inspires the poetic genius—such as it is—of

our unpoetic age'.²¹ Even though he is not entirely convinced by Keats's talent, the Romantic poet is worth considering as a significant hidden influence on the present.

Though Milnes's ostensible purpose in writing the biography was to install Keats within the literary canon, he is interested in the theme of neglect on a broader level. Poised between the Romantic and the Victorian periods, Milnes gives a somewhat confused interpretation of the value of obscurity. In a strange passage early in the biography, he pauses on the 'delusion' of youth, 'enjoyed, thank God, by thousands', that they will become famous. These youthful aspirants

soon learn to estimate their own capacities aright and tranquilly submit to the obscure and transitory condition of their existence: it is felt by many, who look back on it in after years with a smiling pity to think they were so deceived, but who, nevertheless, recognise in that aspiration the spring of their future energies and usefulness in other and far different fields of action. (I, 16–17)

The depiction of youthful enthusiasm draws on the Romantic depictions of childhood and adolescence in works such as *The Prelude*. The lines have close parallels in the rhapsodic descriptions of 'The Poets of England who have Died Young', an essay on Chatterton, Shelley, Keats, and Sir Philip Sidney published in 1839 in the *Cambridge University Magazine*. The author excitedly declares that 'the feelings instilled into the heart in early youth are among the most beautiful in the whole stage of our existence'.²² Yet Milnes's description is followed by a curious image of quiet resignation in later age as a consequence of the more rational and less tempestuous acceptance of life's duties. The idea of usefulness in obscurity, coupled with the self-discipline implied by the careful estimation of one's capacities and the word 'submit', have more in common with later biographies and look forward to Leslie Stephen's defence of obscurity in the *DNB*. The joyful submission to obscurity deviates from the longings for future fame expressed by the young Romantic poets and strikes an odd note in a biography that seeks to rescue a reputation from neglect. Fame, according to Milnes, is indeed less satisfying than the youthful desire for fame; the emotion is more important than the results. With its appreciation of communal 'usefulness' above individual ambition, the passage is in fact a nostalgic commentary on the unsustainable intensity of Romantic longings. Once again, matters of fame and obscurity are divorced from questions of aesthetic taste or canonization, and are brought to bear instead on the health of society.

The public response to Milnes's biography was largely positive, though some of Keats's acquaintances claimed that Milnes had distorted some of his

²¹ [Samuel Phillips], 'The Life of John Keats', *The Times* (19 September 1848), p. 3.

²² [Unsigned], 'The Poets of England who have Died Young', *Cambridge University Magazine*, 1 (1839), p. 2.

material,²³ and Milnes's close friend Carlyle grumbled that Milnes had tried to 'make curry of a dead dog'.²⁴ Another demurral was that of Tennyson, another friend of the biographer and a fellow admirer of Keats. Tennyson wrote 'To—, After Reading a Life and Letters' (1849) partly in response to Milnes's *Keats*.²⁵ The poem contains an attack on literary biography:

For now the Poet cannot die,
Nor leave his music as of old,
But round him ere he scarce be cold
Begins the scandal and the cry:

'Proclaim the faults he would not show;
Break lock and seal, betray the trust;
Keep nothing sacred, 'tis but just
The many-headed beast should know.'

Ah, shameless! for he did but sing
A song that pleased us from its worth;
No public life was his on earth,
No blazon'd statesman he, nor king.

Tennyson expresses the common idea that the biography is a scandal-mongering genre and uses the well-worn image of the biographer as a thief who breaks 'lock and seal'. Intriguingly, Tennyson repudiates the recent democratization of biography, and, holding on to the belief that it should remain a tool for commemorating traditional notions of 'greatness', disregards the ever-growing taste for literary biography that demonstrated that, on the contrary, literary lives were full of interest.

More intriguing still, Tennyson joins Milnes's own underlying belief in the value of the obscure:

But you have made the wiser choice,
A life that moves to gracious ends
Thro' troops of unrecording friends,
A deedful life, a silent voice.

...
Who make it seem more sweet to be
The little life of bank and brier,
The bird that pipes his lone desire
And dies unheard within his tree,

²³ See Hyder E. Rollins, *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers, 1816–1878*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).

²⁴ Thomas Carlyle, quoted in James Pope-Hennessy, *Monckton Milnes: Volume 1. The Years of Promise, 1809–1851* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1955), p. 294n.

²⁵ Lord Alfred Tennyson, 'To—, After Reading a Life and Letters', *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, 3 vols. (Harlow: Longman, 1987), II, 293.

Than he that warbles long and loud
 And drops at Glory's temple-gates,
 For whom the carrion vulture waits
 To tear his heart before the crowd!

The poem moves from critiquing the intrusions of biography to celebrating the hidden ('unrecording friends', an oxymoronic 'silent voice', a 'little life', the 'unheard') and, strikingly, a 'deedful' life rather than an artistic one. The fact that Keats's name is not mentioned in the poem emphasizes Tennyson's concern with the hidden. This wilful embrace of neglect masks a more complex response to poetic fame. Tennyson's response to the biography inevitably involves a reflection on his own fame, as he compares the 'laurel' won by the poet with his own. The poem perpetuates the idea of neglect as a token of worth even as it uses the public form of a poetic address to express it, and confirms Tennyson's own fame in doing so.

Yet the idea that neglect is a 'choice' is a curious one: Keats did not choose neglect, and nor did Tennyson, who at this time had yet to meet widespread recognition, and who had benefited from Milnes's efforts to secure him a pension in 1845. The idea of a 'choice' seeks to return control to the writer at a time when other forces—including biographers—were taking over the management of the public sphere. The poem can be read as part of the growing tension between poets and their apparent commercialization through literary biography. The genre appeared to trespass on one of the roles of poetry itself. Throughout the centuries, eulogies and other poetic tributes had been used to regulate and circulate poetic reputations. Tennyson's response involves a suspicion of the readers of biography, and a wariness of biography as a self-nominated cultural mediator.

THE LIFE OF WILLIAM BLAKE: PICTOR IGNOTUS (1863)

Shortly after his publication of Keats's biography, Richard Monckton Milnes contemplated coming to the aid of yet another neglected artist by publishing an edition of William Blake's works. Instead of fulfilling this ambition, he provided access to his large collection of Blake material to Alexander Gilchrist. Gilchrist had trained as a lawyer before deciding to forge a career as an art critic. He published his first substantial publication, a *Life of Etty*, in 1855, and it was during the preparation of this work that he made the decision to write Blake's life. The resulting *Life of William Blake: Pictor Ignotus* (1863) was the first full-length biography of the Romantic poet-artist.²⁶

²⁶ Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus', with Selections from His Poems and Other Writings*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1863). All references are to volume 1 of this edition.

The Life of William Blake was to a significant extent a collaborative work. Gilchrist had almost completed the biography in 1861 and seen printed proofs of the first eight chapters when he died of scarlet fever. Earlier in the same year, Gilchrist had met Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who owned Blake notebooks of which Gilchrist had been unaware. A Blake enthusiast (who later included a sonnet on Blake in his 1881 sequence *Five English Poets*), Rossetti persuaded Gilchrist's widow Anne—the future biographer of Mary Lamb and close friend of Walt Whitman—to complete the work. The pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood provided her with their full support. Rossetti added a number of comments and illustrations to the work, seamlessly intermingled with Gilchrist's narrative, including a 'supplementary chapter' providing an overview of Blake's works. He also added an entire second volume, which included a selection of Blake's writings and critical commentaries. William Gabriel Rossetti, whose help was also extensive though more difficult to pinpoint, provided an introduction to the 1906 edition of the biography.

Like Milnes's biography of Keats, Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* was a turning point in the history of Blake's reputation, as the work's subtitle 'Pictor Ignotus' stresses. Though some notices of Blake had previously been published,²⁷ G. E. Bentley aptly labelled the years 1831–62 Blake's 'Forgotten Years'.²⁸ Those who had paid attention to Blake had focused on his career as an artist, though Gilchrist sought to place a roughly equal emphasis on his poetry, which was even more 'unknown'. Gilchrist's depiction of Blake as neglected is central to his biographical project, as he draws heavily on the theme of the Romantic neglected artist. Like Keats, Blake is depicted as unappreciated in his own time, and there is a similar concern with preparing a contemporary audience to receive him. Gilchrist, like Milnes, is forthright in his intention to champion the neglected Blake. The case for a revaluation is made in intensely emotional terms that stress the bond between biographer and subject, and between the subject and reader, in a way that reaches beyond the immediate question of Blake's fragile reputation. At the heart of the biography is the idea that the unknown artist forms part of the unconscious of the nation and must wait to be unearthed.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of *The Life of Blake* is the unusual extent to which Gilchrist draws attention to the process of writing a biography. The work is as much a bibliographical study as a biographical one: the author is concerned with retracing books, cataloguing, and analysing them as physical objects. He stresses the difficulty of accessing Blake's dispersed manuscripts and laments that Blake's *Poetical Sketches* are 'now so rare, that after some years' vain attempt, I am forced to abandon the idea of myself owning the book' (24). Rather than using

²⁷ Notably Allan Cunningham's 'William Blake' in *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 6 vols. (London: John Murray, 1830), II, 142–79.

²⁸ G. E. Bentley, Jr (ed.), *William Blake: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1975), p. 220.

footnotes, the biographer dwells on the significance of his sources within the text. He describes editions of Blake's works that he has encountered, notes that 'Mr. Monckton Milnes possesses a fine quarto, Mr. Linnell an octavo copy' (91), and states within the text that 'to Mr. Palmer I am indebted, among many other courtesies, for a copy of the first half of them' (99). Such comments were usually, as they are now, confined to prefaces or footnotes. Another unusual editorial decision was to reprint in their entirety letters sent to the biographer to assist him in his research. Such is the case, for example, with letters written by Samuel Palmer, which are printed complete with the date, 'Kensington, Aug. 23rd, 1855' (318). The decision to do so, rather than simply quote any relevant passages, seems odd unless taken as a conscious decision by Gilchrist both to put himself forward and make the Victorian audience experience first-hand the difficulty of uncovering Blake.

Gilchrist goes further by dwelling on his emotional involvement with his subject. His tone shifts, at times pleading, at others defensive. By the end of the work, so passionate is the biographer's involvement that he declares that 'so far as I am concerned, I would infinitely rather be mad with William Blake than sane with nine-tenths of the world' (343). Gilchrist's efforts to place his relationship with Blake at the heart of the biography become problematic when one considers that the work did not have one, but several, authors. Certainly, Alexander Gilchrist began the project, gathered many of the sources, and wrote much of the narrative. Yet between his death and the publication of the work were two years during which the biography was added to and modified by at least two hands—those of Anne Gilchrist and Dante Gabriel Rossetti—and contributed to by many others.

Significantly, these later contributors were keen to downplay their involvement. In her preface, Anne Gilchrist insisted that, when her husband died, 'The *Life* was then substantially complete . . . The main services, therefore, which the Work has received from other hands—and great they are—appear in the Second Part, and in the Appendix',²⁹ which consisted of the descriptive catalogue of Blake's work. A letter from Anne to Dante Gabriel Rossetti expressed concern that 'the notion should get abroad' that Gilchrist left the work 'incomplete', and insists that insertions from other hands (quotations excluded) would only 'occupy half-a-dozen pages'.³⁰ Alexander Gilchrist's name, accordingly, is the only name on the title page.

Though determining precisely how much each individual contributed is difficult, Anne Gilchrist's account is deceptive. According to the *Rossetti Archive*, Dante Gabriel wrote the entirety of the discussion of *Jerusalem* in the twenty-first

²⁹ Anne Gilchrist, 'Preface to the First Edition', *The Life of William Blake* (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), p. xiii.

³⁰ Anne Gilchrist to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 2 May 1863, *Rossetti Papers, 1862 to 1870* (London: Sands, 1903), p. 25.

chapter, parts of the twenty-second chapter, and comments in the twenty-ninth chapter on Blake's Notes to Reynolds's *Discourses*.³¹ A letter from Anne Gilchrist to William Rossetti in 1862 asks for his help with filling in 'some blanks' such as a 'brief description of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *The Book of Ahania*, *The Song of Los*, *Asia*, and *Africa*'.³² Moreover, Rossetti's interventions were not confined to facts but also included interpretation. As Deborah Dorfman argues, Rossetti's 'contributions to Gilchrist's *Life* tended to Gothicize Gilchrist's already remote hero'.³³ Rossetti also appears to have selected many of the book's illustrations and selections from the poems, a crucial role, since an important aspect of the work was to disseminate the previously unattainable works of the subject. Above all, Rossetti retained the first person used by Gilchrist ('the *Jerusalem*, so far as I can understand it, is an allegory', 207), making the autobiographical 'I' far more slippery than at first appears.

The decision to gloss over these interventions reveals a concerted effort to give readers the impression that one biographer chose to act as the saviour and promoter of Blake. Indeed, in his 1906 preface to the biography, William Gabriel Rossetti wrote that 'Gilchrist was the first successful champion of the cause', and 'rescued the artist from oblivion at a moment when the dark waters had nearly closed over him'.³⁴ In a strange inversion of traditional biographical patterns, it is the biographer, rather than the subject, who has become the hero—a 'champion' to the 'rescue'.

A substantial part of Gilchrist's mission as a 'champion' is to convert his audience into fellow-worshippers of Blake. The biographer describes his role as that of a bridge between the subject and his audience. Working his way through one particularly difficult Blake text, he announces: 'I will give an Argument of the Poem by way of indicating its tenor, and to serve as a bridge for the reader across the eddying stream of abstractions which make up this piece of poetic mysticism' (78). Gilchrist makes numerous attempts to lead the reader through the maze of Blake's works. Gilchrist is more eager than Milnes to elucidate his subject's works and act as a guide. He summarizes complicated passages of the *Book of Thel* into a clearer 'Argument' (78).

More reprehensibly, both Alexander Gilchrist and Rossetti tampered with their sources to make Blake's work more accessible to readers. On 27 August 1861, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who had begun to transcribe passages from his copy of Blake's *Notebook*, sent Gilchrist a letter with passages from '*Auguries of Innocence*, omitting parts and transposing others so as (to my thinking) the better to make its merits tell. I send it you in case you should agree with me and adopt

³¹ See <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/2p-1863.raw.html> [accessed 13 May 2010].

³² Anne Gilchrist to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 22 May 1862, *Rossetti Papers*, p. 6.

³³ Deborah Dorfman, *Blake in the Nineteenth Century: His Reputation as a Poet from Gilchrist to Yeats* (London: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 81.

³⁴ William Gabriel Rossetti, 'Preface', in *The Life of Blake* (New York: Dover, 1998), p. x.

the version'.³⁵ Victorian biographers (including Milnes) often presented themselves as editors; Gilchrist's biographers took on this role more literally, in their efforts to make Blake palatable.

Like Milnes, Gilchrist is aware of the chasm separating Blake and his readers and stresses those features of his subject that might appeal to a Victorian audience. To do this, he turns to Thomas Carlyle. The Gilchrists fervently admired Carlyle—to such an extent that they named their first-born child Percy Carlyle in December 1851, shortly after having read *The Life of Sterling*. Alexander Gilchrist became known to Carlyle personally when the latter read the *Life of Etty*, passed his copy on to Ruskin, and wrote to the author to compliment him. The pair began to correspond, and Gilchrist gave Carlyle some assistance with his biography of Frederick the Great. When the house next to him became vacant, Carlyle proposed that the Gilchrists take it up, and the two families became neighbours during the preparation of the *Life of William Blake*. In September 1862, after Alexander Gilchrist had died, Blake's friend and fellow-artist Samuel Palmer wrote to Anne Gilchrist to air the idea that she include 'a preface (however short) by Mr. Carlyle. I never saw a *perfect* embodiment of Mr. C's *ideal* of a *man in earnest*, but in the person of Blake. And if he were to write only thus much, "This was a good man and true," thousands would be talking of Blake who otherwise would not care two-pence for fifty Blakes put together.'³⁶ Though Carlyle appears to have toyed with the idea, the project never materialized. As with Keats, Palmer's proposition intimates that a critical approach to the rediscovery of the neglected artist would be less efficient than one that presented Blake in a more moral and emotional light. Palmer's comment was insightful, as Gilchrist does present his subject as a version Carlyle's unknown, sincere hero. Like John Sterling, Blake is described as 'child-like' (126), a 'Child Angel' (73). Also like Sterling, Blake is seen as a man at odds with the time in which he lived: a 'visionary' (150) who was 'fretted into greater eccentricity by his age' (172). This eccentricity is taken less as a sign of madness than as a sign of the nobility of his spirit and his refusal to compromise with a corrupt society.

Gilchrist's Blake is 'Victorian' in other ways. His love of children is repeatedly invoked as a symbol of this healthy simplicity. The biographer, despite evidence challenging this, praises Blake for placing small stock in worldly success: 'Blake, by the way, talked little about "posterity"' (206). Blake also pays tribute to the Victorian God of work. In a Smilesian passage, Gilchrist notes his 'indefatigable industry . . . He cared not for recreation . . . Work itself was pleasure' (267). The fact that reviewers laid great stress on the exemplarity of the narrative indicates

³⁵ Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Alexander Gilchrist, 27 August 1861, reprinted in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by William E. Fredeman, 7 vols. (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), II, 61, 65.

³⁶ Samuel Palmer, in A. H. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of Samuel Palmer* (London: Steeley, 1892), p. 248.

Gilchrist's success in the process of adapting the subject to his audience. Gilchrist, like Milnes, believed in meeting his public halfway.

Yet Gilchrist is far less concerned with opening the way for a critical approach to Blake's works than with encouraging an intuitive and emotional relationship with the artist. The biographer declared his inability to provide a clear account of the works by insisting that Blake's 'Design can ill be translated into words, and very inadequately by any engraver's copy. His Poems, tinged with the very same ineffable qualities, obstructed by the same technical flaws and impediments, are as it were a semi-utterance snatched from the depths of the vague and unspeakable' (4). Blake's art is given an otherworldly quality (compounded by the self-contradictory idea of the 'unspeakable' and 'ineffable' qualities of a written poem), and, Gilchrist implies, must be experienced rather than discussed. Later, the biographer insists that 'criticism is idle. How analyse a violet's perfume, or dissect the bloom on a butterfly's wing?' (11). Such comments invite the reader to set off on his own journey of discovery rather than depend entirely on the biography.

Biography is envisioned as a genre that can enable the reader to develop the imaginative empathy necessary for understanding such a complex subject. To avoid misconstruing Blake and to

enter into the full simplicity and *naïveté* of Blake's character, calls for the exercise of a little imagination on his [the reader's] part. He must go out of himself for a moment, if he would take such eccentricities for what they are worth, and not draw false conclusions. If he or I—close-tethered as we are to the matter-of-fact world—were on a sudden to wander in so bizarre a fashion from the prescriptive proprieties of life, it would be time for our friends to call in a doctor, or apply for a commission *de lunatico*. But Blake lived in a world of Ideas; Ideas to him were more real than the actual external world. (115)

The reader is made to experience a range of perspectives and potential self-alienation ('he must go out of himself'). The biographer moves from addressing the reader as a separate entity towards uniting him closely with himself in order to momentarily downplay the confrontational notion of the biographer and subject allied against the world. Indeed, the reader is invited to become something of a visionary: 'To *go with* Blake, it almost required that a man should have the mind of an artist—and an artist of a peculiar kind—or one strongly in unison with that class of mind' (359). Gilchrist plays with the reader's desire to be considered an artistic connoisseur, rather than one blind to Blake's genius. He notes that 'to those disposed to judge a work of art vulgarly by what the eye merely can see, instead of by the emotions aroused, it may look like gross exaggeration to speak of grandeur in so rude and slight a work' (157). The dissenting reader exposes himself to charges of superficiality.

This determination to build the discovery of Blake not on critical standards but emotional ones points to the central concerns of the biography and reveals a broader engagement with the way in which national taste is developed. Gilchrist

insists that Blake's works are 'not merely *exercises* of art, to be coldly measured by the foot-rule of criticism, but truly inventions to be read and entered into with something of the spirit which conceived them' (243). The biographer's repeated distinctions between rationality and imagination echo his conception of the biography itself, which is not intended as a collection of facts or the presentation of a life to be 'coldly measured'. Instead, the biographer demands that the reader commune with its subject.

Gilchrist's determination to reach back to the origins of art—the spirit which conceived them—is key. In another revealing statement, Gilchrist describes the effect of reading Blake: 'As we read, fugitive glimpses open, clear as brief, of our buried childhood, of an unseen world present, past, to come . . . We encounter familiar objects, in unfamiliar, transfigured aspects, simple expression and deep meanings, type and antitype' (73). The use of the pronoun 'we' is a common stylistic feature of the biography, which further unites biographer and reader in the quest to uncover Blake. More arresting, however, is the suggestion that biography can be used to recover a buried autobiography. An enthusiastic writer in *The Spectator* was entirely responsive to these attempts to make Blake appear both obscure and yet already, almost mythically, familiar. The reviewer writes that 'many persons who will not know even his *name* at all may remember the quaint but forcible plates in a didactic little children's novel in three small volumes, called "Elements of Morality," which was translated from the German somewhere about 1790 for the benefit of our fathers' and mothers' childhood'.³⁷ Blake's lack of recognition is set against a sense that he was always hovering in the background, and can be recovered, like a memory, through communal re-examination. The reviewer pursues that a reader and viewer of Blake will gain 'some things as he first knew them, not encumbered behind the days of his life; things too delicate for memory or years since forgotten'.³⁸ Blake appears as a mythical undercurrent in the collective psyche: to recover Blake is to recover oneself and the common memories of the nation.

The conviction that the neglected Blake in fact forms part of a deep-seated collective heritage drives Gilchrist's call that the nation take greater care of its artists. In the 1906 preface to the work, William Gabriel Rossetti expressed a sense that Gilchrist's biography had acted as an almost psychological release, as the nation began to unearth and release treasures buried within their homes: 'the despised pictures emerge from the cellars and attics where they have spent the greater part of a century' (v). As in the biographies of working-class scientists, Gilchrist draws upon the language of tourism to encourage readers to acknowledge the richness of their heritage. The reader is directed to Blakean 'haunts'. Blake 'lodged at No. 28, (now a cheese-monger's shop, and boasting three brass bells), not many doors from Oxford Street on the right-hand side, going towards

³⁷ [Unsigned review], *The Spectator*, 1847 (21 November 1863), p. 2771.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2773.

that thoroughfare' (61). The visitor of Felpham is invited to combine curiosity with an 'especially pleasant summer-walk [which] is that by footpath to the village of Walberton, some five miles northward' (162). The more scholarly minded reader 'who wishes to study Blake as a colourist has a means of doing so . . . by going to the Print Room at the British Museum, which is accessible to any one who takes the proper course to gain admission' (393). So insistent are these remarks that one reviewer objected to this drive to 'describe every locality which our hero has lived in or visited'.³⁹

The encouragement to retrace Blake's steps becomes clearer when set alongside a parallel theme running throughout the biography: that of decay. Like Carlyle, Gilchrist frequently intervenes with chorus-like exclamations ('But alas!', 'Alas! for tenure of mortal Fame!', 44; 'What has become of these, I wonder?', 236). Individuals who are introduced in the narrative are categorized according to whether they gained or lost fame, or remained obscure their entire lives. ('Among Blake's fellow-exhibitors,' states Gilchrist, 'it is now curious to note the small galaxy of still remembered names . . . sprinkling the mob of forgotten ones', 58.) There is underlying awareness of those who were 'not great and famous, but nameless and unremembered' (196). The very physical environment that Gilchrist evokes is profoundly unstable, as he lays an insistent emphasis upon the destruction of buildings and the evolution of villages and towns. ('The street has since been partly re-built, partly renamed; the whole become now sordid and dirty', 102.) It is as if the act of rescuing Blake from persistent neglect could form a way of protesting against the ravages of time, and the reader is offered a chance to impose his will on a disturbingly unstable environment.

The tension between Blake's status as a (buried) national treasure and the fragility of such treasures enables Gilchrist to build his case for Blake's canonization. Though Gilchrist's attitude towards the canon, and above all towards those who determine it, is ambiguous, he makes it clear from the opening of the biography that Blake belongs inside the cultural institutions that had so far neglected him: 'From nearly all collections or beauties of "The English Poets," catholic to demerit as these are, tender to the expired and expiring reputations, one name has been hitherto perseveringly exiled. Encyclopaedias ignore it. The Biographical Dictionaries furtively pass it on with inaccurate despatch, as having some connexion with the Arts. With critics it has had but little better fortune' (1). Gilchrist makes an odd division between books and critics, as if poetical collections and Encyclopaedias developed independently of critics. The effect, however, is to increase the ranks of those who have ignored Blake. In order to stress his own subject's neglect, Gilchrist rather oddly depicts the genre of collective biography as almost excessively democratic, 'tender of the

³⁹ [William Henry Smith], 'The Life of William Blake', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 97 (March 1865), p. 293. Carlyle had exploited this technique at length in *The French Revolution*.

expired and expiring reputations', as if biographies of mediocre lives threatened the reputations of worthier subjects.

Gilchrist's biography is peppered with such complaints. There is a constant allusion to the absence of Blake's works in 'our Museum library' (38), and a lament that 'not one of these often invaluable examples of rare masters was secured for the nation' (355) by the National Gallery. Although he briefly alludes to sketches of the poet-painter by Allan Cunningham and Charles Robert Leslie,⁴⁰ Gilchrist slightly overstates the extent of Blake's neglect during the 'forgotten years' in an attempt to remain confrontational and polemical.⁴¹ The depiction increases the impression of a cause needing to be championed.

Neither can critics be counted upon to redress imbalances or oversights within the canon. The work is replete with attacks on misguided critics, and Gilchrist believes that Blake cannot be properly understood through the narrow 'foot-rule of criticism' (243). In fact, Gilchrist takes some pride in presenting Blake as an outsider, as 'in an era of academies, associations, and combined efforts, we have in him a solitary, self-taught, and as an artist, *semi*-taught Dreamer' (3). If both cultural institutions and critics are lamentably conformist, remaining on the margins becomes an indicator of quality. To a certain extent, therefore, Gilchrist seeks to maintain that the Romantic artist can only be appreciated by the special few in an uninspiring and uninspired age.

Gilchrist presents biography as a genre that can function as an alternative to other canonizing institutions. The exceptionally large number of illustrations signal the biographer's efforts to move his work beyond traditional biography. In collecting previously dispersed poetry and engravings, and linking them in a vivid narrative, the work functions as an accessible, portable exhibition: a literary museum. Yet Gilchrist's sustained attacks on existing cultural institutions, that Monckton Milnes largely avoids, leads the biography towards a difficulty. If Blake's style is '*sui generis* as no artist's ever was' (3), what can the canon possibly make of him?

Indeed, Gilchrist cannot entirely avoid paying tribute to the canon that, ultimately, he desires Blake to be welcomed into. He therefore seeks compromises. One way of achieving this is by drawing attention to literary contexts: 'In 1787, the year in which Blake's hand engraved the *Songs of Innocence*, Wordsworth was finishing his versified *Evening Walk* on the Goldsmith model' (77). By juxtaposing literary events without offering further commentary on the relation between them, Blake can thus preserve his unique status while being reintegrated within the company of names that have endured.

⁴⁰ Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 6 vols. (London: John Murray, 1829); Charles Robert Leslie, *Handbook for Young Painters* (London: John Murray, 1855).

⁴¹ See Dorfman, *Blake in the Nineteenth Century*.

The first individual to be compared to Blake is a fictional one. Gilchrist's choice of the title of Robert Browning's poem 'Pictor Ignotus' as the subtitle to the biography shows an interest in neglect as a theme beyond Blake's individual case. There are obvious parallels between Blake as Gilchrist presents him and Fra Bartolomeo, the monastic, unknown painter loathe to place his works in contact with the public, and deeply suspicious of worldly fame. (Blake was even reproached for expressing the same kind of bitterness that lies at the heart of Browning's poetic monologue.) Yet Blake, unlike the poem's speaker, did not choose to hide from the public glare by producing monotonous, inconspicuous works. The poem, like the biography, is a rejection of the standards of art established by individuals in power. Gilchrist singled out two lines to appear before his own title page:

The sanctuary's gloom at least shall ward
Vain tongues from where my pictures stand apart

This is a curious choice of lines from the poem.⁴² The quotation presents an embracing of neglect as a form of artistic self-protection that contrasts with biography's apparent *raison d'être*: publicizing. Gilchrist seems to be creating a parallel between the monastery and the biography as a place of protection, which in turn echoes Thomas Carlyle's desire to use biography as a form of protection for his friend John Sterling. Yet whereas Browning's poem is concerned with concealing, Gilchrist's work remains an act of display.

Gilchrist largely succeeded in creating a new interest in Blake: critics were largely pleased to be invited to discover a new genius. Blake's name began to circulate freely in exhibitions, articles, and full-length works such as Swinburne's *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (1868), which began as a lengthy review of Gilchrist's biography. When the second edition of the work appeared in 1880, the subtitle '*Pictor Ignotus*' could be dropped. It is often difficult to gauge precisely the influence of a biography in forging or reshaping a reputation, as there may already be an undercurrent preparing the ground for his canonization, as with Keats. Gilchrist's work, however, undoubtedly provided an important turning point. A further testimony to the success of the work is that, today, Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* is, along with Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, the Victorian literary biography most readily available in print.

At least one reviewer, however, was troubled by the work, and the cultural authority of the biographer. William Henry Smith—in his youth a friend of John Sterling—was a philosopher, novelist, poet, and prolific writer for periodicals. Now entirely neglected himself, he was fascinated with issues of canonization: in 1836, for example, he considered the Romantic canon in the article

⁴² Robert Browning, 'Pictor Ignotus', in *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, ed. by Ian Jack, Rowena Fowler, and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), iv, 26–30.

'The Poets of our Age' for the *Westminster Review*, and he made light of the Romantic 'culture of posterity', declaring that he would attempt to 'live upon oatmeal-porridge & prospect of posthumous fame!'⁴³ Smith's review is initially an essay on biography, criticism, and the canon before it slips into a more traditional assessment of Gilchrist's biography. Smith was largely unconvinced by the new claim for Blake's importance, and finds that the 'slight and interesting sketch given by Allan Cunningham, in his "Lives of the Painters", of this remarkable man, was all that the subject required'.⁴⁴ (He tellingly reduces the title of Cunningham's book, which is in fact *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*.)

What disturbs the writer far more than his personal reserves regarding Blake, however, is the emergence of the biographer as a new canonizing force in the public sphere. He develops this idea:

Mr Gilchrist sustains, for his part, the traditional idolatry of the biographer—that is, be it understood, in a certain offhand, patronising style. For our modern modish biographer is not apt himself to kneel at any shrine, though he is well enough disposed to order and superintend the worship of others. He pooh-poohs the old saints in the calendar, and, with infinite amusement to himself, gives you one, for your especial attention, with the glory quite new about its head.

The language employed by Smith is paradoxical: the biographer's approach is 'traditional' but 'modern'; he is 'modish' but disregards fashion sufficiently to unearth new 'saints'. The word 'patronising' adds to the ambiguity, as it implies both the biographer's act of patronage and alludes to a more tense relationship between himself and both subject and readers. The modern biographer, Smith argues, aspires to a position of superiority that he demonstrates by juggling with the canon and by his condescension towards the general public. As the review proceeds, it becomes apparent that Smith's objection is related to a more personal sense of frustration regarding the contemporary role of the periodical critic. As for the latter:

we are constrained to confess that his occupation is wellnigh useless . . . as to that influence on the living literature of his age—on the book that will be produced tomorrow, which he has flattered himself that he possessed—this influence, if he ever possessed it, is gone from him. The stream of literature flows too fast; it sweeps by him, not only too potent for his control, but too swift for his watchfulness . . . Where now is the function of the periodical critic? We are all periodicals—we are all but portions of the same mighty stream.

Smith adds his voice to that of many other contemporary writers who feared that the exponential growth of literature threatened the role of the man of letters. (Atypically, Smith does not blame this loss of influence on the poor quality of

⁴³ K. W. Davis, *Letters of William Henry Smith to the Blackwoods, 1836–1862*, Ph.D. diss., (Vanderbilt University, 1963), p. 201.

⁴⁴ [William Henry Smith], 'Life of William Blake', p. 201.

contemporary literature, but on the contrary on an excess of quality.)⁴⁵ Here, however, this resignation is prompted by a feeling of disdain towards the biographer, a kind of upstart who proclaims his influence on contemporary culture. Smith's reflection on the book 'produced tomorrow' alludes to the lack of impact that his reviews would have, but the use of the future tense also nods to the critic's hope of not only commenting on, but shaping, contemporary literature and the taste of the public. The manner in which the review moves swiftly from considering the recovery of the previously neglected subject to the matter of the influence of men of letters is representative of numerous biographies of hidden lives. Frederick Martin's *The Life of John Clare* presents a further example of the cultural influence aspired to by the biographer.

THE LIFE OF JOHN CLARE (1865)

Frederick Martin's *The Life of John Clare* (1865)⁴⁶ is another important Victorian biography that sets out to save a poet from neglect. In addition to exploring the Romantic theme of the neglected genius, Frederick Martin had to deal with a second well-worn trope: that of the rise and fall of the 'uneducated poet'. As the life of a poet from a humble background, it is an unconventional work on many accounts: it is a rare biography of a 'working' man to ignore an exemplary framework, it describes the subject's weaknesses unapologetically, and it portrays a frequently discontented working man.

John Clare had first caught the public's attention with the help of the Romantic mode of patronage. His *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820) was preceded by biographical accounts of Clare in the *London Magazine* aimed at attracting subscribers. Clare's popularity was short-lived, and by the time he entered the first of two asylums in 1837 he had become neglected, though he continued to write until his death in 1864. His longevity meant that, though commonly classified as a Romantic, he was also a Victorian, something of significance to Clare's biographer who would attack his contemporaries for their neglect. *The Life of John Clare*, a vivid three hundred-page account, is an emotional plea for the recognition of a neglected poet, and above all an examination of the public's relationship with, and responsibility towards, the nation's poets.

The author of this impassioned plea was Frederick Martin, a Jewish writer born in 1830 in Switzerland and educated in Germany, who moved to England during his childhood. Thomas Carlyle saved Martin from a 'miserable existence' as a schoolteacher: Martin contacted Carlyle with the hope of finding some

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 201–2.

⁴⁶ Frederick Martin, *The Life of John Clare* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1865). All further references are to this edition.

employment with him. On 15 October 1856, Carlyle, acknowledging that Martin's life had 'evidently reached the insupportable pitch', responded with the offer of a position as his amanuensis and enclosed a Postal Order for £1. Though Martin worked diligently and showed impressive German scholarship, their relationship was not a success. Carlyle described Martin as a 'desolate little German' given to 'hysterical futilities', and with an exasperating tendency of 'whistling thro' the nose', and he became a source of fun and exasperation in the Carlyle household. By June 1857, Carlyle was helping Martin find a new position 'in the direction of the Museum Clerkship'. Martin further irritated his former employer by preparing a sketch of him for a biographical magazine he had launched entitled *The Statesman*, which he soon abandoned. It later emerged that Martin had also stolen manuscripts from Carlyle.⁴⁷ Despite these dubious activities, Martin went on to edit the *Statesman's Year-Book* for Macmillan (to whom Carlyle had introduced Martin), for which he was granted a pension by Disraeli. The first issue appeared in January 1864, a year before the publication of John Clare's biography.

Like many of the biographers who took up obscure or neglected subjects, Frederick Martin expressed personal frustrations about his own career. The year before his *Life of John Clare* appeared in print, he complained to his publisher that he had 'been fighting the battle of life in a rather rough manner'.⁴⁸ Martin was drawn to the tragic destinies of poets and stories of self-taught geniuses. Shortly after the publication of John Clare's biography, he edited Chatterton's poems and added an introductory memoir to the volume. In the latter work, he describes Chatterton as 'conscious of his mental superiority, yet condemned to obey a man for whom he felt utter contempt, his spirit chafed and fretted, ready to burst its bounds' (xix). It is tempting to hypothesize that Martin may have projected his own dissatisfaction onto his subjects. Such speculations aside, Martin did use his biography of John Clare to address the topic of the treatment of authors in England.

Before discussing Martin's work in greater detail, the tradition of promoting 'uneducated poets' that began in the late eighteenth century and peaked in the early nineteenth century deserves further consideration. Poets such as John Taylor the 'Water-Poet', Stephen Duck, and James Woodhouse experienced similar trajectories as John Clare. Commonly, the aspiring 'uneducated' writer would appeal, via letter and flattering verses, to an influential patron who would circulate copies and vouch for his dependant's character. Biographical sketches were essential in presenting the poet to a public intrigued by the incongruence of a humble literary man. Readers looked to the poets for authenticity in appearance

⁴⁷ Thomas Carlyle to Lord Ashburton, 20 December 1856 and Thomas Carlyle to John Carlyle, 21 March 1857. *CLO*. See also Ashton, *Thomas and Jane Carlyle*, p. 386.

⁴⁸ Frederick Martin to Macmillans, 27 February 1864. *BL*, Add. MS 55402. 1864–82. Correspondence with Macmillans.

and verse: attempts by the 'peasants' to develop a more sophisticated style were rejected or ridiculed. While their fame lasted, the poets were expected to remain submissive and grateful. In the most famous example of a patronage that turned sour, Ann Yearsley, the 'milkwoman of Bristol', began to long for more creative and financial independence from her patron Hannah More after the success of her first volume of poems. Ann was condemned as thankless in the press and firmly put in her place. The public generally tired of these poets with astonishing rapidity. The fraught relationship between poet and patron recalls in many ways that between biographer and obscure subject, which involved a struggle for control and the same risk of tarnishing the aura of authenticity of such subjects through extended public displays. Samuel Smiles's response to Thomas Edward's bid for independence strongly echoes that of Hannah More.

The poet laureate Robert Southey was one of the first writers to take stock of the tradition of 'uneducated poets'. In 1831, he published an *Essay on the Lives and Works of Our Uneducated Poets*, which introduced the *Attempts in Verse, by John Jones; an old servant: with some account of the Writer, Written by himself*.⁴⁹ *Attempts in Verse*, published by subscription, exhibits Southey's patronage of John Jones. It is also an essay of literary history on the fashion for 'uneducated poets' that Southey believed was coming to an end as the 'March of Intellect' (12) entailed the spread of education. Jones is presented as 'humble' (8) but also as 'kind and happy' (11). A key tenet of the work is that amateur poetry among the poor—for Southey rapidly dismisses the idea that the poems have real literary value—is conducive to 'moral' benefits. No social rise is wished for the poets other than comfort in their poverty. The comment on one poet that 'no spoon could have suited his mouth so well as the wooden one to which he was born' (86) is implied for all.

Southey's essay appeared at a time when old-fashioned modes of patronage were disappearing. Southey recognizes the development of a new literary public sphere—the 'less tolerant and less charitable' public (8)—and envisages biography as a means of preserving an old-fashioned mode of patronage. The biographer-as-patron carefully regulates the nature and length of his subject's presence among the public sphere, and all that is expected of the public is 'charity' (8). Acts of benevolence towards the 'mediocre' lead to the contentment of humble poets who are protected from an increasingly harsh public gaze, and contentment, Southey opines, is the foundation of harmonious social relations.

John Gibson Lockhart, in the *Quarterly Review*, agreed that the 'old man's verses' would be warmly received from those 'who appreciate the value of kindly relations between masters and dependants'.⁵⁰ For another reviewer, writing in

⁴⁹ Robert Southey, *Attempts in Verse, by John Jones; an old servant: with some account of the Writer, Written by himself: and an introductory essay on the Lives and Works of Our Uneducated Poets* (London: John Murray, 1831).

⁵⁰ [John Gibson Lockhart review], *Quarterly Review*, 44 (January–February 1831), p. 54.

the *Edinburgh Review*, the work was misguided. The reviewer derides the idea that poetical talents promote 'piety and morality', and above all that 'private charity' still had a role to play in literature. Instead, he praises the existence of an 'independent' public no longer moved by images of 'picturesque poverty' in distributing 'temporary and misplaced relief'.⁵¹ Southey's publication and its reception signal a turning point. The use of biography as a mode of mediation between a writer and his audience was being recognized and questioned.

As Southey anticipated, the craze for patronizing humble poets largely dissipated in the Victorian period. Martha Vicinus has demonstrated in *The Industrial Muse* (1974) that thousands of working men wrote poetry, though these tended to be urban rather than rural poets. Those who tried to follow the itinerary of their 'humble' predecessors were usually less successful than the poets of the Alton Locke variety who published in working-class newspapers run by Chartists and Unionists and took on political and social subjects. It was these, who did not rely on patronage and a biographical framework, that writers such as Carlyle and Kingsley paid attention to in their articles.

Victorian biographers of 'uneducated poets' displayed their resistance to earlier Romantic representation of these subjects by reconfiguring poetry as an extension of contemporary productivity. The author of *Sketches of Obscure Poets* (1833) insists that poetic hyper-sensibility can be harmonized with 'habits of industry'.⁵² Poetry becomes another form of work. The narrator of this anonymous work of collective biography writes of one poet that 'nearly as soon as each work was disposed of, the produce was exhausted by the wants of the author and his family'.⁵³ The word 'produce' underscores the quasi-utilitarian function of the verse. Edwin Paxton Hood carried this notion even further in *The Literature of Labour* (1851). Hood believed that genius was neither 'rare' nor 'extraordinary', and found the Romantic notion of genius as something innate a dangerous notion. For Hood, genius should be coupled with industry. Literature, by even the humblest practitioner, is seen as economically beneficial to the nation: 'the printer is set to work; artists, engravers, binders, and all these persons must live'.⁵⁴ The poet does not contemplate society from afar but must demonstrate a more social form of productivity.

What these works also demonstrate was that the biographer gradually took over the function of the old-fashioned patron. The biographers depict the genre as an idealized democratic space in which two disparate classes may meet. Hood notes that educated readers would find in his work of collective biography 'the love of the spiritual life glowing in the bosoms of men upon whom he has been in

⁵¹ [Unsigned review], *Edinburgh Review*, 54 (August–December 1831), pp. 76, 79, 80.

⁵² [Anon.], *Sketches of Obscure Poets* (London: Cochrane and McCrone, 1833), p. xii.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–7.

⁵⁴ Edwin Paxton Hood, *The Literature of Labour: Illustrious Instances of the Education of Poetry in Poverty* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1851), p. 24.

the habit of looking with contempt'.⁵⁵ As was so often the case with 'obscure' lives, the appearance of the uneducated poet in the public sphere was carefully mediated by the biographer.

Although John Clare was a poet of far greater talent than most of the 'uneducated' poets who came to public attention, the place of poetry in society, the poetic temperament, and the dangers of patronage are all considered in Frederick Martin's *The Life of John Clare*, albeit with greater sophistication. Initially, Martin appears to follow the tradition of biographies of humble poets by neglecting the 'peasant poet's' verse in favour of lively anecdotes. He quotes only eight of Clare's poems, and includes them all in the final third of the biography, when Clare was lapsing into madness. Neither does he offer critical insights. Clare's genius is explained in terms of the poet's feelings rather than his craft. Martin's only commentary on the first of Clare's poems he quotes is that 'the verses came flowing from his pen' (238); of 'The Flitting', the reader is simply informed that 'his feelings found vent in the verses' (247). The biography to some degree draws on the tradition of regarding uneducated poets as born rhymesters and insists that 'a poet he had always been—had been from the day when, a tottering child' (238). Such claims of natural poetic genius are not followed by the additional tribute of considering the poet's work in a more critical and serious manner. As with both Milnes and Gilchrist, criticism takes a second place behind an approach to the poet that considers the force of his personality and morals, and the emotional connection that both reader and biographer can forge with him.

Frederick Martin is uncertain how much to make of Clare's humble origins. As in many other accounts of humble poets, he exploits the seeming incongruence of juxtaposing a 'poet' with a 'peasant' (one of his chapters is even entitled 'The Poet as Pedlar'). Clare had cooperated in creating this image—though he had no other real option—yet Martin condemns those who reduced Clare to the 'Northamptonshire Peasant'. He quotes this title in inverted commas to signal his own distance from it, and evokes it in the context of the public's mistreatment of Clare, who was 'duly petted, flattered, lionized, and caressed—and, of course, as duly forgotten when his nine days were passed' (v). Martin uses the word 'peasant' in inverted commas throughout, almost always following this with an attack on irresponsible patronage. His unease with the label reveals a desire that the poet should be judged on his own merits, separate from his background, yet he does not follow this up by providing a critical rather than a biographical approach to Clare.

Martin manages to reconcile Clare's origins and his poetic activities by advocating a combination of work and art in much the same way as Edwin

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 9–11.

Paxton Hood. He applauds Clare when the poet's waning fortunes lead him to contemplate a return to the farming life. Clare

almost wondered why he had ever despaired . . . There was wealth and health sufficient springing from his daily labour . . . And there was joy scarce ever known when sitting down, at rare intervals, to the inspiration of the muse . . . Clare knew that the poetry, offspring of these happy hours, was far superior to anything that had ever flown from his pen. He almost felt as if now, and now only, he was becoming a true poet. (237)

The 'daily labour' of the peasant provides a healthy counterbalance to poetry, which Martin depicts as a state of unhealthy self-absorption. Clare's muse appears all the more powerful for being visited in moderation, and Clare is a better poet for also being a farmer, partly because he is no longer dependent on inconstant patrons for his livelihood but also because he is in a more stable condition. There is also a sense that the poet cannot content himself with contemplation but must demonstrate a more social form of productivity.

As in the biographies of working-class naturalists, this stance means that the removal of a humble poet to a different social class is not encouraged. However, Martin is unusual in laying the blame for unsuccessful social experiments on the wealthier classes who encourage them. Jolly and Samuel Smiles, as indeed other biographers of working men, were responsible for bringing obscure men before the public. Unlike them, Frederick Martin's main theme is the *consequence* of plucking a subject from obscurity for public entertainment.⁵⁶

Martin approaches the problem by an extensive use of clothes-related imagery. Clare's audience, initially seduced by his 'natural' condition, turns him into an artificial construct. Martin uses the poet's clothes as a metonymy for his status in society: Clare is literally a mis-fit, setting out into the world 'in a threadbare coat which he had long outgrown, and the sleeves of which were at his elbows; with a pair of breeches a world too large for his slender legs' (13). As he gains notoriety, he finds his 'dirty clothes . . . entirely out of place' (85) with the fine surroundings in which he finds himself. The poet finds himself 'clothed in garments such as he had never before worn', including 'a noble, though very uncomfortable, high hat; while his heavy shoes seemed changed by a covering of brilliant polish. Surveying his figure, thus altered, in a looking-glass, John was greatly satisfied with himself, and with a proud step marched off towards Holywell Park' (96). Though Clare seems pleased, his more sophisticated outfit is difficult to wear, and it is ominous that his shoes have not been replaced but superficially covered. It is the figure in the mirror with whom Clare is satisfied, which marks the beginning of a rift between the poet and his doppelgänger, resulting in madness.

⁵⁶ Lockhart's 1828 biography of Robert Burns offers a similar tale of patronage and its consequences. Though Burns struggled with his patrons his poetic reputation endured, unlike John Clare's.

Clare is later ensconced in 'an ancient overcoat somewhat too large for him, but useful as hiding his whole figure from the top of his head down to the heels' (112). As in so much literature of the double, he is both protected and smothered by his double and sartorial alter-ego. Great emphasis is laid on an episode in which Clare joins the army but is given an ill-fitting suit of clothes. Clare's trousers appear to be made 'for a giant' and to 'prevent his tumbling over them, like a clown in the pantomime, he held up his pantaloons with one hand, while with the other he kept his helmet from falling in the mud' (46). The theatrical metaphor draws attention to the way in which Clare would continue to perform a specific role during his short public career. Martin's biography is uncommon in wavering between the poet's and the public's perspective, and in underlining the self-defeating nature of the desire to champion the natural by removing it from its sphere and putting it on display. If the poet becomes a madman, the work suggests, it is as much due to the pressures from without as to those within.

Yet there are many parallels between patronage and biography. Martin consistently condemns individuals who lionized Clare only to abandon him later. He doubts that the publishers Octavius Gilchrist and John Taylor 'thoroughly appreciated John Clare' and notes that the introducing 'account of John Clare' published in Taylor's *London Magazine* was

in the tone in which a *parvenu* might speak of a pauper . . . Though perhaps well-meant in the first instance, this patronizing manner in speaking of Clare, and attracting public attention to him, less as a poetical genius, but as happening to be a poor man, did mischief in the end. It did more than this—it killed John Clare. (88)

Martin ignores the complicity of his own biography in perpetuating the interest in Clare as a man rather than as a poet. The tone of the biography swerves constantly between amusement and condescension, and the narrative is focused throughout upon a string of quirky anecdotes. Martin uses direct speech to an unusual extent, and the work is unquestionably lively. Yet the means employed to resuscitate the deceased and neglected poet echo those strategies that 'killed' Clare, as the work relies to a large extent upon the public's curiosity and willingness to be entertained.

This ambivalence can partly be explained by Frederick Martin's ambiguous attitude towards poets. Clare is in turn the 'deeply distressed poet' (66), the 'much-humbled poet' (79), the 'shy and awkward poet' (84), or again the 'astonished poet' (107). The lofty vision of the inspired poet is also undermined. Describing Clare's reception of some unfavourable criticism, Martin writes: 'He read it over; read it once, twice; and then grasped the counter to prevent himself from falling to the ground. It was the first harsh literary criticism the poor poet had to submit to in his life. The blood rushed to his face; his hands clinched the fatal letter, as if to annihilate its existence' (79). The passage recalls the myth of Keats's slaying by a negative review, yet the drama is

rapidly displaced as Mr Drury sets about cheering the poet with a bottle of ale. Martin again undermines the self-important stance of the poet when narrating a lengthy anecdote in which a drunken Clare falls asleep in an empty hackney coach. The poet wakes to find himself carried away by the coach. He determines to leap out, but the coachman 'had him by the collar in an instant, crying, "And who are you?" Clare tried to explain; introducing himself as author of "Poems of Rural Life," and the "Village Minstrel," in two volumes, with engravings' (153). The Dickensian turn of phrase, comically rounded off with the punctilious insistence upon the 'engravings' once more shatters the poet's composure and dignity, as does Clare's too perfect assumption of the role of 'uneducated poet'. Martin's delight at the misadventures of his subject is evident. Such depictions that mock poetic pretensions alternate with requests for a less faddish, artificial approach to poetry. Above all, however, they present the poet as a profoundly vulnerable figure.

The biographer mirrors old-fashioned patrons in betraying and exploiting the defenceless poet. Yet he is also guardian of the poet's posthumous reputation, rather than simply, as with patrons, an advocate during the poet's lifetime. Even though his approach to Clare's poetry broadly resembles that of other biographers of uneducated poets, Frederick Martin differs strongly from them in the stance he takes on Clare's behaviour. The poet's romantic dalliances, drinking habits, and even his madness are all narrated without condemnation. While these are all retold with great frankness, however, Martin does play with the materials of Clare's life in other areas. Frederick Martin gained the reputation of a diligent researcher with the *Statesman's Yearbook*; in the preface of the work's first edition, published in 1864, he declared that the 'great aim has been to insure an absolute correctness of the multiplicity of fact and figures'.⁵⁷ Martin did not maintain the same level of accuracy in his life of John Clare; he does not list his sources and it is hard to pinpoint which of Clare's manuscripts he consulted, although it is certain that he read 'some very curious autobiographical memoirs' (ix), now known as 'Sketches in the Life of John Clare'.

It is difficult to determine how many of Martin's distortions were errors and how many were deliberate. A glance at Clare's autobiographical writings, to some of which Martin had access, presents a useful point of comparison. Martin's alterations do not involve the suppression of embarrassing facts but, on the contrary, the development and romancing of episodes in Clare's life. In one passage, Clare responds to a proposal that he write an 'Invitation to Subscribers' and arrives at the Post Office to send it. Clare describes the moment:

When I got to the Post Office they wanted a Penny as I was past the hour, but as I had none and hating to look so little as to make the confession I said with a little pettishness that it was not mine and that I should not pay for other peoples letters the man lookd a

⁵⁷ Frederick Martin, *The Statesman's Yearbook* (London: Macmillans, 1864), p. 7.

little surpris'd at the unusual garb of the letter which I was half ashamed of—directed with a pencil, written on a sheet of paper and to add to its novelty sealed with shoemakers wax. I saw his smile and retreated as fast as I could from the town.⁵⁸

Martin's version is as follows:

The post-office was closed, and the clerk at the wicket demanded one penny as a fee for taking in the late letter. John Clare fumbled in his pockets, and found that he had not so much as a farthing in his possession. In a rueful voice he asked the man at the wicket to take the letter without the penny. The clerk glanced at the singular piece of paper handed to him, the pencilled, ill-spelt address, the coarse pitch, instead of sealing-wax, at the back, and with a contemptuous smile, threw the letter into a box at his side. Without uttering another word, he then shut the door in Clare's face. And the poor poet hurried home, burying his face in his hands. (63)

Martin greatly exaggerates the antagonism between the clerk and the poet that is only insinuated in Clare's version. The desire to romance the life is not a sufficient explanation for Martin's changes, since Clare's version is in itself extremely lively. In Martin's it is Clare's quality as a poet that is diminished rather than simply his confidence as in the autobiography. The poet's voice is weak ('rueful') and his words clumsy ('ill-spelt address'). Whereas Clare spoke up in his version in refusing to pay, his voice is muted in Martin's version and the clerk prevents him from speaking any further. The 'poor poet' further obscures himself by 'burying' his face. It is typical of Martin that it is the figure of the poet that is placed under threat. In the autobiography, Clare's voice is strong; in Martin's work, it is the biographer's. The reduction of Clare to a trembling, helpless figure mistreated by his entourage only increases the nobility of Martin's act of championing. The biographer exaggerates the extent to which his subject needs the biographical rescue he provides.

Martin rescues the poet by giving him a mythical dimension. Clare's life is 'the old tale, all over' (v), and his life partakes of tragedy (his rise and fall), comedy (his numerous misadventures), pastoral ('while the sheep were grazing on the borders of Helpo's Heath, . . . the young shepherd and shepherdess talked sweet things to each other, careless of flocks and herds', 4) and the picaresque, as the poet sets off to seek his fortune in London (109). Such shifts foster the notion that Clare represents all that literature can encompass.

Indeed, Clare's life is linked with the most powerful emblem of England's literary heritage: Shakespeare. Clare is compared to Hamlet ('Like Hamlet—He repulsed, | Fell into a sadness, then into a fast, | Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness', 263). His courtship of Patty is closely modelled upon the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* (67) and, as Jonathan Bate has noticed, the manner in which Martin describes the wooing of Clare's mother by his father who would

⁵⁸ John Clare, 'Sketches in the Life of John Clare', in *John Clare by Himself*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1996), p. 23.

tell her stories of foreign lands 'is lifted straight from *Othello*'.⁵⁹ As always with Martin, there is a sense that these references might be either cruelly mocking or a means of raising Clare to a more tragic level, in accordance with Carlyle's view that there is 'the fifth act of a Tragedy in every death-bed'. More contemporary references are also used: Martin quotes from Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall' to describe Clare's feelings ('Love took up the glass of Time, and turned it in his glowing hands; | Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden sands', 21). It is surprising that Martin should use another poet's words to describe Clare's feelings, when he could have chosen words from Clare himself. On the one hand this further diminishes Clare's own voice. On the other, the references make Clare part of a richer literary culture and encourage the reader to see him in this broader light.

The passages in which Martin abandons his light and teasing tone are those in which he assumes the role of cultural guardian. In his final paragraph, he becomes more ponderous: 'There now lies, under the shade of a sycamore-tree, . . . all that earth has to keep of John Clare, one of the sweetest singers of nature ever born within the fair realm of dear old England—of dear old England, so proud of its galaxy of noble poets, and so wasteful of their lives' (295–6). Martin here avoids basing his claims for Clare's recognition upon his working-class status, and moves instead from the particular to the general, with the mythical overtones of 'dear old England', and the 'galaxy of noble poets'. The biographer uses his position to address an entire nation and call it to account for its irresponsible treatment of its cultural heritage. For Martin, Clare's treatment at the hands of his patron and public is a 'national disgrace' (263). Clare is used as an archetype, an image of the nation itself.

Martin constructed his argument so forcefully that this aspect of the biography was the first one that an *Athenaeum* reviewer picked up. The writer agreed that 'there is nothing which the wise and righteous should more earnestly take to heart than the duty they owe to those in the humbler classes of society who possess the fatal gift of imagination. There has been nothing more frivolously misunderstood or more perversely neglected.'⁶⁰ Martin gradually abandons the initial ambition of the biography, which was to bring proper recognition to Clare, as the work becomes a reflection on how the cultural heritage is preserved. Forgetting this 'duty' is even more regrettable than forgetting individual poets.

Frederick Martin is undoubtedly unusual in depicting a member of the lower classes in such frank and unembarrassed terms, although the manner in which he controls Clare's voice can be compared to other biographies of working-class subjects. In expressing the idea that it is the public who are enriched by encountering the forgotten subject within a biography rather than the subject who is

⁵⁹ Jonathan Bate, 'John Clare: Prologue to a New Life', in *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. by John Goodridge and Simon Kövesi (Helpston: John Clare Society, 2000), p. 7.

⁶⁰ [Unsigned review], *The Athenaeum*, 1964 (17 June 1865), p. 806.

rescued by the biographer, *The Life of John Clare* does not stray far from other biographical representations of hidden lives. Biographers of previously neglected Romantic poets showed in various ways that the public had a new role of responsibility to maintain the national heritage, and they made their case in emotional rather than critical terms. The genre of biography could also go some way towards healing the rift between writers and their public, whether by making a claim for fame, as with Milnes and Gilchrist, using biography as a genre that could compensate for and protect individuals from public tensions, as with Carlyle, Keary, and Giberne, or by promoting a kind of levelling between the poet and the public by using biography as a cosy form of social intercourse, as with Lucas. In all these cases, the biographer envisages himself as a necessary mediator between public and subject.

In the opening of *The Life of Blake*, Gilchrist complained of the exclusion of his subject from biographical dictionaries and encyclopaedias. The launch of the *Dictionary of National Biography* would take the deliberation over the inclusion and exclusion of biographical subjects to a new level.

‘Forgotten Benefactors’: The *Dictionary of National Biography*

A succession of cultural projects in the late nineteenth century gave prominence to the question of worthwhile biographical subjects. The National Portrait Gallery is one of the numerous commemorative enterprises that were undertaken in the second half of the nineteenth century, to which, for example, Madame Tussaud’s waxwork museum, the Westminster mural scheme, the Albert Memorial in Kensington, and Postman’s Park could also be added. Calls for a portrait gallery somehow representative of British history had grown louder throughout the 1850s. In 1854, Carlyle, who promoted both the Scottish and English galleries, explained his conception of the Edinburgh exhibition. It would include, he hoped, ‘whoever *lives* in the memory of Scotchmen, whoever is yet practically recognizable as a conspicuous worker, speaker, singer, or sufferer in the past time of Scotland . . . who said, did or suffered anything truly memorable, or anything still much remembered’.¹ The proposal raises as many questions as it solves: how does one define the ‘practically recognizable’, or apply selection criteria to the phrase ‘still much remembered’? The founders of the English project, which began to take shape in 1857, also struggled to set out their policy of inclusion, leading one MP to complain that ‘on looking over the list of portraits already acquired, there are some whose claims to be there I cannot understand’.²

A parallel project that sought to shed light on the nation through the compilation of vast amounts of information was the *New English Dictionary* (*NED*) (1884–1928). Like the *DNB*, plans for the creation of a new dictionary began decades before the first volume was published: as early as 1858, the Philological Society set out initial guidelines for the project in response to Richard Chenevix Trench’s essay *On Some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries* (1857). The project advanced in fits and starts as its first editors—Trench, Herbert Coleridge, and Frederick Furnivall—died. It was with James Murray and the intervention of

¹ Thomas Carlyle, ‘Project of a National Exhibition of Scottish Portraits’ (1854), in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle, Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 3 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall 1857–8), v, 319.

² [Unsigned], *Hansard* (13 July 1858), p. 1422.

Oxford University Press in 1879 that the pace picked up; with the help of thousands of volunteers, the first volume was published in 1884, a year before the first volume of the *DNB*. The projects were often discussed in the same breath. Henry Reeve felt that, together with the new edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* they marked 'the high-water mark of the literary acquirements of this century'.³

The lexicographers working on the *NED* also struggled to establish a policy of inclusion. Trench wished to distance the burgeoning project from the more subjective enterprise published by Samuel Johnson in 1755. Whereas Johnson sought to rescue the English language from 'the corruptions of ignorance, and the caprices of innovation', Trench insisted that 'it is no task of the maker of it [the Dictionary] to select the *good* words of a language . . . The business which he has undertaken is to collect and arrange all the words, whether good or bad.'⁴ Yet even this all-inclusiveness raised difficulties: as the preface to the dictionary states, 'the vocabulary of a widely diffused and highly cultivated living language is not a fixed quantity circumscribed by definite limits'.⁵ Reeve, finding 5,982 obsolete and 870 alien words in the first volume alone, found it 'difficult to discover at what point the line has been drawn, if drawn at all'.⁶

The *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885–1901), which emerged in this context, shared the difficulties of these projects concerning the selection of appropriate subjects. Bravely, its editors set out to combine both criteria of inclusion: eminence *and* humble worth. Indeed, the *DNB* is crucially important among works of nineteenth-century biography in seeking to unite the two apparently distinct currents of contemporary life-writing.

When the *Dictionary of National Biography* was launched by Smith, Elder, in 1882, it was done with the lessons learnt from previous attempts at such works in mind. Though many biographical dictionaries had previously been attempted and published, the one most akin to the *DNB* was the *Biographia Britannica* (1747–66) that aimed, in eight folio volumes, to include 'the lives of the most eminent persons who have flourished in Great Britain and Ireland'.⁷ A new edition was begun in 1777, but collapsed under the letter 'F' sixteen years later. This had remained the principal biographical dictionary until Smith's venture, and had become insufficient for contemporary scholarly needs, notably by having

³ [Reeve], 'Literature and Language of the Age', p. 328.

⁴ Richard Chenevix Trench, *On Some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries, Being the Substance of Two Papers read before the Philological Society, November 5, and November 19, 1837* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1857), pp. 4–5.

⁵ J. A. H. Murray, 'General Explanations', *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 10 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), I, A–B, p. xxvii.

⁶ [Reeve], 'Literature and Language of the Age', p. 343.

⁷ *Biographia Britannica, or, The Lives of the Most Eminent Persons who have flourished in Great Britain and Ireland, from the earliest ages, down to the present times* (London, 1747).

omitted 'hundreds of names that we want to see'.⁸ When George Smith considered publishing a new dictionary he knew that it would never be a commercial success. Instead, these past failures 'challenged [his] pride', and he offered the project as his 'gift to English letters'.⁹

Smith approached Leslie Stephen with his initial idea for a work of universal biography. Leslie Stephen, following J. A. Symonds's advice, persuaded him to downscale the project to a work of national biography.¹⁰ A list of possible 'A's was drawn up to gain a sense of the size of the work (estimated at fifty volumes), and a specimen life, Stephen's 'Addison', was composed. The process of recruiting contributors began, and Stephen was ready to make a public announcement in December 1882, through *The Athenaeum*. In this periodical, he advertised the preparation of a new 'Biographia Britannica'. He describes it as a work 'intended to include English, Scotch, and Irish names from the earliest period. This includes Americans who were also British subjects. It will not include any names of living persons.' He added that 'we should aim at giving the greatest possible amount of information in a thoroughly business-like form . . . We must, in the first place, exclude (with certain exceptions) names which are only names.'¹¹ Stephen's vague language already intimated the problems of selection and organization that lay ahead. He appealed to *Athenaeum* readers for advice, lists of possible biographical subjects, and prospective contributors. The project was officially launched.

A rapid overview of the *DNB* conveys the size and difficulties of the enterprise. A temporary staff was assembled in 1882 and offices found on the top floor of 14 Waterloo Place, next to the offices of Smith, Elder, and Co. After some consideration, Sidney Lee was appointed sub-editor in March 1883. The first volume appeared on 1 January 1885, and a publication rate of four volumes a year was determined upon and maintained until the completion of the project in June 1900. The dictionary eventually totalled sixty-three volumes, with three supplementary volumes in 1901, which included those lives unintentionally omitted and recent deaths.

The bare dates conceal the workload involved. While Stephen struggled to maintain regular office hours, Lee imposed a rigorous schedule of three hours each morning at the British Museum and four in the Waterloo offices for assistant editors, with a half-day's work on Saturdays. The editors, who dealt with angry widows, unscrupulous researchers, and circumlocutory writers,

⁸ [Richard Copley Christie] 'DNB, volumes 1-10', *Quarterly Review*, 164 (January-April 1887), p. 354.

⁹ George Smith, from a conversation transcribed in 1899, quoted in Leonard Huxley, *The House of Smith Elder* (London: printed for private circulation, 1923), pp. 181-2.

¹⁰ See Leslie Stephen to J. A. Symonds, 13 October 1882, quoted in Frederick Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (London: Duckworth, 1906), p. 351.

¹¹ Leslie Stephen, 'A New "Biographia Britannica"', *The Athenaeum*, 2878 (23 December 1882), p. 850.

managed no fewer than 647 contributors; the total number of lives amounted to 27,236.¹² Stephen's letters are replete with grumbles concerning 'le Damned dictionary'.¹³ In 1891, Julia Stephen wrote to George Smith on his behalf that 'it has become perfectly plain to him that he must henceforward give up any attempt to edit the Dictionary'.¹⁴ Though his input in the dictionary remained immense, Lee's name appeared as joint editor in March 1890 (volume 22), and Stephen's name was dropped altogether in June 1891 (volume 27). Lee saw the work through to its completion and oversaw three supplementary volumes (1901), an index and epitome, known as the concise dictionary (1903), and a volume of errata (1904); he also contributed to the corrected reprint of the work in twenty-two volumes, published in 1908–9. 'The *DNB*', Pollard declares, 'could hardly have been produced in an age less strenuous than the Victorian'.¹⁵

Twentieth-century writers and critics have tended to admire the sheer size of the *DNB* project, and agree with Pollard's vision of it as a symbol of late-Victorian entrepreneurship, or what Lord Rosebery termed 'the greatest literary monument of the Victorian age'.¹⁶ Alan Bell describes it as a 'Temple of British Worthies'; for Giles Foden, it is 'one of the great institutions of British life'.¹⁷ Such reverence was not unanimous. A ninety-two page spoof of the work, *Lives of the Lustrious, a Dictionary of Irrational Biography*, signed 'Sidney Stephen and Leslie Lee', appeared in 1901. The introduction sets out the editors' intention to provide a 'monumental work' and provides mock entries on living celebrities, such as Henry James, who is described as a 'Six-Shilling Sensationalist' whose 'works are famous for their blunt, almost brutal directness of style, and naked realism'.¹⁸

The 'monumental' label is a double-edged one. It suggests respect while laying emphasis on precisely those qualities of Victorian biography that the 'new biographers' of the early twentieth century would so persistently attack. Sidney Lee appears in Virginia Woolf's essay 'The New Biography' as the epitome of

¹² Gillian Fenwick's studies on the *DNB* provide invaluable statistics for the work. See Fenwick, *The Contributors' Index to the Dictionary of National Biography, 1885–1901* (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1989) and Fenwick, *Women and the Dictionary of National Biography* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1994).

¹³ Leslie Stephen to Gabriel Loppé, 1 December 1887, in John Bicknell, *Selected Letters of Leslie Stephen*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan 1996), II, 353.

¹⁴ Julia Stephen to George Smith, 7 April 1891. Smith, Elder Papers. NLS. MSS. 23175–6.

¹⁵ A. F. Pollard, 'Sir Sidney Lee and the "Dictionary of National Biography"', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 4 (1926–7), p. 6.

¹⁶ Quoted in Alan Bell, 'Leslie Stephen and the *DNB*', *TLS* (16 December 1977), p. 1478.

¹⁷ Alan Bell, 'A portable Valhalla', *TLS* (2 October 1981), p. 1115; Giles Foden, 'Launched to eternity', *Guardian* (25 September 2004), p. 9.

¹⁸ 'Sidney Stephen and Leslie Lee', *Lives of the Lustrious* (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co. 1901), p. 47. Julie Codell identifies the authors as Sidney Lee and Leslie Stephen themselves in *The Victorian Artist*, p. 266. She does not provide evidence of this authorship, however, and Fenwick's extensive bibliographical study of Stephen makes no mention of the work.

unsatisfactory Victorian life-writing,¹⁹ and is given another dig in *A Room of One's Own*, where she mentions 'that Shakespeare had a sister, but do not look for her in Sir Sidney Lee's life of the poet'.²⁰ Leslie Stephen's posthumous reputation has also been dominated by Virginia Woolf's too memorable representations of him in her autobiographical writings and as Mr Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse* (1927). The enduring belief that biographies of 'obscure' subjects began with Woolf and her fellow biographers has had the unfortunate consequence that Stephen is regularly evoked to depict the distasteful hero-worshipping ways of the Victorians. With the Bloomsbury group in mind, S. P. Rosenbaum stated that "'the lives of the obscure", which most women's were, the *DNB* excluded almost by definition'.²¹

It is true that the *DNB* under-represented several categories of subjects—most obviously women (3.5 per cent of the lives included). In his 1896 essay 'National Biography', Sidney Lee addressed this imbalance, which he attributed to historical conditioning rather than contemporary misogyny: 'woman's opportunities of distinction were infinitesimal in the past, and are very small compared with men's—something like one to thirty—at the present moment'.²² While efforts to question such assessments and the 'phallogocentric'²³ attitude of the *DNB*'s editors are laudable, they have had the consequence of pushing aside the many 'obscure' lives which Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee *did* include.

Leslie Stephen's desire to 'have as many thousands of obscure names as possible'²⁴ in the work points to a very different ambition than one most often associated with this monumental project. The recent publication of the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) has encouraged critics to return to the original publication that, they have pointed out, in fact practised an unusually flexible approach to the choice of subjects. As the *ODNB* editor Colin Matthew states, the 'use of the *DNB* as a sort of establishment roll-call of national pre-eminence is recent'. Matthew praised the 'integrationalist approach of the original edition, in which many minor figures were included',²⁵ together with 'deviants, rebels and dissenters'.²⁶ Though it has now become

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'The New Biography', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume IV* (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), p. 573.

²⁰ Woolf, 'The New Biography', pp. 473–8; Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, ed. by Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 148.

²¹ S. P. Rosenbaum, *Victorian Bloomsbury: The Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 55.

²² Sidney Lee, 'National Biography: A Lecture', *Cornhill Magazine*, 26 (March 1896), p. 273.

²³ Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 119.

²⁴ Leslie Stephen, 'The New Biographical Dictionary', *The Athenaeum*, 2881 (13 January 1883), p. 54.

²⁵ Colin Matthew, 'Introduction', *ODNB*, <http://www.oup.com/oxforddnb/info/prelims/intro/intro2> [accessed 13 May 2010].

²⁶ Colin Matthew, 'The New DNB', *History Today*, 43 (September 1993), p. 11.

commonplace to savour the work as a catalogue of eccentrics and misfits, the developments surrounding the biographical genre that led to such an editorial stance have received less attention.

It was Leslie Stephen who was principally responsible for providing substantial space for lesser-known subjects within the dictionary. In doing so, he united the diverse roles attributed to the 'obscure' in nineteenth-century biography. Firstly, the 'obscure' lives are seen to contain rare creative stimulation for the biographer and imaginative potential for the reader. Secondly, Stephen makes it clear that 'obscure' men and women are not to be recovered and remembered in a systematic project of social revaluation. Instead, they are to be encountered randomly in *DNB*; the editor proposes that a brief contact with, and emotional recognition of, the contribution of hidden lives could in turn sustain the moral vigour of the nation. Finally, Leslie Stephen uses the dictionary to explore a more personal theme of failure, and in turn broadens this preoccupation in order to transform the *DNB* into a celebration of hidden intellectual labour.

THE TWO EDITORIAL APPROACHES OF LESLIE STEPHEN AND SIDNEY LEE

If the dictionary embraces two, often contradictory, visions, it is in great part due to the two distinct contributions of Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee. When George Smith proposed the plan of the dictionary to Leslie Stephen, Stephen had already been working as editor of Smith's *Cornhill Magazine* since 1871. Stephen had established a solid reputation as a man of letters—Noel Annan goes so far as to claim that, after Thomas Arnold, he 'was the second most important man of letters in the late Victorian age'.²⁷ Leslie Stephen was born into the Clapham Sect, a social elite descended from important eighteenth-century Evangelical and Quaker families that included the Wilberforces and the Thorntons, who came to particular prominence through their campaign against the slave trade, and held key positions in the legal, literary, and teaching professions during the nineteenth century. An agnostic who was ordained deacon and priest before resigning his orders, Stephen's works are deeply concerned with ideas of truth, morality, and common sense. Despite harbouring doubts regarding the immensity of the project, he had a love of biography, believed in its artistic potential, and thought 'that there is a good piece of work to be done if I can do it'.²⁸

Leslie Stephen drew many of his ideas on biography from the long tradition of life-writing that privileges the brief portrait and the telling anecdote, to which he added a late nineteenth-century respect for scholarship. He has a natural affinity

²⁷ Noël Annan, 'Editor's Introduction', in *Leslie Stephen: Selected Writings in British Intellectual History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. xi.

²⁸ Leslie Stephen to George Smith, 31 October 1882. Smith, Elder, Papers. NLS, MSS. 23175–6.

with the writings of Aubrey, and with Izaak Walton ('charming little idylls, beautiful to read, but curiously empty of facts'). His assessment of Antony à Wood, whom he describes as 'one of the most thorough and satisfactory of antiquaries', whose 'inestimable collection is charming not only from its good workmanship within its own limits, but also from the delightful growls of disgust' at subjects who did not share his High-Church views might, with some modifications, do well as a description of Stephen's own dictionary entries. 'Of the immortal Boswell', Stephen adds, 'it is happily needless to speak.'²⁹

Stephen compares the pleasure of reading the *DNB* with that of reading the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Though Stephen was expected, to his disgruntlement, to submit to strict scholarly standards with the biographical dictionary, his own delight lies in the unpredictable elements of biography. He claims that 'no man is a real reader until he is sensible of the pleasure of turning over some miscellaneous collection, and lying like a trout in a stream snapping up, with the added charm of unsuspectedness, any of the queer little morsels of oddity or pathos that may drift past him'.³⁰ The passage shows Stephen anticipating many of the later developments in biography that his daughter Virginia Woolf so powerfully embodied, and recalls in particular the opening paragraphs of *A Room of One's Own* in which Woolf, sitting on a riverbank, ponders on her subject and has a thought 'let its line down into the stream', swaying, 'until—you know the little tug—the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line'.³¹ 'Charm' is a recurrent word in Stephen's writings. So is a focus on the small, the part, and the fragment. The reader should, like himself, 'dip' into the entries. As David Amigoni notes, the *DNB* was a contribution to the 'residual desultory and dilettante modes' of late Victorian intellectual life,³² and this was largely the result of Stephen's interventions.

Leslie Stephen was principally responsible for reconfiguring the *DNB* as a homage to mediocre, second-rate, and neglected lives. (The label he gives them constantly changes.) His essays 'Biography' (1893–4) and 'National Biography' (1896) provide important insights into his concept of the *DNB*. In these, he argues that 'the real test of the value of the book is in the adequacy of these timid and third-rate lives', the 'less conspicuous people, about whom it is hard to get information elsewhere'.³³ In Johnsonian terms, he concludes that 'every life . . . has its interest.' He upheld the argument in the later essay, in which he insists that 'it is the second-rate people; the people whose lives have to be reconstructed from obituary notices, or from references in memoirs and collections of letters; . . . or sometimes painfully dug out of collections of manuscripts, and

²⁹ Leslie Stephen, 'Biography', *National Review*, 22 (September 1893–February 1894), pp. 176–7.

³⁰ Leslie Stephen, 'National Biography', *National Review*, 27 (March–August 1896), p. 63.

³¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 8–9.

³² David Amigoni, 'Distinctively Queer Little Morsels: Imagining Distinction, Groups, and Difference in the *DNB* and the *ODNB*', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 10 (Winter 2005), p. 280.

³³ Stephen, 'Biography', p. 172.

who really become generally accessible through the dictionary alone'. For Stephen, 'no one can ramble through this long gallery without storing up a number of vivid images of the lesser luminaries' who are 'full of suggestions to the moderately thoughtful'.³⁴ Such lives have value in scholarly terms, but also for their imaginative potential. Their role, beyond a primary utilitarian function, is to broaden a vision of humanity. They form a recurrent focus of Stephen's commentaries on the *DNB*.

Sidney Lee, who came from a very different background, has attracted far less attention. Unlike Stephen, born into one of the chief intellectual families of Victorian England, Lee was the son of a London merchant. Born Solomon Lazarus Lee in 1859, he was of Jewish descent although he did not later practise the faith, and later changed his name. At Oxford, where he earned a reputation as an exceptional scholar, he specialized in Shakespeare and Elizabethan history. The *NED* co-founder Frederick James Furnivall recommended Lee to Stephen as a possible sub-editor. In his letter of self-presentation to Stephen, Sidney Lee, then aged twenty-three, explained that he had 'studied English history and Literature for many years and I have always endeavoured as far as possible to make my historical work as thorough as possible by going to original authorities and endeavouring to get at the truths through them'.³⁵ Already, Lee was making claims to the kind of rigorous academic study and use of primary sources that were only beginning to take hold in British universities.

Contributors to the *DNB* noted how well suited the editor and sub-editor were. Lee possessed the indispensable scholarly rigour and the patience to scour and correct proofs that Stephen lacked. Beyond editorial practices, however, they were also distinct in their conceptions of biography. Though it is possible to overstate the disparity, it is interesting that whereas Leslie Stephen, anchored within the dominant intellectual group of the period, appealed for the dictionary as a work embracing the obscure, the second-rate, and the eccentric, Sidney Lee, of Jewish descent and belonging to no immediate network of power or influence, would champion the great lives of British history.

In strong contrast to Stephen, Sidney Lee drew inspiration from a classical biographical tradition and embraced Plutarch, Tacitus, Aristotle, and North's sixteenth-century translation of Plutarch. In his own essays and lectures on biography, 'National Biography' (1896), *Principles of Biography* (1911), and *The Perspective of Biography* (1918), Lee reiterated, in language strikingly similar to former exponents of this Great Tradition of biography, that the power of biography lay in its ability to endure. In 1662, Thomas Fuller, author of the *History of the English Worthies* wrote that 'monuments made of wood are subject to be burnt; of glass, to be broken; . . . so that in my apprehension, the safest way to secure

³⁴ Stephen, 'National Biography', pp. 59, 65, 182.

³⁵ Sidney Lee to Leslie Stephen, 15 November 1882. Leslie Stephen: Letters related to *DNB*. Bodleian Library. MS. Don e 121.

memory from oblivion is (next to his own virtues) by committing the same to writing to posterity'.³⁶ Here is Sidney Lee:

Pyramids and mausoleums, statues and columns, however fitting it may be encourage them in the interests of art, all fail to satisfy one or other of conditions of permanence, publicity, and perspicuity. . . . It is to the prosaic, yet more accessible and more adaptable, machinery of biography that a nation must turn if her distinguished sons and daughters are to be accorded rational and efficient monuments.³⁷

To the concern with immortality is brought a strong dose of practicality—the 'accessible', the 'efficient'—which gives the *DNB* project a more contemporary veneer. The implicit affinity between biography and other commemorative constructions that Lee proudly brandishes was precisely what many contemporary critics objected to as a major weakness in the genre. Comments lamenting the 'mausoleum' quality of Victorian life-writing abounded at this time,³⁸ yet for Lee it is an aspect of biography to encourage.

For Lee, 'biography exists to satisfy a natural instinct in man—the commemorative instinct—the universal desire to keep alive the memories of those who by character and exploits have distinguished themselves from the mass of mankind'. Lee describes biography in terms that admirers of contemporary theories of hero-worship would have recognized: the subject's achievements should 'be capable of moving the interest of posterity' and recorded in a manner able 'to outlive the fashion or taste of the hour'.³⁹ Lee's examples include Shakespeare and Wellington. Actions that are 'practically indistinguishable from those of thousands of his fellows'⁴⁰ can claim no place in the work. The idea of the 'serious' and of 'magnitude' appears in complete contrast to Stephen's emphasis on 'charm' and 'queer little morsels'.

It is possible to overstate the extent to which Lee was the more old-fashioned biographer. Though he continued to write bulky, traditional, biographies, including a life of King Edward VII (1925–7), long after Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey had already hastened a biographical revolutions, Lee softened his position regarding hidden lives. In 'The Perspective of Biography' (1918), he notes that 'human action which can be credited with the biographic quality of distinction, varies infinitely in scale' and that 'it is not indeed only the master-spirits,—the Shakespeares and the Miltons, the Drakes and the Nelsons' who ought to be included. Biography can bring 'a goodly sized minority within the

³⁶ Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England* (New York: AMS Press, 1965), I, 2.

³⁷ Lee, 'National Biography', p. 258. See Ian Donaldson, 'National Biography and the Arts of Memory: From Thomas Fuller to Colin Matthew', in *Mapping Lives*, pp. 67–82.

³⁸ Not least Virginia Woolf's own comments on her father's autobiographical writings that became known as the *Mausoleum Book*.

³⁹ Sidney Lee, *Principles of Biography: The Leslie Stephen Lecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), pp. 35–8.

⁴⁰ Lee, 'National Biography', p. 25.

biographic fold'.⁴¹ Nevertheless, this statement holds none of the joyful tone of Stephen's pronouncements on the subject, and forms a very small proportion of Lee's biographical dictums. Neither was Leslie Stephen entirely 'modern' in his approach. Though he criticized the panegyric approach to life-writing, he disapproved of biographical intrusions into private life and sided against J. A. Froude during the furor surrounding Carlyle's biography.⁴² Moreover, though Lee's academic credentials were later attacked by members of the Bibliographical Society in the early twentieth century, at the time of the *DNB*'s inception he possessed a more modern view of scholarship than Stephen, and brought to the enterprise the crucial scholarly apparatus that permitted the *DNB* to survive well into the twentieth century.⁴³

The differences between the two editors help to account for the ways in which the work was both conceived and received. Lee and Stephen used their essays as a form of discussion on editorial policy, partly in order to compensate for their controversial decision to publish the dictionary without a preface. Stephen's essay 'National Biography' is in many ways a direct response to Lee's lecture of the same title, given the same year, 1896. Throughout the essay, Stephen repeatedly, although courteously, distances himself from Lee. He begins by applauding the editor's lecture (perhaps with a touch of competitiveness, as he had by then abandoned that title) before adding that Lee 'left untouched certain considerations which are a necessary complement to his argument'. Again, he asks 'what entitles a man to a place in the dictionary? . . . Mr Lee has given an answer which is, I think, correct in its proper place; but . . . I must point out that there is another.' He concludes by arguing that, though his own vision means that 'the commemorative instinct may not be fully gratified',⁴⁴ the reader may yet benefit from the work in imaginative terms. This public display of disagreement between the two editors is somewhat startling.

Differences in the imagery used by both editors reveal further divergences. Stephen constantly fears that over-scholarly 'dryness' would squeeze out the life of the project. Lee states that biography is akin to 'chemistry', and that the biographer works with a 'magnifying-glass'.⁴⁵ Stephen counters that 'to be reduced to a specimen and put in a museum, is not a very cheering prospect'.⁴⁶ Where Stephen insists on the impossibility of narrating a complete life and

⁴¹ Sidney Lee, *The Perspective of Biography* (English Association, 1918), p. 8.

⁴² Leslie Stephen to Charles Eliot Norton, 24 November 1885, quoted in Maitland, *Life and Letters*, p. 387.

⁴³ This professionalism would be sorely tested in the early twentieth century, when Sidney Lee reinvented himself as a leading Shakespearean scholar and produced a facsimile of the First Folio (1902) that drew acid-tongued criticisms from leading members of the Bibliographical Society, and A. W. Pollard in particular. See Joseph F. Loewenstein, 'Authentic Reproductions: The Material Origins of the New Bibliography', in *Textual Formations and Reformations*, ed. by Laurie E. Maguire and Thomas L. Berger (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), pp. 23–44.

⁴⁴ Stephen, 'National Biography', pp. 51, 57, 65.

⁴⁵ Lee, 'National Biography', p. 261.

⁴⁶ Stephen, 'National Biography', p. 59.

favours the use of suggestive fragments, Lee has faith in biography's ability to present the life as a whole: biography offers the 'completeness which death alone assures'.⁴⁷ The funeral dominates Lee's language. Leslie Stephen's language expresses a belief that biography should bring the dead to life. The biographical sketch should show 'the man in his ordinary dress' and produce the Carlylean feeling 'that a real voice is speaking... and a little island of light, with moving and feeling figures, still standing out amidst the gathering shades of oblivion'. The biographer should put the subject 'at one end of a literary telephone and the reader at the other', and must create 'a speaking likeness'.⁴⁸ For Leslie Stephen, biography was about resuscitating the dead. For Lee, it was about giving them a decent funeral.

Notwithstanding their differing conceptions of what constituted a worthwhile biographical subject, the editors agreed to make their selection of subjects as unbiased and as wide as possible. In the 'Statistical Account' that Lee published in 1900, he claimed that 'the names include all men and women of British or Irish race who have achieved any reasonable measure of distinction in any walk of life' and that 'no sphere of activity has been consciously overlooked'. Indeed, the dictionary acts as a counterpart to the image of Victorian biography as prudish and hero-worshipping by joyfully including criminals and courtesans as well as priests and poets. Lee states that 'great pains have been bestowed on the names of less widely acknowledged importance',⁴⁹ or, as Colin Matthew described them, 'sports people, murderers, journalists, actors and actresses, deviant clergymen, transvestites, fat men, old women'.⁵⁰ Thus, one can read about Dennis O'Kelly (1720?–87), a gamester who owned a racehorse, Eclipse, famous in its day, and a talking parrot who 'whistled the 104 Psalm, and was among parrots what Eclipse was among racehorses'⁵¹ or 'Margaret Catchpole, a real heroine of romance, who stole a horse and rode 70 miles to visit her lover'.⁵²

The editor of the recent *ODNB*, Lawrence Goldman, has usefully highlighted the continuities between the Victorian and twenty-first century dictionaries. However, Goldman's assertion that we should question the *DNB*'s 'status as a distinctive Victorian work' and see it instead as a project that 'subverts many of our stereotypes of the Victorian age' need to be qualified.⁵³ As the preceding chapters have shown, Leslie Stephen was by no means the first Victorian

⁴⁷ Lee, *Principles*, p. 37.

⁴⁸ Stephen, 'Biography', pp. 177, 180, 181.

⁴⁹ Sidney Lee, 'A Statistical Account', *DNB* (1921–2), p. lxvi.

⁵⁰ H. C. G. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 13.

⁵¹ John Andrew Doyle, 'O'Kelly, Dennis', *DNB*, xiv, p. 970.

⁵² Stephen, 'National Biography', p. 64.

⁵³ Lawrence Goldman, 'A Monument to the Victorian Age? Continuity and Discontinuity in the Dictionaries of National Biography, 1882–2004', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 11.1 (2006), p. 112.

biographer to champion 'hidden lives' or question the value of three-volume biographies.

DEBATING INCLUSION

The decision to open up the *DNB* to a wide range of individuals did not resolve the process of selecting suitable subjects. The strategy used to compile names for the dictionary throws valuable light on how hidden lives came to the attention of the editors, and what prompted the inclusion of one 'second-rate' life over another.

A first step was the preservation of existing subjects. An early decision was made to include 'all names that had hitherto been treated in independent works of biography, in general dictionaries, in collections of lives of prominent members of various classes of the community, and in obituary notices in the leading journals and periodicals'.⁵⁴ A glance at these earlier works reveals that an open-minded inclusion policy was not entirely new. Thomas Fuller saw his *History of the Worthies of England* (1662) as a work of moral improvement and chose subjects according to their moral worth. This selection procedure was surprisingly flexible. Fuller was happy to include, for example, 'all such mechanics who in any manual trade have reached a clear note above others in their vocation'. The compilers of the *Biographia Britannica* (1747) made less room for such achievements, but kept the idea of 'such of our countrymen as have been eminent, and by their performances of any kind deserve to be remembered' wide. Again, the intention was to 'prompt men to an imitation of their virtues'.⁵⁵ Such subjects tended to be included for the combination of entertainment and moral instruction they could provide. The motivations that prompted Stephen and Lee to include such men and women were somewhat different. Inclusion of a subject was no longer dictated by piety, but for their scholarly importance, their imaginative value and, as is discussed below, an unarticulated vision of the nation and the relationship between its public and private citizens.

A further step in the process of inclusion was to excavate new subjects. Stephen published alphabetical lists of all the names they intended to include in *The Athenaeum*. Readers were invited to comment on the lists and to propose names they believed worthy of inclusion. Suggestions came flooding in, including the over-enthusiastic list of one specialist who, Stephen complained to Gosse, 'offers me lives of 1,400 hymnwriters alone'.⁵⁶ Others were more successful: Edward Ingress Bell wrote to Stephen with the conviction that 'ALAN DE WALSINGHAM

⁵⁴ Lee, 'Statistical Account', p. lxiii.

⁵⁵ Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England*, 1, 55; *Biographia Britannica*, 1, viii.

⁵⁶ Leslie Stephen to Edmund Gosse, 13 December 1882, Gosse Papers, *Br.L.* BC Gosse correspondence.

the architect of the world-renowned Lanter at Ely Cathedral should find a place in your list'; the architect was duly included, and Bell invited to write the life.⁵⁷ Such transactions display the random element within the final lists of names: subjects who might have been forgotten found a place due to their lucky championing by a specialist or amateur enthusiast. Finding a 'champion' was important: names that found no prospective contributor were dropped. Thus, the thirteenth-century judge Roger de Baalun, the Elizabethan inventor Ralph Babbard, and Robert Bacon, credited as the fifteenth-century discoverer of Iceland, all included in the *Athenaeum* list, were eventually removed. The final list of names was therefore not achieved through 'precision' but through the willingness of individuals to contribute to it.

This process of nomination, an open discussion between private citizens, sought to provide evidence of the democratic nature of the *DNB*. The aimed-for professionalism of the inclusion process coexisted with a less rigorous form of discussion and gentlemen's agreements. As David Amigoni states, the impartiality and openness Stephen (and, later, Lee) sought to flaunt through such strategies was an 'ideological effect generated by the rhetoric of presentational strategies which concealed a dogmatism' that he describes as 'deterministic'.⁵⁸ Certainly, the work was not free from bias. Anyone was free to back certain names for inclusion, but these were more likely to be those of interest to well-educated *Athenaeum* readers: had the lists been published in working-class journals, the results may have been very different.

Furthermore, the work took on the colour, more or less intentionally, of editors' personal tastes. Both Lee and Stephen had a strong sense of the importance of men of letters, supported by most reviewers—the bibliographer (and collector of pornography) Herbert Spencer Ashbee felt that 'every man and every woman who has written a book must be included'.⁵⁹ Poets and writers regularly out-paged eminent scientists and national heroes. Other biases crept in. Stephen, one of the period's famous agnostics, limited the life of Keble to three and a half pages; Lee, less anti-clerical, gave Pusey eight, and admitted in the supplements the lives of St Alban and St Asaph which Stephen had refused on the grounds that the *DNB* was not a dictionary of hagiology. The inclusion process therefore created a large space for subjects whose claims were perhaps not immediately obvious. Yet the appearance of so many obscure lives was determined perhaps less by rigorous selection procedures than a mixture of hazard, deliberation, and personal preference, and the work is coloured by the preoccupations of the time in which it was produced.

⁵⁷ E. Ingress Bell to Leslie Stephen, 10 January 1883. Leslie Stephen, letters related to *DNB*. *Bodleian*, MS Don c 121.

⁵⁸ David Amigoni, 'Life Histories and the Cultural Politics of Historical Knowing: The *Dictionary of National Biography* and the Late Nineteenth-Century Political Field', in *Life and Work History Analyses*, ed. Shirley Dex (London: Sociological Review Monograph, 1991), p. 148.

⁵⁹ H. S. Ashbee, 'A New "Biographia Britannica"', *The Athenaeum*, 2880 (6 January 1883), p. 17.

Given that 'second-rate' subjects could therefore be included for scholarly, ideological, or personal reasons, there was a risk that the dictionary could become a repository of mediocre lives. The desire to bring in thousands of previously neglected subjects while building towards a manageable and scholarly result was one of Stephen's constant preoccupations. The dictionary-maker's role is, for him, involved in bringing 'into some sort of order, alphabetical at least, the chaos of materials which is already so vast and so rapidly accumulating'.⁶⁰

The reviewers' response to such an unprecedented array of second-rate subjects was ambivalent: they almost universally acclaimed their inclusion, but frowned when their coverage seemed disproportionate. Certainly, the presence of subjects whose claims were not immediately apparent was the source of wry comments. Edmund Gosse received the list of potential 'A' subjects, and wrote to Stephen: 'What an array of mediocrities begin with A!'⁶¹ Some reviewers expressed their praise in terms that matched Sidney Lee's. The *Edinburgh Review*, for example, was stimulated by the 'colossal' nature of the late-century biographical and encyclopaedic works, and compared them to 'giants' and 'pyramids'.⁶² Many showed sympathy with Leslie Stephen's aims. Ashbee responded to Stephen's announcement of the project in the *Athenaeum* by urging that 'to these obscurer individuals, of whom special biographies do not exist, or the particulars of whose lives are not easily accessible, special attention must be paid'.⁶³ The publication of the fourth volume was greeted with the statement that the excellence of the work could be seen in its treatment of 'the smaller people', the 'unknown and often uninteresting persons'.⁶⁴ For the reviewer R. C. Christie, they also formed 'the most valuable part of a biographical dictionary'.⁶⁵

Reviewers were alert to the dilemmas raised by the category of 'obscure' subjects. The inclusion of certain obscure names on the ground that a sufficient amount was known about them would increase the element of randomness. The Dissenting minister John Angus was included, a man 'whose sole claim to distinction appears to be the publication of several funeral sermons', though countless, equally worthy, sermon and pamphlet-writers were not. Christie finds in the late seventeenth century a turning point after which began 'an enormous increase in the publication of pamphlets and other ephemeral literature',⁶⁶ and rules of inclusion become more severe. Christie's article points to the fact that no real rules can be established. From a scholarly point of view, this could be

⁶⁰ Stephen, 'Biography', p. 174.

⁶¹ Edmund Gosse to Leslie Stephen, 10 January 1883. Gosse Papers, *Br.L.* BC Gosse Correspondence.

⁶² [Reeve], 'Literature and Language', pp. 328–9.

⁶³ Ashbee, "Biographia Britannica", p. 17.

⁶⁴ [Unsigned review of *DNB*, volume iv], *The Athenaeum*, 3025 (17 October 1885), p. 501.

⁶⁵ [Richard Copley Christie], 'Biographical Dictionaries', *Quarterly Review*, 157 (January 1884), p. 227.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

problematic. From the point of view of gaining a sense of the national landscape, the panorama was fundamentally askew.

A further concern was that of proportionality. A reviewer of the second volume felt that 'here and there, of course, it is possible to find a name treated at greater length than its importance seems to demand'.⁶⁷ Such concerns were related to the possible levelling qualities of a dictionary—anxieties that reached back to the eighteenth century, when the philosophical consequences of alphabetization were considered. In the *DNB*, Daniel Dancer, 'miser' (1716–94), whose 'grandfather and father were both noted in their time as misers' though Daniel himself 'is distinguished from the majority of misers in that, notwithstanding his miserable love of gold, he possessed many praiseworthy qualities',⁶⁸ jostles with the natural philosopher Sir Humphry Davy (1778–1829). King Olaf, called the Black (1177?–1238) can be found close to Patrick O'Kelly, a little-known 'eccentric poet' (1754–1835?).⁶⁹ Stephen and Lee were careful to avoid giving an impression of equal worth by carefully considering the proper number of pages to accord each subject. Since the *DNB*, unlike the new *ODNB*, avoided giving a summarizing paragraph evaluating the subject's evolving reputation, the length of an article was a pointed measure of worth. Where full-length biographies might raise problems of a disproportionate focus on a mediocre life, biographical entries may well have seemed the ideal medium to redress the balance.

If proportionality was sometimes ignored by the editors of the *DNB*, reviewers took it upon themselves to restore it. Indeed, though they repeated in chorus that the obscure lives were the most important aspect of the dictionary, they avoided discussing them in detail in their articles on the *DNB* and focused instead on the 'great' names. A review of the second volume considers at length 'the most important article in the volume': that on Francis Bacon. It is a review of the life of Burke, rather than the 'criminal' William Burke (1792–1829), which occupies much of the review of the seventh and eighth volumes. The movement between drawing attention to the obscure only to return them to oblivion is an important aspect of the work that echoes many full-length biographies of obscure lives. Stephen's extended reflection on this dual movement is central to an understanding of the *DNB*'s obscure lives. After all, it was Stephen himself, who, having reiterated the centrality of obscure lives in his essays, wrote some of the 'greatest' lives—Byron, Carlyle, and Wordsworth among many—for the dictionary. Hierarchies are tested in the work, but not abolished.

⁶⁷ [Untitled review of *DNB* volume II], *The Athenaeum*, 2999 (18 April 1885), p. 497.

⁶⁸ Alsager Vian, 'Dancer, Daniel (1716–1794)', *DNB*, v, 462–3.

⁶⁹ David James O'Donogue, 'O'Kelly, Patrick (1754–1835?)', *DNB*, xiv, 971.

FORGING A GRATEFUL NATION

Despite their qualms, many critics agreed with the *Athenaeum* reviewer who stated that it was in the extensive inclusion of obscure lives that 'the superiority of the work over both the Belgian and the German dictionaries of national biography is marked'.⁷⁰ The *DNB* was one of many enterprises undertaken across Europe in the late nineteenth century that used the dictionary or encyclopaedia as a form of nation-building. The Belgian *Biographie Nationale* was launched in 1866; the German *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* closely followed German unification in the 1870s. The French had published a work of universal biography, *Nouvelle Biographie Universelle*, between 1852 and 1866, but began talks at the end of the century for a work of national dimensions.

The uniqueness of second-rate and hidden lives to the *DNB* must be mitigated. The Belgian *Biographie Nationale* (1866–1938), for example, did address the issue. In contrast to the *DNB*, the Belgian dictionary provided a scrupulously lengthy preface to discuss such editorial decisions. For the editors, obscure lives are of specifically national interest: they can be of no interest to foreign readers, but constitute part of the pride that a citizen may feel for his country.⁷¹ Interestingly, the preface employs the words 'welcoming' ('accueillir') and 'hospitality'⁷² to describe the act of including less eminent individuals into its pages, which suggests the generous impulse of the nation that the dictionary represents and underscores the idea of biography acting as a refuge for the neglected.

This precedent did not prevent numerous reviewers of the *DNB* from responding to it as patriots. By the time the final, sixty-third, volume was published, one *Athenaeum* reviewer boisterously claimed that 'our British lexicographers have had the satisfaction of administering a handsome beating to their most formidable competitors, the Germans'.⁷³ Sidney Lee himself placed the *DNB* project in the context of such rivalries, by declaring it a far more 'earnest endeavour' to satisfy 'the just patriotic instinct' than the attempts in 'Germany, Holland, Belgium, Austria, and Sweden'.⁷⁴ This faintly ridiculous competitiveness makes sense in the context of the rise of a new form of nationalistic feeling in the late nineteenth century.

Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee once again found themselves at odds on the subject of patriotism. Lee's confidence in the superiority of the British project was

⁷⁰ [Unsigned], 'DNB, Vol. iv', *The Athenaeum*, 3025 (17 October 1885), p. 501.

⁷¹ 'De là l'admission dans un livre de cette espèce d'un nombre considerable d'hommes, peut-être dépourvus de valeur pour les étrangers, mais que le souci d'un amour-propre national bien entendu fait une loi d'accueillir,' *Biographie Nationale de Belgique* (Bruxelles, 1866), I, p. x.

⁷² 'Il convenait, en effet, de composer un livre où tous les Belges remarquables, n'importe à quel titre, reçussent l'hospitalité', *Biographie nationale*, I, p. xiii.

⁷³ [Unsigned], 'Dictionary of National Biography', *The Athenaeum*, 3794 (14 July 1900), p. 45.

⁷⁴ Lee, 'Statistical Account', p. lxii.

matched by his confidence in the progress of the British nation. As a dictionary that includes subject's lives alphabetically rather than chronologically, the work itself does not construct a progressive narrative. Yet Lee worked to restore this through his 'Statistical Account', an example of the Whig view of history that saw progress displayed by successive centuries. Lee briefly considers that the superiority of nineteenth-century achievements may be partially explained by a natural tendency to inflate contemporary events. Yet, he pursues, 'by the multiplication of intellectual callings—take engineering and its offshoots, for example—and by the specialisation of science and art, the opportunities of distinction . . . have been of late conspicuously augmented' while educational improvements have 'enlarged the volume of the nation's intellectual capacity'.⁷⁵ A critic in the *Edinburgh Review* agreed that both the *DNB* and the lives it included were 'a striking proof of the advancement of civilisation' that was 'honourably characteristic of the present age'.⁷⁶ Though criminals and misfits are included in the work, they cannot impede the inevitable forwards march of British civilization.

Stephen expressed far more caution regarding both British and nineteenth-century superiority. In the 1870 essay 'National Antipathies', he expressed his opposition to the way in which the language of patriotism was being co-opted by political factions. The article rebuffs contemporary convictions that the English are happier or wiser than others and heaps ridicule on the Englishman's 'keen perception of the notorious inferiority of all other races', as expressed in the assumption that 'an American is, of course, a bad imitation of a Briton'. For Stephen, 'our sympathies and antipathies, as applied to foreign nations, are, for the most part, mere fancies'.⁷⁷ The essay is above all a defence of scepticism in the face of conformity.

Indeed, the *DNB* itself was not elaborated in the starkly patriotic terms with which it was received. George Smith's initial plan had been for a universal rather than a national biography, until the project was scaled down. Manageability, rather than patriotism, was the issue. One of the early names considered for the work was simply 'the new biographical dictionary'. The project was to a certain extent a cosmopolitan one, reflected by the fact that the first and last subjects of the dictionary, Jacques Abbadie and William Henry Zuytlestein, were respectively French and Dutch. The *Athenaeum*, indeed, could not understand why 'complete foreigners, such as De Baan the painter and some of the Dillons, are included',⁷⁸ though others including Christie applauded the dictionary's ability to 'illustrate the cosmopolitan character of our nation'.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the national dimension of the dictionary warrants a slightly longer explanation.

⁷⁵ Lee, 'Statistical Account', pp. lxix–lxx.

⁷⁶ [Reeve], 'Literature and Language of the Age', p. 350.

⁷⁷ Leslie Stephen, 'National Antipathies', *Cornhill Magazine*, 21 (February 1870), p. 156.

⁷⁸ [Unsigned review of *DNB*, vols. xiv–xviii], *The Athenaeum*, 3208 (20 April 1889), p. 500.

⁷⁹ [Christie], '*DNB*, volumes 1–10', p. 367.

Though the idea that nationalism was 'invented' in the nineteenth century has rightly been questioned, what is easier to maintain is that new energy was given to the question of what constituted a nation.⁸⁰ Ernest Renan addressed the issue in his seminal lecture 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation', given in 1882 when the *DNB* was being developed. In this lecture he dismisses race, language, religion, and even geography as the principle components of national identity. He concludes that 'a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle . . . One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.'⁸¹ The nation is defined, to use Benedict Anderson's well-known phrase, as a kind of 'imagined community'. The expression of that community would seem to be ideally found in a biographical dictionary.

The *DNB* was one of many projects that, as John Kijinski writes, 'worked to establish for a wide readership a notion of a shared, organic English culture, one that united all citizens of the nation regardless of class or religion'.⁸² (This 'shared' quality may have been helped by the fact that it was many of the same men who contributed to the different projects such as the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the *English Men of Letters*.) Stephen reflected Renan's language when he described the British Museum as the 'externalized memory of the race',⁸³ which points towards an idea of the nation based less on sharp definitions based on geography or even language than on an assembly of disparate elements of varying cultural resonance.

Though Stephen pioneered the sociological study of literature, it is difficult to glean from the *Dictionary of National Biography* his stance on the relationship between historical context and individual achievement. The format of the biographical entry necessarily detaches the subject from historical context, and reduces the space available for sociological commentary. Instead, the succession of unrelated, non-chronological entries creates a strong impression of the huge importance of individual effort. Stephen himself was attracted to Romantic ideas of self-realization and took upon himself to write many of the lives of Romantic poets and philosophers. The dictionary revived the ancient idea that Britain was 'a nation of individualists'.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ See a survey of the various dates suggested for the 'discovery of patriotism', in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of a British National Identity*, ed. by Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge 1989), pp. lvii–lix.

⁸¹ Ernest Renan, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?', (1882), repr. in *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. by Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 52.

⁸² James G. Kijinski, 'John Morley's "English Men of Letters" Series and the Politics of Reading', *Victorian Studies*, 34 (1991), p. 207.

⁸³ Stephen, 'Biography', p. 174.

⁸⁴ Samuel, *Patriotism*, p. xxvii.

The *DNB* avoided the boisterous patriotism of many of its reviews, but replaced it with a more subtle exaltation of national identity. As Colin Matthew exclaims, in terms even more explicitly patriotic than some nineteenth-century reviewers of the dictionary, the *DNB* 'transcends the ranks of ordinary reference books and epitomises the best characteristics of the British mind by being open, fair, liberal, accurate and quirky'.⁸⁵ In his *DNB* entry on the author Thomas Day, Leslie Stephen similarly states that 'his amusing eccentricities were indeed only the symptom of a real nobility of character, too deeply in earnest to submit to the ordinary compromises of society'.⁸⁶ Whether the British mind was and is all that Matthew and Stephen claim is matter for another book; what is significant is that this was the image that the *DNB* sought to project. Stefan Collini argues that 'pride in the national literature's special talent for expressing a rich diversity of life and feeling... in turn provided an important buttress for those soaring claims about how English individualism and its admirable respect for eccentricity had proved to be particularly favourable soil for the propagation of political liberty'.⁸⁷ The dictionary makes an equivalent reading possible. This openness created a space for lesser-known subjects. When these were included, it is not as groups, such as the 'working-class' or 'women', but as individuals. The undefined, unlimited category of this group of subjects, which Stephen variously refers to as the 'obscure', 'second-rate', 'forgotten', has no precise linguistic, sociological, or epistemological definition.

It nevertheless seems surprising that one who declared in 1870 that 'we ought to be graceful cosmopolites, acknowledging no ties of country, free from all vulgar prejudices' and that 'patriots, as a general rule, seem to me to be a very hotheaded and noxious set of people'⁸⁸ should edit a work of national biography some twelve years later. What Stephen may have understood the *DNB* to represent is worth investigating a little further. Stephen did not reject a national perspective altogether. Though he avoided the patriotic outbursts indulged in by so many reviewers, he was concerned with the role that 'obscure' men and women had in maintaining a healthy society.

THE ROLE OF THE 'OBSCURE'

Leslie Stephen's stance on hidden lives did not initiate with the *DNB* but was the fruit of a long contemplation of their role in society. In his articles, he does not claim for them a straightforward recognition but develops a complex argument

⁸⁵ Matthew, 'The New *DNB*', p. 11.

⁸⁶ Leslie Stephen, 'Day, Thomas (1748–89)', *DNB*, v, 691.

⁸⁷ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 358.

⁸⁸ Stephen, 'National Antipathies', p. 163.

in which the obscure function above all as moral stimulants who can, in fact, return to obscurity once their purpose has been served. Just as the reviewers welcomed the inclusion of second-rate lives before ensuring that the attention they received was in proportion to their apparent importance, so does Stephen repeatedly move between the impetus to remember and forget.

The essay 'Forgotten Benefactors' is essential to understand Stephen's relationship with the 'thousands who have long sunk into oblivion'.⁸⁹ Stephen wrote the essay in part as a memorial to his wife Julia Stephen, who died in 1895, and it was published in his 1896 volume of philosophical and critical essays *Social Rights and Duties: Addresses to Ethical Societies*. It was also a response to the essay 'The Wealth of Nature', published in 1859 by his brother James Fitzjames Stephen, who had pursued an illustrious legal career and gained further renown by writing a rejection of Mill's *On Liberty*. In the biography of his brother that he published during this same period, Leslie Stephen pauses to consider this 'striking' essay, which influenced his own vision of the *DNB*.⁹⁰

James Fitzjames Stephen varies in the appellation he gives to the 'hidden benefactors' of his essay: they are in turn the 'obscure' and the 'unknown' (the former are deemed as having gained slightly more recognition than the latter). The principal thrust of the essay is the extent to which the nation depends for its wealth and health on hidden and unrecognized labour. He writes that it is 'impossible to exaggerate the importance of the social functions discharged by able men whose abilities are superior to the reputation which they earn'. 'Obscure labours' have a crucial part to play for the nation. The patriotic dimension of the essay is important, and James Fitzjames Stephen, a notable patriot, brings to mind Sidney Lee more than his brother in considering 'the aggregate ability of those who, in less than thirty generations, have changed the England of King Alfred into the England of Queen Victoria'.⁹¹ By including lives that reflected those abilities the *DNB* chose to give a rare importance to the idea of the dependence of the nation on unrecognized merit. Here, as in the *DNB*, the inclusion of the obscure may be compared to the inclusion of endless domestic objects within the Great Exhibition of 1851: the apparent cult of the ordinary acts as a testament to the strength, solidarity, and productivity of Great Britain and its empire.

The idea had of course been developed before, and Leslie Stephen saw his brother's essay as a 'sermon upon the text of Gray's reflection in the "Elegy"'.⁹² James Fitzjames Stephen does not dwell on the 'Elegy'—Gray is only invoked, surprisingly, as an example of a man who may have gained more recognition than

⁸⁹ Leslie Stephen, 'Forgotten Benefactors', in *Social Rights and Duties: Addresses to Ethical Societies*, 2 vols. (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1896), II, 15. All further references are to this edition.

⁹⁰ Leslie Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen* (London: Smith, Elder, 1895), p. 170.

⁹¹ James Fitzjames Stephen, 'The Wealth of Nature' (1859), repr. in *Essays by a Barrister* (London: Smith, Elder, 1862), pp. 48–57, 50, 51.

⁹² Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, p. 170.

poets of equal talent—but his influence is once more palpable. Though George Eliot is not named in the essay either, her presence is also invoked through the repeated allusions to ‘unseen influence’ and the ‘obscure effects, which are traceable only in their remote consequences by a careful observer’. (Eliot’s fame had exploded that same year with the publication of *Adam Bede*.) These are all elements that Leslie Stephen would later pick up and develop. There are differences in Leslie Stephen’s essay. He creates a sharper opposition between great lives (the ‘great statesmen, the great churchmen and warriors [who] are commemorated in our official histories’, 15) and humble ones. The ability of hidden lives to stimulate the reader’s imagination is also absent from his brother’s earlier essay. The word ‘benefactors’ also forges a link with Thomas Carlyle, who asked readers to ‘look with reverence into the dark untenanted places of the Past, where, in formless oblivion, our chief benefactors, with all their sedulous endeavors, but not with the fruit of these, lie entombed’.⁹³ Despite these differences, the two essays share a fascination with hidden influences.

An important strand in ‘The Wealth of Nature’ that Leslie Stephen picked up was the argument that the beneficial influence of hidden lives relies to a significant extent upon their continued obscurity. Though homage can be paid to the group of hidden workers as a whole, James Fitzjames Stephen insists that ‘the obscurity of the majority is absolutely necessary to the formation of the atmosphere which is essential to the development of the minority who attain celebrity’. He supports his statement somewhat confusedly. On the one hand, he rejects Carlyle’s emphasis on the importance of creating a ‘whole world of heroes’ by fearing that a nation in which there were no ‘obscure’ would create a dangerous and ‘universal system of mammon-worship’. On the other hand, the maintenance of a balance between greater and lesser men confirms traditional ideas of hero-worship. Stephen concludes his argument with the insistence that, ‘as things stands now . . . no one need be ashamed of his condition in life’.⁹⁴ The advocacy of a state of contended obscurity echoes Samuel Smiles’s biographies of unknown naturalists, whose value rested on their obscurity, and his intense anxiety when one of his subjects made claims for a more permanent kind of fame. James Fitzjames Stephen does not concern himself with the genre of biography. It would appear, however, that a rigid application of his ideas would make the biography of an obscure life impossible to accomplish. Yet if anything, the paradox between remembering the obscure and keeping them in obscurity is even stronger in Leslie Stephen’s work, who talks of doing ‘justice to countless obscure benefactors’ (233), yet also insists that ‘obscurity is a condition, and by no means an altogether unpleasant one, of much of the very best work that is done’. Obscurity, he adds, is a ‘privilege’ (235). Stephen does not directly

⁹³ James Fitzjames Stephen, ‘The Wealth of Nature’, p. 52; Carlyle, ‘On History’, p. 58.

⁹⁴ James Fitzjames Stephen, ‘The Wealth of Nature’, pp. 55, 56, 57.

confront within the essay the consequences of isolating and representing a hidden life in a biography.

The most uncomfortable aspect of Leslie Stephen's promotion of obscurity is that he becomes particularly adamant on the benefits of retaining certain benefactors in obscurity when he addresses the issue of women's roles. It is ironic that, though the essay was meant as a tribute to Julia Stephen, she is a ghostly presence and is never named—she is another hidden influence on mankind and on the author in particular. The ministering duties of womankind, for Stephen, are best carried out in the shade: though the 'faculties of women should be cultivated as fully as possible', he agrees, a woman bringing up 'brave men and women . . . might be doing something really more important than her conspicuous husband' (250–1). Throughout the essay, Stephen draws upon the somewhat hackneyed idea of the corrupting influences of fame, and declares that 'it is unwholesome to live in an atmosphere which constantly stimulates and incites the weaknesses to which we are most liable' (235). Though he does not make it explicit, this distance from public acclaim is obviously deemed more appropriate for some hidden lives than for others. However iconoclastic, Stephen was no radical.

It is possible, however, to make too much of the fact that Stephen used obscurity as an excuse for the confinement of women to private life, although there is certainly a strong element of that. In *Men of Letters, Writing Lives*, Trev Broughton opens up another way of interpreting Stephen's belief in the value of being, and remaining, hidden by exploring the more personal importance of forgetting in Stephen's autobiographical *Mausoleum Book*, in which forgetting 'is an individuating personal trait, an aesthetic trope and an ethics'.⁹⁵ It is a means of avoiding the morbid self-consciousness of which autobiographers were commonly accused, and which would disqualify him as a biographer.⁹⁶ It also showed Stephen a way of balancing 'individualism with social responsibility'.⁹⁷ Indeed, Stephen invites the reader to remember and then forget obscure biographical subjects as part of their moral responsibilities. Leslie Stephen gives several justifications for including obscure subjects in the *DNB*: one is their scholarly interest, another is the amusement they can provide, and yet another is the imaginative leap they can prompt. Of at least equal importance is their moral potential. Stephen described James Fitzjames Stephen's essay as a 'sermon', even though there was little to suggest that in the essay itself. The word in fact reflects the moral emphasis that Leslie Stephen himself brought to the topic.

In 'Forgotten Benefactors', the act of paying tribute to obscure and second-rate lives is deemed a charitable one. The word 'generous' recurs. Stephen asks whether it 'is not true that, in every department of life, it is more congenial to our generous feelings to remember the existence and the importance of those who

⁹⁵ Broughton, *Men of Letters, Writing Lives*, p. 57.

⁹⁶ See Chapter 1.

⁹⁷ Broughton, *Men of Letters, Writing Lives*, p. 57.

have never won a general reputation?' (229). (Interestingly, even Lee picked up the term when he stated in his 'Statistical Account' that 'the principle upon which names have been admitted has been from all points of view generously interpreted'.)⁹⁸ Later in the essay, Stephen insists that 'gratitude to the obscure is . . . I take it, a duty, which we cannot practise without a proportional moral benefit' (266). Such statements reflect Stephen's Clapham Sect heritage. The importance of ministering to the humble and the evangelical duty of paying tribute to the meek are important elements of Stephen's response, even though he confines his reflections to moral rather than religious terms. In this respect, he echoes the famous 'Finale' of *Middlemarch* which pays tribute to those who have 'lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs'.⁹⁹ (Stephen had the occasion to reflect at length on Eliot's work, both in the entry he wrote on her for the *DNB* and in his later 1902 biography of her that he contributed to the 'English Men of Letters' series.) The presence of second-rate lives within the *DNB* also enables Stephen to honour those whose contributions are less visible. This does not, of course, resolve the many difficulties surrounding the selection of obscure subjects: how a hidden life comes to public attention, the extent to which it is representative of other hidden lives, and whether its worth does not rest precisely in being hidden.

Whether the hidden or second-rate lives are those of labourers, women, or men of letters, what binds them is in fact less their status than the feelings that they can incite within the reader. This is partly demonstrated by Stephen's choice of words: he oscillates between using the word 'obscure' and the word 'forgotten' to define this class of subject. 'Obscurity' suggests a condition, whereas 'forgotten' implies that the subject's status is defined by others. It can also suggest either that they were overlooked or that they were once better known before lapsing into obscurity, which again conveys the fluidity of the category of obscure subjects. The word 'forgotten' conveys that the obscure subjects lie within the unconscious of the nation. The choice of 'forgotten' for the title of the essay emphasizes the reader's perspective. It becomes the responsibility of the reader to address these lives, rather than that of the lives to come to the attention of the nation.

When discussing biography in general and the lives of the obscure in particular, Stephen's emphasis is on the contact between the reader and the subject. In an important passage of 'Forgotten Benefactors', he writes:

Instead of ascribing all good achievement to the hero who drops from heaven, or springs spontaneously from the earth, we should steadily remember that he is only possible, and his work can only be successfully secured, by the tacit co-operation of the innumerable

⁹⁸ Lee, 'Statistical Account', p. lxvi.

⁹⁹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 825.

unknown persons in whose hearts his words find an echo because they are already feeling after the same ideal which is in him more completely embodied. (234)

The idea of detachment—of an act from its origin, of a man from his context, of men among themselves—is countered by an insistence upon connection and communication ('secured', 'co-operation', 'echo', 'embodied'). The idea of the responsive heart is thoroughly Carlylean, as indeed is the passage as a whole. The idea of the great man's dependence upon the obscure is transmuted in the *DNB* as the whole nation's dependence upon its silent workers. Stephen presents a very reassuring picture of the act of resurrecting hidden lives, where individuals co-operate rather than struggle. There is no sense that drawing attention to the obscure might destabilize social boundaries, just as there is no conception that in having attention paid to them, the obscure will transcend their condition. The passage reasserts the importance of the 'great man' as much as it celebrates the hidden masses. The focus is heaviest on the responsiveness of those who contemplate this picture. The public is asked once again not to discover, but to remember.

In his essays on biography, Leslie Stephen placed a large stress on the reader's reception of the *DNB* lives. The reader, we are told, must 'supply something for himself, and expand the fragments presented to him 'by the help of his own imagination'.¹⁰⁰ He must complete the portrait by supplying 'the flesh and blood to his [the dictionary-maker's] dry bones'.¹⁰¹ In the common language of resuscitation applied to biography, it is the reader here who brings the dead to life. The biographer's responsibility is to provide the 'concrete fact', the 'significant anecdote' that the reader then builds on. Stephen nevertheless allowed the biographer a more creative role when he notes that the biographer, and dictionary-maker, should 'set the little drama of human life in the right point of view'.¹⁰² The word 'drama' reflects Carlyle's emphasis in *The Life of Sterling*; the combination of an appeal to drama with the importance of the correct perspective recalls Eliot.

Stephen shared with other Victorian biographers a conviction that biography was an essentially harmonizing genre that healed social tensions, and whose moral role went far beyond simple exemplarity by asking readers to connect emotionally with hidden workers who, once they had served their role as stimulants, could safely return to the shadows. On the one hand, the 'obscure' are associated with open-mindedness, nonconformity, eccentricity, and randomness. They warn against the dangers of generalization and point to the value that can be found in the small, the part, the unexpected. On the other hand, this fragmentary

¹⁰⁰ Stephen, 'National Biography', p. 63.

¹⁰¹ Stephen, 'Biography,' p. 172.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* pp. 173, 181.

perspective is repeatedly pulled back to reveal a wider spectrum in which seemingly disjointed lives are bound together in a common national endeavour.

Both James Fitzjames Stephen and Leslie Stephen draw attention to various categories of hidden workers, which is in itself unusual. They include the more obvious categories of labourer and, with Leslie Stephen, of women, or what one might consider to be relatively powerless lives. There is also the category of those whose professions lead to the diffusion of good: James Fitzjames Stephen gives the example of 'the curates of country villages, and the obscure philanthropists'; Leslie Stephen points to Samuel Johnson's commemoration of Dr Levet (236). These can attain to a short-lived 'picturesque and typical glory', and tend to have a local importance.¹⁰³ The members of the third category contribute to the intellectual health of the nation: they are the 'professionals'. These are the lawyers, the architects, the professors and, of most importance for Stephen, the men of letters.

THE HIDDEN WORKERS OF THE *DNB*

Leslie Stephen repeatedly insisted on the importance of including as many authors as possible within the *DNB*, to the extent that it was estimated that anyone who had published at least ten works, whatever their quality, was guaranteed inclusion. By making claims for the value of the mediocre, Stephen was also pursuing a reflection on literary worth. The ever-growing publishing industry raised pressing questions on literary quality and the ability of works to attain immortality in a climate where mediocre and high literature rubbed shoulders. The critic Mark Pattison envisaged an ideal situation in which 'in the literary creations of the ideal world, as in the living organisms of the material world, natural selection has saved us the difficulty of choice . . . In the battle for existence the best survive, the weaker sink below the surface, and are heard of no more.'¹⁰⁴ Men of letters such as Pattison, who had absorbed Darwinian and Malthusian language, took it upon themselves to guide readers through the literary jungle.

Leslie Stephen, one of such men of letters, wavered in his response to the debate. On the one hand, he upheld the value of strict literary standards, with the declaration that 'really the value of second-rate literature is nil'. On the other hand, he engaged in a characteristic dismissal of elitism that opens the door to the tolerance and even encouragement of mediocrity, with the insistence that 'all books are good, that is to say there is scarcely any book that may not serve as a

¹⁰³ James Fitzjames Stephen, 'The Wealth of Nature', p. 50.

¹⁰⁴ Mark Pattison, 'Books and Critics', *Fortnightly Review*, 22 (1877), p. 669.

match to fire our enthusiasm'.¹⁰⁵ The phrase closely mimics his similar justification, based on the kindling of imagination and enthusiasm, for the inclusion of obscure biographical subjects. As editor of the *Cornhill*, he had catered to both tastes. Throughout his works he weighs the obvious merits of Greatness against the more personal pleasure to be experienced from an acquaintance with the 'lesser'. This gave Stephen one of many ways to draw attention to hidden intellectual labour.

Another of these was his selection and management of the dictionary's contributors. When Stephen initially sought to gather contributors, he threw the net wide and gathered a diverse group of writers and researchers, from noted critics and scholars to unknown amateurs. As the project progressed, however, this democratic group was moulded into a more restrained community. A parallel force within the dictionary that is less immediately apparent to twentieth-century readers but which struck contemporary reviewers was the movement through which Stephen brought hidden scholarly talent to light.

The *DNB* contributors, as the mediators between readers and the biographical subjects, played a crucial role in reflecting the nature of the enterprise. Yet what is immediately notable about this group of writers is that they were in the midst of the process of defining themselves. Though the *DNB* archives have been largely destroyed, a bulk of letters from prospective contributors remain. Stephen had sought out many contributors himself; others offered their services. The majority of the correspondents, upon presenting themselves, refer not to their academic qualifications but to their work published in journals or to an area of interest they had happened to follow up. Many loosely defined themselves as 'men of letters'. Thus Thomas Bayne proposes to undertake a number of lives, and adds that 'you may have seen my name in *Fraser*, appended to articles on Modern Poets—Rossetti, Swinburne, &c.'¹⁰⁶ Charles Francis Keary—the nephew of Annie and Eliza Keary—draws attention to his publications in the *Saturday Review*, the *Nineteenth Century*, and other contemporary journals.¹⁰⁷ The qualification of Joseph Knight is that of 'dramatic critic of the *Athenaeum*'.¹⁰⁸ (They all found employment with the dictionary.) Even where contributors worked within a university, this is rarely mentioned. The writers do not identify themselves as academics but principally as writers for the press or independent researchers. These were men of letters who were used to having a more immediate relationship with the wider reading public, and with whom the public, since the gradual abandonment of anonymous articles, had become used to entertaining a

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Noël Annan, *Leslie Stephen: The Godless Victorian* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), p. 186.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Bayne to Leslie Stephen, 25 December 1882. Leslie Stephen, letters related to *DNB*. *Bodleian*. MS Don c 121.

¹⁰⁷ C. F. Keary to Leslie Stephen, 13 November 1882. *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁸ Joseph Knight to Leslie Stephen, 8 January 1883. *Ibid*.

relationship of familiarity. The austere, scholarly remoteness of a work of erudition such as a dictionary was thus softened.

Another category of contributors could claim expertise in an area such as the arts or the navy without clear scholarly credentials. Amateur enthusiasms played an important part in the *DNB*. Thompson Cooper, who wrote over 1,400 lives, worked as a solicitor while cultivating a private passion for biography and antiquarian research. Another large contributor was John Knox Laughton, author of 915 entries, who served as instructor in the Royal Navy and was later invited to lecture on naval history at the new Royal Naval College. Lionel Henry Cust, author of 765 entries on artists, had studied at Cambridge before entering the civil service. He left this employment to pursue his real passion by joining the department of prints and drawings at the British Museum, and later became director of the National Portrait Gallery. George Clement Boase, author of over seven hundred articles, worked as a banker, a ship and insurance broker, a clerk, and managed a business of provision merchants. It was upon his retirement that he threw himself into biographical and antiquarian work.

Indeed, many of the important biographical and antiquarian works of the late century were carried out by what might be termed 'amateurs': Cooper's *Athenae Cantabrigienses* (1858) and Boase's *Bibliotheca Cornubiensis* (1874–82) are among these. The creation of the *New English Dictionary*, later known as the *OED*, of which the first part appeared in 1884, was a similarly monumental enterprise dependent on amateurs. As John Kenyon describes, 'with the exception of Stubbs, all the English historians of the High Victorian era were amateurs, usually resident in or around London, and existing on private incomes or the proceeds of higher journalism'.¹⁰⁹ Appeals for information in the *Athenaeum* provided the idea, however misleading, that anyone could contribute to the dictionary: all that was required was real knowledge and enthusiasm.

This inclusiveness meant that, at first glance, female biographers were able to contribute on the same level as male scholars. In fact, this was far from being the case. Only forty-five of the six hundred and ninety six contributors were women, and most of them were called upon to write the lives of family members or close acquaintances. This relegated women biographers to the more feminine genre of domestic biography; they were further distanced from the realm of professional biography by being invited to contribute for the most part small numbers of lives, unlike many of the male contributors who submitted dozens, and in some cases hundreds, of lives. One of the most prolific female contributors, Elizabeth Lee—sister of the editor—penned at least eighty-one lives but, as Gillian Fenwick has convincingly shown, may well have contributed many more articles under her brother's name. In her valuable study *Women and the Dictionary of National Biography* (1994), Fenwick depicts the offices of the *DNB* as a club-like

¹⁰⁹ John Kenyon, *The History Men* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), p. 100.

domain in which women were unlikely to prove welcome. As Broughton adds, 'the public face of the *DNB*—the face presented at public events and in the press—was overwhelmingly masculine, upper-middle-class, university-educated and steeped in the higher journalism of the day'.¹¹⁰ In fact, in the image of Stephen himself.

The *DNB* lay at the centre of a turning point between amateurism and professionalism. The project developed alongside a number of other historical enterprises that sought to organize the historical archives of the nation and promote scholarly research, such as the cataloguing of Government records (1862), the cataloguing of manuscripts in private collections (1869), and the cataloguing of the British Museum collections. Stephen's concern with 'the chaos of materials which is already so vast and so rapidly accumulating'¹¹¹ was widely shared, and old-fashioned means of researching and writing no longer seemed viable in the face of multiplying archives. T. F. Tout, as a professor at the University of Manchester and *DNB* contributor, could be counted among the professionals, yet he admitted that 'like many Oxford men of my generation I approached historical investigation without the least training or guidance in historical method' and that Stephen's guidelines and advice 'constituted for many of us our first training in anything like original investigation'.¹¹²

The first few months of gathering contributors were certainly somewhat chaotic. Gradually, however, the editors worked towards tightening the reins of the enterprise and presenting the reader with reliable and professional guides to the lives included in the dictionary rather than a heterogeneous group of amateurs and private enthusiasts. Alexander Balloch Grosart, who was found to have plagiarized existing biographical entries, was rapidly excluded from the project. Stephen lost patience with E. A. Freeman's insistence upon maintaining the original spelling of Anglo-Saxon names and became more severe with contributors of unrestrained prolixity.¹¹³ More significantly, Stephen became increasingly keen to reduce the number of contributors and to rely on a trustworthy group of writers. He writes to Gosse in 1885 that 'I am trying for many reasons to form a regular staff upon whom I can depend for this kind of work and have had to throw overboard a whole batch of contributors lately. It is very inconvenient to have a large list.'¹¹⁴ It was eventually determined that William Hunt and Thomas Finlayson Henderson, for example, would receive a regular salary for their contributions. What is significant is that, from a project of national

¹¹⁰ Broughton, *Men of Letters, Writing Lives*, p. 31.

¹¹¹ Stephen, 'Biography', p. 174.

¹¹² Quoted in Annan, *Leslie Stephen: The Godless Victorian*, p. 86.

¹¹³ See Leslie Stephen to Austin Dobson, 10 May 1886, on denying Charles Kent an article on such grounds. Austin Dobson Papers, *Senate House, London*. Letters. MS 810.

¹¹⁴ Leslie Stephen to Edmund Gosse, 31 March 1885. Gosse Papers. *Br.L.* BC Gosse correspondence.

commemoration to which almost anyone, it seemed, could contribute, there emerged a narrower group who took control.

The important presence of a third group of contributors reinforces the sense that the *DNB* fostered clubbishness. Almost inevitably, given Leslie Stephen's background, was the involvement of many members of the Clapham Sect, whose concerns in the mid to late-nineteenth century included a wide range of social reforms, from university reforms to the extension of women's education. Many of the Sect's members, but also their friends and sympathizers, participated in the *DNB* as contributors and wrote lives of their own families. For this group of intellectuals, biography was a powerful tool, which confirmed the importance of the subject's contribution to the nation, and the biographer's loyalty to the group and desire to perpetuate its vision. The contributions of many of these subjects certainly did merit a place in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The huge presence of these lives, however, and that of its members as contributors of the articles, confirmed their intellectual pre-eminence, at a time when changes in the universities and professions meant that their pre-eminence would begin to be tested.

The presence of the Sect within the *DNB* mirrored the tension between inclusion and exclusion that pervaded discussions of who to include as subjects in the dictionary. Collini's study *Public Moralists* paints a picture of the mid to late-Victorian intelligentsia who were members of, or had affinities with, the Clapham Sect. He considers that 'professions, like clubs, are about excluding people'.¹¹⁵ The sense of belonging to an intimate network was actively fostered. Many dinners, principally organized by George Smith, were given for contributors, during which, in between 'poulard braisé à l'estragon' and 'soufflés de merlan au vin blanc', speeches of mutual congratulation and encouragement were made.¹¹⁶ The *Athenaeum*-based exchanges bear some distant resemblance to the discussions of the gentlemen's clubs of the eighteenth century, and indeed many of the *Athenaeum*-reading contributors belonged to the gentleman's club of the same name. Letters from one Francis Espinasse, author of *Lancashire Worthies* (1874) and biographies of Voltaire and Ernest Renan, touchingly show one man trying hard to enter the circle. He writes to his friend the Reverend J. Norwood, who knew Leslie Stephen, as 'the only friend of his with whom I have the pleasure of being acquainted';¹¹⁷ when he came to write to Stephen himself, his tone is self-effacing yet eager ('I supposed that you would be besieged by applicants like myself' and 'wished to be near the door sometime before it opened').¹¹⁸ In the event, he was given seventy-one lives to write.

¹¹⁵ Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 237.

¹¹⁶ *DNB: Circulars, Menus of Complimentary Dinners in Connection with the Undertaking* (1888–94).

¹¹⁷ Francis Espinasse to Reverend J. Norwood, 10 November 1882. Leslie Stephen, letters related to *DNB*. *Bodleian*. MS Don e 121.

¹¹⁸ Francis Espinasse to Leslie Stephen, 14 November 1882. *Ibid*.

The network was thus not watertight. Yet the important presence of contributors from a similar background has several implications. That these figures dominated the dictionary helps to explain the distinct privileging of 'intellectual' pursuits over, say, business and entrepreneurial activities in the work. Another consequence is that, as Cockshut notes, 'for those who died after about 1850 there is a more intimate note... Everyone knows everyone else; a hint of particular foibles may serve better than a statement. After all, the candidate will one day be a candidate for discussion in a later supplement.'¹¹⁹ Importantly, it also enabled Leslie Stephen to promote a form of intellectual labour and perpetuate the notion of a group of intellectuals working for the nation.

Literary work is seen less as a personal than a communal concern. Paying tribute to hidden or second-rate men of letters therefore recognizes their labour in an uncommonly concrete manner, something that no doubt gained importance in Stephen's eyes at a time when the figure of the old-fashioned man of letters was under threat. (Stephen was particularly proud of the fact that the *DNB* was above all the project of one man—George Smith—rather than a governmental enterprise.) There is something of this in his efforts to bring recognition to the increasingly dedicated group of contributors who worked for him on the *DNB*, most of whom were scholars or amateurs with possibly local but certainly not widespread national acclaim.

An unusual feature of the dictionary is the variance of style between entries. The *DNB* regularly departed from the neutral style expected of a scholarly reference work, and thus gave a greater visibility and recognition to the scholars who might otherwise have laboured in obscurity. Unsurprisingly, it was Stephen who favoured such an approach, while Lee, when he took over the reigns of the work, encouraged a greater harmonization and standardization of styles and form. Stephen had discussed with George Smith how much liberty to leave his contributors. Having considered the question of uniformity of referencing, quoting and spelling, he wrote that 'I think myself that in this matter certainly and perhaps in others, it is a mistake to have rules too rigid. I would leave it to contributors to exercise a considerable discretion in such matters. However this is open to discussion.'¹²⁰ One reviewer in the *Academy* objected, as Lee would, to what he felt was a neglect of scholarly standards, and found that 'strange to say, Mr Stephen apparently leaves his contributors to do as they please. Some give even the fugitive sermons of obscure clergymen ("J. D. Burns"); others give selections. Some give lists without dates; others, again, give lists and dates of successive editors of books absolutely without importance.'¹²¹

¹¹⁹ A. O. J. Cockshut, 'The Century of the *DNB*', *TLS* (26 April 1985), p. 466.

¹²⁰ Leslie Stephen to George Smith, 21 September 1884. Smith, Elder Papers. NLS. MSS. 23175-6.

¹²¹ [Unsigned], 'The Dictionary of National Biography. Edited by Leslie Stephen. Vol. vii', *The Academy*, 743 (31 July 1886), p. 65.

Stephen's editorial decision, characteristically, created a larger space for entertainment and human particularity in the dictionary. His own entries are full of examples of his characteristically dry wit. Stephen characterizes Robert Owen as 'one of those intolerable bores who are the salt of the earth',¹²² William Godwin as a 'venerable horseleech',¹²³ and it is declared that 'criticism of Burns is only permitted to Scotchmen of pure blood'.¹²⁴ The *Athenaeum* commented that 'wit and epigram are not specially suited to the pages of a book of reference; but occasionally Mr. Stephen allows himself to lighten his task by one of his keen touches'.¹²⁵ Such phrases played havoc with the sober, detached, and concise tone expected of a dictionary. They also established a warmer relationship with the reader.

Beyond this, the privileging of individual voice over scholarly standardization shows a resistance to consider the *Dictionary* as a whole, and a desire to break it down instead into parts. Stephen's decision calls attention to the individual voices speaking beneath an apparently uniform discourse. Stefan Collini notes the general movement away from 'men of letters' to professional writers and scholars in the late nineteenth century that critics frequently seemed to resist the disappearance of the 'still recognizable figure of the gentleman of letters' and the 'unworldly remoteness' that seemed to belong to the new generation of specialists.¹²⁶ Stephen displayed a comparable anxiety. Collini's analysis once again draws attention to the tension between hidden and visible labour. The two figures of the 'man of letters' and the 'scholar' can be recognized in the two personalities of Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee. Stephen's approach to style within the dictionary reveals his ambivalence towards the disappearance of the traditional man of letters.

Yet Stephen was uncertain concerning the extent to which the scholars should act as authoritative guides for the subjects they were commemorating. Although he encouraged contributors to assume an 'individual' style, he wrote that the dictionary-maker and contributor 'must restrain his rhetoric and sentiment and philosophical reflection within the narrowest bounds . . . The dictionary-maker can at most give a brief indication of the opinions held by good authorities and a reference to the books where they are discussed; and, possibly, may intimate summarily his own conclusions.' The statement sits uneasily with a later comment, made in the same essay, that the writer should 'appear to be simply relating a plain narrative, when he is really dictating the verdict'. The balance of power between biographer and reader constantly shifts, as does what the reader can and cannot expect from the dictionary. Though Stephen strongly believed in the

¹²² Leslie Stephen, 'Owen, Robert (1771–1858)', *DNB*, xiv, 1345.

¹²³ Leslie Stephen, 'Godwin, William, the elder (1756–1836)', *DNB*, viii, 67.

¹²⁴ Leslie Stephen, 'Burns, Robert (1759–96)', *DNB*, iii, 436.

¹²⁵ [Untitled], *The Athenaeum*, 3077 (16 October 1886), p. 493.

¹²⁶ Collini, *Public Moralists*, pp. 204–5.

reader's imaginative contribution to the biographical sketch, he also gave to the biographer the power to direct the reader's mind: 'he may put the narrative so that the comment or criticism is tacitly insinuated into the mind of his reader'. Stephen depicts a teasing relationship between biographer and reader: 'The reader should ask for more and should not get it'; the biographer must proceed 'sternly'.¹²⁷ What remains constant throughout these modulated statements is the importance that there *exist* a relationship between biographer and reader within the dictionary. The reader is not given (or not allowed to think that he or she has) an unmediated access to the biographical subject. The biographer affects discretion while subtly reminding the reader of his presence through style and judgement. Once again, the visibility of the biographer is key.

Reviewers remarked upon the surprising visibility of the dictionary's contributor. They enjoyed the emergence of a dominating, cohesive group of contributors as guides to the dictionary's many subjects. Gradually, reviewers picked up on the recurring names and identified contributors with particular groups of subjects. A review of the seventh and eighth volumes concludes with the comment that

the subjects requiring special or technical knowledge are for the most part in the same hands as in the earlier volumes. Mr. Joseph Knight has several valuable volumes . . . Mr. A. H. Bullen has several opportunities of showing his acquaintance with byways of English literature . . . Prof. Laughton continues to supply the lives of sailors, and is gradually overcoming a tendency to regard every naval officer as a personage of profound importance.¹²⁸

The tone shows that the specialists were not so to begin with, but had become so through their experience with the *DNB* and the 'opportunities' of demonstrating expertise. The gently teasing reference to Laughton reveals the reviewers' pleasant familiarity with these contributors, and conveys the sense that the project was coming into its own. By the eleventh volume, a reviewer could state that 'the articles requiring special or technical knowledge are, for the most part, written by the group of specialists who are by this time well known to Mr. Stephen's readers'.¹²⁹ The tone becomes even warmer for the fourteenth to the eighteenth volumes, where it is noted that 'Mr. Leslie Stephen's staff adheres to him with almost touching fidelity'.¹³⁰ The phrase is interesting as the emotion the reviewer detects cannot be sensed in the succession of entries, but is projected on to the dictionary by readers responding to an impression of intimacy. The reviewers express a hunger for guidance amidst the mass of information being presented to them. The eagerness to stress the authorship of individual articles and to differentiate between styles shows a desire on the reviewers' part as well as Leslie Stephen to create, perhaps even artificially, a more cosy and familiar relationship

¹²⁷ Stephen, 'Biography', pp. 172, 173, 181.

¹²⁸ [Unsigned review of *DNB*, vols. VII–VIII], *The Athenaeum*, 3077 (16 October 1886), p. 494.

¹²⁹ [Unsigned review of *DNB*, vols. XI–XIII], *The Athenaeum*, 3146 (11 February 1888), p. 173.

¹³⁰ [Unsigned review of *DNB*, vols. XIV–XVIII], *The Athenaeum*, 3208 (20 April 1889), p. 500.

with the commemorative project. It reinforces the need for a mediator between the biographical subject and the wider public.

Stephen's letters and essays reveal that he contemplated literary work and his own impressive editorial efforts as a form of work that bore some resemblance to more manual labour. Both Sidney Lee and Leslie Stephen saw the *DNB* as a factory-like enterprise, and use the imagery of machinery to describe it. For Lee, the comparison was a flattering one; for Stephen, it was potentially alienating. Considering the advantages of biography as a form of commemoration against those of poetic memorials, Lee praised the former as a 'prosaic, yet more accessible and more adaptable, machinery' capable of admitting 'with unerring precision, everyone who has excited the nation's commemorative instincts'; the end product would be kept in the 'well-planned storehouse of national biography'.¹³¹ The enterprise is to be productive and efficient.

Whereas Lee conveys the image of a successful Victorian industrialist, Stephen's language situates himself amidst the harassed factory workers: 'to write a life is to collect the particular heap of rubbish in which his material is contained, to sift the relevant from the superincumbent mass, and then try to smelt it and cast it into its natural mould'.¹³² For the older editor, the idea of the machine, with its overtones of dehumanization, was a source of anxiety rather than pride. The image recurs in his letters, as 'the infernal Dictionary must be kept going'.¹³³ By 1887, he felt that he had 'been dragged into the damnable thing by fate like a careless workman passing moving machinery'.¹³⁴ Cultural critics at this time frequently alluded to machinery imagery to convey the expanse of knowledge and the quasi-impossibility of controlling it. The comparison of manual and intellectual labour signals Stephen's attempts to gain recognition for literary and editorial work in a way that make them equally essential contributions to the national landscape. Stephen also described intellectual work as a physically intensive form of labour, which in turns casts on it a quasi-heroic veneer that recalls Carlyle's 'hero as man of letters'. The *DNB* is presented in 'National Biography' as a gift to those who would 'otherwise feel that they were hewing their way through a hopelessly intricate jungle'.¹³⁵

Stephen repeatedly returned to the image of Carlyle's own heroic literary labours to depict his own. Although Stephen distanced himself from some of Carlyle's more excessive ideas, he admired him, wrote his *DNB* entry, and used Carlyle's image of a voice 'speaking out of "the dark and backward and abysm" of the past' to describe his ambitions for the dictionary.¹³⁶ Stephen was particularly

¹³¹ Lee, 'National Biography', pp. 259–60.

¹³² Stephen, 'Biography', p. 174.

¹³³ Leslie Stephen to G. Croom Robertson, 5 August 1883, quoted in Maitland, *Life and Letters*, pp. 378–9.

¹³⁴ Leslie Stephen to Edmund Gosse, 24 October 1887. Gosse Papers, *Br.L.* BC Gosse Correspondence.

¹³⁵ Stephen, 'National Biography', p. 55.

¹³⁶ Stephen, 'Biography', p. 177.

intrigued by Carlyle's depiction of the pedantic historian Dryasdust in the opening pages of *Cromwell* (1845), where documents are described as a 'scattered waste', a 'shoreless chaos' of records, 'unedited, unsorted, not so much indexed' and history is a 'labyrinth', 'dull', and 'dismal', that 'must grow ever darker'.¹³⁷ Stephen picked up this language in 'National Biography', where the 'growth of a great library' is depicted as a 'hopeless labyrinth', and in 'Biography', in which he notes that the dictionary-maker 'stands in awe of Dryasdust' and is 'a toiler among those gigantic piles of "shot rubbish" of which Carlyle complained so bitterly when he too was a slave of Dryasdust'.¹³⁸ On 5 April 1885, he wrote to John Morley: 'I could often howl like Carlyle over Dryasdust, and perhaps I should, if I could howl as loudly, and if I had not misgivings that work of this kind is the best that I am fit for'.¹³⁹ This characteristic self-dramatization suggests that Stephen was simultaneously aggrandizing his heroic labours and harbouring a slight suspicion that his dictionary work brought him rather close to the Dryasdust type himself.

Indeed, in Stephen's later essays, Dryasdust is progressively rehabilitated. In *Some Early Impressions* (1903), Stephen conceded that 'Dryasdust, by preserving records mainly because they were antiquated, has provided materials from which the modern historian undertakes to reconstruct a picture of the past and to lay the foundations of social science'.¹⁴⁰ In 1900 Stephen published an article entitled 'Dryasdust' in response to proposals that the British Museum preserve all provincial newspapers. Stephen begins by railing once more against excessive historical preservation ('would the world be the worse if the *Eatonswill Gazette* passed once for all out of existence?') before admitting 'the case for universal preservation'. The article shifts, however, from the discussion of the cause for preservation to the importance of those carrying out the preservation. The articles become yet another celebration of hidden intellectual labour: 'the index-maker, though he deserves the hearty blessing of all readers, represents the lowest stage of a whole class of work daily becoming more important. . . . The need for such work steadily increases.'¹⁴¹

Throughout the Victorian period, projects such as the *OED* and the *DNB* drew more attention to the labours of its contributors. Stephen's movement between self-deprecation and self-aggrandizement when discussing such work recalls Robert Browning's 'A Grammarian's Funeral' (1855), in which the poet cannot resist poking gentle fun at the unworthiness of the cause to which the obscure grammarian devoted his life ('He settled *Hoti's* business—let it be!—

¹³⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, 4 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1851), I, 2.

¹³⁸ Stephen, 'National Biography', p. 55; 'Biography', p. 174.

¹³⁹ Leslie Stephen to John Morley, 5 April 1885, in Gillian Fenwick, *Leslie Stephen's Life in Letters: A Bibliographical Study* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), p. 387.

¹⁴⁰ Leslie Stephen, *Some Early Impressions* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), p. 156.

¹⁴¹ Leslie Stephen, 'Dryasdust', *Speaker* (23 June 1900), pp. 331–2.

Properly based *Oun*—Gave us the doctrine of the enclitic *De'*) but retains respect for the dedication of the academic's endeavour.¹⁴² The praise of those carrying out the more unglamorous aspects of literary work also echoes contemporary developments in bibliographical studies. In 1875, Edward Arber, who printed a five-volume *Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640*, declared: 'The time is now come when the English Printer and the English Publisher must take their due places in the national estimation. Hitherto the Author has had it all his own way.'¹⁴³ Although the backroom workers of literature never displaced the 'Author' from the limelight, Stephen's request that the public may grant a momentary grateful tribute to the labour of literary men can be usefully seen in this context.

The recognition of hidden literary labours takes on a more personal aspect in the context of Stephen's personal 'aesthetic of failure'. Stephen was notoriously self-deprecating, and his first letters to George Smith on the subject of the *DNB* are full of self-doubt. Having witnessed the decreasing sales of the *Cornhill* under his editorship, he wrote: 'I am rather depressed about my work. I have done my best, but it does not seem as if I made much impression upon any one . . . it gives me qualms in regard to the biography.' It is worth bearing in mind Leslie Stephen's legendary self-dramatizations. When he depicted himself as a mediocrity, or footnote 'of the history of English thought in the nineteenth century'—which he often did—it was with a mixture of stark self-awareness and self-pity.¹⁴⁴ Broughton's penetrating analysis of Stephen's self-presentation in his auto/biographical *Mausoleum Book* (1895) as a 'form of competitive self-assertion the more persuasive for being couched in self-abasement'¹⁴⁵ seems appropriate to describe his strategies surrounding the *DNB* to both diminish and bring to light intellectual endeavours.

In 'Forgotten Benefactors', Stephen demonstrates that the importance he attaches to hidden lives stems in part from autobiographical impulses. Halfway through the essay, he introduces a personal note when he states that the difficulty of judging merit 'presses upon us the more we grow older. It is natural for a man who feels that he has done most of his work, that the night is coming . . . to take stock of his own performances . . . What, he may ask, has he done with his talents? what little fragment has he achieved of what might once have been in his power?'¹⁴⁶ The language of the passage wavers between the autobiographical and that of the philosopher tackling broad truths; the 'we' encompasses both humanity at large and the self. Only the year before, in the *Mausoleum Book*,

¹⁴² Robert Browning, 'A Grammarian's Funeral', in *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, ed. by Ian Jack and Robert Inglesfield (Oxford: Clarendon Press), v, 461.

¹⁴³ Edward Arber, *Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640*, 5 vols. (London: privately printed, 1875), 1, p. xiii.

¹⁴⁴ Leslie Stephen to George Smith, 31 October 1882. Smith, Elder Papers. NLS. MSS 23175–6. See Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 73.

¹⁴⁵ Broughton, *Men of Letters*, p. 61.

¹⁴⁶ Stephen, 'Forgotten Benefactors', pp. 238–9.

Stephen had written: 'Had I—as I often reflect—no pretext for calling myself a failure, had I succeeded in my most ambitious dreams and surpassed all my contemporaries in my own line, what should I have done? . . . Even the best thinkers become obsolete in a brief time.'¹⁴⁷ Yet the following year, he willed his own oblivion in the essay 'National Biography' in which he states that 'if I thought that my posthumous wishes would be respected, I should beg to be omitted from the supplement' of the dictionary.¹⁴⁸ These movements display the profound ambivalence of Stephen's stance on hidden lives. On the one hand, he repeatedly seeks to draw public attention to them, while on the other he wishes to confine them to restful obscurity. This remains the case even when the life he is seeking to 'hide' is his own. When Stephen insists that 'we habitually underestimate the enormous value of the services, whether of man or woman, done in the shade, and confined within a very limited area',¹⁴⁹ he is thinking of Julia Stephen but also of his own labours and that of his fellow-workers.

In 1750, Samuel Johnson, who like Stephen had devoted much of his life to compiling a colossal dictionary, made the case that biographers could take up new subjects—the obscure, the neglected, the failures, the mediocre—by drawing attention to the example of 'the scholar who passed his life among his books'. The largest biographical project of the Victorian period is to a significant extent organized around the same impulse. The *DNB* draws together the many threads of biographical representations of hidden lives that had unravelled in the intervening years. The work demonstrates the artistic power and creative potential lying within lives that do conform to traditional ideas of 'greatness'. It expresses the belief that the vigour of the nation relied extensively on the contributions of hidden lives and on the diffusion of hidden influences. In order to remain beneficial, these lives needed to remain at least partly hidden, yet society as a whole could be invigorated by paying them a momentary tribute. Obscurity could therefore be an opportunity, rather than a restriction, for the biographer, the subject, and the reader. The biographer, surrounded by the more illustrious genres of the novel, poetry, and even history, needed to reassert his own artistic and cultural importance. Finally, it provided a means for men of letters to explore their own obsession with failure and mediocrity at a time when the development of a new reading public and profound transformations in the literary professions threatened an old-fashioned species.

¹⁴⁷ Stephen, *Mausoleum Book*, ed. by Alan Bell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 95.

¹⁴⁸ Stephen, 'National Biography', p. 59.

¹⁴⁹ Stephen, 'Forgotten Benefactors', p. 251.

Conclusion: 'The Lives of the Obscure' and Virginia Woolf

It is appropriate to conclude with Virginia Woolf. Woolf gave such sustained attention to 'obscure lives' and associated them with new departures in biographical writing to the extent that earlier attempts to consider such lives have been overshadowed. 'Obscure lives' manifest themselves throughout her works. In her essay 'The Lives of the Obscure', published in three different versions between 1924 and 1925, a librarian retrieves for the narrator some volumes from a dusty Victorian library in which rows of biographies lie forgotten.¹ The 'obscure' also feature in short stories such as 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' (1906), in her mock-biographies *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933), and in her novels.

Surprisingly few of Woolf's contemporary biographers shared her fascination with hidden lives. Those who did were usually less interested than the Victorians in commemorating individuals who had recently passed away (with the important exception of A. J. A. Symons's quest-biography *The Quest for Corvo*, published in 1934). Instead, they began to pay unprecedented attention to the hidden lives of the past in works such as Eileen Powers's historical narrative *Medieval People* (1924), Geoffrey Scott's *The Life of Zélide* (1925), and Lytton Strachey's collective biography *Portraits in Miniature* (1931). Despite the early twentieth-century determination to challenge Victorian hero-worship, the 'new biographers' were by and large too preoccupied with dismantling old icons to set about immediately raising new ones. Woolf, however, places hidden lives at the heart of her reflections on biography.

Alison Booth writes that 'Woolf participated in a modern revision of biography, altering the public, adultory emphasis of Victorian three-volume "lives".'² While there is much to support this traditional reading of Woolf seeking to break from the customs of her predecessors, it is also apparent that Woolf absorbed many of the preoccupations of her forebears, and in particular those of her father, Leslie Stephen. As Laura Marcus notes, 'the links between Stephen's and Virginia Woolf's essays on biography and memoirs, particularly her "Lives of the

¹ Virginia Woolf, 'The Lives of the Obscure', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume IV* (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), pp. 118–45. All further references are to this edition.

² Booth, *Greatness Engendered*, p. 109.

Obscure", are striking... especially, given the common perception that Woolf wholly rejected her father's biographical methods'.³ Marcus's important insight can be extended to reveal that not only did Woolf often share her father's conception of biography, but that she also has much in common with the diverse range of Victorian biographers who had tackled hidden lives before him. As this conclusion argues, Woolf did not create a new biographical trend but instead recast a pre-existing one.

Virginia Woolf appreciated the possibilities offered by the choice of a 'hidden' subject. In 'The Lives of the Obscure' forgotten or unknown men and women are presented as the raw material from which art is made. Their evanescent quality stimulates poetic reveries: 'Gently, beautifully, like the clouds of a balmy evening, obscurity once more traverses the sky, an obscurity which is not empty but thick with the star dust of innumerable lives' (120). Like many Victorian biographers, including Leslie Stephen, Woolf constructed obscurity as a space of artistic potential. In 'The Art of Biography' she declared that 'the novelist is free; the biographer is tied'.⁴ Obscure lives disrupt this rule and are associated precisely with freedom. In *Orlando*, the eponymous hero(ine) is enraptured by the consequences of obscurity: 'the pith of his phrases was that while fame impedes and constricts, obscurity wraps about a man like a mist; obscurity is dark, ample, and free; obscurity lets the mind take its way unimpeded... He may seek the truth and speak it; he alone is free; he alone is truthful; he alone is at peace.' Obscurity enables the barriers of space and time to be transcended. It leads Orlando to reflect on the 'obscure generations', 'obscure noblemen' and 'forgotten builders' who have built his house. The house has endured and perpetuated life, with its inhabitants 'working together with their spades and their needles, their love-making and their child-bearing'.⁵ Obscurity conjures images of fertility and productivity. Again, in the essay 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' (1927), the narrator wanders into a second-hand bookshop, and expresses 'a hope, as we reach down some greyish-white book from an upper shelf, directed by its air of shabbiness and desertion, of meeting here with a man who set out on horseback over a hundred years ago... an unknown traveller', or of making 'other such sudden capricious friendships with the unknown and the vanished'.⁶ The passage recalls the example Leslie Stephen gives from the *DNB* of an 'obscure' life: 'Margaret Catchpole, a real heroine of romance, who stole a horse and rode 70 miles to visit her lover'.⁷ For both Stephen and Woolf, such

³ Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 98.

⁴ Woolf, 'The Art of Biography', p. 145.

⁵ Woolf, *Orlando*, pp. 100, 102.

⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume IV*, p. 487.

⁷ Stephen, 'National Biography', p. 64.

encounters were powerfully suggestive, and the 'delight and wonder'⁸ they produced benefited primarily the person experiencing them.⁹

Despite her fascination with hidden lives, Woolf displayed uncertainties regarding their literary and social value. Most nineteenth-century biographers removed possible doubts about the worth of their subjects by appealing to the highest authorities (usually Carlyle, but also Johnson, Eliot, and Ruskin) and enthusiastically building a case for the quiet significance of everyday lives. Leslie Stephen, however, struggled with the idea of mediocrity in a manner that anticipates the qualms of his daughter. In her essays, Woolf often questions the merit of saving the mediocre for posterity, as in her review of E. V. Lucas's biography of Anna Seward, in which she asks 'why should Miss Seward need a biography?'¹⁰ In 'The Eccentrics' (1919), she enjoys the fancifulness of a subject such as Lady Hester who 'kept her white horse perpetually in readiness for the Messiah in her stable'. However, she cannot avoid questioning the deeper value of such charming but seemingly superficial tales: 'What whim is it that bids us go seeking them round the corners and just beneath the horizon of so many good books devoted to good men? Surely the world has been right in conferring biographies where biographies are due?'¹¹ Like the reviewers of the *DNB*, who were quick to point out when a subject was given more column inches than he deserved, Woolf cannot repress a more traditional reverence for hierarchies.

Woolf wavers between according such lives a serious role and considering them simply as charming. 'Charm' was a significant attraction for Victorian biographers of 'obscure' lives, and they were often not so shy of quaintness, frequently opening their biographies with lengthy descriptions of delightful scenery. They stressed their appreciation for the 'charm of everyday life'; Bernard Barton's life is described as full of 'charm and instruction', Mrs Bayly makes a case for the 'charm' of Mrs Sewell's life, and Leslie Stephen was drawn to Izaak Walton's 'charming little idylls'. This quaint appeal seems to minimize the potential impact of the lives. The biographers also associated charm with the picturesque, which in turn they linked with the reader's ability to engage imaginatively with the subject.

For Woolf, foraging into the unknown is also represented as a delightful dalliance. In the *London Mercury* and *Dial* versions of 'The Lives of the Obscure', the introduction ends with the exclamation: 'how delicious to ramble and

⁸ Woolf, 'Street Haunting', p. 490.

⁹ For Woolf, 'obscurity' gained further resonance through its recent association with psychology. In 'The New Biography', she reflects that a subject's true life can be detected 'in the inner life of thought and emotion which meanders darkly and obscurely through the hidden channels of the soul', p. 473. The 'obscure' had become the site of investigations that some Victorian biographers had probed but never fully explored.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, 'A Swan and Her Friends', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume I* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), p. 151.

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, 'The Eccentrics', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume III* (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), p. 38.

explore!' (141), which brings to mind Stephen's encouragement to his readers that they 'ramble through this long gallery' of the *DNB*. In 'The Lives of the Obscure', the combative narrative of a reader strenuously rescuing the neglected from the ravages of time is set against the pleasure to be taken in a more leisurely reading, which the disproportionate presence of entertainingly unconventional subjects—such as the female scientist Eleanor Ormerod, who played with water-grubs while still in her high chair—accentuates. The overwhelming effect of the essay, which opens in a local library 'with windows that look to the sea and let in the shouts of men crying pilchards for sale on the cobbled street below' (118) is of an old-fashioned cosiness, which at first seems to smooth over the wider implications of unearthing buried existences. Yet Woolf was ambivalent about these pleasures. She was alert to the quaintness involved in such recuperations of the past in its more homely, everyday condition, and of the self-indulgence of the reader who is seduced by it.

Woolf finds a compromise in 'The Lives of the Obscure' in the idea that one of the key roles of forgotten individuals is simply to introduce new perspectives on great lives. 'Little Miss Fend' meets a 'man with very bright eyes': William Blake, while at the local inn, filled with the obscure, 'Mr. Charles Lamb has just left the room' (121). Woolf stressed this aspect of the obscure in the introduction of the *London Mercury* and *Dial* versions of the essay. 'In spite of their invincible mediocrity', these individuals provide through their similarly mediocre memoirs the 'background, atmosphere, and standing of common earth which nourish people of greater importance' (140). They are there to provide perspective on and to prepare the way for greater talents. Biographies such as *Mothers of Great Men* (1859) and Stephen's 'Forgotten Benefactors' had previously explored this angle, and in recent years countless works have explored the lives of the wives and mistresses of great men in a similar way. This emphasis diminishes the importance of the 'obscure' on one hand by denying them individual worth, while insisting that hidden influence is a valuable path of inquiry on the other.

Mediocre books and, by implication, lives, could have a further, 'more important office'. In Carlylean language, Woolf describes them as 'the dressing-rooms, the workshops, the wings, the sculleries, the bubbling cauldrons, where life seethes and steams and is for ever on the boil' (141). The insistence on hidden labour is also a constant feature of nineteenth-century biographies. In the latter, as in 'The Lives of the Obscure', the temptation for the biographer and reader to delve among this chaotic, life-giving scenery is coupled with the understanding that the energy of these life-givers is dependent on their remaining backstage. One can resource oneself through contact with them, but this contact should best be a temporary one.

Where Woolf differs strongly from Victorian biographers of 'obscure' lives is in her analysis of marginality. The single most important difference between nineteenth-century biographies of hidden lives and those explored by Woolf is

that she uses the 'obscure' as a means of attacking social imbalances rather than as a way of smoothing them over. Although charming eccentrics form one category of Woolf's 'obscure', another equally important group is that of hidden lives, past and present, that were constrained by social circumstances: the 'maimed company of the halt and the blind', a 'bearded Jew, wild, hunger-bitten', an 'old woman flung abandoned on the step of a public building'.¹² Woolf's language when alluding to them reinforces the tension between sight ('glaring', 'public building') and invisibility ('blind', 'abandoned'). They are overlooked by the public in a far more devastating way than Victorian biographers allowed. That Woolf was notoriously ambivalent regarding the lower classes and campaigns for democratization should not distract from the importance of her investigation into the 'obscure'.

Woolf addressed a common tenet of nineteenth-century biographical writing: that understanding the other developed the faculty of altruism and avoided morbid self-obsession. However, she gives it a slightly new twist. In 'Street Haunting', the rambler's encounter with other lives enables the narrator to 'shed the self' and become 'part of that vast republican army of anonymous tramps' in a manner that is both desirable and troubling.¹³ The political reverberations of Woolf's phrase contrast with the Victorian biographers' depictions of the crowd, as they resisted any possibility that their work had 'republican' potential. Whereas nineteenth-century biographers felt that the genre would help readers to 'shed the self' in order to quieten selfish desires and contribute in a more productive and harmonious way to society, Woolf uses this image in a more militant manner.

Woolf is concerned with how individuals, but above all women, have been excluded from official discourses. In 'The Lives of the Obscure', her tone and perspective changes radically from that of her nineteenth-century predecessors when she discusses female lives. To uncover hidden female lives is, for Woolf, to uncover a narrative of oppression. The essay contains a striking catalogue of female misery. Strutt, 'a bit of a character', would 'not let his daughters eat meat, so no wonder they died of consumption' (119); 'Poor Fanny Hill' was 'forced to drudge for her husband's mistress, for Captain M. had wasted all her fortune, ruined all her life' (120); Edgeworth's first wife, to whom he was 'a tyrant', could barely express her 'bewilderment, her loneliness, her despair' (123); and Thomas Day pours wax on his prospective wife and shoots pistols at her to gauge her docility (125). Woolf often expressed uncertainty over whether anger was an appropriate response to tales of female oppression and condemned Charlotte Brontë for allowing 'indignation' to seep through into *Jane Eyre*.¹⁴ Yet there is an undeniably combative dimension to her declaration that 'if ever a woman wanted

¹² Woolf, 'Street Haunting', pp. 483–4.

¹³ Ibid, p. 481.

¹⁴ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 110.

a champion, it is obviously Laetitia Pilkington' (127). It is in such passages that Woolf breaks with the Victorian treatment of 'obscure' lives.

Woolf's unrevised short story, 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' (1906), is an early attempt at imagining a female biographer uncovering a hidden woman's life. The first section describes a social historian, Merridew, who desires to take hold of precious manuscripts, including a medieval woman's diary, the value of which the owner seems barely aware. (Indeed, the story can be read as a reversal of James's 'The Aspern Papers'.) The initial project is described in terms that echo the historiographical essays of Macaulay and Carlyle:

I have not scrupled to devote several pages of large print to an attempt to show, vividly as in a picture, some scene from the life of the time; here I knock at the serf's door, and find him roasting rabbits he has poached. . . . In another room I show you Dame Elinor, at work with her needle; and by her on a lower stool sits her daughter stitching too, but less assiduously.¹⁵

Merridew (and Woolf) go beyond the nineteenth-century historians by arguing that women's exclusion from history was the result of a far more deliberate process of suppression than for lives of poor or forgotten men. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf imagines an old woman whose daily life has not been preserved, and comments that 'no biography or history has a word to say about it'. Equally distressing is the fact that the woman herself can only recall fragments of male battles or great men ('she would say that she remembered the streets lit for the battle of Balaclava, or had heard the guns fire in Hyde Park for the birth of King Edward the Seventh'). The woman has not learnt to think about her own history.¹⁶

Woolf tries to counter this history of exclusion by redefining exclusion in a more positive manner. In *Three Guineas* (1938), she elaborates a discourse in which the obscure and anonymous take on the potentially powerful role of the 'outsider'. Marginality is initially associated with powerlessness: she has 'no right to speak' or speaks 'ignorantly as an outsider must'. Rapidly, however, this is reversed. Woolf proposes that the daughters of educated men create an 'Outsiders Society' that would work for 'liberty, equality and peace'.¹⁷ The outsider is sufficiently distanced from society to be able to question it. Woolf offers women the chance to turn a situation of oppression to their advantage. In 'Anon' (1938–9), invisibility again contains subversive potential: 'Anon had great privileges. He was not responsible. He was not self conscious. He is not self conscious. He can borrow. He can repeat. He can say what every one feels.'¹⁸

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Dick (London: Hogarth Press, 1985; repr. 1989), p. 34.

¹⁶ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 133–4.

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, ed. by Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 196, 310.

¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'Anon', in Brenda R. Silver, "'Anon' and 'The Reader': Virginia Woolf's Last Essays", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 25 (Autumn–Winter 1979), p. 397.

Here also, Woolf's strategy is not entirely new. A number of Victorian biographers of women preceded Woolf in suggesting that being invisible might be liberating rather than oppressive. Eliza Keary and Agnes Giberne, for example, exaggerated their subject's obscurity in order to free them from the constraints of the public sphere and to represent them with far greater flexibility. In biographies of missionaries, the subject's departure from England also provides an occasion for the women to relish the freedoms suddenly conferred by being outside England. The same conclusion that women must remove themselves from public scrutiny in order to be fulfilled can be drawn, though Woolf's playful yet forthright propositions for women's role in society are absent in these works. Most Victorian biographers of women avoided entering into an explicitly feminist argument, even when they were feminist themselves. Biographers were sufficiently aware of embarking on an unusual project in paying full-length tribute to an individual female subject.

The idea that life-writing could be used to provide women with a sense of their own identity and history as a part of a feminist project of recuperation was never expressed as explicitly by Victorian biographers (whether male or female) as by Woolf. Authors of collective biographies, which were canonical projects in themselves, were generally more confident in expressing the importance of building a separate, female history. Most female Victorian biographers were not concerned with recovering hidden women's lives because they were only just beginning the process of paying tribute to famous women's lives. Attempts to collect female lives usually involved lives of writers or of royalty, such as Mrs Elwood's *Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England* (1843) or Anna Jameson's *Memoirs of Celebrated Female Sovereigns* (1831). Virginia Woolf relied heavily on auto/biographical fragments written in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to dig up forgotten lives. Victorian biographers had little access to similar sources for earlier centuries, and archival research was anyhow in its infancy. The endeavour to discover hidden lives, whether male or female, in the past had barely begun within the genre of biography and was often associated with a narrow antiquarian interest.

Woolf weaves into this communal feminist project a reflection on the national import of these lives. In *A Room of One's Own*, the narrator wanders through the London streets 'feeling in imagination the pressure or dumbness, the accumulation of unrecorded life'. These lives include those of the

women at the street corners with their arms akimbo, and the rings embedded in their fat swollen fingers, talking with a gesticulation like the swing of Shakespeare's words; or from the violet-sellers and match-sellers and old crones stationed under doorways . . . All that you will have to explore, I said to Mary Carmichael, holding your torch firm in your hand.¹⁹

Woolf's examples combine an interest in both unrecorded female and unrecorded working-class lives, conveyed with earthy vibrancy. The allusion to Shakespeare

¹⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 117.

hints that these women are in touch with something as old, English, and national as the country's most famous dramatist, and prepares Woolf's evocation of Shakespeare's imaginary sister. The somewhat quaint image of 'violet-sellers and match-sellers', selling small objects which together evoke the useful and the pleasurable, gives the impression that these lives transcend a particular epoch, as do the 'old crones'. By choosing the image of the 'fat swollen fingers', Woolf counterbalances their 'charming' appeal with social resonance. The image of the torch underscores the darkness of the territory to be approached, while evoking the necessity of transmitting such endeavours to future generations.

Woolf was certainly not the first to make such connections between Englishness and the neglected: Samuel Smiles, Richard Monckton Milnes, Alexander Gilchrist, Frederick Martin, and Leslie Stephen did too. In 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', the solid, ancient country house in which Joan lived enables its current male inhabitant to consider 'all generations . . . bathed in his mind in the same clear and equable light'.²⁰ The obscure are considered as the foundations of the nation. Whereas many Victorian biographers maintained that paying one's respect to the neglected works towards the good of the nation, Woolf adds that exploring these lives would benefit women most of all. Woolf did at times think in national terms, but with a feminist angle. In 'The Intellectual Status of Women', she argues that 'the seventeenth century produced more remarkable women than [sic] the sixteenth, the eighteenth more than the seventeenth, and the nineteenth more than all three put together'.²¹ The phrase is almost identical to Sidney Lee's statement in his 'Statistical Account' with the single, crucial, difference of gender. There is an uncertainty in Woolf's works as to whether feminist history should be written in a manner radically different from male history, or whether it could follow similar patterns.

Victorian biographers focused their attentions less on the individual subject than on their impact on the community. Stressing the social benefits of altruism more than personal fulfilment was their goal; time and again, they ask for the reader to show their 'gratitude' to hidden labour and pay their own tribute to hidden influences on the nation and themselves. Leslie Stephen concluded his essay 'Forgotten Benefactors' as follows:

And nothing, I think, helps one more than a vivid and enduring consciousness of the enormous debt which we owe to men and women who lived in obscurity, and whose ennobling influence has yet become a part of every higher principle of action in ourselves . . . To cherish and preserve that influence by every faculty we possess seems to me to be our plainest duty; and we may comfort ourselves, if comfort be needed, by the reflection that, though the memory may be transitory, the good done by a noble life and character may last far beyond any horizon which can be realised by our imaginations.²²

²⁰ Woolf, 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', p. 43.

²¹ Virginia Woolf, 'The Intellectual Status of Women', *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing*, ed. by Michelle Barrett (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 55–6.

²² Stephen, 'Forgotten Benefactors', pp. 266–7.

The passage is in many ways characteristic of Victorian biographers' attitude to hidden lives. A sense of gratitude is cultivated, the hidden are valued in moral terms ('ennobling', 'duty') and cherished principally for the impact that they have had on the present ('ourselves'). Woolf, in contrast, reaches after something more active than an expression of thanks. Woolf's interest in hidden influences has much in common with that of her father. In 'Forgotten Benefactors', Stephen writes that 'there must have been countless forgotten Newtons and Descartes', who, in their day, had to exert equal powers in order to discover what are now the most familiar truths'.²³ Turning to literature, Woolf also argued in *A Room of One's Own* that 'masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of common thinking, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice'.²⁴ Unlike Stephen, however, Woolf illustrates this with female examples, including that of the eighteenth-century scholar Eliza Carter who paved the way for later female achievements.

The worth of hidden female influence was given its most powerful fictional expression during the nineteenth century in the conclusion of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Eliot wrote of her heroine Dorothea Brooke that 'the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs'.²⁵ Virginia Woolf wrote a slight revision of the passage in *A Room of One's Own*, in which she considers Shakespeare's imaginary sister:

Drawing her life from the life of the unknown who were her forerunners, she will be born. As for her coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. But I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while.²⁶

Woolf comes exceedingly close here to the insistence of countless Victorian biographers that work in 'poverty and obscurity' was worthwhile. The phrase even echoes attempts by biographers of women and working-class men to deny the possibility of social mobility by painting the attractions of obscurity. However, where Eliot uses the passive word 'rest' to describe the obscure, Woolf's depiction stresses action ('effort', 'determination', 'work'). Eliot does indicate a narrative of gradual progress ('growing good') yet emphasizes the present and how it was constructed on past efforts in a way that reflects most nineteenth-century biographies of the 'obscure'. Woolf picks up from this point and looks towards the future

²³ Ibid., p. 230.

²⁴ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 85.

²⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 825.

²⁶ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 172. See also Alison Booth, *Greatness Engendered*, esp. p. 92.

and places the reader among the obscure themselves and faces them with their own responsibilities. There is a strain in her essays on bringing about *change* that is absent from most Victorian biographies.

The emotional graveside tribute that Eliot and Victorian biographers of 'obscure' lives requested of their readers is very different from the place Woolf assigns to Shakespeare's imaginary sister and the other unfulfilled female lives she represents. Nineteenth-century biographers were clear that they did not expect nor want their initially 'obscure' and apparently mediocre subjects to achieve fame through their endeavours. Sudden fame suggested a form of social disruption that was highly distasteful to them. The encounter between the subject and reader is repeatedly shown to be a temporary one. The function of the 'obscure' subject was to stimulate an emotion within the reader: empathy, which in turn developed the faculty of altruism, but also an emotional acknowledgement of the thousands of individual contributions that built communities. With the exception of certain writers, the biographers did not focus on the future status of their subject.

Woolf's recurrent use of the word 'record' to describe her biographical endeavours reveals an altered stance, which has more in common with later twentieth-century attempts to champion neglected lives. The accent is no longer on a transient contemplation but on remembering and recording elusive lives. This emphasis is maintained even though Woolf expressed some doubts as to the effectiveness of biography as a tool in salvaging lives (male or female) from neglect. Indeed, in 'The Lives of the Obscure' and 'Street Haunting' she depicts men and women who had already been commemorated in a biography, yet this did not present them from being forgotten. The biographies in the library and bookshop are dusty and neglected. In 'The Diary of Mistress Joan Martyn', Merridew's self-satisfied voice is abandoned at mid-point, and succeeded by Joan's own voice through her diary. This narrative division seems to beg the question of whether the intrusion of a contemporary voice and the intrusive biographer is a potential danger. Joan herself doubts the power of words ('there is nothing in the pale of my days that needs telling') and privileges oral history ('as my mother would say, the best stories are those that are told over the fire side; . . . it is certain that no written book can stand beside them').²⁷ Biography appears as a third choice, behind direct communication and autobiographical writing.

This hesitation discloses Woolf's partial assent to Carlyle's and Leslie Stephen's attractions to silence. (In 'Anon', she writes that 'it seems possible that the great English art may not be the art of words'.)²⁸ Yet the compelling nature of the diary seems to justify the efforts made to recover it in order to bring to light a rare female history. Woolf's attempts to trace not merely individual lives but a lineage of hidden histories offered a new direction for biographies of 'obscure' lives, which has been extensively picked up by more recent feminist biographers.

²⁷ Woolf, 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', pp. 61, 62.

²⁸ Woolf, 'Anon', p. 338.

Woolf, who famously wrote that 'a woman writing thinks back through her mothers',²⁹ draws attention to the importance of building an alternative tradition of previously neglected female lives and insists that 'all these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded'.

In *Flush*, a footnote pauses to dwell on the Barrett's servant 'Wilson': 'The life of Lily Wilson is extremely obscure and cries aloud for the services of a biographer . . . she was typical of the great army of her kind—the inscrutable, the all-but-silent, the all-but-invisible servant maids of history.'³⁰ The language is once more Carlylean. Carlyle, however, praised these silent individuals (mostly men) but also silence itself ('Silence, the great Empire of Silence: . . . It alone is great; all else is small').³¹ Woolf wishes, in contrast, to break such silences, as the word 'cries' implies. Women, she implies, are the first casualties of the silences imposed by male historians.

In 'The Lives of the Obscure', the subjects are not Jamesian ghosts seeking to ward off prying eyes, as in 'The Real Right Thing' (1899) or subjects who are carefully protected from public intrusions by their biographer, but ghosts who desire human contact and who are electrified by the possibility of being brought back to life. They are 'waiting, appealing, forgotten, in the growing gloom' (119), 'all taut and pale in their determination never to be forgotten, men who have just missed fame, men who have passionately desired redress' (121). This desire for remembrance contrasts with Victorian biographies in which the reader is assured that the subject cared nothing for fame, and in which the benefits of public exposure are often queried. Woolf would later alter, rather than originate, the biographical representation of 'obscure' lives by placing a new accent on the value of active remembrance, rather than a grateful recognition, of the hidden. Unlike the majority of Victorian biographers, Virginia Woolf does not encourage the writing of hidden lives in order to alert readers to recent or present achievements, but to point towards future ones. In order to do so, however, she borrowed heavily from the innovations of her predecessors who had, during the Victorian period, exploded the boundaries of biography.

CODA

Biography underwent profound changes during the nineteenth century and the significant number of biographies commemorating hidden lives was one of its most important developments. Two poems, one composed before the Victorian period yet at a time when the foundations were being laid for biographies of 'hidden' lives, and another written four years before Lytton Strachey sounded the death knell of Victorian biography, provide a glimpse of the distance biographies

²⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 127.

³⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Flush* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1928), p. 229.

³¹ Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 192.

of these lives had travelled. Both were reactions to the generous inclusion policies of biographical dictionaries. In 1782, William Cowper wrote the following:³²

'On Observing Some Names of Little Note
Recorded in the Biographia Britannica'

Oh, fond attempt to give a deathless lot
To names ignoble, born to be forgot!
In vain recorded in historic page,
They court the notice of a future age:
Those twinkling tiny lustres of the land
Drop one by one from Fame's neglecting hand;
Lethæan gulfs receive them as they fall,
And dark oblivion soon absorbs them all.

So when a child, as playful children use,
Has burnt to tinder a stale last year's news,
The flame extinct, he views the roving fire—
There goes my lady, and there goes the squire,
There goes the parson, oh illustrious spark!
And there, scarce less illustrious, goes the clerk!

Henry Newbolt published his response to the *DNB* in 1912:³³

'Minora Sidera'
(The Dictionary of National Biography)

Sitting at times over a hearth that burns
With dull domestic glow,
My thought, leaving the book, gratefully turns
To you who planned it so.

Not of the great only you deigned to tell—
The stars by which we steer—
But lights out of the night that flashed, and fell
To-night again, are here.

Such as were those, dogs of an elder day,
Who sacked the golden ports,
And those later who dared grapple their prey
Beneath the harbour forts:

Some with flag at the fore, sweeping the world
To find an equal fight,

³² William Cowper, 'On Observing Some Names of Little Note Recorded in the Biographia Britannica', *The Poems of William Cowper, Volume I: 1748–1782* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 409.

³³ Henry Newbolt, 'Minora Sidera', *Poems: New and Old* (London: John Murray, 1912; repr. 1919), pp. 48–9.

And some who joined war to their trade, and hurled
 Ships of the line in flight.
 Whether their fame centuries long should ring
 They cared not over-much,
 But cared greatly to serve God and the king,
 And keep the Nelson touch;
 And fought to build Britain above the tide
 Of wars and windy fate;
 And passed content leaving to us the pride
 Of lives obscurely great.

Cowper considers the dictionary's attempts to immortalize 'names ignoble' as doomed to failure. The dictionary-makers have been seduced by the charm of such lives: their motivation is fondness rather than a critical assessment of the subjects' worth. The poet underscores the fruitlessness of the endeavour by following a solemn stanza by a light and playful one. Classical references (the river Lethe) and grand appeals to a 'historic page' and 'future age' are undermined by the nursery-like tones of the second stanza ('There goes my lady, and there goes the squire'). The play on the word 'illustrious' cruelly diminishes the importance of the unnamed parson and clerk.

Newbolt displays no such irony. The later poet also uses the imagery of the domestic fireside, only here fire has a creative rather than a destructive potential. (Though the poem is angled towards masculine lives, the image recalls the beneficial influence of women in the terms used by Leslie Stephen.) Newbolt's tones become more rather than less ceremonial. As with many Victorian biographers, he ponders the equal though very different value of great and 'obscure' lives. The stress on the subjects' lack of concern with fame and the emphasis on contentment echo the reassurances of numerous biographers that no social transgression was being advocated (they 'cared not over-much' for future fame).

Four elements in particular illustrate the expanse between the earlier and later poem, which brings out the particularities of the Victorian concern with hidden lives. The patriotic overtone was absent from the earlier verse but plays a central role here, just as the biographers were centrally concerned with both demonstrating and promoting the health of the nation. The notion that the attention given to neglected individuals in biographies was only a transient one and that immortality was not claimed for the subjects is also a new element. Thirdly, the poet places immense importance on the emotions that these lives generate in the reader (here, pride), in a manner that was unique to Victorian biographers. Finally, Newbolt fulfils one of Leslie Stephen's greatest ambitions for the dictionary by expressing his 'gratitude' to the men of letters who created it ('you who planned it so'). Writing the lives of neglected individuals gave writers an unusual chance to assess their own importance to society and position themselves as possibly inglorious but nonetheless essential mediators between the mercurial public and its hidden benefactors.

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UNSIGNED ARTICLES

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