1 Biography as an Institution

A biography should either be as long as Boswell’s or as short as Aubrey’s.

Lytton Strachey, ‘John Aubrey’

It is appalling how small even the most extensive knowledge boils down when it is pithily used.

George Bernard Shaw to Archibald Henderson

The extremes Lytton Strachey proposes for the length of biography highlight the problem Bernard Shaw expresses which persists throughout the history of the genre: the proper size and scope of life-writing. In the nineteenth century, this issue was especially acute as the Victorian attraction to history, leading to the inclusive life, opposed the plea for an interpretative life indicated by George Eliot in 1852. Initially, the analytic life was a minority voice as large, multi-volume biographies dominated Victorian lives. However, a tradition originating in short Latin lives, renewed by antiquaries of the sixteenth century, popularized by Aubrey’s Brief Lives in the seventeenth, dignified by Johnson’s Lives of the Poets in the eighteenth and culminating in works like Strachey’s Portraits in Miniature in the twentieth reasserted the centrality of the brief life. In the nineteenth century, the form reached its apogee in collective lives, biographies in series and biographical dictionaries. Their extraordinary sales and continued influence is a measure of their importance.

In the nineteenth century, three publications demonstrate the institutionalization of biography in the brief life: Samuel Smiles’s Lives of the Engineers, John Morley’s English Men of Letters Series and Leslie Stephen’s Dictionary of National Biography. Collectively, they confirm the importance of brief lives extended by such later writers as Edmund Gosse and Lytton Strachey. Critically, these works display the important tradition of short, analytic lives in advance of the modern preference for such biographies, as well as the constant tension in biographical history between the size and

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value of a biography. The issue is literary and moral since the perception and acceptance of the subject’s life is frequently in proportion to the length and detail of the biography. The question for the reader of the brief biography becomes whether or not the shorter life is as accurate and truthful as the longer; or, to reverse the emphasis, can overwhelming detail also provide an overall sense of character and pattern for the life? In short, does thoroughness of detail prevent the imaginative penetration of the life of the subject?

In his biography of John Sterling, Carlyle quotes the following passage written by Sterling from France in 1836:

I have also lounged a good deal over the *Biographie Universelle* . . . As to the *Biographie Universelle*, you know it better than I. I wish Craik, or some such man, could be employed on an English edition, in which the British lives should be better done. ²

Some forty-nine years later, Sterling’s wish would be met by an English version of the *Biographie*, the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The appearance of the *Dictionary of National Biography* in January 1885 was the culmination of nearly three-quarters of a century of fascination and attraction to brief biographies or biographies in series. And it is this form of biography that became better known and more widely read than any other in the period.

As early as 1827 the need for brief lives evaluating rather than chronicling a subject was recognized. In the ‘Preface’ to the *Universal Biographical Dictionary* (1800), John Watkins wrote

Instead of lamenting with the great Lord Bacon that ‘the writing of Lives is not more frequent,’ we could, perhaps with more propriety, wish that the practice were either limited or better directed . . . Of late years, thanks to the officious zeal of friendship, and the active industry of literary undertakers, biographical memoirs have become as multitudinous, prolix, and veracious as epitaphs in a country churchyard.

Carlyle continued this criticism in his essays on Scott and Boswell, suggesting that authors be paid for not writing fulsome lives.³ A review in 1857 predicted what occurred over the remaining years of the century as biography grew to unmanageable proportions: