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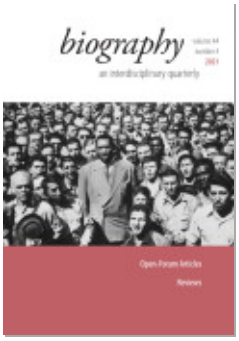
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The ABC of Modern Biography by Nigel Hamilton and Hans Renders (review)



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3. See Magnússon on Matthías Vidar Sæmunðsson's biography of Héðinn Valdimarsson (180).
4. The reference is presumably to Virginia Woolf's "The New Biography": "[Harold Nicolson] has shown that a little fiction mixed with fact can be made to transmit personality very effectively" (99–100). The passage concludes: "Let it be fact, one feels, or let it be fiction: the imagination will not serve two masters simultaneously. . . . Truth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible . . . the mixture of the two is abhorrent." Woolf's earlier essay, "The Art of Biography," reaches similar conclusions in the discussion of Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex*.
5. *The Conversation* lists her as a postdoctoral fellow in History at the University of the Free State ("Lindie Koorts").

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Caitríona Ní Dhúill is Professor in German at University College Cork and the author of *Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). She was a researcher at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography, Vienna, from 2005 to 2009, and has taught at the universities of Dublin, St Andrews, Durham, and Vienna.

The ABC of Modern Biography

Nigel Hamilton and Hans Renders

Amsterdam University Press, 2018, 250 pp. ISBN 9789462988712, $35.00 hardcover.

The alphabet provides an arbitrary arrangement of groups of people or things, based on the contingencies of a specific writing system. As such, it offers a neutral organizational basis for registers, reference works, and ballot papers. When applied to larger discursive projects that aspire to some degree of conceptual unity, the ABC format suggests the character of a primer or introduction to the subject. As a structuring device, ABC is also a knowing nod to the irreconcilable tensions

between contingency, comprehensiveness, and coherence. This makes it particularly suited to an exploration of biography, a genre that confronts perhaps more starkly than any other the challenge of shaping the contingencies of lived life into a coherent readable narrative.

In the realm of literature, ABC formats have been used as a frame for self-consciously eclectic groupings of aphoristic, provocative reflections—one thinks of Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading*, or more recently, Laszlo Földenyi's *Heinrich von Kleist: In the Web of Words*, a suite of short essays on key words taken from works by the German author, from *Ach*! (ah!) to *Zufall* (coincidence). The *ABC of Modern Biography* takes a comparable approach: in twenty-six alphabetically ordered "entries," each around eight pages in length, Nigel Hamilton and Hans Renders offer argumentative takes on a variety of issues relating to biography, encompassing questions of theme (war, youth, sex), form (composition, quotation), genre (memoir, journalism, obituary), and discipline (history, ethics, facts). The authors, both eminent biographers who have also published extensively on the genre, can demonstrate a profound knowledge of modern biographical literature. The volume is rich in lively details from a wide range of biographies and writings on biography. Choice quotations from the usual suspects (Samuel Johnson, Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey) are interwoven with later interventions from Leon Edel, David Novarr, Ira Bruce Nadel, Hermione Lee, Richard Holmes, and a range of continental European—often Dutch—sources with which many anglophone readers will be unfamiliar. (Renders directs the Biography Institute at the University of Groningen.) Hamilton's mark is evident in the frequent references to biographical literature on US presidents (he is the author of biographies of JFK and FDR); examples from literary biography and from biographies of celebrities and popular cultural figures are also abundant.

The brevity of format invites a narrative in broad strokes. Many entries gesture to a wider historical frame encompassing classical biographies (Plutarch, Suetonius, Xenophon) and earlier models of life depiction (the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Gospels as proto-biography, St. Augustine and Rousseau in the autobiographical tradition, traditions of portrait-painting since the Renaissance). But the focus, as the title suggests, is on *modern* biography, programmatically used in contradistinction to the *post*modern.

The authors are upfront in the claims they make for biography. These can be summarized as follows: biographies are a privileged medium through which a culture endorses the search for, and value of, truth as a primary ethical imperative in its relationship to the past. As such, biography—uniquely among historiographical forms—has survived unscathed the "virus" of deconstruction and postmodernism that swept through the humanities, particularly literary studies and history, in the latter decades of the twentieth century (183, 178). Undaunted by the onslaught of these theoretical fashions, biographers continued to pursue a "moral" task (159): the "honourable quest for practical, verifiable truth" (157). Biographies worthy of the name remain "independent, free from external influences and devoid of ideology" (14).

The familiar debate about the constitutive tension in biography between evidence and interpretation—what Virginia Woolf called "granite" and "rainbow"— is pressed into the service of a polemical argument that lays the blame for Donald Trump's presidency and all it stood and continues to stand for (fake news, alternative facts, post-truth) at the door of not just one virus, but a family of them: deconstruction, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, the culture wars, identity politics, creative nonfiction, memoir (without an "s"), and life writing. Biography is the antibody, to continue the topical metaphor; its commitment to "verifiable facts and truth in recording real lives" (183) is the personal protective equipment for humanist scholars seeking "safe passage beyond the ruins of deconstructed history" (76). Biographers, one could say, quarantine past lives and ensure they will survive lockdown until we have a vaccination, the components of which will be truth, facts, composition, and detail (some of which will be sourced from "memoirs," with an "s").

Hamilton and Renders are not the first to argue that deconstruction and post-structuralist theory paved the way to the wholesale undermining of truth which we now witness daily. It's a position expounded at greater length, if not with greater coherence, by Michiko Kakutani. It relies on a conflation of post-foundationalist discourse analysis, which queries the accessibility of a universal ground for human understanding, with anti-foundationalist manipulation of language in the service of power, of the kind dramatized by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, analyzed by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and emitted daily from the White House during the Trump presidency (Farkas and Schou).

The assault on truth in contemporary culture and politics, both during and since Trump's presidency, is a grave concern. The ethical issues raised by false memoirs (such as those by James Frey and Benjamin Wilkomirski) are taken seriously by scholars of life writing and auto/biography.[1] The question of how these troubling phenomena relate to debates about relativism, deconstruction, and the so-called "culture wars" is certainly one that deserves to be explored in more rigor than Hamilton and Renders demonstrate in these brief essays. What is particularly striking is their persistent association of the *abuse* of power (Trump, Putin) with theoretical and intellectual inquiries into the *operation* of power in social and symbolic formations. This association proceeds rhetorically, through a loosely causal narrative according to which Trump's election is the "upshot" (108) of developments in cultural studies and life writing. Here is an example:

> Without respect for fact, but only uncritical support for self-expression in all its proliferating modes, Life Writing centres have served to valorise the articulation of identity regardless of whether the authors of autobiographical materials were, or are, telling the truth or not. The consequences of such uncritical laxity have been sad—such as a US President choosing to communicate with the public entirely by means of shameless, unverified, deceit-filled and often insult-laden Tweets, put out as forms of Life-Writing! (108)

This suggests that Trump has spent too much time at the feet of Hermione Lee and Max Saunders.[2] (In fact he would be advised to spend more.) More egregious still:

> Black Lives Matter became a *cause célèbre* in America in 2016, but it almost inevitably inflamed a counter-sense of grievance among white citizens—one which, in part, led to the election of a deeply anti-immigrant white man as the 45th US President. (81)

The caveats and dilutions ("almost," "in part") suggest that even the authors suspect they're straying onto dangerous territory here.

It's worth tracing some of the "sources" enlisted in support of such arguments back to their original context, to lay bare the distortions that take place en route. The authors quote Michael Holroyd on life writing, which has a "different agenda" from biography—it "concentrates principally on people who belong to and represent categories or classes of people who have been victimised in the past," offering "retrospective justice." In the account offered by Hamilton and Renders, Holroyd considers the focus in lifewriting studies on marginalized lives to be a "deeply disturbing" promotion of "causes" (104), and is concerned at the lack of "science to be seen in such writing" (105). Holroyd's statements to this effect, if such exist, are not referenced; in fact, on consulting the article quoted, we find Sir Michael in mildly curious and reminiscent mode, pleased with his fountain pens, graciously acknowledging the achievements of his colleague Richard Holmes, and looking forward to learning about new developments in lifewriting studies at a forthcoming conference at the University of Sussex.

If discussions of biography are to be weaponized for the war on the War on Truth—and it's a big if—then such discussions will need to proceed by example. One could start by eschewing misleading rhetorical association and the suppression or distortion of evidence; or by refraining from undue vilification of those (within and outside the academy) who espouse methods and perspectives that differ from one's own; or by acknowledging the internal diversity of one's object of criticism (life writing) and differentiating with care between its various manifestations (not all memoir is false); or by frankly confronting one's own imbrication in structures of power and privilege. The self-styled "guardians of truth" (126) could do well to ask: whose truth? It becomes clear by the time we get to "Z" that the understanding of biography implicit on every page of this *ABC* is restricted to narratives about the lives of publicly salient ("notable," "famous," "powerful") figures (163, 31, 101). For all the rhetorical flourishes in defense of democracy, then, the model of biography the authors ultimately espouse is strangely undemocratic. "There has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful," wrote Samuel Johnson in 1750, suggesting radically democratic possibilities for the genre he did so much to shape (205). In *The ABC of Modern Biography*, the lives of the marginalized or subaltern are mostly consigned to the "licensed mendacity" of "memoir" and "Life Writing" (118). The biographer who emerges from this often

engaging and informative *ABC* is proudly modern, as the title suggests: he has survived the virus of the culture wars, and lives to tell the tale (or *grand récit*), but he has "forgotten the lessons of our modernity," to borrow Alain Buisine's phrase (163). A hero-worshipper by his own admission (207), the biographer of Hamilton and Renders' account remains bound to the heroic narrative of public action, and blind to the ways in which biography is not only *not* "devoid of ideology" (and which discursive formation could assert this of itself?), but *constitutive of* (as well as parasitic on) an ideology of individual human agency that is profoundly out of kilter with our perilous times.

The viral metaphor of which the authors are fond has acquired a new edge since this book appeared. We now know that a virus may have the power to enforce radical changes in our ways of living and working. It may induce us to become slower, more contemplative, and more keenly aware of our fragility and interconnectedness. Above all, a virus—whether biological or discursive—alerts us to the fallaciousness of that much-vaunted individualism that heroic biography has long extolled.

Notes

1. See Couser, *Memoir*, particularly ch. 4; and Smith and Watson.
2. Hermione Lee is advisory director of the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing, and the author of numerous biographies and studies of biography, including *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (2009), which Hamilton and Renders cite. Max Saunders founded and co-directed (with Clare Brant) the Centre for Life Writing Research, King's College London, is currently Interdisciplinary Professor of Modern Literature and Culture at the University of Birmingham, and is the author of *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (2010).

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Writing Life Writing: Narrative, History, Autobiography

Paul John Eakin

Routledge, 2020, xxii +152 pp. ISBN 9780367439101, $160.00 hardcover.

The most unique characteristic of Paul John Eakin's research in the field of autobiographical studies is his interdisciplinarity. His last two books in particular, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999) and *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2008)—which offer valuable exchanges among narrative studies, history, historiography, rhetoric, developmental psychology, cultural anthropology, the law, and neurology—place his work among the most important of the last five decades. Such ambitious epistemological dialogue might leave out some specific discussions of issues such as race, gender, and class, but as Craig Howes explains in his foreword to the book, the wide range of subjects addressed by Eakin with such brevity "makes them more suggestive than exhaustive," and that his talent to inspire "other researchers to examine in detail the texts he mentions, topics he raises, or conclusions he draws, often in passing, has been the source for some of his greatest contributions to life writing" (x). The present collection of essays contains—in addition to evidence of this broad and sometimes exotic approach to life writing—a form of self-assessment of his life's work, a career retrospective that also suggests new ways of thinking about the subject of autobiographical texts. Extending the interdisciplinary dialogue established in his previous works, this collection offers insights about writing the self and identity representation in the age of the internet along with a dialogue between autobiography and quantum cosmology.

The book's three-fold structure presents different dimensions of life writing as they have been explored and examined by Eakin throughout his career. The four essays of the first section, "Narrative," explore narrative beyond an understanding of it as a literary expedient and as a social and cultural practice that is at the same time natural and developed culturally. Due to Eakin's fierce defense of narrative as