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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 41

The
Perspective of Biography

By

Sir Sidney Lee

President, 1917

September, 1918

THE PERSPECTIVE OF BIOGRAPHY

THE English Association treats its presidents generously. It asks nothing of them during their year of service save a presidential address. And it is the peculiar rule of the Association that the president shall render this sole official tribute not on assuming his office but on quitting it. The presidential address is of the nature of a swan song ; it celebrates a presidential demise.

In the absence of any earlier opportunity I now assure you, albeit with my latest presidential breath, of the value which I set on the honour you did me a year ago by electing me your President. Thereby you constituted me a small link in a chain of persons highly distinguished in very varied walks of life. Lord Crewe, *my* predecessor in the presidential chair, combines with strong literary predilections a long and varied experience of political responsibilities. My successor, Mr. Asquith, whom you have elected a few minutes ago, filled for an exceptionally long period, the highest and most responsible of all offices of State. At the same time, amid all his manifold and conspicuous activities, legal as well as political, Mr. Asquith has amply testified to an inborn faith in the power of literature to comfort, to stimulate, and to guide. No choice, if I may venture to say so, is better calculated to advance the interests of the Association, which I believe to be closely identified with those of the nation at large.

It would ill beseem me to compare myself with the last or the next occupant of this post of President, but I cannot forbear to mention one point of difference between their connexion with this Association and my own.

My relations with the Association were domestically close before I reached by your good will the presidential eminence. I am not the only president who served an internal apprenticeship, but, as a rule, my predecessors have come from the outside to fill the throne. They have not risen from the lower ranks of the hierarchy. I am proud to

recall how with Professor Bradley, Dr. Boas, and others who are now more active than myself in the working of the Association, I helped to draft more than eleven years ago the first Constitution of the Association. I remember how I filled the chair at the first General Meeting, when that draft was adopted, and Dr. Montagu Butler, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, was chosen the first President. To-day we have to mourn his recent death, which makes the first gap in the roll of our past presidents. Dr. Butler, in the light of his wide educational experience, declared that the Association aspired * to minister to a work which had long been pressing and would not brook delay \ Since Dr. Butler's year of office the Association has vastly grown in numbers and efficiency. The committee has been steadily reinforced by new-comers of acknowledged position in the worlds of letters and of education. Very heartily may the Association be congratulated on its assured stability, and on the healthily progressive increase of its authority and influence.

It is indeed well at a moment so critical in our country's fortunes as the present that this should be so. There are signs abroad that this Association will need in the near future all the strength it can command, in order to reach the goal towards which it is striving. The War has brought to light some rifts in what Shakespeare called 'our intellectual armour \ A popular cry is daily gathering strength for the reorganization, the reconstruction of the whole course of our national education. The conviction grows that the panacea for all our national shortcomings is to be found in the substitution of the Natural Sciences and modern foreign languages for all other and older subjects of study.

Meanwhile, it is the purpose of this Association so to exert its energies as to bring home to English people four great truths. This Association claims, firstly, that for English boys and girls, for English young men and young women, the English language is the chief medium of intellectual development; secondly, that a thorough command of the native tongue is an essential condition of all free and extended activity of mind ; thirdly, that the national literature, in all its range and excellence, is entitled to stand at the head of the intellectualising agencies at the disposal of English people; and fourthly, that English literature deserves to be treated educationally as the best road of approach to the understanding and appreciation of the literature of other times and other nations. It is no doubt wise to revise and broaden the nation's curriculum of study, but it is the work of our Association to secure for the study of English a foremost place throughout the British Empire in every

newly devised scheme of elementary, secondary, and university education. Whatever else is to be studied seriously, we say that English should be studied seriously too. We ask that English should be the constant, the energetic, the unresting ally and companion of whatever other studies the calls of national enlightenment and national efficiency may prescribe.

II

This is not the first time that I have spoken or written of biography; the main business of my life has brought me into practical touch with the theme. I cannot refrain from drawing deductions from a prolonged personal experience, but I am not intending to-day any autobiographical excursion or confession. I am proposing especially to examine various moral and intellectual tendencies and certain chronological conditions which in my view either hamper or promote the production of sound and useful biography. I fear that I cannot avoid repeating some things that I have said before, but I am endeavouring to traverse some ground which I have not gone over before.¹

It is an accidental coincidence that I have chosen a subject some aspects of which my appointed successor in this Chair has already dealt with. Mr. Asquith's address on Biography only became known to me on its very recent publication in his volume of *Occasional Addresses*. That volume appeared after I had fixed on my own theme.

I have perhaps the less compunction in adhering to my original choice not merely because the field is a wide one admitting variety of treatment, but because Mr. Asquith largely devotes his address on biography to a branch of biographical writing which I judge to lie outside the strict biographical area. Mr. Asquith largely deals with autobiography, which, although obviously of the same family, is a collateral, and the family likeness is not in my view very close. Autobiography breathes a spirit and pursues an aim which, in my opinion, widely differs from that of biography. The man or woman who designs to describe himself and his own activities, writes in a vein which has little

¹ Although this address follows for the most part fresh lines, I have occasionally borrowed a few passages from three earlier essays of mine on the subject of biography, viz. 'National Biography', a lecture delivered at the Royal Institution on January 31, 1896, in *Cornhill Magazine* March 1896* (reprinted separately); 'Principles of Biography', the Leslie Stephen Lecture (Cambridge University Press, 1911); 'At a Journey's End' in *Nineteenth Century And After*, December 1912. Mr. Waldo Dunn's *English Biography* (1916), in Dent's 'Channels of English Literature' gives a comprehensive historical survey of the subject.

in common with the writer who sets out to describe another person and another person's activities. The autobiographer works from within outwards, while the biographer at least proposes to himself to work from without inwards. He is bound to start work from without, and he has been known to stay without all the time, never getting inwards at all. The autobiographer fixes his gaze mainly on himself. He is before all things an egoist. His success is proportioned to his self-absorption. His biographical kinsman is an altruist. His success is proportioned to his self-suppression. The general distinction is of the kind which separates the lyric poet from the dramatist.

'It would not be altogether absurd if a man were to thank God for his vanity among the other comforts of life.' Benjamin Franklin sets these words in the forefront of his autobiography, and they deserve to be set as a motto at the head of every successful autobiography. They are equally appropriate to autobiographical performances differing so widely in external circumstance as those of Samuel Pepys and John Wesley, of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Herbert Spencer.

Dr. Johnson may be right in his assertion that 'those relations are commonly of most value in which the writer tells his own story', but it is clear that a wide gulf separates a biographer's mental operations which are predominantly objective from an autobiographer's mental operations which are predominantly subjective. The one speaks the language of the plaintiff or defendant in the court of life, the other that of advocate or judge.

It is desirable to insist on this distinction because occasionally the failure of biographic effort is attributable to a confusion of the ultimately disparate aims of biography and autobiography. The biographer of the great Victorian novelist George Eliot, modestly anxious to suppress himself, and to let, as he says, his subject speak for herself, created out of quotations from George Eliot's letters and journals what he called, as I think erroneously, an autobiography. He wished his performance to be judged by an autobiographical standard. But a scrapbook of arbitrarily selected discontinuous extracts from letters and diaries, if they are worked into no connecting narrative, is neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring. The bricks stand piled in the builder's yard but the pile fails to serve the purpose of a building. An autobiographer alone can pen an autobiography, and no substituted service is allowable.

III

I do not propose to spend time in defining biography, or in tracing its historical evolution. It suffices to say that biography came into being at an early stage in the processes of civilization to satisfy a natural instinct in man, which may be called the commemorative instinct. Biography exists to satisfy the natural desire of civilized man to keep alive the memories of those who by character and exploit have distinguished themselves from the mass of humanity.

At a first glance biography may appear to be neither so imposing nor so generally effectual a mode of preserving the distinctive memories of buried humanity as portraiture or sculpture, or monumental architecture, or memorial foundations. Yet history shows that biography is, as Thomas Fuller, one of the early English practitioners, wrote, 'the safest way' to protect a memory from oblivion. Biographies wear better than pieces of pictorial or plastic art, or architectural monuments, or even memorial foundations, charitable or other. Memorial foundations have a habit of outgrowing the original tradition, of ceasing obviously to fulfil the commemorative intention. Biography is in any case a necessary complement, a protective corollary, of other forms of commemoration. In its absence the commemorative purpose, the personal significance, of a surviving portrait, or statue, or monument, or foundation lacks any certain guarantee of a long life.

Vain was the chiefs, the sage's pride,
They had no memoir and they died.

Thus biography which exists to satisfy the commemorative instinct has for its aim the transmission to posterity of a full and fair history of a human being who by virtue of a combination of character and exploit has arrested contemporary attention and is likely to excite the curiosity or interest of a future generation. Biography is the endeavour to transmit as enduringly as is possible distinctive personality and achievement. In its most exalted aspect biography may be said in Milton's high sounding phrase to embalm and treasure up 'the precious life blood of a master spirit on purpose to a life beyond life¹.

In the workaday world, however, biography does not confine its attention to the master spirits. As our chairman, Sir Henry Newbolt, once wrote of biographers when he was poring over the pages of the *Dictionary of National Biography* :

Not of the great only [they] deign to tell
 The stars by which we steer,
 But lights out of the night that flashed and fell
 To night again are here.

No person deserves a biography unless he be, in the literal sense, distinguished. The subject of a biography must be associated with a personality and with works which are distinguished, in the sense that they are not met with in the every-day range of human experience. But human action which can be credited with the biographic quality of distinction, varies infinitely in scale. It is not indeed only the master-spirits,—the Shakespeares and the Miltons, the Drakes and the Nelsons,—who in the interests of the present or the future justly invite biographic commemoration. Biography touches earth far below the stars. Although it leave out of account the vast majority of men and women, it can only justly satisfy the commemorative instinct by bringing a goodly sized minority within the biographic fold.

The Italian poet Ariosto imagined, with some allegorical vagueness, that at the end of every man's thread of life there hung a medal stamped with his name, and that, as Death severed Life's thread with its fatal shears, Time seized the medal and dropped it into the river of Lethe. Nevertheless a few, a very few, of the stamped medals were caught as they fell towards the waters of oblivion by swans, who carried off the medals and deposited them in a temple or museum of immortality. Ariosto's swans are biographers, whose function it is to rescue a few medals of distinguishable personality from the flood of forgetfulness into which the indistinguishable mass is inevitably destined to sink.

IV

In the categories of creative art, biography can claim no foremost place. A touch of the portrait-painter's creative insight is essential to biographic eminence, yet the density of the raw material in which the biographer works hampers the exercise of the creative faculty in a degree unknown to other branches of art, literary, pictorial, or plastic. Efficient biography predicates a vast preliminary labour of a mechanical kind. 'Biography', wrote Boswell, the best of all biographers, 'occasions a degree of trouble far beyond that of any other species of composition | The biographer begins his task by sorting heaps of written or printed papers, by exploring official records; by ransacking many a dark and dismal cavern of research. Boswell modestly refrained from detailing all his herculean labours of

investigation lest he might be judged, as he said, to be *ridiculously ostentatious'. Carlyle, another biographic giant, unashamedly showered floods of imprecations on the obtuse tyranny of Dr. Dryasdust to whose car his biographic vocation bound him. Theselhastors, Boswell and Carlyle, set authoritative examples which humble disciples ignore at their peril.

It is the biographer's first duty to sift and to interpret his sweepings. Only when that process is accomplished can he hope to give his findings essential form. Unity of spirit, cohesion of tone, perspective, these are the things which a due measure of the creative faculty will alone guarantee. Otherwise, the delineation will lack the semblance of life and reality. Unlike the dramatist or the novelist, the biographer cannot invent incident to bring into relief his conceptions of the truth about the piece of humanity which he is studying. His purpose is discovery, not invention. Fundamentally his work is a compilation, an industriously elaborated composition, a mosaic. But a touch of the creative faculty is needed to give animation to the dead bones; to evoke the illusion that the veins' verily bear blood'.

The uninitiated tend to confuse a life or a biography with a 'character' or character sketch. The character sketch may form a useful segment of a biography but as a substitute for a life it has small or no value. Dr. Johnson opens his great collection of the *Lives of the Poets* with the warnings that 'a character is not a life'; that 'a character furnishes so little detail, that scarcely anything is distinctly known, but all is shown confused and enlarged through a mist'. A 'character' is a nebulous impressionist study. The method of the 'character' study is, at its best, that of the impressionist artist who paints Venice in a hazy blur, so that no palace or canal can be identified. The method, however triumphantly the hand of genius may apply it to canvas, is inapplicable to efficient biography. The method of the efficient biographer is the more modest and mundane method of Canaletto, whose careful observation shows with distinctness and in a true perspective every Venetian brick or pile.

The practice of the art of biography abounds in pitfalls. Although pictorial art and biography have only superficial affinities, the biographer may well digest the counsel which Ruskin authoritatively offered the pictorial artist. Ruskin's words run thus:

'There is only one way of *seeing* things rightly, and that is, seeing the whole of them, without any choice or more intense perception of one point than another, owing to our special idiosyncrasies.'

It is the biographer's indulgence in the partial view, the giving an

unchecked rein to his idiosyncrasies, which accounts for most of the wreckage in the biographic ocean. The biographer too often fails to see his facts steadily or to see them whole. His angle of observation excludes from his view much that is relevant, because it does not square with his personal predilection: his drawing is often out of perspective, not merely because he lacks the architectonic capacity of unifying or fusing detail, but because he suffers his private sympathies or antipathies to exclude much that is essential to completeness. Again, the writer's partialities will render his lights too brilliant and his shadows either too dark, or, as is a common experience, not dark enough. Right perspective both in a mechanical and moral sense is a primary condition of satisfactory performance.

The true principle of perspective in biography may be readily deduced from the triumphs of the art which belong to our own literature. It is doubtful if any literature can claim such successful examples of the art as Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, and Lockhart's *Life of Scott*. For reasons which perhaps will not convince everybody, I would place beside these noble biographic monuments two others—Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*, and Froude's *Life of Carlyle*. True perspective comes of the twofold power of coherent arrangement and of unconstrained and undistorted vision. Boswell, Lockhart, Carlyle, and Froude may all be credited with the twin virtues or capacities. In the result each of their biographic performances is * a satisfying whole', 'a perfect round'.

Whatever may be the effect on biographic perspective of moral or spiritual obliquity, it is of primary importance to note that there can be no glimmer of perspective when the architectonic faculty is absent or is idle. To my thinking, Carlyle not merely excelled even Dr. Johnson in the practice of biography, but he also expounded its theory more correctly and more comprehensively than the literary dictator. Carlyle thus described a biographic work to which perspective was lacking, owing to the absence of power or endeavour to bring consistency to the constituent elements. Carlyle depicted the result thus:

* A mass of materials is collected, and the building proceeds apace. Stone is laid on the top of stone, just as it comes to hand; a trowel or two of biographic mortar, if perfectly convenient, being spread in here and there, by way of cement; and so the strangest pile suddenly arises, amorphous, pointing every way but to the zenith; here a block of granite, there a mass of pipe-clay; till the whole finishes, when the materials are finished; and you leave it standing to posterity, like some miniature Stonehenge, a perfect architectural enigma.¹

Carlyle was writing of Moore's long and full *Life of Byron*, where an unusually rich biographic opportunity was missed, not owing to

any definable defect in the writer's vision, but because he lacked capacity to co-ordinate his raw material. Moore had access to ample evidence, both documentary and oral. He was a personal friend of the poet, and was on intimate terms with other personal friends. Reports of eyewitnesses were at hand to corroborate or correct written testimony. He enjoyed literary experience although it was gained in other than biographic fields. But in his *Life of Byron* he paid scant attention to the mechanical conditions of true biographical perspective. The outcome was a maze without a plan.

Yet disastrous as is the biographic effect of the neglect of the mechanical perspective, a worse fate befalls biography when the biographic perspective is distorted by an error in the biographer's angle of moral or spiritual or intellectual observation. The masters of biography and of biographic perspective, Boswell, Johnson, Lockhart, Carlyle, and Froude, were very conscious of the dangers incidental to the defectively narrow angle of biographic observation, and their example teaches the all-important lesson of broad and accurate vision.

V

For purposes of detailed exposition here it may be convenient to substitute the short term 'bias' for the longer phrase 'distorting angle of observation'. My meaning will not be prejudiced by the exchange. The injurious forms of 'bias'¹ seem to me to fall under five main heads which, although they may at times appear to encroach on one another, have each clearly distinguishable features. There is firstly the 'family' bias which connotes short-sighted domestic partiality. Next comes the 'official' bias, which connotes undue respect for conventional formulae of public or social life. There is thirdly the 'ethical' bias, which condemns biography to serve exclusively the irrelevant purpose of moral edification. Nearly akin is the bias of unconditioned hero-worship which connotes undiluted panegyric and obsequious adulation. Finally there is the bias of the historian, which confuses the biographic aim with another only distantly akin to it. The 'historical' bias is calculated to repress unduly the element of personality which biographers exist to transmit.

The family bias, is best or worst discernible in biographies from a near kinsman's peri. The kinsman will rarely have made any previous experiment in the biographic art, and there is small likelihood that he has acquired any substantive architectonic faculty. The domestic biographer claims that his subject has been in life under his

direct observation, and that his intercourse has been of the most intimate kind; but these conditions create in themselves no absolute, nor adequate qualification for biographic enterprise. Those who live in domestic relation with eminent men rarely see in the true perspective what is most worthy of remark about them. They tend to set in the forefront of their picture his domesticities, his domestic virtues. They take a domestic pride in his public service, with the detail and significance of which they are usually very imperfectly acquainted. They have knowledge peculiar to themselves—a partial knowledge which is only of biographic value when it is thoroughly fused with the whole available stock of biographic material. It may sound harsh to say that biography has no place for the widow's tears or the orphans' cry. On the other hand the family bias often cherishes esoteric prejudices which may lead to the omission of essential facts. I have known biographies conceived in the distorting atmosphere of family prepossessions, which ignore the calling or status of the subject's parents, because, though these were quite creditable, they were humbler or more plebeian than the family bias found palatable. The uncorrected perspective of the family biographer often impels him to fashion a wooden idol, which may be adapted temporarily for domestic worship but can serve no larger and no lasting purpose.

VI

The second form of bias, which I term *the ethical or edificatory bias*, will sometimes ally itself with the domestic bias, but it also manifests itself apart and equally distorts right biographic perspective. Sound biography of virtuous and valiant men will inevitably stimulate virtue and valour in its readers, but the aim of biography is misconstrued if edification be its deliberate goal. Many worthy persons harbour the delusion that biography should avowedly and exclusively inculcate moral principles. On this showing, there should be habitually chosen for biographic treatment, only those men and women who could with any semblance of veracity be pictured as saints. Even so, the commemorative instinct, which biography exists to satisfy, will occasionally demand the admission of sinners to the biographic fold. The edificatory biographer will in that case be driven into one or other of two very dubious courses. The sins of his personage must be either so extenuated as to give the impression that he was a saint after all, or, if that device prove impracticable, the biographic theme must be contorted at all hazards into an awful example which by its repulsiveness shall keep the reader rooted in the path of virtue and orthodoxy •

But the edificatory bias will also work with far greater subtlety. In the bulk of biographic subjects there will be lack of such strongly marked characteristics as will allow the boldest of biographers to present his model in the single and simple guise of either saint or devil. The edificatory bias works less obtrusively but no less deleteriously in the biographic treatment, for example, of one, who, although he be assuredly possessed of all the normal virtues, pains the friendly and orthodox biographer by heterodox deviation from established creeds and conventional practices. I shall describe a case of this kind where prompt steps were taken to arrest the error of biographic vision due to the edificatory bias, by the production of a second biography which presented the true perspective. A useful opportunity is thus offered of studying both poison and antidote together, of examining the same subject in both true and false biographic lights.

John Sterling, an attractive man of some literary power and much philosophic curiosity, at the age of 28, after a distinguished career at Cambridge University and various adventures in search of a regular occupation, took Holy Orders in the Church of England and served a curacy for eight months. His ordination was an ill-judged and precipitate step, from which he quickly retreated. It left no material or substantive impression on the moral or intellectual development of his personality. His temperament was always vivacious, enterprising, and eminently sociable. His brief career had no lack of happiness, although he fell early a prey to consumptive disease, and died at the age of 38. Sterling stands on the border line which separates those who do and those who do not merit biographic commemoration. His literary experiments and his varied associations give him the benefit of the doubt, but only a very exceptional set of posthumous circumstances could have justly made him the hero of two biographies instead of one.

Within four years of his death Archdeacon Hare, Sterling's lifelong friend and at one time his College Tutor and religious mentor, published a memoir, impregnated past cure with the writer's idiosyncrasies which were wholly religious or theological. Hare's biographic vision was blurred by the edificatory bias. He represented Sterling's career as a tragedy of spiritual torment, as a pathetic illustration of the misery incident to religious doubt. Hare's biography of Sterling is for the most part an edifying exposition of the alleged wretchedness which comes to those who question orthodox tenets. Carlyle happened to be another close and very affectionate friend of Sterling. To his mind Hare's edificatory bias wholly belied Sterling's personality, and

gave an erroneous impression of the trend of his life's pilgrimage Carlyle retorted in a portrait from his own easel. It was a case of Johnson writing Boswell's life; but Carlyle almost emulated Boswell's pertinacious industry in collecting the needful material. The result was a comprehensive and complete record of Sterling's short life in a perspective, unembarrassed by Hare's prepossessions. All taint of morbidity or mawkishness is absent from Carlyle's canvas, while there is no exaggeration of the modest interests attaching to Sterling's character and exploits. The organization of fact is admirable. Sterling was at one time, like Carlyle himself, a disciple of Coleridge, and the master is incidentally portrayed from personal observation with an unrivalled sureness of touch. Such shadows as truth demanded in Sterling's portrait are there, and they illustrate the all-compelling justness of Carlyle's angle of observation. A little vignette, in which Carlyle depicts Sterling reading to him and to Mrs. Carlyle some modest poetic exercise, is worth quoting as proof that the biographer saw firmly and steadily all that there was to be seen of Sterling, and saw it whole. Carlyle's comment on Sterling's elocution runs thus: 'A dreary pulpit or even conventicle manner; that flattest moaning hoo-hoo of predetermined pathos, with a kind of rocking canter introduced by way of intonation, each stanza the exact fellow of the other, and the dull swing of the rocking-horse duly in each; no reading could be more unfavourable to Sterling's poetry than his own. Such a mode of reading, and indeed generally in a man of such vivacity the total absence of all gifts for play-acting or artistic mimicry in any kind was a noticeable point.' Carlyle's aim is not to edify, but to speak the biographer's truth as he knew it.

VII

The official bias is usually innocent of conscious edificatory intention. It chiefly shows itself in an excess of formal deference to the orthodoxies of social and official convention. The official bias implies a blind faith in official or social decorum. It forbids any challenge of what Carlyle called 'the respectabilities'. When Froude was preparing in Carlyle's lifetime Mrs. Carlyle's correspondence for publication, he invited Carlyle's opinion as to whether he ought not to omit some unflattering judgement on a public personage still living. Carlyle merely said *it would do the public personage no harm to know what a sensible woman thought of him'. Here you have a brutal defiance of the conventional reticence in biography to which the official bias clings.

It is largely in the supposed interest of men who have played a prominent part in public and social life and of the orthodoxies identified with public and social decorum that the official bias is cherished. But the official bias is not only seen to be operative in biographies of men who have held public office—biographies of dignitaries of the official hierarchies. It will often infect the biographies of writers and artists when they have, risen, as sometimes happens, on the stepping-stones of artistic genius to social eminence. It also tends to infect the biographic pens of those who themselves enjoy social eminence and are worshippers of the decorous orthodoxies, whatever may be their biographic themes. All who yield to the temptation of making a fetish of social convention are, when they turn biographers, the ready prey of the official bias.

The official bias is the foe of completeness; it sternly forbids the disclosures of the whole truth. It prides itself on a daring liberality when it suffers even scanty and partial glimpses of aught that lies behind the canonical scenes of officialdom. Unseemliness is often imputed by the official bias to any full notice of a public hero's private and personal predilections and experiences, as though biography can serve a genuine or satisfying purpose when a public man's idiosyncrasies or private activities are kept by the biographer behind a screen. Biography has small concern with the pomp and circumstance of public affairs or with social ceremony and pageantry. It is bound to attach a primary importance to the wires, often surprisingly slender, of motive and opportunity from which hang the great weights of public achievement. The perspective of biography is obviously all awry when private conduct and affairs are denied their share of the canvas or when they are imperfectly co-ordinated with public conduct and affairs. The demure voice of orthodoxy urges that it is above all things needful to preserve the dignity of a personage who has enjoyed public place and public renown. The fallacious cry works manifold disaster. A passion for sport, an indulgence in the lighter social pleasures will often be judged by the victims of the official bias so to detract from the solid and serious fame of greatness that leading interests and characteristics of the hero will be ignored or vaguely and inconspicuously suggested in the biography. Either by suppression or by diplomatic evasion the sensitive susceptibilities of officialism will be saved, and appearances will be firmly installed in the place of realities.

It is almost sufficient condemnation of the official bias that it should be irreconcilable with a familiar biographic law, which Plutarch framed and all his efficient disciples have loyally obeyed. 'Nor is it',

wrote Plutarch, *in the most distinguished achievements that man's personality may be best discerned; an act of small note, a short saying, a jest will distinguish the real character better than the greatest sieges and most decisive battles.' To Plutarch's 'sieges' and *battles', one might well add, the longest and most belauded tenures of high office in church or state, or the most exalted positions in the world of art, literature, or science. Perspective depends on the presence of veracious detail, of trifling circumstance. It is true that no more space should be allowed to a man's littlenesses, to his eccentricities, to his inconsistencies, to his lapses than is needed to convey a truthful impression of the whole personality. But for the biographer under the fatal sway of the official bias to dismiss altogether essential unheroic evidence is to substitute a wooden effigy or plaster of Paris model for a being of flesh and blood.

The official bias is widespread; its epidemic prevalence is mainly responsible for the fallacy which imputes to the biographer at large ghoulish propensities—a morbid desire to tumble about helpless corpses and even to tear them limb from limb. The poet Tennyson, who in early life derided 'sleek respectability' in biographic and other fields as a British idol, fell in later life under the obsession of the official bias. He read into Shakespeare's imprecation on his gravestone—'cursed be he that moves my bones'—a warning against all biography save of the official kind. Tennyson rather indiscriminately credited any free and unofficial biography of a distinguished man with a design to

Proclaim the faults he would not show ;
Break lock and seal; betray the trust;
Keep nothing sacred.

The poet added by way of ironical plea for unofficial frankness :

Tis but just
The many-headed beast should know.

Tennyson's taunt would be well merited by biography which is merely scurrilous and malicious, but that biographic species is so rare as to be negligible and censure is wasted upon it. The moral sense of all healthy communities is active enough to forbid its practice. In any case the moral energy of the community is better employed in a crusade against the official bias which fosters reticence at the expense of truth.

I forbear to give concrete illustrations of the working of the official bias and of the false errors in perspective which flow from it. I could mention a vast number of recent biographies of politicians, bishops,

professors, heads of colleges, and other dignitaries which justifies Carlyle's ejaculation of eighty years ago 'How delicate, how decent is English biography, bless its mealy mouth \ As a rule it were better for the public interest to have no biography at all than a biography which is conceived in the official spirit of evasion or suppression, which distorts the perspective by economizing truth.

VIII

I come now to the bias of hero-worship which commonly expresses itself in undiluted panegyric. The biographic aim of truthfulness disallows the claim to unvarying human perfection. Whenever that claim is accepted the biography becomes a beatific vision of a ghost instead of a living portrait of a human entity. Success in biography presumes sympathy with the biographic theme and admiration of heroic achievement. But mistrust is excited by the biographer who presents his hero in no mood other than the heroic, who never modulates the heroic key. The best practitioners in biography have readily checked the hero-worshipping distortion of biographic perspective, without injury, nay with benefit, to the just deserts of their subject. Boswell, when preparing his biography of Dr. Johnson, bluntly refused Miss Hannah More's request * to mitigate some of the asperities of our most revered and departed friend¹ on the righteous ground that he would 'not cut off the doctor's claws nor make his tiger a cat to please anybody \ Boswell's retort suggests the proper frame of mind in which the biographer should approach his work.

Boswell's admirable precept is couched in the tone of his master whose own biographic labours illustrate to convincing effect the virtues of candour in a biographer and the futilities of hero-worship. In his *lives of the Poets* strong personal prejudice occasionally provokes unwarranted censures, but, as a rule, Dr. Johnson is liberal in the praises of eminent achievement, and he is eminently fair in his estimates of mediocrity. He is prone to dwell on all the minute personal traits which he thinks to be essential to the presentation of a faithful likeness. The effect sometimes approaches the grotesque, but the biographic goal would not be reached otherwise. For example, the doctor harboured no doubt or disparagement of Swift's intellectual genius, but his appreciation would suffer had he omitted this living picture of Swift's person.

* The person of Swift had not many recommendations. He had a kind of muddy complexion, which, though he washed himself with

Oriental scrupulosity, did not look clear. He had a countenance sour and severe, which he seldom softened by any appearance of gaiety. He stubbornly resisted any tendency to laughter '.

IX

The historian's or historical bias stands on rather a different footing from the four other kinds of bias with which I have dealt. No less prejudicial than any of them to the right biographic perspective, it yet ministers *to* quite a different phase of distortion. A writer will never achieve the true biographic aim if he seek to serve at once two literary masters, History as well as Biography.

The distinction between history and biography lies so much on the surface that a confusion between them is barely justifiable. History may be compared to mechanics, the science which determines the power of bodies in the mass. Biography may be compared to chemistry, the science which analyses substances and explains their operation by their composition. The historian has to describe the aggregate movement of men, and the manner in which that aggregate movement moulds political or social events and institutions, and mainly political events and institutions, which, despite all recent argument to the contrary, remain the historian's ultimate concern. **

The biographer's concern with the crowd is secondary and subsidiary. From the mass of mankind he draws apart an unit who is in a decisive degree distinguishable from his neighbours. He submits him to minute examination, and the record of observation becomes a mirror of his exploits and character from the cradle to the grave. The historian looks at mankind through a field-glass: the biographer puts an individual man under a magnifying glass.

It goes without saying that the biographer must frequently appeal for aid to the historian. An intelligent knowledge of the historical environment—of the contemporary trend of the aggregate movement of men—is indispensable to the biographer, if he would portray in fitting perspective all the operations of his unit. One cannot detach a sovereign or a statesman from the political world in which he has his being. The circumstances of politics is the scenery of the statesman's biography. But it is the art of the biographer sternly to subordinate his scenery to his actors. He must never crowd his stage with upholstery and scenic apparatus that can only distract the spectators' attention from the proper interest of the piece. If you attempt the life of Mary Queen of Scots, you miss your aim when you obscure the human interest and personal adventure, in which her

career abounds, by grafting upon it an exhaustive exposition of the intricate relations of Scottish Presbyterians with Roman Catholics, or of Queen Elizabeth's tortuous foreign policy. These things are the bricks and mortar of history. Fragments of them may be needed as props in outlying portions of the biographical edifice, but even then they must be kept largely out of sight.

On these grounds I am afraid that that mass of laborious performances which bears the title of 'The Life and Times' of this or that celebrated person, calls, if not for censure, at any rate for faint praise. These weighty volumes can be classed neither with right history nor with right biography. The majority of them must be reckoned evidence of a misdirected zeal, of a misapprehension as to the true significance of biographic endeavour. Often such compilations are storehouses of raw material which are of great use to both biographer and historian in their own separate domains. But the perspective from the biographical point of view is seriously at fault.

X

I come now to my last point which touches a comprehensive condition of biographic perspective and one which I have not so far handled. The efficient accuracy of the biographer's angle of observation will be substantially influenced by the distance of time which intervenes between the death of the biographic subject and the preparation of the biography. It is an essential quality of biography that the career of which it treats should be complete. Biography of the right kind excludes from its scope careers of living men, careers which are incomplete, because death withholds the finishing touch. No man is fit subject for biography till he be dead. Living men have been made themes of so-called biographies, but the choice inspires a limitation which forbids compliance with cardinal conditions of the art. The so-called biographers of living public men rarely make pretence of submission to the great primary principles. Consciously or unconsciously they aim at presenting some restricted view or interpretation of a prominent person's character and action. The design is either to increase or to diminish his reputation at the time of writing. There is no large intention of unfettered portrayal of personality. Apart from the essential defect of the material owing to the withholding of death's completing touch, the so-called biography of a living man is commonly steeped in raw partisan colouring which lacks endurance. Whether the outcome be lavish panegyric or, as is sometimes but more rarely the case, lavish vilification, the hues of the picture quickly fade. The

ultimate hope of the writer is to create or stimulate sympathy or antipathy, an aspiration which is alien to conceptions of just biography. It is to the category of party pamphleteering that living biography may be logically relegated. It may stir a transient interest. It will in any case go to swell the heap of raw material which the true biographer will have to sift. But in itself the biography of a living man lacks biographic vitality.

The intervention of death alone brings the career within the lawful range of biography. It is not easy to state with precision the interval of time which should separate the operation of death from the production of the biographic record? There is a widely held belief that a biographer invites failure unless that interval be long, unless at least one generation has passed away before the biography be attempted. The inquiry reminds one of Pope's ironical discussion as to the number of years which is needed to convert an author who enjoys contemporary fame into a classic? Is there any better hope of fixing the exact point of time when a dead hero grows ripe for biography?

Shall we or shall we not, account him so,
Who dy'd perhaps, an hundred years ago?

Suppose he wants a year will you compound?
And for a memoir deem him safe and sound.

While seeking some general definition, one may not demand too rigorous an enactment:

We shall not quarrel for a year or two;
By courtesy of England, he may do.

It would seem at first sight that two at least of the forms of bias to which I have called attention, the family and the official bias, will enjoy freer scope for their evil work when the interval is short, than when it is long. The bias of hero-worship, too, may do the perspective greater harm when the hero has lately passed from life than when his death is a remote event. At any rate the family bias and the official bias can scarcely exert their full force save when persons are still alive to cherish first-hand memories of the hero. There seems plausibility, moreover, in the verdict that posterity takes a genuine interest in the description of a man's career only when its atmosphere is purged of the distorting influence of contemporary feeling or prejudice. The disturbing mists of partiality are more difficult to disperse or even penetrate while the partners or eye-witnesses of the man's activities survive.

On the other hand, there are wellnigh insuperable difficulties *to* be encountered if a life be delayed * till interest and envy are at an end'. Among sources of biographic information the personal witness will always hold the first rank. In every case there will be details of importance to efficient biography which live in the memory of friends and colleagues, and with lapse of time will either perish or will survive in an inexact and hazy tradition. The personal knowledge which gives biography its opportunity of completeness is * growing every day less, and in a short time is lost for ever \ , On such grounds the motto of biography which seeks to satisfy the primary principles of the art would appear to be * the sooner the better' rather than ' the later the better '.

This is substantially the creed of Dr. Johnson, who is a very high authority, if not the final oracle, on most points of biographic theory and practice. Dr. Johnson's earliest performance in the art concerned itself with Richard Savage, a poet of modest attainments, whose career was variously chequered. Johnson lived in close personal intercourse with Savage, and cherished a friendly feeling which, despite its sincerity, did not underrate his defects of character. Savage died on 31st July, 1743. A bare week elapsed before Dr. Johnson, in an anonymous letter to the *GentlemanCs Magazine*, stated that the poet's 'life will be speedily published by a person who was favoured by his confidence'. Johnson's complete and satisfying biography was published in the following February, within seven months of the death of the subject. Johnson's *Life of Savage* is a model of what the biographic commemoration of a star of small magnitude should be. It is a faithful yet candid narrative, extenuating nothing, and of course setting nothing down in malice. It owes wellnigh all its excellence to the promptness with which it was taken in hand.

Froude's *Life of Carlyle*, in spite of the storms of controversy which still beat about the book, supplies evidence to much the same effect. Froude, who was the close personal friend of Carlyle for the last thirty-two years of Carlyle's life and was his literary executor, published his full biography within three years of Carlyle's death. Froude's method is a combination of the methods of Bos well and Lockhart. It gives very practical effect to the biographic precepts of frank sincerity which Carlyle formulated and repeated with characteristic emphasis. It is no discredit to the biography that some of Froude's readers deemed Carlyle to be hoist by his biographer with his own petard. The outcry which Carlyle's friends raised against Froude's directness of speech was a tribute to his freedom from the

various biases of domestic partiality, moral edification, officialism, hero-worship which were calculated in Carlyle's tried judgement to ruin the perspective of biography, and to reduce the art to futility.

In his biographic portrayal of Carlyle Froude suppresses none of Carlyle's angularities of temper, of his sharpnesses of tongue, of his defective sympathies, of his self-absorption. Froude painted the shadows darkly. But they do the perspective no wrong, for the lights are also strong, and glow with the reflections of direct personal scrutiny. The* portrait finally leaves a convincing impression of living^g truth which a postponement of the work would have imperilled and in all likelihood would have frustrated.

There really seems little disagreement among the best practitioners as to the serious risks of delay in the preparation of biography. Boswell began his *Life of Johnson* within a few months of the Doctor's death, and published it, despite its bulk, within seven years—before any serious inroad had been made on Johnson's circle as it was in his day. Five years intervened between Sir Walter Scott's death and the appearance of Lockhart's voluminous record. In recent times the interval has tended to grow even briefer. Lord Morley, one of my most distinguished predecessors in the presidency of this Association, lately described as *pernicious counsel' the familiar protest against the publication of a biography until the subject's death was forty or fifty years old. His own exhaustive *Life of Gladstone*, in much of which the biographer is himself the indispensable personal witness, was written within five years of the statesman's demise. The current tendency seems, indeed, to indicate a progressive abbreviation of the interval between the death of a distinguished personage and the composition of a biography. In the last three or four years there have been published some six or seven full memoirs of prominent persons who died less than two or three years before the appearance of the biography. It is to be admitted that some of these works show in active and deleterious operation many of the forms of bias against which I have declaimed. But there is no clear proof that a delay of twice or thrice the duration would have exorcised the evil, while it is certain that a long postponement would have entailed the loss of personal testimony. All the biographic experience of our generation confirms the conclusions that the first-hand reminiscence of living contemporaries is the least dispensable ingredient, and that the ever-threatening distortions of perspective are due to causes by no means invariably traceable to the chronological conditions of production. Broadly speaking, despite the dangers to which the true

perspective is always liable, the balance of advantage seems to incline towards early as contrasted with late biography. A lost opportunity of an early biography may never be recovered at a late epoch. The wisdom of the world would have benefited to the end of time had Thomas Heywood fulfilled his promise of a biography of his friend and contemporary, William Shakespeare, when the great dramatist was recently deceased.

Again, if the commemorative instinct continue *to be active in the case of one who receives early biographic commemoration, a later generation may ask for a fresh biographic experiment on a more satisfying scale and in a juster perspective. Fresh documentary material may well become available in the long passage of years and may give a new significance to the information already accessible. At the same time, every late biographic effort will suffer unless the personal witness has been enlisted in good time in the biographic service.

XI

I fear that much that I have said may be reckoned by many to be 'counsels of perfection'. Yet the examples of Johnson, Boswell, Carlyle, and Froude prove that such 'counsels of perfection' have been repeatedly turned to practical account by those who enjoy a genuine biographic faculty. Some of the familiar forms of bias which I have censured—domestic partiality and hero-worship, for example—will often be blameless, if not praiseworthy, propensities, when they flourish outside the peculiar domain of biographic effort. But the biographers, who are unable when at work to hold such impulses in check, can hope for no salvation; they will 'come like shadows, so depart.'

It is easier to preach than to practise. But the time is appropriate to overhaul our conceptions of biography as of wellnigh all other conceptions. The great events which are stirring all our minds give the commemorative instinct of all nations—not alone of our nation—a vital energy, and a range for exercise, exceeding anything which has been previously known. Biography will be called on—nay, is being called upon owing to the premature ending of so many lives of high promise on the battlefields of land, sea, and air—to perform its peculiar commemorative function on a vaster scale than ever before. In due time the statesmen and commanders who are controlling the nations' and the world's destinies will themselves submit, at the summons of the commemorative instinct, to biographic scrutiny. All who have studied biographic principles in the past owe it to the

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future to do what is possible to ensure in the next era the observance of biographic truth. None should be held to be qualified for biographic service whose range of observation is unduly restricted, whose vision is distorted by such forms of bias as are inimical to the true biographic perspective. Biography can only justly satisfy the commemorative instinct of humanity when it is the fruit of conscientious industry combined with the power of coherent and vivid delineation. Just and enduring biography means also sagacity and charity, dignity and measure, but the breath of its life is candour.

Tis not enough taste, judgment, learning join ;
In all you speak, let truth and candour shine.

