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## Concluding Reflections

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In the last couple of decades, many historians have sought to move beyond the longstanding and probably futile quest to establish the precise place of biography in history and instead explore a number of new ways of thinking about the relationship between history and individual lives. One of these ways focuses on historians themselves and on the different kinds of insights that an exploration of their lives can offer. As one can see in this volume, several different approaches have been taken to this question, with some historians turning to write their own autobiographies, and exploring the broader historical understanding that can be gained from describing and analysing one's own experience, while others have sought rather to see whether a study of the lives of particular historians, either individually or in groups, offers a new understanding of the kinds of history that they wrote and of broader developments within the discipline.

The increasing numbers of historians who have turned their attention to autobiography in recent years has been widely noted, both by other historians and by scholars of biography. Paul John Eakin and Jeremy Popkin have both pointed to the importance of historical training and the sense of being part of a disciplinary community evident in much of this work. Autobiographers with a trained historical consciousness, in Eakin's view, may be uniquely capable of 'explaining what it means to be living in history' and of offering both a personal account of major historical developments and a sense of their impact on particular lives, families and

communities.<sup>1</sup> Australian historians, as Popkin points out, have taken to the writing of autobiography with particular enthusiasm.<sup>2</sup> It has offered some, such as David Walker, a way to write a new kind of history in which personal and family memory could be drawn on more extensively as his loss of sight made other kinds of research more difficult, or others, such as Tim Bonyhady and Graeme Davison, a way to explore aspects of a family past that reflected wider historical patterns or placed Australian experiences into an unexpected European or global historical context.<sup>3</sup> Women have been significant players here too, as both Ann Moyal and Sheila Fitzpatrick make clear.<sup>4</sup> Moyal's survey, in this volume, of the Australian women historians who have written autobiography shows both how rich and extensive this literature is.

While one approach of historians to the writing of autobiography has centred on the extra insights their training might offer them in describing the world in which they lived, others have turned their attention rather to questions about the writing of history and whether and how it differs from writing autobiography. For Manning Clark, as Mark McKenna argues in this volume, it was impossible to write history without writing autobiography – although this approach was not one that was well received by his colleagues. But other historians have rather emphasised the challenges that writing autobiography or memoir posed to their understanding of history and to their sense of themselves as writers. This question is addressed by Fitzpatrick in this volume in her engaging discussion of the problems that she encountered as she moved from writing history, in the course of which she had always stressed her objectivity and impartiality, to writing memoir, which sometimes depended on fallible memory – and made her much more aware of herself as a writer and of the kinds of response she sought to produce in her readers. Fitzpatrick's essay also offers a useful reminder of the challenges to once dominant notions of objectivity in history that came to the fore in the 1980s and 1990s, as women and people of colour began insisting not only on

1 Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 145–51, doi.org/10.1515/9781400820641.

2 Jeremy D. Popkin, *History, Historians, & Autobiography* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

3 David Walker, *Not Dark Yet: A Personal History* (Sydney: Giramondo, 2011); Tim Bonyhady, *Good Living Street: The Fortunes of my Viennese Family* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011); Graeme Davison, *Lost Relations: Fortunes of my Family in Australia's Golden Age* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2015).

4 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *My Father's Daughter: Memories of an Australian Childhood* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010); Ann Moyal, *A Woman of Influence: Science, Men & History* (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2014).

being included as objects of historical inquiry, but on the importance of their perspectives and critiques of forms of objectivity that saw them as insignificant.

One strand of historian's autobiography that has become prominent in some American, British and particularly French historical writing, but is not explored here, centres on autobiography as a way for historians to explain the link between their personal lives and the historical questions they chose to address. It is an approach closely connected to Pierre Nora, who sought to collect autobiographical essays that examined their work within the framework of their lives and beliefs for his collection, *Essais d'ego-histoire*.<sup>5</sup> Not all of those who wrote for Nora accepted his sense that the life and the beliefs and commitments of a historian did, or should, have an impact on their work. However, a number of those who worked with him found the approach to be a very stimulating one and went on to write at much greater length about the close connection between their political experiences and beliefs and their historical writing. Luisa Passerini and Annie Kriegel stand out as historians who have done major work here.<sup>6</sup> Inevitably, this discussion has raised issues related to those dealt with by Fitzpatrick concerning memory and its place in the writing of history.

The sense of exercising a disciplinary training in writing autobiography and memoir, or of writing as a member of a professional or disciplinary group has often meant that historians' autobiographies eschew the intimate or very personal aspects of their lives and concentrate rather on broader social, political and institutional questions. This is not always the case, however. Two of the really outstanding historians' autobiographies, Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) and, more recently, Barbara Taylor's *The Last Asylum* (2014),<sup>7</sup> have both drawn on painful and intimate experiences to explore major social questions: the impact not only of poverty, but also of state agencies on family relationships in Steedman's case, and the end of the asylum and its painful consequences for those with mental illness in Taylor's. These works show very clearly the importance of historical training and understanding in the writing of lives in ways that enable those lives to explore historical

5 Pierre Nora, ed., *Essais d'ego-histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).

6 Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1996); Annie Kriegel, *Ce que j'ai cru comprendre* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1991).

7 Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago, 1986); Barbara Taylor, *The Last Asylum: A Memoir of Madness* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014).

subjectivities and central questions in family and personal life as well as to offer insights into particular periods and places in broad social and political terms.

Moving from autobiography to biography, one can see from this volume how large and varied a field it is. A number of prominent historians have been the subject of excellent and expansive biographies that explore their lives, works and personalities. Mark McKenna's prize-winning biography of Manning Clark is a case in point, as is Maxine Berg's wonderful biography of Eileen Power, or Adam Sisman's biographies of A.J.P. Taylor and H.R. Trevor-Roper.<sup>8</sup> All of these biographies in their different ways add significantly to our understanding of the work of their subjects: the reasons why, and the way in which, they chose to study particular periods or problems; the influences exercised on them by teachers, friends or colleagues; the development of their methods and approaches. There is a question here, however, as to whether the biographical treatment provided by historians to their subjects when the subjects are historians is different in kind from the treatment of any other subject whose biography is written by a trained historian. Whether these works are simply good contemporary intellectual biographies, whose subjects simply happen to be historians, rather than something different in kind is difficult to resolve.

At the same time, it is clear that focusing on the lives of historians currently offers a new way of writing the history of history, both as a discipline and as a profession. Rather than focusing on institutions or changing scholarly methods, this new approach via both individual and collective biography is concerned with the impact of particular forms of family life and education, of personal outlook and especially of social networks on the work of historians. This line of enquiry allows ample scope for exploring the very different ways of writing history of near contemporaries – Strachey and Trevelyan, for example – and relating it to their personalities, the way they chose to live and their understanding of what writing history entailed. It does also serve to highlight the links between historians and the wider social and political world they inhabited or which served to furnish their imagination. As several essays in this

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8 Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2011); Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History: Eileen Power, 1886–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Adam Sisman, *A.J.P. Taylor: A Biography* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994); Sisman, *Hugh Trevor-Roper: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010).

volume show, a biographical approach often underlines the importance of national stories and of the ways in which individual historians imagined them or imagined themselves in relationship to them.

The fallibility of memory is something that many autobiographers have to deal with. It is, as Sheila Fitzpatrick makes clear, particularly troubling for a historian, accustomed to questioning sources and checking facts, who is seeking in this case to use his or her own memory as an archive. Recognition of this difficulty in recording and writing their own lives, even for the most scrupulous of historians, alongside a much broader interest in the many challenges involved in understanding and writing the lives of others, does seem to have had a significant impact on how historians see their biographical subjects – especially on how they see the various ploys those subjects use to confuse later researchers. Where once the emphasis for the historian writing biography would have been placed squarely on unmasking the lies that a person told about him or herself and on revealing the *truth*, there now seems to be much more interest in how the subject constructed his or her own life, even if the construction was clearly fictitious. The fantasies and the creation of myths by a person have increasingly come to be seen as an important aspect of their lives and as something that needs to be understood, rather than exposed.

In a similar way, the false leads carefully constructed for later biographers by figures as different from each other as Manning Clark and Joseph Stalin become a source of interest and even of amusement. For the historian as writer, interested in the creative process of writing, it is as important to tell the reader how the clue was laid, discovered and then disentangled and what it is intended to hide or overlay, as it is to ascertain the actual truth of an event or a situation. What one begins to see here then is not just, as Fitzpatrick suggests, that the writing of autobiography by historians challenges many common assumptions about the writing of history but also that this wide and ever-growing interest in historians' autobiography and biography will fundamentally change the ways in which we see, think about and write history.

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