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Biography and Historiography: Mutual Evidentiary and Interdisciplinary Considerations

Biography is history, depends on history, and strengthens and enriches history. In turn, all history is biography. History could hardly exist without biographical insights—without the texture of human endeavor that emanates from a full appreciation of human motivation, the real or perceived constraints on human action, and exogenous influences on human behavior. Social forces are important, but they act on and through individuals. Structural and cultural variables are important, but individuals pull the levers of structure and act within or against cultural norms.

Wars are started and prosecuted by women and men, not by invisible forces. Plagues are resisted, or not, by men and women, and by leaders. Corporate achievements and economic panics are human-made and human-resolved, rarely the product purely of inexorable external agents. Scientific and political advances result from individual achievement set within a collaborative context (as Janet Browne reminds us herein), not random symbiosis. The hands of individuals are everywhere, usually visible but equally often buried beneath the detritus of economic, social, or climatic consideration. Only committed biographers who are consummate historians can sift the silt of the past, remote or recent, effectively to develop testable hypotheses about decisive moments and those who shaped them. Only biographers who are steeped in the historiography of particular chronological periods and geographical arenas can explain why influential individuals did what they did when they did, and with what exact aims in mind.

Most of the time, history is the product of rational actors

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choosing rationally, no matter how anomic or formless the result. Admittedly, only in a minority of cases can historians (and biographers) discern what unnamed individuals in their vast number did, or did not do, to shape the currents of past eras, or how they and theirs responded to exogenous shocks like the plague, volcanic eruptions, and global cooling and warming. It is the task of biographers (and historians) who embed their subjects in the swirling forces of a time to demonstrate how those subjects mastered those forces, or were rendered ineffective by them.

Biography is not a method, or an art form, separate from history. Ideally, biographies are as integral to historiography as are the best standard social or economic histories. Biographical treatments must never be divorced from their temporal or spatial contexts. Choice, and rational action, occurs only within such a framework. The individual, in other words, is always within the historical web, not without it—whatever she or he, or biographers, might think.

AN INTRINSICALLY INTERDISCIPLINARY ENDEAVOR Although narrative history can be written without the employment of a full range of interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary investigatory methods, effective biography demands more than the piling up of facts. (Michael Prestwich suggests, in an essay in this special issue, that biography is the purest form of narrative history. He follows Stone and White in offering narrative as a reaction to statistics and jargon, but this biographer differs.¹) Subjects navigate the watery currents, sometimes staying midstream, sometimes veering to one bank or another. Why do they shift course? What are the economic, the political, or the psychological or psychosocial factors to which their actions were subordinate? Are we able to employ advanced or simple statistical techniques to show how their actions or decisions were unusual, or subject to episodic fluctuation? Did imbibed medicines or narcotics distort their equilibria? Were they subject to metabolic disorders, like George III, or severe heart conditions, like Cecil Rhodes? How much were the tides of history parted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's infirmity, or

1 Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on an Old History," *Past & Present*, 85 (1979), 4–23; Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), 40; Richard T. Vann, "The Reception of Hayden White," *History & Theory*, XXXVII (1998), 148. For a discussion of my differences with them, please see below.

President Reagan's incipient senility? It is incumbent on the biographer, as a contributor to history, to assemble the evidence, weigh its significance, and examine appropriate counterfactuals. Why did Britain's leaders impose partition on India/Pakistan? What were in their individual and collective minds, especially Prime Minister Clement Attlee's, and why did Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah not create a better result? What drove them each, and all?

Good biographies examine every facet of their subjects' lives, turning them this way and that, and subjecting them to all manner of interdisciplinary tests (as Prestwich did to his medieval English kings.) Trying to understand Rhodes and the impact that he exerted upon his contemporaries and his era compelled me to investigate geology, mining engineering, finance and financial manipulation, rhetoric (Rhodes was also a politician and a political schemer), agriculture, horticulture, and a host of Rhodes' other pursuits and influences as a rapidly rising entrepreneur in the farther reaches of South Africa. I even had to learn something about citrus-tree breeding; Rhodes introduced orange growing to South Africa. Additionally, since he taught South Africans to dip their sheep, I had to learn something about epizootic diseases and their vectors.²

Biography becomes intellectual history in that we have to know all of the influences, across many dimensions, on an individual's life and work. From whom did Charles Darwin, Jinnah, Nehru, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Sir Stewart Gore-Browne, Rhodes, and all of the others derive their inspiration and ideas? Who taught Rhodes at Oxford and Edwin Ginn at Tufts University, then in its infancy? What did they read? What kinds of reading material accompanied Joseph Thomson during his arduous and lengthy treks across the continent of Africa? Was Thomson influenced by David Livingstone or by the writings of more contemporary Britons? Rhodes was an omnivorous reader, tearing favorite books apart to give pages to his friends so that they could read what he had just finished, and follow his trains of thought.

It was necessary, too, in the cases of my Africa-related subjects, that I understood the intricacies of contemporary race relations, and how Rhodes (and others) changed them for the worse. I had to place Rhodes within free masonry, and to know, more than

2 Rotberg (with Miles F. Shore), *The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power* (New York, 1988).

superficially, about the Oxford in which he studied desultorily and about the malt industry in the town of his father's vicarage.

Because Rhodes was such a towering influence among his peers in Africa and Europe, and because his global political and economic stature belied his physical and ostensible mental gifts, I could not begin to analyze what Rhodes accomplished, and how he did it, despite so few natural advantages, without enlisting the collaboration of a noted psychoanalyst. Together we sought to discern the contours of Rhodes' psyche. How else could we authenticate his gifts and explain his counterintuitive power? How else could we begin to sketch his command of others, especially others with considerably different backgrounds? How else could we understand his unrivaled ability to extend an empire in the face of innumerable obstacles and simultaneously to be both exploiter and benefactor?

Motives and psyches are obviously important. Biography is sterile if it becomes a recitation of events or—as in some biographical treatments—if readers are plunged headfirst into the deep vat of stale, jumbled arcania. What a subject eats, meal after meal, or all of the little towns that he or she visits, and what she does there, may occasionally be germane. But usually such detail is pointless. Readers would prefer to learn how a hearty appetite or a mania for peregrination changed a discovery or somehow ennobled an act of courage. Did it make a real difference that President Wilson went on a long national tour in 1919 to campaign for a ratification of the charter of the League of Nations, only to suffer a fatal stroke? Was it significant, or game changing, that Rhodes, like his contemporaries, consumed huge quantities of food and drink, and puffed cigarettes constantly? I tried to aggregate Rhodes' consumption patterns to see if he were a sometime inebriate and if not, whether his premature death were nevertheless a plausible result of heavy drinking, overeating, and tobacco addiction.

Did Rhodes suffer from syphilis? Was Darwin a hypochondriac? If so, in either case, did it matter? One of my other biographees, Thomson, the African explorer, suffered acutely and died young from cystitis, schistosomiasis (bilharzia), and other parasites at the age of thirty-six. We can assume that during his last long trek through what are now Malawi, Zambia, and the Congo Copperbelt, he was too weak and harried to explain to African chiefs about, or even to gain their authentic signatures for, the mass of land concessions and treaties that eventually were to justify

Britain's subsequent annexation of the area. We know that Ginn, the late nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century American publisher and peace advocate, was said to have lost some of his eyesight during his university years, but we have no hard evidence, and we can hardly tell from his subsequent successes as a corporate executive and forceful public-opinion leader that reduced vision was a determining variable.³

Clearly, John Chilembwe, the early twentieth-century Malawian reverend and rebel, was debilitated by asthma, which may have driven him to “live free or die”—to commence a hopeless insurrection against British colonial rule. That at least was a hypothesis that I explored in an essay and a part of a book about him.⁴ Likewise, in a biography of Gore-Browne, a British settler turned nationalist politician and friend of Africans in twentieth-century Zambia, it was important to explore the extent to which his sexual preferences influenced his politics, and whether deep relations with a maiden aunt also determined his approach to political choices in a colony emerging from colonial domination.⁵

In the Gore-Browne case, I also had to understand colonial Zambian society in all of its ramifications, and set his military career in southern Africa in its proper perspective. But because Gore-Browne also distinguished himself in World War I as a young officer in the trenches, I was obliged to write an exhaustive chapter on him at the Somme, and to prepare a birds-eye view of the war. Similarly, just as Rhodes' life involved citrus growing (and much else), Ginn was a major patron of architects and planning. Hence, I had to veer away from understanding his peace advocacy to learn something about American city planning and architecture at the end of the nineteenth century.

THE NATURE OF EVIDENCE Biographers and historians depend on a rich combination of evidentiary material. In a pre-Internet age, they preferred first-person written sources—everything from letters to and from principals and others to diaries, journals, logs, and scrawled notes—as well as oral interviews with the subjects

3 *Idem*, *A Leadership for Peace: How Edwin Ginn Tried to Change the World* (Stanford, 2007).

4 *Idem*, “Psychological Stress and the Question of Identity: Chilembwe’s Revolt Reconsidered,” in *idem* and Ali A. Mazrui (eds.), *Protest and Power in Black Africa* (New York, 1970), 337–369. Chilembwe also featured in a part of *idem*, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965).

5 *Idem*, *Black Heart: Gore-Browne and the Politics of Multiracial Zambia* (Berkeley, 1978).

in question. Second-person accounts and reflections are helpful, especially from unimpeachable sources, and even third-person reminiscences—by persons who never knew the subject in question directly—are occasionally suggestive. Browne consulted the immense treasure trove of Darwin Papers at the University of Cambridge and drew on the thirty or so earlier biographies. Riall used early biographies contemporary in time to Garibaldi, as well as his own romanticized memoirs. Speeches by a subject can provide important clues, as can articles and books written by a subject for publication, though not always. Telegrams (I sifted hundreds of them when writing Rhodes' life) are a poor substitute for more intimate musings, but they can be valuable nevertheless.

Of my four biographies, one was blessed with abundant first-person written documentation and interviews. The other three were studies in making the best of sparse material or hardly any at all. Each had its problems that were unique to the individual, but common to the biographer's lot. We the contributors to this special issue have each had to contend with too much or too little material. Having too little intimate evidence prevents a biographer from accounting for a subject's actions with any certainty, or from knowing the many pressures that impinged on a subject before or during either crises or ordinary times. Letters or diaries need not be revealing to be conclusive, but without any such direct evidence, biographers must necessarily make inferences—sometimes unsatisfactorily—from crumbled shards and scattered clues. Abundant documentation can yield such fundamental information as where a subject was, geographically, at a crucial moment, or what a subject intended to do. Absent hard clues, biographers must triangulate and make educated guesses. But when they concoct conversations, they go much too far.

Gore-Browne, the subject of my second biography, wrote at least once a day at great length for sixty years to his aunt, Dame Ethel Locke-King, who resided nearly always in England. She wrote faithfully back to him every day. During World War I, when Gore-Browne was in the trenches in Flanders fields, he wrote letters and postcards twice or thrice daily to Dame Ethel, as well as to many others. After several visits to Gore-Browne's mock Tuscan mansion in a remote part of rural Zambia (for reasons other than fact finding), he handed me all of his papers, including letters to and from his late aunt, and urged me to write his story.

For his biography, I thus had many more letters, reports, news clippings, cartoons, oral interviews, and so on than could easily be assimilated. I also accumulated written and oral reports about Gore-Browne by others. I knew him only in his last years. Earlier, he had been a soldier in South Africa and member of an important boundary-setting commission, before serving as the leading representative in the local colonial legislature. He advocated for Africans and for improved race relations well before it was popular to do so. He befriended and worked with the first African insurgents in Zambia, assisted their movements, and, after independence, received Zambian honors and a state funeral. Gore-Browne was a formidable politician and formidable intellectual champion, despite his aristocratic upbringing, of early decolonization. Assuming that his lengthy correspondence and detailed diaries were reliable, I came to know him well, and even to glimpse his romantic, and highly complicated, love life. Fortunately, too, Gore-Browne wrote superbly, with a fine turn of phrase. So did his aunt.

My first task was to catalog everything and then, after other projects were completed and Gore-Browne had died, to make sense of it all. The abundant documentation was not necessarily unimpeachable. Much of it could have been fantasy or embroidery. But, when carefully cross-checked against the history of the times (some of which I had recently researched and written), and when tested by other memories and memoirs and by the colonial and postcolonial record, it largely proved fair and more than just a single story. I indeed had the makings of *Black Heart: Gore-Browne and the Politics of Multiracial Zambia*. Not everything that could have been said remained in the book after the publishers had trimmed it, and the idea that Gore-Browne's letters could be edited and published on their own sadly disappeared as the old-fashioned publishing market slipped away. Nonetheless, the experience of writing a biography rich enough to be compressed, rather than one needing to be stretched and inferred from slim hints, was a blessing. It meant that I could be sure, as a biographer, that I really had captured my subject and that little was likely have been hidden from me, and thus from readers (except that which the publisher cut).

My three other biographies—of Thomson, Rhodes, and Ginn—were as different from each other, and from that of Gore-Browne, as could be imagined. But they were similar in one key respect: In each case, the documentary evidence was less full than

even minimally desirable. In none of these three cases did I have more than occasional personal correspondence or a diary to flesh out the official record. (Prestwich's essay in this collection discusses this same problem with regard to medieval times.) Thus, to decide what any of these men were thinking—what their emotions were, what drove them to act as they did, and what their worries were—was far more difficult than it had been with Gore-Browne. Biographers always have to infer, but Thomson, Rhodes, and Ginn left me major riddles to solve without their direct assistance. None of them had committed more than very limited introspection to paper, or transmitted their private thoughts to others.

Even Rhodes, who conquered Africa, the imperial world, mining, and high finance, left no personal papers or diaries that reflected on his love life; on his interactions with major global players (Queen Victoria, Lord Rosebery, Paul Kruger, and Chief Lobengula); on his intimate or near-intimate political and business associates (Leander Starr Jameson, Alfred Beit, John Blades Currey, Neville Pickering, John X. Merriman, James Rose Innes, Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr, Olive Schreiner, and Princess Radziwill); on his many notable acquaintances from a feverishly brief life at Oxford; or on his experiences in the diamond fields, in the early days of railroad, and on his creation of the British South Africa Company. Among mounds of telegrams and extensive official correspondence, only a few shreds of personal reflection could help me to draw conclusions about Rhodes' goals and (controversial) methods of operation. Despite an assiduous scouring of archives and private repositories across the world, and a perusal of all of the memoirs of Rhodes' contemporaries, my biography of Rhodes was forced to depend on indirect evidence, the conjectures of colleagues, and psychoanalytically suggestive probabilities to provide the fullest possible portrait of one of the most dynamic, successful, influential buccaneers of the late imperial period.

But regardless of whether Rhodes ever uttered an introspective thought that was effectively remembered, whether he neglected to put his private musings on paper, or whether he purposely destroyed intimate reflections, as his biographer, I had to work with the otherwise ample account of his actions to present an appropriately comprehensive and nuanced evaluation of his myriad achievements and failures. I had to suggest why Rhodes

may have taken that particular decisive turning rather than another equally plausible one. Notwithstanding the absence of direct internal intimations, I had to provide as complete an analysis as possible of Rhodes' role in the Anglo-Boer War, in the Jameson Raid, in the assault on the lands of the Shona and the Ndebele, in various mining exploration and stock-watering schemes, and in the creation of the scholarships that carry his name.

When writing about Gore-Browne, I benefited from a cornucopia of personal and public information. When writing about Rhodes, I possessed a mass of public information and only inklings about his personal life. But when writing my first biography, of Thomson, the explorer of Africa, I struggled to present an effective and responsible portrait despite a great dearth of material that reflected on his inner life. My primary sources were Thomson's own published writings about his arduous and extensive travels across Africa from 1878 to 1891 and those few letters to, from, and about him that appeared in the official archives of the Foreign Office and the Royal Geographical Society.⁶

Thomson followed in the virtual footsteps of Livingstone but was a "gentle" and "considerate" explorer in an age when Henry Stanley's kind of swashbuckling was more the norm. He traveled about 15,000 miles, more than any other explorer of Africa after Livingstone and Stanley, and traversed what are now modern Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, Malawi, Nigeria, Zambia, and Morocco during six epic exploration and treaty-signing travels. He became prominent at the age of twenty after leading a Royal Geographical Society exploration across southern Tanzania to Lakes Rukwa and Tanzania, and ascertaining that the sources of the Nile River were not to be found in the various Congolese and Tanzanian tributaries that drained into the Great Rift Valley and Lake Tanzania. Originally second-in-command, he assumed control of the expedition (150 people) when its first leader unexpectedly died. That someone so young and inexperienced (with no previous African acquaintance) could assume the reins so seamlessly and cross great swathes of country and dangerous terrain without any disputes, disagreements, or deaths was a remarkable achievement. Thomson traversed nearly 3,000 miles on this, his first, journey.

6 *Idem*, *Joseph Thomson and the Exploration of Africa* (New York, 1971).

I was intrigued by Thomson's youthful accomplishments, but who was he? Detailed information about his childhood in a small village near Dumfries, in Scotland, was sparse, even in and around Dumfries. So was the full record of his geological training at the University of Edinburgh, or traces of his friendship there with James Barrie—who wrote *Peter Pan*—and his decision to seek employment with the Royal Geographical Society in Africa. It seems little more than chance that he emerged as a robust and well-respected independent actor in the crowded field of African investigation. But what equipped him to take advantage of the opportunity and subsequently (as a proven traveler) to accomplish an acclaimed traverse of Kenya from Mombasa to Lake Victoria and back (climbing Kilimanjaro and Kenya en route), to go up the Rovuma River in Mozambique in search of coal deposits for the Sultan of Zanzibar, to battle across Malawi and Zambia obtaining signatures from African chiefs in order to obtain treaty rights for Rhodes, and to conquer Morocco's Atlas Mountains from Fez? Additionally, Thomson made geological discoveries, collected ferns and other flora new to science, identified zoologically new fauna (such as *Gazella Thomsonie*), and even collected lacustrine conchological specimens for the British Museum.

Since answers to these and similar questions were difficult to obtain given the lack of revealing journal entries or letters to close friends (Thomson seems to have had few such friends and no desire to confide private ideas to paper), I had to develop answers based on official correspondence from the field or from Scotland to the Society and to British emissaries living in Zanzibar. There were some commentaries by British officials in Zanzibar, and a few from London, but not many. Thomson usually moved so rapidly that his life was a blur despite steady achievements. He never had enough time, he thought, to tarry and examine matters in great detail, and he usually rushed through the complex and linguistically challenging African continent without absorbing, or contemplating, all that it had to offer. I had to suggest answers to key behavioral questions from his reports back to the Society, from his correspondence with diplomats, and from the pages of his published travels and a racy novel about Africa that he wrote after crossing Masailand. Thomson turned out to be a worthy study despite the deep digging into fugitive sources and the tentative conclusions about his motivations that his biography required.

Ginn had no connection to Africa (or to Rhodes), although he, like Rhodes, became wealthy and prominent during the 1890s and early 1900s. Ginn was a self-made success in Boston who became, like Andrew Carnegie, an early corporate campaigner for peace and disarmament as well as for a world court and a world police force. He was an innovator in textbook publishing, introducing Shakespeare, new mathematics, and science to high school and university curricula. He led a comparatively monochromatic and proper corporate life until he remarried in the 1890s (in his late fifties) and, possibly prodded by his second wife and by renowned preachers in Boston, became an unexpected beacon of the American peace movement. Ultimately, he spent part of his fortune on promoting world peace in the 1900s and establishing the World Peace Foundation in 1910.

Research assistants and I scoured university and corporate depositories for the mass of his official Ginn & Co papers that must once have existed, and for his private correspondence. From a limited supply of unpublished letters discovered in the archives of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and elsewhere, we were able to conclude that Ginn had been a compulsive correspondent with a penchant for soliciting advice and support from myriad colleagues and acquaintances throughout the United States and Canada and, eventually, Europe. But much of that vast trove had disappeared. Even the official company archives had vanished, probably when Ginn & Co had been sold to the Xerox Corp. in 1968.

A biography in this case, as in the case of Thomson, had to fall back upon Ginn's published letters to a small-town local newspaper in Massachusetts, to his occasional speeches in public forums, to a handful of letters from his son, and to a problematical reminiscence by an aggrieved daughter-in-law. There was nothing by, to, or reflective of the feelings of his second wife. Yet, I was sure from the conjunction of circumstances that she had greatly influenced his global attitudes and his decision to become a champion of peace. As a result, I could be suggestive in this particular arena, although never conclusive. Just as it was impossible to prove Rhodes' personal predilections from the available evidence, so was it impossible to demonstrate conclusively that Ginn transformed himself from a Brahmin publisher into an avant-garde peacenik solely because of Francesca Ginn. Nor was it possible, absent his

own reflections, to be sure why—late in life, after hunting and fishing for decades—he became a fervent apostle for vegetarianism and for children’s toys that were nonmartial: “No guns for boys,” he declaimed to the horror of his colleagues and contemporaries.

Estimating Ginn’s wealth through the probate record was comparatively easy compared to other necessary probes. Yet, writing the history of his wildly successful company, which began out of a backpack during the U.S. Civil War and prospered in the 1880s and 1890s when Ginn & Co became the largest stand-alone text publisher in the country, proved difficult without the concern’s own archives. Nor could I do little more than speculate about Ginn’s relations with Melvil E. Dewey. Why did Ginn decide to join Dewey’s forlorn attempt to metricize the U.S. measurement system while disdaining Dewey’s decimal system, which transformed library shelving practices?

I learned that Ginn played golf with former President William Howard Taft, corresponded with President Theodore Roosevelt, and was well known to governors, senators, and representatives from Massachusetts. Ginn lobbied against the Spanish-American War in Washington, and sponsored large peace congresses in New York and Boston, as well as in Europe. But what drove him? What impelled him to establish the International School of Peace as a precursor to the World Peace Foundation (which still exists)? What did he think that he had accomplished as his life ebbed away on the eve of World War I?

I was able to answer those kinds of questions more confidently regarding the life and drives of Gore-Browne, who engagingly and lavishly set out plausible answers almost ad nauseam for six decades. I also had access to letters by Lady Gore-Browne, and interviews with her, with their daughters, and with Gore-Browne himself. I knew many of Gore-Browne’s contemporaries, and interviewed them tellingly. But my other biographical subjects were long dead; even someone so famous in his lifetime as Rhodes had left more clues than answers. Rhodes’ notoriety—his susceptibility to strong criticism as well as fawning adulation—and his relationship with writers like Rudyard Kipling and statesmen and opinion makers like Lord Salisbury and Lord Alfred Milner—may have placed opinions and speculations about him in various degrees of circulation, but what he himself was thinking remained something of a mystery.

Ultimately, biographers must make do with the hands (and the evidence) that they are dealt, however difficult or imprecise. They must ferret out whatever morsels of information can be obtained from bland or unlikely sources. They are obliged to explore obscure caches of information and investigate fugitive testimonies, all with the object of a richer understanding of motive and method. For that reason, biographers have been known to test Napoleon's hair for arsenic or disinter Alexander's bones, although most of us who are faced with uncertainty make our deductions from more mundane but equally suggestive evidence. If they ask the right questions, however, biographers may be able to suggest reasonably definitive answers.

I am confident that Rhodes was ambivalent about the Jameson Raid and did not favor it. I am fairly sure that Rhodes manipulated the sale of mining shares, and probably gulled certain kinds of investors. I know that Ginn competed for peace-advocacy leadership with Carnegie, but I can only suppose that he established the World Peace Foundation in part because of that rivalry. I know that Thomson needed paid employment in 1890 when he went to work for Rhodes and that he was in a hurry to persuade chiefs to sign pre-printed treaties transferring land to Rhodes' company, but not that he was aware of the unethical, or at least presumptuous, nature of his actions. Gore-Browne mulled over each of his dilemmas repeatedly in hand-written missives. As a biographer, I naturally wished that my other subjects had turned now and then to a penned reflection. But none did, although Rhodes fired off innumerable single line telegrams. "Get treaties," he cabled Thomson, without saying why and how.

MAKING BIOGRAPHY BETTER HISTORY Prestwich quotes Elton's denigrating views of biography and biographers. Historians "should not suppose that in writing biography [they are] writing history." He also notes that Blanning and Cannadine say that biographers do not "write anything that is recognisable as serious history."⁷ Lucy Riall quotes Lockyer and others who suggest that biography is an illegitimate "suspect enterprise." Some scholars say, Prestwich reports, that biography rarely transforms historical un-

7 Geoffrey R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (London, 1967), 169; Timothy C. W. Blanning and David Cannadine (eds.) *History and Biography: Essays in Honour of Derek Beales* (Cambridge, 1996), 1.

derstanding. Stanley Wolpert, in another essay in this special issue, reports that many of his colleagues in the UCLA history department regarded Fawn Brodie's several biographies as outside of, or less than, history, even though his own work had always been both heavily biographical and consummately historical.⁸

Stone supposed that all of the narrative needs of biography to establish the chronology of individuals inhibited proper history, but he was misled both about biography as narrative and about how imaginative, carefully constructed biographical treatments fed history and were history. Susan Ware and Prestwich have both written biographies that were other than conventional narratives. Historians who write biographically need not follow a narrative model and, like Prestwich, need not even start with births or follow the temporal pulse of a life. My article-length approach to Chilembwe was sharply focused, and hardly biographical in the chronological sense.

The Chilembwe essay, and good biographies, solve a problem and answer penetrating questions. They need not flow along a standard narrative path. When writing about Rhodes, I was attempting to learn what enabled a person of unprepossessing demeanor, a rambling manner, a high-pitched squeaky voice, and no unusual conventional intellectual abilities or attainments to mobilize a legion of followers on a rough, distant frontier and attract the loyalty and cooperation of financiers and politicians much more able and persuasive than was he. Was it an especial quality of emotional intelligence? Was it some rustic charisma? Or the unusual force of a young man's vision? Or certitude, expressed strongly, over and over? *The Founder* was organized to explore those questions in order to ascertain Rhodes' role as a maker of history. The narration of all aspects of his abbreviated life was secondary in design to an unraveling of the conundrum that his actions and his ability to manipulate others posed so dramatically. Indeed, some historians (at least) clearly write biography in order to understand and write history, not because biography is the antithesis of, or some sort of substitute for, history.

Riall approached Garibaldi in a similar questioning manner: "How did a revolutionary outsider from a humble background"

8 Roger Lockyer, "Writing Historical Biography," *History Today*, XXXIV (November, 1984), 46.

achieve uncommon greatness and the ability to motivate almost everyone with whom he came into contact? Garibaldi had a “prodigious talent” for political mobilization, and like Rhodes, the gift of emotional intelligence. Yet, was Garibaldi more or less than Giuseppe Mazzini’s tool? Was he merely the beneficiary of the print revolution? Or did he (consciously) feed an ongoing romantic impulse in contemporary Italy?

But does not biography sometimes ennoble or uplift a distinctive individual beyond his or her historical significance? Clearly not Nehru or Jinnah, two subjects of Wolpert, nor Browne’s Darwin, my Rhodes, or Prestwich’s Edward I. But “yes” in the case of the Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s unknown Martha Ballard (*A Midwife’s Tale* [New York, 1990]), and possibly “yes” again in the cases of Thomson, whose exploits across Africa might have been cited merely in passing were it not for a biography, and of Gore-Browne.⁹ In the last case, my history of nationalism in Zambia (written before the biography) gave Gore-Browne his due. But with the publication of the biography, Gore-Browne’s fuller role in the making of modern Zambia, and in and on the frontiers of colonial rule in Africa, could be parsed more completely. In that sense, Gore-Browne was elevated not inappropriately from the supporting historical cast to one of the main leads of the modern African drama of decolonization.

Similar kinds of biographical exploration obviously contribute to fresh reconsiderations of history. Ginn’s role in the American peace movement and anti-war dialogue before World War I was not known at all before the biography. Now he can take his place in a history of the era just as Ware’s biography of Molly Dewson—*Partner and I* (New Haven, 1987)—Jacqueline Dowd Hall’s *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching* (New York, 1979), and Barbara Sicherman’s *Alice Hamilton: A Life in Letters* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984) enabled those women (and many others) to find their rightful places in the historiography of a place or an era. Even in the case of persons who were already historically prominent—

9 In 1961, I discovered an unknown manuscript by George Simeon Mwase in the Malawi archives. In it, Mwase described his own life and explained Chilembwe’s rebellion. When it was published as *Strike a Blow and Die: A Narrative of Race Relations in Colonial Africa* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), it elevated Mwase from the ranks of an unknown player in to an important expositor of Malawi’s foremost anticolonial struggle.

Darwin, Nehru, Margaret Sanger, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the English kings—writing about them biographically should help us to understand their historical contributions more completely and to enable revisionist interpretations to be considered. Rhodes had attracted many hagiographers and a few biographers before me. Now that he is centered within a full biography, critics and admirers can decide, based on evidence and explanation, whether his place in the history of southern Africa, and in British imperialism, should be as large or as significant as it was once thought to be.

Only trained historians can write satisfying historical biography. As Browne, Prestwich, Riall, Ware, and Wolpert imply with genuine modesty, learned historians are well equipped to situate the life and accomplishments of individual actors within the larger forces of regional and global history: They can marry endogenous with exogenous elements; they can evaluate the accuracy of what a subject chooses to say or not to say about actions taken or not taken; and they alone can plumb the depths of individual motivation and match it against consequence and result. Because of his intimate acquaintance with pre- and post-partition South Asia, Wolpert was ideally placed to know when Jinnah or Nehru was embroidering or revealing reality (or various realities). Steeped in the court rolls and charters of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Prestwich could prepare a compelling biography of an early English king.

Biographies of well-known subjects (as Ware discovered) are easier to publish and sell than biographies of historically influential but lesser-known individuals. Yet the fact that a biography is a good read, and sells, need not make it a satisfying biography for historians or for history. Too many biographies abound with superficial treatments of the currents of history; too many repeat the mistakes and stories of predecessors without grounding them in new research or testing received notions against accurate representations. I was the fourteenth or so biographer of Rhodes. All but two of my counterparts passed on false rumors obtained from the writings of their predecessors. Like the “telephone” game, one biographer after another had taken as gospel the telling (which proved not so telling) anecdotes embedded in those earlier volumes.

THE CRAFT There are innumerable popular, ahistorical, biographies just as there are unhistorical historians who put “the integrity

of the discipline of history at risk” by violating the conventions of historiography.¹⁰ If it is desirable to try to distinguish historical biography from its popular and populist partner, then it is necessary to set some standards.

First and foremost, historical biographies are evidentially based. They fabricate no conversations, avoid as much conjecture as possible, and explore what is known and unknown. They hew close to their sources and cite them religiously. They eschew vague attributions, and understand what constitutes an appropriate inference. They display both facts and counterfactuals, explore what did not happen as well as what did, and they are not afraid to stipulate the limits of their knowledge. Whiggish biographies are out. The best biographies, as the best histories, are inherently comparative. Darwin, Wallace, and Spengler belong together even though only one of them may serve as the main subject. Rhodes could not appear on stage, in other words, without Beit, Alfred Milner, Hofmeyr, Merriman, and others crowding the footlights.

Hagiography is not biography, and must be avoided at all costs. Even though biographers often grow attached to their subjects—such intimacy being a natural by-product of intensive research—they need not be impartial about them, as Wolpert worries. Historical biographers should be intent on polishing their works, not the character of their subjects. Hard-nosed historians never show bias; they set out successes and failures with equanimity. “Warts and all” is a good policy, a biographical objective eminently capable of being achieved. Readers (and reviewers) wanted me to tell them whether Rhodes was good or evil, but those choices were oversimplified. I said in *The Founder*, and often when speaking to groups in person, that he was both good and evil, and why. That is the biographer’s task, especially the why and the how.

CHOOSING A SUBJECT Prestwich, Ware, and Wolpert discuss how they chose their subjects. Prestwich had written about kingly practice and kingly maneuvering before he was requested, serendipitously, to become a kingly biographer. Wolpert’s India and Pakistan were his concerns and fascinations. In many senses,

10 Gordon Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (New York, 2008), 104.

he was obliged to become the biographer of men that he knew because they were the modern creators of his chosen geographical subjects as well as the architects of their eras in India and Pakistan. Like Wolpert and Prestwich, I report that three of my biographical subjects chose me: Gore-Browne, directly and in person, and Thomson and Rhodes because of my desire to unlock the many secrets of colonial and postcolonial southern Africa. Rhodes was at the center of every conceivable colonial southern African web; Thomson worked for Rhodes, as did Harry Johnston, Chilembwe, African chiliasts and politicians, and many others in early Malawi and Zambia who already figured largely in my original research. Gore-Browne also fit neatly into the mosaic of decolonization, an early historical pursuit. Similarly, Thomson was part of another larger historical investigation, an attempt to appreciate to what extent the European discovery of inner Africa depended largely on African collaboration and guidance. Those studies appeared in my edited *Africa and Its Explorers: Motives, Methods, and Impact* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), one chapter of which featured Thomson.

As Ware explains in her essay in this special issue, she has pursued many biographical directions: political; social; revealingly personal; the well-known and the less well-known; individual, dual, and collective treatments; and, most recently, a sports personality. Each of these biographies is situated squarely within the new discipline of feminist biography. “The key is a focus on gender as a primary influence on women’s lives,” she writes in her essay herein. The male model of success will not necessarily work for women since their public lives, she asserts, rarely unfolded in straightforward ways. Riall, agreeing, writes that “male-defined categories” have always driven biography, which “seems unable to describe and account for the shape of most women’s lives in the past.”

Ware also rightly declares, “More than anything else, the hallmark of feminist biography is close attention to the connections between a subject’s personal and professional lives.” The second half of her last sentence could well apply to all biographies. Nothing, although the medievalists might throw up their writing hands, strengthens a biography more than the unity of professional and personal elements. The first can hardly exist in a vacuum without the second, as Wolpert’s attempt to bring Lady Mountbatten into

his life of Nehru should make clear. Browne, analogously, sets Darwin firmly in the metaphorical bosom of his family, friends, colleagues, and rivals. Likewise, Rhodes' desire to surround himself with men, and to keep women out of his inner circle, may have helped him to realize many of his worldly objectives as well as to shape the direction of his scholarships. Achievements are orchestrated by agents, and agents are affected by what occurs outside the office suite as much as by what occurs within it. We need only interrogate the biographers of Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and William J. Clinton—or Martha Ballard and other hitherto unsung heroines and heroes.

Is biography an exercise in elitism? Ulrich and others have shown that it need not be, and that Stone need not have worried too much about incorporating the lives of ordinary men and women into historical reconstructions. Great women and men do not accomplish their good or middling works alone; any solid biography shows the work of its principal subject interwoven with that of other people. The history of a period flows through the lives of biographical subjects. Even Amelia Earhart's story, which Ware wrote, was hardly a solo adventure.¹¹ Nor was that of someone at the center of the American peace movement, like Ginn, or even that of a peripatetic explorer like Thomson.

As several of my fellow contributors to this special issue make clear, a potential biographical subject may present her- or himself through the discovery of previously unknown caches of documents or interviews, or through the revelation that the achievements of certain individuals have been overlooked or minimized more than they should be. Scholarship moves forward and uncovers neglected persons and trends. So does revisionism, even in the overcrowded arena of presidential studies. Possibly, the most compelling reason for writing a biography is an authorial desire to understand an individual's role in bringing about change—in altering destiny.

Writing good biographies means writing good histories. The same evidentiary rules apply. Although nearly all biography is narrative, it need not be, and other problem-based or thematically focused

11 Susan Ware, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism* (New York, 1993).

methods are equally effective. Moreover, the category “biography” covers collective treatments of several individuals or groups, and need not be restricted in theory or in practice to elites. Usually, first-person or near first-person sources are the basis of biographies, but imaginative researchers have created biographical treatments from disparate and irregular resources.

Biographers, as historians, are able to discover motivation, and to place their subjects fully in the context of their political, social, and economic times. They have often been responsible for recovering the force of forgotten human agency—for rescuing critical and overlooked human efforts in the surge of historical changes. Without biographies (and biographers) of all kinds, especially those that are sensitive and responsible, the historical enterprise would be far less informed, and far less complete.