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Medieval Biography Biography is undeniably popular. Large and weighty lives of the eminent, and not so eminent, weigh down many a bookshelf. As a case in point, remarkable success has been achieved by the author of a biography about an eighteenth-century duchess. Even politicians turn to write biographies in their spare time. “Today, biography is in the ascendant,” writes a historian of the genre. The hard evidence of book sales, however, fails to support the thesis of the rise in biography. Figures taken from *Publishers Weekly* show that in the United States, it was in the 1920s that biographies appeared most frequently in lists of the top ten best selling books. Taken together, biography and autobiography sold their best in the 1940s.¹

The perception that biography has become both more reputable and more successful, however, is hard to deny. The existence of a biographers’ club, which unusually awards prizes for book proposals rather than published works, is evidence of the confidence of authors in their craft. Biography has attracted increasing academic and critical interest. For example, *The Journal of Historical Biography* was founded in 2007. One suggestion made in it is that biography lies at the very core of history, involving as it does the actions of men and women, the process of “being human.” “Lacking a sense of who we are, of where we have come from and where we are going, we turn to biography as compensation.” If biography were not regarded as important, it would not have been possible to mobilize an army of historians, 9,800 strong, to write the 55,000 lives included in the magnificent *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.²

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1 Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (New York, 1998). For biographies written by politicians, see, for example, William Hague, *William Pitt the Younger* (New York, 2005); *idem*, *William Wilberforce* (London, 2007); Douglas Hurd, *Sir Robert Peel* (London, 2007). Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 292; Susan Currie and Donna Brien, “Mythbusting Publishing: Questioning the ‘Runaway Popularity’ of Published Biography and Other Life Writing,” *M/C Journal*, XI (Aug. 2008)—<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/43>.

2 For the biographers’ club, see <http://www.biographersclub.co.uk/>. Donald Wright, “Reflections on Donald Creighton and the Appeal of Biography,” *Journal of Historical Biogra-*

The case against biography was put by Elton: “Even at its best biography is a poor way of writing history.” Two of his reasons for this judgment were (1) that no individual was important enough for the history of an age to be written around him or her and (2) that the chronological limits of a life rarely define a historical period. To explain an individual requires a biographer to examine a subject’s private relationships and analyze his or her formative years, matters which are not of any wide historical significance. According to Elton, “In so far as [biography] is history, it tends to underline the potential weakness of narrative.” Moreover, if a biographer should range more extensively, beyond the narrow confines of a subject’s life, “he fails in his own task.” A historian “should not suppose that in writing biography he is writing history.”³

Broadly, the argument against biography is that history is about much more than the lives of individuals; it is about the study of political, social, economic, and intellectual movements that are much more than the sum of those involved in them. There is a general distrust of the biographical genre among academic historians. Witness the comment, made in 1996, “Few historians today trouble themselves with large-scale, full-dress biographies. Even fewer biographers write anything that is recognisable as serious history.” One historian admitted to the fear that to be labeled a biographer “marked the doom of one’s reputation in the historical profession.”⁴

Elton’s views are supported by the fact that historians are not trained to write biography. Most biographies take a narrative form, an approach that students are taught to avoid. One university history department states baldly in its advice to students, “Beware narrative: As a general rule, if you find yourself telling a story, you have probably drifted from the point.” Another advises, “The analytical and expository voice will always prove more effective than the narrative mode of writing.” History doctorates

phy, 1 (2007), 22–23; H. Colin G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (New York, 2004); <http://www.oup.com/oxforddnb/info/prelims/intro/intro5/#outcomes>.

3 Geoffrey R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (New York, 1967), 169.

4 For a distinguished medievalist’s expression of this point about history and biography, see Kenneth B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (New York, 1973), ix. Timothy C. W. Blanning and David Cannadine (eds.), *History and Biography, Essays in Honour of Derek Beales* (New York, 1996), 1; William S. McFeely, “Preface,” in Mary Rhiel and David B. Suchoff (eds.), *The Seductions of Biography* (London, 1996), x.

rarely take a biographical or narrative form. Admittedly, one British university offers a Master of Arts course in “life writing,” but it is in a department of literature and creative writing, not history. Likewise, at another university, the politics and international relations department, not history, offers a course in political biography.⁵

There are good reasons why medieval historians, in particular, should not write biographies; they face greater difficulties than historians of most other periods because of the remote nature of the evidence, which limits the insights into character and motivation that historians of more recent periods can expect to provide. In this article, I want to look at the issues raised by biographical approaches to the history of England during the period about which I have written, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁶

CONTEMPORARY EVIDENCE A great deal of evidence of a public character survives for England from these two centuries: vast numbers of government instructions of all kinds, a great many charters recording land grants, a profusion of court records, and a considerable number of estate accounts. Careers can be traced through offices held, and lands acquired. In contrast to this wealth of documentation, however, remarkably little material of a personal nature is available—no collections of private correspondence, such as the fifteenth-century Paston letters, nor much contemporary writing that could be described as biographical. There was no tradition of writing king’s lives. Jean de Joinville wrote a celebrated life of Louis IX of France, but his brother Geoffrey, who served Edward I, did not do the same for the English king. The *Life of Edward II*—probably written by a royal official but emphatically not an official work—acquired its title only in the eighteenth century. It was a chronicle of the reign, not a life of the

5 For the caveat about narrative, see the website of The University of Otago, New Zealand: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/history/studyskills/essays.html>; The University of Lancaster: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/haywardp/hist213/writing.htm>. See for example the list of theses in progress at British universities in 2007, <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Resources/Theses/tpmedieval.html#e>. Of all the theses listed in medieval history, only three titles suggest a biographical approach. The two universities with biography-like courses are the Universities of East Anglia and Nottingham. See <http://www1.uea.ac.uk/cm/home/schools/hum/lit/Courses/Postgraduate> and <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/politics/TeachingStudy/CourseDetails.php>.

6 Prestwich, “English Government Records, 1250–1330,” and Paul D. A. Harvey, “English Estate Records, 1250–1330,” in Richard H. Britnell (ed.), *Pragmatic Literacy East and West, 1200–1330* (Woodbridge, 1997), 95–118, provide a brief survey of this material.

king. A herald wrote a life of the Black Prince, but there was none of his father, Edward III. The lengthy thirteenth-century verse life of a great magnate, William Marshal, found no imitators. One unusual chronicle, the *Scalacronica*, was written by a knight, Thomas Gray, who made extensive use of the tales that his father had told him, but this work did not amount to a biography. In biographical terms, Scottish history is far better served than English history, given the great verse life of Robert Bruce by John Barbour.⁷

What, then, led me to write a biography of Edward I, one of England's most important medieval kings? In the late 1960s, Douglas—the general editor of the brand-new English Monarchs series published by Methuen, of which the first volume, Douglas' own *William I*, appeared in 1966—approached me to write such a book. Because the task of writing a life of Edward I seemed too daunting at an early stage in my career, however, I decided on a different course. My approach to what I regarded, and still regard, as some of the most important questions about the English state in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries was an analytical one. In my first book, which appeared in 1972 and drew heavily from my doctoral thesis, I looked at the problems of war and its organization under Edward I strictly thematically, offering chapters on the royal household, the cavalry, the infantry, taxation, credit finance, and so forth. The need to fit these various elements into a chronological framework was provided by a brisk, brief narrative chapter at the outset of the book. The advantage of this strategy was that I was able to set the agenda that I wanted, asking a set of specific questions, without feeling any obligation to cover areas in which I had little interest.⁸

When, in the mid 1970s, I was asked to write a book on the first three Edwards, it never occurred to me to take a strictly biographical approach to the monarchs, though it would have been

7 Nicolas Vincent, "The Strange Case of the Missing Biographies: The Lives of the Plantagenet Kings of England 1154–1272," in David Bates, Julia C. Crick, and Sarah Hamilton (eds.), *Writing Medieval Biography 750–1250* (Woodbridge, 2006), 237–257; Prestwich, *Edward I* (Berkeley, 1988), 108; Wendy R. Childs (ed.), *Vita Edwardi Secundi* (New York, 2005); Diana B. Tyson (ed.), *La Vie du Prince Noir, by Chandos Herald* (Tübingen, 1975); P. Meyer (ed.), *L'Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal* (Paris, 1891–1901), 3v.; Andy C. King (ed.), *Sir Thomas Gray, Scalacronica 1272–1363* (Woodbridge, 2005); Archibald A. M. Duncan (ed.), *John Barbour, The Bruce* (Edinburgh, 1997).

8 David C. Douglas, *William the Conqueror* (Berkeley, 1966); Prestwich, *War, Politics and Finance under Edward I* (Totowa, N.J., 1972).

possible, no doubt, to do so. Instead, the book was a more general study of the development of the English state, the influence of war providing a major theme. *The Three Edwards* provided a chronological account of events, but chapters on parliament, the nobility, the economy, and war and chivalry also gave it a strong analytical element. The characters of the three kings were discussed, but the book provided little in terms of biographical details.⁹

THEORETICAL ISSUES I was then approached again to write about Edward I in the English Monarchs series; sadly, the original author had died. This time I agreed to the proposal, and the result appeared in 1988. Had biography become more acceptable? It has been suggested that the English Monarchs series was influential in promoting the revival of biographical studies. Douglas, however, had provided no manifesto for the biographical approach, and the pace at which the volumes were produced does not suggest any great initial enthusiasm for the project. For many years, the publishers showed no great anxiety to carry the project to fruition. The series, however, had an undoubted reputation, and to write in it carried a considerable cachet. The volumes had a scholarly format and style; these studies were intended to be definitive.¹⁰

Although in its inception, the series was not seen as a revival of biography, in the longer term it may well have served to give biography a good name. One other book from the same publishers, Barrow's influential study of Robert Bruce, also demonstrated the value of a biographical approach to medieval history, though it was much more than a biography; it also provided an examination of "the community of the realm" in Scotland, and how rule was exercised in its name. The book demonstrated the way in which a theme could inform a biography, providing it with argument and intellectual vigor.¹¹

9 Prestwich, *The Three Edwards: War and State in England, 1272–1377* (New York, 1980).

10 Prestwich, *Edward I*. Bates, Crick, and Hamilton (eds.), *Writing Medieval Biography 750–1250*, 12, wrongly attributes the English Monarchs series to Yale University Press during the 1970s. The initial publishers, Eyre and Spottiswoode, who started the series in the 1960s, were eventually incorporated by Methuen, which lost enthusiasm for the project. After the publication of Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (London, 1997), Yale University Press assumed the series, which has thrived ever since.

11 Geoffrey W. S. Barrow, *Robert Bruce & the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2005; orig. pub. London, 1965), xiv. Initially published by Eyre and Spottiswoode, like the English Monarchs series, the book "threatened to go into limbo" but was rescued by Edinburgh University Press.

Biography is a form, perhaps the purest form, of narrative history. By the time that I began writing *Edward I*, an intellectual justification for a narrative approach had appeared. In 1979, Stone wrote, “A belated recognition of the importance of power, of personal political decisions by individuals, of the chances of battle, have forced historians back to the narrative mode, whether they like it or not.” He saw narrative, in part, as a reaction to “indigestible statistical tables, dry analytical argument, and jargon-ridden prose.” Stone also suggested that it was a response to the early use of computing by historians who operated in teams, used punch cards, and produced unintelligible printouts. “Scientific” history, based on the analysis of reams of economic data, had failed to fulfill the dreams of its proponents. Economic determinism was proving unacceptable; after all, suggested Stone, “contraception, for example, is clearly as much a product of a state of mind as it is of economic circumstances.” A decline in ideological commitment was a further element. Narrative offered a return to “stylistic elegance, wit and aphorism.”¹²

Yet, although I recognized the significance of the factors that Stone identified, a life of Edward I did not fit his bill particularly well. Stone, for example, advocated the exploration of the impact of sex and violence on individuals, and he explained that the revival of narrative, as he observed it, was concerned with the “lives and feelings and behaviour of the poor and obscure.” That program hardly fitted a biography of a medieval king. Nor was Edward’s state of mind concerned with contraception; he had at least seventeen children.¹³

At the same time that Stone’s article on the revival of narrative appeared, as I was thinking and writing about Edward I, new ideas about the nature of historical writing, influenced by “the linguistic turn,” also began to circulate. Hayden White discussed, in abstruse terms, the significance of “the text,” and emphasized the importance of narrative in history. None of this discourse had, as far as I am aware, the slightest impact on me. I was shamefully unaware of White’s work until the 1990s. I wrote in blissful ignorance of the theoretical ideas that proponents doubtless hoped

12 Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on an Old History,” *Past & Present*, 85 (1979), 4, 9, 10, 15, 19.

13 Stone, “Revival of Narrative,” 23. It would not have been anachronistic to discuss contraception. See Peter A. Biller, “Birth Control in the West in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries,” *Past & Present*, 114 (1982), 3–26

were transforming the historian's task. Much of this postmodernist discussion consists of relatively simple ideas dressed up in tortuous and obscure language, in contrast to the writing of history, in which complex ideas should be expressed as clearly and straightforwardly as possible. White's concern lest "any learned discipline lose its occult character," and thus presumably become comprehensible, is not one that I share. Had I read that "the knowledge provided by narrative history is that which results from the testing of the systems of meaning production originally elaborated in myth and refined in the alembic of the hypothetical mode of fictional articulation," I would have been at once impressed, bemused, and left little the wiser.¹⁴

For me, history is about explaining, illuminating, and interpreting the past. To do so requires the collection of evidence, followed by a process of evaluating it, sorting it, and employing it to test different hypotheses. Some of the questions to ask arise from reading what other historians have written; others arise out of the evidence itself. Elements of the inquiry can also derive from personal preoccupations and interests. The results of these processes need to be written as clearly as possible, but, in the end, there are no final right answers. Much of the evidence is capable of bearing more than one interpretation, and new questions can always be asked of it. The ideas of philosophers of history have had no place in this practice for me. I am, I suspect, guilty, as White charged Elton and J. H. Hexter, of displaying "an eclecticism that is a manifestation of a certain suspicion of theory itself as an impediment to the proper practice of historical inquiry, conceived as empirical inquiry."¹⁵

The problems involved in planning and writing *Edward I*

14 Richard T. Vann, "The Reception of Hayden White," *History and Theory*, XXXVII (1998), observes the way that "historians have almost entirely tuned out" of White's work, despite its influence in other fields (148), and notes the problems that some historians have with White's use of language (150). Nancy F. Partner, "Hayden White (and the Content and the Form and Everyone Else) at the AHA," *History and Theory*, XXXVI (1997) (a theme issue), described Vann's analysis as demonstrating "a relentless course of obscurity for all of Hayden White's work among professional historians" (104). Useful guides to postmodernism are provided by Callum G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (Harlow, 2005); by Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London, 1997). For trenchant criticism, see Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London, 1997), and for a more recent valuable discussion, Ian Mortimer, "What Isn't History? The Nature and Enjoyment of History in the Twenty-First Century," *History*, XLIII (2008), 454–474. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), 40, 45.

15 *Ibid.*, 31.

were many. One was the question of whether to adopt a strictly narrative approach, faced also by Warren in his *Henry II*, published in the same series, “for the several stories proceed not consecutively, but concurrently, and are interrelated.” Fearing that the historian “in chasing many hares catches none,” he chose to tell his several stories in separate sections of his book. I had no doubt that a broadly chronological framework was necessary, but I was concerned that a narrative would do no more than tell the story, without providing sufficient explanation. Certain elements needed analytical treatment if the reader were to make any sense of a complex reign. A chapter on the king and his family met the personal element required of a biography. The royal household, an important element in government, was treated separately, and other chapters dealt with Edward’s legislation, with parliament, and with council. I discussed the Welsh and Scottish wars individually, rather than integrating them into a more general narrative.¹⁶

The book was more a history of England in the time of Edward I than a pure biography, though it lacked the examination of economic development and of the church that an overall history would have included, and, not surprisingly, it did not cover again, in detail, ground that I had already covered in *War, Politics and Finance*. The range of topics was, nonetheless, daunting. The legal history involved proved particularly formidable to examine; I was concerned whether I had sufficient expertise to deal properly with the changes to the law during Edward’s reign.

SOURCES The main problem facing a biographer dealing with the medieval period, however, is a lack of the kind of evidence that reveals personality with any clarity. As Tout, the great historian of medieval royal administration, explained, “It is one of the standing difficulties of the mediaeval historian, who has to depend on record sources for his material, that he can seldom visualise with any clearness the personalities of the men whose external careers he is able to trace in almost superabundant detail.” Personal comments like those written in a letter by William Gold—a late fourteenth-century English mercenary who fought with Sir John Hawkwood in Italy—after his mistress had abandoned him, are highly exceptional: “Love overcomes all things, it even prostrates the stout,

16 W. Lewis Warren, *Henry II* (Berkeley, 1973).

making them impatient, taking all heart from them, even casting down into the depths the summits of tall towers, suggesting strife so that it drags them into deadly duel, as has happened to me because of this Janet.” Edward I left no such traces; yet the personality of the king had to be a central element in the book. It would have been possible to adopt the solution that was to be employed by Gillingham in his study of Richard I: “This is not a book about Richard’s inner life,” he wrote, explaining that he was not concerned with what the king was really like, but with how contemporaries viewed him. I chose, however, to try to use the limited evidence at hand to assess the king’s character.¹⁷

Account books provided some information. Payment of substantial compensation to a squire assaulted by Edward at the wedding of one of the king’s daughters suggests that the king had a violent temper. A bet placed with his laundress may indicate that he could be playful. Few personal letters survive, but an intriguing draft of one shows the king changing an initial reference to canine excrement to a misquotation from one of the most obscene works of medieval literature to survive. Edward’s correspondence with his mother during her old age suggests that they were close but argumentative. The few remarks attributed to Edward in contemporary sources intimate a firm and decisive turn of phrase. In 1297, Edward told the earl of Norfolk, “By God, Sir Earl, either you go or hang,” when the latter would not agree to go to fight in Gascony. Although this command has the ring of truth about it, Walter of Guisborough, the chronicler who reported it, was prone to invent dialogue.¹⁸

Much of the evidence can be interpreted in different ways. It is often argued that Edward was an enthusiast for the legends of King Arthur. He had the coffins of what were thought to be Arthur and Guinevere opened at Glastonbury, and the remains reburied, and he held at least two Round Tables. The great feast

17 Thomas F. Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History of Mediaeval England* (Manchester, 1923–1933), ii. 20; William P. Caferro, *John Hawkwood: An English Mercenary in Fourteenth-Century Italy* (Baltimore, 2006), 204; John B. Gillingham, *Richard I* (New Haven, 1999), ix.

18 Prestwich, *Edward I*, 111; Pierre Chaplais, “Some Private Letters of Edward I,” *English Historical Review*, LXXVII (1962), 79–80. The Audigier poem was published by D. J. Conlon, “La Chanson d’Audigier—A Scatological Parody of the Chansons de Geste,” *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, XXXIII (1989), 21–55. Margaret Howell, *Eleanor of Provence* (Oxford, 1998), 296–298, provides more detail about Edward’s relationship with his mother than Prestwich, *Edward I*, 122–123.

on the occasion of his son's knighting, however, did not take Arthurian form. My conclusion was that Edward's self-identification with Arthur was "probably no more than a conceit he toyed with occasionally." In my estimation, the king was courageous, conventionally pious, usually loyal to those close to him, and occasionally bad-tempered.¹⁹

PSYCHOLOGY I had no prospect of employing any form of psychological analysis in my analysis of Edward I's character; there is no evidence of the king behaving in ways that could be explained in Freudian or other terms. The dangers of such an approach are illustrated by the fate of the ideas about Richard II set forth by Steel in 1941. Steel wrote of Richard's "acute neurosis" and his "schizoid mind," describing him as becoming a "mumbling neurotic, sinking rapidly into a state of acute melancholia." Although Saul, Richard's latest biographer, rightly dismissed any suggestion that Richard was mad, he surprisingly proceeded to provide a new psychological analysis, suggesting that the king was "narcissistic" and that he "experienced great difficulty in relating to the external world." Saul was careful not to go so far as to claim that Richard was autistic, though this is the clear direction of his suggestions. The difficulty for the medievalist is that the sources rarely present the sort of evidence on which such a diagnosis can safely be made. Richard II's habit of sitting on his throne for long periods, requiring his courtiers to bow when his gaze lighted on them, was certainly odd, but it was not a symptom from which a specific mental condition can safely be deduced.²⁰

The use of such analysis provides an extreme example of the risk involved in using anachronistic concepts to make judgments about figures from the past, but psychological analysis is not the only hazard. In the nineteenth century, Bishop Stubbs had no problem in producing sonorous value judgments based on the moral code of his own day, characterizing Edward I as "truthful, honourable, temperate and chaste; frugal, cautious, resolute; great

19 Roger S. Loomis, "Edward I, Arthurian Enthusiast," *Speculum*, XXVIII (1953), 114–127; Prestwich, *Edward I*, 108–122, 416.

20 George B. Stow, "Stubbs, Steel, and Richard II as Insane: The Origin and Evolution of an English Historiographical Myth," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, CXLIII (1999), examines the criticisms of Steel's ideas, which he finds to be rooted in the nineteenth-century works of Bishop Stubbs (601–638). Anthony B. Steel, *Richard II* (London, 1941), 174, 216, 279; Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven, 1997), 367, 391, 463–464.

in counsel, ingenious in contrivance, rapid in execution.” Nor was Stubbs apparently too concerned about contradicting himself; in another assessment of Edward, he stated, “Personally he was a great king, although not above being tempted to ambition, vindictiveness, and impatient violence.”²¹

PROBLEMS For me, matters were not so simple. The values of the medieval period were not those of today. One particular troubling moment in Edward I’s career, his expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290, has been explained in various ways. In economic terms, the unpopularity of Jewish moneylenders was clear. From the perspective of the royal finances, the Jewish communities in England had little to offer by the late thirteenth century, since they had already been drained by heavy taxes. At the same time, anti-semitism was rampant; stories of ritual murder by Jews circulated widely. The decision that the king reached in 1290 made straightforward financial sense: The exile of the Jews was the concession that he made in return for the grant of a substantial tax. The strands underlying this move, however, were complex. It is impossible to write about this topic without awareness of the appalling events of the twentieth century, but Edward I should be judged in terms of the values of his own day, not those of later periods. Contemporaries did not condemn him for the expulsion.²²

Wales and Scotland presented possible difficulties. Edward I’s conquest of Wales, and his attempted conquest of Scotland, can still arouse strong national feelings. In the case of Wales, however, Davies, the great Welsh historian, did not take so hostile a view of Edward as might have been expected. He described, for example, the king’s legal and judicial treatment of Wales in 1284 as “majestic and masterful.” In contrast, Barrow, one of the most notable Scottish medievalists, though ostensibly lauding Edward for his 1305 constitutional settlement of Scotland (not easy for a Scot to do), in fact damned him with faint praise: “It was no small achievement for this elderly, conventional, conservative, unimaginative man that he had learned anything at all.” Barrow described Edward’s refusal to allow the garrison of Stirling to surrender until he had tried out his latest siege engine as demonstrating “meanness

21 William Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England* (Oxford, 1906; orig. pub. 1880–1884), II, 104, 165.

22 Prestwich, *Edward I*, 345–346.

of spirit and implacable, almost paranoid, hostility.” Being half-English and half-Welsh, I carried less nationalistic baggage than Barrow did. I could try only to avoid bias, and to rely on what the evidence revealed. The settlement of 1305 was limited and inadequate, and the treatment of the Stirling garrison “not as harsh as it might have been,” given that the resisters were not hanged.²³

Some of the dangers facing a biographer were relatively easy to avoid. The temptation to give a subject more importance than he or she deserves is not so great in dealing with a king as it is with a relatively minor individual. In the medieval period, monarchs were undeniably important. Accordingly, I attempted to provide as much a history of Edward I’s reign as of his personal life. To the charge, from Elton’s standpoint, that I was not writing a proper biography, I would happily plead guilty. Another potential pitfall for the biographer is the temptation to identify too closely with a subject. This was not something that I felt likely to happen. I have little in common with a tall, athletic king, fond of hunting, who read few, if any, books. Edward bore no conceivable similarity in my mind to a twentieth-century academic. My career as a teacher in a British university did not provide me with experiences that paralleled those of Edward I in any way. The danger was perhaps the opposite one, a complete lack of empathy.²⁴

RECENT APPROACHES The revival of narrative history, and with it of biography, has developed considerably since *Edward I* was published in 1988. It is striking that the more recent volumes in the English Monarchs series have taken a more chronological and narrative approach than I did. Saul’s volume on *Richard II* takes the reader through the king’s life from start to finish, with just one chapter providing an analytical excursus on the royal court. Gillingham’s *Richard I*, published in 1999, provides another example of the same approach. Carpenter examined the early years of Henry III’s reign by means of a detailed and skillful narrative; he

23 Rees R. Davies, *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change* (New York, 1987), 367; Barrow, *Robert Bruce & the Community of the Realm of Scotland*, 168, 174–175; Prestwich, *Edward I*, 502, 504–505.

24 Norman Cantor, in *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York, 1991), 259–260, suggested that Joseph R. Strayer’s interpretation of the government of Philip IV of France owed much to the way in which he governed the history department at Princeton. I do not believe, however, that there are any parallels between my chairmanship of the History Dept. at the University of Durham and Edward I’s rule of England.

began to write a life of the king but found that the minority alone deserved its own substantial book. Length is a problem that comes with the narrative approach. Vincent's biography of Peter des Roches, who played a leading role in the first part of Henry III's reign, extends to more than 500 pages. Biographers are afflicted by a desire to be fully comprehensive, in a way that other historians are not.²⁵

The clear contrast between my book on Edward I and Morris' recent study of him illustrates the way that the writing of biography has changed over the past twenty years. Morris adopts a lighter, more colloquial style, and he takes a much more chronological approach, pointing out, "No one has attempted to tell Edward's story from beginning to end since before the First World War." One valuable consequence is that a good many details of the king's itinerary are provided, revealing, for example, a pilgrimage journey to Worcester in 1294, "a flying visit to secure the necessary spiritual aid." Morris' book is, however, much more than a blow-by-blow chronological account of Edward's life. It offers, for example, a lengthy discussion of the cult of King Arthur, with an explanation of why the twelfth-century author Geoffrey of Monmouth concocted his elaborate fictional history of Britain. Furthermore, the fact that Edward did not go to Ireland proves no obstacle to the inclusion of a few pages about English government there. Morris' narrative is thus "thickened" by substantial passages of explanation.²⁶

Yet, certain important elements of the reign receive much less attention than they might deserve, such as the series of statutes promulgated between 1275 and 1290; the reign was notable for its lawmaking. But Morris' approach is justified by doubts about the extent to which the king himself was involved in the detail of the new statutes. Moreover, although parliaments naturally feature in the course of the narrative, Morris includes no section that discusses the various interpretations of historians to explain the development of the institution. The readership that Morris addresses apparently has no interest in a range of alternative hypotheses.

It does, however, want to know about sex. Therefore Morris

25 Saul, *Richard II*, 327–365; David A. Carpenter, *The Minority of Henry III* (Berkeley, 1990), xi; Nicholas Vincent, *Peter des Roches: An Alien in English Politics 1205–1238* (New York, 1996).

26 Marc Morris, *A Great and Terrible King: Edward I* (London, 2008), xiii, 273, 162–168, 218–221.

discusses when Henry III may have first bedded his young queen Eleanor of Provence, a topic never broached by Howell, Eleanor's excellent biographer. Surprisingly, however, he does not comment on the speed with which Edward I's second queen, Margaret of France, became pregnant. Morris' Edward is more eloquent than mine, slightly less bad-tempered, more debonair, and a better judge of people.²⁷

POLITICAL BIOGRAPHIES A number of books on thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England illustrate both some of the advantages and some of the problems inherent in a biographical approach. One of the accusations that can be levied at biography is that it rarely transforms historical understanding. It is more likely to add detail to a picture with outlines that are already known and established than to create a different image of the past. However, two biographies of great nobles of Edward II's reign were highly influential in rethinking the political history of a disturbed and complex period. Until the 1970s, the prevailing orthodoxy laid great stress on constitutional issues, the key conflict being between the king and his favorites, who sought to govern through the royal household and its departments, and nobles, who wanted to control the Crown through parliament and the great offices of state, the chancery and exchequer.

In political terms, the emergence of a so-called "middle party" during the central years of the reign was of fundamental importance. Maddicott's *Thomas of Lancaster*, and Phillips' *Aymer de Valence* provided a different perspective on the period. Individual grievances and personal rivalries came to the fore. Constitutional issues were still current, but such issues as the cancellation of royal grants of land were more important than those about the administrative structures of royal government. In Phillips' analysis, the "middle party" vanished; it had been an inappropriate analogy drawn from the politics of a much later period, and its members proved to be, for the most part, moderate royalists.²⁸

While demonstrating the ways in which biography can provide a key to an understanding of medieval politics, Maddicott's and Phillips' books also show how difficult it is to write true biog-

27 *Ibid.*, 1–2; Howell, *Eleanor of Provence*.

28 John R. Maddicott, *Thomas of Lancaster 1307–1322* (New York, 1970); J. R. Seymour Phillips, *Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, 1307–1324* (New York, 1972).

raphies. Maddicott admitted that “Lancaster’s upbringing is strikingly obscure,” thus limiting the discussion of his early years to a mere seven pages. Phillips’ intention was to reassess the Earl of Pembroke’s role in the politics of Edward II’s reign, “[thus making] it necessary to omit any detailed treatment of his activities in the later part of the reign of Edward I.” Although both authors adopted a narrative approach for the most part, each found it necessary to provide analytical chapters discussing the retinues and estates of their subjects. Important aspects of personal life had to go unexplored for want of sources; virtually nothing is known of the Earl of Lancaster’s relationship with his wife, though she may have been a willing participant when Earl Warenne abducted her in 1317. Of Valence and his first wife, Phillips wrote, “Very little is known of their married life together, and apart from one unrevealing letter written to Aymer by Beatrice in 1296, there is no surviving correspondence between them.” Nor is there more information about his brief second marriage.²⁹

The survival of such sources as episcopal registers has made bishops a relatively fruitful area of biographical research for many years, at least as far back as the 1950s when the lives of Archbishop John Pecham of Canterbury and Bishop Anthony Bek of Durham were published. A considerable number of studies of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century bishops have been written in more recent years. Despite a law of diminishing returns in the value of examining the minutiae of episcopal administration, the major political role played by men such as Robert Winchelsey, archbishop of Canterbury, or Adam Orleton, bishop of both Hereford and Winchester, gives their biographies considerable importance. Since little information about the origins or early careers of such men is available, it is not often possible to write fully comprehensive lives. One study of a fourteenth-century bishop diverges significantly from the biographies of other bishops; Thomas de Lisle, bishop of Ely, emerges not as a statesman, administrator, or scholar but as the leader of a criminal gang.³⁰

29 Maddicott, *Thomas of Lancaster*, 3, 8–66; Phillips, *Aymer de Valence*, 22, 240–268, 5–6; Linda E. Mitchell, *Portraits of Medieval Women: Family, Marriage and Politics in England 1225–1350* (New York, 2003), 109–114.

30 Decima L. Douie, *Archbishop Pecham* (New York, 1952); Constance M. Fraser, *A History of Anthony Bek, Bishop of Durham, 1283–1311* (New York, 1957); Jeffrey H. Denton, *Robert Winchelsey and the Crown 1294–1313* (New York, 1980), 7–8; Roy M. Haines, *The Church and*

A MEDIEVAL SCHOLAR Intellectual history is a field in which a biographical approach can yield considerable dividends, by explaining an individual's contribution to learning and scholarship. Southern's work on Robert Grosseteste is a remarkable example of the way in which the voluminous writings of a medieval scholar can construct an account of his intellectual development. Southern's ingenious portrait reveals Grosseteste to have been highly individualistic and intellectually independent. Probably born in about 1170, he did not receive an education in any of the great schools of the late twelfth century, such as that in Paris; he was, instead, the product of an English tradition of scholarship at Hereford. His initial interests were scientific, but from the mid 1220s, he developed in new directions. He learned Greek, and, remarkably, he achieved a massive output of theological works late in life, between 1225 and 1235, when he became bishop of Lincoln. Because the evidence outside Grosseteste's own writings is scant—his years as bishop of Lincoln are well documented, but his earlier career is not—Southern had to rely, to some extent, on material in an early sixteenth-century life of Grosseteste, though not on the story that he traveled to Rome and back in twenty-four hours on a magic horse.³¹

Not surprisingly, Southern's views have been contested, especially his theses regarding Grosseteste's late emergence as a scholar of true genius. Part of Southern's argument hinges on a remark about Grosseteste's role as master of the schools at Oxford by a later bishop of Lincoln, more than forty years after Grosseteste's death. Southern interpreted the remark as meaning that Grosseteste held this post after 1225; others conclude that he obtained it in 1214. In that regard, the question of his links to the schools of Paris is important. Although some of his work was close to that of William of Auvergne, whom he described as his friend, Grosseteste did not necessarily study in Paris, despite the record of a legacy concerning property in Paris bequeathed by Robert Grosseteste in 1223, which was confirmed by William of Auvergne. If this testator is the same Grosseteste, it casts his career in

Politics in Fourteenth-Century England (New York, 1978), 1–2; John Aberth, *Criminal Churchmen in the Age of Edward III: The Case of Thomas de Lisle* (University Park, 1996).

31 Richard W. Southern, *Robert Grosseteste: The Growth of an English Mind in Medieval Europe* (New York, 1986). In the second edition of this book (1992), xxvii–lxvi, Southern provided a valuable riposte to his critics.

a dramatically different light, revealing him to have had a wife and three children, a scenario that many scholars are loathe to accept. This disagreement shows how an important element in the life history of a biographical subject can rest on the shaky foundations of ambiguous and scattered scraps of evidence. As well as pointing to the limitations of biography, the controversy also indicates how crucial biography is; a convincing account of Grosseteste's intellectual growth depends on the ability to reconstruct accurately the course of Grosseteste's life.³²

Southern may have identified himself too closely with his subject. Cantor suggested that Southern's analysis of Grosseteste was, in part, autobiographical, that Southern saw himself as having a distinctly "English mind" and an intellectual independence similar to that of the thirteenth-century bishop. This argument has some force. Southern was a scholar who wrote in his maturity. His first book was published when he was forty-one; he was seventy-four when his book on Grosseteste appeared; and his final work came out when he was eighty-five. Southern's capacity for empathizing with his subjects is also evident in his treatment of Anselm of Bec, archbishop of Canterbury, another great medieval scholar. Part of the final paragraph in his joint study of Anselm and his biographer Eadmer could virtually be autobiographical: "He founded no school, and in many ways the immediate future turned against him and his methods. Ironically, his influence was most conspicuous where it was least personal—in the sphere of politics. His own pupils, though stirred into activity by his large and perceptive spirit, went their various ways."³³

WOMEN With the development of gender history, the place of women in medieval society has attracted increasing interest in recent years. It does, however, create problems for the biographer. Much more evidence about men survives than about women. In the Middle Ages, because unmarried maidens and wives had no le-

32 James McEvoy, *Robert Grosseteste* (New York, 2000), 22–29; Joseph Goering, "When and Where did Grosseteste Study Theology," in McEvoy (ed.), *Robert Grosseteste: New Perspectives on His Thought and Scholarship* (Turnhout, 1995), 36–51.

33 Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages*, 352; Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (London, 1953); *idem*, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe. I. Foundations* (New York, 1997); William Palmer, "Sir Richard Southern Looks Back: A Portrait of the Medievalist as a Young Man," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, LXXIV (1998), 18–31; Southern, *St Anselm and His Biographer* (New York, 1966), 354.

gal independence, they left relatively few traces in the records; widows form an easier subject of study. Thirteenth-century queens, however, have been well served, given the scholarly works about Eleanor of Provence and Eleanor of Castile, which have done much to explore and explain the nature of queenship in medieval England. The contrasts between these two women were considerable. Since Henry III's queen Eleanor of Provence played a far more significant political role than her Castilian namesake, Edward I's queen, the evidence about her is far more extensive. Chroniclers noted her doings, and a substantial number of her personal letters and household accounts survive. The problems for Eleanor of Castile's biographer were more acute. The chroniclers are largely silent about her, and only one of her personal letters survives, sent to an abbot to thank him for loan of a book. There is, however, substantial evidence about her estates, and a household account for one year. Eleanor emerges as interested in gardens, chess, hunting, arranging marriages, and embroidery. Her acquisitive accumulation of estates suggests a darker side to her character.³⁴

High-born ladies have been less well served by biographers than queens have, but a study of Elizabeth de Burgh, lady of Clare, is an exception. She went through three marriages and a long widowhood; her independent status as a widow made it relatively easy to research her activities. The survival of her estate and household accounts facilitated the biographer's task, permitting the exploration of a wide range of themes in her life, from her friendships to her patronage of education. In the case of many other women, however, the evidence is insufficient to enable biographies; an understanding of the role of women in society is developed better by means of studies of particular groups than by the examination of individual careers.³⁵

PEASANTS Stone was keen that narrative history should tell the lives of ordinary people. A major difficulty for medievalists in

34 Howell, *Eleanor of Provence*; John C. Parsons, *Eleanor of Castile* (New York, 1995), 3–4, 55, 62–63, 153–154.

35 Frances A. Underhill, *For Her Good Estate: The Life of Elizabeth de Burgh* (Basingstoke, 1999). See also Mitchell, *Portraits of Medieval Women*, for biographical sketches of noble women. For examples of studies involving groups rather than individual women, see Peter Coss, *The Lady in Medieval England 1000–1500* (Stroud, 1998); Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540* (Manchester, 2003).

writing biographies, however, is that only extraordinary people are susceptible to this treatment. There are plenty of lives of kings and bishops but none of peasants. Court rolls can sometimes help to determine the broad outlines of an individual life, but the sort of detail needed to fill the spaces is inevitably absent. In a study of the Black Death, Hatcher suggested a solution: “In order to bring the lost history of the Black Death to life, and to place the evidence that survives within a rich living context, I have had to invent situations and dialogue and employ techniques reminiscent of docudrama.” The central character of the book, the priest Master John, is largely an invention “because it is impossible to find anything of significance about him.” Postmodernist critics might consider that the past can be constructed by creating imaginary characters to populate it, but the question of whether this is an acceptable historical technique remains. Should a book so written be classified as a historical novel? A novel would require more plot and more love interest, and less academic rigor; Hatcher’s book is a strange chimera, to be admired, but not copied.³⁶

POPULAR BIOGRAPHY Much historical biography is aimed at a popular market. No writer on the medieval period, however, has attempted to emulate Foreman, author of the celebrated biography of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, who posed, apparently naked, behind a pile of copies of her book for a publicity photograph. That the success of Foreman’s book undoubtedly did much to encourage nonacademic authors to write biographies led the historian Roberts to suggest, at least partly tongue-in-cheek, that there should be a regulatory authority to protect “proper historians” from “amateurs.” In contrast, White, condemning the “professional and pseudo-scientific or ‘objective’ study of the past,” saw what he terms “‘practical’ historiography,” including historical biography, as addressing “the great enigmas of temporality, death, and absence.” At the same time, however, he saw this form of history as leading “a somewhat shabby existence” as “‘popular’ or amateur.”³⁷

36 John Hatcher, *The Black Death* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), xiii.

37 For Foreman, see <http://www.amanda-foreman.com/images.shtml>. Juliet Gardiner, “Are Historians like David Cannadine and Andrew Roberts an Endangered Species,” *Sunday Times* (London), 27 July 2008; White, “The Public Relevance of Historical Studies: A Reply to Dirk Moses,” *History and Theory*, XLIV (2005), 335.

A recent example of the popular genre is Weir's narrative study of Isabella, Edward II's queen, which is long, extremely detailed, and attractively illustrated. Among the considerable interesting, if not necessarily significant, information in it is the fact that the floor of Edward II's bathroom at Westminster had 2,250 tiles. The Ordinances of 1311, a major political and constitutional document, is summarized in a mere ten lines whereas largely irrelevant details about Henry III's improvements to royal sanitary arrangements occupy fifteen lines. The chronological structure of the book renders it all too often as little more than a catalog of events. The story is good, but the sources do not exist to enable a proper reconstruction of Isabella's character. Weir is properly cautious: She writes that Isabella might have suffered a nervous breakdown when her lover Roger Mortimer was executed, coinciding with depression following a stillbirth, "but there is no evidence for this." As for sex, apparently Isabella "was a sensual, even highly-sexed woman." Readers hoping for evidence of this allegation, with salacious details of the liaison between the queen and her lover, however, will be sadly disappointed; Weir is true to her relatively uninformative sources.³⁸

Weir's book is properly researched, making full use of contemporary sources (and an unpublished doctoral thesis), and it is provided with ample footnotes. The notes, however, reveal the nonacademic nature of the book; a large number of the references are so imprecise as to be virtually worthless. Biographies such as this one perform a valuable service by bringing history to a wide audience, but they also do a disservice by providing little more than a highly readable story. There is little indication that White's "great enigmas" are tackled. The narrative treatment limits the questions that Weir asks of her material, and readers are left with a blinkered view of the early fourteenth century. Although Weir's biography of Isabella is a popular, not an academic, book, Weir is hardly to be dismissed as an amateur. She is a highly professional author, whose books sell in quantities that all but few academic books can achieve.

The problem of how to provide the sort of detail necessary to

38 Alison Weir, *Isabella, She-Wolf of France, Queen of England* (London, 2005), 54, 84, 88, 353—published in New York as *Queen Isabella: Treachery, Adultery and Murder in Medieval England*.

encourage, and even titillate, a popular audience is further demonstrated by Mortimer's recent life of Edward III, which contains much good history but also questionable judgments about the king's personal life. The birth of one of Edward's sons at least sixteen days early leads Mortimer to suggest adultery on the part of the queen. A tale that the king raped the countess of Salisbury is rightly dismissed, but the discussion reaches the doubtful conclusion that the king "definitely enjoyed and encouraged the multiple flirtations of his sexually-charged court." Even the king's devotion to his queen is given an unjustified spin, with the suggestion that "his sexual desire for his wife was evidently compulsive." Mortimer employs the journalistic technique of smearing by innuendo in noting grants made to some of the ladies attending the queen: "Such grants are not suspicious in themselves, but they alert us to the fact that Edward was aware of his wife's female companions." He even entertains the bizarre hypothesis that the queen, infirm in her last years, may have encouraged one of her attendants, Alice Perrers, to "please" the king.³⁹

The main problem attending medieval biography is the lack of evidence to illuminate the inner life and character of any subject. It is rare to find material on which psychological insights might be based. A complete life is virtually impossible to write; childhood is in most cases a blank that can be filled only by speculation and hypothesis. The wealth of detail that is expected to provide color, particularly in a modern popular historical biography, is difficult to provide without courting irrelevance. Yet much good medieval history has been written in recent years in biographical form, and genuine advances in understanding have been achieved when historians have adopted this approach. Biography, however, can provide only some of the answers. It is not a good medium for explaining long-term trends, and its concentration on the elite elements of society—kings, queens, bishops, and nobles—is a severe limitation. Constitutional history, economic history, and the history of towns and of manors are staple elements of the medieval historian's trade that a biographical approach can do little more

39 Ian Mortimer, *The Perfect King: The Life of Edward III, Father of the English Nation* (London, 2006), 183, 197–198, 380.

than approach tangentially. A history of a king, such as Edward I, may do something with these aspects of the past but only by becoming more a study of the reign than of the ruler. Biography has its place, but history is much more than the sum of men and women's lives.