

Preface: Biography and History

This special issue of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* is devoted to the role of biography in history and the impact of biographical explorations on historiography. Six historians and biographers from Britain, Canada, and the United States discuss how history and biography overlap, complement each other, and exist never as separate pursuits but always as parallel means to the same historiographical ends. The biographer-historians write about different periods—medieval kingship; nineteenth-century scientific learning and discovery; nineteenth-century nationalists, explorers, and buccaneers; and twentieth-century American pioneering and adventuresome women, South Asian political entrepreneurs, and African patriots. Michael Prestwich, Janet Browne, Lucy Riall, Susan Ware, and Stanley Wolpert are all masters of their historical periods as well as experienced, occasional, serial biographers.

Their essays, and mine, are incorporated in this special issue because each writer has tackled in her and his own manner the many complicated issues of biography as history. Each essay discusses the craft of biography and how its human subjects were chosen, and why. Each compares different methods of biography and different treatments even of the same subject. Several of the essays reflect on the intrinsically interdisciplinary quality of the fullest and best-articulated biographies. They examine two of the biographer's dilemmas—a dearth of first-person versus an over-abundance of first-person and other documentary evidence. Ware and Riall explore feminist biography; Browne the complications of writing about Darwin as a thinker and colleague; Prestwich the special problems of medieval biography; and Wolpert the intersection of participant observation, personal familiarity, and committed involvement in a watershed era. My own contribution ranges across time and geography, from Africa to America, and from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.

Each of the essays is reflective and instructive. Each hardly covers the same ground as another. Yet, as a collection, the editors of the *JIH* hope that these essays stimulate further discussion about the role of biography in the writing of all history, and lead to new biographies by accomplished historians of all periods on all continents.

— ROBERT I. ROTBERG