

*P. B. Waite*

## **Invading Privacies: Biography As History**

Mark Twain says that we are fools for trying. Biography cannot be done. A man's inner life is all that matters, and that we can never know.

His real life is led in his head, and is known to none but himself.... His acts and his words are merely the visible, thin crust of his world.... The mass of him is hidden—it and its volcanic fires that toss and boil, and never rest, night nor day. These are his life, and they are not written, and cannot be written.... Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of the man.<sup>1</sup>

Most biographies are, by this argument, a mere construction, like the 50-foot brontosaurus in the museum: made up out of 600 barrels of plaster and nine old bones.

To take the other scenario: biography can be regarded as easy. It is something every duffer can have a go at. Biography is whatever those who do it think it is. It is a lot easier than writing fiction; it requires no artistic invention; the plot is ready made to order; the subject was born, married, worked and died. You have only to write it up in chronological order. Any ass can do it. Many have. The result has not infrequently been biographies of shattering boredom. One does not need to single them out; all that need be said is that if the biographies so conceived are not completely dead, there is no doubt about the expediency of burying them.

There is probably, in the English-speaking world at least, a working consensus of what good biography ought to be. It ought to aim at making sense of its subject, consistent with the evidence available. All is grist: whatever illuminates the subject is evidence. The life of the private man informs that of the public one; they help explain each other. That much, anyway, was the gist of a transatlantic seminar on political biography held in 1988 at Ditchley Park, Oxfordshire.

Some biographies have had a strong influence on their readers even if difficult to measure. R. B. Bennett read and re-read Money Penny & Buckle's four-volume life of Disraeli. Richard Nixon did the same with Lord Blake's modern biography of Disraeli, rather disconcerting Lord Blake. Harold Wilson was influenced by Carl Sandburg's life of Lincoln, John F. Kennedy by Lord David Cecil's *Melbourne*. And there are biographies with contemporary impact; Bob Hawke's success in 1983 in becoming Prime Minister of Australia was attributable in part to the favorable portrait of him in an independent biography in 1979. Such studies can't be definitive; Richard Gwyn's *Northern Magus*, on Trudeau, cannot, and the Trudeau Papers will not be open for some time; but the public are entitled to want such books, and if historians don't write them, reporters will. I like Gwyn's book, but some biographers wince at it.<sup>2</sup>

But even the best of biographies raise profound questions of veracity and method. I am not saying that biographers are charlatans; rather, their weakness may be inherent in the *métier*. It is as if a biography were defined as a series of holes, held together by a string. One problem, always, is lack of evidence. Another is the tension between evidence and its interpretation. Some biographers have avoided this problem neatly by offering no interpretation. Historians, especially, are prone to believe that a mass of documents will tell its own story. But letters and dates do not make a biography; the author has to select. Sometimes, the tension between evidence and interpretation is *too* strong. J. A. Froude set out to make Henry VIII a great and good king; but Froude's interpretation is destroyed by evidence Froude himself provides.

Let me illustrate with what many informed Canadians would call the greatest Canadian biography in English, Donald Creighton's *Sir John A. Macdonald*. What inference is one allowed to make from evidence? Creighton makes many; he puts ideas into Macdonald's head as if he had proof positive they had been there. Just three examples, taken almost at random. The first, New Year's Eve, 1872-73:

On New Year's Eve he was in his room at the East Block working away at the details of the [Canadian Pacific Railway] arrangement, when a card was brought in to him. As he stared at it, he realized that this was the visit he had been dreading for months past.<sup>3</sup>

I don't know the authority for saying that Macdonald had been dreading that visit for months past. It may have been a logical inference from the circumstances. It may have been hindsight. Whatever it was, was it true? Or again, Macdonald in the 1890s:

... deep within him lay the inarticulate conviction that so long as he was physically capable of doing so he must watch over the country which he had created. A long lifetime was scarcely long enough to complete the work which he had in mind.<sup>4</sup>

These assumptions are still more daring. Are they true? We don't know. Take the following on Alexander Campbell, Macdonald's law partner:

A sensitive and thoughtful young man, emotional yet scrupulous and cautious, Campbell was in many ways a more complex character. He brooded. He philosophized. His standards were obstinately high; he was rather dourly conscientious; he developed stubborn loyalties.<sup>5</sup>

This is Alexander Campbell as Creighton imagined John A. Macdonald saw him. How far is the biographer to be the alter ego of his subject? Standards "*obstinately high*"; being "*dourly conscientious*"; those adverbs are loaded. And they are loaded by Professor Creighton.

I do not wish to suggest that Creighton was not thorough. I knew few historians who were more painstaking; he had covered a great deal of research, and carefully. In order to ensure the accuracy of his quotations he took page proofs of his *Macdonald* to Ottawa, and checked them against the originals. There may be other historians who do that: I don't know any. But what Creighton *was* doing, once past careful citing of documents, was making a series of imaginative inferences as to what Macdonald was thinking, in effect trying to be Macdonald himself. It came to the point where Creighton tended to describe those who opposed Macdonald as intellectually deficient, morally weak, or—still more remarkable—physically repulsive. Those perspectives may have been like Creighton, who did not suffer fools and held long grudges, but they are unlike Macdonald who, while shrewd and perceptive, did not so categorically form or force his judgments.

This really won't do. I admit mine is an historian's perspective; a literary biographer might be less troubled and might regard Creighton's merely as a literary device. I tend to regard it as a way of bending truth. An historian's continued reliance on hard evidence, our suspicion of categorical assertions, all of that makes us hesitate before the luxuriance of characterization that Creighton uses.

One can clear out one's approaches to biography, in the spirit of Descartes' systematic doubt in his *Meditations*, cutting out the underbrush of literary devices, the thickets of adverbs, until we get at least to a typography of ineluctable fact, the bare geography of men's lives, a

condition which is, of necessity, lean and hard. Some recent work in history has tended in that direction; by this perception, biography is a work merely of genial pseudo-scholarship; biography is written in one's old age, when one is too fat and too flaccid to do real history. It does not count on the scales of academic reputation. This is the view of the *Annales* school in France, which prefers computerized studies of micro-biography, a kind of double helix, that allows one to program a whole series of analyses, vertically across two or three generations, or horizontally across a census. The *Annales* school believes that biography is too concerned with the individual, too little with society. But the trouble with these quasi-mathematical studies is their dehumanization of history, supplying a surfeit of method and extracting a minimum of life. As recent French critics have pointed out, the result has been the "émiettement de l'histoire," the crumbling away of history into little pieces, devoid of holistic meaning.<sup>6</sup>

At the other end of the scale is a type of biographer who cheerfully ignores facts—they often do get in the way—and reconstructs with cheerful abandon, like Lytton Strachey in *Elizabeth and Essex*. The point is perhaps, as Philip Ziegler noted in the *New York Times Book Review*, that "only the disciplines of history can save the biographer from the wastelands of empty and ill-founded speculation...."<sup>7</sup>

Evidence determines what a conscientious biographer can do. The near total destruction of Sir Robert Borden's private correspondence, as well as his law office papers in Halifax, made preparation of the official biography difficult. Borden's personal life can only be got at through a very few things, and good biographers don't invent. This explains why Boswell's *Johnson* comes to life only a fifth of the way into the book, when Boswell first meets Johnson, in Covent Garden, Monday, 16 May 1763. Up to that point the biography is rather leaden. Until then, Boswell did not know Johnson: the light that is thrown upon Johnson afterward shows up the darkness before.

One of the great Fathers of Canadian Confederation was George Brown, the tall, raw-boned Free Kirk Scot, who founded the *Toronto Globe*. He had come to us graduate students of the late 1940s as an unlovely covenanter, whose vast energy was mainly given to noise, querulousness and anti-Catholicism. His constructive role in Canadian Confederation could at best be regarded as a temporary aberration from his normally destructive behavior. Then came the discovery of the Brown Papers in Scotland. Brown had long been a bachelor; but in 1862 when he was 41, he met and married Anne Nelson, of the Edinburgh publishing house; he was head over heels in love with her.

Brown wrote his new wife constantly, and from those marvellous letters emerges, not just a more complete Brown, but, because so much *more* complete, different: loving, cheerful, even friendly. Indeed, one Canadian historian felt that the famous portrait of the Fathers of Confederation should be amended to include the *Mother* of Confederation, viz. Anne Nelson Brown, so much had George Brown's marriage done for his amiability, personal *and* political.

The other side of the difficulty created by too few papers, is a plethora of them. Mackenzie King, our prime minister 1921-1930, 1935-1948, kept everything, down to dance programs and Christmas cards. And he kept a diary from 1893 until he died in 1950—one million words of it. This richness is invigorating, but that big diary raises a serious question: does the past have a right to its own privacy? Does the biographer belong in the bedroom of his subject? With diaries, and some kinds of correspondence, he gets there, whether he likes it or not. MacGregor Dawson, the first official biographer of King, faced this problem with the first volume, published in 1958: King's night adventures with late and accessible ladies. Dawson simply omitted all reference to those episodes. Honest as he was, he therefore called his volume I a "political biography." One has to recall the context of the late 1950s, when a frank disclosure of King's nocturnal affairs would have been shocking. The times can determine not only what one *can* say, but what one can *want* to say. C. P. Stacey, 14 years later, was less prudish.

Sir John Thompson, Canadian Prime Minister 1892-94, wrote his wife Annie nearly every day that he was away from her. Away from Annie, Thompson was, like Charles II of Spain away from his Queen, nasty, disagreeable and dangerous. For a biographer it is a splendid correspondence, allowing one behind the scenes as with no other Canadian Prime Minister. But Thompson was a private man; his wife and family were his world and he hated outsiders in it. What do I do, as biographer, with the intimate messages that Sir John sent to his wife, sometimes in shorthand? He was an uxorious husband, like Brown; he hated being away from the big double bed in Halifax; from his long-hand and his shorthand one discovers a passionate man, hungry for home. Only three people in the world have read those shorthand passages: Thompson, Annie, and me. I am a *voyeur*, and disconcerting it is.

Different biographers will give different answers. W. B. Yeats told Katherine Tynan, "Remember, it is the stains of the earth colour that make man differ from man and give interest to biography."<sup>8</sup> Tennyson

took the other side. He told a biographer of Lord Byron that his concern should only be with Byron's poetry. Byron's notorious private life was Byron's business, not posterity's. W. H. Auden would have agreed: the private lives of artists and poets shed no significant light on their work.<sup>9</sup> Auden's reasons were different from Tennyson's:

Never will his sex belong,  
To his world of right and wrong,  
Nor its values comprehend  
Who is foe and who is friend.<sup>10</sup>

Current fashion goes the other way: that Byron cannot be read as if he were a disembodied brain creating poetry, and that his life has to be seen unblushingly as it was. The biographer need not, should not, be prurient, raking up scandal for the titillation of contemporary taste: but neither ought he to blink it away. Should one not openly and candidly accept such evidence, judging it as part of a man's life? I think so. The alternative seems unacceptable. Deliberate suppression of the essential is deliberate distortion. But there is a world of fighting in what constitutes "essential." Is Thompson's double bed essential?

Thompson died in 1894. The problem is more serious when one is dealing with someone who is still alive, or recently died, whose friends, relations, especially wives, are still around to make judgments, or worse, become bitterly offended. That one had not the right to seriously harm the living is a proposition proper to assert: but the measure of what is serious harm is not easily ascertained. In dealing with a contemporary subject there may be no comfortable way. The choice may be between keeping on good terms with friends and relations, and thus failing in one's duty to posterity, or taking the more ruthless position, risking the displeasure and anger of contemporaries in the belief that the honesty of the portrait will in the long run be its own reward. Carlyle would say, do the biography, not the ghost of one.

Recently I wrote the biography of Larry Mackenzie, for 18 years the president of the University of British Columbia. He was born in Nova Scotia in 1894, and died in Vancouver in 1986. When I started, in 1976, he gave me *carte blanche*: "I don't give a god damn what you write." That blazing vote of confidence was all very well, but there are rights and wrongs to be weighed and it is *not* simple. The difficulty was discussed in *TLS* some years ago:

The important thing is that each life is part of a tissue of confidences which extends to many lives, and it is only when all those lives have ceased that some degree of ethical obligation to maintain confidence

finally vanishes. The biographer has at any rate an obligation to consider the motives which caused his subject to keep something quiet, and to give some measure of respect to those motives which regard others.<sup>11</sup>

Larry Mackenzie had a considerable run of papers—some 200 feet in the UBC Archives—and they represented both the public and the private man. Among them was a fat bundle of letters, in an attractive squarecut hand, from a girl he fell in love with when he was in Geneva with the International Labor Organization in 1925-26. She was the daughter of an American professor of International Law, a graduate of Bryn Mawr, and was abroad perfecting her French and German. Polly was 22, brilliant, beautiful; her mind came at you like ringing steel. Larry Mackenzie fell in love with her; he was then 31 years old, when love, like measles, hits hard. He kept everything from her pen, even delicious late night notes: "I'll meet you at the garden gate at 11 o'clock. Rap on the window." Or, "I'm free tomorrow evening, Friday, and you can have it all if you want. I *hope* you do." To Larry's offer of marriage Polly hesitated, then said no, and in 1928 she married someone else. As soon as he heard of her marriage, Larry, now at University of Toronto as a professor of International Law, married Margaret Thomas. So Larry and Polly each married others. Within a year Polly, at least, was regretting it. Perhaps they both were.

It was not easy for Larry's wife, Margaret, either. One day, a year after they were married, when Margaret was pregnant with their first child, she came across a bundle of those Polly letters. Her letter chiding Larry is noble, sad, really devastating. "Why didn't you *tell* me about Polly?" Margaret asked. "Now I know why you have not really loved me." *That* letter, too, is in Larry's unique archives.<sup>12</sup>

Larry and Polly continued their correspondence for years; her most recent letter in his archives is 1979, and they met from time to time. It had always been a respectable arrangement: but of course nothing could alter what they had between them, an elegiac sense of *temps perdu*, of what had once been, of what, indeed, *might* have been. Polly's letters continue to strike this note even across fifty years of correspondence. Margaret, the wife, knew that Polly's letters were in the UBC Archives and she did not like it. William Allen White's recommendation to any biographer was "Kill the widow!" If not, she might well murder you first. Margaret Mackenzie could not avoid resenting me; she knew what I knew. She died a year after Larry, and six months before the book about her husband (and herself) appeared from UBC Press. Larry didn't care; he was determined that his love for Polly should, somehow, be remembered; Polly for her part was sur-

prised and pained that she was mixed up in the biography at all. Polly wrote to me, "The truth of that love affair between Larry and me was, and is, my business and Larry's, not yours, and certainly not the public's. It is private and it should stay private. No one needs to know these details."<sup>13</sup>

What is my duty as biographer? As I see it, that duty is to tell the truth, *coûte que coûte*. So far, so good. But *how much* of the truth? Have I the right to cut into confidence, tenderness, sadness even, in this love affair, and marriage, for the sake of some historical ideal, or, worse, to pursue some aberrant peculiarity of my own, or to gratify some prurient taste on the part of the public?

One answer is that this private life of Larry's had nothing to do with his career, nor with his professional work in International Law, his presidency of the University of New Brunswick, nor of the University of British Columbia. By this argument, his biography need not deal with his personal life; biographies of public men should not be expected to comprehend their private world, or only insofar as is necessary to explain public actions. That is, perhaps, the nub of it: is one's preoccupation with the private man an insidious delight, justifying invasion of privacy by flaunting the banner of truth?

There may be no final answer. It might depend on the man or woman concerned. Larry was thought by some colleagues at UBC to be almost devoid of emotion, however kind he was. Since Polly's opinion was quite different, was it not possible that this 1926-28 love affair had savaged Larry emotionally? It was a difficult question. One day in Vancouver in 1979 Larry and I had been talking most of the afternoon; his wife was out, the house was quiet, and it seemed to me that if ever I was to broach this question it was now. "Look," I said to him, "you can tell me to go to hell and that you don't want to answer this. But let me put it anyway: The result of this breakup between you and Polly in 1928 was that, sturdy Pictou County Scot that you were, you took yourself in hand, battened the hatches down and drove your ship onward into the future, knowing that you could never again feel the same way about any other woman. Polly was everything. Isn't that what happened?" Larry stared at me. I had got far past his guard. I had hit where it hurt. And for such a cause! He turned to me, almost shyly, "I think that's about it," he said in a low, husky voice.<sup>14</sup>

Certainly Sir John Thompson, the perceived public man, was so very different from the private man that I argued that it was essential to understand the private Thompson to explain the public one. With Thompson there is an almost Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde quality in the



juxtaposition. And I should extrapolate the argument even further: a public person (or any other kind) cannot be read properly without his or her private life. Sir Robert Borden, a fascinating character, is still a man whose portrait is unfinished, like the one of him by Sir William Orpen in Ottawa, simply because so little of the private man is available to us. Thus, in the life of Borden, his *Letters to Limbo*, written in 1935 and published in 1971, 34 years after his death, assume extraordinary importance. Borden could at last say what he really thought of men and events. It seems to me we have no option: where we can, we must break into a man's inner life, with all the risks that that entails.

R. B. Bennett is in a worse position. His portrait has never been properly done. The letters his sister Mildred wrote to him tell me more about Bennett than any biographer so far. Mildred Bennett was a handsome, vigorous woman, who adored her older brother Richard (older by 19 years), and from about 1920, as it would appear, they were inseparable both socially and politically. They lived *en suite* at the Palliser, Calgary, when Bennett was in practice there and was MP for Calgary; when they were in Ottawa, especially after Bennett became Leader of the Opposition in 1927, and Prime Minister in 1930, they lived *en suite* at the Chateau Laurier. In 1931, when Bennett was 61 and Mildred 42, she married W. D. Herridge, already Canadian Minister at Washington. When that happened a *cri de coeur* arose from the Conservative Party. Who now was there to give the human touches, the social sense of belonging to the Party?

In April, 1931, when Mildred was packing up at the Chateau to go to Washington to live with her new husband, she said her brother would always remain at the centre of her life, as he had been these many years past:

MMB

Chateau Laurier

n.d.

Dick, my dear dear brother,

I can't leave this address without a little note to you—If I could only say all that is in my heart but I can't—and I know that you realize that in the midst of my most sacred and divine love you have never for a moment been out of my mind—in fact, I sometimes wonder if I am not going to be very lonely for you. I've *not* changed and never will. I sometimes think that loving Bill as I do—I've loved and valued you even more—

I can't write more my darling Dick, but always my adoration to the grandest and finest brother a sister ever had—

Ever and *forever*,

Your devoted sister,

Mildred

Mildred was born in 1889, when Bennett was already nineteen years old, making a living teaching school in Douglstown, up on the Miramichi, two hundred miles north of Hopewell Cape. That it was not the usual brother-sister relationship is obvious. A friend wrote to Bennett, "I think I know what you feel about her [Mildred's] marriage. I never met such love between a brother and sister before...."<sup>15</sup> What was the character of that relationship as Mildred and Bennett grew older together?

By August 1932, a year and a half after Mildred had gone to Washington, Bennett was in love with Hazel Kemp Colville, a handsome 44-year-old widow living in Montreal. Newspapers said he was going to marry her. Bennett denied that; but behind the scenes, as he wrote to Hazel, "I am only a weak emotional man, hungry for companionship...." Surely, a devastating comment on his life. Bennett's stern carapace was only that. Formidable enough to all appearance, how vulnerable he was!<sup>16</sup>

One of the hardest things for biographers to discern, from even the best of evidence, is this juxtaposition of appearance and reality. It occurs all the time and one scarcely knows how to take note of the weight and effects of its many modes. In history it is one of the most elusive problems. One description of its treacherous nature is the famous fallacy, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. Unlike science, history rarely shows a neat sequence of cause and effect; what looks like it is often really an accidental chain of circumstances. Edgar Allan Poe has a telling description of this in *The Mystery of Marie Roget*. The mystery was created by the inability to perceive that what appeared to be simple cause and effect, a straight sequence of events, was not so at all. The real chain of events was completely hidden, and had to be unravelled. Every reader of detective stories is aware of this contrast, often ironic, sometimes tragic, between the apparent and the real. Tendentious reading of cause and effect is more plausible because of paucity of evidence, and the quick delight we all take in jumping from premise to conclusion, when we think we discern why things happened. But chance always breaks up neat sequences of change.

Change is exceedingly awkward. We all change; on the outside we know we do; on the inside we may think we don't. We may feel that our

basic ways of thinking, as distinct from our opinions, change relatively little; that if our lives are multifarious, our perception of ourselves may seem consistent. But all this time, in all kinds of ways, we are changing. W. J. Alexander, Professor of English at Dalhousie and Toronto, after the sudden death of his wife in 1913, wrote a memoir of her for their nine children:

Our children are growing out of her knowledge; if she could come back she would feel the shock of change; we should have to explain things to her. All this is very sad to me. I read her letters & that old life seems so remote; I feel as if I were then another person. Memory is a terribly poor substitute for the actual ... I do not care how much we value what we have, we have no measure to tell how much it means to us until it is lost.<sup>17</sup>

Henry James used to say that biography was nothing unless it portrayed this, the subject's growth, change, and both in varying intensities, "since it was by these things they themselves lived."<sup>18</sup>

I had a dramatic illustration of it working on Larry MacKenzie. I had written a chapter describing the mature Larry as I saw him. The chapter was based on interviews I had had with him between 1976 and 1980 and with colleagues at UBC who knew him when he was President, 1944 to 1962. I rather liked the chapter. So did the people at UBC who read it. Then, greatly daring, I sent it to Polly in Ireland for her opinion. "Who is it?" she wrote back, "I don't recognize him. It isn't the man I knew in Geneva in 1925 and 1926. *He* was quite different. He was diffident, uncertain, a man going places in the world no doubt, but without the guile or the vanity you have given him in this chapter."

She was right. My portrait of Larry was drawn from my talking to UBC colleagues, and reflected mainly the latter years of his presidency and my own interviews with him fifteen years further on. What I had portrayed was not Polly's Larry MacKenzie, but UBC's. I had the UBC MacKenzie of the 1950s right, but the Geneva MacKenzie of the 1920s wrong.

Historical documents, letters, even diaries, do not usually give any sensation of this; even less do they suggest the diverse way in which time is experienced: continuity, routine, on the one hand; surprise, chance, on the other. Great biography should show the evolving and lambent lights of memory, regret, a sense, elegiac if necessary, of life passing. It is not easy; the evidence for it is usually found only in little corners, in the interstices of other, seemingly more important things. For example: Sir John Thompson's father left Waterford, Ireland, for Nova Scotia in 1827, when he was 30 years old. He never returned. He

lived in Halifax for the rest of his life; there is no evidence that he was not contented there, and much that he was. Was this the reason he never returned to visit Ireland? The answer turned up in a letter of his son *22 years* after the death in 1867 of the father. "I envy you," said Sir John Thompson in 1889, "your visit to Waterford—a place which has a strong hold on my heart, because of all the sadness I used to see in my father's face when he spoke of it."<sup>19</sup> This was a revelation. Thompson's father had wanted to go back, but never could. He hadn't the money.

Men and times change: it is hard to catch them in the act of doing it. Thus it is that other people's lives look neater and seem to form a whole when looked at from the outside. Camus said biographers run after an illusion of unity.<sup>20</sup> Truth is messy. This is suggested in Virginia Woolf's novel *Jacob's Room*, where Jacob is dead and everything is left in ultimate disorder, bills, invitations, love letters, old suits, old shoes, old snapshots. That is often the point where biographers begin.

Yes, and Jacob did not leave *everything* behind either. There were things missing. In fact what biographers get is a glimpse of the iceberg above the sea, with a vast unknown configuration fathoms below. I ran across this with a biography I published of Sir John A. Macdonald in 1975. Macdonald's first wife died in 1857. He married his second wife in 1867. In between, I wrote, Macdonald was rather a man's man, living in a world of politics, poker and whisky. I had reasons for the remark, but negative ones: no evidence to the contrary. Alas for such elegances! The book had scarcely been published when I heard about some Cartier Papers at the McGill Archives, from which it was all too patent that if Macdonald was living in a man's world he was doing it only part of the time. There was a certain lady (or possibly ladies) in Quebec City who quite ruined my argument.<sup>21</sup>

A still more difficult problem is one encountered for the first time with *Larry Mackenzie*: the danger of extrapolating a general argument from a particular of limited application. "... You've discovered my weak point," Polly wrote to him, "that I'm a bottomless pit as far as money is concerned.... I'm one of those people who have no conception of money or what they do with it—why I know not—my training hasn't been luxurious." Perhaps not; but I assumed from the general cast of her style and remarks, especially when combined with her education at Bryn Mawr, that I could set her down as well-bred, well-off and comfortable. It turned out that her academic family was *not* wealthy. They were in fact impoverished by her mother's ill health, and she, as the eldest daughter, Bryn Mawr or not, had had to watch every penny. What she wrote to Larry was a private joke; she and

Larry loaned each other money from time to time, scrupulously repaid; her spendthriftness was a joke over a debt of something like \$18.22. And from that particular I had extrapolated a whole pattern of his history! Had I not been able to check it with her, 60 years later, well-off and comfortable is almost certainly the way she would have been set down.<sup>22</sup> Of course, one can rightly say I was too reckless, making inferences from far too limited particulars. But that is often all historians have to go on. We look at that bit of evidence in front of us, and try to strain out of it its meaning. Sometimes we are dead wrong. Sometimes even letters can be wrong. Asquith once said his biography could never be written, because he'd covered up his tracks. He knew whom to write to frankly, they would destroy his letters; if there was prospect of a letter of his being kept, he wrote accordingly. Often, letters do not tell the whole truth, but are sometimes written as a form of disguise. In this respect, the *Annales* school is safer.

Thus it is, finally, a question of what one does with the evidence. Lytton Strachey, who made biography into an art, who created an excitement that has been the measure of biography since, was a holy terror with evidence, suppressing it cheerfully when it did not suit his purpose, reading few, if any, primary sources. The first prerequisite of the historian, said he in the preface to *Eminent Victorians*, is ignorance, "ignorance, which simplified, and clarified, which selects and omits, with a placid perfection. . .!"<sup>23</sup> His story about General Gordon of Khartoum is typical, Gordon retiring to his tent with a bottle of brandy and a Bible, and emerging in due course visibly inspired—by the brandy. That yarn is based on very dubious sources; Strachey thought it was too good to miss. On the other hand, Strachey's description of the genre of biography he was trying to supplant has relevance:

Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design? They are as familiar as the cortege of the undertaker, and wear the same air of slow, funereal barbarism.<sup>24</sup>

Strachey was able to get away with so much because he wrote supremely well. He took great liberties with history; it may be said that he suborned it; but he cared about style. One can discern two awful polarities: the dull, honest book that one can trust to the last comma, but which neither touches the heart nor much enlarges the mind; and the brilliant, treacherous and fascinating biography that is wrongly

disciplined—disciplined, that is, by the author's desire to please, to create a memorable portrait. That one is fascinated by a portrait does not make it true. An author has to aim for the best of both, rather as one thinks of Holbein's marvellous portrait of Henry VIII: its technical excellence and its conviction. The biographer has to aim right, and hope his talents are up to realising his aim. Desmond MacCarthy, in a perceptive sketch of Henry James, shows what can be done with creative facts, a remembered conversation:

It occurred after a luncheon party of which he [James] had been, as they say, "the life." We happened to be drinking our coffee together when the rest of the party had moved on to the verandah. "What a charming picture they make," he said, with his great head aslant, "the women there with their embroidery, the...." There was nothing in his words, anybody might have spoken them; but in his attitude, in his voice, in his whole being at that moment, I divined such complete detachment, that I was startled into speaking out of myself: "I can't bear to look at life like that," I blurted out, "I want to be in everything. Perhaps that is why I cannot write, it makes me feel absolutely alone...." The effect of this confession upon him was instantaneous and surprising. He leant forward and grasped my arm excitedly: "Yes, it is solitude. If it runs after you and catches you, well and good. But for heaven's sake don't run after it. It is absolute solitude." And he got up hurriedly and joined the others.<sup>25</sup>

In the end it must be a man's mind, and our understanding of it, that is our aim. Mark Twain may have been right: yet we have no option but to try to break into a man's inner life. What is the *Innigkeit* that moves men and women to do what they do? It is not easy, even when they tell us. There are layers of meaning, one might almost call them layers of hypocrisy, in what people say of themselves.

Selection of evidence will always color the result. Two studies of Jane Carlyle illustrate it. J. A. Froude wrote a masterly life of Thomas Carlyle whom he knew well; in it Jane Carlyle was portrayed as a sensitive, misunderstood wife, dominated by an unfeeling husband. Elizabeth Drew, writing 40 years later, found Jane rather shrewish, and that Thomas Carlyle, the hard genius of the Froude portrait, was gentle and long-suffering under a great deal of domestic provocation. Both authors had used genuine letters, nor had either cooked the quotations. What really happened was selection, a selection dictated in Froude's case by his being half in love with Jane Carlyle; Elizabeth Drew, 40 years away from all that, was more attracted to Thomas.<sup>26</sup>

Thus it is all very well for Disraeli to say, "read no history; nothing but biography, for that is life without theory."<sup>27</sup> Life biography may,

indeed, be; without theory perhaps; but, as Alfred Deakin of Australia pointed out in 1909, history, and by implication biography, has manifold possibilities for distortion:

Having now seen history in the making for 30 years, I am amazed to find how plastic the past becomes in the hands of its recorders. . . the effect of my life experience is to discredit most of the personal estimates of history. . . no man knows himself thoroughly, or anyone else more than superficially, except by accident or inspiration.<sup>28</sup>

It is striking that those two sometime newspapermen, Mark Twain and his younger contemporary Alfred Deakin, should both have said that biography is no more reliable than history.

There is at the heart of all biography a penumbra of uncertainty, the shadow of the unreal, that cannot be wholly dispelled. It can be mitigated by one's confidence in the author, in the scrupulousness of his research, in his careful weighing of evidence, in the honesty of his intentions, in the protean range of his intelligence: in short, that truth, that much abused word, has been the author's aim. The reader is like Dante's trusting in Virgil, being taken into the circles of that amazing *Inferno*, the past, being shown wonders, so that from these adventures Dante, you or I, emerges wiser, nobler and more civilized.

Great biography is a noble subject. Leon Edel's life of Henry James may really get us closer to *Geschichte wie es eigentlich gewesen*, if for no other reason than that it chronicles so elegantly the development and change in James's mind and world. But there is no finality. Biographies like histories must become anachronistic, as we do. Even the greatest portrait is never finished. New evidence always accumulates, and with it must come new lights, new interpretations. For in biography as in history, men and women ought to be only what the evidence, old and new, allows.

The supreme argument for biography as history now falls fairly into place. There are no forces; there are no movements; there are no trends: there are men and women. They make the forces, movements, trends. They may behave differently as individuals, groups, or crowds; but, thinking or feeling, loving or hating, educated or primitive, they are all human. Mostly they leave no records; the great challenge to the historian-biographer is to honestly chronicle and describe those who do, with all the evidence one can gather, all the skill one can deploy. It is a great enterprise to try to recover the charm, elegance, even ugliness, certainly character, long or newly gone. All generations, one might say, are equidistant from eternity. Great biography, as Carlyle

wrote of Boswell's *Johnson*, is a revocation of destiny: those who are dead are alive, they who are silent speak: so Dr. Johnson, though the Mitre Tavern was blown to atoms in 1940, and the wine glasses of his dining long before that.<sup>29</sup>

Biography is not on the periphery of history; it is in the middle of it, in the midst of that multitudinous past that history represents. It catches men and women in process—*das Gewordene als Werdendes*, as the Germans neatly have it. It is thus at the core of history; one individual existence, one instance of the way history happens; of the way also, be it asserted despite Tolstoy, that individuals often make history happen.

## NOTES

1. A. B. Paine, ed. *The Writings of Mark Twain, Vol. XXXVI, Mark Twain's Autobiography* (New York, 1929), 2. Camus says much the same thing: "Auprès de cette foule [de mots], ce que l'histoire nous rapporte est une goutte d'eau perdue dans la mer." *Carnets*, 1942-1951, 2 vols. (Paris, 1962) II, 306.
2. *The Northern Magus* was published by McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, in 1980 and went into paperback edition the following year.
3. D. G. Creighton, *John A. MacDonald: The Old Chieftain* (Toronto, 1955), 147.
4. Creighton, 426.
5. D. G. Creighton, *John A. MacDonald: The Young Politician* (Toronto, 1952), 72.
6. I owe this reference to Professor Naomi Griffiths of Carleton University, Ottawa.
7. *New York Times Book Review*, Feb. 23, 1986. Brought to my attention by Professor J. H. Aitchison.
8. Cited in *Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London, 1954), 155.
9. Edward Mendelson. "Authorised Biography and its Discontents" in D. Aaron, ed., *Studies in Biography* (Cambridge, 1979), 11.
10. W. H. Auden cited, Mendelson, 12.
11. *Times Literary Supplement*, April 10, 1969, cited in J. L. Clifford, *From Puzzles to Portraits: Problems of a Literary Biographer* (Chapel Hill, 1970), 123. Clifford's chapter, "How much should a biographer tell," is well worth reading.
12. Larry's relationship with Polly, and with Margaret is set out in P. B. Waite, *Lord of Point Grey: Larry MacKenzie of UBC* (Vancouver, 1987), 47-56, 61-68. The N. A. M. MacKenzie Papers are in the UBC Archives, all 200 feet of them.
13. PBW Archives, Halifax; I have compressed the substance of a number of letters from Polly, 1985-1988.
14. *Lord of Point Grey*, 63.
15. University of New Brunswick Archives, R. B. Bennett Papers, vol. 896, #561420; Mildred to R. B. B., n.d. [April, 1931], written on Chateau Laurier Paper, Rosa Rosenberg to R. B. B., April 27, 1931.
16. Professor Carman Miller, McGill University, to PBW, January 2, 1989, enclosing copies of, among other, letters R. B. B. to Hazel Kemp Colville, Saturday, n.d., but from internal evidence late August, 1932, from the Chateau Laurier. I am most grateful to Professor Miller for drawing these letters to my attention.

There is correspondence on the subject of Bennett's "engagement," including a stern letter from Bennett to the editor of the *Boston Advertiser*, over the publication of the rumor on Sunday, October 23, 1932. The *Ottawa Journal*, Dec. 6, 1932, noted that Bennett departed for England, still a bachelor, after rumors had been circulating for weeks. R. B. Bennett Papers, vol. 946, #s 597744 to 597759.



17. University of Toronto Archives, W. J. Alexander Papers, "Reminiscences," 55, written after Laura Alexander's death, in 1913.
18. Leon Edel, *Henry James, The Untried Years, 1843-1870* (Philadelphia, 1953), epigraph.
19. National Archives of Canada, Sir James Gowan Papers, Thompson to Gowan, May 30, 1889. See P. B. Waite, *The Man from Halifax: Sir John Thompson, Prime Minister* (Toronto, 1985), 15.
20. Albert Camus, *Carnets, 1942-1951*, II, 24-25.
21. See P. B. Waite *John A. MacDonald: His Life and World* (Toronto, 1975), for this too bold assumption.
22. See *Lord of Point Grey*, 48; letters from Polly in PBW Archives, Halifax.
23. Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London, 1921), vii.
24. Strachey, viii.
25. Desmond MacCarthy, "Henry James," in *Portraits* (London, 1949), 154.
26. J. L. Clifford, *From Puzzles to Portraits*, 102-104; 109-110.
27. Benjamin Disraeli, *Contarini Fleming* (London, 1904), I, 141.
28. J. A. la Nauze, *Alfred Deakin, A Biography* (Melbourne, 1965), 572. The reference is to June 13, 1909.
29. Thomas Carlyle, "Boswell's Life of Johnson," *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 7 vols. (London, Chapman and Hall, n.d.), IV, 82.