

issues invariably concern competing values and interests. At the heart of many ethical dilemmas are the competing values of truth and respect. The author is at pains to point out that he has no agenda to 'police' life writing in order to ensure protection and respect for vulnerable subjects. Nevertheless his argument leads to a more balanced position, where the interests of such subjects need to be considered more carefully and to influence subsequent decisions about what to exclude and what to include in published texts.

Although, in his own words, this is not a book about bioethics, the author draws upon key concepts of this contemporary approach, such as the principles of autonomy, beneficence and justice. By careful analysis of a range of different examples, he demonstrates the complexity of the issues at stake, and how these principles might come into conflict. The wide range of his examples is drawn mainly from North America, but the author provides detailed contextual information so that a reader unfamiliar with them can appreciate the ethical issues at stake. The unusual and atypical nature of his examples might suggest that the ethical issues are themselves atypical. On the contrary, the issues are pervasive and insofar as vulnerability is considered a matter of degree rather than kind, then for that reason alone the book is to be thoroughly commended as an essential text in *any* consideration of ethics and life writing.

I found this to be a challenging book in two senses. First, it makes intellectual demands upon the reader, and secondly it challenges practice. Although never strident, the author makes his case persuasively and insistently, and the integrity he displays commands respect. He has, in a sense, made himself vulnerable in making his own text public.

Terry Martin
University of Southampton

A VIVID SENSE OF A PARTICULAR SOCIETY

Twentieth-century autobiography: writing Wales in English. Barbara Prys-Williams, 2004. Cardiff: University of Wales Press; ISBN 0708318916, 224 pp., £14.99 paper.

This study is part of the CREW (Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales, University of Wales Swansea) Series that explores the English language literature of modern Wales. It is an examination of the autobiographical work of seven (all deceased) writers of autobiography including the well-known academic and literary critic Lorna Sage, the miner-writer B.L. Coombes and the distinguished poet R.S. Thomas. Except for Coombes (born 1883) the subjects were all born

in the twentieth century with the youngest writer being Sage (born 1943). Others examined are writer Rhys Davies, novelist Margiad Evans, miner-writer Ron Berry and humorist Gwyn Thomas.

This is a diverse range of writers from different parts of Wales (and elsewhere in origin) with differing class and other backgrounds; at least initially, the choice seems rather 'random'. I began thinking of well-known possible recruits (e.g., Raymond Williams) to the list but the inclusion of less well-known and diverse figures made an interesting contrast. Prys-Williams justifies her selection by saying she has chosen her 'subjects according to my personal judgement of the intrinsic interest of their autobiographical offerings rather than from a desire to represent particular Welsh experiences or propensities in that period'. She adds that each of the writers discussed provides a 'vivid sense of what it was like to live in their particular society if you were them'. She does caution, nevertheless, that the views of Wales are 'lively and memorable' but are 'distinctly idiosyncratic' and 'should not, however, be mistaken for accurate historical record' (p. 1). Her main focus is to analyse the 'sense of self' as 'enacted and discerned by my chosen writers'. As she admits, it was often a 'problematic exercise' (p. 3).

Prys-Williams detects in a number of the authors both a 'calculated self-portraiture' and 'unintentional self-betrayal', with at times writers realizing that there are 'unsounded depths' that do not readily arrive into consciousness (p. 3). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Prys-Williams employs the conceptual apparatus of psychoanalysis to delve into the writers' 'sense of identity', which while commented on by them, has 'sometimes seemed inaccessible to them at the time of writing'. She argues:

Many of my subjects experienced a 'laming of the soul' to a lesser or greater degree in early childhood. The lifelong neediness which resulted for many of them seems to have been an important impetus to writing about their own lives in various and often highly constructed forms. By engaging with their lives, at some cost, many of my subjects gained insight into and, importantly, a sense of power over or control of the past It may be significant that some of the most committed self-examination in the works studied here was written towards the end of the writer's life.

(p. 8)

The chapter on B.L. Coombes, the miner-writer, is of particular interest in highlighting processes that can be involved in the construction of a published autobiography (although some of the discussion is apposite for unpublished autobiographical writing where, it can be argued, there is also an audience). B.L. Coombes' *These poor hands* was a best-seller for the Gollanz Left Book Club in the late 1930s and detailed the life, suffering and danger of mining life. Prys-Williams adds that she had grown up

in a mining community, the daughter of a doctor who dealt with mining accidents and diseases. She undertook a great deal of 'sleuthing' into various archives on the writing of the Coombes autobiography and says she has rewritten her account of it several times. She argues that Coombes, in the light of the drafting of *These poor hands* (1939), other tellings and archive materials (e.g., letters), can be shown to have regarded his life as a 'highly malleable commodity'. There was his perception of an intended, receptive (middle class) audience with an its expectation of a 'factual' account of the miner's life and his conscious self-portraiture as the 'naive' working miner. She then details the complicated communication between Coombes and the publisher, how the autobiography emerged (with a request for significant changes in content and a degree of replacement 'fictionalization'), while noting that the Gollancz Left Book Club's had its own purposes within the surrounding socio-political climate.

The particular approach by Prys-Williams, in using Freud, Bowlby and Jung in the interpretation of the sense of self as revealed in autobiographical writing, is certainly of interpretive interest and provides a highly readable and detailed investigation. But, it will not suit those wary of 'applying' such a powerful conceptual apparatus. The references to Eakin and Lejeune (and others) perhaps could have been expanded alongside other exciting recent developments in auto/biographical interpretation. However, the psychoanalytic approach is broadened by Prys-Williams with an intent to show how her writers undertook an important 'class positioning' in the formation of their identities, while noting the 'historical forces' that are significant in 'shaping achieved identity'. It seems, in addition, that for many of the subjects, the landscape of Wales was an important aspect of their lives, while (at least for some) the 'particular idiosyncrasies of their bodies have contributed to their sense of self' (p. 7). For, Prys-Williams, the autobiographies chosen inspired her 'through the personal meanings they have found in the self and the history that shaped it'.

Brian Roberts
University of Huddersfield

WOMEN EXPERIENCING WAR

Women's autobiography: war and trauma, Victoria Stewart, 2003. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan; ISBN 1403903069, 204 pp., £47.50 cloth.

Victoria Stewart's engagingly written book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the long-term effects of war trauma on people's