

Probably the most frustrating thing about this book is the author's near total disregard for bibliographic conventions. In light of his frequent reminders of his status as a professional biographer and academic, the absence not just of a bibliography but of any information regarding the year of publication or publishers of the biographies he reviews, nor of the dates of his own reviews, is perplexing and sloppy. One would think that a professional biographer would appreciate that the devil is in the attention to this kind of detail, that much of the author's credibility in such a 'contentious' genre relies on the author's observance of these basic practices. Likewise, the editorial standards leave much to be desired; given that this is such a short book, one would have thought that we could have been spared not just the twice but thrice repetition of material that blights the otherwise satisfactory 'Comparing Biographers'.

In summary, I would hesitantly recommend this book, but with strong reservations and only to those who are avid readers on the subject of biography.

*Essays in biography* (2005) fares considerably better, not least because of the comparative modesty of the author's stated objective. Though the insistence on the 'play on words' represented by the title is rather forced, nonetheless the aim 'to essay, to make an attempt, a test, or a trial' (p. vii) on the nature of biographical writing as an intrinsically unfinished enterprise is both interesting and commendable.

And so these essays generally prove to be. The standards of Rollyson's writing, analysis and critique are considerably improved. The essay on W.A. Swanberg, biographer of Hearst, Pulitzer and Dreiser among other notable American writers is particularly worthy as a polemical offering on biographical writing; though Rollyson's apologetic excusing biographers of literary figures from attending to their subject's writings is less than convincing, his deflection onto the development of the biographer's voice raises interesting and challenging questions about the genre. Significantly, the quality of analysis benefits considerably by the inclusion of a critical bibliography. Highly recommended.

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#### **METHODOLOGICAL RIGOUR IN THE IMAGINATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF PAST LIVES**

*Writing biography: historians and their craft.* Lloyd E. Ambrosius, editor, 2004. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press; ISBN 0803210663 cloth, 166 pp., £34.50.

In September 2000, six distinguished historians, three men and three women, were invited by the Department of History in the University of Nebraska–Lincoln to reflect on the writing of historical biography. They considered biography's role in the writing of history, the selection of subjects for study, and the approaches adopted, as well as the analysis of the available source materials. This book is the result.

After reflecting on the motives for writing biography (breathing life into dry census data, for example) and the influence of the author's personality on the choice of subject, Shirley A. Leckie argues that it is important to make the person alive for the reader. Thus, the subject's intimate or domestic concerns should be revealed, together with the way they confronted the existential issues faced by every one. Each person must also be seen in the context of their times. But while the writer should struggle to see the world with the eyes of the subject, a degree of detachment and objectivity is required.

R. Keith Schoppa stresses the importance of social and cultural contexts. His experience in writing the biography of the 'second-tier' Chinese leader of the 1910s and 1920s, Shen Dingyi, revealed that the standard western approach focused on the individual was of limited use in understanding a Chinese subject. The importance of the group in Chinese society required a different approach in which the individual was set in a web of social networks. Retha M. Warnicke reached similar conclusions from her research into the lives of two wives of Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn and Anne of Cleves. Elite women of the Tudor period became visible in the sources almost only when they participated in rites of passage, especially marriage and childbirth, and within their kinship and family networks. Warnicke, however, gives several warnings: against assuming that the way things are done today was the way in which they were done in the past (Christian rituals, for example); about the fictions contained in some of the most frequently quoted sources (ambassadorial reports, for example) and the persistence of long-established but distorted views of both individuals and their socio-political context (Bishop Gilbert Burnet's invention of the 'Flanders' mare' to describe Henry's reaction to Anne of Cleves).

Like Leckie, John Milton Cooper reflects on how biographers choose their subjects. As well as recounting his own experience, he urges authors to choose subjects of historical significance, whose study would throw light upon the times in which they lived and the events in which they participated. Sufficient source material must also be available. Biographers converse with their subjects through reading their words, listening to their voices or watching them on film and talking to relatives, friends and associates. Cooper commends the use of a comparative study of contemporaries, like his work on Roosevelt and Wilson, as particularly revealing.

As well as studying individuals for the light that they might throw upon their own times, they can also be researched to discover how their lives illuminate their ideas, especially where significant shifts in their thinking are apparent. Robert J. Richards explores this theme through the life of Friedrich Schelling, a former room-mate of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and a founder of the natural philosophy movement of the late eighteenth century, which was such an influence on the scientist, Alexander von Humboldt, and the poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Most research in historical biography tends to privilege texts as source material. Although Cooper and Schoppa mention the value of oral evidence, it was left to Nell Irvin Painter to urge the use of pictures. Seemingly natural representations of reality, visual images are actually carefully contrived and require careful analysis. They are particularly valuable as sources of biographical information in the study of what Painter calls 'subaltern subjects', that is 'individuals who are oppressed on account of their group identity' but who have the possibility of exercising power over others. Painter includes white women, as well as 'members of stigmatised minorities'. She argues that the careful analysis of images allows the biographer to portray the subject more thoroughly as a person and to unpack cultural meaning, especially when compared with stereotypical images. The existence of stereotypes is often overlooked. Painter exemplifies the value of images through studies of the portraits of prominent African Americans. Both Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass, for example, used their portraits to project images of the respectable American bourgeois in stark contrast to the stereotypes of the typological 'black' of their time, whether the ex-slave or the 'darky' of minstrelsy or 'cook-mammy'.

In sum, there is great diversity in this book. But the authors share concerns for methodological rigour, as well as an imaginative selection and use of sources. Their reflections on the nature and approach of historical biography are interesting, useful and stimulating.

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## ONLY CONNECT

*Communicating: the multiple modes of human interconnection.* Ruth Finnegan, 2002. London and New York: Routledge; ISBN: 0415241189, paper, 306 pp., £20.00.

This book is based on long reflection by Ruth Finnegan on how we communicate with others and her own research experience in widely separated places – witnessing the richness of story-telling performances in West