



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 54, No. 8

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, AUGUST 1973

Some Uses of Biography

IN OSCAR WILDE'S play *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth remarks: "The Book of Life begins with a man and a woman in a garden." To this, Mrs. Allonby replies: "It ends with Revelations." It is the wealth of interesting stories that come in between that make up biography.

Autobiographies and biographies are increasingly helpful as the complexities of life multiply. How men and women faced up to challenges boldly and either won triumphantly or went down gallantly is a story pertinent to statesmen, to people in the professions and in business.

Some may say that the practical concerns of people and the patterns of society have changed so radically that it is useless to read the story of a person written even twenty years ago. Yet the values, the principles and the practices that made life worth-while in the past have not really changed. Analyse any life-story and you will find it composed of ambition, learning, work, relations with people, and awareness of the rightness and wrongness of actions.

Books that tell about the lives of people are the most valuable on one's bookshelves. One famed bookman divided his big library into two parts — biography and "all the rest". He said that he had never read a biography from which he had not learned something.

How men and women planned their lives, faced up to difficulties, and attained success, gives us a yardstick by which to measure the progress of humanity, including ourselves.

Self-improvement

Reading biography is not to be thought of as a sure-fire way to attain personal success, but the attentive reader will learn much about how people did jobs, won friends, and got ahead. As Emerson remarked: "In every man there is something wherein I may learn of him, and in that I am his pupil."

A biography shows the effectiveness of self-help, of patient purpose, of resolute working, and of integrity. In reading about the life of a person you see how problems arise, are sharpened, project themselves into crises and conflict, and how they are met by action.

Sometimes a young man will discover himself, his qualities and possibilities, in a biography just as Correggio felt within him the stirring of genius on contemplating the works of Michelangelo.

This sort of study is quite different from reading rules for behaviour and prescriptions for success in a textbook. Example is one of the most potent of instructors, and here, in biographies, are examples of how to put ideas across in business or politics, and how to so live as to be worthy of remembrance. Here you see the causes of people's victories and defeats, so that you can avoid the latter and imitate the former. Even if your achievement does not quite match theirs, it will at least have a touch of it.

Reading biography is not all that is needed by an aspiring person. One has to get busy doing things. A well-written biography does not picture its subject sitting around apathetically while life flows past. Theodore Roosevelt, who campaigned for "the strenuous life", would not allow photographers to snap their shutters while he had his hands in his pockets: he showed his vitality by gesturing with them as busily as a prize-fighter.

Even to people who do not expect to get utilitarian hints from the experiences of others, biography is an inspiring study. When we read the story of a life we learn that its subject was not born a professional this or that, or a skilled craftsman or astronaut. He was born a human being and worked at becoming what has made him famous.

People who have reached the peak of success in any enterprise have passed through discouragement and hard times, but they learned that there are few things a person cannot do if he is doggedly determined. In desperate situations they masked their doubts and made a display of confidence and serenity. They refused to call any try their last try.

Every success biography emphasizes that the prevalent "something for nothing" philosophy does not stand up under examination. Everything has a price and must be earned.

Biography also dispels the idea that there is no more creative work to be done, only copying, anno-

tating and criticizing. Every life-story reveals something that its owner found new, something fresh. It would be ridiculous for an artist today to say "All that is left for me to do is to copy the nymphs and the madonnas of the old masters."

Practical lessons

Biographies of men and women in all callings tell us how they sold goods or ideas, gained support for their plans, and earned friendships. Readers may learn their principles of salesmanship: that argument is not a selling device, that one should find out what people's wants are, that it is not by showing off their own importance but by giving other people a sense of importance that they turn opponents into supporters.

Benjamin Franklin was an accomplished salesman. Seeking to win the friendship of a man who had attacked him in a speech, Franklin wrote him a note expressing the desire to read a rare book of which the man was proud to be the possessor. The man sent it; Franklin wrote a note of appreciation; they became lifelong friends.

LaSalle, the noted French explorer, gained the goodwill of hostile Indians by addressing them in their own language and using their style of oratory. Emil Ludwig said of Napoleon in the Italian campaign: "Half of what he achieves is achieved by the power of words." Sometimes the general told his ragged, hungry army about the good food and comfortable lodging they would find beyond the mountains; on other occasions he pictured his soldiers returning as heroes to their home towns.

These examples from biography show how leaders paid attention to the needs and desires of those whom they wished to influence.

Aspiring people are not ashamed to draw upon the experience, thoughts and work of others for inspiration, ideas and methods. Thoreau had been gone half a century when his doctrine of civil disobedience was applied by Mahatma Gandhi in India and South Africa. Shakespeare drew the material for his plays from many biographies. It was a translation of Plutarch's *Lives* that introduced him to the great gallery of Greeks and Romans.

Writing a biography

Biography reveals problems old as life itself and tells how people dealt with them — problems of love and passion; problems of ambition and the desire for money and prestige; problems of temptation and sin.

Some life stories are written by professional writers, some by admirers seeking to perpetuate the memory and teachings of a person who contributed to society; the *Meditations* or *Thoughts* of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus are the writings of a king.

Most distinguished persons dislike "incense swingers" — people who are forever saying "isn't he marvellous?" A thoughtful and serious biography stressing a person's personality is in a different class,

just as a politician having his face made up for a televised campaign speech is a different figure from that presented when he is defending his position on an important Bill in the legislature.

The topics for composing a eulogy upon a person have been set forth in the standard books of instruction for speakers and writers, beginning with Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. The doctrine is explained by Hoyt Hopewell Hudson in his essay introducing Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly*. The speaker or writer should start with the person's ancestry and family, and find something notable there; perhaps even the country or city of his birth would lend evidence of his merit; his upbringing and education would be canvassed for similar evidence; and then one passes on to his achievements, his virtues, his public honours. If a man was descended from kings or nobles, of course he partook of their noble and royal qualities; if he came of humble stock, his own virtue was the greater for having climbed above the common run without the advantage of high birth. How many biographies one finds written strictly on this formula!

Light years above such stories is the account written by John Gunther of the spirited fight for life by his son, stricken by an incurable disease at the age of sixteen. It is a story full of urgent sincerity, entitled *Death Be Not Proud*.

So how does one judge a biography? It is true that the story of a person's life is concerned with basic facts: birth and death, love and jealousy, conflict, social experience, triumph and defeat. More is needed than merely to record these. In a good biography the determining incident is made vital, the decisive turning point is highlighted, the abstract thought is humanized. The biography must recreate its central character so as to give the reader a sense of rounded reality showing how this person discharged his obligations to himself, to his family, to his community, and to the human race.

Reading such a biography is to associate with someone who meant something to society. The ideal biography will give you a feeling of fellowship with the person you have been reading about, and a longing to have just such another as he was for your friend.

Some great biographies

The biographer discovers and reveals essential greatness. "Had Boswell never existed," wrote Clifton Fadiman in *The Lifetime Reading Plan*, "Johnson would still have been a great personality. But we might never have known it."

Plutarch was the first notable biographer in the world's history. He grouped forty-six lives in pairs, a Greek and a Roman, for the sake of the similarity of their work or circumstances. His excellent rule was to epitomize the most celebrated parts of their story rather than to insist upon every particular circumstance of it.

Queen Victoria left, in her letters and journals, one of the most astonishing autobiographical monuments

ever achieved. She displayed total, disconcerting candour. Her biography by Elizabeth Longford tells about Disraeli's flattery by which he coaxed The Widow of Windsor back into society; about the putting of John Brown in his place; about the Queen's obsessive interest in royal matchmaking — "I do wish one could find some more black-eyed princes or princesses for our children."

Women have been biographers with deep penetration. It was Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell's sympathetic understanding of Charlotte Brontë that enabled her to produce a haunting, vividly human, portrait. Miss Brontë wrote to Tennyson about one of her books: "In the space of a year the publisher has disposed of but two copies; and by what painful efforts he succeeded in getting rid of these two himself only knows." But four months later her *Jane Eyre* came off the press, and it was an instant success.

Not many women entered the book publishing arena, where they were treated slightly. The lives of Jane Austen and Emily Dickinson, whose poems were published only after her death, indicate the timidity with which they wrote and show the gap between their period and that of the present.

Queen Victoria summed up the prejudice against her sex in a letter to the Princess Royal. Her husband, Prince Albert, she said, shared with all "clever men" the tendency to despise "our poor degraded sex."

Agnes Strickland was author (in collaboration with her sister Elizabeth, who forbade use of her name on the title page) of the successful *Lives of the Queens of England*, published in five volumes in 1839.

Lady Dufferin, wife of Lord Dufferin, who was Governor-General of Canada from 1872 to 1878, wrote a delightful autobiography in the form of letters to her mother. They report with shrewdness, humour, and candour the incidents that made up the private and public lives of the Dufferins in Canada. (*My Canadian Journal*, Longmans Canada, Ltd., 1969).

The biographer

The hallmark of a good biographer is not passion but good sense. He has to weed out the irrelevant and seek what is strong, novel and interesting. He needs a profound knowledge of human nature, wide sympathies, and an impersonal standpoint.

The biographer will do well to adhere to the standards of a good executive: calm demeanour, judicious appraisal, reflectiveness, temperate language.

Every biographer must solve the complex problem of honesty. A thing may be true, but its recounting may not be honourable.

There is a temptation to paint the subject's virtues in rich colour and to whitewash his vices. Aristotle told us how to do this discreetly: for the purpose of praise or blame, the writer may identify a man's actual qualities with qualities bordering on them. Thus a cautious man may be represented as cold and design-

ing; a simpleton as good-natured; a callous man as easy-going. The rash man may be described as courageous and the spendthrift as liberal.

Here are two examples of writers striving for honesty. When Boswell was urged to omit instances of Johnson's objectionable overbearing manners, he replied that he would not make his tiger into a cat to please anybody. Jean Jacques Rousseau exposed his own follies, saying: "In this book I have hidden nothing evil and added nothing good."

It is necessary to chronicle some little events because they make inevitable or bear upon some noteworthy events, or show how traits of character emerge. But the little things must have point and purpose. It is a reprehensible fault in a biographer to shift the lens from the vital to the trivial. The significant thing about Churchill was not that he smoked cigars and liked to dictate his memos while lying abed, but that his was the voice that rallied the free world to defeat Naziism, Fascism, and their cruel sponsors.

The aspiring biographer will find much of interest and value in the "Biography and Memoirs" chapter of H. M. Paull's book *Literary Ethics* (Thornton Butterworth Ltd., London, 1928).

Getting the facts

The amount of work involved in preparing to write a biography becomes evident when one considers the quantity of material that must be examined. In collecting representative letters of Queen Victoria, Arthur Benson and Viscount Esher found more than 500 volumes dealing with only the first 42 of her 81 years. André Maurois tells us that 500 volumes had been written and printed about Victor Hugo, yet the unpublished part of his papers far exceeds the part already made public. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle left whole rooms full of personal papers and notebooks, including 1,500 letters to his mother.

A person who does his research hastily, being content to examine only part of the data, is not acting honestly. His story will be partial and therefore unfair.

"It is easy," said Paull, "to forgive the writer who in his enthusiasm over-praises the object of his admiration, but it is not so easy to pardon those who enjoy raking up scandal about celebrities." It may take a person all of his allotted seventy years to complete his great achievement, but a biographer can lay it in the dust in an hour-long paperback.

Socrates urged his pupils to be sensible about this: "Do not mind whether the teachers of philosophy are good or bad, but think only of Philosophy herself." Coming nearer to our own day, Lord Peter Wimsey, the detective created by Dorothy L. Sayers, said about a man chosen to captain a cricket eleven: "Provided the man can captain, I don't care a bit if he has as many wives as Solomon, and is a forger and a swindler into the bargain."

History records many examples of men and women of indifferent morals who have yet served the world well as business people, statesmen, artists, and soldiers. We can admire the work of a person as we do a fine act in a theatre without rushing backstage to examine the scaffolding that supports the scenery.

Writing your own story

It is the duty of upright and capable men of all ranks, said Benvenuto Cellini in his autobiography, who have performed anything noble or praiseworthy, to record the events of their lives.

A person's own story will tell about some fateful occurrence unnoticed by his colleagues, or a flash of illumination that opened new visions to him.

A title for an autobiography might be "My Life — and what I have done with it", but the writer should remember that he stands in court afresh at the end of every chapter, subject to critical examination. He may think that his frequent glances at himself in the mirror show him as he really is, but other people have different views of him.

Writing an autobiography may be useful to the writer. It will serve as a survey showing him where he is and what changes he should make in the direction he pursues. It is also an exercise in composition and writing.

The story of a life need not be left until life's end. Professor William Carleton Gibson, of the University of British Columbia, wrote *Young Endeavour* (Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, U.S.A., 1958) in which he told interestingly about the discoveries made by more than sixty students of medicine in their undergraduate years.

Some autobiographies

Every piece of biographical writing, whether by the subject or some other writer, increases the reader's self-reliance by demonstrating what people can be and what they can do.

Some, like John Bunyan, have set down simply the battle of the emotions that tried their souls. Vicomte de Chateaubriand, one of the most important figures in the literary history of France, gives an account of his life and thought in *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*. In *Out of My Life and Thought* Dr. Albert Schweitzer selects bits here and there from mind and life to illustrate the *why* of what happened.

Madame de Staël's *Memoirs* are amusing. Her portraits of persons are vivid and convincing. Yet, as she said in opening her story: "If I write the record of my life, it is not because it deserves attention, but in order to amuse myself by my recollections."

Benjamin Franklin's is the greatest autobiography in American literature. He was gifted by nature with a versatility of genius unexampled by any figure known to history, with the exception, perhaps, of Leonardo da Vinci. That is the judgment of Sir J. A. Hammerton, expressed in his *Outline of Great Books* (Wise & Co., New York, 1936).

Sir James M. Barrie, whose dramatic fantasy *Peter Pan* is universally adored, told a story in his Rectorial Address at St. Andrews University in 1922 — a story which stands as the greatest example of courageous autobiography. "It is a letter to me from Captain Scott of the Antarctic, and was written in the tent you know of, where it was found long afterwards with his body and those of some other very gallant gentlemen, his comrades. It begins: 'We are pegging out in a very comfortless spot. . . . We are in a desperate state — feet frozen, etc., no fuel, and a long way from food, but it would do your heart good to be in our tent, to hear our songs and our cheery conversation. . . . We are very near the end. . . . We did intend to finish ourselves when things proved like this, but we have decided to die naturally without. . . .'"

This story is printed in Barrie's *Courage* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1930).

Fame is not all

Biography has been described as the literature of superiority, but a person can be superior in even humble life. In fact, there are some people who believe that you learn most about the state of society by studying the lives of the little, typical figures in it.

Some of the most interesting autobiographies are by people who are not great in an absolute sense but have a story to tell and tell it interestingly. And what better bequest could men or women leave to children than the plain story of their lives, their triumphs over adversity, how they picked themselves up after a knock-down, how they progressed from point to point in understanding, always striving toward something better, and how they rejoiced when they reached a new peak.

The person who reads biography will not become mentally bankrupt. To read and to learn from what he reads is a mark of intelligence.

We learn all we can from history and biography in order to profit by the accumulated wisdom of the race. We do not have to start our own lives from the ground, but from the shoulders of the people whose lives we read.

Not only instruction and inspiration are to be found in biography, but comfort and peace of mind. This is touched upon by Nicolo Machiavelli, the Florentine statesman and political philosopher, in a letter to a friend:

The evening being come, I return home and go to my study; at the entrance I pull off my peasant-clothes, covered with dust and dirt, and put on my noble court dress, and thus becomingly re-clothed I pass into the ancient courts of the men of old, where, being lovingly received by them, I am fed with that food which is mine alone; where I do not hesitate to speak with them, and to ask for the reason of their actions, and they in their benignity answer me; and for four hours I feel no weariness, I forget every trouble, poverty does not dismay, death does not terrify me.