

Introduction to the Special Issue – “Scientific Biography: A Many Faced Art Form”

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Biographers have many things in common. They see connections between psychology and ideas. Between personal life histories and grander historical patterns. They are respectful of origins. They value agency. They seek out personal papers and spend hours in archives. They carefully track down connections, redrawing and recreating networks of relationships to people, institutions, schemes, traditions. Most of all, they believe in the illuminating power of a life. Whether it is unusual or quotidian, unique or emblematic, a life is always illustrative of its times and therefore reflective of them, or at least – in the right hands – it can be.

But biographers, too, can be as different from each other in their motivations as the characters they seek to alight are in their lives. For some biography is an exercise in laying down precisely the facts of someone's life, carving out its historical territory and thereby explaining its significance. For others it is a pursuit of a reputation, an attempt to grapple with the memory of a life more than with the life itself. Still others embark upon biography as a means by which to track the history of a particular idea, like race or democracy or altruism or the gene, the genre affording either an aesthetically pleasing or organizationally efficient, or simply an easier, way to speak about issues that are greater than just one life. Some biographers are interested in how a biography reflects on the future, others on how it illuminates the past. Some view it primarily as story telling, others as accounting, still others as a moral tool for historical retribution. Some are most interested in psychology and the inner world, others in actions, still others in the connections between the two. Some train their attention on failures, some on

successes. Some direct their craft at other scholars and still others at wide audiences. Biography may be afforded a corraling and artificially unifying space in bookstores and in catalogues, but upon closer examination it proves to be a myriad of very different things.

In this Special Section of *Journal of the History of Biology*, and in light of the recent resurgence of discussion on the general topic of biography, the pluralities of a particular kind of biography, the scientific biography, will be taxonomied and juxtaposed. Five scholars who have produced very different kinds of biographies of life scientists have been asked to consider a set of fundamental questions pertaining to their motivations and craft:

- Is your scientist a central and well-known player, or is he peripheral and unknown? Why did you make that choice?
- Is your scientist an end or a means? In what way, and why?
- Who is your imagined audience? Are you more interested in speaking to fellow historians, to scientists, or to intelligent lay readers? Why?
- How does the answer to the above question relate to your view of the nature and import of biography writing?
- Is there anything unique about scientific biography as opposed to general biography?
- Are you more concerned with history or historiography in approaching a biographical project?
- What are the salient differences between fiction and non-fiction when it comes to writing a gripping biography? What are the limits and boundaries between the two?
- How can biography be compared to other units of historical analysis, such as ideas, institutions, organisms, research programs, instruments?
- Is biography writing a moral exercise? If so, in what way?
- Is biography writing more an art or a science? How and why?

The contributors all use illustrations from the lives they have studied in addressing these questions, and have each been asked to share their thought processes in the first person. While some things may unite them, it is my hope that the readers will see that each biographer has undertaken quite a different project. Interestingly, in reply to the basic question:

- Why are particular lives important?

It will be shown that many different answers exist – different in *kind* as well as just in *emphasis*.

The contributions span the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and cover different fields in the life sciences from evolutionary theory to immunology, mathematical population biology to botany, from medicine to genetics to development. In the opening contribution, Thomas Söderqvist provides a broad introductory analysis of seven distinct “species” of biographies – from *ancilla historiae* to commemoration to virtue ethics – each with a particular end and a unique style and approach. His taxonomy of biographical species is instanced by examples from the biography of the Danish immunologist and Nobel Laureate, Niels Jerne. Next, Jim Endersby takes us back to the world of nineteenth century Victorian science, as he discusses writing the life of Joseph Hooker. Endersby shows that while Hooker’s own biography quickly proved rather boring, it ultimately opened an invaluable window through which to learn more about scientific practice and professionalization in a particular age. Michael Dietrich follows with a different sort of analysis of biography making. His concern, looking at the German born maverick geneticist Richard Goldschmidt, is more to do with the biography of a reputation than with the biography of a man. The often subtle, sometimes heavy-handed ways in which posterity makes use of reputation are the subject of his contribution. Next, Nathaniel Comfort returns to the subjects themselves – and to the art of the oral interview. Drawing on his experience writing about the Nobel Laureate geneticist, Barbara McClintock, and on two other subjects studied as part of the Oral History of Human Genetics Project, Comfort moves the discussion into the realm of craft, showing the ways in which interviewing can become a method for thinking and learning about a biographical subject distinct from reliance on written sources. Finally, Oren Harman rounds off the Special Issue with a contribution dedicated to biography as an art form. Drawing on his work on the eccentric mathematical geneticist, George Price, and on the evolution of altruism, he shows how form can become a tool for conveying content, comparing the writing of a biography to the composing of music or the creation of sculpture.

It is my hope that taken together, the contributions to this Special Issue help to show that biography, in fact, is not a single art form. Rather, it is many art forms independently, and simultaneously all of them together at once – different from each other in interesting ways, and, even more so, for interesting reasons. Enjoy!