

## Biography and *Mentalité* History : Discovering a Relationship.

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Every piece of historical writing has a theoretical basis on which evidence is selected, filtered and understood. This statement is as true of scientific empiricism as it is of poststructuralism, although the theory is more likely to be explicit in the latter case. The same is true irrespective of the historian's approach, whether it be Marxist or in the vein of the French *Annalistes*. As has been stated :

“Each historian and each age redefines categories of evidence in the light of its needs, sensibilities, and perceptions. The value of any conceptual framework is what new combinations of data or inferences from the data it may contribute to the historian's ability to interpret documents and the other raw material of history.”<sup>1)</sup>

This is certainly one of the enduring strengths of the historical profession. It is also undoubtedly one of the pleasures in writing history, this present paper being no exception.

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1) Peter Loewenberg, *Decoding the Past : The Psychohistorical Approach*, New Brunswick, 1996, p.15.

An appropriate way to discuss the similarities and differences between biography and *mentalité* is to first comment on each discipline separately highlighting some of the difficulties and limitations of each, and then to compare the two with each other, to demonstrate a relationship.

From the historian's viewpoint, biography can be simply defined as the record of a life and is thus a branch of history, a small segment of a bigger pattern, just as the story of the development of a town, a state, or a nation may be thought of as "an element in a larger whole".<sup>2)</sup>

All biographies are historically interesting since each one necessarily includes some information about its subject's time. However, not all biographies are "historical biographies". To qualify, a study must be informed by a systematic desire to add to our knowledge of a past society, that is, to relate its subject to its unique temporal context. Emphasis may vary - the primary point may be to understand the individual against the backdrop of his or her times, a common approach in the nineteenth century, or to use the life as a document, or text, to understand the society, a predominantly twentieth century approach. Whatever the case social relations must be prominent for "history deals with societies as well as individuals, and any society is far more than the sum of its parts. Vast economic, social, and cultural forces, which obviously transcend the lives of individuals, are basic elements in history."<sup>3)</sup>

A biographer in pursuit of an individual long dead is usually hampered by a lack of sources: it is often impossible to check or verify what written evidence there is; there are no witnesses to cross-examine. Scanty documents may be

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2) J. A. Garraty, "The Nature of Biography", *The Craft of American History: Selected Essays 2*, A. S. Eisenstadt (ed), New York, 1966, p.56.

3) *Ibid*, p.58.

parched out by doubtful chronicles, perhaps legends. Each life, however, presents its own opportunities as well as specific difficulties to the biographer: the ingenuity with which he handles gaps in the record—by providing information, for example, about the age that casts light upon the subject—has much to do with the quality of his resulting work. Boswell knew comparatively little about Dr. Johnson's earlier life, and it is one of the "greatnesses" of his *Life of Samuel Johnson LLD* that he succeeded without inventing matter or deceiving the reader in giving the sense of a life progressively unfolding.

A further difficulty is the unreliability of most collections of papers, letters, and other memorabilia edited before the twentieth century. Not only did editors feel free to omit and transpose materials, but sometimes the authors of documents revised their personal writings for the benefit of posterity, often falsifying the record and presenting their biographers with a difficult situation when the originals were no longer extant.<sup>4)</sup>

The biographer writing the life of a person recently dead is often faced with the opposite problem: an abundance of living witnesses and a plethora of materials which includes the subject's papers and letters, conversations transcribed from tape, newspaper clippings, magazine "exposés", as well as the record of interviews granted the biographer by his subject's friends, associates, and enemies. In short, when writing the life of any man or woman, whether long of recently dead, the biographer's chief responsibility is vigorously to test the authenticity of

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4) Conversely, letter-writing or correspondence can be viewed as unwitting autobiography. The appeal of gaining direct access to another person's thoughts as they occurred and emotions as they were felt was explained by Freud in a comment on biography that applies equally well to correspondence. We are raised to the level of the subject by observing his strengths, while *he* comes down to us by revealing his weaknesses. As a result we come closer as human beings. (*Letters of Leonard Woolf*, Frederic Spotts (ed), London, 1992, p. xi).

the materials by whatever rules and techniques are open to him.

Assembling a string of facts in chronological order does not constitute the life of a person—it only gives an outline of events. The biographer therefore seeks to elicit from his materials the motives for his subject's actions and to discover the shape of the subject's personality. The biographer who has known his subject in life enjoys the advantage of his own direct impressions, often fortified by what the subject has himself revealed in conversations, and of his having lived in the same era and thereby avoiding the pitfalls in depicting the distant past. However, on the debit side, such a biographer's view is coloured by the emotional factor present in a living association. Conversely, the biographer who knows his subject only from written evidence and perhaps from the report of witnesses lacks the insight generated by a personal relationship but can generally command a greater objectivity in his effort to prove his subject's inner life.

Biographers of the twentieth century have had at their disposal the psychological theories and practice of Sigmund Freud and of his followers and rivals, and the extent to which these new biographical tools for the unlocking of personality have been employed and the results of their use have varied greatly, as shown for example by Erik Erikson's psychological study *Young Man Luther* and Leon Edel's five volume biography of Henry James. Freud himself believed that his theory also offered a key to the understanding of historical personalities, and in a famous essay on Leonardo da Vinci he in effect carried out the first exercise in "psychohistory".

Of all the technological and methodological innovations made in the past fifty years, psychohistory has attracted the most curiosity outside the profession of history, but it is also the most flawed. Compounded with the problem of evidence, already discussed, there exists a flaw in assuming that psychohistory is

valid for previous ages. Freud's picture of emotional development is in effect very culture-bound and "rooted in the child-bearing practice and mental attitudes of late nineteenth century middle-class urban society". Efforts to apply psychoanalysis to earlier periods risk anachronism, the reading of the assumptions of one period back into other periods. Indeed, this was a problem for all psychological theory, Freudian or otherwise. Instead of being reduced to a formula, perhaps the structure of human personality over time is precisely what is needed to be investigated.

Although Erikson's *Luther*, and that of his followers, was extremely controversial, particularly in its use of evidence and inference, the way was nonetheless paved for the growth of a psychohistorical "school" in the United States.

The significance of this approach to the study of biography is well illustrated in John Mack's Pulitzer Prize-winning "psycho-biography" of T.E. Lawrence, first published in 1976.<sup>5)</sup> A professional psychiatrist and Head of the School of Psychiatry at Harvard University, Mack tackled Lawrence's complex personality and showed how Lawrence tried to transform his personal neuroses into public accomplishments and attempted to solve many of the problems of his period. Mack employed psycho-analytical techniques to explain Lawrence rather than to denigrate him, his intention to have "not in any way reduce Lawrence or to show him in a bad light but to complete (his) own picture"<sup>6)</sup>. The result was a balanced answer to the previous debunking line of criticism as expounded by Richard Aldington in the 1950s. However, to his credit, Mack was well aware of the shortcomings of his approach, admitting that he concentrated on purely

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5) J. E. Mack, *T. E. Lawrence. A Prince of Our Disorder*, London, 1976.

6) B. Bond, *The First World War and British Military History*, Oxford, 1991, p.254.

psychological factors and that his book was not a measured narrative.

One of the problems of contemporary history, it can be argued, is that scholars today are too close to the events of this period to achieve sufficient detachment, and that they are further handicapped by their limited access to confidential records. However, the circumstances in which Jeremy Wilson wrote his authorised biography of T.E. Lawrence was a favourable one. Trained importantly as a professional historian, he had at hand before him the advantage of near enough to forty Lawrence biographies as well as access to previously embargoed material. Like Mack, he was well aware of the limitations of the psycho—biographical approach and the problems that it imposed on serious biographical study.<sup>7)</sup> By bringing both the positive and negative features of Lawrence's personality into focus sympathetically, Wilson was able to draw more convincing conclusions about the nature of Lawrence's achievements. For example, the Arab Revolt is given the proper degree of attention that it warrants, which reversed Wilson's earlier thinking that too much attention had been accorded this in other books. In short, his approach resulted in the first major scholarly study of Lawrence, an invaluable reference point for further academic study in this field.

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Although biography can be described as the life story of an individual with special emphasis on his or her social role, its recent usage also allows the term to mean the collective life portrait of a group of individuals. The idea of collective biography—also termed prosopography<sup>8)</sup>—is a product of the broadened social awareness that profoundly affected many academic disciplines at the turn of the twentieth century, when the conviction arose that individuals cannot truly be

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7) J. Wilson (ed), *T. E. Lawrence Studies*, Vol No 1, Spring, London, 1976, pp.5-7.

8) L. Stone, *The Past and the Present Revisited*, New York, 1987, p.45.

understood apart from the groups to which they belong : classes, professional groups, nationalities, and so on. A pioneering work of collective biography was Charles Beard's *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* which analysed the lives and economic interests of authors of the American constitution. However, Beard paid little attention to kinship or social relationships in developing his group portrait.

The real breakthrough into general acceptance by the history profession did not come until the publication of Namier's *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, which popularised prosopography, or "Namierism", in Britain. Namier believed that social groups could not be understood apart from the people who composed them. Utilising biographical studies and dictionaries that had accumulated since the eighteenth century, he "worked impressionistically through case studies and personal vignettes, which he used to build up a picture of elitist personal interests, mainly kinship groupings, business affiliations, and a complicated web of favours given and received"<sup>9)</sup>.

Since the 1930s a "school" of collective biography had also emerged, and was based largely on the adaption of the statistical methods of quantitative demography to history. Practitioners of this approach tend to think that human affairs are controlled more by mass opinion and popular "mentalities" than by the actions of elites. And their focus is the composite study of ordinary people about whom little can be known as individuals, and in general their work reflects a concern to shift emphasis away from exceptional individuals (even in groups) towards the study of the behaviour of the inarticulate.

At this point some basic understanding of the nature of the *mentalité*

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9) Ibid, p.50.

approach to history, as practised by the French *Annalistes*, is necessary. For want of a definition, *mentalité* can be defined as an attempt to “get inside” the mind set of a group, such as a society, in order to see the world through collective eyes, an approach that is very much concerned with the emotional, the instinctive, and the implicit<sup>10</sup>. It is a way of seeing how for example in any given society in the past people apprehended their daily experience, of seeing their attitudes to time and space, pain and death, family relationships, and religious observation. This approach is very much exemplified in Robert Mandrou’s *Introduction to Modern France 1500–1640* in which he characterised the outlook of ordinary French people as “the mentality of the hunted”: helplessness in the face of a hostile environment and chronic under-nutrition producing a morbid hypersensitivity, in which people reacted to the least emotional shock by excessive displays of grief, pity, or cruelty.

However, an important point to understand is that although *mentalité* may be an appropriate way to approach a biographical study, it, just like all approaches to the study of history can only ever be an attempt, a basic premise underlying the contentious subjectivity—objectivity debate. Historians continually disagree over interpretations, even about what to treat as evidence and whether the “facts” of history are found or made. And so what does this say about history? Is it a creative art, or a science of discovery? Either way, is there such a thing as historical truth?

Just as with the modern-day psychoanalyst spending a lifetime unsuccessfully understanding his subject, the biographer—indeed the historian—must realise how futile is his ideal objective to get to the truth and that any attempt to reach a

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10) J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, London, 1992, p.103.



conclusion, in the final analysis, can only ever be interpretive.

The impossibility of “knowing” another person is well exemplified by James Joyce’s archaeological, historical, anthropological, and psychological novel *Ulysses* which was in effect an attempt to record all of man’s experience focused in a single day : “the most concerted effort ever made in the novel to relate every part to every other part and to the whole, often in many ways”<sup>11)</sup>. But in fact this book can be seen by the very nature of its approach as a study in *mentalité*, that is, a biography that concentrates on two lives—Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom—over a period of a day.

A pioneering contribution to *mentalité* history is Marc Bloch’s *The Royal Touch* described as not only an essay in religious psychology but also as a work in historical sociology—or historical anthropology—focusing on belief systems and the sociology of knowledge. Mainly concerned with the history of miracles, the study concludes with an explicit discussion of the problem of explaining how people could possibly believe in such “collective illusions”.<sup>12)</sup> In a study of the miraculous powers ascribed to mediaeval kings to cure the skin disease, scrofula, Bloch probed the sacred mystique surrounding kingship in the Middle Ages. He was curious about the naive readiness of mediaeval man to believe in miracles. He was struck by the fact that even the skeptics who questioned the king’s power to heal accepted the truth of testimony about the healings, which was based on little or no evidence. One of Bloch’s purposes was to show the power of a collective illusion. But another was to reveal the historical character of collective psychology by pointing out the differences between the mediaeval and the modern mind.<sup>13)</sup>

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11) C. G. Anderson, *James Joyce*, London, 1967, p.108.

12) P. Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, London, 1990, p.18.

One of the strengths of *mentalité* history is that it is interdisciplinary ; that is, it can draw from such disciplines as economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and religion, an approach evident in aforementioned works. It is also evident in Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, a unique approach as not only does it undermine *mentalité* itself by seeking "to demonstrate the intellectual and psychological disturbance at the popular level caused by the seepage downward of Reformation ideas,"<sup>14)</sup> but it can also be seen as one kind of biographical study. The book does not focus primarily on the collective thoughts of the then society but rather sees the world through the eyes of one man, Dominico Scandella, miller, school master, guitar player.

A good example of a biographical study being also a study in *mentalité* history is Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror* which looks at the effects on society of the disastrous Black Death of 1348–1350. Interdisciplinary in approach drawing on sociology, psychology, and religion, it is in essence a biography. To narrow the focus of her book to a manageable area, she chose a particular person's life—Enguerrand de Coucy VII, a member of the nobility—as the vehicle of her narrative, and in this way showed how biography can be a means of exhibiting an age, or in her words "a prism of history"<sup>15)</sup>.

Biography is useful because it encompasses the universal in the particular. It is a focus that allows the writer to narrow his field to manageable dimensions and the reader to more easily comprehend the subject. Given too wide a scope, the central theme may wander, become diffuse, and lose shape. As Tuchman has

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13) P. H. Hutton, "The History of Mentalities", *The Annales School. Critical Assessments*, S. Clark (ed), London, 1999, Vol.2, p.385.

14) *The Past and the Present Revisited*, p.90.

15) B. Tuchman, "Biography as a Prism of History", in *Biography as High Adventure*, S. B. Oates (ed), Minnesota, 1986, p.93.

pointed out, “one does not try for the whole but for what is truthfully representative”<sup>16</sup>. And she found de Coucy, due to his long and busy life, a perfect example and vehicle to demonstrate her argument. His life was as if designed for the historian. He suppressed the peasant revolt called the Jacquerie ; he married the King of England’s eldest daughter, acquiring a double allegiance of great historical interest ; he freed his serfs in return for due payment ; he campaigned three times in Italy ; he picked the right year to revisit England— 1376—the year of John Wycliffe’s trial, the Good Parliament, and the deathbed of the Black Prince, at which he was present ; he was chosen for his eloquence and tact to negotiate with the urban rebels of Paris in 1382, and at a truce parley with the English at which a member of the opposite team just happened to be Geoffrey Chaucer ; he was agent or envoy to the Pope, and to the Duke of Brittany ; he commanded an overseas expedition to Tunisia ; he founded a monastery at Soissons ; he testified at the canonization process of Pierre de Luxembourg ; and as “the most experienced and skilful of all the knights of France”, he was a leader of the last Crusade. In short, he supplied for Tuchman leads to every subject : marriage and divorce, religion, insurrection, literature, Italy, England, war, politics, and a wide range of people of his time, from Pope to peasant, thereby providing a *mentalité* type biographical study.

It is helpful to understand that certain elements differentiate *mentalité* history from other kinds of history, particularly narrative history and biography. First, *mentalité* history is primarily concerned with the lives and feelings and behaviour of the poor and obscure rather than the great and powerful, although in more recent times it has not necessarily concentrated on one or the other. Second,

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16) Ibid, p.94.

analysis remains as essential to the *mentalité* methodology as description and this combination can result in an awkward style in changing from one mode to another. Third, it allows an opening up of new sources, often records of criminal courts which used Roman law procedures, since these contain written transcripts of the full testimony of witnesses under interrogation and examination. Fourth, this type of history often tells its stories in a different way. Under the influence of Freudian ideas, it can explore the subconscious rather than sticking to the plain facts, and under the influence of the anthropologists this approach tries to use behaviour to reveal symbolic meaning. Finally, *mentalité* history can tell the story of a person, a trial, or a dramatic episode, not for its own sake, but in order to throw light upon the internal workings of a past culture and society.<sup>17)</sup>

The history of mentalities represents, for some historians, the new approach to illuminating the role of the common people in history. For some time the innovations of this approach in conceiving time, space, ritual and popular culture have enjoyed acceptance from those social historians keen to recover the everyday life of the lower orders through histories of the family, the mob, riots, women, sexuality and even death. Taking an interdisciplinary approach characteristic of the *Annales*' 'total history', the project of the *Annaliste* historians of *mentalité* has even been linked to that of the British Marxist historiographers.<sup>18)</sup>

One immediate difficulty in offering a unified critique of *mentalité* stems from its changing use amongst Annalists. Jacques Le Goff, for example, has stated that the very imprecision of the term *mentalité* may be its strongest attribute. Arguing that *mentalité* has the innate capacity to designate the residues of

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17) *The Past and the Present Revisited*, p.91.

18) P. Burke, "Reflections on the Historical Revolution in France : The Annales School and British Social History", *Review*, I , 1978, pp.147-64.

historical analysis, he reminds us that these residues constitute an important, yet overlooked, area of research :

The level with which the history of *mentalité* is concerned is that of the quotidian and the automatic, that which eludes the individual subjects of history because it throws a light on the impersonal content of their thought, that which Caesar and the last soldier of his legions, Saint Louis and the peasant on the land, Christopher Columbus and the sailor in his caravels have in common. The history of mentalities is to the history of ideas what the history of material culture is to economic history.<sup>19)</sup>

In this respect, with imprecision allowing for a common denominator, there is no reason to exclude biography from the *mentalité* approach to history. Its inclusion neatly fits in with the *Annaliste* project.

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Historians and their writings are commonly classified according to one of a number of categories. And the division of political, intellectual, economic, social and mental history at least corresponds to recognizable areas of thought and behaviour. However, historians who specialise in one branch of history do risk attributing too much to one kind of factor in their explanations of historical change, and these approaches have been termed “tunnel vision”.<sup>20)</sup>

Survey works of history or general syntheses which seek to draw together the research findings of a large number of specialists into a coherent whole, have in

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19) J. Le Goff, “Mentalities : A New Field for the Historian”, *International Social Science Council Social Science Information*, XIII, 1974, p.85.

20) *The Pursuit of History*, p.107.

general been unsuccessful, because the conventional division between politics, economics, society, and ideas is often rigidly adhered to in the structure of these books. Historians who approach their own research with “tunnel vision” are conditioned to think in this way when they attempt a bird’s eye view. However, the interdisciplinary approach to history of *mentalité* has certainly helped historians avoid the thematic specialization, and the influence of the *Annales* historians has been particularly salutary.

From the above points, in presenting a case demonstrating the relationship between biography and *mentalité* history, it can be seen not only how close that relationship is but also how indebted biography is to the *mentalité* approach to history.

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