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Lives and the writer's pact

Abstract

In this paper Claire Woods discusses the complexities she is discovering as she constructs a biographical narrative of her parents' lives, as an accompaniment to the editing of their letters and diaries - with the overlay of historical research because it is a narrative set during the two World Wars and draws on the primary artefacts as well as secondary sources. There is a negotiation of emotions, self and of objectivity at every point; as creating another's portrait forces a renegotiation of self. From the teaching point of view, this work provides insights germane to her role as a supervisor of doctoral and honours' students engaged in similar writing and research.

I began a conference presentation of this paper with a reading of a work in progress, albeit in a very much unformed state:

> I open the cardboard shoebox, gently finger the line of envelopes, browning, tatty-edged and tied in blue-ribboned bundles, the scrappy newspaper clippings dry to touch, almost crumbling, and the faded photos. I take one clipping, unfold it gently and begin to construct a story, their story, my story too, for without it, I would not be here and writing.
>
> NURSES RETURN.
> BOMBING IN MALAYA.
>
> *Transferred from Singapore two days before its fall, 60 Australian nurses from all states of the Commonwealth have arrived safely in this country. They comprise half of the nursing staffs of the 10th and 13th Australian General Hospitals. Another 60 remained in Singapore.* (Newspaper clipping source unknown- circa 24 February 1942)
>
> The newspaper clipping is yellowed with age. Sixty years ago almost to the day I write this, Belinda arrived home in Australia to a new stage in her life.
>
> Fifty-seven years from that day, she died; she turned her head to the light and was gone from the world. With her

went the memories that I wish now I could tap and question. With her went the stories I wish I had recorded more carefully and with less impatience as I heard them recounted often as if she were telling them for the first time.

Only now can I begin to tell some of her story. Only now can I bear to open her letters and read into her life all those years ago. Only now can I feel I am not intruding too much on the world she and my father created for themselves in their letters - and indeed in the first months and years of their love. Only now can I justify the telling of their story - and feel that they would not mind that their private world in a time of trauma might be revealed so that others might understand something of courage and devotion and ultimately, love.

Is this too grand? Am I treading where I should not in reading their letters to each other? Do I shatter their privacy even beyond the grave by exposing their feelings during what my father described as 'The Silence'?

I shift her photo above my desk, see my arm linked in hers, note my broad smile, her quiet, enigmatic, almost Mona Lisa-like gaze. She holds the pose with a gentle confidence and brown eyes directed at the camera. Her back is straight, her neck long though lined, her brow unwrinkled, her grey-white hair brushed back, and the cord of her hearing-aid trails over her right shoulder.

Do you mind if I write about you? Do you mind if I tell of your love, your passion? What do you think is important here?

'He was remarkable,' she murmured on one occasion. And on another, 'I don't know how he lived his life.' This she said of my father but also of her own father.

On the day the photo was taken, we had sat together on the bench overlooking her garden and the nature reserve across the road. She had taken great pride in the tameness of her garden of roses and lawn, and in the rawness of the reserve across the dirt road. 'It was never the same after the War,' she said, 'because they gave him a different set of teeth.'

'How did he lose his teeth?'

'Oh, he was beaten one day - a Jap smashed his face with a rifle butt.'

I had never heard this. I was then 50 years old. I had never questioned my father's mouth, never remarked on his false teeth in a glass in the bathroom, never really thought about his teeth at all, never heard directly that he had been beaten by the Japanese guards in the POW camp - although I knew it had happened as it did to all the Allied POWs. Now she let slip a small scrap of information - and said no more.

And thus it was throughout my childhood. So, where to begin as I put together what I consider is a remarkable story

> of love, and more, of courage and commitment in a time fraught with uncertainty and sorrow? Their story is not unlike millions of others - yet it is theirs and it is mine. It is the story that underpins my life.

Allow me walk through some of the issues involved in researching, writing and presenting this 'biographical narrative': I choose this phrase quite specifically, for I am not engaged wholly in biography. Yet, I am constructing a story; a narrative of lives, through a process of editing and compiling of letters, diary fragments, and other assorted artefacts as well as historical data. Is this biography or memoir? How autobiographical or subjective and self-reflexive is the telling? Is it an edited volume with accompanying annotation or narrative? The issues can be posed in many ways; the essence is, however, that there is a complexity in this kind of non-fiction endeavour that is much debated.

Of biography in all its complexity, Michael Holroyd opines:

> Between history and the novel lies biography, their unwanted offspring, which has brought a great embarrassment to them both. In the historian's view a biography is a kind of frogspawn - it takes ten thousand biographies to make one small history. (Holroyd 2002: 8)

I can see that I am engaged in the production of a bit of frogspawn and that I am thus involved in perhaps one of the ten thousand - or one of the million or more - biographies that make up not a small history but a large history in the twentieth century. I am also very aware that there are many volumes of edited war diaries and letters already published. I wonder, then, do I have something else to say which has not yet been said by others as they have recounted the experience of being on the cliff-face at Gallipoli, or in the trenches on the Western Front, or in Singapore just before the Fall in 1942, or in a POW camp somewhere in Asia. Not only this, I wonder how I can present this story, construct the narrative so that it represents faithfully the personal history of individuals caught in circumstances not of their making, and make their experience mean something to others.

This exercise is not like writing a regular biography, whatever 'regular biography' might be. It is not an exercise in 'great men or women' exposed, not an exercise in 'life and letters', nor a critical and biographical commentary on a life in politics or on the world stage. This exercise is not like that undertaken by Richard Holmes tracking Robert Louis Stevenson - following his steps in a sort of autoethnographic biographical study of *Travels with a Donkey* (Holmes 1995). Or Peter Ackroyd, writing on Dickens in fictocritical biographical mode, whereby he can fictionalise a conversation to illuminate an unrecorded event (Ackroyd 1991). Or Drusilla Modjeska in *Poppy*, teasing out her Mother's life, as part-biography, part-autobiography and part-fiction (Modjeska 1990). Or Claire Tomalin who can rely on Pepys' diary and build from that with details drawn from other historical documents and thus, with the wealth of data available, not only tell a chronological tale but also build the story in terms of themes and topics - jealousy, death and plague - as she delves into the minutiae of his daily life (Tomalin 2003).

On this direction in biography, Holroyd notes that the publication of Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* signalled a change in the biographer's craft, for Johnson the biographer had achieved a license to focus on the

'domestic privacies' and the 'minute details of everyday life' (Holroyd 2002: 22). Again, with Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, biography took on a new freedom to explore the way in which biographical information was presented. And Holmes, Tomalin, Ackroyd and others have followed suit. Thus today as Holroyd points out,

> biography is beginning to have as many forms as fiction: it exists as detective work, as melodrama, as crime reconstruction, as pastiche, as physical and metaphysical travel, as interrelated nonfiction stories. By taking on these sympathetic forms, literary biography can supply parallel narratives to those of novels. (Holroyd 2002: 26)

Holroyd also notes that 'Biography will continue to change, will become more personal, more idiosyncratic, imaginative, experimental, more hybrid, and will move away from the comprehensive "Life and Letters" structure' (30).

The biographer today assumes a different stance as writer and researcher. 'Biographers now claim to be creative writers, without apparently undermining the authenticity of their work,' notes Kevin Brophy, citing Deidre Bair (Brophy 1998: 30). Bair has claimed in an interview about her biographies of Simone de Beauvoir and Anaïs Nin that

> When I sit down to write a chapter, I know what I want to say but sometimes when I finish I find that I had no idea I was going to write it that way. I like to interpret cultural history but I like to think of biography as a creative act. It's the approach to scholarship with which I am most comfortable. I like to think of myself as a creative writer. (cited in Brophy 1998: 30)

Bair, Holroyd and others are particularly concerned with the literary biography - the biographer working as detective to represent the life of the well-known, or perhaps less well-known but still published and acknowledged, writer (novelist, poet) or perhaps public figure (particularly someone with a substantial publication/written record). In such biographical endeavour, there is an assumption that there is already a public acknowledgment of the subject that makes the enterprise worthwhile. And even if there is not, there is every possibility that a biography might enhance a reputation, or make it or resurrect it.

Such is not the case with my subjects. Their claim to fame is nothing more than having been ordinary people bound up in the two cataclysmic events of the twentieth century - WWI and WWII. It is the magnitude of the events themselves, and thence the individual experience, that becomes the justification perhaps for pursuing this story; a story of my parents - Australians caught up in world events and circumstance in which they were powerless to intervene. Yet, these were circumstances which they, like many others, had to endure and that thereafter shaped them and their lives and those around them, including most particularly their children. Understanding this, I am struck by an important element in the making and justification for biography - and I turn to Strachey who wrote:

> 'Human Beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past. They have a value which is independent of any temporal process - which is eternal and must be felt for its own sake.' (cited in Holroyd 2002: 26)

This sentiment moves me. As does the comment from Richard Holmes that, 'The dead call us out of the past…they ask to be heard, remembered, understood' (cited in Holroyd 2002: 19). And here is an extract from an obituary for the man I am writing about:

> …one of the finest gentlemen we have been privileged to call friend - would that our later generations could know and follow in the footsteps of Stan Woods, officer, gentleman and comrade. (*The Brown and Blue Diamond,* March 1982)

'Would that later generations could know and follow in the (his) footsteps': here is a call from his peers asking that he be remembered, that his life might be known.

But this on its own would not normally be sufficient for one to start writing the story of one's father or mother, unless they were particularly famous. Perhaps, then, I can justify this narrative because it has something to do with the significance to Australians of the Anzac legend, the Anzac experience and the way in which it shapes our history and thus our sense of national identity. One has only to be at a Dawn Service in Australia or at Gallipoli alongside 11,000 young backpackers, or to stand mute in sorrow at a cemetery on the Western Front or visit the Australian War Memorial as one of the quarter of a million visitors each year, to sense the interest in the experiences, the tragedies and the individual stories of very ordinary Australians in time of trial. Thus one might want to present a story, which has elements of drama, innocence, passion, commitment, fortitude, faith, and courage - human elements reflected in diaries, letters, notebooks and artefacts worthy of a place in the archives or the Australian War Memorial. More than this however, the story to be told might also reveal something of situations that should never be forgotten. Finally as one of my friends said to me, 'One of the reasons you must write this is that it is emblematic of so many more personal histories and stories'.

I have set out on this task with all the inherent dilemmas for the writer of the biographical narrative. I feel the burdens of the researcher-writer and the obligations to the subjects very keenly and personally. Holroyd again:

> Biographers are their messengers, charged with responsibilities that need imagination as well as accuracy - which is why Desmond MacCarthy described the ideal biographer as "an artist upon oath". (Holroyd 2002: 19)

I feel then that I am 'on oath' to use their letters, the diaries, and the miscellany of cards and artefacts, with sensitivity and with a real awareness of how they might feel as their lives and feelings are exposed to public scrutiny.

Let me now turn to some of the issues I see confronting me as an author and as a teacher, for they are also issues I need to address in my supervisions of an Honours candidate editing a POW diary from the Changi camp as a stepping-stone towards her doctoral work on the same topic, and a PhD student who is writing a biographical / autoethnographic study of family history. The issues can be roughly categorised as personal, ethical, practical and procedural, and theoretical.

There is no doubt in my mind that writing a biographical narrative is emotionally demanding in ways that might be anticipated. However, the

extent to which this exercise stretches me personally is a constant surprise. I read a letter from Stan as a then just-'liberated POW', written in extreme conditions, and I struggle to walk within it to feel the strained joy or the eager relief from ugliness. I read, as part of the background research, a set of letters from another POW or a wife to a soldier in the Great War, and read these as if they might have been letters written by Stan or Belinda. I feel them in others' writing. I read a passage from an Army report while sitting in the research section of the Australian War Memorial; a passage of lyrical writing, unexpected in an Army report, which because it is a first-hand account and written within hours of the events described, gives those of us who read it 60 years later, eyes with which to see. Others less involved and personally committed might read, acknowledge the moment and retain a readerly distance. My writerly self is intimately committed to emotion and engagement with the words describing Prisoners of War after three and a half years of brutal internment and liberated just two days earlier arriving to board the hospital ship, HMAS Wanganella, in then North Borneo (see Appendix). And I cannot stop the tears.

A practical difficulty in dealing with this project is not a preparedness to dwell in emotion, but rather finding the time in a working and teaching life that will allow such necessary *indulgence*. I use the word reluctantly because while writing I am aware that this is a project which needs to be fitted into whatever limited time I can allocate to it. At the same time I know that this is a project of emotions and personal exploration as much as it is a story of others' lives. Thus, it demands much of me as writer (not as academic) and that tears should not be seen as indulgent but necessary to the felt endeavour. This is of course a problem for anyone who wants to write and must teach or work in order to sustain the writing life. Anyone in the academy today teaching in a writing program - anyone who tries to write the next chapter of a novel, keep a reflective head and heart available for a poem to evolve, or find the time to revise a short story - understands this tension. Writing such as this cannot be done in snatched hours.

There is something even more testing in this project, which borders on the ethical. How much can I expose of the subjects', Stan and Belinda's, private world, and the world of their letters, for others to see? It is also a world that impinges on the rest of their family, including my siblings. Do they have a different view of some aspects of the telling? Certainly, they had different relationships with our parents. How 'true' or perhaps 'acceptable' is my version of some events and stories recalled from my and their past? Any writer who researches aspects of personal or family history might ask such questions. Thus Terri-ann White in a moving exploration of her process of unpacking the secrets and mysteries of her ancestors, comments, 'What does it mean to write personally? By telling the story of my family, am I short-selling any of its individual members? Revealing any secrets? Who do they belong to?' (White 1997)

These questions inevitably lead to the issue of the location of the writer within the text; that is, how far do you write yourself into the story? How far is the biographer an autobiographer? How are the boundaries between biography / autobiography / lifewriting / memoir to be negotiated? Donna Brien's distinction between biography and memoir is helpful:

> I believe a memoir, if not about one's own life, to usually be a personal account of someone else by a friend or colleague of the subject. In the constellation of lifewriting, memoir is accepted to be a more intimate, more impressionistic and usually less comprehensive portrait of its subject than a

> biography, a portrait which is often drawn with some knowledge of the essential subjectivity of memory. (Brien 2002)

Perhaps then, my project might more accurately be described as a memoir. Yet, it is not, since it is a construction using the subjects' letters and documents. This is not my story but I am intimately involved. It is at one level a personal account, as I collate and organise my parents' documents and respond to these. How far do I locate my experience in the text as I explore, investigate and experience their letters, or visiting the Western Front or talking with one of Stan's POW mates? Do I write as recent biographers have, reflecting on my exploration, on my writing, on my emotions? The self-reflexive creative biographer / editor at work is exposed, as a biographical narrative, written about others and their texts - letters, cards, diaries - is researched and constructed. But to what extent is such self-reflection important or necessary?

Richard Holmes claims that the biographer's role is to 'produce the living effect, while remaining true to the dead fact'. Picking up on this Tasker muses:

> But what is the living effect? It's hard enough to find the dead facts, and the living effect that most biographers produce must be a combination of research and intuition, reconstruction and imagination. (Tasker 2001: 4)

The point is that the contemporary biographer writes without the authority imputed to early biographers by their readers, and the relationship between the contemporary biographer and the reader is defined by inherent tensions and scepticism. Thus, '…the biographer must always be doubted, cross-questioned, read between the lines' (Malcolm cited in Brophy 1998: 31). Malcolm further comments:

> In a work of nonfiction, we almost never know the truth of what happened. The ideal of unmediated reporting is regularly achieved only in fiction, where the writer faithfully reports on what is going on in his imagination. (cited in Brophy 1998: 31)

Trust established between writer and reader is essential, as Tasker notes (referring to Holmes' biographical 'walking tour' study of Robert Louis Stevenson) in the writing and reading of fiction and nonfiction: 'Fiction and non-fiction alike require an understanding, or relationship of trust, between the voice of the writer and the inner voice of the reader, which exists for the time of reading' (Tasker 2001: 4).

When the writer edits letters and diaries and uses these as the centre of a biographical narrative, as with my project, then several possibilities come into play. The issue of reader / writer trust is somewhat ameliorated by the presence of the letters and diaries. The reader has access to primary documents but must trust the editor and biographer's choice and arrangement of documents. However, the role of the intimately-involved editor and biographer challenges that trust in just the way Tasker and Malcolm suggest. Thus, with the choices to be made, personal and ethical issues flow into each other.

The very task of composing and of structuring the narrative, integrating the artefacts available to the writer in this particular task, means that the writer and editor has to touch on writing so personal that to publish it

might be to expose what the dead would never have revealed. We did not read my parents' letters while they were alive. Yes, we had them in safekeeping but my siblings and I felt it would be a violation of their privacy while either one or both were living. And now as I write, I cannot consult them, I can only attempt to honour them, and make a commitment to telling a story which is about them and about others so that it might not be forgotten.

My project is not so much a biography as a narrative of two lives; hence, my use of the term *biographical narrative*. There is a plot - there is a beginning, and key events and a series of complications - and ultimately a resolution. There are also questions about how to tell this. Do I treat it as a novelist would and leave the reader in suspense? No, that is probably not possible since it is clear from the beginning that these two survive and do reach each other again. So how to create the tensions and suspense, which were actual and very real for the key players as they lived this stage of their lives? I have as yet not found the answer to this dilemma. However, an exploration of the ways in which other editor / writers have presented like manuscripts provides some direction.

There are edited war diaries or letters that simply offer a brief introduction and then present the letters chronologically, varying degrees of annotation or historical context. Others present more extensive narrative commentary - offering historical and contextual information as well as representing a narrative recreation of events interleaved with texts from newspapers and official records, e.g. *Voices from the Trenches* by Noel Carthew (Carthew 2002). There are those which offer the letters and diaries with different voices of commentary (the editor / compiler, family members, friends) or other texts (official records, photographs, etc) used to provide background or specific contextual or personal information, e.g. *Love Letters from a War - the letters of Corporal John Leslie Johnson and this family June 1940-May 1944*, edited by Len Johnson (Johnson 2002). These are works created and constructed as layered multi-voiced texts where the primary documents, letters and diary perhaps, have been woven into a complex historical and artistic representation.

Handling documents, diaries, letters, related artefacts and personal records charges the task of writing and presentation of a biographical narrative with constant tension. It is more than helpful to me - as a writer and as a supervisor of PhD and Honours students who are engage in a similar project - to share the problems with them. The intersections between their work and mine are often obvious, sometimes surprising and frequently illuminating.

Intersections with supervision

All the above noted issues are matters for discussion and consideration. In addition, we share empathy and in-built curiosity in these different but ultimately shared endeavours. There is a great delight in revelations, in explorations and in discoveries as the works evolve. And yet, there are also questions we might ask ourselves: How much do you share between supervisor and research student? How much do you allow for public gaze as the project evolves and you, the supervisor, and the student present at conferences or seminars? For the supervisor this becomes a matter of protecting the student's private life and those of others who might feel the impact of the publication being created. This is a particular responsibility, which the supervisor cannot shirk. The making involves a careful teasing

out of the personal, private and the allowable public information. When a student is engaged in a work of memoir / lifewriting / family history then the dilemmas such as those White (1997) poses are a daily accompaniment to the writing.

When the student has also made a decision to evoke in fiction some of the hidden events, within the context of the memoir or biography, then one holds onto the guide rail on the slippery slope of veracity and the edgy territory of subjectivity. Brien, in an engaging discussion of three published examples of biography / life writing / personal memoir, explores the tension inherent in the enterprise, particularly when elements of fiction - whether it be a fictionalised narrator, fictionalised events or dialogue and such like - expose the text as less than verifiable. She addresses the ethical issues central to the task:

> Dialogue and other details may be reconstructed and even, in part, misremembered, as it is, without doubt, impossible to be totally true to reality as it happened, but lifewriters will at least attempt this. Ethical biographers and autobiographers work with veracity as their aim (this is the motivation for all that research, after all) and this striving for veracity is respected, and expected, by readers. (Brien 2002)

Veracity seems to me a worthy mantra for supervisor and student to share. I like to think that what Brien calls 'a sincere desire to tell the truth' (as opposed to 'a wilful and conscious propensity to tell…what is not true') can be the guide to how the story is told. Significantly, it is the sincere intention that counts - although this does not necessarily mean that there is a 'truth' presented:

> A sincere intention does not, of course, mean that what someone writes is right (there are probably Holocaust deniers who are sincere) but for memoirists and other lifewriters it seems, at very least, one of the basic conditions of the genre, and the pact that lifewriters have with their audiences. (Brien 2002)

Supervisor and student have a responsibility to acknowledge this 'pact'. Thus, the project I am embarked upon enables me to reflect on the writing and research of my students and the ways this is represented to their potential readers, with greater clarity and (I hope) sensitivity. Their projects help to illuminate aspects of my project and together we can explore how we write, why we are immersed in this work and why and how we want someone to read what we have to say in presenting these biographical 'frogspawn' to others.

For my own part, justification for my biographical narrative, one of thousands of frogspawn lives, comes from Alan Bennett recalling his journey to find the grave of Uncle Clarence on the Western Front (Bennett 1994). Bennett, while sensing the nobility and despair of the soldier's senseless death, speaks of his anger because 'Nobody could say now why these men died'. He then refers to an immediately contemporary event, President Reagan sending troops into Libya circa 1986. The point being, Bennett implies, that such military intervention seems to serve no purpose and can only waste young lives needlessly. Thus, his gentle elegy for an uncle and his personal pilgrimage to a War Commission grave serve to make a firm personal and political point.

So it seems to me important that some of the stories which might be used to create and maintain the ANZAC legend, are told not to falsify the legend, as it is when being used by our contemporary leaders for political purposes, but rather to tell the story of the impact of war on individual lives and to assert the reality of such traumatic events on people like you and me - ordinary folk living what should be ordinary lives in peace.

Appendix

Extract from report by Lieut. T.H. Roberts, Education Office, 2/2 Australian Hospital Ship. (1945, AWM 452/6/2)

THE STORY BEHIND THE REPORT OF 'B' OFFICERS' EDUCATIONAL GROUP KUCHING PW CAMP

HMAS WANGANELLA loaded her first Recovered PWs on 13 Sep 45. They were taken on board from Allied launches and barges, the Kuching River being too shallow for navigation by large vessels. Those of the ships company whose duties kept them on deck watched the barges approach with very uncertain emotions, for, in the human sense, this was the day toward which the Australian war effort in the Pacific had been dedicated. The actual arrival on board of the first PWs, however was almost a complete anti-climax, as unnatural in its way as a sort of multiplied meeting of Stanleys and Livingstones. We were prepared to receive a number of sick and confused men who would require every assistance in our power, even to carrying them up the gangway. We were not prepared for a formal parade. Yet a parade of the AIF was what we witnessed, the sorriest, most farcical and most moving parade I have ever seen. Before leaving Kuching, these men had evidently decided that an AIF unit returning to civilisation, even if it was via a hospital ship, must behave as soldiers should. They had rehearsed the approach. In faded uniforms and the most battered, indomitable digger hats, they essayed to march up the gangway, anticipated taking a salute, and turning their papers over with military formality. It was not a success. Some of them had to be assisted. Willing hands snatched packs from frail backs, offered an arm to the sick. There were few salutes, many smiles and inadequate phrases of welcome. What had been intended as an impressive parade, so sadly like Gautier's Les *Vieux de la Vieille*, became after a few moments what it ought to be. Put to bed, where first they grumbled at being treated as patients; these echo soldiers were soon excited tired men. White sheets were fingered curiously, thin bodies bounced on spring beds, shining china cups were drained and then stared at, questions began to pile on unanswered questions and after a while there was sleep. Return to article

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