

2010 SEYMOUR BIOGRAPHY LECTURE



The Biographer's Contract

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First of all, my thanks go to Jan Fullerton, Director-General of this great and much loved National Library, for kindly inviting me to give this prestigious annual lecture. Next my gratitude goes very specifically to John and Mrs Heather Seymour, for endowing this lecture and for their commitment and support of biographical research in Australia. Then, too, Kathryn Favelle has expertly coordinated this event, with assistance from Vivien Mitchell, and I am grateful to both for their warm and gracious efficiency. Finally, may I say what an enormous privilege it is to be here. To have the opportunity to address an audience of this kind, in this unique city, will always remain for me a very great honour.

The business of authoring another person's life is problematic and potentially dangerous. You need to be brave to write biography. It's not just the labour involved, nor the obsessive research which often involves more travel and hours of work than can be deemed cost-effective, but it is also the fact that it requires a self-exposing judiciousness. At every stage in the procedure decisions are made, not with the backing of any committee or support of a line manager, but usually by the biographer alone. The rightness or wrongness of these decisions affects not only the selection and handling of the material used, but almost every aspect of the project, from the initial negotiations with descendants of your subject, the literary executor or interested parties, to the publicity that surrounds the book's publication. Few of us get by without erring at some point. Biographies, as you will know, can be distorted by flattery or idealisation, or dulled by a

superfluity of small facts. At one point, while writing my biography of the painter Vanessa Bell, I was so enthused by the closeness of the relationship between Bell and her sister Virginia Woolf that, in detailing their lives, I quoted a letter that mentioned a sponge bag, a forgotten sponge-bag. As one reviewer rightly pointed out, it was one detail too many. And, for a while afterwards, critics, whenever they came across another over-stuffed example of this genre, referred to the author as belonging to the 'sponge-bag' school of biographers. I felt deeply chagrined to be the source of this infamous label and still today have such a horror of sponge-bags I can scarcely bear to bring one with me when I travel.

But there is rarely a moment when a biographer is not faced with some kind of responsibility, to the facts, to ethical issues, to the past, the future, one's audience and to one's craft. The material has to be sifted with intelligent alertness, not just for facts, names, links and connections, but also for the inner life of one's subject. You need an open mind and an open heart to note, with feeling, intellect and intuition, what is being said; to hear also the tone of voice or the irony or hyperbole that is being used. I find it important at relevant moments to let the voice of my subject come through by means of quotations from their letters. It is in this way that the reader can catch, very precisely, a wry observation, a momentary hesitation or a characteristic way of looking at things. It is important too to catch the register of a person's vocabulary. For instance, if Vanessa Bell, who was a stoic, admitted 'agitation' – a fairly mild word, you might think – I knew that something was seriously wrong. But there are times where a biographer, feeling his or her way into another's mind, finds scant help. Samuel Beckett, for instance, refused point blank to engage in any discussion about the meaning of his work. I experienced a similar silence when I went, as a biographer, to the British Council in London, in search of Stevie Smith.

As a poet, Stevie Smith is best known for the three tragi-comical short verses that form 'Not Waving but Drowning'. It's a poem that has universal appeal: most of us, after all, do at some point know what it is like to feel disorientated, out of step, emotionally exiled, finding ourselves, as

the character in Stevie Smith's poem says, 'much further out than you thought/ And not waving but drowning'. In the late 1960s the British Council had brought out LP recordings of poets reading their own verse; and in connection with this, they had asked every poet concerned to send in biographical details. I was well advanced with my biography of Stevie Smith by this stage, but I went to her the British Council in order to see if what I had written chimed with what she herself thought was significant. A fat, bulging file was put in front of me, and leafing through its contents I learnt what busy lives poets lead, what a lot of prizes they win, residences they fulfil, wives they have and how extensively they travel. Finally I arrived at Stevie Smith's biographical details which amounted to two type-written sentences: 'Born in Hull. But moved to London at the age of three and has lived in the same house ever since.'

Why struggle with this genre, you may ask, in the face of such a flight into anonymity. Aware of the difficulties that biography presents, I am still sometimes astonished when young academics tell me they are making it the vehicle of choice for their first major publication? Such a move would have been unwise for several decades. From the 1940s onwards, while the textual analysis of New Criticism held sway, and on through the sixties and seventies while Parisian theory created one orthodoxy after another, this allegiance to biography might have damaged your chances of gaining tenure. Poststructuralist and deconstructive theorists questioned the notion of the individual as an originating point of consciousness and sought to disconnect the life from the work. It is a delicious irony that the fame of Roland Barthes' 1968 essay, 'The Death of the Author', has become a major reason why his name lives on. Nevertheless, for many years biography was shunned by academia; it was thought to be conservative, regressive, blindly humanist in its assumptions and not alive to the crises, conflicts and discoveries that have exploded the kind of classic narrative on which biographies have traditionally depended.

And yet, in the twenty-first century, like the mysterious smile on the Mona Lisa, biography continues to fascinate with its suggestion of the known and the unknown. Today it is not only

popular but it also carries intellectual authority. It is interesting to see how intelligently and acutely it is used today to access politicians, and not least here in Australia, in the wake of Kevin Rudd's rise and fall and continuing political activity. Biography is also now firmly embedded within academia. This lecture coincides with the intensive week-long residential course 'Using Lives' which brings to Canberra students from all over Australia who are working on theses in some ways shaped by biographical subjects and methods. And here and in England, certain universities are actively promoting the writing and study of biography, and employing leading scholars in order to do so.

Some of the questions that are being asked of biography today include the following are: How does a biographer combine factual accuracy with innovation? Must a strong narrative drive be at the expense of contingencies? What kinds of selfhood are on display in the presentation of identity? How do we reconcile the private individual with the performative nature of public life? And should biographers imitate Boswell and promise 'veracity' about themselves as well as their subjects? What is our responsibility to a past which in some ways remains open, not completed, while we write about it in the present and for the future? Is there a place in biography for postmodernist indeterminacy? Such questions can make biographers nervously aware of the multiple questions and commitments they must keep in mind.

If there is a twenty-first century development in all this, it is, I think, the sudden rise in popularity of 'life-writing'. This variant term, a literal translation of the medieval Greek from which the word 'biography' derives, has been used to suggest that the graphic representation of life can take many forms and find more outlets than the traditional cradle-to-grave biography. One noticeable aspect of the work emerging from 'life-writing' courses is the greater degree to which personal narrative, reflection and theorizing mesh together. Sometimes a biographical essay is accompanied by a psychosocial analysis of its content or an enquiry into the play of gender roles within it. Whether or not this agrees with one's needs as a reader, it must be admitted that this

explosion of interest in biographical writing, among people from all walks of life, would have pleased Dr Johnson. 'No species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography', he wrote in 1750 in the *Rambler*, 'since none can be more delightful or more useful.....I have often thought that there has rarely passed a Life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful.'

I worry, however, that if a biographer is primarily motivated by a desire to prove a specific ideological point or a political theory, his or her subject is likely to suffer. However, it would be foolish to try to establish a set of rules for biography as it is a hybrid and fluid genre, always spilling out of neat packages and persistently reshaping its enquiry as the questions that interest each generation change. This is one reason why there can be no such thing as a definitive biography. But an absence of fixed rules or goals does not mean there are no *external* constraints and *internal* restraints affecting the biographical project. For the biographer deals not with fictional characters but real people, and with that comes responsibility. The more the biographer is aware of those responsibilities, the more she or he will feel themselves to be under contract. Hence the title of my lecture – 'the Biographer's Contract'.

A biography cannot sail free on the author's imagination. It is instead tied to facts and often watched over by interested parties, be it a widow, a literary executor or a keeper of the flame. Of course, there are many kinds of biography, from the scholarly edifice to the breezy framing of celebrities and therefore there will be many kinds of contract. If a biographer is aiming at shock, voyeurism and titillation, his or her contract may be similar to that of an assassin; at the other extreme, biography may harbour the kind of dutifulness that curtails enquiry and upholds the status quo. But even the most daring or inventive the biographer comes to recognize that biography is necessarily a *constrained* art form. This may be true of all creative acts. Paul Valéry in his 'Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci', published in English in 1929, states the following: 'An author preparing a discourse, and meditating on it beforehand, finds himself at

once *source*, *engineer* and *constraining influence*. One part of him is the impulse; another foresees, arranges, suppresses; another, remembering and deductive, keeps an eye on the material, preserves the harmonies, makes sure of the permanence of the *calculated design*.'

It is an interesting description of the creative process, and in particular of the verbal architecture that the biographer must construct. The word 'judicious', as you've perhaps noticed, has already come up twice, once in Johnson's desire for a 'judicious and faithful narrative'. As mentioned, a biography is not like a sailing ship steering out to sea with the wind of imagination in its sails: it is more like a tent fixed to the earth and if one of its pegs is only loosely in place, the endeavour can come crashing down, as with Ian Hamilton's abortive attempt to write a biography of J. D. Salinger.

So anyone embarking on a biography needs to think carefully about the ways in which she or he is contracted to the project. The standard dictionary definition of a contract is 'an agreement on fixed terms'. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it further: 'Proceeding from or showing sound judgement; marked by discretion, wisdom, or good sense.' And as a verb it can mean 'to effect by agreement'. Now there is obviously room for manoeuvre here. Certainly there may be times when the biographer needs to reject discretion. And there will be more contracts than the written agreement between publisher and author. In its standard version, this insists that the book's material must be original, in no way a violation of any existing copyright; that it must contain nothing obscene, libellous or defamatory and that all statements purporting to be facts must be to the best of the Author's knowledge and belief true.

Biographers like myself, who work on subjects within living memory, whose written words are still in copyright, know how unwise it is to embark on a major project of this kind without first seeking an agreement with the literary executor regarding access to papers and permission to quote. And there are often various other conditions on which spoken or written agreement is sought at this stage. Some biographers, for instance, ask if an embargo can be placed

on relevant archives or documents not yet in the public domain, so that, while they are at work on their subject, no-one else can access this material. This kind of agreement firms up the grounds on which one can proceed. But a biography can be written, without copyright approval or authorisation. Peter Ackroyd boldly produced a ground-breaking, useful biography of T.S. Eliot, despite being denied access to the letters or the right to quote more than a few lines of any poem.

At the outset biographers need to be aware of interested parties, those to whom they will be in some way indebted, contracted or, committed. Again, it is wise to establish agreements of some sort at the start, lest a vital dependency is suddenly withdrawn.

It struck me, recently, that this diplomacy and preparatory work is rarely discussed by practitioners of biography in the prefaces or acknowledgements of their books. Sometimes we glimpse these constrictions in passing. Earlier this year, David Marr revisited his biography of the writer Patrick White in order to deliver the Menzies Lecture at King's College, London. Titled 'White's London', he unfolded White's long-standing and ambivalent relationship with this city. Marr wove into his talk a riveting portrait of White, touching on his ambition, sexuality, wit, greatness, tetchiness, censoriousness, among other things, and he ended with an explanation of why news of White's death, rather surprisingly, reached most Australians via London, the city that shaped White and had formed his other home. Interestingly, in an aside, we learnt that White had read through the manuscript of Marr's biography – and here I quote Marr – 'in front of me, slowly, over nine agonizing days'. We can readily guess at what made those days so agonizing. Was Marr perhaps anxious about the extent to which he had fulfilled or contravened expectations? Had there been spoken or unspoken agreements between him and White? And was he, at the moment, acutely aware of awkward tensions between his various commitments - to his material, to his subject, to his own self, to history and posterity, to his craft, and to his readers?

Property, permission and copyright are legal issues. The law, by means of copyright, protects our written words. But there is no copyright on the facts of our lives. Hence the relative

freedom surrounding the making of biopics. The subject of a recent television biopic in Britain was Lord Longford, the Labour peer who befriended the child murderer Myra Hindley after she was imprisoned for life. One of Longford's daughters, Rachel Billington, was asked what she thought of the film. She was careful to praise Jim Broadbent, the actor who had played her father, but then admitted it had been painful to see on screen her father being sacked from government by the actor who played Prime Minister Harold Wilson, when in fact he had resigned, and to see her mother played as a dithery old lady, when she had been an elegant, specially alert woman of considerable intellect, and an outstanding biographer. Worryingly, the power of film enables these distortions to lodge deep in public consciousness. Despite the uncovering of many inaccuracies and false statements in T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, his name is still treated with a certain hagiography owing, I think, to the lasting power of David Lean's film, 'Lawrence of Arabia'. Hence, too, the frustrating experience of Iris Murdoch's biographer, Peter Conradi. After speaking at a literary festival on Iris Murdoch, a woman came up to him and, with reference to some detail, announced: 'You got it wrong in your book.' Why do you say that, he asked? Her reply: 'It wasn't like that in the film.'

The need to achieve good audience ratings no doubt shifts film and TV biopics towards dramatic solutions that ignore brute facts. A biography is differently analysed, its truths scrutinised over time and checked by many interested parties. Many of the problems confronted by biographers who write about those within living memory arise from imperfect contracts between the biographer and the literary executor or the spokesperson for the family or the deceased person's estate. If these are written contracts, the precise terms have been inadequately stated; or they are tacit agreements, with nothing on paper; or they are imagined contracts, imagined because they exist in the mind of one party only and have not been properly communicated to the other, therefore no agreement has been reached. Often these contracts concern sensitive information.

My only encounter with situations of this kind have been fairly trivial. One arose while I was writing the life of Charles Darwin's granddaughter Gwen Raverat. As her name suggests, she had married a Frenchman, Jacques Raverat, who began to suffer from ill health. It remained undiagnosed until he tried to enlist in the French Army at the start of the First World War when it was discovered that he had multiple sclerosis, or disseminated sclerosis as it was then called. By the end of the war, when they tried to start a family, he had already more or less lost the use of his legs and because of this partial paralysis they had to seek help with conception. They were ahead of their times in this, for the simple process involved was in those days officially only used agriculturally. I was surprised to be rung up, not by the two daughters of the Raverats, but by a more distant member of the Darwin who simply said: 'We do not think it should be mentioned.' I noted the use of the royal 'we' in connection with the Darwin family, and was astonished that a Darwin was asking me to suppress information that reflected advanced thinking. I responded diplomatically, pointing out that the topic was passed over in a paragraph or less and saying that I would discuss it further with the two daughters. In fact they had no problem at all with the relevant paragraph and the information was not censored.

There had been an earlier moment with that book when I had thought I was up against a more difficult issue. The two daughters had noticed some anti-semitic remarks in their father's early letters and asked if they could be ignored. I was able to point out that one or two passages from these letters had already been published in a biography of Jacques's friend Rupert Brooke and that it would therefore be foolish to try to cover up this aspect of his nature. It could, with reference to his French upbringing, the long-running Dreyfus affair and the anti-Semitism in France and in certain French newspapers, be placed within a wider context and thus to some extent be, not excused, but explained.

In both instances I felt that the constraints initially proposed would have compromised my independence and integrity. Anti-semitism and multiple sclerosis are public concerns and a

biographer's audience can be far-reaching. It seemed important to me, from the point of view of other sufferers of multiple sclerosis, to mention the difficulties the Raverats had faced. In addition the constraints suggested by the family, however well-intentioned, did not fit with today's society, whose ethics entail a belief in openness. Readers today generally believe that there should be no censorship or idealization, a belief that goes hand in hand with the growing resistance, in many spheres, to authority. But for the nearest and dearest of a famous person the situation may not be so cut and dried.

Nigel Nicolson, the son of the diarist and diplomat Harold Nicolson and of Vita Sackville-West, aristocrat, poet, novelist and gardener, had no qualms about publishing *Portrait of a Marriage*, his mother's account of how she and Violet Trefusius left their husbands and fled to Continental Europe in order to have a passionate affair. But it is clear from Nigel Nicolson's own memoirs, and from my slight personal acquaintance with him, that he was by nature a rather private man; and when he gave Victoria Glendinning permission to proceed with her biography of Vita he made one condition: that when listing all the women with whom his mother had affairs – and there were a great many – she was not to mention the affair Vita had with her sister-in-law, Harold's sister. Glendinning respected this request. In the book she simply says that the two women were very close. She felt certain that anyone who had read that far would be able to recognize what was implied.

Censorship in this instance was merely an English nicety, Vita's affair with her sister-in-law, being a step too far in Nigel Nicolson's mind. The two women were not blood relations and it was not a case of what Canon Law calls 'prohibitive consanguinity'. But this was precisely the issue in the case of Fiona MacCarthy's biography of Eric Gill. MacCarthy, a razor sharp journalist and a leading authority on the history of design, refused to do as others had done and turn a blind eye to passages in Gill's diaries which referred to incest with his sisters and daughters and sexual relations with dogs. Two previous writers had noted this material and kept silent. But this was

dynamite information, for Eric Gill was widely regarded as the greatest English artist-craftsman in the early twentieth century. He was also a devout Catholic and a central figure on the founding of three Catholic art and craft communities laid down on semi-monastic lines.

To this day MacCarthy remains perturbed by the outcry that greeted this book. Its publication coincided, in England, with the Cleveland child abuse scandal, a notorious case, involving incest, which ran for many weeks in the British press and media, and heightened public revulsion at this crime. But what specifically hurt MacCarthy was the sudden turning away of Gill's literary executor, Walter Shewring. The latter had worked with Gill, had gone on to be a schoolmaster at Ampleforth, a famous Catholic boarding school in Yorkshire, and though not a monk, as are other teachers at this school, he had lived a celibate life. In an essay looking back on her relationship with Shewring, MacCarthy has recounted how it developed, from the first formal meeting in a barren waiting room in the school, where a cup of tea and shortbread biscuits were the only nod to conviviality, to what became regular festive outings to Marmaduke's Haunted Bistro in York, where Shewring would order two bottles of Corvo wine and the conversation flowed. After one of these meetings, MacCarthy gave Shewring a finished typescript of the manuscript. He promised to check the source notes, but rather surprisingly said, with regard to the text, 'I leave that to you'. MacCarthy was certain he knew that it revealed incest as this had privately created issues before among Gill's closest associates. Afterwards a letter arrived from him acknowledging that she had illumined a great deal, and with it came a school-masterly list of corrections on points of detail. Then suddenly came another message from him, scrawled urgently on a half-sheet of lined paper, telling her that 'our acquaintance and correspondence must now cease'. MacCarthy shook with sobs as she read it. She concluded that the family had informed him of their hostility to the book and he had been obliged to side with them in what became a bitter vendetta against her. It needs also to be said that, when the book came out, MacCarthy published an article on Gill in a Sunday newspaper which went a step further than the book and also named,

in connection with incest, one of Gill's daughters who was still alive. Story has it that this daughter did not mind but that her children took enormous offence.

MacCarthy, who went on to publish a prize-winning biography of William Morris, writes: 'The book Eric Gill had been my first full-length biography. I began it in a state of naivety, imagining my only loyalty lay with Gill himself and the truth relating to the bizarre contradictions of this single human life. What I had not been prepared for was the fact that in searching out the truth, especially the truth of a near contemporary, you impinge on other interconnected lives as well, stirring emotions, resurrecting memories. In the dangerous complexities of writing a biography, the book on Eric Gill was my baptism by fire.'

What comes through here is her humility in acknowledging her naivety. But this confession also raises another important issue. Should a biographer respect the right to privacy of those still alive? As mentioned previously, there is no copyright on the facts of our lives and, in Gill's case, it would have been impossible to expose incest without naming the members of the family involved. But there are many cases where a biographer is wise to exercise discretion when touching on lives that are still being lived, and may feel silently contracted in this respect.

Given the disturbing paradoxes that Eric Gill's life presents, it is a relief to find the critic Elizabeth Hardwick, when writing about Thomas Mann, talking about 'the inexplicable balancings in one soul of heredity, historical moment, character and choice'. Virginia Woolf would have agreed with her use of the word 'inexplicable'. 'We do not know our own souls,' Woolf wrote in her essay 'On Being Ill', 'let alone the souls of others.' But what is the biographer to do with such observations? Hold back judgement and resist from comment? Critics and reviewers often get very irritable if a biographer withholds comment or refuses to offer a view. Yet there is integrity in this position and sometimes it should be adopted. Nevertheless a biography with no views would make very dull reading.

Interestingly, Elizabeth Hardwick was herself the victim of biographical abuse when her former husband, the poet Robert Lowell used her personal letters in some of his poems, changing them in places to suit the needs of his verse. Lowell had been a poetic touchstone to another poet Elizabeth Bishop. He was also Bishop's friend, mentor patron, ally and almost-lover. But Bishop was shocked by Lowell's use of Hardwick's letters and saw it as a desecration of poetry and personal dignity. She condemned him unequivocally. '[Aren't] you violating a trust?' she wrote. 'Art isn't worth that much. It's not being gentle to use personal anguished, tragic letters that way - it's cruel.' Somehow their friendship survived, though, as William Boyd mentions in recent article on Bishop, its equilibrium was never fully recovered. But I am grateful to Boyd for also drawing attention to another quotation from Bishop's letters which speaks directly to us biographers. 'My passion for accuracy', she writes, 'may strike you as old-maidish - but since we do float on an unknown sea I think we should examine the other floating things that come our way very carefully; who knows what might depend upon it.'

And so we come to what is perhaps at the heart of the biographer's contract - the recording of truth and the attempt to commemorate it. Is this still possible in an age of relativism? Not only possible, I would suggest, but urgently needed, for the truths contained in any unpretentious report, be it a record of a parish outing or a school report, remain the foundation of all literary endeavour. Here is that great anatomist of melancholy, W. G. Sebald, looking back over what distinguishes the best scholars on the work of Kafka. I quote him: 'Today if you pick up one of the many Kafka studies to have appeared since the 1950s, it is almost incredible to observe how much dust and mould have already gathered on these secondary works, inspired as they are by the theories of existentialism, theology, psychoanalysis, structuralism, poststructuralism, reception aesthetics or system criticism, and how unrewarding is the redundant verbiage on every page. Now and then, of course, you do find something different, for the conscientious and patient work of editors and factual commentators is in marked contrast to the chaff ground out in the mills of

academia....it seems increasingly that...all [who] have concentrated mainly on reconstructing a portrait of the author in his own time, have made a greater contribution to elucidating texts than those exegetists who dig around in them unscrupulously and often shamelessly.'

The poet, Geoffrey Hill, when asked why his poetry was so difficult, replied because people are difficult. And because people are difficult, writing biography remains a complex task, full of often unresolved tensions. It requires awareness of tradition as well as innovation, boldness as well as diplomacy and sensitivity. You can simplify a life to make for easy reading, but do not forget that similar reductions, omissions and silences have been used by totalitarian regimes not to commemorate human life but to support its denial. A biography that communicates effectively encourages us to empathize with an age or a people or a race or class different to our own. It brings the past closer to us and thereby thickens, enriches and challenges the present. Moreover by looking at history through the life of an individual, we come closer to the particularities of the period and they can become freshly vivid.

Recently a friend told me of the lively response on the part of one intellectual to the news that a certain writer had died. 'Oh good,' he replied, 'now I know that I have got all of him on my shelves!' Let's hope his collection also contains a copy of this writer's life.

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