Negotiating Biographical Boundaries

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Contents

Abstract 3

Declaration 4

Acknowledgements 5

Introduction 6

1. Woolf, Strachey and the 'New' Biography 10

2. 'The Widow and the Friends': What to Reveal and What to Conceal 18

3. From Hagiography to Pathography: The Biographer's Point of View 29

4. Fictional Biography: Expanding Biographical Possibilities 40

5. 'The Many Lives of Douglas Mawson': Challenges and Objectives 52

Works Cited 63

Abstract

Negotiating Biographical Boundaries, the second part of this thesis, considers the challenges, the constraints and the myriad decisions and considerations involved when writing about the lives of others. Chapter one is a discussion of Virginia Woolf's two essays, 'The New Biography' and 'The Art of Biography' which were pivotal in initiating a conversation about the perils and dilemmas of the genre, in particular the difficulties of how to treat facts and how to navigate the border between withholding and revealing information.

In chapters two and three, through an analysis of a number of biographical works, including several by and about Woolf, I consider the ways in which life writers have negotiated the 'biographical boundaries' of genre and form, of public and private, fact and fiction, detachment and involvement, and how far biography has evolved and in some cases departed from the ideals of 'the new biography'. In chapter four I look at the genre of 'fictional biography' in which imaginative acts take precedence over facts, turning conventional biography on its head and unsettling notions of objectivity and truth in life writing. The exegesis includes but is not limited to discussion of biographies of Mawson published between 1977 and 2013. The writing of my thesis has coincided with the centenary of Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition 1911-1914, during which time new works have been published and his heroic status has come under question. The studies of him discussed here represent a variety of biographical approaches and interpretations which raise different questions about the limits and possibilities of biography. In the final chapter I position my creative work in the field and discuss my own objectives and challenges in trying to portray the life of Douglas Mawson, and the lives that influenced and were a part of his.

Declaration

This is to certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution, and to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. In the case of both ‘The Many Lives of Douglas Mawson’ and ‘Negotiating Biographical Boundaries’, there will be a two-year embargo.

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Introduction

‘The Many Lives of Douglas Mawson’ contributes to a burgeoning field of what might be termed ‘experimental biography’, that is, life writing which is reflective about problematic issues involved in attempting to capture a life. The greatest challenge is how to determine and how to negotiate the boundaries of a genre which seems to be forever suspended in an indefinite space between fact and imaginative speculation. As Lytton Strachey wrote in his preface to *Eminent Victorians*, ‘it is perhaps as difficult to write a good life as it is to live one’ (7).

It may seem that my objectives as a writer are completely different from Douglas Mawson’s aims as a polar explorer but the nature of our quests is not dissimilar: his was an investigation of a continent; mine is an investigation of his identity both as a man and as a legendary historical figure. As I work and type I sometimes visualise the research and the writing process as a physical act of exploration. I am out in the desert with Douglas Mawson. We are dressed alike—in dusty boots and breeches. In fact, sometimes I wonder if we are one and the same person. As critic and biographer Leon Edel wrote: ‘to succeed the biographer must [become] for a while that other person, even while remaining himself’ (*Writing Lives* 40).

Mawson is armed with a geological pick; I have a pen over my ear. I watch him pick up tiny bits of shell, rocks with the markings of waves, fossilised jellyfish. He looks at what lies beneath the ground; surveys what lies above and beyond it; studies the layers of rock under the surface of the earth; examines the distribution of vegetation, the colour and quality of the soil in search of clues to the evolution of the earth. Meanwhile, I sort through memories, quotes, letters, diaries, photographs, gossip and hearsay, dates and receipts, myths and contradictions in my search for the ‘real’ Douglas Mawson.

Our respective fields of work require us to venture out into uncertain terrain. In the Antarctic Mawson had to be forever watchful. Just orienting himself was a constant challenge: the earth’s magnetic field played havoc with his compass; ‘water-skies’ could make the sea look like land; fresh snowfalls could change the landscape in an instant; the faintest line in the ice could signal a crevasse. The territory of life writing is no less perilous and just as confounding. Its ambiguous nature is reflected in terms like ‘creative non-fiction’, and ‘fictional biography’, its controversial and problematic nature, in the titles of articles and books: ‘The Impossible Art’, *The Troubled Face of Biography*, ‘Confessions and Transgressions’, ‘Lies and Silences’, *Lives for Sale*. An impure art, biography sits uneasily between history, psychology, journalism, science, travel and literature. Harold Nicholson argues that because it ‘has no claim to a specific branch of literature’ its status has fluctuated throughout history in accordance with the rise and fall of ‘public interest in human personality’, and with the ‘ebb and flow of religious belief’ (138).

Richard Holmes doubts whether there could ever be a biographical canon in the way that there is a literary canon of classic novels because written lives are always being replaced and superseded by new versions; this process of endless revision prevents biography from enduring in the way that novels do (‘The Proper Study?’ 15). As Woolf wrote in ‘The Art of Biography’, Boswell’s Johnson or Lytton Strachey’s Queen Victoria, however brilliant, will be outlived by great fictional characters like Shakespeare’s Falstaff, and Jane Austen’s Miss Bates, because novels endure while biography is perishable by the very fact that real lives are always open to new interpretations (*Collected Essays IV* 227).

In Antarctic terminology there are many words and expressions to describe ice. 'Blue ice', the ice that forms when the sea freezes, is the most unstable. I often think that writing about lives is like this. The thin line between safety and the sea I imagine as the precarious boundary between evidence and speculation, writing and lived experience, biographer and subject. You never know where to tread and you are always wondering when you might break through into the sea but despite the perils, biographers, like explorers, are compelled to keep going and to keep testing the limits. That lives are constantly being rewritten is testament to this.

It seems entirely apposite that metaphors for discovery and exploration are often used to describe biography. Lytton Strachey portrayed the biographer as an explorer rowing out 'over the great ocean of material', and of lowering 'here and there a little bucket' into the 'far depths' to 'bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen....to be examined with a careful curiosity' (*Eminent Victorians* vii). For Virginia Woolf the biographer was a miner's canary who must 'go on ahead of the rest of us...testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions' (*CE IV* 226). British historian and political biographer Ben Pimlott extends Woolf's image of the biographer as a pioneer when he likens writing biography to 'entering a deep cavern' where unknown exploratory possibilities await him; 'the cavern is a human life, the walls of the cavern are the evidence', he explains. 'From the lie of the land, you can tell that the cavern is likely to be an interesting one. But until you light your lamp and crawl around, you don't know what you will find'. And what you need most is courage: 'to be as bold and inventive and creative and iconoclastic as possible within the cave walls—that should be the aim of the biographer' ('Is Contemporary Biography History?' 34, 40).

Whether a cavern or an ocean lives are mysteries to be unravelled. In a letter to Edmund Gosse, Robert Louis Stevenson described biography as a puzzle and the facts as the pieces that the biographer tries to fit together (qtd. in Seymour 253). Similarly, Mawson likened science to a jigsaw puzzle and he argued that in order to get a sense of the complete picture, in order to advance scientific knowledge, no pieces should be ignored; unknown areas should be explored in favour of those already visited, such as the well-trodden South Pole region. He had his eyes on the then vast unknown section of Antarctica lying directly south of Australia about which only ‘vague and imperfect reports’ had thus far been produced. Both writers and explorers strive to add a new piece to the puzzle—something interesting in the undergrowth rather than just another section of sky.

Despite the realisation that ‘you will never get the whole picture; there will always be crevices out of reach’, the writing of a life is never a futile endeavour, for ‘the project is finite’ even if the life isn’t (Pimlott ‘Is Contemporary History Biography?’ 34). The quest is the investigation itself, fuelled by an intense curiosity. As Philip Zeigler writes: ‘biographers must aim to embrace the totality of the subjects’ life’ even though this aim is ‘unattainable’, and they ‘must never lose their hunger for the minutiae of their subjects’ everyday existence’ (225-226).

In the following sections I look at some of the ways in which biographers have dealt with the challenges and the constraints involved when writing about the lives of others. The discussion is confined to biography only even though the distinction between biography and autobiography is by no means clear. As one critic put it, ‘the occupational hazard of the biographer is the autobiography he does not intend’ (Sisk 456).

Woolf, Strachey and the 'New' Biography

Although experimental biography and criticism of biography are not new, a century or so ago Virginia Woolf began a conversation about the genre's blurred boundaries in two essays written twelve years apart: 'The New Biography', published in 1927, and 'The Art of Biography', published in 1939. Woolf's questions and theories about the possibilities and the limitations of the genre of life writing continue to be of influence and relevance in the practice and criticism of biography today. Although the genre has greatly expanded since Woolf's day, the central dilemmas biographers encounter are essentially the same almost one hundred years on.

A direct contemporary of Douglas Mawson, Woolf was a pioneer in the field of life writing, as a writer, critic and reviewer, as he was in science and geographical discovery. While previous polar explorers had merely skirted around the edges of Antarctica surveying it from ships, Mawson became engaged in opening up the interior. As he was sledging into the heart of the continent to unveil its secrets, Virginia Woolf was advocating that biographers move beyond the external facts of a life and get to the very essence of character and 'tell the truth about the dead' (*CE IV* 223). And like Mawson who was stressing the importance of visiting unexplored territory in favour of retracing the steps of his predecessors, Woolf was drawing attention to lives that had been historically unrecorded or under-represented, especially the lives of women obscured by the masculine 'I', and the need for new literary forms in which to present and to read them.

In 'The New Biography' Woolf discusses the changing nature of the genre of life writing in the early twentieth century. She felt that it had begun to move away from a preoccupation with facts to a renewed concern for character: 'We can no longer maintain that life consists in actions only or in works. It consists in personality' (*CE IV* 230), she writes. This idea that the study of the interior life is essential to a successful biography is also true of Woolf's thoughts about fiction. Hermione Lee argues of Woolf's writing that 'fiction is often her version of biography' (*Virginia Woolf* 8), and that 'her essential subject' in all her writing, even her diaries, was about exploring ways of 'catching the self' and 'the struggle to turn the self into language' ('Biomythographers' 97). In 'A Sketch of the Past', Woolf argues that memoirs fail 'when they leave out the person to whom things happened' (*Moments of Being* 65). In her essay, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', the expression of character is central to the success of all forms of writing.[1]

Ira Bruce Nadel asserts that although historically biography has been affected by many disciplines, it is the novel which has had the greatest influence on the development of the genre 'with character forming the most important point of intersection' (104-105). In fact, biography's relationship to fiction can be traced back to much earlier times. Ian Hamilton identifies the classical period as the 'first golden age' of biography which was concerned with the tension between 'commemoration and critical interpretation' (27), and the second golden age as coinciding with Shakespeare's history plays which were psychological character studies of leaders and kings (67). Indeed, it is largely because of its association with fiction that biography is so appealing as well as problematic.

Greater experimentation and innovation in life writing in the eighteenth century directly coincided with the rise of the novel with many biographers borrowing novelistic techniques to represent character. In the nineteenth century, however, with its emphasis on historical progress, the genre became less open to imaginative form with a focus instead on ‘documentation, industriousness, fact-gathering and objectivity’ (Nadel 85). Victorian biography, therefore, privileged external over internal experience, and was characterised by a reverence for facts, a pattern that Virginia Woolf protested so strongly against. At a time when she felt that biography was becoming more adaptable to new narrative forms and showing a greater interest in subjectivity, she exposed the methods of Victorian biography as wholly inadequate for presenting lives. Her own theories and practices in life writing were in large part a reaction against her father Sir Leslie Stephen, a leading proponent of the Victorian biographical tradition and the founding editor of *The National Dictionary of Biography*. For Woolf, the *National Dictionary of Biography* was ‘conventional, patriarchal, impersonal, censorious and censored’ (Saunders 439), and represented ‘artistic wrongheadness’ (*CE IV* 231). Reed Whittemore notes that Leslie Stephen and his successor Sir Sidney Lee were ‘committed to displaying *moral* character’, expressed in visible deeds and achievements. As a consequence they ‘could be immensely inhibited about mentioning inner lives’ (60-61). The truthful depiction of inner lives was not only seen as ‘an insult to propriety’, argues Hamilton, but also counter to the role of professional biography to promote and to preserve reputations (115).

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[1] It is significant that Mrs Brown is a woman who unlike a man has no public profile and whose life cannot therefore be defined by exploit which suggests that Woolf was pointing to the future of fiction and even biography.

In her essay ‘The New Biography’, Woolf deplores the fact that Victorian biography had reinstated ‘the conventions that James Boswell had destroyed’ (*CE IV* 230). Boswell, she argues, had encouraged biographers to give equal attention to both illustrious and uneventful lives and to express ‘not only the outer life of work but the inner life of emotion and thought’ (*CE IV* 230). In detailing Samuel Johnson’s peculiarities, his mannerisms and his flaws through the use of anecdote and dialogue, Boswell succeeded in drawing out the humanity and the uniqueness of his subject and in so doing created an enduring work in *Life of Johnson*. It is true to say that in the 21st century Boswell is still widely upheld as a model biographer for his ability to distinguish between significant and insignificant detail.

According to Woolf, Victorian biographers by contrast lacked any instinct for selectivity or design. They noted down every fact irrespective of whether it was interesting or significant so that the reader had to wade through 'an amorphous mass...for any trace that this fossil was once a living man' (*CE IV* 231). Their subjects, she argues, resemble 'the wax figures...preserved in Westminster Abbey', bearing 'only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin' (*CE IV* 121). [2]

In 'The New Biography', which is in part a review of Harold Nicholson's *Some People* (consisting of nine character sketches), Woolf attests that writers such as Nicholson and Strachey were reclaiming the biographer's freedom. Along with Woolf, Nicholson and Strachey were among a number of writers of the early twentieth century who were expressing a new self-consciousness about the genre. Many were practising (and experimenting) biographers who were also reflecting and speculating on the form in critical and theoretical works. Central to most of these works was an acknowledgement of the increasingly novelistic features of biography. *The Development of English Biography* by Harold Nicholson was published in 1927 by The Hogarth Press in the same year as Woolf's essay 'The New Biography'. In *Aspects of Biography* by André Maurois published in 1929, Maurois acknowledges the influence of Nicholson's book and was also most likely influenced by EM Forster's Clark Lectures delivered at Cambridge University only a year before and later published as *Aspects of the Novel* which ‘made the question of ‘character’ and ‘personality’ central to the analysis of fiction’ (Marcus 201).

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[2] Meanwhile, the emergence of biographical novels in the same period, such as *Anna Karenina, David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre* made up for the lack of truthful portraiture in biography. It was novelists in their more real depiction of imaginary lives who 'received the pass and ran with Johnson's ball' notes Hamilton (116).

The new biography Virginia Woolf described was first of all visibly different from Victorian biography in that it was shorter. Andre Maurois had, Woolf notes, ‘boiled the usual two volumes of a Shelley life into one little book the size of a novel’ (*CE IV* 231). She praises Strachey, a major practitioner of ‘The New Biography’, for compress[ing] four stout Victorians into one slim volume’ in *Eminent Victorians* (231), a study of four lives: nurse Florence Nightingale, Cardinal Manning, Archbishop of Westminster, General Gordon, a military leader, and Thomas Arnold, an educator. The section on Dr Arnold, which is the shortest, is only thirty pages long.

This outward change reflected a change in point of view, and a new equality between the writer and his subject. ‘Whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he is an equal’ declares Woolf (*CE IV* 231). *Eminent Victorians* reflects this new authorial position, signalled first of all in the irony of the title which ‘capture[s] precisely the expectations and the assumptions of the genre’ (Evans 7). Like Woolf, Strachey, whose father was a general, was making a break from his ‘historical lineage’ in his ‘hostility towards militarism, imperialism, and other fashionable ideals’ (Avery 841). In rejecting a reverential stance, Strachey even goes so far as to refer to his biographical subjects by their first names, and further, by their nicknames: Florence Nightingale is ‘Flo’; in his biography of *Queen Victoria,* he calls the Queen ‘Vicky’. By dispelling his subjects’ mythic reputations, Strachey sought to expose the hypocrisy and prudery of Victorian biographers who, obsessed by the idea of goodness, ‘favoured protecting near and dear ones and carrying their inner life to the grave’ (Whittemore 51). In *Eminent Victorians,* the very first page of the section on Florence Nightingale signals

Strachey's motives. He challenges the popular impression of Nightingale as 'a saintly, self-sacrificing woman' (129) by announcing that 'the truth was different. In the real Miss Nightingale there was more that was interesting than the legendary one; there was also less that was agreeable' (129).

Shorter works challenged the perception that length was equated with truth and greater coverage of a life. Truth was to be found elsewhere and by other means. The practice of arranging a life chronologically was discarded in favour of a more philosophical approach. As Strachey writes in his preface to *Eminent Victorians*, the 'wise' biographer will realise that 'a direct method of scrupulous narration' is not the most effective way of depicting past lives. Instead 'he will adopt a subtler strategy', and 'attack his subject in unexpected places' (vii). The new biography depended on drawing out the essence of a subject's individuality through anecdote, distinguishing features and turns of phrase[3] in such a way that 'whole chapters of the Victorian volume are synthesized and summed up' (*CE IV* 323).

Woolf praises Strachey for making his eminent Victorians 'live as they had not lived since they were actually in the flesh' (*CE IV* 223), and Nicholson for having 'devised a method of writing about people as if they were at once real and imaginary' (*CE IV* 232) in *Some People*. In Woolf's opinion, these works had revived the public's curiosity and interest in humanity, and she rejoices in biography's liberation from 'all the draperies and decencies' (*CE IV* 230) of Victorianism, and the biographer's newly reclaimed freedom to interpret and evaluate lives rather than merely record them. However, she is nevertheless acutely aware of the dangers and pitfalls of a genre which is ultimately limited by being grounded in real lives. The new (or rather renewed) interest in personality over action was compelling the biographer to combine 'the truth of real life and the truth of fiction' which Woolf famously called 'granite and rainbow'. Achieving a balance between the two, she warns, necessitates 'using no more than a pinch of either' (233-234), and both Nicholson and Strachey were sailing very close to the wind. She recognised the tension between fidelity to facts and the desire to be inventive, but saw the truth as indispensible.

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[3] The idea that single details about a subject can effectively transmit personality dates back to Plutarch who wrote in *The Age of Alexander* that 'a chance remark or a joke may reveal far more of a man's character than the mere feat of winning battles in which thousands fall, or marshalling great armies, or laying siege to cities' (qtd. in Hamilton 26).

The difficulty lies in how to interpret 'a pinch'; even Woolf was ambivalent about this, and it continues to be a contentious issue in biography today. Her theories about the measure of freedom a biographer could or should have changed in accordance with her own experiences as a practising biographer trying to reconcile the opposing forces of 'granite and rainbow'. This serves to illustrate the unstable status of the terms 'fact' and 'fiction', and the permeability of the genre's boundaries. In 'The New Biography', she declares the biographer an artist. It is no coincidence that such a positive perspective on biography coincided with the writing of *Orlando*, which, written as a satirical biography, freed Woolf from issues of censorship and factual accuracy, which she saw as the two main obstacles to a biographer's artistic freedom. In 'The Art of Biography', she demotes the biographer to a craftsman. Significantly, this essay was written while she was working on a serious biography of her friend, artist and art critic, Roger Fry, which she found very difficult to write because she became enmeshed in the very traditions she was railing against. Her conclusion in this essay, that 'the biographer is tied; the novelist is free' (*CE IV* 221), is therefore less optimistic, and reflects the difficulty of bridging the gap between the theory and practice of life writing. She recognised the potential and the value of biography which she predicted would have 'a long and active life before it', but also foresaw that it would be 'a life full of difficulty, danger, and hard work' (227).

As Lee argues, Woolf was always looking for ways to combine fiction and biography. Success she felt lay in a seamless fusion of 'granite and rainbow' but she recognised the near impossibility of fusing fundamentally incompatible principles, and contended that biographers had 'for the most part failed to solve it' (*CE IV* 229). Certainly, her reviews of biographies indicate that she was not always satisfied with the solutions to the tensions between fact and creativity. There is always too much of one and not enough of the other, resulting in either an unbalanced or superficial portrait.

Ira Bruce Nadel argues of biography that 'the reason for its popularity with authors as well as readers, remains its ability to provide meaning for an individual's life, transmitting personality and character through prose' (155). Yet while getting to the inner person is widely believed to be the central task of biography, 'there has been less consent and less certainty concerning both the methods by which this dimension is to be approached and the problem how the claim to inwardness can be reconciled with that of factuality' (Schabert *In Quest of the Other Person: Fiction as Biography* 49).

‘The Widow and the Friends’: What to Conceal and What to Reveal

Among the key characteristics of the new biography as defined by Woolf were ‘freedom from pose, from sentimentality, from illusion’ (*CE IV* 233). In ‘The Art of Biography’ she notes that whereas in the past biographers had omitted or covered up the flaws of their subjects so as not to disillusion the public or offend the still living, towards the close of the nineteenth century this ‘effigy no longer carried conviction or satisfied curiosity’ (*CE IV* 222).

In advocating that biography be honest and uncensored, as a reviewer she was critical of biographies which did not disclose their subjects’ private lives. She declared EM Forster’s life of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson ‘quite futile’ for not including Lowes Dickinson’s homosexuality (qtd. in Lee, ‘Biomythographers’ 105). She lamented Edmund Gosse’s lack of courage in *Father and Son*—‘if only he had possessed greater boldness, if only he had pushed his curiosity further...’ Gosse’s portraits are superficial, she argues, because ‘fear seems always to dog his footsteps’. Held back by ‘his respect for decorum, by his decency’ he dances around his subjects, insinuating, suggesting and hinting but ‘never speak[ing] out’ so that we never come to know them ‘intimately’ (*CE IV* 83-84).

In discussions in the 1930s with her circle of friends she supported the proposed publication of Strachey’s ‘extremely candid letters’ (‘Biomythographers’ 105). She commended Harold Nicholson for having ‘the courage to rid himself of a mountain of illusion’ in *Some People* (*CE IV* 232-233), and declared the artist Walter Sickert ‘among the best of biographers’ for portraying in his portraits ‘the whole of the life that has been lived to make that face’ (*The Captain’s Death Bed and Other Essays* 176). In Woolf’s opinion, Sickert succeeds because he achieves a sense of completeness and unity which is not reached by way of ‘the three or four hundred pages of compromise, evasion, understatement, overstatement, irrelevance and downright falsehood which we call biography’ (*CDB* 176). [4]

Yet, when she embarked on her biography of Roger Fry, she found it difficult to write with the same frankness and courage she admired in writers like Nicholson and Boswell. She felt constricted by facts on the one hand and intimidated by the guardians of Fry’s reputation on the other. These two impediments prevented her from exercising ‘independent judgment’ which she believed was an essential biographical right (*CE IV* 231).

Feeling weighed down and hemmed in by facts, her artistic freedom constantly checked under the supervisory eyes of Fry’s five sisters, *Roger Fry* took Woolf six years to complete and she repeatedly referred to the writing of it as ‘a grind’. ‘How does one square the relatives?’ she asked her friend Ethel Smyth (*Letters* 27 Jan. 1937). ‘How can one cut loose from facts, when they are contradicting my theories?’ she despaired (qtd. in Harris 12). Ultimately unable to reconcile her vision of Fry with the facts and her ‘need for discretion’ (‘Biomythographers’105), Woolf proved a tentative, guarded biographer. She does not mention Fry’s long relationship with Helen Anrep with whom he lived but never married; she makes no reference to his affair with her sister Vanessa Bell. The death of Fry’s first wife, artist Helen Coombe, who was committed to a mental asylum ten years into their marriage, is relegated to a footnote. Michael Rosenthal argues that Woolf’s ‘reticence’ and ‘unwillingness’ to explore Fry’s most significant relationships and ‘the texture of his emotional life’ means that ‘her own work falls short’ of the ‘aim’ of the ‘new’ biography (216) as she herself stated: to create ‘a seamless whole’ through the fusion of granite and rainbow (*CE IV* 229).

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[4] In many respects, Woolf was aspiring to do in writing what some of her contemporaries were aiming to achieve in painting, in particular in the portraits by Dora Carrington, Duncan Grant and her sister Vanessa Bell which were ‘domestic, impressionistic, irreverent, informal portraits which sought the essence of character through colour and form’ (Harris 12).

Yet, even as Woolf 'found herself caught between old and new conventions' ('Biomythographers' 104), she was certain that the days of Victorian biography were 'over' (*CE IV* 234). Hermione Lee observes that Woolf was very much aware of writing in 'a period of transition', and that she 'and her contemporaries were poised on the edge of the revolution in life-writing' which has evolved into the genre it is today where 'the only taboo is censorship' ('Biomythographers' 105).

Woolf predicted that had Strachey lived, he would have further explored 'the vein that he had opened' regarding the biographer's 'right to all the facts that are available…so far as the law of libel and human sentiment allow' (*CE IV* 226). Biographical facts, she recognised, were not fixed like the laws of science but were continually open to new interpretations for 'opinions change as the times change' (*CE IV* 226). She foresaw that the changed 'accent on sex', influenced by the rise of psychological theory, would result in 'the destruction of a great deal of dead matter still obscuring the true features of the human face' (226). Strachey also anticipated more relaxed attitudes to notions of biographical privacy in a letter to John Maynard Keynes: 'Our time will come about a hundred years hence, when preparation will have been made, and compromises come to, so that, at the publication of our letters, everyone will be, finally, converted' (qtd. in Hamilton 154-155).

In their predictions Woolf and Strachey were right. Woolf's nephew Quentin Bell, who was the first to write her life in 1972, wrote candidly of his aunt's bouts of madness, and revealed that she had been sexually molested by her half brothers George and Gerald Duckworth.[5] Bell's two-volume biography was preceded by *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography*, published in 1967 by Michael Holroyd, which coincided with the decriminalisation of male homosexuality in England and Wales, and with the rise of gay rights and feminism, and is considered a landmark in the genre (Hamilton 253). Mark Bostridge states in the preface to *Lives for Sale* that 'modern biography' is often considered to have begun with the publication of Holroyd's biography, 'which broke through the barriers of biographical discretion' by setting out to treat Strachey's homosexuality 'without any artificial veils of decorum' (xii).[6] Holroyd faced opposition from some of Lytton Strachey's family members but in reviewing the biography in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Roger Fulford commends him for remaining undaunted, for writing his biography of Strachey 'without fear or favour', and for giving 'a picture of Strachey and his world which is not only alive but is assured of a long life'. It seems that Holroyd's biography comes close to Woolf's ideal of a balanced, enduring portrait, and Fulford's response reflects the value placed on biographical candour. Significantly, Holroyd later wrote a single volume version to his original two-volume biography (*Lytton Strachey by Himself: A Self-Portrait*, 1971), and shortened it again more than twenty years later (*Lytton Strachey: The New Biography*, 1994), not only to meet demand for shorter works but also to accommodate the public's 'growing fascination with sex' (Hamilton 260).

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[5] For his biography Bell drew on Woolf's own revelations about her sexual history and about her abuse as a child in her memoir 'A Sketch of the Past' published posthumously in *Moments of Being* in 1976.

It is now fifty years since the publication in 1967 of *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography*, and the idea that the private life must be expounded in biographies is even more prevalent in today's digital world where privacy is virtually non-existent. As Hermione Lee notes, 'even if it is hard to distinguish, at times, between a dislike of hypocrisy and a delight in scandal, the ethics of our society entail a belief in openness' (*Biography: A Very Short Introduction* 9). This has been facilitated by our curiosity about the lives of others, and the easy access to information through technologies which have led to changed attitudes about the distinction between public and private. Woolf noted that the revolution in biography coincided with the development of new media; that she and her contemporaries were living ‘in an age when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters, and diaries, at every character from every angle’ (*CE IV* 226). The twenty-first century is characterised by even greater exposure of lives, not only through photography and print media but also through blogs, social network sites, documentaries, biographical films, Reality TV, and tabloid talk shows, bringing private revelation into the public domain and expanding the possibilities for biographical expression.

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[6] Although not the first to reveal the sexual behaviours and orientation of the circle of friends known as the Bloomsbury group to which Strachey is attached, Holroyd's carefully researched and documented account of the complex web of relationships in the Bloomsbury group was new in so far as previous biographers of members of this group had either not mentioned homosexual relationships or otherwise only hinted at them (Evans 5).

One effect of this shift from private to public for contemporary biography is that the genre has expanded to encompass unknown lives from a diverse range of social and cultural groups: the marginalised, the abused, the disabled, the elderly, the poor, the terminally ill. Biography is still concerned with the lives of public figures—politicians, artists, writers, royal figures, sports starts, television personalities, actors and singers—but, as if in answer to Woolf’s question, ‘Is not anyone who has lived a life and left a record of that life, worthy of biography?’ (*CE IV* 226-227), ordinary lives, previously neglected from the historical record, have been rescued from obscurity, including Woolf’s servants in *Mrs Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury* by Alison Light.

These developments, which have resulted from what Mary Evans calls ‘the democratisation of auto/biography’ (11), have brought with them new dilemmas around how to address matters of privacy in so far as ‘the accessible life’ has come to be regarded as ‘the recordable life’; in other words, ‘if the evidence is available it seems to follow inexorably that it must be all put down’ (Matthews in Zurbrugg et al. 447). This reflects a curious return to the documentary style of Victorian biography. As Lee argues, there is a belief that ‘the value of the exercise of life-writing depends on its honesty and thoroughgoing investigativeness’ (*Biography* 9).

In *The Silent Woman* in which she analyses the biographies of Sylvia Plath, Janet Malcolm famously likens the work of a biographer to that of ‘the professional burglar’, who invades and pilfers lives, ‘triumphantly bearing his loot away’ (9). She asserts that there is ‘a kind of collusion’ between the biographer and his readers, and an expectation that the biographer will go to any lengths to carry out his task (9-10). Biographers are expected to dig up the secrets of their subjects, even if this involves having to ‘ruthlessly subdue’ the relatives who are to be viewed as their ‘natural enemies’ (10-11). *Bitter Fame,* Anne Stevenson’s biography of Sylvia Plath, was attacked, argues Malcolm, because Stevenson made an unforgivable mistake by declaring in her preface: ‘Any biography of Sylvia Plath written during the lifetimes of her family and friends must take their vulnerability into consideration, even if completeness suffers from it’ (qtd. in Malcolm 10). Despite a prevailing belief that full disclosure is synonymous with truth, Evans takes issue with the assumption that full revelation is a necessary good. She argues that ‘this reading of auto/biography takes little or no account for the way in which ‘revelation is a very moveable feast’, and that explicitness is not necessarily better or more revealing than reticence (139).

One effect of this contemporary focus on openness or ‘busybodyism’ (9), as Malcolm calls it, is that intimate details might be given more attention in biographies than other equally interesting or significant information about a life. Woolf argued that in noting everything down without employing a selective and evaluative eye, Victorian biographers produced a superficial portrait, but this modern insistence that all private details must be disclosed may be another version of ‘tell-all’ which potentially has the same effect of inhibiting rather than facilitating access to ‘the reality’ of character and the achievement of a rounded portrait. Michiko Kakutani describes James King’s biography *Virginia Woolf*, for instance, as ‘just the sort of shapeless, charmless biography Woolf and her Bloomsbury compatriot Lytton Strachey deplored’, revealing ‘more than anyone would want to know’ about Woolf’s ‘menstrual problems, her attacks of diarrhea, her difficulties in buying clothes’ (‘Virginia Woolf, Every Last Bit of Her’).

In an article for *The New York Review of Books* in 1985 (‘Biography and the Sexual Revolution — why Curiosity is no Longer Vulgar’), Leon Edel maintains that relaxed attitudes to sex and privacy have been largely beneficial for biography (13). Like Holroyd, who shortened his original biography of Strachey in order to align with changing notions of privacy, in 1977 Edel released a one-volume abridgement of his five-volume biography of Henry James published between 1953 and 1970. In his new version, *The Life of Henry James*, he was more candid and more speculative and he felt that his biography benefited from these revisions because he realised that a subject’s ‘passional life is a distinct part of his or her being’. However, he warns that ‘we must learn all over again the lessons of relevance’, and not lose sight of the fact that ‘our goal is still to arrive at the essence of human lives, not at inventories’ (‘Biography and the Sexual Revolution’).

By way of example, Edel points to Ted Morgan’s biography of Somerset Maugham (*Somerset Maugham: A Biography* 1980), which focuses on Maugham’s ‘psychosexual life’, as having gone too far in its descriptions of Maugham’s ageing. Physical decline is just ‘a sad part of human existence’, argues Edel, and by elaborating on details such as Maugham’s loss of control over bodily functions, Morgan does not celebrate what makes his subject unique.

Robert Skidelsky contends that contemporary biography is motivated by ‘a celebration of the commonplace’, which might be one explanation for why so much attention is often given to a subject’s private experiences. Skidelsky, like Edel, protests against this practice because achievement is ‘reduced to life and times’. He asserts that ‘reductionism’ is one of the great vices of modern biography (12).

Another argument against the inclusion of intimate details of a subject’s sexual and physical experiences is that it is ethically questionable. Edel objects to Morgan’s biographical practice when he asserts that such a representation ‘crosses the boundary of human dignity’. He argues that the treatment of a subject’s private life requires judgement and tact and ‘a respect for fundamental human considerations’ (‘Biography and the Sexual Revolution’). One work (or rather group of works) which has attracted much controversy for being both reductionist and unethical, a reflection of the fact that the democratisation of life writing extends to readers and critics as much as it does to writers, is the biographical trilogy, *Iris, Iris and the Friends, and Widower’s House* by John Bayley about his wife, British writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch. The first two books of the trilogy focus on Murdoch’s final years when she was suffering the indignities of Alzheimer’s. Bayley describes how she watches Teletubbies, a programme for toddlers, and how she had become incontinent and ‘would sometimes do it on the carpet’ (*Iris* in Wilson 259). Details of this kind were further publicised in the 2001 feature film *Iris* inspired by Bayley’s books *Iris* (1998) and *Iris and the Friends* (1999).

The popularity and success of Bayley’s trilogy can be attributed to the fact that he writes so lovingly of his wife and presents her mental decline as just another phase of their marriage and their life together. However, there is an imbalance of power in the relationship between Bayley as biographer and Murdoch as subject, and this makes Murdoch 'a vulnerable subject' according to Thomas Couser (x). Although she was alive when the first book was published, due to her deteriorated mental state Murdoch was unaware of its existence. Couser argues that since she was 'without competence to consent to having her dementia so publicly portrayed', and that because it is unlikely that she would have agreed to Bayley's depiction of her, 'there is some question to the ethicality of the representation' (x).

Gertrude Himmelfarb attests that whereas in the past writers had to do battle with the widow to access a life, now in many cases those doing the exposing are in fact the family members themselves, a development which she refers to as a 'new form of spousal or parental or filial abuse' (38). In her opinion *Iris* is representative of this trend. Himmelfarb argues that 'it is monstrous to think that the last five years of [Murdoch's] life should so overwhelm the other 75' (35). She questions Bayley's reasons for such an 'invasion of privacy' and notes that his self-rebukes for the occasions on which he was not loving enough towards her 'have the effect of enhancing his own image of an almost superhuman patience, while also providing the occasion for revelations of some of the most gruesome details of his wife's condition' (35).

Similarly, AN Wilson, author of *Iris Murdoch As I Knew Her*, doubts that Iris, 'an intensely private woman' (258), would have liked the intimate details of her life exposed, and he too questions Bayley's motives for writing about his wife in the way that he did. He concludes that Bayley's 'preservation of his version of [Iris Murdoch's] memory could now be viewed as a kind of revenge' for his wife's numerous affairs, and her greater success and recognition as a writer (260). Wilson not only considers Bayley's representation of Iris to be unethical and self-promoting but he also objects to the diminishing effect it has on Murdoch's reputation. As Lee argues:

> When poets or novelists object to biography, it is often not so much for ethical or protectionist reasons as because biography seems to them a reductionist simplification, a grotesque travesty of what they do, and an interference with a writer's main ambition – which is to be judged by, and remembered for their writing. (*Biography* 98)

Bayley stated in one interview: 'I thought that if I could write something about her that was interesting more people would want to read her books, which are so good' (Moir). According to Wilson, however, rather than expand Murdoch's reputation Bayley has effectively diminished it. As an illustration of this, Wilson points out that Kate Winslet, who played the young Iris in the film *Iris*, was unable to find the time to read any of Murdoch's novels despite stating that she had huge admiration for her (260). Bayley's memoirs and the subsequent film have ensured that Iris Murdoch, a successful writer of plays, text books on philosophy and more than twenty novels, and a Booker Prize-winner, is chiefly remembered for having Alzheimer's disease, for being 'that writer who went mad' (Leith 2001).

One thing that Woolf did not prophesy, argues Hamilton, is that lives, including her own, would be dramatised in film as well as in print (Hamilton 167). More specifically perhaps, she did not foresee the extent to which biographical representation could stand in for the life, and determine how a subject is remembered. Arguably, the 2005 film *The Hours*, based on Michael Cunningham's book of the same name inspired by *Mrs Dalloway*, has meant that for many, Woolf, like Murdoch, is known more as 'that woman who went mad' than as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. Similarly, cellist Jacqueline du Pré is remembered not for her music but for the scene in which she demands to have sex with her brother-in-law in the film *Hilary and Jackie*, based on the book by du Pré's sister and brother-in-law. Another example is Vita Sackville-West. According to her biographer Victoria

Glendinning, she was ‘first and foremost a writer’ (xvii) and yet she is mainly remembered, not for her writing but for her unconventional marriage and affairs with women (Skidelsky 13). This is due to the publication of *Portrait of a Marriage* in 1973 by her son Nigel Nicholson which reveals her love affair with Violet Trefusis described in her own (unedited) diary and in alternate chapters by Nicholson. Amber Regis notes that the book ‘has come to inform nearly all subsequent accounts of [Vita Sackville-West’s] life’ (288). The 1990 BBC production of *Portrait of a Marriage* (authorised by Nicholson) has helped further promote Sackville-West as a lesbian heroine while her novels remain unread.

Hermione Lee suggests that it was not without some trepidation that Woolf foresaw the opening up of the private life in biography, confiding to her diary, ‘I’m glad I think, that there should be a full & outspoken life’ (*Biography* 105). Did Woolf sense that in response to the sin of omission biographers would say too much about the private life and not enough of other things and so tip the scales the other way? Candour, as a guiding principle of the new biography, ostensibly liberated biographers; it licensed them to produce what Woolf called ‘the creative fact’ by drawing illuminating connections between the public and the secret self, to become not merely recorders but interpreters of lives. However, ‘biographical frankness’, argues Robert Skidelsky, has become ‘a distraction from the task of connecting up the life and the work’, and has become an end in itself (3).

From Hagiography to Pathography: The Biographer's Point of View

While revelation is not always illuminating and enlarging, the endorsement of biographical candour initially developed in response to Victorian reserve; it was intended to breathe life into the 'wax figures' of Victorian biographies in order to create a more realistic and rounded portrait. Hermione Lee expresses a commonly held view when she says that *Eminent Victorians* is 'a flamboyantly pioneering work which [has] provided a blueprint for all modernist theorizing about biography' (*Biography* 78). As a leading proponent of the new biography, Lytton Strachey's legacy is that he encouraged biographers to consider the nature of their task, and to think about how to strike a balance between 'the recital of fact and artistic effect', and how to 'exercise selectivity' which he 'found so lamentably absent in the commemorative biography' (Altick 84). His 'great achievement', argues Edgar Johnson, is that 'the author's point of view became explicit instead of being a muzzy, unacknowledged projection of personality' (522-523).

Strachey's distinctive style and perspective is the reason for his enduring reputation and reflects his central motivation—the privileging of interpretation over fact. 'Uninterpreted fact', he once stated, 'is as useless as buried gold', and 'a biography without a point of view 'resembl[es] nothing so much as a very large heap of sawdust' (*Portraits in Miniature* 170). In this sense, according to Ira Bruce Nadel, Strachey's works can be classed as 'interpretative/analytic' biographies, in which the biographer acts as a guide for the reader in understanding the meaning of the material in relation to 'a well-defined thesis'. He adds that such biographers 'may also be advocates pressing for the prosecution or defence of their subjects' (170-171). Katherine Frank notes that most analytical biographies focus on a famous person whose life has already been written about, and they rarely include new factual information because ‘the point of these books is invariably a new slant on what is already known’ (3).

All four figures in Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* had previously been the subjects of glowing biographies. In response to this hagiographic convention, Strachey sought to reveal these established Victorian heroes as ordinary people by exposing their weaknesses and flaws. Florence Nightingale is revealed as a neurotic workaholic, General Gordon as a drunk who caused the deaths of thousands. Manning is depicted as ‘an obsessive ecclesiastical opportunist’, and Thomas Arnold as ‘a pompous public-school master who tended to confuse himself with God’ (Altick 81).

‘The debunking process’, notes William Medlicott, ‘was widely regarded as the main function of the new biography’ (93). However, as Woolf recognised, there is always tension between facts and interpretative intention created by the inevitability of point of view. In ‘The Art of Biography’ she admires Strachey for showing his eminent Victorians ‘as they really were’ (*CE IV* 223) by fully exercising ‘the biographer’s power of selection and relation’ (224), but she did not always endorse his practice. She maintained that while biographical material must necessarily be manipulated to get to the reality of character, facts must retain their integrity for they can always be ‘verified by other people’ (225). While she pronounces *Queen Victoria* ‘a triumphant success’ (223) because Strachey only included information which could be authenticated, she declares *Elizabeth and Essex* a failure because when he encountered gaps in the record, Strachey was ‘urged to invent’ (225). While Woolf sanctions ‘the creative fact’ in biography, ‘entirely invented facts’ are inadmissible for they ‘undermine trust in anything offered as fact’ (Saunders 467).

Certainly the debunking trend continues in biography today in the denigration of kings and queens, politicians, priests, business tycoons and anyone with a prominent public profile, and like Strachey, life writers continue to be measured against standards of intellectual honesty and what constitutes a fair representation. However, while Strachey relied almost exclusively on secondary sources, many biographies today include long pages of endnotes and draw on mostly primary material. This greater professionalism brings with it higher truth claims and as a result incites stronger criticism when a biographer is perceived to have demonstrated bias through the distortion of factual evidence.

The more pernicious nature of some contemporary biographies which emerge out of a reaction against ancestor-worship, and are often not softened by the hallmarks of Strachey's writing (the employment of wit and irony), can be partly attributed to Strachey's influence. Yet in offering an alternative to hero-worship in biography, Strachey was advocating for a more balanced portrait. 'Essentially his truth consisted of not calling something bad good', argues Skidelsky (7). This is different from what Michiko Kakutani sees as a signal shift. In an article for *The New York Times* in 1994 entitled 'Critic's Notebook: Biography as a Blood Sport', Kakutani argues of the current trend in biography that 'unmasking the misdeeds of the mighty' is a result of 'the public fascination with gossip and disenthronement' and the post-modernist belief in the importance of the biographer's role as interpreter. This, she argues, has 'helped sanction the spread of wholesale speculation in biography writing', and even 'crept into prize-winning biographies', as well as 'biographies written by scholars and academics'. Among the biographies she picks out as examples of this trend is *Nancy Reagan* (1991) by Kitty Kelley, who was, according to Kaplan, 'charged with writing out of an animus so virulent that Nancy Reagan is her victim rather than her subject' (1991). Kelley's equally controversial 'unauthorised' biography of Frank Sinatra (*His Way: The Unauthorized*

Biography of Frank Sinatra, 1986) is also mentioned, as well as Albert Goldman's biography of John Lennon (*The Lives of John Lennon*, 1988) which Paul McCartney declared 'a piece of trash', and over which Yoko Ono threatened to sue for libel. In defence of 'unauthorised' biography, Kelley maintains that public aversion arises because 'some people cannot accept their idols with flaws'. Her argument is that the unauthorised biographer is freer to write the truth and get behind 'the manufactured public image' of his or her subject and in so doing can offer 'a public service'. Kelley asserts that 'whether authorized or unauthorized, a good biography is nuanced and complex'. However, Kakutani objects to such merciless debunking because it results in 'absolutist characterizations', and contrary to Kelley's claim, Kakutani attests that it 'tend[s] to preclude a nuanced understanding of the subject ('Critic's Notebook').

Jerome G Manis has suggested that this kind of biography might be termed 'degradography' (387). Joyce Carol Oates popularised the synonym 'pathography' which she defines as 'hagiography's diminished and often prurient twin' ('Adventures in Abandonment' 1988). It might also be described as interpretative/analytic biography gone awry.

In reviewing a biography of the American writer Jean Stafford by David Roberts (*Jean Stafford: A Biography*, 1988), Oates observes that 'the biographer chooses to sound, from virtually his first page, the clarion call of failed promise', judging most of Stafford's life as an adult through her decline into alcoholism for which Roberts argues she primarily had herself to blame. This, writes Oates, is 'pathography's unmistakable slant, emphasis, tone'. In defining the differences between pathography and what she refers to as 'traditional biography', Oates argues that in traditional biography the biographer attempts to present and understand the subject through an examination of 'the spirit of the times'. As Ben Pimlott observes: 'biography is about character but it is not about character abstracted from that environment' ('It's All in the Life'). Oates praises Robert Ellmann's biography of Oscar Wilde for the way in which 'the story of Wilde and the history of his epoch dovetail', and Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoevsky for placing Dostoevsky 'in the social and political context of 19th-century Russia'. Oates asserts that conversely 'pathography typically focuses upon a far smaller canvas, sets its standards much lower' ('Adventures in Abandonment').

An example of what might be classed as 'pathography' is Roland Huntford's *Scott and Amundsen* (1979) which sought to debunk Robert Scott. 'If Scott received undue adulation in the past, he has now received undue abuse', wrote Chauncey Loomis in a review of Huntford's double biography ('Great Scott Debunked'). At the time of the book's release, Wayland Young, writer, politician, and son of Kathleen Scott and her second husband Baron Kennet, wrote an article in defence of both Scott's and Kathleen's reputations because he objected to the way in which Huntford had 'misused' archives to which he had given him access. By 'misuse' Young meant Huntford's deliberate omission of some material to align with his own vision of Scott, and his use of 'intuition' rather than documentary evidence to establish his account of events (29).

Young concedes that successful 'debunking biographies' can be deemed 'part of historiography' for they 'seek to set right what the biographer thinks is an error of judgement or lack of courage in earlier biographies of his subject' (20). Explorers of the 19th and 20th centuries were seen to represent the triumph of human will over nature. Their achievements were bound up in national prestige and they were so revered that they were above criticism—'to say a bad word about David Livingston after his death in 1873 was to risk horsewhipping', writes Loomis. Indeed, in *Biography: A Brief History*, Ian Hamilton acknowledges that 'the demand for patriotic, and exemplary, rather than honest, lives' in the Victorian age was partly a result of not only ‘Victorian expansionism’ but also imperialism and the pursuit of ‘imperial fame’ (111).

However, it is not criticism of Scott that Young protested so much against but the biographical approach. On the subject of debunking, Young argues that ‘since by definition it sets out to challenge accepted opinion, the debunker’s scholarship must be not only as good as that of earlier biographers, but must be above reproach’ (20). In Young’s opinion, this is not the case with Huntford’s book. The unbalanced contrast between the two men where ‘Amundsen can do no wrong and Scott no right’ renders it, according to Young, ‘intrinsically incredible’ (21). Young points out that this bias is reflected even in the index. Under ‘characteristics’, Scott is ‘allowed’ only one virtue in a long list of flaws and shortcomings while Amundsen is attributed many positive qualities and only two ‘defects’. Like Young, Loomis notes that Huntford does not treat Scott and Amundsen equally. He believes that this is because, in contrast to Huntford’s ‘detailed and balanced’ portrayal of Amundsen which ‘allows’ Amundsen ‘the dignity of not only being a great explorer but also a complex man’, he allows Scott ‘no dignity whatsoever’ (7).

Similarly, *Flaws in the Ice* by David Day attempts to revise traditional views of Douglas Mawson. Certainly Mawson has for a long time been hailed a national hero who has until now received very little criticism or question. As the sole survivor of the Far-Eastern Sledging Journey, historians and biographers have wholly relied on his account of what happened. As Hermione Lee notes, it is important to question all testimony because unless unpacked ‘truths gather weight by being repeated and can congeal into the received version of a life’ (*Biography* 9).

Day's book challenges the popular perception of Mawson as a natural leader, as a stoic, and a modest man dedicated to science. Like Huntford, who argues that Scott's poor preparation and poor leadership caused the deaths of his pole companions, Day blames Mawson for the deaths of Ninnis and Mertz. Yet, while this approach seeks the kind of truthful portrait advocated by Strachey, it can more visibly be described as the kind of biography defined by Oates with its focus on failure and dysfunction. In his preface to *Flaws in the Ice,* Day sets out his thesis:

> While most historians ascribe the deaths of the two men [Ninnis and Mertz] to bad luck, my re-examination of the existing evidence, reveals that their deaths were caused by Mawson's relative inexperience, over-weening ambition, and poor decision-making. Until now there has been little questioning of the official account that Mawson gave to explain the deaths of his companions and his own seemingly miraculous survival. This is partly because historians have been hampered by a shortage of evidence. (2)

Day's argument, however, is disingenuous. As Woolf attests, if a biographer is 'urged to invent', invariably he comes up against 'other people' who can 'check his invention' against what is already known. This is evident in reactions to *Flaws in the Ice* by Antarctic scholars who objected to the factual inaccuracies they identified in the biography and to the unfairness of Day's portrait of Mawson. Day claims that his book is based on 'new evidence' about the AAE which has been 'hidden away for the last century' (*Flaws in the Ice* 2-3). He argues that the non-publication until recently of other expedition members' own diaries and accounts.... ha[ve] obscured the serious flaws that characterised [Mawson's] ill-fated venture' (279). However, in a review of *Flaws in the Ice* called 'Debunking Mawson' in December 2013, historian Tom Griffiths points out that the diaries which Day claims have been 'hidden' until now 'have been available for decades in public libraries and archives and have been studied intensely by many people’. Griffiths attests that even the newest source, Cecil Madigan’s diary, which was published in 2012, is not new because it was accessed by biographers and historians prior to its publication and since 2000 has been ‘partly available’ in *Vivere Fortes*, a family history of the Madigan family published by Madigan’s son David. ‘There is a revealing sleight of hand here by the author’, writes Griffiths: ‘the phrase “hidden away” suggests something sinister, perhaps a conspiracy, and it is David Day who is going to bring it to light’.

In terms of his biographical practice, Griffiths argues that Day does not name other writers of Antarctic scholarship—he refers to them only as ‘other historians’, and in so doing, ‘contrives an archival silence into which his book can be seen to enter afresh and alone’. While ‘*Flaws in the Ice* claims to be a new history’, says Griffiths, ‘it does not provide a historiography by which we might judge that claim’.

In an article in *The Australian* in December 2012 entitled ‘Mawson Experts Respond to David Day’, Beau Riffenburgh, author of two biographies of Mawson, similarly argues that by not contextualising Mawson’s decisions, traits and behaviours (either historically or in the field of exploration), Day provides an ‘unfair assessment’ of Mawson, and not the ‘more complete portrait’ or ‘more balanced assessment’ he purports to be have achieved in the preface to his book. Day persistently singles Mawson out for criticism, notes Riffenburgh. He argues that Day makes the rationing of food on the Far-Eastern Sledging Journey seem ‘unique to Mawson’ although reducing rations on Antarctic expeditions was common practice when delays or slow progress meant that food had to be eked out to last the distance of the journey. Riffenburgh takes issue with Day’s assertion that Mawson was ‘inexperienced’ because it is not counterbalanced with an acknowledgment that by the time of the AAE Mawson was already known nationally as well as internationally for his role on The British

Antarctic Expedition of 1907-09. Riffenburgh points out that Mawson's previous polar experience was pivotal in attracting support for the AAE, but that this is not acknowledged in Day's book, nor the fact that no one, including Mawson, was really experienced because they were all venturing into unexplored territory ('Mawson Experts Respond to Day').

In order to verify his interpretation of Mawson, Day draws heavily from the diaries of Cecil Madigan but, argues Riffenburgh, Madigan was virtually alone in his persistent criticisms and dislike of Mawson. Riffenburgh points this out in his own book *Aurora*:

> Madigan's diaries, or his son's book based in part upon them [*Vixere Fortes* 2000], give a negative impression of Mawson and his abilities over a broad range of areas, some seemingly so out of character with all else known about the expedition leader as to be of doubtful accuracy. (352)

Riffenburgh concludes that *Flaws in the Ice* 'smacks of either a lack of knowledge about the entirety of Antarctic exploration or some negative agenda about Mawson' ('Mawson Experts Respond to Day').

In an interview with *The Advertiser* in October 2013, Day stated that he 'hadn't set out to write a negative portrayal of Mawson', and had 'originally...wanted to try and be as sympathetic as it was possible to be' but explained that 'the more I got into it, at every turn I became more and more critical of Mawson's actions, and just couldn't understand some of them' (Bogle). *Flaws in the Ice* is reflective of this change of tack. As in the Huntford biography of Scott and Shackleton, the claim that Mawson was a failure permeates *Flaws in the Ice.* It colours the whole narrative. Beginning with the book's title, it is evident even in the chapter headings. Chapter 1 is entitled 'A Cascade of Calamities'. Significantly, this is an expression borrowed from Madigan’s diary which describes Madigan’s opinion of Mawson’s leadership on the Far-Eastern Sledging Journey. It signals the main thrust of the book: a series of wrongs Day purports Mawson committed which led to the deaths of Ninnis and Mertz. Chapter 13, ‘Stumbling into History’, emphasises Mawson’s alleged incompetence and undeserved heroism.

However, as Hermione Lee warns, biographies driven by ‘punitive or revengeful motives’ can be as equally as distorting as those which glorify and idealise a life; that ‘over-involvement, either way, can be counterproductive’ (*Biography* 12-13). In an article in which he reflects on the writing of his 2011 biography of Manning Clark (*An Eye for Eternity*), and the challenges of striking a balance between involvement with and detachment from the subject, Mark McKenna advises that

> Biography is not a trial. The subject is not a felon awaiting prosecution. Nor is the exercise of judgement on a biographer’s part akin to that of a District Court Judge. In the pages of biography, final verdicts are fatal. And if anyone should be free to play judge and jury it is not the biographer but the reader. (86)

‘Final verdicts’ deny a subject complexity and depth. Like Scott in the Huntford biography who was reduced to ‘an incompetent bungler’ (Jones 201), Mawson in *Flaws in the Ice* is reduced to an incompetent egoist with dubious morals. Day ‘is so keen to find fault that we lose any sense of Mawson as a complex, conflicted human, or as a man attached to any greater purpose than self-justification and self-aggrandisement’, argues Griffiths. Yet in Day’s opinion, his reading of Mawson has redressed an imbalance in interpretations of him. He claimed in an interview that Mawson was ‘a two-dimensional character who is now a three-dimensional character’ (Darby 2013).

As Hamilton asserts, ‘since Lytton Strachey, the task of challenging myths has become a *sine qua non* of modern biography’ (83). He states that despite being aware that there can be no single or definitive version of a life, biographers acknowledge that ‘they are part of a wave of insistent attempts, highbrow *and* lowbrow, to reinterpret the past and present lives on behalf of the current generation...’ (83). Biography is an ongoing conversation between writers, readers, reviewers and critics; it is an endless game of competing truths and is indicative of the fact that interpretation is subjective, and that there are infinite combinations of granite and rainbow.

Fictional Biography: Expanding Biographical Possibilities

As discussed, biographers are often deemed to have produced a distorted or superficial portrait by violating perceived boundaries between fact and fiction, detachment and involvement. Like Woolf, contemporary life writers continue to explore, and critics and reviewers continue to debate the best and most acceptable ways of bringing out the reality of a subject, but it is clear that we are no closer to reaching common consent on this issue; it seems that we are always brought back to Woolf's assertion that 'the trouble lies with biography itself' in that 'the biographer is tied'; he or she is always answerable to the widow and the fact (*CE IV* 225; 221).

In 1927, Harold Nicholson predicted that 'the biographical form will be given to fiction, the fictional form will be given to biography' (155-156), and he suspected that in this way, it 'may well discover a new scope, an unexplored method of conveying human experience' (158). Woolf's *Orlando,* a playful biography of Vita Sackville-West in novel form, was released a year later in which the subject, Orlando, breaks free of the constraints of age and time, of gender and of perspective by living over a period of four hundred years, first as a man and then as a woman. This was followed by another experimental work in 1933: *Flush*, a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, was told from the perspective of her pet spaniel. Like some writers before and many since, Woolf discovered that in making a leap in genre, in writing biography as fiction, she could evade the perennial difficulties that faced the conventional biographer to produce something quite different with its own kind of truth.

Ina Schabert classes Woolf's *Orlando* and *Flush*, along with *I, Claudius* (1934) and *Claudius the God* (1935)*, Count Belisarius* (1938) and *Wife to Mr Milton* (1944) by Robert Graves, as the pioneering works of what she refers to as 'fictional biography' which she concedes ‘now prospers as a genre in its own right’ (‘Fictional Biography, Factual Biography and their Contaminations’ 13). Indeed there are many contemporary examples of fictionalised lives. Some, like *Flush*, explore the idea of how a life might be viewed outside of human consciousness. Another example is *Mrs Chippy’s Last Expedition* by Caroline Alexander, which traces the adventures of Mrs Chippy, the Shipwright’s cat on Shackleton’s Endurance Expedition 1914-17. As prophesied by Nicholson, such works experiment with alternative ways of accessing and depicting lives, although few are as fantastical as *Orlando*.

Fictional biography differs fundamentally from what Schabert terms factual biography’ in that it is motivated by a sense of ‘poetic truth’ as opposed to historical truth (‘Fictional’ 4). While factual biography ‘must correspond with historical knowledge’, and any claims made must be verifiable (4), in fictional biography the imagination is not subordinate to the facts; rather the facts of a life are made to operate in accordance with ‘the overall design’ of the work rather than having to align with ‘a reality of history’ (‘Fictional’ 7). This results in fiction having a liberating rather than a disabling effect on fact (Saunders 467).

Characteristics of fictional biography as identified by Schabert include attention to historical accuracy contrary to the popular conception that fidelity to the facts is exclusive to factual biography; an acknowledgement of contradictory information; the creative and figurative use of evidence to express the inner life; and the invention of scenes and episodes to elucidate the personality of the subject as conceived by the author (‘Fictional’ 6).

Schabert argues that fictional biography ‘makes up for the limitations characteristic of factual biography’ (*Quest* 48). One way it does this is by focusing on a lesser known aspect of a famous person’s life or on the life of an unknown figure. While many well-known lives are the subjects of fictional biographies, many obscure figures have also featured, such as Captain James Cook's wife Elizabeth in *Mrs Cook* by Marele Day, and the mother of Henry Lawson in *Louisa* by Brian Matthews. In fact, Schabert asserts that fictional biography 'is most successful with obscure lives' where there is less material to draw from ('Fictional' 13).

Fictional biographers are characteristically self-conscious about writing biography in the fictional mode, and they state their objectives quite explicitly. This is in contrast to factual biography where the line between fact and fiction is often unclear ('Fictional' 3). Indeed, factual biographers have attracted controversy for not delineating that border. One well-known example is Edmund Morris. By inventing a fictitious narrator named Morris, who is also a character within the story in *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, Morris merges fact and fiction so that 'a fictional conceit becomes a seamless part of the narrative' (Walter 334). However, Heather Rossiter's 2001 biography of AAE member Herbert Dyce Murphy, *Lady Spy, Gentleman Explorer*, claims to be 'all true' on the back cover. Reviewer Ian Stone argues that such an assertion is misleading because there are large sections of 'direct quotation' which he concludes 'must be simple invention'. Rossiter's narrative, he argues, is constructed 'by a series of judicious interpretations' (172). Essentially, where fact and fiction intersect is not made clear in the way that it is by fictional biographers who often signal that their work is 'an experiment in biography' or the 'imagined life' of a real person.

Fictional biographies are often both the story of a life and critiques on the theory and practice of biography. The inclusion of multiple narrators in some works unsettles the notion of the omniscient narrator in allowing for more than one point of view, as in *The Mutual Friend* by Frederick Busch, which presents the life of Charles Dickens through the voices of his wife, tour manager, house maid and mistress (Jacobs). Others take the form of the biographer or narrator's quest for the subject in order to emphasise the subjective nature of biographical information ('Fictional' 8). Examples of such works, which are also referred to as 'footsteps biographies', include *The Quest for Corvo* (1934) by AJA Symons, *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) by Julian Barnes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1985) by Richard Holmes, and *Possession: A Romance* (1990) by AS Byatt. The quest entails the biographer desiring or identifying with the subject with whom they are in pursuit, while also questioning what constitutes 'evidence', and how that evidence is gathered (Marcus 211). The use of an alternative author/narrator allows for debate about the challenges of contemporary biography, and draws attention to what Holmes describes as 'the subliminal battle of imagination between subject and biographer upon which all life-writing ultimately rests' (*Coleridge: Early Visions* xvi).

Many of these features can be seen in *Orlando* as a fictional biography of Vita Sackville-West. Firstly, it is consistent with fictional biography's 'insist[ence] on scrupulous scholarship as an essential stage of preparation' ('Fictional' 3). Many details about Vita's personality (embodied in Orlando), such as her androgyny and her promiscuity, as well as details about her heritage, are accurate. That Woolf was concerned with adhering to historical accuracy is evident in a letter to Vita Sackville-West in which she asks for information about her life: 'the whole thing has to be gone into thoroughly' (*Letters* 13 Oct. 1927), she writes. *Flush* is also founded on facts. It is largely based on correspondence between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett; Flush did exist as the Brownings' pet dog, and many of the events in the narrative, such as his kidnapping, really happened.

Also consistent with fictional biography is the imaginative use of the facts to suggest 'a truth about a real person in a more poignant way than would a factual account' ('Fictional' 6).

Although *Orlando* is playful, Woolf was ‘serious in her attempt to capture the reality of Vita Sackville-West’ (Cooley 73), and the novel is ‘essentially serious speculation about the self and how it can be known’ (81). While Woolf felt unable to resolve the dilemma of writing about Roger Fry ‘both factually and decorously’ (Cooley 79), she was completely free to write about Vita under the veil of a novel and behind the guise of a narrator/biographer, ‘neatly avoiding legal and social indictment’ (Hamilton 161).[7] ‘It’s all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind’, she wrote to Sackville-West on October 9 1927 (qtd. in De Salvo and Leaska 251).

It could be said, then, that fictional biography arises from scepticism about the capability of traditional biography to express the truth of character. Schabert argues that the emergence of fictional biography ‘proves not only that contemporary novelists strive for interpersonal knowledge, but also that they do not consider conventional biography as especially conducive to such knowledge’ (*Quest* 51). For instance, the fact that Orlando changes sex and lives through several centuries suggests that the value of a life might be measured not by its length but by its intensity. Transgressing gender points to the multiplicity of selves and challenges gendered notions of nature and character.

Orlando’s ‘biographer’, as distinct from Woolf the writer, regularly intercepts the story to speculate on the limitations of biography. Implied as male, the biographer frequently references the ‘biographical fathers’ (Cooley 73) who believed that to give ‘the greatest possible amount of information in a thoroughly business-like form’ was the biographer’s central task (qtd. in Cooley 72). Woolf makes ‘a caricature’ of Sir Sidney Lee, who succeeded her father Leslie Stephen as editor of *The National Dictionary of Biography*. ‘Character which does not translate itself into exploit is for the biographer a mere phantom’, writes Lee in his *Principles of Biography* (9). ‘Life’ according to men such as Lee ‘has nothing whatever to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking’ (*Orlando* 167) so on reaching a stage in Orlando’s life in which Orlando does not express herself through exploits, the biographer is unable to continue with the narrative; he can do nothing but sit still, blow his nose, stir the fire and wait for something to happen (167). Significantly, Orlando has become a woman by this point in the novel; as a woman she cannot be defined by her actions because traditionally she has no presence in the public sphere and is therefore an unworthy biographical subject. In this way Woolf is indirectly drawing attention to the value of women’s lives and other obscure lives, and she is raising the question of how to write such lives which calls for a different approach. In so doing she is responding to the Victorian scale of judgement exemplified in Sidney Lee’s assertion that ‘the life of a nonentity or a mediocrity, however skilfully contrived, conflicts with primary biographic principles’ (qtd. in Nicholson 146).

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[7] Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* was published in the same year as *Orlando* (1928). A British court judged Hall’s book obscene and ordered that it be destroyed. Meanwhile, ‘Orlando’s ambiguous, androgynous treatment of sexuality was reviewed entirely in terms of its charm, its wit, and its idiosyncrasy’ (Lee, *Virginia Woolf* 527).

Orlando’s biographer confronts the inevitable tension between the recital of facts and the impulse to tell a story. He tries to record the life of his subject faithfully and objectively but ‘he blatantly defies his own rules and attempts to express the “reality of character” despite himself’ (Cooley 76). He concedes that it is difficult to ascertain the truth when faced with gaps in the evidence and so points to the inevitability of interpretation and speculation. After Orlando changed sex, ‘no one has ever known exactly what took place later that night’ (*Orlando* 82) he writes, and accepts that this together with conflicting testimonies (some saw the Ambassador lock his door; others maintained that they had heard music; a washerwoman saw ‘a man’s figure’ 82) makes it ‘necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to make of use the imagination’ (75).

As Woolf contends in ‘The New Biography’, ‘it is easier’ to pursue the idea ‘that the true life of your subject shows itself in action...rather than in that inner life of thought and emotion’ which is so much more difficult to portray (*CE IV* 229-230). Orlando’s biographer, like all biographers, has difficulty resolving granite and rainbow for, as he admits, ‘thought and life are as the poles asunder’ (167). Throughout the novel the biographer is in pursuit of Orlando who, like a chameleon, changes her appearance and constantly eludes him so that he has to ‘peer and grope’ in the dimly-lit streets of London (which represent the ‘rainbow-like intangibility’ of personality), sometimes catching sight of her only to ‘again lose it’ (137). The futility of the biographical chase is referenced at the end of the novel when a wild goose flies over Orlando’s head.

Other recent works which bring the techniques of the novel to the difficult art of biography and the unknowability and multiplicity of lives are *Possession* by AS Byatt and *Flaubert’s Parrot* by Julian Barnes. Like Woolf, Byatt and Barnes reassess the status of the document in biography. As Holmes asserts, all the sources on which a biographer bases his account of a life are ‘inherently unreliable’ (qtd. in Benton 30). Stanley Weintraub notes that even when a life has been well documented, the biographer ‘has at best only a small fraction of the facts’, and those facts have already been through a selective process; they represent what the subject wanted to survive him, and what those who knew him chose to reveal (176).

In *Possession*, after finding a bundle of letters, fictional scholars Roland Michell and Maud Bailey go in search of fictional Victorian poets, Christabel LaMotte (based on Christina

Rossetti) and Randolph Henry Ash (based on Tennyson and Browning), with the aim of establishing the true nature of their relationship. The discovery of contradictory evidence points to the idea that a single version of events, a single truth, cannot be ascertained. Similarly, in *Flaubert's Parrot*, while researching the life of Gustave Flaubert, the fictional narrator Geoffrey Braithwaite comes across two stuffed parrots in different museums in Rouen both purporting to be the 'real' parrot that Flaubert had borrowed and kept on his desk while writing *Un Coeur Simple*, the inspiration for the novel's parrot Lulu. This sets Braithwaite on a journey to discover which parrot is the authentic one, and which one the 'imposter'. He asks how contradictory evidence can be reconciled: 'How do you compare two parrots, one already idealised by memory and metaphor, the other a squawking intruder?' (21). In the last chapter he discovers that the two birds he had come across could have been any two of fifty originally held at the museum at the Hôtel-Dieu.

In an interview on BBC Radio in April 2003 (*World Book Club*), Barnes admits to having 'an instinctive suspicion of biography' because 'it gives us the illusion that we are learning all the answers', and 'makes life too neat'. The parrot, or rather parrots, with their confusing provenance, and with the way in which their plumage changes colour under different lights, are symbolic of the inaccessibility of the past, which is likened to 'a slippery piglet' (*Flaubert's Parrot* 14).

In *The White* (1999) Adrian Caesar similarly speculates on the art of biography and doubts the ability of traditional biography to reveal a truthful account of a life. His book traces the last twelve days of the journeys of Scott and Mawson—Scott's on return from the South Pole in 1912, and Mawson's to his hut at Commonwealth Bay in 1913. It is an example of another common form of fictional biography in its focus on the "last days" of subjects' lives

(‘Fictional’ 8). Caesar uses the diaries of Scott and Mawson as ‘stepping stones’ to explore territory not usually covered in biographies of men where the emphasis tends to be on public achievements. Through invented scenes, dreams, memories and monologues, he imagines their psychological states and humanises them by ‘put[ting] the body back into the text’ (‘Grey Areas in the White’ 100-101).

In his essay ‘Grey Areas in “The White”’ in which he explains his reason for writing biography in the fictional mode, Caesar explains that he was ‘deliberately attempting to question and subvert the idea of authority in biographical narrative’ in order to highlight the fact that all biography is ‘imaginative interpretation’ (100). He stresses that when he came to write about Scott and Mawson in *The White*, ‘their stories were already public fictions’ (102), but he argues that conventional biographers tend not to acknowledge this. Indeed, rather than drawing attention to the subjective nature of sources, factual biographers are inclined to justify their choice of materials and their methods of research in an effort to claim authority and authenticity. This is true of many biographers of Mawson. Beau Riffenburgh argues that basing *Aurora: The Australasian Antarctic Expedition 1911-1914* on ‘primary materials and original sources’ allows for ‘an historical immediacy and authenticity that is not otherwise possible’ (2). In *Mawson: A Life* Ayres relies primarily on the diaries of Mertz and Mawson when recounting the Far-Eastern Sledging Journey because, he explains, ‘they were composed on the spot’, unlike *The Home of the Blizzard*, written after the expedition ‘with stylistic input from Dr Archie McLean who heavily worked over Mawson’s drafts’ (71). In saying this Ayres suggests that the diaries are more truthful because of their immediacy.

Caesar points out that Scott’s and Mawson’s accounts of the sledging journeys (in the absence of other accounts) have tended to be reproduced without question when in reality the diary entries are ‘deeply subjective utterances by very interested parties’ (101). He notes that Mawson describes the death of Mertz in the present tense, a narrative choice reminiscent of adventure writers who wanted to give a sense of drama and immediacy to events when in fact, Caesar surmises, it ‘seems likely’ that he wrote it later in stages (*The White* 146). In *The White* it is suggested that Scott was very aware of the power of language to determine how a life is remembered; he dreams of ‘martyrdom’ (31), and is ‘exhilarated’ (83) by the realisation that he could shape his story into one of heroic sacrifice to avoid the disgrace of failure and to absolve himself of blame: ‘Language, he was learning, could be manipulated to conceal far more than it revealed, to both make and mask, to create illusions and shield truths’ (89).

Caesar notes that descriptions of the physical hardships that the party endured are noticeably absent in Scott’s diary; he suggests that this was because Scott felt that such details would contaminate his story of heroism (‘Grey Areas’ 99). In order to expose the gap between the actual experience and the way that experience has been remembered and portrayed, Caesar vividly depicts Oates’s bleeding nose and eyes and the stench of his gangrenous feet, the raging thirst and fierce hunger that the men endured, the mind numbing cold and the inordinate time it took to write a few lines with their blackened fingers. In contrast to the ‘cheerful fortitude’ expressed in their letters and diaries, Caesar argues that the men would have been feeling depressed, irritable and anxious as a result of malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies (*The White* 64).

In response to conventional biography’s tendency to gloss over discrepancies in character as well as events, Caesar highlights the gap between the way Scott has been depicted and the kind of man he might have been. Caesar dismantles the romanticised version of Scott, which originates in Scott’s diaries and has been perpetuated in subsequent accounts of his story, by revealing his weaknesses, his fears and his insecurities; his ‘squeamishness’ about killing animals, his temper which he had difficulty controlling, his impulse to weep, his pessimism and depression, and his ‘fits of lethargy’ (*The White* 34). Importantly, Caesar does not do this to judge or to discredit Scott as Huntford’s book does, but rather to humanise him, the allowance for contradictions being a central concern of fictional biography.

Similarly, in the Mawson narrative, Caesar presents Mawson’s unemotional nature as both a strength and a weakness; it is instrumental in his survival but also prevents him from forming intimate friendships. In response to the lack of questioning around the topic of cannibalism, Caesar suggests that it is in keeping with Mawson’s character to consider it, and to also reject it. He allows Mawson to see the death of Mertz as ‘a liberation as well as a loss’; to be on the one hand horrified by his own contemplation of cannibalism, and on the other to wonder whether he had made the right decision to not use Mertz’s body as a source of food (143) .

Caesar expresses a fundamental motive of fictional biographers when he stresses that he is ‘offering critique rather than revelation’ (‘Grey Areas’ 102). Central to fictional biography is the absence of any claim to a true or single reading of a life. As Orlando’s biographer notes, ‘a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many as a thousand’ (*Orlando* 277). However, even if fictional biography offers ‘a possible, plausible version of the experience which we can never come to know’ (‘Fictional’ 13), the line between fact and fiction continues to matter. Fictional biographers are still not quite as free as novelists because their narratives are founded on real lives. According to Hermione Lee, Woolf struggled with the last chapters of *Orlando* because ‘the rival claims of satire and fantasy and personal tribute weren’t easy to resolve’

(*Virginia Woolf* 514). Marele Day, author of *Mrs Cook*, stated that she was unsure whether she would write about a real subject again because she was constantly torn between ‘faithfulness’ to her subject and the impulse to make things up. Ultimately, she felt ‘constrained by the facts’ and limited by Mrs Cook’s largely uneventful life (‘Notes for Reading’ 4, 8). It seems that all life writing, even that which prioritises fiction over fact, still confronts the inevitable tensions of granite and rainbow inherent in the genre.

‘The Many Lives of Douglas Mawson’: Challenges and Objectives

In my creative work *The Many Lives of Douglas Mawson*, like all writers of lives my main objective has been to elucidate and understand my subject—‘a biographer is like a grinder of lenses. His aim is to make us see’, wrote Leon Edel (‘Biography: A Manifesto’ 3). Yet my title reflects the futility of trying to capture a single or consistent identity and is an acknowledgment of the impossibility of ever fully knowing a person. The structure of the work, as a collection of non-fiction vignettes rather than as one continuous narrative, is integral to the idea that lives are fragmentary and elusive, mutable and multi-layered. Although I do not consider my work a novel or a work of fiction, I am aware that its approach is reflective of the central paradox in life writing—the combination of fact and creativity.

‘The Many Lives of Douglas Mawson’ also encompasses the idea that lives are not experienced in isolation but are collective and relational. If all the ‘invisible presences’ which shape a person are left out, ‘how futile life-writing becomes’, notes Virginia Woolf in *Moments of Being* (80). The title is also a reminder to myself to be open to all of Mawson’s modes of existence, for my greatest challenge has been less about negotiating with ‘the widow and the friends’, or the difficulty of how to treat facts, than the need to guard against being reverential. ‘A filial tribute’, said Quentin Bell, ‘is of all literary forms, the most difficult and the most perilous’ (qtd. in Marler 41).

The title refers as much to Mawson’s many written lives as it does to the ones that he lived. Just as he is never a fixed personality, opinions of him are not fixed either. This multiplicity of perspectives reflects the infinite ways in which the same archival material may be interpreted and reinterpreted, and the various biographical writings about him reflect his altering public and private status.

As Harold Nicholson observed, ‘no branch of literature has been more sensitive than biography to “the spirit of the age”’ (135), and my work is in part a response to and an engagement with the different ways in which Mawson has been remembered and portrayed between the extremes of hero and anti-hero. Lennard Bickel’s *This Accursed Land*, a dramatised account of the Far-Eastern Sledging Journey, came out in 1977 at a time when Mawson was relatively unknown even nationally in comparison to his polar contemporaries, Scott and Shackleton. In an afterword to *This Accursed Land*, Eric Webb ‘deplored’ the lack of recognition Mawson had received, even in Australia; ‘his epic’, he argues, was ‘a triumph of the human spirit over formidable adversity’ (205). This belief encapsulates the main purpose of Bickel’s book: to draw attention to Mawson’s heroism. Twenty years or so later, and possibly partly as a result of Bickel’s book, Mawson had become an established hero, any mortal feelings and failings having been neatly airbrushed out so that he was more or less cocooned in his mythic status. In a way Bickel had merely announced Mawson’s heroic standing because he was already being transformed into a myth long before that by those who knew him. He was described variously as ‘a Viking’ (Grenfell Price qtd. in Thompson 166); ‘a heroic Dane of old-world romance’ (‘Perils and Privations: Delicious Food Dreams’ 5); ‘a legend in his own lifetime’ (Russel 72). Mawson also contributed to his heroic image in reiterating the story of the AAE (and of the sledging journey by popular demand) in lectures and publications, and in his donations to museums and other institutions.

In 2000 Caesar brought Mawson back to earth in *The White*: he has him ‘perform a rear’, contemplate cannibalising Mertz, dream of Paquita’s ‘lissom body’ (137). In 2011 Craig Cormack wrote *In Bed with Douglas Mawson*, its title reflecting the familiar tone with which he addresses Mawson. A writer and science journalist, Cormack based his book on his own 2007 voyage to the Antarctic during which he holds imaginary conversations with the heroic age explorers (in particular with Mawson), about the decisions they made, about their scientific accomplishments, and about the Antarctic environment in the intimacy of his cabin.

As in any other case in which there have been multiple life depictions of the same subject, all works on Mawson have either filled gaps in the record or revised previous accounts. Each writer has approached him from a different angle with different motivations. Such differences are often signalled in the chosen titles and dust jackets. Beau Riffenburgh wanted to present Mawson in a broader context by focusing on the collective nature of the AAE; his 2011 book *Aurora* looks at the three AAE bases to bring out the characters and the work done over the whole expedition for the first time since the release of *The Home of the Blizzard* in 1915. The cover shows an indistinguishable group of men on the ice as opposed to a portrait of Mawson. Philip Ayres presents his life from birth to death in *Mawson: A Life*, covering his war work and his scientific career as well as his domestic life. The cover shows Mawson in a shirt and tie rather than in a balaclava to indicate this wider interpretation. *Flaws in the Ice* reflects David Day's argument that the Far-Eastern Sledging Journey was not due to accident and bad luck but the result of human error. On the dust jacket Mawson is shown sitting by himself among some rocks, extradited from the annals of polar history. Conversely, *Alone on the Ice*, a 2013 book by US writer David Roberts, depicts Mawson as an unsung hero overshadowed by men like Scott and Shackleton. While Mawson is variously celebrated, enlarged or condemned in these examples, other works have sought to shift the focus away from him to draw attention to those stories and to those people who have been obscured by his greater status: the other expedition members; the sailors on *Aurora*; the women who were left behind.

My book *An Antarctic Affair* (2008) focuses on Mawson's relationship with Paquita and the part she played in his survival. I was interested in how both she and Mawson survived the two and a half years that he was away and how this long separation and the minimal communication between them during this time shaped their partnership and the course of their lives. I wanted to consider how they dealt with absence and loneliness, and to consider what compromises and sacrifices had been made. One inspiration for this book was the chance discovery and subsequent publication in the year 2000 of the letters they wrote to each other between 1911 and 1914, which offered a new perspective on Mawson and revealed the character of Paquita whose youth, naivety, anxiety and endurance come out in the correspondence. There is no equivalent story in the lives of Mawson's Antarctic contemporaries, such as Scott, Shackleton and Amundsen.

If women are historically underrepresented in the history of life writing, they are virtually absent in the history of polar exploration. The first recorded presence of a woman in Antarctica was as late as 1935, and the literature about Antarctic expeditions has necessarily been written by men, although that is now changing with the rise of more women Antarctic historians and biographers as well as more women working in polar regions. I have always been intrigued by how much Paquita was a part of Mawson's polar world. She kept in touch with expedition members even after his death, and spoke with scientists in England on his behalf about the natural history specimens brought back. She was also his first biographer. Yet, she has been given minimal mention in works about him. For this project I saw this as both an opportunity to bring her to light and to discover lesser known aspects of Mawson.

In my creative thesis I have sought to explore Mawson in a broader context, beyond 1914, beyond his engagement to and love affair with Paquita, and beyond his work and experiences as a polar explorer to encompass his lives as an academic, scientist, conservationist, farmer, husband and father. Just as importantly, I wanted to reflect on the impact of his legacy on Paquita, as well as on their daughters Pat and Jessica and on subsequent generations of the family, because at the heart of my creative work is an investigation of the difficulty of reconciling Mawson's public and private selves. I feel at once close to and far away from him. On the one hand I see him as my great-grandfather and on the other as a national figure. I actually visualise this twofold perspective as the me who sits in one of his brown leather chairs viewing him from the inside and the me who sits in a grandstand with the general public viewing him from a distance.

From my dual position as both descendent and detached bystander, I was interested in trying to reach an understanding of Mawson by tracing the ways in which his public and private personas intersect and inform each other. For instance, when at last he sighted the sea on the final leg of the Far-eastern Sledging Journey, he said that it was like being greeted by 'an old friend'. Knowing this, it makes sense that he later chose to build his family home by the sea. In the hut he had little privacy. It is not surprising then that he wanted high windows at 'Jerbii' so that no one could 'peer in'. He was generally frugal and yet he was an extravagant shopper at the Adelaide Central Market. Such qualities seem incongruous until you consider that he almost died of starvation in the Antarctic. Viewed in this light his overspending can be interpreted as stocking up for leaner times.

I wanted to put the ordinary day-to-day Mawson up against the superhuman one to find the man who resides somewhere in between. I am fascinated by what happens when greatness is bestowed upon a person. As an action hero, Mawson is attributed with certain qualities, such as bravery, endurance, stoicism, resilience, strength and manliness. The stories that have been passed down both in the public and the private domain, serve to highlight these qualities and confirm his heroism. In a radio interview Paquita described how he once had stitches after severing his thumb and refused an anaesthetic. She said that he sat calmly throughout the operation without even flinching (qtd. in Thompson 174). In his book *South with Mawson* Charles Laseron recalls Mawson venturing into the freezing sea at Commonwealth Bay to retrieve a box of supplies that had fallen out of the launch. I wonder whether these stories were chosen, if only subconsciously, because they meet the expectations of what an explorer is like. They catch on and are repeated until Mawson is built up in such a way that he becomes a figure of myth who is perpetually involved in daring feats. It is easy to get stuck in this way of thinking about him; to forget that he was sometimes ordinary even if he did embody many of these attributes; to forget the ways in which he might not have aligned with this heroic ideal, but was a complex human being like anyone else.

So much of what Mawson did was carried out in a masculine environment: as an explorer, as a scientist, as a boy who grew up without sisters. Yet, as the father of two daughters he also lived in a feminized, domesticated world which he embraced and to which he very much belonged. He bought Pat and Jessica shoes and stockings when in England. He liked nice things in the home. He could not only cook but liked cooking and had shown an early interest in household tasks. On the one hand he wrote letters to world leaders about international affairs and on the other he wrote with equal fervour to his family about such things as the maid burning the toast and the importance of closing the henhouse gate.

His relationships with his wife and daughters reveal aspects of his personality which manifest in different ways in other contexts, and this intrigues me. For example, he showed great concern for the welfare of his family and also for his men on the AAE but while at home this concern was probably endorsed and understood as fatherly protection, it was sometimes seen as conservative and over-cautious, even overbearing, in the Antarctic. His propensity to educate his daughters translated to advice and guidance to his men which was less welcomed by some who interpreted this as meddlesome and patronising.

On a broader scale, in this project I was also interested in juxtaposing the portrayal of the AAE and the actual experience of the expedition. The men explored for the noble cause of science, for knowledge for future generations. In reality the conditions for procuring and preserving specimens were difficult and uncomfortable, and the work often mundane and not much more than basic collecting. As explorers they have always been associated with perilous outdoor pursuits when in actual fact much of their time was spent indoors doing jobs traditionally assigned to women, such as cooking, washing, and sweeping. I wanted to expose the gap between their imagined polar life as perpetually dangerous and exciting and the reality of their routine existence in the Antarctic, not in order to say that they were not heroes but to show that they were many other things too.

To allow for exploration of these tensions and connections, each chapter of my creative work is triggered by an object or set of objects associated with Mawson's private and public legacies. Like lives, things have multiple meanings which change depending on their context. There is a set of skis in the animal cabinet in the South Australian Museum which makes me think of the men on the AAE practising under Mertz's instruction; of Mertz weaving and gliding over the ice leading the dogs; and also of Paquita standing in them (or a pair like this) on a snowy slope in Iran in 1939.

While many objects, like the skis, open up multiple interpretations, others serve to obscure the private Mawson and thwart wider perception of him beyond the public legend. Hurley's iconic photograph of Mawson in a balaclava is one such example. In continuing to resurface as the definitive image, it encapsulates the persistent desire to pin down the self, and is emblematic of how 'truths' are created and perpetuated through repetition. This image is associated with the AAE and with Mawson's survival of the Far-Eastern Sledging Journey, but in fact it was taken on BANZARE when Mawson was almost fifty years old. In this sense, it is a false image. One of two photographs of Mawson on return from the Far-Eastern Sledging Journey is similarly misleading. One day when looking closely at this image Mark Pharaoh, senior collector at the South Australian Museum, realised that Mawson's head did not match his body; it had been superimposed with a photograph of his face taken at the South Magnetic Pole with Professor David and Doctor Alistair Mackay in 1909. Frank Hurley could not have taken the 1914 photograph because by the time Mawson returned to the main base, Hurley was on his way back to Australia on the *Aurora*. However, he was known for manipulating images and it is possible that Hurley altered it later; the historical importance of the image would not have escaped him. Mawson's face looks more exhausted in the 1909 photograph and Hurley (if it was he who altered it) may have wanted to use it for dramatic effect. In a review of Lincoln Hall's pictorial biography *Douglas Mawson: The Life of an Explorer* (2000) in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Fitzgerald), the reviewer commented on this particular photograph. His remark that it was 'one of the most revealing snaps...of an emaciated Mawson, who lost a third of his body weight in Antarctica' serves to exemplify how myths can be created and reinforced out of evidence without being questioned or unpacked.

The hut at Commonwealth Bay is another example of an object which stands in the way of Douglas Mawson the private man. It has come to define him and the myths associated with it are perpetuated in the continuing conservation work being carried out by the Mawson Huts Foundation. In its ongoing state of preservation, situated on a shifting continent whose future is uncertain in the face of climatic change, it stands as a metaphor for the tension between permanence and transience, and the elusive nature of life writing itself. The difficulty of accessing the hut due to its precarious position on a remote and windy section of the Antarctic coast, subject to becoming filled with ice every winter, is representative of the difficulty of accessing a life, of capturing a whole sense of a person, and the impossibility of recapturing the past.

My wish for Mawson's ghost to appear when I was there, and for him to 'tell me all the things he never said and all the things he never wrote down', cannot not be granted but it nevertheless represents my belief in the magic of being where Mawson has been. It brings me closer to him, and creates the same sense of intimacy that occurs when coming into touch with his papers and other belongings. I have traced the physical trail of his life with the idea that the material relics of his life might offer some insight into his character, some inspiration and enlightenment. Antonia Fraser calls such a practice 'optical research', which she defines as 'going to places and looking at them' (113) as opposed to spending time researching in archives (although I have done much of this too). Aside from going inside his hut at Commonwealth Bay, I have daily inhabited the spaces in which Mawson spent so much of his life and work at The University of Adelaide. More recently, I have been to his native Yorkshire. There I visited the graves of his grandparents and other family members, and just as I plucked Mawson's copy of Robert Service's *Rhymes of a Rolling Stone* from the shelves of an Adelaide bookshop quite by chance one afternoon, in Stainburn, Yorkshire, I entered the overgrown churchyard where his ancestors lie and without knowing the location of the Mawson graves, I walked straight to his paternal grandmother's grave.

During the course of writing about him, I have hoped for similar magical moments. I have returned again and again to the South Australian Museum to the Mawson exhibition like a detective convinced that I have missed a vital clue. Even though I know that lives can never be entirely understood: they are much too complex, too fragmented and too entwined for that, I sometimes wonder whether I have been waiting for a revelation, for Mawson to suddenly unravel before me. I stand perfectly still in that dimly-lit space tuning into the recorded sounds of a blizzard and the distant barking of dogs as if waiting for the 'rapture' that Virginia Woolf wrote of when she began to see what belongs with what in the 'hidden pattern' to which she believed we are all connected (*Moments of Being* 72).

The way in which the exhibition imposes a kind of superficial order on things has the same seductive power of biography, which is packaged so as to create the illusion that lives unfold under neat headings like 'school days', 'marriage', 'death'. In the museum, encased in separate cabinets, each set of artefacts is limited and defined by the surrounding glass, by the titles they are given and by their implied association with each other. The sense of order that it gives is pleasing and calming so that it is easy to half-believe that there is no such thing as the chaos of existence. Yet everywhere things resist containment. Certainly Mawson cannot be caught, labelled and sealed in a jar like the sea specimens on display because his many selves are in constant flux. He is at once all of the five men in the row of photographs that face out towards the lift where visitors emerge: he is the old one, the young one, the middle-aged one, the one with hair and the one without, the one in the suit, the one in the hat, the one in the car. I am interested in understanding how all these Mawsons intersect. Biographer Katherine Frank states that 'rather than suppress [the] plurality of selves in any human life, the biographer must trace their complicated inter-relationship' (11). This has been my main objective in writing *The Many Lives of Douglas Mawson*, even in the knowledge that complete understanding of any biographical subject is impossible, for as Justin Kaplan writes: ‘In many respects biography is a feat of illusionism’ (‘The Real Life’ 3).

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