Frank McDonough looks at the old question of whether history is made by great individuals or impersonal forces.

There is a common assumption that great individuals are the dominant influence on historical change. Most people believe history without Joan of Arc, Henry VIII, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Mussolini, Kennedy, Gorbachov and Thatcher would be dull. Of course, the cult of the personality is central to all recorded history. The Greek and Roman Empires linked their greatest periods with great leaders. Most European monarchs claimed to rule by divine right. Individual greatness was integral to the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. The stress on the power of the individual reached new levels in the 20th century, as dictatorships of the left and right elevated their leaders to god-like status. Hence, the myth of individuals rising above society to shape the course of history is pervasive and based on two assumptions. First, the actions of leaders are taken in isolation from their position within society. Second, the study of leader is justified because they did act independently of any restraints.

As has often been pointed out, however, leaders are the products of a particular society, represent powerful social groups and are subject to uncertain economic conditions. The fate of Tsar Nicholas in the 1917 Revolution, for example, was linked to Russia's abysmal display in the 'Great War'. Equally, the rise and fall of Bismarck was due to existing power brokers in the German monarchy and aristocracy. In 1917, moreover, Henry Cabot Lodge said of Woodrow Wilson: 'He does not want war, but I think he will be carried along by events'. Even Adolf Hitler once said, 'I am your leader. I must follow'.

Nevertheless, the role of individuals in history has provoked enormous debate. This has revolved around the best way to present their role within history. The Whig-Liberal tradition of the 19th century stressed great individuals shaping and moulding historical events. Hence, this 'history from above' approach viewed the role of leadership as integral to the development of British parliamentary democracy and crucial to the outbreak of wars and revolutions. After 1945, however, Marxist- and socialist-inspired historians pioneered an alternative 'history from below' approach which put emphasis on social and economic forces limiting the power of individuals. A great programme of research designed to rescue those previously 'hidden from history', including women, ethnic groups, children and the poor, began in earnest.

In turn, this led to a great debate about what history is all about. Political historians emphasized the importance of the state (although most political historians have long discarded the 'Great Man' view of history), social historians laid stress on the people and economic historians argued for economic factors to be treated as the major influence on historical development. Indeed, put three such historians in a Mini, get them talking about history and you will get three conflicting answers.

Biography as pop history

The presentation of individuals in history, therefore, is left to biographers. The public loves biographies more than any other kind of history. This fascination with biography began in the Victorian age. In those days, biographies were mostly written by people with an intimate knowledge of and respect – often love – for their subject. The result was a vision of the individual written through rose coloured spectacles. And, although Lytton Strachey led a movement towards a more critical approach to great Victorian leaders after the First World War, it was not until after the Second World War that a more scholarly and critical approach to biography took root.

However, most professional historians view biography as bad history. E.H. Carr claims a distinction should be made between a biographer, who treats a subject as an individual separate from society, and a historian, who examines individuals as part of society. Similarly, G.R. Elton, a passionate defender of the importance of political history, also views biography as poor history because it fails to examine the age in which the individual lived. More recently, J.M. Mackenzie, the noted imperial historian, claimed biographical writing ignored modern social and economic research techniques and was thus a poor training for a professional historian.

The biographer is, therefore, the best rewarded and least respected member of the historical profession. Nevertheless, many widely respected historians including A.J.P. Taylor, Ben Pimlott, Norman Gash, Alan Bullock, John Grigg, David Dilks, Alistair Horne and David Marquand have all written critically acclaimed biographies. Norman Gash puts the poor
image of the biography down to social and economic historians, who wish to exclude the role of leadership from their analytical framework. Hence Gash's view that the self-styled 'People's History' is equally narrow, often concentrating on unrepresentative groups in local areas of dubious historical significance. For example, the localized history of the Victorian Chartist Movement ignores the importance of the power of the state. Equally, economic historians make bold claims about growth and investment in the Victorian economy which are based on very limited and contradictory sources.

**Pseudo-psychology**

Nevertheless, most biographies do follow a fixed, unadventurous and predictable pattern. They start in early life, sketch out the character of their chosen subject, often from limited evidence, and use this poor psycho-analytic method to explain later actions. Thus the biographer usually starts out as a psychiatrist before, if ever, becoming a historian. In every major biography of Adolf Hitler his 'mind' and early life tower over subsequent events, even though sources relating to his early life are sketchy and contradictory. In many other biographies, childhood difficulties, relations with parents, school days and even physical characteristics are given undue importance.

**Reputable biography**

Even so, there are historical biographies which avoid this poor Freudian analysis. For example, Frank Barlow's study of Edward the Confessor, one of the last English Kings of the Anglo-Saxon period, is a superb example of a scholarly historical biography. It shows that most previous biographers of Edward were too reliant on sources written over a century after his death by pro-Norman historians keen to portray him as a Saint who favoured Norman Conquest. However, by sifting through a wide range of pre-Conquest sources, Barlow shatters this myth. The result is a biography which avoids putting Edward on the psychiatrist's couch and instead gives a calm and cautious analysis of his influence on political change. Not surprisingly, the book stimulated further historical research. The same is true of Robert Blake's widely respected biography of Disraeli. The major strengths of this book are a superb grasp of the broader political structure in which Disraeli operated, the avoidance of the pseudo-psychoanalytic method and a clear distinction between his private and public life. The result is a biography which provides an interpretation of the issues raised by Disraeli's approach to politics.

Similarly, there are several noteworthy biographical rehabilitations of historical figures with a poor image which deserve mention, including David Marquand's demolition of the Guilty Man myth of Ramsay MacDonald, David Dilks' transformation of Neville Chamberlain from political simpleton deluded by Hitler into sharp, thoughtful and well briefed politician who 'hoped for the best and prepared for the worst', and Ben Pimlott's timely and impressive rehabilitation of Harold Wilson.

**Hagiography**

On the other side, however, are endless examples of biographers being too uncritical. John Neale's biography of Queen Elizabeth I could be subtitled: Why I admire this English Queen. A.J.P. Taylor's eulogy on Lord Beaverbrook is remarkable, when compared with his cynical treatment of every other great individual he ever wrote about. The very common desire to love thy subject is also evident in John Pollock's recent hagiography of Gordon of Khartoum. This claims to seek 'The Man Behind the legend' but then skirts over Gordon's well known brutality towards his enemies, and by the same token is too sympathetic towards Gordon's fairly dodgy private life.

**Hatchetography**

This search for the 'Man Behind the Legend', however, has its downside. In recent years a sensationalist form of biography designed to debunk heroic figures, grab headlines and boost sales has become fashionable. For example, a recent biography of John F. Kennedy devoted more time to his sex life than his achievements. Similarly, three biographies on Winston Churchill turned him from Britain's War Hero and most famous dead Englishman into a political failure, an alcoholic, even a racist. Furthermore, a collection of biographical essays on 'Eminent Churchillians' mowed down (in true Strachey style) the reputations of many supporters of the Post-War consensus on the welfare state. However, this trend towards what can only be described as hatchetography produces a band-wagon effect. Even a recent biography of Gladstone by Roy Jenkins examines the Liberal Leader's fondness for prostitutes, pornography and
flagellation in blow by blow detail. No doubt we shall soon learn that Henry VIII had a gay lover, Stanley Baldwin had an affair with Gracie Fields and Cleopatra spurned Anthony because she was a lesbian.

Accordingly, the standing of biography among historians has never been lower. While other branches of history produce enlivening new research techniques using modern technology, the biography stares ostrich-like at the sand. The idea of situating biographical subjects in a broader context has been equally slow. On the other hand, there are some small flickerings of hope. Roy Foster's biography of Randolph Churchill, for example, avoids the traditional 'life being lived' approach to offer a broader picture of Churchill's approach to Victorian politics. Britain and Joseph Chamberlain by Michael Balfour is a very innovative attempt to link Chamberlain's concern for industry, empire and social reform with broader aspects of British history from 1860 to 1914. It is an interesting exercise, if only because it shows the difficulties of attaching un-due importance to any one individual. However, these few attempts to drag biography kicking and screaming into the twentieth century are but an oasis in a generally barren and uninspiring desert.

Thus biography may be good bedtime reading but it distorts the role of leading individuals by looking at their role in isolation from political structures, social forces and economic realities. The road to salvation for biographers, however, is not tabloid biography. This may attract attention to the author, ring cash tills and grab headlines, but the trivial personalized details of such biographies do little to broaden historical knowledge. Nor can biographers relapse into the safe oxygen tents of cheap Freudian analysis, hagiography or the simplistic 'Great Man' version of history. If history is to remain a living and breathing subject it must show why the past has significance in the present, beyond mere nostalgia and triviality. Therefore, just as biographers have put their subjects in a psychiatrist's chair, they too might pro6ft from similar self-analysis – if the result is a more enlightening way of presenting the role individuals play in the complex pattern of historical development.

Further Reading

- P. Honan, 'Some Problems in Biography', Victorian Studies, 1973

About the Author

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