Biography, history, agency: where have all the ‘great men’ gone?

Chloe Ward

Abstract

From the 19th century, the biography has stood at the heart of the Western historical enterprise. The ‘great men’ of history have been valorised as the sources of change in the world. Yet, biography has equally been decried as ahistorical and elitist, leading to its widespread abandonment, by the second half of the 20th century, as a means of understanding and relating historical change. In the 1970s and 1980s approaches to biography attempted to restore its sense of political purpose and its academic reputation - with mixed results. However, in the past ten years theoretical attempts to reintroduce the notion of individual agency to history, and the emergence of works that successfully navigate the boundary between history and biography, have demonstrated the latter genre’s validity as a means of historical analysis. This paper argues that these recent developments, when complemented by the historicisation of the Western biographical genre attempted here, show that the biography can make a valid contribution to the history, though not for the reasons given by both its traditional champions and its radical critics.

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Much like the extraordinary individuals traditionally claimed as its subjects, the biography in history has endured mixed fortunes. From a position of pre-eminence in historical writing in the 19th and early 20th century, the ‘great men’ of history were sidelined by the efforts of social history, which refused them their primacy as the motivators of historical change and, in so doing, repudiated
biography’s claim to be ‘real’ history. This was not the last indignity the ‘great men’ suffered: in the 1970s and 1980s post-structural theories questioned their very existence as coherent subjects of study, diminishing the possibility of their use even as solely narrative devices. Yet these same postmodern imperatives and techniques allowed feminist historians to go some way towards rehabilitating the biographical genre. However in ultimately conforming to the ‘plot’ and prerogatives of the Western biographical model, such works can still claim only limited historicity. With the development of new theoretical approaches to not only biography, but the problem of individual agency in history, along with the historicisation of biography as a Western phenomenon with its roots in 19th century conceptualisations of the individual and his worth, biography can, ultimately, be reinstated as a valuable means of historical analysis.

The historiography of biographical writing shows how academic history has understood its relationship to the individual life story and also, by extension, how historians have conceived of and responded to the notion of individual agency. The incredulity with which historians often regard biographical endeavours exposes the limits of their belief in human agency as a source of historical change. For the purposes of this article, ‘history’ refers to an admittedly conservative definition of the discipline. As we shall see this definition is by no means uncontested; similarly, biography has a diversity of purposes beyond the explanation of historical change.¹ However, taking on academic historians’ challenge on their own terms and claiming biography as a means of ‘proper’ historical analysis can, perhaps, finally rebuff the glib but persistent argument that biography’s focus on the personal precludes it from real value as historical analysis.
Accepting this limited understanding of what ‘counts’ as history effects the bifurcation of the question of the historicity of biography. In asking, *does the individual matter to history?* we ask if a focus on the individual biographical subject can be justified as anything apart from a narrative device, or a pedagogical or political statement. This leads to a second question: *does the individual matter to the past?* By establishing the latter, the former can be affirmed: if individuals did effect real historical change, then biography can make claims on history. Only lately, however, have historians come some way towards successfully doing so. By recognising how the individual’s experience and comprehension of the world informs their actions, historians have lately sought to restore the validity of the individual as a historical actor. In so doing, they have also found a justification for the use of individuals as subjects of history. This justification is not only more credible than the blasé assertions of uncompromised agency typical of much older and some contemporary political biography, as explored below. It also addresses the elisions of more recent, and at first appearances more radical, biographical traditions that in their implicit diminishment not only of the subject’s agency, but the existence of that subject itself, compromise their political claims and purposes.

In the early modern age, history was largely seen as that of the individual and his actions in the world. A materialist view of the individual in history is neatly summarised in Thomas Carlyle’s 1840 dictum: ‘Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in the world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here’. The figuring of the individual as the primary subject of historical study also derived from an idealist perspective: Hegel posited the ‘great men’ of history as agents of the *Weltgeist*, apprehending the next stage in human progress and leading the world into that future:
The great individuals of world history ... are the far-sighted ones: they have discerned what is true in their world and in their age, and have recognized the concept, the next universal to emerge.  

This is not only a claim on how the past works. It is also an implicit justification for the study of the individual as a historical subject and using him as a means of explaining events, and the essence, of his times. The western world’s philosophical individualism, and belief in the capacity for self-creation outside of contextual constraints, informed such views and laid the foundations for a continuing biographical tradition. For instance, it has been suggested that the lineage of Weberian notions of ‘charisma’ and charismatic domination finds its origins in the European poetic cult of Napoleonic genius. Nietzsche, meanwhile, among 19th century figures who venerated the heroic individual, distinguished that man from his obvious and oft-cited classical precursors with a new emphasis on his ‘aristocratic self-assertion’, as opposed to his acting out of a social role. Also for this reason, in the 19th and early 20th centuries biography was seen as a way through which the nation could understand itself and affectionately contemplate the achievements of its ‘notable’ inhabitants as exemplified, with some qualification, by the early editions of the British Dictionary of National Biography. The ‘great men’ were the rightful representatives and embodiments of the modern nations. Even the 'new biography' of the early 20th century, a movement exemplified by titles like Lytton Strachey's Eminent Victorians, while taking a decidedly less hagiographical tone, did not question its forebears assumption of the individual life’s capacity to express the principle ideals of its age. Apart from its historical explanatory purpose, we cannot forget, either, the pedagogical purposes of the 19th century biography: like the hagiographies to which this traditional
This tradition persists. Robert Rotberg’s recent defence of biography as a means of historical analysis amounts, in the end, to a defence of the methodology of the biographer as akin to that of the historian. However, just because a biographer is well-versed in historical scholarship, it does not follow that his or her biography is history. Rotberg elides the significant problems posed to biography in the 20th century through his conservative and predictable choice of subjects. He acknowledges these as ‘obvious’. For instance Cecil Rhodes, Rotberg writes, stood ‘at the center of every conceivable colonial southern African web’, making him the ideal biographical subject. Rotberg assumes acts of agency as the principal determinants of such individual’s fates, and their later consecration within the historical and biographical canon. For instance Rhodes, Rotberg writes, mobilised a ‘legion of followers’, despite having an ‘unprepossessing demeanor, a rambling manner, a high-pitched squeaky voice, and no unusual conventional intellectual abilities or attainments’. These infirmities suggest, perhaps, something outside of Rhodes himself that enabled his achievements; nonetheless Rotberg privileges Rhodes’ personal achievements ahead of structural determinants, his capacity to ‘alter destiny’ emerging as the key criterion for determining individual historical significance.

I emphasise this example because of what it reveals about the persistence of old traditions in biography and, more broadly, Western academic and narrative traditions. This persistence of the ‘heroic life’ as a narrative mode and an object of popular veneration, as exemplified by Rotberg’s writing and defence of biography may, itself, be usefully historicised. As Featherstone writes, the lionisation of history’s heroes in itself signifies the
incomplete nature of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century project to consecrate and legitimise ‘everyday life’, as attempted, for instance, by the social sciences and social historical traditions. This critique originated in Marx’s materialist inversion of Hegelian idealism which, like traditional biography, posited men as agents of historical change. However, Marx’s advocacy of the individual in history came with a crucial qualification, as expressed in \textit{The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte}:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.\textsuperscript{13}

Marxist materialism and its associated emphasis on the circumstantial determinants of individual actions proved the undoing of the ‘great men’ as viable subjects of historical study. By the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century the respective political and epistemological claims of ‘history from below’ and social history challenged the individual’s privileged position in history. As Peter Stearns writes, this loose movement of scholars was underpinned by two central premises: ‘that ordinary people not only have a history but contribute to shaping history more generally, and that a range of behaviors can be profitably explored historically beyond (though also including) the most familiar political staples’.\textsuperscript{14} Social history’s recognition of the ‘small’ men, and women, of history undermined the implicit elitism of political history, and of historical biography that valorises the individual and either severs him from his social context, or claims him as its master. Further, social history’s weighting towards a structurally deterministic outlook, or at least a focus on collective action as the underlying force of history, displaced the ‘great men’ from their position as the primary agents of historical change. Lawrence Stone, in a novel
conceptualisation, saw this as the, albeit temporary, victory of structural history, with its analytic impetus and institutional focus, over the older tradition of narrative history, which valorises ‘man not circumstances’.\textsuperscript{15} Francois Furet saw the downfall of the individual in history, similarly, as originating in academic history’s vast borrowing from social science initiated by the \textit{Annales} School, its historiographical reflection found in the demise of political history:

It is in the study of politics, of human choice, that history best expresses its capacity to create and to constitute the arena for the study of man … the price paid by history for remodelling itself on the pattern of the social sciences is that it focuses primarily on what underlies those choices, on what determines them and what makes them inevitable despite the appearance of freedom.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, the reorientation of academic history’s focus towards the institutional, social, and economic left the individual by the wayside.\textsuperscript{17} The individual came no longer to matter to the past and, therefore, not to history, either.

However social history’s early confidence in an objective and totalising understanding of the past and its inhabitants was shared by the older biographical tradition. This meant that though the individual no longer had a role to play in the creation of history he or she retained some value, as an illustration of historical processes at work, in the historian’s assured attempt at relating the past in its totality. Yet there was still worse to come for historical biography, even following this reduction of the individual to mere decoration on the superstructure of the past. The ‘linguistic turn’ in history questioned the very existence of a coherent, individual ‘self’ to exemplify and explain historical processes. The related arguments of post-structuralism, cultural history and gender history
dissolved this idea of a unitary ‘self’, unchanging through time and unaffected by the perceptions of others. It became impossible, as traditional, specifically political, biography would have it, for the historian to ‘order an individual’s life with an origin, logic, purpose, and outcome, and with a single, objective identity that can be narrated chronologically’. Similarly the post-structural assault on the historian’s capacity to understand the material reality inhabited by the individual agent rendered his or her historical context itself an invention. The twin effect of the dissolution of the individual personality, and the denial of his or her knowable and communicable material context, was to make the individual historical actor at best the product of naïve imagination, at worst of narrow bourgeois individualism.

However the post-structural criticism of historians’ assumptions about material reality enabled the emerging disciplines of women’s and gender studies to stake their claim on the biographical field and partially rehabilitate the study of the individual as an academic pursuit. Scholars came to focus on how individuals experienced their historical worlds, rather than how they constituted them. Feminist scholars’ acknowledgement of a lack of ‘fixity’ of self in the past led to new emphasis on the performative aspects of individual identity, now seen as salient, not suspect, because analysis of the ‘performance’ of identity could reveal its historical, contextual determinants. To this end, it sought both to illuminate the personal and subjective in history, and show how individuals can be re-inserted into general histories, because, for example, women’s experience could be seen as ‘prisms for observing shifts in the gendering of their worlds’. Here, it should also be noted that this new biography is but a part of the broader feminist biographical ‘movement’, and that their respective methodologies and epistemological assumptions are not, necessarily, one and the same – for instance, the new biography’s
focus on the discursive is shared, but not so strongly emphasised, by other feminist biography that owes a greater, acknowledged debt to social history; and vice versa. Nonetheless, in each taking ‘gender’ as their means of analysis, and gender politics as the purpose of their historical explanation, these two different but not mutually exclusive movements often intersect and, thus, can be discussed together. To that end the intellectual scaffolding on which feminist biography, in all its forms, rests its claims on historicity is not so convincing. While its interrogation of the individual, to provide a means of observing historical change proved valuable, feminist biography is not so effective in re-establishing the importance of the individual actor to the past; that is it say, it makes little concrete, convincing claim on individual agency and its effectiveness in generating historical change.

In this respect much the same arguments that undermined old-fashioned political biography, most successfully by social historians, can be marshalled here against feminist biography. In her historiographical review of contemporary work on individual women’s lives, Susan Ware cedes ground to the contextual determinants of individual behaviour, positing her biographical subject as ‘a window on a wider vista’. Yet one must also ask if the historian is attempting to explain broader historical processes, changes and continuities, why then use the cipher of the individual life and risk distorting that broader historical picture with the undue privileging of the individual agent? For narrative purposes, perhaps; more cynically, the abiding commercial and popular interest in the life and times of the great or the iconoclastic may account for this. Ware concedes this point. She argues biography is history when the two intersect. Biography, however, enhances history by reaching for a broad, non-scholarly audience. Ware, as others have done, criticises the ‘narrow vision’ of history. However, her and others’ attempts to reach beyond the parameters
of traditional academic history in no way accounts for history’s traditional criteria, narrow as they are. In the end it provides no satisfactory defence of material individual agency in the past, and therefore no defence of biography as a means of explaining historical change. Feminist biography’s political purpose, closely aligned with the emergence of social history and women’s history, is to establish that women’s lives are ‘no less historically important than men’s’. Yet its attention to the individual life seems at odds with the social history tradition it claims as its forebear, which looked to the lives, not the life, of the makers of history. The liberating potential of social history is not realised by biography that insistently positions its subject at the centre of the historical narrative. Without justifying that person’s singular importance to a social narrative of such a history, such biographies invite the accusation of historical distortion. In this respect, political biographers like Rotberg are not the only inheritors of the 19th century tradition. Feminist biography, like the post-modernism in which it finds its roots, is complicit in this failure to truly democratise the life story. This complicity may account for the discrepancy between the democratic goals of the social history to which feminist history and biography owes a debt, and feminist biography’s own limited achievements. Its attribution of individual will and power to the previously unseen ‘makers’ of history, ultimately conforms to the heroic, inherently ‘masculine’ plot of individual triumph over the banality of everyday circumstances. Feminist biography, rather than fulfilling the promise of a more democratic understanding of the course of individual and collective lives, in attempting to overturn the ‘male’ plot ultimately conforms to its norms and standards, and in so doing posits a vision of biography as history that is neither as radical, nor as convincing, as it first appears.
Post-structuralism moved the debate about the individual beyond the question of the material determinants of his or her personality and actions. ‘Discourse’ emerged as the key to understanding people and their behaviours. The most extreme arguments claimed the individual ‘self’ to be constituted by discourse alone. The discursive inflections of the new biography, that emphasises how the individual life, and personality, ‘can be altered to suit the times, the setting, and/or the demands of a particular audience’, nonetheless show the human subject to be beholden either to its material circumstance or its cultural moment, at best an attenuated claim on individual agency with serious academic and political implications.

Ultimately, the new biography does not satisfactorily answer the implicit charge of its subjects’ passivity. Grounded in the understanding of the individual’s ‘performance’ as a response to cultural and social determinants, it can make at best a limited claim on historical agency. For instance, in positing Marilyn Monroe as an exemplar of such a post-structural ‘variegated’ identity, though one, in this case, at least in part of her own making, Lois Banner emphasises Monroe’s active role in the creation of major tropes of 1950s celebrity and femininity. This goes some way towards re-establishing agency in the manufacture of discourse. It does not, however, fully establish the material significance of the historical actor. In such a biographical treatment Monroe emerges, first and foremost, as the representative of history, not history’s maker. As Banner herself states, her interest is in subjects who ‘articulated cultural understandings, rather than individuals who followed or contested them’. This is not to disavow the importance of discursive analyses, or those that have looked to the ‘experience’ of history: these yield important insights about the past. However, not addressing the materiality of the past could potentially limit even the pedagogical usefulness of the work of historians like Banner.
Banner’s avowed purpose in writing biography is therapeutic as it is historical. Banner argues that empathy for the historical subject encourages her students to reflect on their own lives, and their own identities.26 It should be noted that in this respect her goal is not so dissimilar from the aims of the 19th century biographer who pursued a morally instructive purpose in biography; a purpose, historians may reasonably argue, inimical to true historical scholarship. More importantly, in saying that a subject, if she exists at all, has discursive implications alone gives an attenuated vision of human agency that could prove, if not counter-productive, then politically less than inspiring to those seeking to connect to and alter their material worlds.

Yet while biographers like Rotberg assume men to be masters of their own fate and reputations, others have adopted a far more reflexive practise in the analysis of ‘great lives’. These programmes of rigorous contextualisation of the individual in history yield insights that may apply more broadly to biographical endeavours. Lucy Riall and Ian Kershaw each respectively look to the production of the subject’s reputation, both in his or her lifetime, and after as the key to revealing the social processes that produce the ‘great’ individuals of history and, in doing so, work to legitimise the biographical genre as historical, revealing as it is about the historical events and circumstances signified and encapsulated by their subjects’ reputations. In her biography of Giuseppe Garibaldi, Riall positions the idea of his ‘greatness’ at the centre of her analysis. In so doing, she examines how contemporary and historical perceptions and representations of Garibaldi as one of the ‘great men’ of history came as a result both of structural determinants (for instance, changes in technology and demography) and the contrivances of Italian liberals and Garibaldi himself.27 Kershaw, from a position of outright scepticism of the idea of ‘greatness’, similarly and expansively examined the dialectical
relationship between the historical actor, and historical context, to reveal not only the discursive ‘meanings’ of the individual, but how these meanings effect real, material change. Introducing his two-volume biography of Adolf Hitler, Kershaw lays bare the problems of reckoning with the individual’s role in historical events. Kershaw’s *Hitler* provides a particularly salient example of how the individual can matter in history, because Kershaw’s biography stands at odds both with a historiographical tradition that has seen Hitler as either an exemplar of the ‘great man’, for better or worse, and one that has viewed him as the product of depersonalised historical processes. Kershaw denies the simplicity of an intentionalist view of Hitler as the sole agent of the Third Reich and its crimes, with its commensurate mystification of the role of German society in bringing him to power. More critically perceptive than a highly personalised history of Hitler is one that shows the ways in which political, social and cultural discourse contributed to ‘the making of Hitler’. Yet Kershaw does not refuse Hitler his historical particularity, and his personal role in the making of the Nazi epoch. He refutes blinkered structural determinism by posing several counterfactuals, hypothetically removing Hitler from his instrumental position within the Nazi Party, to conclude that ‘whatever the external circumstances and impersonal determinants, Hitler was not interchangeable’. The meeting of Adolf Hitler and a set of political, social, cultural, and economic conditions, although the latter structural determinants, Kershaw asserts, were more important than the man himself, produced both Hitler’s public character (the *Führer*) and in so doing created the historically particular conditions that determined the nature, and the course, of the Third Reich.

The interrogation of history’s ‘great men’ has had its effect. They have been convincingly contextualised as actors on a stage not entirely of their own making. Their historical reputation
justifies their biographical interrogation and their historicisation. It is against their reputations as ‘great men’ that their biographers position these subjects, and the production of their reputation is then shown to have real historical effects. What, then, for the ‘smaller’ players on the historical stage? Rotberg, like his forebears in political biography, has little time for the passive experience of history. As suggested earlier, the new biographers and feminist biographers pay that experience its due, but at the cost of that experience becoming history’s exemplar, not history itself. Without establishing the significance of the individual as an actor in the past, for these individuals there seems no way of justifying their biographical treatment without inviting the latter accusation. For instance, Rotberg’s dismissal of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s biographical treatment of the American midwife Martha Ballard as ‘ahistorical’ can, and has been, answered by the expansion of history’s parameters. 30 However to answer the problem in Rotberg’s own terms could definitively close the door on such implicitly elitist position on who ‘matters’ in history.

In a critical comment on Geoff Eley’s *A Crooked Line*, which sought a renegotiation of the relationship between the apparently dichotomous social and cultural methodologies of history, Gabrielle Spiegel offers a new direction, or an identification of a new direction already being pursued by historians, that could reintroduce the individual as an effective agent in history. Tentatively labelling this approach ‘neo-phenomenological’, Spiegel asserts that this new history would neither deny the individual’s role in the past, as in social history, nor disperse it, as post-structuralism and cultural history might do. Nonetheless she builds on the insights of both these movements to effectively reconceptualise individuals as historically important. Spiegel would see historians reinsert ‘the agent as an effective social actor … by highlighting the disjunction between culturally
given meanings and the individual uses of them in contingent, historically conditioned ways’. As such, Spiegel’s prescription moves beyond both the standard Marxian, materialist position and post-structural approaches that claim discourse as constitutive of the subject to place that subject as, if not the origin of historical change. Grounded in ‘a belief in individual perception as the agent’s own source of knowledge about, and action in, the world – a perception mediated and perhaps constrained but not wholly controlled by the cultural scaffolding or conceptual schemes within which it takes place’, the subject, by Spiegel’s reading, is not merely the vessel through which material and discursive forces act. As a distinct and irreducible character, the subject is empowered to, itself, work through these forces. Such recognition of the individual as an effective actor in the past, in its turn, could re-establish the individual as a legitimate historical actor and a legitimate subject of history. This, however, does not amount to a demand for a return to old-style biography that sees the individual as either a principle motivator of historical change, or as having a merely metonymic value as expressing the character of his or her age. Rather, it proposes that the biographical approach to history should study the individual with reference to his or her social determinants, and his or her responses to society, in order to show the nexus between that person and his or her social context. This approach emphasises the subject’s experience of history, however, goes a step further in claiming how experience can inform the individual’s shaping of his or her future; that is to say, our past.

Here we see the most concrete justification for the use of the individual life as a means of historical analysis beyond a narrative device. It is in this spirit that academic biography has enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent years. Contributors to the American History Review’s June 2009 discussion of biography wrote about a variety of projects to which a biographical approach
has proved fruitful, showing the newfound confidence of biographers in claiming their work as ‘real’ history. David Nasaw in his introduction stakes a new claim for the biographical genre. Nasaw readily cedes narrative and epistemological ground to the, mostly literary, critics of the historian-as-biographer, who accuse the historian of a failure to centre the individual subject. This, however, is not a failure; instead, Nasaw writes, ‘historians are not interested in simply charting the course of individual lives, but in examining those lives in dialectical relationship to the multiple social, political, and cultural worlds they inhabit and give meaning to’.

In this way the individual is not used merely as a representative of his or her epoch, but identified as existing in a symbiotic relationship with his or her historical context, each effecting to generate the other. This model of ‘symbiosis’ might risk a simplistic and evasive generalisation of complex processes. However, Spiegel’s prescription presents a challenge of research to which the historian is particularly well suited. Precisely because of the general nature of Spiegel’s neo-phenomenological model the historian must pay close and rigorous attention to the specific and irreducible conditions of individual lives, allowing for their proper and convincing historical interpretation.

However, while Spiegel’s conceptual reorientation of individual agency provides the backbone to future pursuits of the biographical subject, a number of historians have developed the methodological muscle necessary to proving biography’s worth as ‘real’ history. Alice-Kessler Harris, in her work on the American playwright and activist Lillian Hellman demonstrates, in practice, a keen awareness of the agent’s crucial role in determining the historical trajectory of a given period. Kessler-Harris positions Hellman within a set of material and discursive circumstances. Yet even Kessler-Harris’ choice of words says a great deal about the active role Hellman took in her own life course, and the broader
world around her. Hellman, Kessler-Harris writes, engaged in ‘contests’ with her social and political context, entering into a ‘dialogue’ with 1950s America. In positioning her subject thus, Kessler-Harris posits Hellman as neither unduly heroic, nor as merely a viewpoint from which to look at impersonal historical change. In the end, Hellman provides a narrative device, but not unjustifiably, because her job is not just to ‘narrate’ historical processes; she is an actor in the drama of her life, and cannot be reduced to a function of either social processes or discourses of identity. The dichotomy, for instance, of Hellman’s achievements and the personal respect she commanded against her public infamy speaks to the ‘social meaning of a woman’s success story’, yet this ‘social meaning’ is derived not only from outside perceptions of Hellman, but the action Hellman takes in her own life-course, often against the dominant discourses and circumstances of her age. What Kessler-Harris calls a ‘grandiose’ statement is most interesting, but it should also be noted for its modesty:

I think an individual life might help us to see not only into particular events but into the larger social and cultural and even political processes of a moment in time. (emphasis added)

In the end, the modesty of such claims in biography may be key to its flourishing as ‘real’ history. The centring of the individual subject, ahead of the collective, or structural, account of historical change, need not unduly prejudice history if it is balanced against other accounts of individual’s ‘neo-phenomenological’ responses and contributions to historical processes. In the same edition of the AHR, Jochen Hellbeck traces the contours of the Soviet autobiographical genre, wherein individuals were encouraged to write of their experience of the Marxist unfolding of history. Ironically these individual writers often revealed themselves not as mere subjects of that process, but in seizing control of their
experience and narration of history, staked a claim in the future, too. The commitment to tracing one’s life’s progress towards its teleological endpoint served to fill the Soviet citizens’ lives ‘with orientation, purpose, and power’. In this case, their claims on human agency in fact constituted enactments of that agency. Hellbeck identifies a whole other historical lineage to the Soviet biography, which, in its emphasis on the collective experience as giving rise to that of the individual, and the need to assess history in terms of its collected parts, emerges as a counterpoint to the Western tradition that claims ‘individualism as its central ideological and animating force’. This individualism was the origin of modern biography and, looking back, even the most radical attempts to revolutionise the genre framed themselves in this same mode, prizes individual self-creation as the key qualification for biographical treatment. A more committedly ‘collectivist’ approach to life-writing may lead biography, at last, away from epistemological and narrative imperatives of the Western 19th century tradition; the imperative by which even its opponents have defined the value of their interventions in the genre.

It is, in the end, possible to historicise the Western biographical ideal, as has been done here. The prerogatives of such biography have, however, lately found themselves out of step with the relentless charge towards recognition of broader processes, the significance of collective action, and the dubiousness of the possibility of a single, unitary human subject in the past and in biography. This problem cannot be resolved without the reconceptualisation of biography’s narrative mode, and its political and epistemological foundations and intentions. The individual cannot be erased from history altogether; Rotberg has a point when he writes that ‘individuals pull the levers of structure and act within or against cultural norms’. However agency should not and cannot be assumed and the demands of narrative do not justify the
centring of the individual at the expense of his or her broader historical context. Between them the ‘collectivist’ approach of Soviet biography, the insights of Spiegel’s neo-phenomenological approach, and the work of historians like Kessler-Harris in balancing the individual against his or her context in a dialectical relationship, may well provide the best way of negotiating the biography/history nexus. At extremes, this means the biographer of the famed individuals of history must be alive to the forces that produced their reputations, while for those pursuing the obscure biographical subject, close attention must be paid to the acts of agency through which they contributed to the making of the past. For the historian-biographer, understanding of the individual comes from understanding his or her contextual determinants and vice versa; the individual need not be either history’s passive observer nor its master. The individual matters in the past, because individual behaviour, derived from an individual’s apprehension of and immersion in the world, contributes to the changing shape of his or her society. This dialectical relationship between agent and structure demands and deserves untangling in academic history. One means of achieving this may well be biographical.

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About the Author

Chloe Ward completed her Honours Degree in History at Flinders University in 2012, with First Class Honours and a University Medal. Her main interests are gender history, social history and cultural history. She has a strong research focus on 20th century Britain, particularly in the 1930s through to the Second World War and towards the establishment of the welfare state.
2 By and large, these subjects were men.
23 Ware, ‘Writing Women’s Lives’, p. 415.
30 Rotberg, ‘Biography and Historiography’, p. 319. *A Midwife’s Tale* won the *Pulitzer Prize*, the *Bancroft Prize*, the John S. Dunning Prize, the Joan Kelly Memorial Prize in Women’s History, the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians Book Prize, the Society for Historians of the Early Republic Book Prize, the William Henry Welch Medal of the American Association for the History of Medicine, and the New England Historical Association Award.
34 Kessler-Harris, ‘Why Biography?’, p. 626.