THEORY, METHOD AND BRITISH POLITICAL ‘LIFE HISTORY’*

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Abstract

The British tradition of political life history has six conventions: ‘tombstone’ biography, separation of public and private lives, life without theory, objective evidence and facts, character, and storytelling. I describe each in turn and review the main debates in the tradition before turning to the swingeing critique by ‘the interpretive turn’. Postmodernism deconstructed grand narratives by pronouncing the death of the subject and the death of the author. I outline an interpretive approach that reclaims life history by focusing on the idea of ‘situated agency’: that is, on the webs of significance that people spin for themselves against the backcloth of their inherited beliefs and practices. I explore, with examples, the implications of this approach for writing life history, stressing the different uses for biography open to political scientists. I end with some brief thoughts on why the British tradition of political life history has proved resistant to change.

Biography

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Key words

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so I never know who I am
nor how many I am or will be (Neruda 2003, p. 475).

Introduction

‘Life history’ refers to auto/biography and the collection and use of personal documents - memoir, diary, oral history, and other personal documents and stories— to write ‘a life’ (Denzin 1989, chapter 2; Roberts 2002, chapter 3). Every bookshop will have shelves curving under the weighty tomes about sports stars and other celebrities. Ghost-written autobiographies abound. Hagiographies are equalled by the exposés of sexual peccadilloes, financial misdoings, and criminal activity. No one could possibly say anything sensible about the many manifestations of life histories in one short article. So, I must be specific. I am talking about British political ‘life history’. Life histories come in many forms. For example, Smith (1994, p. 292) provides a typology ranking biographies on their ‘objectivity’. The scale moves from objective and scholarly-historical, to artistic-scholarly, narrative, and fictional biographies. My main concern is with ‘highbrow’ or scholarly life histories, although some ‘low-brow’ or popular life histories can command attention for the quality of their investigative journalism and their insights.¹ Finally, I focus on the contribution of political scientists, not historians or other scholars in the humanities. I seek to identify what political scientist can bring to the study of life history, although I think we have much to learn from genre blurring with our sister disciplines. For Marquand (2009, p. 187), political scientists who write life histories are a ‘minority species’ and the most academic life histories are by historians. However, if we include the range of life writing (Richards and Mather 2010), there is much to consider.

The British tradition

As Pimlott (1994, p. 150) observes, there is a British tradition of political biography, which extends to all forms of life history by and about the British political and administrative elites.² It operates in a ‘straitjacket of unspoken, unwritten convention’. I have boiled these commentaries down into six conventions and their associated debates: ‘tombstone’ biography, separation of public and the private lives, life without theory, objective evidence and facts, character, and storytelling.³

Tombstone biography

Given that most of the following remarks are critical, I must say loud and clear that the British tradition has produced some accomplished life histories. Pimlott (1992) on Harold Wilson, Skidelsky (1983, 1992 and 2000) on John Maynard Keynes and Bernard Crick (1989) on George Orwell, to name but three, are major works of scholarship, distinguished by their command of sources, insights, and quality of writing. Nonetheless, the tradition retains nineteenth century characteristics and Marquand’s (2009, p. 189) appellation ‘tombstone biography’ remains apt. Much biography commemorates the lives of the great and the good. As Blake (1988, p. 81) would have it, ‘the social historian is concerned with the “common man”. The biographer is not’. It would seem that Strachey’s (1989 [1918]) urgings to replace hagiography with psychological insight, scepticism and attacks on subjects from unexpected places were heeded only in part:

A tradition in which, partly out of admiration, partly because of familial pressure or authorial gratitude, but mainly out of an ingrained centuries-old habit of mind, biographers take it for granted that their task is to portray their subject as more worthy than she or he might otherwise be thought to be (Pimlott 1994, p. 157).

So, 'although the nineteenth century hagiographical tradition was dented ... it survives implicitly ... in many, if not the majority of works' (Pimlott 1999, p. 38).

To compound the problems of these 'valets to the famous' (Pimlott 1994, p. 159), the genre is not proper history. It succumbs to one of two temptations; it presents their subject either as extraordinary or as representative of the government of the day. It instructs and entertains but it does not provide 'a proper understanding of evolving political institutions and processes, and an appreciation of the lasting achievements of significant individuals operating within those systems' (O'Brien 1996, p. 61). Needless to add, writers of life histories demur.⁴

Separating public and private

A corollary of tombstone biography, especially political life histories (Evan 1999, p. 20), is the strict separation of the public and the private lives. Pimlott (1994, p. 154) claims, 'what we have today is a new species: the warts-and-all hagiography'. So, the private life with all its warts is on public display, but all is not as it would seem. The warts are 'redefined as engaging quirks or even as beauty spots'. As a result:

most modern biographies, for all their revelations of promiscuity and personal disorder, have barely departed from the Victorian, and medieval, tradition of praising famous men. ... [Much] of the old masonry remains intact. Nowhere is this more true than in the comparative backwater of political biography (Pimlott 1994, p. 154).

Indeed, Marquand (2009, p. 193) wonders whether the 'kiss and tell' parts of life histories add anything other than a little gaiety for the reader. There is nothing wrong with a little gaiety but, more important, there are links between the private life and political action and too often biographers fail to explore them. As Evan (1999, p. 21) observes, Harold Macmillan

never referred to his wife's lifelong affair with Robert Boothby, and his biographer, Alastair Horne (1988 and 1989), failed:

to connect this silence with Macmillan's behaviour in the Profumo scandal of 1963.

Faced with the possibility of a sexual scandal in which national security interests were involved, and the consequent need to investigate personal and sexual relationships, Macmillan simply refused to act.

In a similar vein, Pimlott (1994, p. 156) observes that Phillip Williams' (1979) life history of Hugh Gaitskell casts a 'discrete veil over Gaitskell's private life', omitting, for example, his affair with the socialite Anne Fleming, the wife of James Bond's creator, Ian Fleming. She had previously been married to Esmond Harmsworth, 2nd Viscount Rothermere, press magnate and proprietor of the *Daily Mail*. Whether the leader of the Labour Party mixing in High Tory circles was of no political importance is a matter of opinion.⁵

Life without theory

Political biographers are a minority species not just because there are relatively few practitioners but because the enterprise lacks standing; 'real intellectuals do not do political biography' (Bolton 2006, p. 1). In particular, they seem to take pride in the fact that life history is 'life without theory' (Marquand 2009, pp. 189-91). Of course, the British tradition is a body of theoretical assumptions about the nature of the real world and how we know what we know about it. Of its several theoretical assumptions, its modernist-empiricist belief in the objective, or natural history, approach is the most pernicious because it assumes the various documents and records about the person are in some sense 'objective', when they are social constructions; that is, texts which create their version of the subject (Roberts 2002, pp. 37-46).

There can be no life without theory even though the theory is mainly implicit. But it is accurate to claim that the British tradition does not often engage with the theoretical debates that concern biographers working in other disciplines. Thus, Roberts (2002, chapter 2) on the 'Uses of biographical research' has *nothing* on politics or political science, yet it is an interdisciplinary text. There are only a few brief passing references to any political life histories (Roberts 2002, pp. 63-4). Perhaps political scientists cannot be expected to wander in literary fields but history and sociology are closely related disciplines from which Roberts draws many examples.

With rare exceptions,⁶ British political scientists who write life histories do not reflect on the biographical method or other forms of life history, nor do they engage with methodological debates elsewhere in the social and human sciences. In Blake's (1988, p. 75) opinion, 'one might write better biographies by not thinking too much or too self-consciously about the correct way of doing it'. Skidelsky (1988, p. 14) observes:

Biographers write biography; they rarely spend much time thinking about how they ought to be writing it – at least not in this country. We have produced great biographers; but no important theorists of biography.

Similarly, Pimlott (1999, p. 31; 1994, pp. 149-50) concludes:

the genre itself receives scant attention, and when it does crop up discussion normally focuses on the lives of literary figures ... political or historical biography gets short shrift.

So leading biographers agree 'scant attention' is paid to the theory and methods of political life history and the little that exists commonly takes the form of reflections on 'how I did it' (Morgan, 1988; Pimlott 1996).

Objective evidence

Modern life history is praised for its research; for its objective evidence and facts, indeed, some life histories resemble nothing more than encyclopaedias. For example, Marquand's (2009) account of 'a new golden age' in 'academic biography' lauds the attention to factual detail and exhaustive archival research (see also Pimlott, 1994, p. 151). It lies at the heart of Nicholson's (1927, p. 142) 'scientific biography'.

When political scientists discuss political life history as a method, they focus on its usefulness as evidence and on whether it meets political science's standards of reliability, validity, accuracy, objectivity. Assessments of the value of life histories as evidence stress its limits. Gamble (1994) assessed the evidential value of a batch of political memoirs under three headings; the ethos and style of the government, the political arguments and doctrines of the political parties, and understanding policy formulation and implementation. Most were deemed poor sources and seen as 'self-serving, bland and highly selective' (Gamble 1994, p. 35), providing neither new and interesting data, nor insights on the politics and government of the times. However, a few were valuable under one or other heading and political scientists were enjoined to look at the contrasting accounts of key policy decision. Overall, although there are many ministerial biographies, autobiographies, memoirs and diaries, 'few are much use to the student of Whitehall' (James 1999, p. 252; and see Richards and Mather 2010 for a listing between 1964 and 2008). While diaries are seen as providing better evidence than the memoirs because of their immediacy - they are not retrospective reconstructions - nonetheless their accuracy and interpretations are much debated. Similarly, oral history is seen as unreliable because interviewees are self-serving and, consciously and unconsciously, construct 'official' images of themselves and their organizations. Comparing interviews leads to irreconcilable contradictions and there are often no written records to cross-check their

accuracy. The veracity of interviews is also undermined when they are not attributed. In short, political scientists advise, ‘buyers beware’.

Finally, life histories are seen as incompatible with modernist-empiricist political science.⁷ It is seen as old-fashioned narrative, which is:

“less academic”, overly subjective, and too partial. It does appear ‘explanatory’ in orientation or theoretical in approach; it does not articulate a rigorous methodology shared by like-minded scholars (Arklay et al 2006, Preface).

Life history does not permit either hypothesis testing or generalizations; there are no, ‘guidelines by which to abstract from reality the "critical" elements which would provide the material for comparisons on a large scale’ (Blondel 1981, p. 67; Roberts 2002, pp. 6-13).⁸ As Marquand (2009, p. 188) concedes, the discipline of political science makes little use of life history and ‘political scientist biographers have rarely tried to apply insights gained from their academic study of politics to their biographical writing’. The key question is what is the use of life history in political science? Is it the traditional biographer’s aim of a chronological history with narrative drive that uncovers the character of its subject? Or is it the historian’s aim of a better understanding of evolving political institutions and processes. Or, is it the political scientist’s aim of answering some broader disciplinary question about (say) leadership. Clearly, the question of whether modernist-empiricist criteria provide an appropriate yardstick for life history research depends on the answer to a prior question about the uses of biography? I return to the question of the uses of life history and life writing below.

Character

If Strachey (1989) gave us irreverence about the Victorian greats, Freud also shaped the modernisation of life history in the twentieth century:

The growing impact of psychological and psychoanalytic theories on literary creation and criticism clearly played a central role in shaping the ‘new biography’ and its emphases on identity rather than event or action (Marcus 2002, pp. 203, 205).

With rare exceptions this trend did not encompass the full-blown use of psychoanalytic theories.⁹ Rather it led to an interest in revealing the *character* of the subject; in providing an interpretation of an individual.

‘The aim should be to understand an individual life, the forces that shape it and the motives that drive it, in the context in which it is placed (Pimlott 1984, p. 157).

The aim of finding the subject’s ‘true character’ is a common aspiration among writers of life history. Edel’s *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica* (1984, pp. 142-58) remains a landmark conspectus of the field and at its heart is the task of probing into the subject’s mind by using insights drawn from psychoanalytic theory. This search for the subject’s character is an anathema to Crick (1980, pp. xxiii-xxv) who deems it the ‘empathetic fallacy’. He argues that ‘human identity consists in relationships, not in inwardness’ and the biographer is not able ‘to enter into another person’s mind’. His preference is to observe behaviour, especially Orwell’s occupations, report the views of others, and admit the several different views of a life. This debate on whether to focus on character or the public life, on the empathetic or reflexive biographer, encouraged biographers to look at different narrative forms. They began to deploy the arts of rhetoric and persuasion, and look to writers of fiction for inspiration:

Although the biographers ... seldom explicitly abandon the genre's claims to be an investigative historical enterprise founded on evidence, they implicitly accept that biography is mainly a form of storytelling, a literary form which is generically as close to the novel as it is to history. Confident too that it is not just the boundary between fiction and non-fiction which has become less clear as a result of advances in critical understanding of the nature of texts, but the whole notion of a biographical fact, some biographers try deliberately to free themselves from the tyranny of the documentary record (St Clair 2002, p. 222; see also Roberts 2002).

Storytelling

Storytelling is 'the one consistent convention of biography' (Pimlott 1994, p. 152). 'The biographer is, first of all, a writer and must have the ability to tell a story' (Thwaite 1988, p. 17). For Nicolson (1927, pp. 142-3), biographers face a dual demand:

To meet the interests of "scientific biography" he (*sic*) has to accumulate a vast amount of authentic material; to meet the current desire for "literary" biography he has to produce this material in synthetic form. A synthesis, however, requires a thesis, a motive, or, to say the least, a point of view. ... The problem which the biographer ... has to solve is therefore that of combining the maximum of scientific material with the perfection of literary form.

This storytelling resembles nothing more than a detective novel. There is a plot in which the author reveals the truth about the subject at the end (Marcus 2002, p. 211). Timeworn chronology is the dominant narrating device with little recognition of how it can distort analysis (Evan 1999, p. 135). For Pimlott (1999, p. 38), the storylines are 'sated with sermonising' with the authors acting as 'literary nannies' making moral judgements (Pimlott 1994, p. 152). Political biographers seek to understand; they also apportion blame.

If good biographies are like novels in that they practice the arts of storytelling, what is the difference? For the objective biographer, a life history is grounded in facts, in the search for truth (Pimlott 1994, pp. 151-2). Others observe that facts are selected, even created, by historians and there are many truths; plasticity rules. The writer creates 'his' or 'her' version of the subject and sins of omission and silences are inevitable. Pimlott (1999, p. 41) is adamant: 'I am defiantly and possessively aware that they are not 'true' portraits – they are my Dalton, my Wilson, my Queen'.

The interpretive turn

To the outsider peering in, the British tradition seems as solid as it is stolid. Even its practitioners concede: 'neither in the ivory tower, nor in the garret, is there much sign of a will to experiment' (Pimlott 1994, p. 159). If I compare the theory and practice of political life history in Australia with that in Britain, it is clear that much is missing from the British tradition. Australian political scientists did not dismiss the insights from political psychology as 'psychobabble'. The Melbourne School and its Diaspora may have attracted odium at home but it took psychosocial life history seriously, producing important work and attracting international approbation (for a review see Walter and 't Hart 2009). Others turned to a broader definition of the political that encompassed the 'forgotten lives' of women and indigenous people; and to prosopography or the collective study of lives; of the shared characteristics of an historical group, when there are no individual life histories because there are too few historical documents with which to construct an individual life (and for a survey see Walter 2009). However, I want to concentrate on another major development in the social and human sciences which by-passed the study of political life history in the UK; 'the interpretive turn'.

I do not intend to provide another potted summary of the interpretive turn but to discuss the issues it poses for life history as a field of inquiry.¹⁰ Much of what I will say under this heading will seem ‘old hat’ to colleagues in anthropology, history, literature, and sociology. I can only plead that it is not commonplace when reading British political life history or political science more generally (see Bevir and Rhodes 2006, chapter 3). Political scientists are resistant to ‘genre blurring’ (Geertz 1983) between the social and human sciences. So, they ignore discussions of life history and life writing as a method in other disciplines. Indeed, such terms as life history and life writing are rarely used. If intellectual respectability is the goal, then biographers must engage with this broader literature on theory and methods, especially qualitative research methods. My discussion parallels the earlier description of the British tradition.

From tombstones to illusions

Biographers’ grand narratives of great men as epitomised by tombstone biography are an ‘illusion’:

The biographical project is an illusion, for any coherence that a life has is imposed by the larger culture, by the researcher, and by the subject’s belief that his or her life should have coherence (Denzin, 1989, p. 61).

Fish (1991, pp. 13-15) states the dilemma for biographers in its extreme form. He argues there has been a shift from a discourse of the self as a conscious subject endowing the world with meaning to a discourse which explains meaning as the product of an episteme, paradigm or structure beyond the grasp of the conscious subject. The self is ‘dissolved’, so ‘the notion of an intentional actor with a history and biography must dissolve too’. Any life history assumes ‘notions of agency, personhood, cause and effect’ that both govern our readings and are

contested and contestable. What price the life history of an intentional actor in a postmodern world without agency? The death of the subject is paralleled by the death of the author:

The challenge to ‘authorship’ has been a focus of contemporary literary criticism

The issue has widened the question of interpretation of texts – whether the focus should be the author, the text, or the audience or, more fundamentally, whether the focus should move from authorship to the multiple voices of the texts and the expectations and ‘reading’ of the audience (Roberts 2002, p. 72; and the *locus classicus* on the death of the author is Barthes 1977).

Lives and theories

This theoretical challenge to life history and life writing by postmodernism prompted many a vigorous reply. There are many contending theories to choose between; feminist, ethnic, Marxist, post-structuralist, cultural studies, and the several personality theories (and for a brief survey see Denzin and Lincoln 2005b). Interpretive theory provides a cogent reply to the postmodern challenge and it begins from the insight that to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, the beliefs and preferences of the people involved.¹¹ The idea of meaning lies at the heart of the interpretive approach:

We need to go beyond the bounds of a science based on verification to one which would study the intersubjective and common meanings embedded in social reality ... this science would be hermeneutical in the sense that ... its most primitive data would be a reading of meanings (Taylor 1971, p. 45).

An interpretive approach seeks to understand the webs of significance that people spin for themselves. A life history is a ‘thick description’ or narrative of a life and the biographer writes his or her construction of the subject’s constructions of what the subject is up to

(adapted from Geertz 1973, p. 9). So, biographers must unpack the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals through which they construct their world and take seriously the Thomas theorem (1928, p. 572) that ‘if men (*sic*) define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’. The resulting narrative is not just a chronological story. Rather, I use narrative to refer to the form of explanation that disentangles beliefs and actions to explain human life.¹² Narratives are the form theories take in the human sciences, and they explain actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of actors. People act for reasons, conscious and unconscious (Bevir 1999, chapters 4 and 7) and this focus on meaning, beliefs and practices dissolves the distinction between public and private. They are indissolubly linked in the webs of significance that people spin.

From facts to webs of interpretation

The objective approach to evidence and facts of the British tradition presumes:

Lives have natural histories that unfold over time and ... are marked by objective events and experiences. A life is pictured as an orderly production. ... They are preoccupied with objective events and subjective definitions of these events. They presume that accurate, truthful, valid and consistent interpretations of the past can be given (Denzin 1989, p. 50).

Although Denzin is talking about sociology, nonetheless this view is also common in political life history and assimilates life history to modernist empiricism and its conventions on reliability, validity, accuracy, objectivity. Indeed, because biographers often do not have fully articulated ontological and epistemological positions, they can be accused simultaneously of being modernist-empiricist yet not being scientific because they do not test hypotheses. However, they do not have to play the modernist-empiricist game. There are other criteria by which to evaluate life histories.

The alternative criteria for judging the qualitative research (and therefore life history) include:

Adequacy, aesthetic finality, accessibility, authenticity, credibility, explanatory power, persuasiveness, coherence, plausibility, trustworthiness, epistemological validity and verisimilitude (Roberts 2002, pp. 6, 37-40; see also Denzin and Lincoln 2005, Table 1.2)

Objective knowledge arises from criticising and comparing rival webs of interpretation in terms of agreed facts; from comparing rival stories. Objectivity is a product of 'local reasoning' in that it arises from the critical comparison of narratives within an academic community, reconfirmed in debate between communities, where all debates are subject to the provisional rules of intellectual honesty such as established standards of evidence and reason; we prefer webs of interpretation that are accurate, comprehensive, and consistent.¹³

From character to life myths and situated agency

An interpretive approach reclaims life history and life writing from the postmodern critique by focusing on the idea of 'situated agency': that is, on the webs of significance that people spin for themselves against the backcloth of their inherited beliefs and practices. Bevir and Rhodes (2003 and 2006) argue social contexts influence, as distinct from govern, the nature of individuals. The idea of tradition covers both inheriting beliefs and transforming them as they are handed down from generation to generation. It is evocative of a social structure in which individuals are born, which then acts as the background to their beliefs and actions even while they adapt, develop, and reject much of this inheritance. People are constantly confronting novel circumstances and dilemmas that require them to apply tradition anew. So, traditions are remade by agents as they spin their webs of significance, hence the label situated agency.

By extension, a life is an ‘unfinished project’ as people try to ‘organize those projects around his or her *identity*’ (Denzin 1989, p. 29) to create a ‘life myth’ (Edel 1984, pp. 161-2; Walter 2002, pp. 324-5), which helps us ‘to understand the shapelessness of lives, the anarchy of thought, and the unpredictability of the future, as they are actually experienced’ (St Clair 2002, p. 222). Life myths, or webs of significance, or narratives of a life:

(1) always come in multiple versions, and they never have clear endings or beginnings; (2) stories are grounded in a group’s culture where criteria of truthfulness are established; (3) the stories told are never the same as the stories heard; (4) stories are shaped by larger ideological forces which put pressure on persons to establish their individuality (and self control) in the stories they construct (Denzin 1989, pp. 39 and 77).

In short, there are no grand narratives, no unified lives, only life myths. So, we must ask both ‘how individuals give coherence to their lives’ and ‘how biographers give coherence to their subjects’. We need to look for the sources of the coherence, and the narratives that sustain them (Denzin 1989, p. 62). Of course, not all lives have a unifying myth; they can be a story of fragmentation, incoherence, perhaps failure. So, in such cases, we look for the sources of the incoherence. In both cases, we start with inherited beliefs and practices; with traditions.

Varieties of storytelling

Life history is storytelling and Van Maanen’s (1988, p. 8) observations on writing ethnographic tales are particularly relevant to the art of writing political life history. He argues ‘there is no way of seeing, hearing, or representing the world of others’. He identifies three ways of telling: dispassionate, third-person documentary or realist tales; personalised or confessional tales in which biographer and a subject are on a journey to find each other; and impressionist tales, which ‘highlight the episodic, complex and ambivalent realities that are

frozen and perhaps made too pat by realist or confessional conventions' (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 119). I am not arguing for any one of these ways of telling the tale. I agree with Van Maanen that the aim is to find 'more, not fewer, ways to tell of culture' or, in this case, life histories. There may be 'no way to stuff a real-live person between the two covers of a text' (Denzin 1989, p. 82) but still we try, and the realist chronological narrative is not the only way. There is a menu. There are choices.¹⁴

In a similar vein, White (1973, p. 7) invites us to be self conscious not only about narrative form but also the language we use. The meaning of my stories will depend on the language I choose to tell them:

Providing the 'meaning' of a story by identifying the kind of story that has been told is called explanation by emplotment ... I identify at least four different modes of emplotment: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire.

So, the choice of language, whether romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire, emplots different explanations in the text.¹⁵

With an almost audible tone of irritation, Pimlott (1994: 159) observes:

Neither in the universities, nor outside them, does anybody bother much about composition, structure, shape, dramatic effect, sub-plot – kindergarten stuff for any fiction writer.

Van Maanen, White and their kith and kin in the interpretive camp not only invite political biographers to bother more but also show them what to bother about.

Implications

Given my criticisms of the British tradition, it is incumbent on me to provide examples of other ways of writing life history to the British tradition (or sociographic) approach. I start with three studies of Australian prime ministers, all different from one another but none chronological, tombstone biographies. I chose them because all three use life history and life writing as a tool for answering broader questions in the study of politics that go beyond the life itself; they are not just chronological narratives. Often the uses of biography are cast in the most general terms. For Morgan (1988, p. 33), the task of the political biographer is 'to try to answer political questions about public issues'. Similarly, Pimlott (1999, pp. 39, 41) writes about 'a character in an environment' because it 'illuminates a changing environment'. So, he wrote about Harold Wilson 'as a way of assessing the change of attitudes that swept Britain in the post-war period, and especially in the 1960s'. My three examples address more specific questions, and show that political scientists writing life history can and do apply insights from the academic study of politics in their life writing (cf. Marquand 2009, p. 188).

Pat Weller's (1989) study of Malcolm Fraser, prime minister of Australia between 1975 and 1983 is 'a study of the way in which Malcolm Fraser acted as prime minister' Weller (1989, pp. xi-xvii) focuses on a prime minister in action and on 'the exercise of power and influence within the Australian political system'. It reaches for conclusions on the difficulties of political leadership and for understanding on the way in which Australia is governed. The portrait is not the Fraser of popular, public imagination – determined, intolerant, powerful, and trampling over all in his way. Rather, we see a man whose power resided in consultation and his ability to persuade, manipulate and on occasion direct as necessary. We learn much about Fraser. We learn more about the occupation of prime minister. The surprise is that mainstream political science should have had so little to say about the *occupation* of politician. The analysis of what ministers and prime ministers do, how, why and with what

success would seem an obvious set of topics for a life history, and as important as a chronology of people, places and events. Not so. Life and times rule.

An even less conventional approach is taken by Don Watson (2002) in his account of Paul Keating, prime minister, 1991-1996. The book is, to use Watson's term, an 'inexact history' based on an 'inexact diary'. Watson was a speech-writer and political adviser in the Prime Minister's Office and the book is an insider account of life at the court of King Keating. It is an example of a meeting between life history and ethnography: an accidental auto-ethnography of 'being there'.¹⁶ It is a rambling book, overlong and desperately in need of some clearer organising ideas than 'events, dear boy, events' and Keating's burgeoning ideas for mastering them. But its defects are the source of its strengths; it provides a detailed portrait of tumult and chaos and, over it all, the brooding presence of Paul Keating. Anyone reading the book knows something about the limits to power; about the exhaustion of body and mind. If Weller's analysis of Fraser in action dominates our sense of the man, then you can smell and taste Keating and his court even if you are never quite sure of what is going on.

Judy Brett's (1992) account of Robert Menzies, prime minister 1939-41 and 1949-66, is different again in both theory and method. Brett (1997, pp. 14-15) holds to the suspicion that all is not as it would seem and that the task of the biographer is 'to understand human lives in all their moral and emotional complexity' by using psychoanalytic tools to get behind the worlds of heroes and villains 'to understand political leaders and their quest for power'. The method is the comparative analysis of Menzies' public and private languages. The task is to tell the story of a political life and make it intelligible. The tools of psychoanalysis are part of the toolkit the biographer can use to make a life intelligible. She starts with the public man, the public life, and his public discourse. She identifies the key ideas in his public discourse and then compares them to his private language to identify what it means both to him and to

his audience. Moreover, no language can be understood outside its context. So, Menzies' discourse is related to both Australian conservative thought and the social history of his times. Brett's analysis of the psychological underpinnings of Menzies' political beliefs and his ability to flatter middle-class Australia - the forgotten people - into accepting his non-labour political principles – hard work, independence, and sacrifice – is a singular achievement that gives the lie to all the snide comments about psychobabble.

The distinguishing feature of these three examples of life history and life writing is that all use life history to address issues beyond the life itself. For Weller, it answers questions about the occupation of prime minister. For Watson, it answers questions about court politics. For Brett, it answers questions about the use of language. All three are commendably clear on the uses of biography. They demonstrate not only that life history has many different uses, but also that political science can make a distinct and distinctive contribution to writing it.

Of course, there are many examples outside political science of different ways of writing life history. Thus, Denzin (1989, pp. 64-6) takes us much further afield because he looks to literary biographies for inspiration, using a variant on Jean Paul Sartre's method in writing his life history of Gustave Flaubert. He 'begins with a key event in a subject's life and then works backwards and forwards from that event' (Denzin 1989, p. 67). These key events or epiphanies are an experience that alters the 'the fundamental meaning structures in a person's life' (Denzin 1989, p. 70) but no story is ever constructed by only one individual: 'we must learn to connect biographies and lived experiences, the epiphanies of lives, to the groups and social relationships that surround and shape a person':

As we write about lives, we bring the world of others into our texts. We create differences, oppositions, and presences which allow us to maintain the illusion that we have captured the 'real' experience of 'real' people. In fact, we create the persons we

write about, just as they create themselves when they engage in storytelling practices (Denzin 1989, p. 82).

It would also be a mistake to think such novel practices are in fact new. Alphonse James Albert Symons (A. J.) had a crab like approach to biography rejecting chronology in favour of reasoning ‘backwards as well as forwards, to infer the child from the man’ (Symons 1934, p. 51). So, the biographer’s task is to:

‘Lift the curtains on a hero full developed and manifesting the idiosyncrasies which make him worth writing about, to follow his career until the end, illustrating meanwhile the changing of his character with the years and then, at the finishing, to retrace the steps by which he had become what, in the first chapter, he was shown as being’ (Symons 1929, p. 156).

Whether starting with an epiphany or the idiosyncrasies which make him worth writing about, the simple point is that there are more ways to tell our stories than writers of British political life history had ever envisaged let alone practiced.¹⁷

Conclusions

If you are a political scientists writing for the profession, not a general readership, and you foreswear the British tradition, what do you do? I list the lessons as bullet points. I have already discussed each one earlier. Here, I use stark simplicity to highlight the differences with the British tradition.

- *Blur genres* – what can we learn from the human sciences, most notably ethnography?

- *Uses of biography* - what broader questions in the study of politics that go beyond the life itself are you seeking to answer?
- *Contending theories* – which of the contending theories – personality theory, feminist, post-structuralist or interpretive – will provide the conceptual tools for grasping the relevant meanings, beliefs and actions of the subject?
- *Situated agency* - what backcloth of inherited beliefs and practices, of traditions, informs the webs of significance that people spin for themselves?
- *Life myths* - narratives of a life always come in multiple versions, and they never have clear endings or beginnings, so how do individuals give coherence to their lives and how do biographers give coherence to their subjects?
- *Varieties of storytelling* – how do we find more, not fewer, ways to tell the story?

Many of these points are commonplace in other disciplines. Why is British political life history so stolid? Where is the experimentation with subjects, with literary form, so common in other branches of life history? The British tradition is longstanding and glacial in its rate of change because it is sustained by broader political traditions, the forces of commerce, and the characteristics of mainstream political science.

The British political tradition contains beliefs about leaders knowing best. The Westminster narrative is the classical constitutional view of British government. Its core tenet is a belief in centralisation or hierarchy, with its roots in the royal prerogative and the monarchical origins of British government (Rhodes 2011). Birch (1964, pp. 244-5) argues this tradition of ‘a

strong leader' willing to make 'unwelcome decisions' determines the nature of political responsibility in the British constitution. It sustains the view that history is made by great men and, after Margaret Thatcher, great women.

This fixation on the great and the good is reinforced by commercial imperatives and readers'; expectations - what Nicholson (1927, p. 134) calls 'the taste for biography' – which lock biographers into commemoration with revelations, admiration with sleaze. Although voiced as criticisms, O'Brien's (1998, pp. 52, 56 and 57) observations that blockbusters pour off the presses, that the industry is 'media driven and market led', and that nothing is able 'to stem the tide of market forces' are essentially accurate. Much biography even when written by academics is not written for an academic audience, so it eschews the epistemological and methodological issues discussed here for a rattling good tale of this person in these times. Because a biography is written for a wide readership does not mean it is of poor quality or that such biographies are always bad history. It means simply that there are great pressures on authors to conform to a profitable template; the narrative drive of the chronological detective story that reveals the true man or woman as it excuses their faults.

British political science has a strong modernist-empiricist mainstream. There are established and widely recognised subfields: political theory, political institutions, political behaviour, public policy and administration, comparative government and politics, political economy, and international relations. Political scientists who write life history are not now, nor have they ever been, part of this mainstream. British political life history is an example of the 'passive pluralism', which permits subfields, like feminism and race, 'to establish themselves *alongside* the existing fields co-existing in a patterned isolation within the same institutional framework without either genuinely engaging with each other or becoming entirely autonomous' (Collini 2001, pp. 299-300). The problem with such isolation, of course, is that,

although writers of life history may sit beside the mainstream unharmed, they are also unheard and cut off from broader debates about theory and method. Patterned isolationism sustains an insular British tradition of political life history.

There has been no sustained challenge to the tradition. The dilemmas posed by Freud on the one hand, and Strachey on the other, were either ignored, or dismissed as inappropriate, or assimilated, for example, as a call for empathy in studies of character or in the sympathetic treatment of warts. Why was there so little interest in psychobiography? There was a widely shared antipathy to psychological approaches. For example, O'Brien (1998, p. 53) claims that psychology 'arouses scepticism' among historians; that 'as disciplines, history and psychology do not ... mix at all well together', and that psychological modes of explanation are 'accorded short shrift' because 'historical evidence rarely allows for the application of psychiatric analysis or psychological theories to the activities of dead politicians'. He claims there are too many examples of psychohistory 'straining circumstantial and indirect evidence to the point of incredulity', although he gives no examples. Its claims to scientific standing are 'pretensions' and historian 'rejoice' at 'the apparently irreversible demise of Freudian theory', presumably because they are blissfully ignorant of any theories since Freud. It matters not that O'Brien's comments are more rant than argument; they illustrate widely held views.¹⁸

To compound this antipathy, there was no school of biography, no wellspring of political life history like Australia's Melbourne School, to act as a stimulus for innovation. This school may have been 'evanescent' but it lasted from 1970 to 1990 and its Diaspora can be traced to this day (Walter and 't Hart 2009, p. 364). Such a school could have developed around, for example, Ben Pimlott at Birkbeck College. It did not, and that is down to happenstance as much as to the traditions, even the antipathy, of political science. The political science

profession is small in Australia and it has often been the case that a few individuals can exert a disproportionate influence over the profession's development (Rhodes 2009). Alan Davis was the Australian pioneer in psychosocial biography. No one played the equivalent role for British biography.

For me, life history is a construct of its times. We construct complex individuals so we can comprehend the ambiguous world in which we live. Biography feeds our collective need to render reality knowable. It was ever thus. As Nicholson (1927, p. 150) observes of Lytton Strachey:

He was not one of those who readily attribute the complex interaction of events to any divine or human agency. He knew that life was largely inexplicable and fortuitous, that human actions are governed by chance more often than by will, by emotion or instinct more often than by reason; he knew that public affairs are in general but a series of improvisations and expedients (Nicholson 1927, p. 150).

The interpretive turn takes a variously constructed world, the unintended consequences of human action, and contingency of public affairs as its basic building blocks. It urges us to look for more and better ways of telling life histories just like we need more and better ways of studying politics.

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Notes

¹ Some low-brow political life histories are part of the reason for the poor reputation of life history in some quarters of political science. In Australia, Barnett and Garrard (1997) on John Howard is a cure for insomnia in its long-winded hagiography. The instant life histories of the new leader are shorter and distinguished by even shorter shelf lives; for example Macklin 2007 on Kevin Rudd, and Anderson 2007 on David Cameron.

² See also Marcus 2002; Marquand 2009; O'Brien 1998; Pimlott 1990 and 1999; Strachey 1989 [1918]; Theakston 2000; and the several essays in Homberger and Charmley 1988.

³ Throughout this article, I return to a comparison of Australian and British ways of writing life history because the differences help me to identify the distinct and distinctive characteristics of the British tradition. Australian biographers also provide me with examples of innovative ways of writing life history. Of course, American political science is the heartland of several schools of psychiatry, political psychology and psycho-biography (for an overview see Schultz 2005), but I must confess to a touch of perversity. I could not resist using Australian examples to show the metropolitan motherland that its colonial cousins can break with the shackles of the British tradition. In Australia, the equivalent tradition is called sociography. Walter (2007: 413) defines it as 'an empiricist, positivist tradition – strictly chronological, and favouring public over private and description over analysis as well as preservation of emotional distance'. It was the dominant approach 'at least until the late twentieth century'.

⁴ On this debate, see the symposium on 'Is political biography a good thing?' *Contemporary British History*, 10 (4) 1996, 60-86; O'Brien 1998; and Pimlott 1999.

⁵ For Australian examples see Clendinnen 2004 criticisms of Martin (1980) on Parkes, and the reviews of Rowse (2002) on Coombs in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 61 (4) 2002: 99-117.

⁶ There are always exceptions, in Australia, James Walter (1980 and 2002) and Judith Brett (1992 and 1997) break decisively with the mould of the British tradition. Their intellectual roots are in political psychology and the Melbourne School. See Walter and 't Hart 2009: 360-64 for a brief history of the Melbourne School, and Walter 2009: 100-102 for a listing of Australian psychosocial life histories. For the UK, I found little equivalent work, see note 10.

⁷ Modernist-empiricism treats institutions such as legislatures, constitutions and policy networks as discrete, atomised objects to be compared, measured and classified. It adopts comparisons across time and space as a means of uncovering regularities and probabilistic explanations to be tested against neutral evidence (see Bevir 2001).

⁸ Though often made, the point is, at best, over statement. A life history can be seen as equivalent to a heuristic case study; that is, a case that is used to discern 'important general problems and possible theoretical solutions'. Such life histories can build theory and make generalizations when 'conducted seriatim, by the so-called building-block' method (Eckstein (1975: 104-8). In effect, Eckstein's (1975: 116) argument would see life histories as one way of testing theories.

⁹ The few exceptions include Abse's (1989 and 2003) rather eccentric psychobiographies of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair; Berrington 1974; and Iremonger 1970. There are a few attempts to modify if not break with the British tradition. The first volume of Anthony Seldon's (2004) biography of Blair is organised around key people and events, although they are in chronological order. The second volume returns to strict chronology and is another

tombstone biography (Seldon 2007). Powell 2011 is based, like Watson 2002, on an ‘inexact diary’, structured around maxims drawn from Machiavelli, with some instructive vignettes, but it is not a life history and it boils down to an attempt to salvage Blair’s reputation.

¹⁰ For general overviews see: Bernstein 1979 and 1991; Rabinow and Sullivan 1979 and 1987; and Rosenau 1992. For a comprehensive survey of associated qualitative methods, see: Denzin and Lincoln 2005a.

¹¹ See for example, Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006 and 2010; Berger and Luckman 1971; Denzin 1989; Geertz 1973 and 1983; and Roberts 2002.

¹² There is a massive literature on narratives. Alvermann 2000 provides a short introduction. I found the following helpful: Barthes 1993; Bevir 1999: 252-62 and 298-306; 2000 and 2006; Czarniawska 2004; Ricoeur 1981, chapter 11, and 1991, chapter 6; and White 1987.

¹³ For a detailed account see: Bevir 1999: chapter 3; and Rhodes 1997: chapter 9. See also Roberts 2002: 37-40 and his citations for a discussion of internal and external consistency, and of corroboration by the subject.

¹⁴ Not only can we learn from ethnographers when writing life history but observation is an invaluable part of the political science toolkit when collecting data on living subjects. For a primer see Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; and for an example about British government see Rhodes 2011. The affinity between the two fields is clear from the work of Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988; and Van Maanen 1988.

¹⁵ For a discussion of these and other modes, such as epic and cock-up, in the analysis of storytelling in organizations see Gabriel 2000: 83-5.

¹⁶ An auto-ethnography is a personal ethnography, or ethnographic memoir, or narrative of the self, all set in a delineated social context. For an extended discussion see Humphreys 2005.

¹⁷ The parallel in fiction is with the story told from the vantage point of its several participants as in Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria quartet* (1957-60), William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929); and Mario Vargas Llosa, *The real life of Alejandro Mayta* (1986).

¹⁸ Such psychobabble critiques fail to recognise the diverse work on theories of personality, a better label for the field than the narrower term psychoanalysis. On this diversity see the essays in Corr and Matthews 2009; and the readings in Funder and Ozer 2010. The Social Psychology Network is a valuable resource for the interested reader, see: <http://www.socialpsychology.org/>.