

tion of the field strength will then cause a movement of the diaphragm, which movement will cause a sound wave in the air.

In the foregoing it has been assumed the reader is at least slightly acquainted with the most elementary principles of electricity and science in general. No attempt has been made to give exact values for the various parts nor directions for making any particular sets, as that is not the purpose of this article. Likewise the detailed application of the principles discussed will vary somewhat with the type of set in question. Should there be sufficient demand for it, the authors will be glad to give specific instructions for the making of a few of the best sets that can be constructed at the various price ranges.

WILLIAM BYRD HARRISON AND
GEORGE WARREN CHAPPELEAR, JR.

THE ETHICS OF BIOGRAPHY WRITING

NOTHING but a love of gossip satisfactorily accounts for the genuine satisfaction a reasonably indiscrete biography gives us. The keen delight that stirs within us at the suggestion of "secret memoirs" or at the less than subtle insinuation in the word "real," as is frequently the fashion nowadays in revised biographies, is as full of revelation as many an autobiography that purports to bare the recesses of some richly experienced soul. Even the most austere among us are inclined to find some apology for mental dishabillé.

We are told in that schoolboys' *bête noire*, Caesar's *Commentaries*, how the news-mongering Nervii were wont to lay hands on all strangers passing their way and demand, under the threat of punishment, that the newcomers tell them stories of people and places in other parts of the world. Nice perception did not seem to be a prominent characteristic of this Gallic tribe; all that they insisted upon was that they be told something they had not heard before. Even in this far-away day we are no less curious for something new; the *aliquid novi* is still one of the highest goods; and it plays nowhere a more important part than in things biographical. Unlike the

Nervii, however, we prefer stories that are real and true; but our words "real" and "true," when applied to biography, seem to carry with them the paradoxical but usual meanings of "objectionable and "immoral." The announcement of a forthcoming publication, offering a feast of inner-circle news of some prominent figure in public life, any sort of revelation of state or stage secrets of a picturesque character, never fails to bring its thrill even to the blasé fictionist. Hence, *The Mirrors of Washington* or *The Mirrors of Downing Street*, no less than a Jefferson's *The Real Lord Byron* or the French memoirs of the Napoleonic era, reflect as perfectly the character of their readers as of those whom they image more or less successfully. With the sweet morsels of gossip under our tongues, we amusedly murmur *humanum est —narrare*.

Carlyle's *Reminiscences* were received with rapture by his generation, because his contemporaries were glad to find that, despite the eminence he had obtained, he had quite a liberal allotment of faults and was in so many respects not greatly different from themselves. When, however, as literary executor, Froude presented a more extensive picture in his *Thomas Carlyle*, his efforts were met with a storm of abuse; for Carlyle's friends felt that even if Froude had painted Carlyle as his friends believed him to be, yet there were many things that should not have been said by one so close as Froude had been to Carlyle. Looking at the office which Froude performed from the standpoint of biographic art, however, and in a later generation, we feel that the literary executor was justified in accepting Dr. Johnson's view that men should be judged by the *mass* of their characters; and surely Carlyle could stand the whole truth, if any one could. The question of propriety, it seems, might be applicable to the admission of certain letters of an intimate nature, but of no special biographical bearing; otherwise, the consensus of opinion is that Froude achieved one of the great triumphs of biographical literature.

Unpardonably grievous, however, are the literary sins committed in the name of candor. The ultra-candid advocate, with examples in mind drawn largely from the literature of the confessionalist, mistakes the desire to pro-

duce something sensational for that of exemplifying the true biographical spirit. Evil it is true, is usually mingled with the good in all strong personalities and deserves its fair place in the biographer's portraiture; but that fair place has this limitation, beyond which the biographer, whatever his relation might have been to his subject, dare not go: Is this a true portraiture of the man whose character I am aiming to present? Is the material I am considering of value in painting the picture in its true colors?

The limits in the use of biographical material that may safely guide the biographer in his relationship to the public, as well as to his subject, are definitely set by the function of the biographer: he is emphatically a compiler, not a creator. Had Southey sufficiently realized the nature of his office, he would not have marred his otherwise splendid *Life of Nelson* by intruding his own moral views of life on his readers in what purports to be the life of Nelson. It was likewise the persistent dwelling on the penumbra of Poe that made Griswold's biography of the poet a veritable literary crime. A portrait, we are well aware, may not become a picture with the shadows left out, but if the shadows are made too prominent the portrait is likely to be spoiled. Our own best philosopher in this field, William Roscoe Thayer, is insistent that, in writing biography we should tell the story as nearly as possible as the actor or hero underwent it.

"Truth, naked, unblushing truth," is Gibbon's first essential in an autobiography. And there is more than a half-truth in the witticism that defines an autobiography as "only what a biography ought to be." Cellini's *Memoirs* represent the author as guilty of almost every crime known to humanity. While the picture presented is not a particularly creditable one, our Italian artist had the keenness to appreciate the truth of the French maxim that every good biographer must adopt as his blue light in the matter of compromising with his subject and the susceptibilities of the subject's friends and relatives: *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*.

However charming amiability may be in the actual intercourse of life, it is surely not a praiseworthy characteristic in a biographer. A reviewer of Balfour's efforts to tell the story of Stevenson's life makes this significant

criticism: "Mr. Balfour has completely suppressed a very unedifying but most attractive Stevenson in favor of the heroic gentleman who wrote Vailima prayers and abounded in lay sermons." Boswell did not make a saint of Johnson, nor Moore of Byron; they felt too strongly the assurance of Pliny: *Qui vitia odit, homines odit*. Shakespeare, to whom we look for a finished bit of wisdom for all relationships of life, declares that "the best men are moulded out of faults." Carlyle's *Reminiscences* may be correctly pronounced the "unkindest and most scornful book in English literature," but the author has a higher conception of the duties of a biographer than Mr. Balfour apparently possesses. Brutal frankness in biography, simply as such, has not much in it sfavor; but no man has a right to be judged by his strengths alone. The real likeness, if there be one, must be made up of lights and shadows. It is indeed difficult to be charitable toward the freakish view (taken from the preface of a current biography) expressed in these terms: "The writer of this memorial has not thought it necessary to call attention to defects in the character she has sought to portray."

The purpose of biography is to present what is characteristic and habitual in the life of the subject. The incidents, of course, that indicate temperament, opinions, personal habits, oddities, prejudices, and, to whatever extent they affect character, the occurrences that reveal weaknesses, foibles, indiscretions, and vices, have a place in the composite picture that the biographer by virtue of his office is obligated to present. Egotism, in reality, is to a large extent the material with which the biographer is working. Such is the source of interest and strength in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*.

In the interest of the highest truth, however, there is sometimes not only a legitimate but decidedly advisable and praiseworthy type of suppression that every biographer will insist upon as both his and the subject's right. There are, for instance, incidents and temporary mental attitudes in the life of every individual that are not the outgrowth of character; such mere incidents have no place in the story of a life, but serve only to dim the biographic outlines. Literary critics are inclined to raise the cry that modern biography, owing to an apparent lack of discrimina-

tion in material, has become both artless and cumbersome. Delicacy and good taste, it should be understood, are not in conflict with depicting the subject as he actually lived among men.

That a biographer should deliberately set himself to the task of defending his subject is an undertaking in itself wholly indefensible. Magnified epitaphs and extended biographical tracts have very justly received the condemnation of Mr. Asquith and other critics, as contradicting the rightful function of biography. They are, in reality, as serious literary distortions as biographies written for the purpose of illustrating a theory. We may safely accept the injunction to be on our guard against the biographies of an advocate. Whatever may be said of Hallam Tennyson's *Life of Alfred Tennyson* as a filial undertaking, it is obviously more of an idealization of the poet than it is a life of Tennyson the man; the son's reverence for his artist father misled him into erecting a monument to the poet's art. Likewise, Stowe's *Lady Byron Vindicated*, as a biography is as inherently false as the family or official compilation purporting to be the complete story of an individual. The object of biography can not be regarded as effected by either eulogy or satire; hence Lady Shelley's biography of the poet, as is the case with almost all other biographies of Shelley, is as offensive on the one hand as Macaulay's essay on *The Life of Samuel Johnson* is on the other. Both err in the extreme in their conception of the rightful purpose of biography. Notwithstanding La Rouchefoucauld's standard that "our enemies come nearer the truth in their judgment of us than we do in our judgments of ourselves," we are far from being persuaded that even the brilliancy and encyclopedic knowledge of Macaulay can atone for the inevitable obliqueness with which he has treated his subject. It is, rather, wise and well-regulated sympathy, interest, appreciation, and enthusiasm that must be looked upon as prime qualifications in a biographer.

Our library shelves are laden with literary white-washings. While it is of the utmost importance that the biographer should be entirely free from bias or a desire to compromise unwisely, yet quite as objectionable is the practical application of the motto: *De mortuis*

nihil nisi bonum. As a motto for the biographer it should read: *De mortuis nihil nisi verum*. "Certain fashionable biographies of the present day," declares Edmund Gosse, "deserve no other comment than the word 'Lie' printed in bold letters across the title page." The true biographer does not allow himself to descend into the state of an apologist; nor will he, whatever may be his personal admiration for his subject, allow himself to make an idol of that subject. Suetonius presented the Caesars with the same freedom with which they lived; but, like the good biographer he was, he did not show himself to be primarily concerned with making a book; his concern was apparently the depicting of these ancient worthies as their contemporaries knew them. The essential spirit of enthusiasm is present in his work; and best of all it is enthusiasm for the truth. *La vie publique*, whether it be a Caesar or a political boss of one of our great cities, can no more be treated in disregard of the truths of literary art than an Amiel or a Guerin.

Biographers are credited with being hilarious liars. Much of our recent memoir-writing, in point of fact, is nothing but systemized and padded journalism; and it is the atmosphere of journalism that is responsible for the chaos into which the vital and the trivial are so frequently blurred. Next to fiction, biography is perhaps the most commercialized branch of present-day literature. The journalizing of the art of biography is undoubtedly the greatest blight under which it now rests. It is of moment to compare the *Journal* of Eugenie de Guerin, in which is found one of the sincerest, as well as most intimate, relations of a soul that the world possesses, with the host of post-war biographies, of which the *Memoirs* of the Ex-Kaiser is a fair sample. The spiritual grandeur of the former in contrast with the self-vaunting, braggart attitudinizing of the latter brings out the literary freshness and charm of the literary biography as infinitely superior to the journalistic *apologia* of the former German war-lord.

Too many biography writers, who are in no sense biographers, as is the case with Germany's great paranoiac, see their work as drama or epic, and, consequently, laws other than those belonging to the art of biography control their efforts. Official position may

constitute a vantage ground from the standpoint of advertising, but can not of itself give a warrant of success in producing a work of art. Unfortunately, such pithless memoirs tend to drive better work from the field. The biographies of dull, pompous, or priggish people, as well as those written by such, must not be confused with literature, whatever honors their writers may have had bestowed upon them.

The failure on the part of biographers to get a proper conception of their function has given us many biographical myths, and accounts, in a large measure, for the ever-growing list of common-place and bad biographies. To secure the right result in biography, there can be no other motive than that which inspired the admirable Boswell: a desire to perpetuate for all time the life of a great figure as he walked among men, an enthusiasm for the truthful presentation of the admired figure, but an admiration for the character and achievements of the man of such a nature that the only aim in the biographer's mind is that men coming after may know and properly estimate the subject with the same fidelity to truth as that which evoked the writer's efforts. The subject of a biography does not determine its common-placeness; this is rather the result of method of treatment. Sainte-Beuve's *Portraits* deal with people who made very little stir in the world; yet each succeeding generation adds a host of admirers to this biographer's work. Carlyle writes, in his *Life of Sterling*: "I have remarked that a true delineation of the smallest man, and his pilgrimage through life, is capable of interesting the greatest man."

While the spirit of enthusiasm for a subject is a splendid asset, when not allowed to control the admission or exclusion of material that may gain biography's legitimate end, yet a spirit of extenuation, indicating as it does an ulterior motive or at least a warped judgment, admits of no defense. That the best men are but men at best can not justify the impression of obliqueness in the treatment of a life; the essential thing is rather an attitude towards the truth as uncompromising as that of a Cato. Unpopular characters have too frequently made their appeal to would-be biographers, because of the opportunity thus offered to espouse a cause, take issue, or set

history straight. The result of such work has been to make respectable, apparently, a biographical moral code somewhat similar to that set forth by Cellini, in extricating himself from one of his difficulties: "Bethinking me first of my own safety, and in the next place of my honor."

More fatal than the characteristic of obliqueness in the writing of biography is the inexcusable trait of malice, as evidenced, for extreme illustration, in the Duc de Saint-Simon's portrait of Louis XIV. Drawn with the most deliberate animosity, the barely concealed motive of the *Memoirs*, it has been uniformly regarded as a type of the unethical in biographical writing. A like spirit is manifest in Purcell's *Life of Cardinal Manning*, written in as utter disregard for the truth as some of the political sketches of prominent political characters both here and abroad. We can but recall Othello's injunction to Ludovico and Montano:

"When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice."

Edwin's editing of Pope, for the same reason, has been uniformly regarded as a literary sin and blunder.

We sometimes might wonder what the wives of Ruskin, Byron, and Carlyle thought of them. But would our estimates of the essential characteristics of these outstanding literary figures be greatly modified by such prejudiced views? Doubtless Xantippe's biography of her husband would have contained some details in the life of that illustrious gentleman which Xenophon failed to chronicle for us; yet the friction in the domestic life of the Greek philosopher, presented from so partial a view of the character of the man, would not likely alter our judgment of the man. The wives of these men may have known them better than the outside world knew them, but it is doubtful if they could have given an impression of fairness in their estimates of characters which they could not weigh dispassionately.

That a calm, judicial review of the life of a near one is possible is evidenced in Max Müller's story of his father's life. We have no reason to believe that the son has not given us a picture as true to the life of his subject that a portrait painter could have giv-

en of his physical lineaments. A similar success may be instanced in the biography that the poet Crabbe wrote of his father. There seems little doubt that unfavorable prejudice if not real malice on the part of the early biographers laid the foundation for many of the distorted views relating to the characters of Sir Francis Bacon and Edgar Allan Poe. Maltreatment at the hands of prejudiced biographers gives some justification for the bitterness of the cynic's view—

"That glory has long made the sages smile;
'Tis something, nothing, words, illusions,
wind—
Depending more on the historian's style
Than on the name a person leaves behind."

Sydney Lee holds that the main business of a biographer is to transmit personality.¹ If he had added temperament, he would most assuredly have presented the two outstanding considerations in biography writing. We are accustomed to the emphasis upon character, which deals with those things that exhibit the individual's purpose and action; but the real charm of biography, as distinguished from the mere event-story, consists in that subtle something which has more to do with the individual's manner of living and tastes for life, commonly called "personality." Laura Spencer Porter, in *Haunted Lives*, discards the usual biographical procedure for a real philosophy of biography:

"All these Time at last—the only lastingly considerable biographer—rejects and throws away. That which Time retains as precious and imperishable is rather some fine essence of the spirit, some essential personality built up and moulded by preferences, predilections, and prepossessions of a most highly spiritual order. The loves, the desires, the dear delights of men; the returning dreams, the recurrent longings that will not be gainsaid; the dead and long-lost dreamings that revisit the glimpses of our moon—these are indeed the spirit of us, and our immortalities."

There are apparently some lives which defy recognized biographical methods; under current, as well as past, standards there is such a thing as the *abiographic* life. The fault lies, perhaps, more in the limitations of our speech than in the biographic art. Language, seemingly, is not capable of depicting the fineness of some human characters; they seem rich

beyond expression. Ellis, Yates, Garnett, Story, Swinburne, and Gilfillan have successively tried to present the life of William Blake; each in turn has doubtless felt, as Carlyle did in the case of Burns, that all previous biographies left much unsaid. Unlike the story of such a life as that of Daniel Boone, the problem does not lie in the presentation of the events of his life, but rather in harmonizing a rare combination of mind, heart and character qualities into a full, rich, consistent whole. Yet the real life of William Blake has not yet been written. Such lives possess a spirit of child-like vanity, the ingredients in the make-up of such self-biographers as Eugenie de Guerin, which the biographer needs to know how to appreciate and handle, to make his composite picture. Only the biographer who is able to look at the world through the eyes of his subject can hope to succeed in presenting that life truly to others.

Whatever may be the nature of his problem, however, the biographer's duty to both his subject and the reading public is clear and unmistakable; the world has a right to an honest, richly complete presentation of the character and achievements, personality and temperament, of the subject, as true to life as human skill can make it. The biographer must evidence in all the finer adjustments of the inner and the outer facts of the life of the individual not only a perfect knowledge and appreciation of the rules of the art side, but in every way "a manliness that will not let him lie."

It is difficult to think of any other kind of writing that reveals so much of the character of the writer; not even in history is there the same opportunity for the play of character upon character. A realization of the ethical demands in this type of literature would undoubtedly lessen the number of biographical travesties that yearly pour from our presses. A sacred duty or a high privilege admittedly calls for the best that is within one; when the duty takes the form of biography, the task must be performed without the thought of the invisible censor.

"Grey are all theories
And green alone Life's golden tree."

JAMES C. JOHNSTON.

¹*Principles of Biography*, by Sidney Lee. The Cambridge University Press. 1911.