

Writing Women's Lives: One Historian's Perspective

Author(s): Susan Ware

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Susan Ware

Writing Women's Lives: One Historian's

Perspective In 1913, Winifred Harper Cooley offered a succinct observation about the then-new movement of feminism: "All feminists are suffragists, but not all suffragists are feminists." Given the task at hand—ruminating whether biography is good history and why—the twenty-first century equivalent might be, "Many historians make good biographers, but not all biographers make good historians." This article explores this proposition with reference to the field of women's history, predominantly American women's history.¹

Looking at the biographies of American women published by historians over the last forty years provides conclusive proof that biography can be good history, but the point is much stronger than just the strength of individual books. From the very start, biography played a vibrant and significant part in the growth of women's history as a well-respected and popular field within the historical profession. In fact, no other field has demonstrated the symbiotic connection between biography and history better than the study of women and gender. Furthermore, because the interdisciplinary field of women's studies grew alongside women's history, biographers of women have often drawn from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives as they went about their business of telling women's lives in new and exciting ways.

On the most fundamental level, the interest in, and demand for, biographies of women shook up the larger genre of biography by introducing a different type of person as worthy of biographical treatment. Moreover, because the contours of women's lives were often different from those of men, the format and goals of biography had to be rethought; the male plot did not work. For many

Susan Ware is an independent scholar located in Cambridge, Mass. She is the author of *Title IX: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 2006), as well as of the biographies mentioned in this article, and the editor of *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary—Completing the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), as well as of other volumes mentioned in this article.

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1 Cooley quoted in Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, 1987).

historians of women, the end result was an interpretive and narrative strategy that put gender at its center. The insistence of feminist biographers that the personal is political, and that the same attention must be paid to the daily lives of their subjects as to their more public achievements continues to ripple through the field of biography as a whole.

AMERICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988) dates the beginning of the modern period of women's biography as 1970, coinciding with the publication of Milford's *Zelda*. The beauty of Milford's book was that it took the public fascination with F. Scott Fitzgerald and flipped it on its head, placing *Zelda*, not her illustrious husband, at the center of the story. That refocusing provided a fresh perspective on the writings of both Fitzgeralds, as well as a new appreciation for the challenges that *Zelda* faced as she tried to forge her own writing career—while her more famous husband kept expropriating her material (and her life). This shift in emphasis may sound mundane now, but it was truly revolutionary at the time—the “click” moment for many women, when the forceful ideas of modern feminism hit home. Strouse's biography of Alice James, the bed-ridden, neurasthenic but brilliant member of the James family who had the misfortune to be female, had a similar impact when it appeared in 1980.²

Books like *Zelda* fed an unprecedented popular hunger for women's biographies. Filling that need were such books as Lash's Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Eleanor and Franklin* (1971) and Nicholson's *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973), a son's view of the highly unconventional marriage of Harold Nicholson and Vita Sackville-West. Johnson's *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives* (1972) challenged the traditional norms of biography by foregrounding the life of Mary Ellen Meredith rather than dismissing her as a minor character in the shadow of her famous husband (George Meredith) and father (Thomas Love Peacock). Other popular biographies of women from these years included Bell's *Virginia Woolf* (1972), Lewis' *Edith Wharton* (1975), and Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974). Adding to this list memoirs like Hellman's *An Unfinished Woman* (1969) and *Penti-*

2 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York, 1988), 12; Nancy Milford, *Zelda: A Biography* (New York, 1970); Jean Strouse, *Alice James: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980).

mento (1973), and Mead's *Blackberry Winter* (1972) shows these years to have been something of a golden age for reading about women's lives.³

Meanwhile, the field of women's history was springing into life. Various factors came together in the 1960s and 1970s to fuel its growth: the waves of social protest set in motion by the civil rights movement in the 1950s; the revival of feminism as a national issue, sparked in part by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963); the emergence of women's liberation separate from the New Left; and demographic changes in women's lives, including higher workforce participation and widening access to education. An especially critical intellectual factor was the rise of social history, which looked at the lives of ordinary Americans. With its emphasis on history from the bottom up, social history upended the traditional focus on wars, presidents, and great (white) men that had prevailed up to that point. Social history also presented an opportunity to regard women's lives as no less historically important than men's, and the early pioneers of women's history eagerly seized it.⁴

On the matter of jumpstarting women's history, much more energy went into (to paraphrase Lerner's path-breaking 1969 article) learning about the mill girl than the lady. Yet, biography played a vital part in the early days of women's history, too. Lerner's biography of the Grimke sisters of South Carolina appeared in 1967, and Sklar's influential biography of Catharine Beecher, which proved to be one of the cornerstones for the separate-spheres paradigm, along with Cott's *The Bonds of Womanhood* (1977), came out in 1973. Other early biographies that appeared in the breakout years of the early 1970s included Kennedy's *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (1970), Flexner's *Mary Wollstonecraft* (1972), and Davis' *American Heroine: The Life*

3 Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin: The Story of Their Relationship, Based on Eleanor Roosevelt's Private Papers* (New York, 1971); Nigel Nicholson, *Portrait of a Marriage* (New York, 1973); Diane Johnson, *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives* (New York, 1972); Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (London, 1972); R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York, 1975); Richard Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York, 1974); Lillian Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman: A Memoir* (Boston, 1969); *idem*, *Pentimento* (Boston, 1973); Margaret Mead, *Blackberry Winter: My Early Years* (New York, 1972)

4 For an overview of the history of American women's history, see Ware, "Introduction," in Sheridan Harvey et al. (eds.), *American Women: A Library of Congress Guide for the Study of Women's History and Culture in the United States* (Washington, D.C., 2001).

and *Legend of Jane Addams* (1973). Several of these biographies have been supplanted by later interpretations (Kennedy's by Chesler's in 1992 and Davis' by Knight's, in 2005, among others), but at the time, they were highly influential, read and taught in many of the early women's history courses springing up across the country.⁵

Another critical spur both to the field of women's history in general and women's biography specifically was the publication of the original volumes of *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary* in 1971. Begun in the 1950s, under the sponsorship of Radcliffe College and the dedicated leadership of Edward T. James and Janet Wilson James, the 1,359 entries showed the range and depth of women's contributions to American life, a pointed correction to women's near-total exclusion from existing biographical dictionaries at the time and a dramatic spur to further research. The tradition of using biographical essays to advance the field of women's history continued with *Notable American Women: The Modern Period* (1980) and *Notable American Women: Completing the Twentieth Century* (2004).⁶

Even though biography was intrinsic to the resurgence of women's history, the question of how historians should write these biographies of women was still open. It underlay much of the scholarship produced in the 1980s, the tenor of which was later summarized in the edited volume, *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* (1992). Featuring essays by ten historians describing their personal odysseys as the authors of a range of biographies recently published or nearing completion, the volume made the case for

5 Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," *Mid-Continent American Studies Journal*, X (1969), 5-15; *idem*, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina* (Boston, 1967); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven, 1973); Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977); David Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven, 1970); Eleanor Flexner, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Biography* (New York, 1972); Allen Davis, *American Heroine: The Life and Legend of Jane Addams* (New York, 1973); Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York, 1992); Louise Knight, *Citizen: Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy* (Chicago, 2005).

6 Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul Boyer (eds.), *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary, 1607-1950* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971); Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (eds.), *Notable American Women: The Modern Period* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980); Ware and Stacy Braukman (eds.), *Notable American Women: Completing the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

how the application of feminist analysis not only enriched individual projects but also had the potential to reshape biography in general. For example, the willingness of biographers to talk openly and self-consciously about their relationships with their subjects, including how feminism shaped their approach to the study of biography, marked a new level of candor and self-awareness for the field as a whole.⁷

What exactly is feminist biography, and how does it differ from a biography of a female subject that does not employ feminist analysis? The key is a focus on gender as a primary influence on women's lives. Feminist biography posits that traditional narrative arcs that trace a male model of success or achievement do not necessarily apply to female subjects. Women's public lives rarely unfolded in straightforward ways; they were often complicated by struggles to obtain an education, find productive work, or escape the expectations of traditional female roles and other distractions, like marriage or motherhood. More than anything else, the hallmark of feminist biography is close attention to the connections between subjects' personal and professional lives. How did particular women arrange their lives to be able to excel in a public realm usually reserved for men? What choices and decisions did they make along the way, and what obstacles did they face and overcome? Did these women combine traditional familial roles with their public careers—the proverbial challenge of “having it all”—or did they escape such responsibilities by remaining single, either by choice or necessity? What support structures and other networks did women have? All of these questions, and many more, were suddenly on the table when writing biographies of women.

It is important to distinguish the feminist interest in personal matters from what Oates called “pathography” in a 1988 review of David Roberts' biography of Jean Stafford—a pernicious focus on “dysfunction and disaster, illnesses and pratfalls, failed marriages and failed careers, alcoholism and breakdowns and outrageous conduct.” (Oates felt that Roberts paid too much attention to the ravages of Stafford's alcoholism and not enough to her work.) One of the main trends of twentieth-century popular culture was the disappearing boundary between public and private life, accompa-

7 Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Perry, and Ingrid Scobie (eds.), *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women* (Urbana, 1992).

nied by the increasing sexualization of everyday discourse. Private details that once would have been hidden or ignored now turn up prominently in books, films, and web pages; celebrities have become fair game for all manner of indignity, from voice-mail rants to police mug shots to sex tapes. This collapse of personal privacy in turn has affected what is considered acceptable material for biography, both for contemporary figures and those in the past. But to what end? Too often the details seem included solely for titillation rather than integrated into an overall interpretation of someone's life. Without such a larger explanatory purpose, details from private lives, far from fulfilling the goals of feminist biography, are simply the personal without the political.⁸

The fruitfulness of feminist analysis applied to biography is evident in a range of books published in the 1980s. Sicherman's *Alice Hamilton: A Life in Letters* (1984) placed the life of the medical pioneer first within her supportive family context and then within the nurturing world of women's networks at Hull House. Wexler tackled what it was like to be a female—as opposed to a male—radical in *Emma Goldman in America* (1984) and *Emma Goldman in Exile* (1989), as did Garrison in *Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent* (1989). Antler's 1987 biography of educator Lucy Sprague Mitchell employed the concept of feminism as life process. Perry looked at politics from a gendered perspective in *Belle Moskowitz: Feminine Politics and the Exercise of Power in the Age of Alfred E. Smith* (1987), as did Alpern at journalism in *Freda Kirchwey: A Woman of The Nation* (1987). O'Brien analyzed Willa Cather in terms of both gender and sexuality in *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (1987), and Lois Rudnick's *Mabel Dodge Luhan: New Women, New Worlds* (1984) tackled the writer's complicated personae. Mark's *A Stranger in Her Native Land* (1988) argued that anthropologist Alice Fletcher's work with American Indians was made possible by supportive female networks that countered the hostility of the male-dominated profession. All of these biographies were just as much influenced by the political and scholarly climate of feminism as they were by the contours of the individual lives profiled.⁹

8 Joyce Carol Oates quoted in Carl Rollyson, *Biography: A User's Guide* (Chicago, 2008), 215.

9 Sicherman, *Alice Hamilton: A Life in Letters* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984); Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America* (Boston, 1984); *idem*, *Emma Goldman in Exile* (Boston, 1989); Dee

As women's biography entered the 1990s, two vastly different books showed the new directions that it was taking while also providing confirmation that biography can make great history. The first was Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale* (1990), which used the sparse but meticulously kept diaries of Martha Ballard, an obscure colonial-era midwife on the frontier of Maine, to tell a rich and nuanced story of family, gender, medicine, politics, and community life. In many ways a microhistory, Ulrich's skilled narrative also functions as a biography because it places Ballard at the center of the story, allowing an unknown eighteenth-century woman to come alive for modern readers.¹⁰

Two years later, Cook published the first volume of her biography of Eleanor Roosevelt, which immediately shot to the bestseller lists. Twenty years after Lash's *Eleanor and Franklin*, Cook gave us a different Eleanor. Many of the so-called "facts" were the same in both books, but they resulted in dramatically different portraits. Instead of Lash's narrative pivoting around Eleanor's discovery of her husband's affair with Lucy Mercer in World War I, Cook placed the roots of Roosevelt's independence much earlier—when her husband was first elected to the New York legislature in 1910. Since such a well-bred woman could never admit to political ambition for herself, she always cloaked it under the guise of helping her husband, especially after he was stricken by polio in 1921. The power of Cook's interpretation—indeed, of feminist analysis in general—was that it provided a fresh perspective on one of the twentieth century's most influential citizens.¹¹

Any list of other notable women's biographies of the 1990s would be eclectic, as befits the breadth and diversity of the field of American women's history. However, it would certainly include Echols' biography of Janis Joplin, *Sweet Scars of Paradise* (1999), which grounded the singer in the constricted world of east Texas

Garrison, *Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent* (Philadelphia, 1989); Antler, *Lucy Sprague Mitchell: The Making of a Modern Woman* (New Haven, 1987); Perry, *Belle Moskowitz: Feminine Politics and the Exercise of Power in the Age of Alfred E. Smith* (New York, 1987); Alpern, *Freda Kirchwey: A Woman of The Nation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987); Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York, 1987); Lois Rudnick, *Mabel Dodge Luhan: New Women, New Worlds* (Albuquerque, 1984); Joan Mark, *A Stranger in Her Native Land: Alice Fletcher and the American Indians* (Lincoln, 1988).

10 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York, 1990), won the Pulitzer Prize for history as well as many other awards.

11 Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt. I. 1884–1933* (New York, 1992).

where she grew up during the 1950s and then analyzed the gender dimensions of the male-dominated world of rock and roll in which Joplin operated and to which she ultimately succumbed. Horowitz brought her expertise in the history of women's higher education to bear in *The Power and the Passion of M. Carey Thomas* (1994). Lear captured both the world of nature writing and the beginnings of the modern environmental movement in *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (1997). Cayleff situated the life of extraordinary athlete Babe Didrikson Zaharias within both sports and women's history in *Babe* (1995), and Horowitz offered an intellectual biography of Friedan in *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique* (1998). In a creative use of collective biography, Orleck interwove the lives of Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman, Freida Miller, and Clara Lemlich Shavelson to tell the story of women's contribution to the twentieth-century labor movement in *Common Sense and a Little Fire* (1995).¹²

One of the most vibrant parts of the expansion of women's history is the sustained attention to the lives and contributions of African-American women. Biography has been central to this enterprise, symbolized by the preponderance of biographical entries in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (1993). Painter totally reshaped how historians viewed the figure of Sojourner Truth in her 1996 biography. More recently, Ida Wells-Barnett has been the subject of multiple biographies, as has Harriet Tubman. The much-consulted papers of activist Pauli Murray at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe continue to spur many biographical works-in-progress.¹³

12 Alice Echols, *Sweet Scars of Paradise: The Life and Times of Janis Joplin* (New York, 1999); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Power and the Passion of M. Carey Thomas* (New York, 1994); Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York, 1997); Susan E. Cayleff, *Babe: The Life and Legend of Babe Didrikson Zaharias* (Urbana, 1995); Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique* (Amherst, 1998); Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-class Politics in the United States, 1900–1965* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

13 Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (eds.), *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (Brooklyn, 1993); Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York, 1996); Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York, 2009); Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign against Lynching* (New York, 2008); Patricia Ann Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill, 2001); Beverly Lowry, *Harriet Tubman: Imagining a Life* (New York, 2007); Kate Clifford Larsen, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York, 2004); Jean McMahan Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories* (Madison, 2003). The importance of biography applies just as strongly to the study of African-American men. See David L. Lewis, *W. E. B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality*

Southern history is another field in which biography has played a leading role. In the groundbreaking *The Southern Lady* (1970), Scott heavily relied on biographical sketches to build her case that women were more active in public life during the years before suffrage than usually thought. So did Hall in *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (1979), exploring the life of a white activist to tell the larger story of the early efforts to stamp out lynching (the fact that Hall, one of the preeminent social historians of her generation, started out as a biographer is further proof that the supposed divide between biography and social history is illusory). Clinton published biographies of both black (Tubman) and white (Fanny Kemble) southern women. Ransby and Lee, both historians, employed biography to document the influence that black women such as Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer had on the emergence of the civil rights movement, providing a much-needed counterbalance to the emphasis usually given to such male leaders as Martin Luther King.¹⁴

The field of political history also has been strongly influenced by biography. As historians moved beyond the separate-spheres paradigm of the 1970s, they began to realize that women had been much more involved in the public sphere than previously suspected. To put it another way, women's history helped to broaden the understanding of what is political in ways that have been productive not only for research on women and gender but also for the field of American political history. In addition to Cook's multiple volumes on Eleanor Roosevelt, the first volume of Sklar's meticulous and wide-ranging biography of Florence Kelley (1995) situated the history of social reform within the worlds of women's and men's political culture, with broad implications for each. Scobie provided a feminist interpretation of the political career of Helen Gahagan Douglas in *Center Stage* (1992). Allgor's biography

and the American Century, 1919–1963 (New York, 2000); Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes* (New York, 1988); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), among others.

14 Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930* (Chicago, 1970); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York, 1979); Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (New York, 2004); *idem*, *Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars* (New York, 2000); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 2003); Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana, 1999).

of Dolley Madison, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (2006), re-energized the dusty field of nineteenth-century First Lady historiography by demonstrating how Madison used social networks and other connections to advance her own—and her husband’s—political agenda.¹⁵

It was only a matter of time before feminist gender analysis began to focus on men as well as women. Witness the highly constructive attention to studies of masculinity and male roles in politics, diplomacy, economics, and the family that began in the 1990s. Although this broader definition of gender has yet to make the same inroads into historians’ biographies of men as it did on those of women, works like Dalton’s 2002 biography of Theodore Roosevelt definitely show the benefits of a gendered analysis. So does D’Emilio’s *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (2003). Even if gender is not the primary analytical framework for most biographies of men, the field of biography has long moved beyond the time when only a man’s public life was worthy of study to the detriment of the family and friendship networks that nurtured him. Feminist biography provided an important nudge in this direction.¹⁶

Just as it is possible to provide a gendered interpretation of a man’s life, so too should it be possible to provide a feminist analysis of an antifeminist figure. Alas, despite its subtitle, Critchlow’s recent biography, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade* (2005), utterly fails to do so. Focusing entirely on Schlafly’s public career, Critchlow mentions details of her personal life only in passing, dropping bombshells like her decision to go to law school or run for Congress with little comment about how this plan affected her family, marriage, and home life. More broadly, he never discusses how she might have been helped or hindered by her gender. Perhaps a future scholar will be able to provide the nuanced, integrated portrait that Schlafly deserves.¹⁷

Lurking behind this survey of women’s history is the question of what makes a biography good and reliable history. Rollyson’s

15 Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation’s Work* (New Haven, 1995); Scobie, *Center Stage: Helen Gahagan Douglas, A Life* (New York, 1992); Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York, 2006).

16 Kathleen Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life* (New York, 2002); John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York, 2003).

17 Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade* (Princeton, 2005).

notion that “biography puts characters first while history favors events” is not a fair assessment, but he is correct to say, “If you ask a historian to write a biography, you are more likely to get history.” Although not every biography written by a historian is of the “life and times” variety, such biographies, whether by a male or a female, tend to engage and analyze a larger historical landscape. The training that historians receive encourages breadth of vision, conferring tools for gathering evidence, sifting hypotheses, and making sweeping arguments. If an individual is at the center of the project, the result is biography as well as history. The further question of whether it is “good” biography or “good” history speaks to the standards of the enterprise and the skill of the author. On these terms, history and biography are by no means antithetical.¹⁸

Biographies by historians, especially historians of American women, however, are only a small subset of the wider field of biography. Can contributions from other fields, such as literary criticism, art history, and performance art, also be good history? Sometimes they are, but not always. Analyzing and re-creating the lives of women and men whose primary claims to fame were intellectual or artistic often calls for different skill sets than those about people whose lives revolved around political activism and social change; the end results or goals of these biographies are often different as well. Historical biographers can seamlessly weave their subjects into the wider exterior world, but literary biographers face the challenge of finding the right narrative balance between life events, literary criticism, and the interior roots of creativity, a process propelled by (in Hamilton’s words) “curiosity about human nature, not the more impersonal forces of society and politics.” Historians often have to proceed from the opposite direction, focusing on a particular person precisely because of his or her position in a larger historical moment or paradigm shift; the challenge is to use the individual as a window on a wider vista. The fact that biography and history per se can constitute two different agendas makes comparing them akin to comparing apples and oranges; the best course is simply to judge each on its merits.¹⁹

In that light, many biographies of literary and artistic figures

18 Rollyson, *Biography: A User's Guide*, 141–142.

19 Nigel Hamilton, *How To Do Biography: A Primer* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 66.

unquestionably qualify as good history. For example, Marshall's compelling and meticulously researched *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* (2005) fully situates her characters in the rich landscape of nineteenth-century religious, cultural, and intellectual history. So do Capper's two volumes on Margaret Fuller, and Hedrick's Pulitzer-prize winning biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Examples from the twentieth century include Bair's *Simone de Beauvoir* (1990), Robinson's *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Life* (1989), and Kaplan's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (2002). Among other shared characteristics, all of these books take an extraordinarily capacious approach to the life and times of their subjects.²⁰

In the end, the most telling distinction between types of biography does not concern whether a subject is an activist or a writer, or whether an author is a historian or a literary scholar, but whether a biography is intended for a general or for a scholarly audience. Could it be that many historians who practice biography still see themselves primarily as academics rather than professional writers, even when their biographies reach, either by intent or serendipity, a wide readership? Biographers, however, consciously pitch their products and their prose far beyond academe, aiming both their topics and their style of storytelling at the broadest possible audience. This breadth of purpose contrasts to what is seen as historians' narrow vision. Hamilton is a good example of a biographer who holds historians in disdain: "Never forget as you compose your work that the biographer is not a historian, recording facts for facts sake." Tuchman did not have much good to say about the historical profession either. But it behooves historians to look carefully at the contributions of popular writers and biographers—a topic far beyond the scope of this essay, even if it were limited to just women—because many of them may, in fact, be practicing good history.²¹

Although nonscholarly biographies need not, in principle, be devoid of historical interest, the majority of the garden-variety bi-

20 Megan Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* (New York, 2005); Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life, The Private Years* (New York, 1992); *idem*, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life, The Public Years* (New York, 2007); Joan Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York, 1994); Deidre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir* (New York, 1990); Roxana Robinson, *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Life* (New York, 1989); Carla Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York, 2002).

21 Hamilton, *Biography: A Primer*, 195.

ographies that glut the popular market generally have little to recommend them in that regard. Nor should the extent to which the demands of the marketplace can potentially shape biography, both popular and scholarly, be ignored. Successful celebrity biographers such as Barbara Leaming and Donald Spoto can generally ignore the rigors of doing original research, consulting/citing primary sources, or taking a critical analytical stance. Because they can disregard the historian's need to sift and craft arguments or make a case for the historical significance of their subjects—let alone justify their own continued employment in academia—their biographies often fail any serious test of credibility. (One thing in their favor, however, is that they are as apt to write about women as about men; Hollywood is one of the few areas of popular culture in which women enjoy equal status.) Nonetheless, they are likely to make more money and attract more attention than academic biographers do.²²

THE CRAFT Although biography is recognized as one of the most popular forms of history by the reading public, hardly anyone talks about the actual craft of writing biography. Biographies just seem to emerge *ex nihilo* in print, with no discussion of the choices and challenges of research, organization, interpretation, and voice. The apparent assumption is that historians and writers should just know how to create a biography, without any preliminary discussion or forethought (much in the way that graduate students are expected to know how to teach without any dedicated training). Similarly, reviews of biographies tend to spend 95 percent of their word count rehashing the life at hand, with scant attention to the skill of the biographer—or lack thereof—in making the story come alive. Similarly, when given an assignment to read a biography, students often tend to fixate on whether they like the person depicted rather than to bring their critical faculties to bear on whether the work represents solid scholarship or a genuine contribution to history. The life looms so large that it is often hard to see

22 Barbara Leaming's biographical studies include Bette Davis, Orson Welles, Katharine Hepburn, Roman Polanski, Rita Hayworth, Marilyn Monroe, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and Jack Kennedy. She is topped by Donald Spoto, who has written biographies of Alan Bates, Audrey Hepburn, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Tennessee Williams, Ingrid Bergman, Elizabeth Taylor, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Laurence Olivier, Marlene Dietrich, Lotte Lenya, Alfred Hitchcock, and Stanley Kramer.

the infrastructure (the interpretive framework and narrative strategy) supporting it.

When Bowen, the author of six well-respected biographies of famous men, was asked why she never wrote about a woman, she replied, “I have, six times.” She was making the point that a biography is not only about its subject but also about its biographer; behind every biography lies autobiography—the spark that draws a biographer to a subject in the first place and the interaction that unfolds as the project moves forward (or stalls, as often happens). This point holds true for all writers and their chosen forms, but it seems especially salient for biographers, perhaps because biographies take so long. Biographers live figuratively with their subjects for years; they had better feel some connection with them. As feminist theory reminds us, the personal is relevant to the broader intellectual agenda.²³

BIOGRAPHY AS A CAREER My own journey toward biography began in the 1970s. Although I have been a voracious reader since childhood, I gravitated more toward nineteenth-century novels than biography while growing up: No Great Lives for me. When I opted to major in history rather than English in college, I piggybacked my newfound identification as a feminist with a desire to research and write about women’s history. Drawn to using individual lives to tell broader historical narratives, my senior thesis at Wellesley in 1972 looked at the group of women who gathered at Seneca Falls in 1848, and my dissertation at Harvard identified a network of women who served in the New Deal. After *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* was published in 1981, I decided to do a full-scale biography of Mary W. (Molly) Dewson, the social reformer-turned-politician, who was a prominent character in my women’s network, and my career as a biographer was launched.²⁴

A formative influence soon occurred. I was asked to join a biography group in Cambridge, Mass., that also included Joyce Antler, Ann J. Lane, Barbara Sicherman, and Janet James, who were then actively working on biographies of Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Alice Hamilton, and Lavinia Dock, re-

23 Catherine Drinker Bowen quoted in Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*, 22.

24 Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

spectively. The group included the women who were to become editors of all three incarnations of *Notable American Women*. At the 1984 Berkshire Conference of Women Historians held at Smith, our biography group went public with a session titled "Individual Choices, Generational Themes: Constructing Women's History through Biography," which was greeted by an enthusiastic, overflow audience. Many of the questions with which we were grappling in our own attempts to combine the new field of women's history with the more traditional genre of biography received their first public hearing at that session.

The transformative impact of feminist analysis on my work is demonstrated by the distance of the original title of my Dewson biography, "From Wellesley to the White House," from its final incarnation as "Partner and I." The first draft was a traditional political narrative that did not deal intensively with Dewson's personal life, which she shared with a woman named Polly Porter. As I tried to make sense of the various zigzags in Dewson's career, it gradually dawned on me that practically every one of her career decisions was based on how it would affect her relationship with Porter. Consequently, my conception of the book underwent a profound shift. Instead of my initial plan to write a "straight" political biography (the word certainly has a double meaning in this case), I restructured the narrative to integrate Dewson's political and professional choices with the personal priorities of her "partnership" (their word) with Porter.²⁵

Having placed the Porter–Dewson partnership at the center of the biography, I had to confront the inconvenient fact that I had only two extant letters, both from Porter to Dewson, to support my interpretation. I had to turn to another source—a collection of scrapbooks that Porter and Dewson had lovingly assembled over the years, their conscious attempt to leave a photographic legacy of their shared lives. Photographs from these scrapbooks occupy a central place in the final version of the biography. Instead of just including pictures with captions, I crafted a pictorial essay that could stand entirely on its own as a representation of Dewson and Porter's life together. It begins with a quotation from Dewson to her trusted housekeeper in Maine: "If there is ever a fire at Moss

25 This paragraph draws from Ware, "Unlocking the Porter–Dewson Partnership: A Challenge for the Feminist Biographer," in Alpern et al., *Challenge of Feminist Biography*, 51–64.

Acre, the first thing you are to save is the scrapbooks.” I believe that the photo essay makes a major contribution to the book as a whole and shows (again, if there was any doubt) the love that bound these women together.²⁶

The story of how I came to write about the Porter–Dewson partnership holds various implications for writing biography. Besides rescuing the lives of numerous “lost women,” one of the most important contributions of women’s history to the craft of biography has been its emphasis on how personal lives intersect with public accomplishments. This is not to say that more psychological interpretations or psychobiographies are necessary, however, but that more attention should be given to the ordinary daily lives of our subjects. The people with whom they share their beds and their expenses may well factor into events beyond the household. (For example, Porter’s wealth helped to subsidize Dewson’s political career.) This insight applies both to men and women but is more salient for women achievers. Until recently, women who lived the kind of public life deemed worthy of historical treatment almost inevitably had to make decisions and sacrifices that had potentially profound effects on their personal lives. In charting a woman’s public achievements, we need to assess both the benefits and the costs of such personal choices.

After my Dewson biography was published in 1987, I toyed with the idea of a collective biography but instead settled on Amelia Earhart. The transition was not as abrupt as it first seems. The questions that animated my interest in Dewson and women’s issues in general during the New Deal—their public achievements, their exercise of power and influence, and the fate of feminism in the postsuffrage era—were still in the forefront, but the field of focus changed from politics to popular culture. Nonetheless, taking on Earhart is a daunting task for any biographer, especially since at least one or two biographies of her seem to appear every year. My publisher, W. W. Norton, even had another one on the same fall list as mine in 1993! The fact that it came to an entirely opposite conclusion bothered them not one whit.

At first I actually shunned the label of biographer, claiming that I was writing a book about Earhart but not a biography. To

²⁶ Ware, *Partner and I: Molly Dewson, Feminism, and New Deal Politics* (New Haven, 1987), 106.

that end, in my first draft I compressed all of the biographical material into the first chapter and killed her off on page forty—the biographer's revenge. When an early reader pointed out that my organization robbed one of the century's most fascinating unsolved mysteries of its inherent drama, I conceded the point and revamped the structure. Only after I had finished the final draft did I admit that I had, in fact, written a biography of Earhart, just not a conventional one. My portrait included everything that biographies are supposed to cover—Earhart's entire public career, insights about her private life, and the matter of her historical significance. Its departure from traditional biography came in its abandonment of the usual birth-to-death chronology in favor of a more thematic approach. "Stretching the boundaries of biography," I call it, but it is really what any writer tries to do with her work—find the best narrative structure to tell the story. Even though I am a huge believer in chronology (when I taught at New York University, my graduate students threatened to embroider a pillow for me with the mantra "Chronology is your friend"), when it comes to biography, I strongly prefer a topical and thematic approach.²⁷

I am the first to admit that I did not discover a single new fact or piece of evidence about Earhart's life. I simply arranged the facts in a different order, which added up to a different kind of biography, precisely what feminist scholarship has been doing all along. *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism* (1993) argues that individualistic heroines from popular culture, like Earhart, helped to keep a feminist impulse alive during a period without an active feminist movement. To make that point, I had to use not only the tools of biography and history but also cultural analysis, media representation, and iconography. Once again, photographs played a central role in the text. The book was structured with biographical chapters at the beginning and end. These bookends, as it were, allowed me to roam more thematically in the main portion of the text. Having a subject who "popped off" (her phrase) just shy of her fortieth birthday made this strategy easier to deploy than it would have been had Earhart lived a conventionally long time. It also taught me something else—that books about famous women receive more attention

27 *Idem*, "Amelia Earhart as Popular Heroine," *Culturefront* (Fall, 1993), 10–13.

than do books about more obscure women, and given the public's ongoing fascination with Earhart's life and disappearance, books about her usually shoot to the top of the list.²⁸

Feeling cocky as a biographer, I decided to return to my idea of a collective biography. Just as *Beyond Suffrage* had spawned my Dewson biography, so did a chapter in *Still Missing* about other contemporary popular heroines in the 1920s and 1930s provide the template for *Letter to the World: Seven Women Who Shaped the American Century* (1998). I opened the book with a mock audition to choose the following cast of characters: Eleanor Roosevelt, Dorothy Thompson, Margaret Mead, Katharine Hepburn, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, Martha Graham, and Marian Anderson. I crafted short biographical essays on each one, counting on the cumulative effect of their shared influence as individualistic popular heroines to tie the book together and make the broader point about their importance to women's history and feminism. Whether my methodology worked or not, I had great fun trying to distill each life into forty pages or so.²⁹

As an aside, if I could wave a magic wand over the field of biography as a whole, I would cut almost every biography in half. Who actually reads these doorstops? How much can any but the most retentive reader remember? For this reason, I have always been attracted to juvenile biographies in which authors are forced to distill a life into a manageable size and interpretation for young readers. It is especially instructive to compare books written for adult and/or scholarly audiences with juvenile versions by the same author. For example, O'Brien's brief but cogent treatment of Willa Cather's life for young readers in Chelsea House's "Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians" series offers a clearer and much more accessible portrait of the artist than her far denser *An Emerging Voice*, which in almost 500 pages manages only to reach the publication of Cather's first novel. Similarly, Cayleff's young adult biography of Didrikson is much more forthright in its treatment of her lesbianism than her longer scholarly book. Perhaps every biographer should be forced to do a version of her book for young readers.³⁰

28 *Idem*, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism* (New York, 1993).

29 *Idem*, *Letter to the World: Seven Women Who Shaped the American Century* (New York, 1998).

30 O'Brien, *Willa Cather* (New York, 1995); Susan E. Cayleff, *Babe Didrikson: The Greatest All-Sport Athlete of All Time* (Berkeley, 1995).

After my third biography, I began to identify myself publicly as a serial biographer, even though that label made me sound like a demented psychopath. Serial biographers are common among professional writers but fairly rare in the historical profession. Many historians tackle a biography at some point in their careers, but it is usually a one-shot deal. Often the seeds of a biography lie in an earlier book in which the individual in question played an important role, as in the progression from Freedman's *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830–1930* (1981) to *Maternal Justice: Miriam Van Waters and the Female Reform Tradition* (1996). In other cases, a historian with an abiding interest in a particular historical figure had to wait for the right timing and inclination to undertake a biography. For example, Kessler-Harris had always been fascinated by Lillian Hellman, but not until she accepted my offer to do the entry on Hellman for *Notable American Women* did she decide to take the plunge.³¹

One reason that I happily accepted the offer to edit *Notable American Women* was the chance to immerse myself in the selection of the approximately 500 women to be included in the biographical dictionary. An ulterior motive was the opportunity to mine this vast database of dead women for possible future books. The match was especially good since the volume's time frame (women who died between 1976 and 1999) meant that the height of subjects' careers would be the decades from the 1920s to the 1960s, precisely my main period of scholarly expertise. Reading obituaries of possible candidates in the *New York Times*, I felt as though I were reading the personal ads, except that I was looking for a subject for my next book, not a mate. I found her—radio talk show pioneer Mary Margaret McBride (1899–1976).

Mary Margaret (everyone was on a first-name basis with her, and I was too in my book) offered special challenges to the historian. Known and loved by millions of listeners at the height of her radio career in the 1940s, she had been off the air for decades and was quickly receding from popular memory. Publishers welcome biographies, but they also want to be assured of an audience and sales before assenting to publish obscure figures like McBride. Add to this stricture what I call the great black hole of radio history:

31 Estelle Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830–1930* (Ann Arbor, 1981); *idem*, *Maternal Justice: Miriam Van Waters and the Female Reform Tradition* (Chicago, 1996); Alice Kessler-Harris, "Lillian Hellman," in Ware and Braukman (eds.), *Notable American Women: Completing the Twentieth Century*, 291–293.

Compared to the reams of books on Hollywood and film, radio is a backwater in media studies, despite its enormous popularity in mid-century America. Enticing readers to be interested in this figure was going to take an especially creative narrative structure.

After a fitful attempt to compress all of Mary Margaret's pre-radio biography into a first chapter, as I had with Earhart's pre-aviation career (confirming the proposition that biographers, like generals, often fight the last war), I realized that without knowing why Mary Margaret was important, no one would be willing to plow through this background chapter, let alone read the book. Therefore, I decided to start the book with six short chapters that described her radio program at its height, with an emphasis on the bond that she formed with her predominantly female, stay-at-home audience. The experience of Mary Margaret's listeners suggests that women in the 1930s and 1940s actively, indeed greedily, listened to the radio for information and ideas to which they would not otherwise have had access. Radio programs like Mary Margaret's thus helped to break down the societal forces that kept women isolated and marginalized in their homes. After my readers learned why Mary Margaret's program was so important both for women's history and radio history, the narrative backtracked to tell the story of her upbringing, early career, and eventual move to radio, a story that she had shared with her listeners over the air on many occasions. The third part of the book picks up the thread from World War II to her death in 1976, and an epilogue discusses the contemporary talk-show phenomenon with a look back to Mary Margaret's earlier role. I am convinced that if I had employed a traditional cradle-to-grave chronology, the book would have been a dud.³²

My current project stretches the boundaries of biography even further, although this time I may have gone too far. Using my Earhart book as a model, I am writing about Billie Jean King, Title IX, and women's sports, mainly in the 1970s. Once again I have chosen a biographical figure (this time one well known; I learned my lesson with McBride), around whom to anchor a larger theme—in this case, the revolution in women's sports that

32 Ware, *It's One O'Clock and Here Is Mary Margaret McBride: A Radio Biography* (New York, 2005).

has occurred since the 1970s. King is in every chapter, sometimes as the dominant figure and other times in more of a supporting role. I use her to connect the history of sports with the history of feminism, linking the explosion of opportunities for women in tennis and sports in general with the revival of second-wave feminism during the 1960s and 1970s. I trace all of the major facets and events in her life—including her tennis career, her advocacy for women's sports, and her struggle to accept her sexuality—always trying to set those themes within the broader frame of women's history over the past four decades. I consider it a biography, just not a traditional one. I hope that it will also be considered good history.

It has now been forty years since women's biography burst onto the scene, forty productive and stimulating years of scholarship. No longer would anyone question why we need biographies of women; no longer should a scholar feel hesitant or discouraged about embarking on such an undertaking. Yet, there is no denying that the field as a whole, and the reception of the books, has shifted. In the 1970s, it was new and exciting; readers (and professors offering the first women's history and women's studies classes) practically lined up for the books as soon as they were published. Characters like Eleanor Roosevelt, Virginia Woolf, and Edith Wharton captured the popular imagination. But known luminaries were not the only ones who attracted the attention of biographers. A whole new range of subjects—the female half of the population—suddenly became fair game for biographical treatment. Bringing a previously unknown or unrecognized woman to wider attention has always been one of the most compelling goals of modern women's biography; early practitioners tackled it with almost messianic fervor. It was fun having the first crack.

By no means, however, have all of the good subjects been taken. New historical figures worthy of biographical treatment will always continue to surface as history widens its reach into new fields and tackles new questions. For example, Vicki Ruiz is working on a biography of Latina labor activist Luisa Moreno, whom she met several decades ago when she was researching her dissertation on the unionization of cannery workers in California in the 1930s. Mae Ngai is writing a multigenerational biography of a Chinese American family, the Tapes, in San Francisco. These bi-

ographies will no doubt take central places in the fields of Latino history and Asian-American history.³³

Actually, now may be a good time to start revisiting some of the earlier classics, just the way Cook revisited and fundamentally revised Lash's view of Eleanor Roosevelt. This is not just a case of discovering new sources or uncovering fresh evidence. A biography is inextricable from the time of its writing. Contemporary questions will always drive a project, whereas, questions that animated earlier biographies can seem dated and less compelling. Biographers must accept that there is no such thing as a definitive biography and that their subjects will always be open to multiple interpretations. For example, admirable as Middlebrook's haunting 1991 biography of Anne Sexton is, the time is overdue for a scholar to revisit Sexton's life with a more critical analysis of how the male psychiatric profession treated women patients during the 1950s and 1960s. The next Sexton biography might also pay more attention to her poetry and less to her dysfunctional life and eventual suicide.³⁴

The thrust of feminist biography several decades ago—focusing on the interplay between the personal and the political during a woman's life—is starting to lose its freshness now that such an approach is so much more commonplace for men as well as women. Just as women's lives (at least elite white women's lives) are increasingly becoming more similar to men's, the former chasm between how biographers write a woman's life and how they write a man's life has narrowed. From a certain perspective, this development should be cause for rejoicing, but the fact that so many more biographies of men than of women continue to be written (and reviewed) should be ample warning against complacency. There is still much more advocacy work to be done before biography becomes truly gender-neutral.³⁵

Because I initially embraced biography in the formative decade of the 1980s, I suspect that I will always approach my subjects

33 Both Ruiz and Ngai presented their work at the Schlesinger Library Summer Seminar on Gender History, "Writing Past Lives: Biography as History," Cambridge, Mass., June 24–29, 2007.

34 Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Boston, 1991).

35 In my admittedly unscientific survey (what Heilbrun once called the "Aunt Agatha and me" approach to statistics), I reckoned that approximately 30% of the biographies reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review* in 2007 and 2008 were about women—a proportion substantially higher than in 2003, when it was only 22%.

through the lens of feminist biography. Yet, I must admit the tiniest temptation to rethink my stance after teaching Ransby's masterful biography of civil-rights leader Ella Baker. Making it clear that her personal life was her business alone, Baker insisted that she be judged on her political actions and influence, not any notions of her role as daughter, wife, or caretaker of her niece. This stance fundamentally affected how Ransby framed the book. As Hine and others have pointed out, black women often had good reasons to keep their feelings and emotions to themselves. If so, the feminist biography model of connecting the personal to the political may not work equally well across all fields of women's history. Turning that connection on its head, Ransby's biography suggests that the most radical position that a woman can take is to move beyond gender entirely. But is not freedom from gender constraints one of the goals that feminism has been trying to achieve for all these years? Maybe this balance should be seen as yet another challenge for feminist biography.³⁶

In the end, the attempt to grapple with the question of whether biography is good history is probably too broad and diffuse for all but the most facile generalizations. One of the main contributions of women's history and feminist theory has been to challenge the category of *woman* by always asking, "Which women?" Broad categories like *biography* and *history* could fruitfully be subjected to the same question. In the end, I am left with a fairly simple conclusion, based on my decades of wandering as a serial biographer in the larger field of history: It is much easier to write biographies than to write about biography.

36 See Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, and Schecter, *Ida B. Wells and American Reform*, for a discussion of gender constraints. See also Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs*, XIV (1989), 912–920; rpr. in Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela Di Leonardo (eds.), *The Gender/Sexuality Reader: Culture, History, and Political Economy* (New York, 1997), 434–439.