



Biography

in the Writing of History

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THE INFLUENCE of particular men and women has long been recognized by historiographers as a central driving force behind important events and developments. Allan Nevins wrote that the "most prominent of the fortuitous chances of history is the intermittent appearance of commanding personalities." Using Thomas Carlyle as his authority, he explained: "A living spirit guides the race, and . . . this spirit is best embodied in the great leaders—whether the hero as soldier, the hero as saint, or the hero as man of letters."

And "some personalities have been . . . 'cataclysmic.'"^{*} Hence, an important figure in history may be regarded as a "great" man or woman whether he or she affected the human experience in a positive or negative way. Special recognition does not bear any moral connotation, or even suggest that a person earned an image of greatness. It conveys only the perception that he or she initiated, changed, governed, expressed, or in some other way affected a process of life enough to rank among the commanding personalities of history.

An image worthy of special attention can evolve from contributions of variable scope and significance. A leader in national or international affairs has made an ideal subject for the biographer. Surely Arthur Link has felt secure in his commitment to explain Woodrow Wilson's progressive influences as president at Princeton University, governor of New Jersey, and chief executive for the United States. Stanley Vestal and others have had no doubts about the value of doing biography on Sitting Bull, because the Hunkpapa Sioux leader gained an image of influence on intercultural relations in North America as great as that of any Indian since Montezuma.

Some men and women of regional stature or symbolic importance have made obvious choices for biographers, too. Harold McCracken was safe in his assumption that George Catlin and Charles Russell should be singled out for their artistic portrayals of American western landscapes and societies. Several authors have thought it worth while to prepare biographies on Dakota Indian leaders named Wabasha and Little Crow, even though no member of either family ever presumed to do more than share responsibility for

^{*} Nevins, *Gateway to History*, 50 (New York, 1962).

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tribal life and Indian-white relations in the area between central Wisconsin and the Big Sioux River Valley. Sister Consuela Marie Duffy wrote with confidence about the importance of heiress Katharine Drexel, who brought a fortune from Drexel, Morgan and Company to found a religious order that improved conditions for American Indians and black people.

In the use of biography to recognize or honor such a wide variety of contributions, the selection of historical personalities is not always equitable. Some individuals of considerable significance have been overlooked through accidents of fate – the destruction of personal papers, contributions not likely to stir the imaginations of readers, similar accomplishments by others already recognized in print, and so forth. Others of modest accomplishment have become subjects of study because personal friends or novice biographers have erred in their judgments about the appropriate goals of the genre.

To qualify for recognition in biography, one should have played a central role in some incident or development worthy of narration and explication. When this criterion is satisfied, biography becomes a most efficient means of dealing with the past. A life story addresses cause with clarity, for most events occur and movements evolve through the efforts of influential individuals. Biography cuts to the center of process, because ordinarily a course of events is tailored by a few to be accomplished by many. Biography explains consequence, because almost any development may be evaluated efficiently through reminiscences by or studies about its principal architects. The utility of a life story is enhanced, too, if the subject has exemplified or personified a movement. For instance, the best way to understand the evolution of modern nursing is through the life story of Florence Nightingale.

THE BIOGRAPHIES of Minnesotans in this issue clearly satisfy the essential criterion for selection and reveal how three commanding personalities affected movements of abiding significance in state, regional, or national history. The life story of Edmund Ely describes the career of a missionary who was fairly typical among those who operated northwestern Indian stations for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions during the age of Jackson. Evidently,

Ely was an easterner who came west to find meaning in life, as well as to promote the doctrines of Christian faith and the principles of American nationalism. Throughout his tenure in the field, he served as a representative of Calvinist dogma together with Anglo-American culture among tribal members. At Sandy Lake, Fond du Lac, and Pokegama, he experienced problems with interdenominational squabbles and suffered rejection by day school enrollees. For many years of service, he gained only a handful of converts and endured the tensions of cultural interface. His experience was typical among those of ABCFM ecclesiastics in almost every way except that he lacked tenacity. Ely was like the brothers Samuel and Gideon Pond, who left Dakota missions in southern Minnesota out of frustration before their work was done, and unlike the families of Stephen Riggs and Thomas Williamson, who remained to establish an intercultural belief system that survives under Indian control today.

A fascinating essay on the presidential bid of William Windom deals with nominating strategies and convention procedures in 1880, when Republicans dominated politics across the United States. Based mainly upon newspaper reports, this piece explains how a U.S. senator from Minnesota with some proclivities similar to those of Ignatius Donnelly, James B. Weaver, and William Jennings Bryan nearly won nomination as the regular Republican candidate, and inevitable election. It says little about accomplishments in Congress that made Windom a likely nominee for his party in 1880, but it offers “tantalizing . . . conjecture” about how close he came as a candidate from a state which has yet to place one of its own in the White House.

The life story of Horace Cleveland makes an ideal biography. This student of Frederick Law Olmsted brought eastern standards of civic improvement and landscape design to the Twin Cities in the post-Civil War era. Through their application he left his personal imprint on the character of the metropolitan area.

Thus several themes in regional history are presented effectively in biographical essays. They deny a reader access to details, but they give efficient emphasis to the origins, developments, and long-range significance of movements to which three commanding personalities devoted their professional lives.



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