

## The biographers' tales

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THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, editors. Sixty volumes. Oxford University Press. £7,500 (US \$13,000). 0 19 861411 X

Who's in, who's out and who's writing

Different literary forms have been dominant at different times in different countries. In Britain, drama expressed the shifting pattern of society over four generations from the mid-sixteenth century, poetry from the mid-seventeenth, the novel from the mid-eighteenth. History had its day from William Robertson, Gibbon and Hume to Henry Hallam, Macaulay and the Trevelyan, and poetry had another surge in the nineteenth century. Fichte, in *Über das Wesen des Gelehrten*, had an explanation for this, picked up by both Coleridge and Carlyle. There is a "divine idea" at the bottom of the world, not recognizable to most of us among the superficialities of life, but (the words are Carlyle's) "the Man of Letters is sent hither specially that he may discern for himself, and make manifest to us this same Divine Idea: in every generation it will manifest itself in a new dialect".

Has biography come to express the spirit of our age? More and more biographies command an ever larger readership. Carlyle would not have been surprised: "The History of the World is but the Biography of great men", from which he drew the surprising deduction that made *On Heroes* so exciting in 1840, that "Odin, Luther, Johnson, Burns . . . are all originally of one stuff; that only by the world's reception of them, and the shapes they assume, are they so immeasurably diverse".

It was this principle, interpreted by Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, that inspired George Smith, the great publisher, to bring the Dictionary of National Biography into existence in 1882. His original idea had been a world biography on the lines of the *Biographie Universelle* (forty volumes, 1843-63), but in English. Stephen, who edited *The Cornhill Magazine* for Smith, thought otherwise, and on his advice in 1882, Smith "resolved to confine his efforts to the production of a complete dictionary of national biography which should supply full, accurate and concise biographies of all noteworthy inhabitants of the British Islands and the Colonies (exclusive of living persons) from the earliest historical period to the present time". This succinct definition by Lee, who took over from Stephen in 1891, had some odd exceptions: almost all the Irish rebels of 1798 were included, but pre-1776 Americans were not. But on the whole that was the rule applied then, and in the supplements published since.

Chroniclers of the DNB from Lee onwards give the impression that British biography, or at least biographical dictionaries, sprang from the brow of Zeus, without antecedents. Far from it: Aelfric's *Lives of the saints* inaugurated a long medieval tradition, and Thomas More's *Life of Richard III*, written in Latin and English, looked back to Sallust as well as forward to the exemplary plan of Izaak Walton's *Lives*. This, too, was not new; the "parallel lives" of North's translation of Plutarch were implicitly examples. Dryden first coined "biography" in English to define Plutarch as "the history of particular men's lives" (Fuller's *Worthies* provides "biographer" for their writers). But the earliest attempt at a complete national dictionary was by Thomas Birch (1705-66), who has descended from "historian and biographer" in the old DNB to a mere "compiler" in the new. He did indeed compile many "lives", some if not all original, but his *Biographia Britannica*: or, the lives of the most eminent persons who have flourished in Great Britain and Ireland (1747-66) was the first systematic alphabetic dictionary of its subject. Like all its successors, it drew on the obituaries of the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1731-1876), so perhaps that publication's founder, Edward Cave, is the real father of British biography. But Birch's dictionary found imitators, the most successful *The British Plutarch* by Thomas Mortimer (1762), and a continuator, Andrew Kippis, whose unwieldy second edition was never completed.

None of these predecessors was given much credit in the original DNB (although its title was to have been *Biographia Britannica*) and they have fared even less well in the new, due, perhaps, to a further century's gap between these and Smith's enterprise. Lee wrote an admirable account of this, and of Smith himself, in the first volume of the 1901 Supplement to the DNB, which he carried up to 1912. About his own collaboration with Stephen, Lee wrote affectingly of the former's "catholic interests . . . his tolerant spirit, his sanity of judgement, and his sense of fairness"; if impatient with "mere antiquarian research" (what did he make of his most prolific contributor, Thompson Cooper, who "never ceased to investigate the antiquarian by-paths of literature?"), "he refused mercy to contributors who offered him vague conjecture or sentimental eulogy instead of unembroidered fact". Lee himself "was not more autocratic than was necessary for the smooth running of the machine up to time . . . and realized that its value depended on the general standard of the articles and not chiefly on the merits of the more important lives. His relations with his staff were far from autocratic". The two shared "the editor's sanctum", a small back room next to Smith, Elder's premises, to which they were connected by a speaking-tube.

The large front room looking into Waterloo Place was the workshop; several large tables, many inkpots, piles of proofs and manuscripts on

chairs and tables, a little pyramid of Stephen's pipes at one end of the chimney piece, a little pyramid of Lee's at the other end. The narrow side room opening out of it held on its shelves a fine assortment of reference books, sets of the Gentleman's Magazine and of Notes and Queries, Wood, Le Neve, and other biographical collections.

The picture is by C. H. Firth. The scene, with which he was familiar as a contributor, clearly appealed to him, and he was one of the main advocates, with H. W. C. Davis and J. R. Weaver, of the acceptance of the bequest by Smith's son-in-law of the copyright and stereotype plates of the DNB to the Oxford University Press in 1917. This was bitterly opposed by Charles Cannan, Secretary to the Delegates of the Press, but he died in 1919, and Davis and Weaver produced two more volumes, covering 1912-30 (Davis had the victims, Weaver the generals of the First World War). L. G.

Wickham-Legg edited the next two decades, assisted in the second by E. T.

Williams, who was responsible for the next two, up to 1970; he retired in 1980.

The standard set by Stephen and Lee was kept up by Davis and Weaver, although constrained by the all too recent deaths of their subjects. Shortening the focus from ten centuries to ten years made problems that their successors failed to solve, the later volumes conspicuously arid and banal, apart from the odd posthumous hatchet job. The problem was not unrecognized at Oxford; immediately after the bequest, Davis wrote that "the tendency after the war will be towards the study of Movements and Developments rather than of pure biography". The study of medieval and some periods of later British history had been transformed by the series of abstracts of original documents produced by the Record Commission in the nineteenth century, and the DNB was carried on in its wake; it was now overtaken by its own success. In 1941, John Sparrow analysed some of its shortcomings, its narrow vertical sections of profession, the equally constricted horizontal layers of class, the venial failure to anticipate the judgement of posterity, all matters on which Stephen and Lee had failed to agree.

The 1970s, Williams's last decade, were miserable for Oxford University Press. The oil crisis had brought a threefold rise in the cost of paper, but "Resale Price Maintenance" required Board of Trade sanction (often painfully delayed) for any increase in the price of the 18,000 titles then in Oxford print. But the DNB was not forgotten; Janet Adam Smith wrote a cogent appeal for revision in the TLS in 1972. I had been involved in planning what became the very successful New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, where the commercial success of the existing edition enabled a wholly rewritten text, computer-based and thus capable of simultaneous publication; I wrote a long report for the Delegates of the Press, recommending a similar approach. The "Compact" DNB duly appeared, but investment in the future was deemed impossible at a time of general retrenchment. The London branch of OUP was closed, and then the printing business, three centuries old, in Oxford. Short-sighted though the latter decision proved, the removal of the general publishing business to Oxford awoke the dormant academic side, no longer prosperous after the huge American investment in academe ended abruptly with the Kent State University massacre. But it was the huge success of "English as a Foreign Language" that restored both prosperity and funds, and enabled the Press to think again about the DNB.

Christine Nicholls's volume of 1,000 Missing Persons, published in 1993, led the way. It put right some shortcomings of the past: Sir George Cayley, deemed eccentric in his own time, was now recognized as a pioneer of aviation; more generally, something was done to rectify the imbalance between the sexes due to the rigidity that Sparrow had noticed. Already in April 1990, the Delegates had, with the British Academy, formally applied to the Government for funding to support the research costs of a complete new edition. This was granted through the Academy, the Press undertaking the cost of editorial (including contributors' fees), production and distribution costs.

H. C. G. Matthew, editor of Gladstone's Diaries, was appointed editor and started work in September 1992. He found a plan that envisaged publication in serial parts, like the original DNB, due to start in 1995 and end in 2010. He sensibly recognized the advantages of computer-compilation, and determined that the deadline for publication of the complete work should be brought forward to 2004.

With equal good sense, he determined that the old edition should not be abandoned, no matter how obsolete some of it was, taking Smith's view of the DNB as "a living organism". Computer technology made it possible to reproduce the original text alongside the new (some of these are not original, for Lee went on revising until 1912). Digital-imaging techniques made it possible to illustrate the articles, and one in five of them now have portraits provided by the National Portrait Gallery.

All this has been achieved, despite Colin Matthew's untimely death in 1999, to be seamlessly succeeded by Brian Harrison (both owed much to Robert Faber, the project director). It has cost some £25 million, of which £3.7 million is government-funded, the Press supplying £19.2 million towards all the costs of compilation and a further £3 million in manufacturing costs. This investment, editorial and financial, redeeming seventy years of half-hearted support, justifies the title Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, which might seem at first sight presumptuous. Its publication, complete and on time, is an achievement worthy of the congratulation bestowed on it in the general introduction. Altogether, 54,922 articles have been written by 12,550 authors, under a supervising committee of twenty, with two editors, thirteen consultant editors, 375 assistant editors, forty project staff, forty publishing staff (plus a further twenty-one OUP staff), three picture researchers, 144 research assistants, and about 300 freelance, temporary, or part-time staff. The text that they have produced is available in sixty volumes of print (without the "original" texts) or online at an annual subscription of £195 (+ VAT - why?) for individuals, varying rates for institutions.

With the subscription comes access to further revisions, which are to be continued under the editorship of Laurence Goldman. It is with this that the Oxford investment will be justified and (with luck) rewarded. Twenty-five years ago, a computer-based New Grove not only enabled simultaneous publication of the entire work, but subsequent derivatives, chronological or thematic (the volume on opera, for example), in book form. In 1995, Matthew promised the same in his Leslie Stephen Lecture on "The New Dictionary of National Biography". A set of thematic dictionaries of different professions, each named after one of the Muses (like Herodotus), might make entertaining reading. But it seems more likely that the ODNB will be the last such work to be published in that form, as well as on the Web, to which we all now turn first for any reference.

How well does it work as a website? Well enough, in its primary purpose of delivering an article on someone you know whose life you wish to explore.

Furthermore, you can obtain lists of all the names in alphabetic or chronological order, or in reverse, and also lists of members of "families" or "groups", related to the subject of your enquiry. You can also click on the "original" texts and on the names of contributors, with lists of the articles that they have written.

There are, besides, "themes" on which you can obtain short essays or lists. You can even search the entire text for individual words or combinations thereof. All this is easily done, but ease of access is not the same as versatility, and here there are some shortcomings. You have to ask for names in the right way; it is no good keying in "Colin Matthew", it must be "H. C. G. Matthew" ("Matthew, H" or "Matthew, C" will work, although with an intermediate sort). Ada, Lady Lovelace must be sought as "Augusta Byron". Peers were always difficult to find in the DNB: titles might change, but not the family name, so you had to look there, however familiar the title.

In the ODNB you can find them under either, but the names of the titles are a new hazard: "lord" or "countess" will work, but not "earl" or "duke" (perhaps considered to be names). "Families" or "groups" are limited to those identified as such: "Stephen" is a family, but not "Montagu". You can have a list of all Montagu Earls of Salisbury (except, inexplicably, Thomas, the ninth Earl), but it is no good trying to work out how the Montagus and Nevilles were related. As to "groups", you can have "Pre-Raphaelite women" but no Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the Tolpuddle Martyrs but not the Souls; try a word-search, and you get, not Lady Desborough, but pages of those who left money for masses. You can look up "fields of interest", twenty-five in all, such as "art" or "trade and retailing". As to themes, a reflection of Davis's "Movements and Developments", they too are limited in scope: what is the use of a list of the names of all the Home Secretaries, or unique of a history of Berwick-upon Tweed (omitting that, due to a change in the official style of the realm, it remained at war with Germany without a break from 1914 until 1945)?

Just searching the database, however, with all these options, is a wonderful diversion in itself, with endless possibilities. No doubt its rigidities will disappear, just as text-messaging has been transformed by a "memory" that anticipates the word you want as you key it. What, then, of the text itself? Over more than forty years I have grown used to the original DNB in sixty-three volumes, 30,941 articles by 653 authors (most of them by fifty-seven in-house writers), bound in olive pebble-grain cloth. My edition belonged to G. M. Trevelyan (the subject of an excellent article by David Cannadine in the ODNB), and came to me after his death in 1962. It is marked in Volume One. "Send errata to the Secretary to the Delegates, Clarendon Press, Oxford". It seems unlikely that George Trevelyan did, since his note on G. C. Boase's article on Edward Horsman (1807-76), one of the Adullamites of 1866, has escaped revision.

Boase wrote, "He best served the public by exposing jobs and other weak points in the ecclesiastical system"; Trevelyan noted, "He was finally driven out of politics for swindling a relative of his of enormous sums of money". The reviser is Matthew himself, one of 631 to which he turned his hand. He also wrote 147 new articles, in 289,447 words, more than anyone else. Those on the more famous include A. J. Balfour, John Buchan, Edward VII and VIII (a proficient if not expert player of the bagpipes), George V and VI, Gladstone, Sidney Herbert, Harold Macmillan, C. F. Masterman, Florence Nightingale, Sir Cecil Spring-Rice, Connop Thirlwall and (with K. D. Reynolds) Queen Victoria. Herbert and Nightingale make a good pairing, Macmillan is certainly fair and sometimes vivid, if lacking in character, and Gladstone masterly, if a little too consciously so, in its control of so much material. The minor characters that Matthew added are an odd collection: Gladstone's sad sister Helen, who might have otherwise rated no more than a sentence in the article on her brother, Thomas Beighton, a missionary printer, James Jeremie, Dean of Lincoln, Isaac Jermy, victim of a celebrated mid-Victorian murder, and Nicholas Pocock, a contributor to the DNB. They all seem bit-players in the great Gladstonian drama.

But the appearance of these figures is only part of more drastic changes in balance. The old DNB had 1,286 barristers and judges but only eight solicitors (not so surprising then). The clergy were even more dominant, and politicians and authors had more than their fair share, simply because facts about them were accessible. Now Anita McConnell has written 595 articles, mainly on scientists and inventors, Anne Pimlott Baker 470 on painters, gardeners and businessmen, and Elizabeth Baigent 437 on travellers, many more of each profession than in the DNB. The book trade, book-collectors and librarians are still under-represented, and the articles on newer media, such as broadcasting, are erratic - Lord Reith, Richard Dimbleby, Norman Collins and Sir George Barnes might have lived on different planets. The total number of persons is up by 42 per cent, an increase far from merely modern; every century before 1500 (except the seventh and eleventh) has half as many again. Matthew saw that "Stephen disliked the concept of absolute worth as a criterion for inclusion, sensibly preferring utility, interest, readers' demand, variety of coverage, spice, liveliness and individuality", and determined to pursue these goals further, fortified by far wider access to material.

In this he was hoist on his own petard, the equally sensible decision to retain all the original subjects, however irrelevant their "worth" might seem today. But people previously excluded by geography or time, Britain's Roman and earlier native rulers, pre-1776 Americans and others whose lives had been spent abroad, as well as foreigners who lived in Britain, people in business and labour, arts and culture other than literary on a far wider definition - all these were now admitted. Persons famous for their opposition to British expansion, Powhattan, Nuncomar, Cetewayo and Te Rauparaha (but not Tipu Sultan or Nana Sahib) are now included, and with them strangers who came to this country, "Prince Giolo", brought by William Dampier from the Philippines, Omai, who came with Sir Joseph Banks, and Bennelong, Governor Phillip's ambassador to the Aborigines in Australia, who visited George III. The original eleven "legendary personages", among them King Arthur and Merlin, have grown to include Britannia, Friar Tuck, Junius, John Bull and Tommy Atkins (but not the Long Man of Cerne, arguably the most ancient Briton). And there are many, many more women.

This rights an old wrong, but only to a limited extent. If the DNB came out when a class system was in force that segregated "public" and "private" life more than before or since (relegating women too easily to the "private" zone), adjusting the balance is easier said than done. Great political hostesses, head-mistresses, women religious, landowners, academics (now), or those in industry and trade, wise women and nurses, poets, novelists and even preachers, all need a proper account. But this still leaves "the feminist argument that women were simply excluded from the British power structure" (Matthew) unanswered. That they were included to a greater degree than the DNB suggests is certainly true, but how to reflect it? Many more are now included, double the number in the DNB, thanks to the specialist consultant editor, Jane Garnett. But "double" only means up from 5 per cent to 10 per cent; if the word "woman" recurs 4,615 times, "man"

is still four times as frequent.

Women famous in their own right are still apt to be found under their husbands, and others, like Marion Richardson, whose method taught generations of children to write well, are omitted. Not all the women are heroines like Margaret Roper (who gets a disappointing article), Florence Nightingale, or Edith Cavell. Matthew and Reynolds's Victoria is shorter and sharper than Lee's, and Reynolds, author of 252 articles, accounts for women already famous, including Princess Diana, Louise von Alten, successively Duchess of Manchester and Devonshire, and Lady Flora Hastings.

Gladstone's near- Nemesis Laura Thistlethwayte, "courtesan and lay-preacher", is dealt with by J.

Gilliland, along with eighty-seven others, mostly actresses, with a few murderers and pirates. Theo Aronson has a royal straight flush with Mrs Keppel, Lillie Langtry and Skittles. Barbara White has written sixteen lively articles on women criminals; the beguiling Moll Cutpurse is by Paul Griffiths. There are about a hundred entries for suffragettes, among them Mary Sophia Allen, later a pioneer policewoman.

"Occupation" makes it hard to discern sex, the more so since words that denote it are usually pejorative. All fifty-one nurses are women, but Elizabeth Raffald is the only woman among the ten cooks, while "embroiderer", once a male preserve, now registers only one man out of seven. Of sixty-one "gardeners" only seven are women, plus three "garden designers", like Gertrude Jekyll. Against this, occupations once restricted to men now number many more women. But no increase in representation will satisfy ultra-feminists, who are interested only in some women, and even those do not always comply with what is desired of them. Thus Rebecca West's opinion of D. H. Lawrence ("She appreciated his vitalism, but found lapses in common sense, particularly in regard to issues of gender") leads to the conclusion "This sensitivity to the dynamics of gender makes the recovery of her work important for feminist studies". I can hear the snort of outraged derision that this would have provoked from its subject, and Jane Austen would no doubt have smiled at the elephantine account accorded to her, no improvement on Stephen's superannuated but perceptive essay at a tenth the length.

On the other hand, Virginia Woolf, quintessence of the Stephen legacy, receives an understanding as well as objective account from Lyndall Gordon. Matters of specific feminine interest, such as fashion, do not come off so well. There is no article for Edward Molyneux, the first to put British fashion on the world map, though Norman Hartnell, Charles Worth, Thomas Burberry and Austin Reed are in. Constance Spry and Ernestine Carter, however, are both given their due, and there are moving evocations of Jean Muir (by Fiona MacCarthy), as well as Elizabeth David (Artemis Cooper) and Jill Tweedie (Katharine Whitehorn).

Along with fairer distribution of the sexes comes, inevitably, sex itself, once firmly a "private" matter. There was no mention of Lord Grey's notorious liaison with Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, in the DNB article by J. A. Hamilton, whose onslaught on George IV pulled no punches. Trevelyan's extensive notes do not allude to it, but E. A. Smith redresses this even handedly.

Other extra-marital or same-sex connections are deftly acknowledged by a "See also" cross-reference. Owen Dudley Edwards deals with its many complexities in the life of Oscar Wilde in a marvellous article full of original aperçus, such as "All the major Irish Renaissance writers of protestant origin showed some evangelical inheritance, substituting cultural for spiritual leadership". Perhaps its most extreme expression comes in the sad and tender account of Donald Cammell, as irresistible a human being as Bruce Chatwin and even more attractive. The further breadth of human nature, as rich as any in the DNB, is displayed to the full in the 142 articles written by Richard Davenport-Hines, every one a winner, notably that on Ernest Boulton, the Victorian transvestite. Some are eminently respectable, distinguished either by birth, like the ninth Duke of Devonshire, or by achievement, such as Sibyl Colefax, Richard Monckton-Milnes (a particularly good article), or Sir George Lewis. But generally there is some interesting flaw, as in the lives of Chips Channon, Lady Caroline Blackwood, or J. Meade Falkner (minus the breach-of-contract trial that turned him from armaments to writing novels and collecting liturgical manuscripts).

Some are outright rogues - aristocratic, Lords Lucan and Erroll ("colonialist and philanderer"), commercial, Emil Savundra, Peter Rachman and Robert Maxwell (his vast influence on the book trade not forgotten), or political, Tom Driberg and Stephen Ward. Others recall famous crimes or trials: William Palmer the poisoner, James Bulger (a strange inclusion) and "Jack the Ripper". James Goldsmith, John Aspinall, Mme Blavatsky and Horace Cole, the practical joker, hover in the wings.

Not that the DNB itself was short of the eccentric. Geoffrey Madan's list of seventeen lives "not normally consulted" included John Selby Watson, the classical scholar who murdered his wife (Crockford, asked if he was the only clergyman guilty of wife-murder, replied cautiously that he was the only one to have been convicted of it) and John Howell, the inventor - "having made, at considerable expense, a model in the shape of a fish, he entered the machine, tried to swim under water at Leith, and was very nearly drowned". The new versions are now less incisive, as are the judgements. "He was as opposed to ritualism as he was to rationalism, and every form of liberalism he abhorred", the old verdict on Dean Burgon, is now watered down. Other petty criticisms might be made. The useful lists of works in the DNB have gone, "since library catalogues are so abundant and full" (but not always accurate). "Wealth at death" less usefully takes their place: Chatwin left £584,388, Bess of Hardwick was just "very wealthy". The "families and groups", 408 in all, lack coherence, and seem to have grown out of the private enthusiasms of the more prolific contributors.

The source references, on the other hand, are immensely expanded, and show the value of a web-based "literature search". Very rarely, older but still useful works escape; Modern English Biography (1892-1921) by Frederic Boase, one of the 1993 Missing Persons, still needs to be consulted. The lists of "likenesses" remain, although the 10,000 portraits are a greater gain. The National Portrait Gallery's archive, not just the pictures on its walls, but the vast number of prints and photographs that it also holds, is as great a national asset as the DNB, and not so well known. The idea of joining forces has produced a double benefit. To see Reynolds's vision of Warren Hastings en-livens Peter Marshall's excellent article, one of many on the British in India. This vision of the past adds a whole new dimension to the verbal record.

It can be improved: the Eton picture of "Jane Shore" is of a half naked woman known (wrongly) as Diane de Poitiers, although the lifetime portrait of Edward IV's mistress is cited in the article's references; and Caroline Norton is unfairly photographed as a sad old woman, not in

the beauty painted by Landseer, Hayter and Grant. The choice of who gets a likeness is also erratic: Joseph Wright's Sir Brooke Boothby and Thomas Day, two of his best portraits, are not there, and every relic of Leslie Stephen's article on Day, arguably his best, has gone with it. Of all that he wrote, only those on Allan Cunningham, Calverley, Augustus de Morgan, Laurence Oliphant and James Spedding remain. Stephen himself receives an excellent account from Alan Bell, as does George Smith from Bill Bell.

This is, then, a different work, in more ways than the passage of time and expansion of scope allow, not Stephen's but Matthew's vision of a national biography. What, overall, is the difference? Matthew had a clear view of the merits of Stephen's vision, quoted above, and pursued it with even greater vigour, writing a far larger number of articles himself. But it was not his alone. The army of contributors and editors have added to it, but in a way more fragmented than the DNB, kaleidoscopic rather than organic. The army of contributors (twenty times as many as the DNB) and editors was too large for ordinary human control, and a mechanical system took its place.

The engine of compilation that Matthew created was efficient but inflexible. The shape of every article was determined by a complex form that contributors had to fill in (they were also forbidden to communicate with each other, "a sound and strictly maintained policy" to Matthew, but an absurd constraint to them). Like all who take to a cause late in life, he seized on computer-compilation with an almost apocalyptic fervour. Well aware that delay begets greater delay, he drove the project forward with more than ordinary energy, as if he knew time was not on his side. Final editing was kept inside the house (with some disastrous results), but even so it took even greater acceleration at the last minute to bring the ODNB out on time. There are signs of this haste, from misprints to errors of selection, but something else was lost further back. "He maintained a rare attitude of humility, of astonishment and admiration, before the unpredictable spectacle of life"; the words are Edmund Wilson's on Lytton Strachey, but they describe what Stephen did, and what the ODNB engine lacks. Dr Johnson said, "At Oxford, as we all know, much will be forgiven to literary merit", which many of the articles possess; as much is due to Matthew's determination, generously recorded in his successor's long introduction.

Stephen Leacock thought that the essence of an Oxford education was to be "well smoked" by your tutor. What is lost has gone like the smoke from Stephen's and Lee's pipes.

What, finally, of the question with which we began? Is biography the literary form that expresses our age? Simultaneously with the ODNB, and, clearly, by no coincidence, *Lives for Sale*, edited by Mark Bostridge, a set of "Biographers' Tales" by thirty-three well-known modern practitioners has also been published (256pp. Continuum. £16.99. 0 826 47573 6). These, like anglers' tales, fall into two categories: "the one that got away", and "so large that even I, when talking of it afterwards, may have no need to lie". But all biographers do lie, if only by selection. What makes most of these pieces, trivial or serious, uniformly engaging is the revelation of the sleights of hand, cunning, even deceit, that landed the fish; a fly will catch one, while another requires a trawler.

Self-conscious heirs of Strachey, they oscillate between his model and the Victorian "Life and Letters" against which he rebelled, only himself to be so memorialized by Michael Holroyd. They all know the fallibility of memory, in witnesses and even documents, and are themselves fallible (my recollection of the inception of Robert Skidelsky's *Life of Keynes* is quite different from his). But by fair means or foul, what they are after is the truth. This is transparent in the work of perhaps the greatest contemporary biographer (not among Bostridge's thirty three), Richard Holmes. Virginia Woolf grew up under the shadow of the DNB, and *Orlando* is a playful satire on its ideas and ideals. Her verdict, "By telling us the true facts, by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very greatest", is its vindication.

John Gross's article on the entries for Literature, Journalism and Publishing in the ODNB will be published next week.

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The Canterbury Tales is the last of Geoffrey Chaucer's works, and he only finished 24 of an initially planned 100 tales. The Canterbury Tales study guide contains a biography of Geoffrey Chaucer, I...Â The Tale of Melibee. There was once a young man named Melibee, mighty and rich, who had with his wife Prudence, a daughter called Sophie. One day he took a walk into the fields, leaving his wife and daughter inside his house, with the doors shut fast. The similarity between the two tales may be evidence of a source relationship between them. On the other hand, it could just be that both tales draw on a motif that was very common in medieval fabliau, the "cradle-trick," in which someone gets into the wrong bed because the cradle has been moved. Finally, "The Reeve's Tale" is notable because it's the first example we have in English of a writer trying to imitate an accent other than his own. Throughout the tale, the story can be seen as a reflection of the Miller's character as told by Chaucer's the narrator. It is clear that the narrator wants to separate himself from the Miller's character as he states several times that he is merely "rehearing" what the Miller had said.

"Methynketh that I shal reherce it here. And therefore every gentil wight I preye, For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye Of evel entente, but that I moot reherce" (ll. 3170-73). The Canterbury Tales was popular centuries before it was actually published in c. 1476 CE. There are more copies of this manuscript than any other full-length medieval work except the penitential poem The Prick of Conscience, also from the 14th century CE, which was only so frequently copied due to its use by the Church. The Canterbury Tales is considered Chaucer's masterpiece and is among the most important works of medieval literature for many reasons besides its poetic power and...