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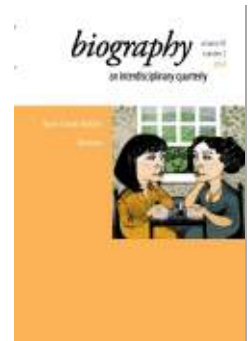
*Biography: An Historiography* by Melanie Nolan (review)

Karoliina Sjö

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## ***Biography: An Historiography***

Melanie Nolan

Routledge, 2023, 400 pp. ISBN 9781138387232, \$180.00 hardback; ISBN 9781138387249, \$48.99 paperback.

Biography has a long history, and historians have also been engaged in its practices for a considerable time. Numerous debates have emerged over the uses, theories, and methods of historical biography. Melanie Nolan contributes to these discussions with the book *Biography: An Historiography*, which examines the use of biography among Western historians. In *Biography*, Nolan presents and examines seven major debates on practice, theory, and method in the context of biography and history. She systematically considers the different discussions and challenges that historians have faced in using and writing biography—or biographies, reflecting the genre’s diversity—from the nineteenth century to the present.

Spanning nine chapters, including an introduction and conclusion, the book covers a range of disciplinary debates: over heroism in the Victorian era; artistic and scientific approaches in the post-Victorian era; problems of other minds; counterfactuals in the Cold War era; contingency and causation; atomizing lives in the postwar era; microhistory and the singularization of history in the late twentieth century; and life writing and egohistories in the present. Nolan introduces and examines these debates in chronological order, although there is some overlap between discussions. Nolan begins each chapter by introducing the topic and a few key figures who “personify the wider debate” (129). Although her focus starts with a few individuals, it expands through the chapters to include several additional names, their different points of view, and their contributions to discussions about biographical practices. Each chapter usefully ends with suggestions for further reading.

The book addresses many other important and relevant issues concerning biography and biographical practices, including questions about fact and fiction, the problem of representativeness, issues of perspective, truth, and memory, and the use of source materials. Nolan’s book reflects one of biography’s longstanding concerns, which appears in debates across time periods: the question of the individual, both in terms of the individual’s role and position in history and in terms of the connections between individuals, collectives, and society. Nolan also addresses the question of who is worthy of a biography and how historians should tell other people’s lives, demonstrating how perspectives and emphasis on these questions have varied over time.

As the current director of the National Centre of Biography and the general editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* at the Australian National University, Melanie Nolan clearly has an extensive professional background in the subject of biography. She has done a remarkable job with this book. Its title, *Biography: An Historiography*, suggests an ambitious approach, given the enormous scope of the

historiography of biography. In the introduction, however, Nolan clarifies that she refers “to biography written in the English-speaking world, mostly Anglo-American” (16), and also includes the “Anglo-Saxon world” in the debates (182). I could not help but wonder if this particular focus should be reflected in the title of the book, as it currently presents the Anglo-American world as the norm and neglects other regions and continents—an issue still unfortunately common across publications and approaches. Of course, delimiting the topic is essential, but it should also be clearly and sufficiently justified, argued, and problematized—something that could be done more directly and clearly in Nolan’s book as well.

While the debates and viewpoints presented in the book are important and relevant, the book also excludes a lot, even among the range of biographical works and research written in English. Of course, Nolan could not include everything in one book, but selection is always an act of power, and it shapes the image and perception of historiography. It would have been beneficial for the book to include more reflections on such matters. As mentioned, I appreciated the suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter, which broaden the topics and discussions—or at least provide the reader with the opportunity to do so.

The book’s Anglo-American emphasis does not come without problems, which is evident in one of Nolan’s main arguments. Nolan discusses the role and concept of the “biographical turn,” arguing that the narrative about it has been limiting and has caused “widely held assumptions” suggesting “that historians were little interested in biography for most of the twentieth century, before the biographical turn.” In contrast, the book implies that the debates and interest in biography remained quite the same among historians during the twentieth century, with biography even serving as a central methodological tool for historians, contrary to what has been presented by many scholars in recent decades when emphasizing the specific turn (4, 13, 16, 364). While this may be true to some extent—perhaps especially in an Anglo-American context—and the “biographical turn” warrants discussion, it is also true that in many countries, there has been growing interest among historians in individual histories and in doing biographies, especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century. In some Nordic countries, for example, historical biography was not highly esteemed or practiced after the Second World War, but this changed radically in the 1990s, as discussed in Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir et al.’s edited collection, *Biography, Gender and History: Nordic Perspectives* (2016). Overall, biographical debates and practices have varied across regions, continents, and countries, although there is transnational overlap, which some sections of the book shortly demonstrate when Nolan connects the book’s discussions to some—albeit to a limited—extent with French, Italian, Dutch, German, and Icelandic debates.

Nolan’s book also reflects how the field and history of biography have been very male-dominated, as demonstrated, for example, by the representative people Nolan has chosen to highlight. Of course, Nolan includes women in the book, as

there have always been biographies about women and women have written historical biographies, but they remain underrepresented. Traditionally, the voice of individual history has long belonged to “great men,” and more recently to “great women,” which has roots in the “great man theory,” as Nolan points out, particularly in Chapter One and Two. As Nolan discusses, however, the field’s emphasis shifted from the study of the history of great figures to the study of the history of ordinary people during the twentieth century, especially after the Second World War.

Since the 1960s, historians have brought women and girls to the fore more and more, and the methodology of biographical research, especially throughout the early twenty-first century, has given focus to the study of women and different marginalized groups. Thus, women and gender history have strongly influenced and reshaped the methodology of biography, just as biography has influenced and shaped women and gender history. Although gender is discussed in Nolan’s book to some extent, I would argue that this should have been one of the central debates covered, worthy of its own chapter. Additionally, the chapter on current debates in life writing is, in my opinion, unfortunately very limited considering the importance of life writing studies in biographical research. Biographical research has become closely entangled with the interdisciplinary field of life writing research, although historians have frequently been underrepresented in the wider debates on the field.

It also remains somewhat unclear what Nolan means by the term “life writing,” as it seems that she connects it very strongly with egohistories and with historians practicing their own life writing and using their own writings as source materials. That said, Nolan mainly presents the lifewriting debates within the Dutch School, which is very critical of the field of life writing and of historians using people’s own writings or other materials as source material. As Nolan notes, Hans Renders, Nigel Hamilton, Binne de Haan, and others complain “that identity politics has led to an abandonment of critical analysis” when using these kinds of sources (340).

Nolan appears to agree with these points of view to some extent when she contends that historians treat lifewriting materials without criticism. She argues that “too much of life writing, even historian’s egohistoire, is neo-hagiography” (340). These discussions, however, are not new. Halldórsdóttir et al. note *how* in Iceland in the 1970s historians criticized biography as being too hagiographic in style (15). This is only one example of how disciplinary debates often persist or become circular.

As for the criticism of historians being too uncritical of lifewriting materials, source criticism is one of the basic methods for historians, and it should go without saying that it applies to different lifewriting and autobiographical sources as well. In *Biography and History* (2019), Barbara Caine dedicates a chapter to the histories and connections between life writing, biography, and history. Nolan references this book but also criticizes it to some extent when she discusses it as a typical example of telling a linear story of historians’ biographical practices (9). Caine’s chapter

“Auto/Biography and Life Writing,” among many other examples, is worth reading (63–81).

In Nolan’s current debates section, I would have liked to read about the debates focused on ecobiography, “a little-researched form of life writing which depicts how human selves are supported and shaped by their environment,” as, for example, a writer and researcher Jessica White puts it (2020). Ecobiography has been under methodological development for some time, and it will undoubtedly continue to develop and remain a topic of debate in the fields of historical biography, environmental history, and environmental humanities in the future.

In the final chapter of the book, Nolan discusses and concludes the role and importance of historians’ “biographical methodological toolkit” (355). As Nolan reflects through the book, it is clear that theory and method as well as different debates over biographical approaches have always shaped historians’ biography. Despite the importance of theory, Nolan concludes her book by stating that “empiricism is the umbrella method for historians writing biography and its development underwrote the pattern of contemporary biographical practice” (355). Thus, it seems that source materials and empirical methods will remain at the core of historical biography practices, but methods and theories will undoubtedly continue to evolve.

Overall, the book has merit, and despite the limitations I have pointed out above, it is an important addition to the field. *Biography: An Historiography* could have benefited from more editing related to structure, clarity, and copyediting issues, as it can sometimes be a bit difficult for the reader to follow the text, given its complexities and numerous names of people who have contributed to the field of biography. Nonetheless, the book is a significant contribution to the biographical field and serves those studying and working with biographies.

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**Karoliina Sjö** is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Turku, Finland. She specializes in the cultural history of modern life writing, various autobiographical sources, and biographical research. She has published on the cultural history of diaries and life writing, as well as the ethics of narrating past lives.