

Historical Studies 521  
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## Canadian Biography

### PREAMBLE

Biography has played a central role in the writing of Canadian history. Biographies written in the late Victorian period portrayed their subjects as paragons of virtue. O.D. Skelton inaugurated scholarly biographical writing in Canada, with a heavy emphasis on research and documentation, with his two volumes Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier. This “life and times” approach was primarily interested in national achievements and the subject’s life was tied to politics, in particular. Little attention was paid to private life. Biographers assumed that their subjects were crucial to the times and that their role in national life was a positive one. Rarely were women the subject of biographical studies by historians because it was thought that women’s lives were confined to the private sphere and consequently they had little impact or significance in public life.

This heroic and political tradition in biographical writing reached its pinnacle in the 1950s with **Donald Creighton’s two-volume biography of Sir John A. Macdonald, The Young Chieftain and The Old Politician** and also Brown of the Globe, a two-volume study of Macdonald’s major political adversary by J.M. S Careless. Viewing the past through individual lives was institutionalized in Canadian historiography with the creation of the collaborative historical project, the Dictionary of Canadian Biography [DCB], which is published jointly by University of Toronto and Laval University Press.

Just as the DCB was being launched in the early 1960s, biography came under heavy criticism from a new generation of historians who were primarily interested in social history. Biography was criticized, and sometimes dismissed, for being elitist. It focused on the accomplishments of the extraordinary or the famous, such as Prime Ministers or Generals. Moreover, the biographical approach assumed that society was shaped by the thought and activities of a small number. But the social historian was more impressed by the impact of broader social forces and structures. Biography was limited as tool for historians because it ignored most people in society. One could not gain a full understanding of the past through the narrow prism of Great Lives, according to this perspective.

Despite this challenge, biography has remained central to the study of Canadian history. In response to the “social history revolution”, the subject matter, methodology, and style of biographical writing changed. The “paragon of virtue” tradition was laid to rest, as modern biographers no longer assumed that their subjects were heroic figures.

One sees this change most dramatically in comparing J.K. Johnston's portrait on Sir John A. Macdonald in the DCB, Vol. XII and his essay in J.M.S. Careless, ed., Pre-Confederation Premiers with Donald Creighton's magisterial biography. The most famous example of a biographer presenting a negative portrait, indeed the "underside" of his character is **C.P. Stacey, A Very Double Life: The Private World of Mackenzie King**. The subtitle of this book indicated another new trend in biographical writing. It is no longer thought appropriate to write about the public life only. Now biographers must also include private life.

The emphasis on private life reflects the influence of social history on the writing of biography. The myriad of questions that interest the social historian, such family relationships, the role of women, impact of disease, how households are arranged and how people lived their daily lives, can be studied in an intimate way through biography. **Charlotte Gray** is one of the leading biographers in Canada writing from this social history perspective. Her biography of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Trail, **Sisters of the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Trail**, is an exceptionally good example of this new approach to biography. The social history approach to biography has encouraged writers to take on the lives of the "ordinary". Biographers discovered that they could write life histories about people who were not notable, influential, powerful, famous, wealthy, artistic, or saintly. The DCB now contains biographies of servants, trades people, the poor or vagrant, and criminals -to name just a few categories- that were overlooked a generation ago. By necessity, some of the most innovative biographies in this private life-social history vein have been written by feminists. **Great Dames, edited by Elspeth Cameron and Janice Dickin**, includes many essays or mini-biographies demonstrating how the lives of women who were not "notable" and did not play an active "public role" can be written about.

## THE COURSE

The purpose of this course is to explore the role of biography in the writing of Canadian history. In particular we will investigate the merits and drawbacks of the biographical approach to history. We will also look at the different trends in Canadian biographical writing.

In the seminars, students will discuss the biographer's craft and its relationship to history and they will analyze the different schools of biographical literature in Canadian historiography.

The **research papers** should be 15-20 typed pages.

They can take the form of either:

- A) **a biography**. Students can select a historical or contemporary figure -provided they place the person in a historical context- and write a brief life sketch along the lines of the biographies in Great Dames or the Dictionary of Canadian Biography

OR

B) a **historiographical assessment of biography**. For example, students can assess the biographical literature on a controversial historic figure, such as Louis Riel, William Lyon Mackenzie King, William Aberhart, J.S. Woodsworth, or Nellie McClung..

Students can also write a paper on how biographical literature has enhanced or detracted from our understanding of a crucial era in Canadian history, such as the Confederation era (1864-67), or World War I.

An alternative is to write a paper outlining how biographies of a group of people, for example, women in the era of reform and suffrage, have aided in understanding the history of women in Canadian society.

Seminar Participation.....25%  
Research Proposal.....10%  
Seminar Paper.....15%  
Research Paper.....50%

DUE: Oct. 14 at the VERY LATEST  
DUE: Dec. 12, 2003

### SEMINAR READINGS

Week 1: The Biographer's Craft

Reading: Adam Sisman, Boswell's Presumptuous Task: Writing the Life of Dr. Johnson

Week 2: Traditional Political Biography

Reading: D. Creighton, John A. Macdonald, The Young Politician & the Old Chieftain  
(with Introduction by P.B. Waite)

Week 3: The Triumph of the Private

Reading: C.P. Stacey, A Very Double Life: The Private World of Mackenzie King

Week 4: Biography and Social History

Reading: Charlotte Gray, Sisters of the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill

Week 5: Biography and Feminism

E. Cameron & J. Dickin eds., Great Dames

Week 6: Biography of Controversial Canadians

Reading: A. Cohen & J.L. Granatstein, eds., Trudeau's Shadow: The Legacy of Pierre Trudeau

Alternatively, students can sample the voluminous biographical literature on Louis Riel.

-Bowsfield, H. ed., Louis Riel: Selected Readings

-Stanley, G.F.G. Louis Riel

- Howard, J.K. Strange Empire
- Flanagan, T. Louis “David” Riel: Prophet of the New World
- Siggins, M. Riel: A Life of Revolution
- Owram, D. “The Myth of Louis Riel”, *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol.63, 1982

Students should also read some of the following essays in the Department of History office, SS 656. These essays will enrich appreciation of the art of biography and understanding of the relationship between biography and history

From Stephen B. Oates, ed., Biography as High Adventure: Life-Writers Speak on Their Art (1986)

Paul Kendall, “Walking the Boundaries”

Frank Vandiver, “Biography as an Agent of Humanism”

Mark Schorer, “The Burdens of Biography”

Barbara Tuchman, “Biography as a Prism of History”

Paul Mariani, “Reassembling the Dust”

R.C. Brown, ‘Biography and Canadian History’

Frances Halpenny, “Expectations of Biography” from Boswell’s Children

From Peter France & William St. Clair, eds., Mapping Lives: the Uses of Biography (2002)

Richard Holmes, “The Proper Study?”

Mark Kinkead Weekes, “Writing Lives Forwards: A Case for Strictly Chronological Biography”

Miranda Seymour, “Shaping the Truth”

Kay Ferres, “Gender, Biography and the Public Sphere”

James Walter, “The Solace of Doubt?: Biographical Methodology and the Short Twentieth Century”

The best recent historical-literary interpretation of biography is: Paula Backscheider, Reflections on Biography (Oxford University Press, 1999)

## PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism occurs when one submits or presents one's work in a course, or ideas and/or passages in a written piece of work, as if it were one's own work done expressly for that particular course, when, in fact, it is not.

As noted in the **Department of History Guide to Essay Presentation**, plagiarism may take several forms:

- Failure to cite sources properly may be considered plagiarism. This could include quotations, and wording used from another source but not acknowledged.
- Borrowed, purchased, and/or ghostwritten papers are considered plagiarism, as is submitting one's own work for more than one course without the permission of the instructor(s) involved.
- Extensive paraphrasing of one or a few sources is also considered plagiarism, even when notes are used, unless the essay is a critical analysis of those works.
- The use of notes does not justify the sustained presentation of another author's language and ideas as one's own.

Plagiarism is a serious academic offence. A plagiarized paper will automatically be failed. Plagiarism may also result in a failing grade for the entire course and other penalties as noted in **The University of Calgary Calendar**.

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