

# Different Lives

*Global Perspectives on Biography in  
Public Cultures and Societies*



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# Historical Biography in Canada: Historians, Publishers, and the Public

*Daniel R. Meister*

People look to biographies to examine and re-examine the past. And in the case of Canada, a nation that is perpetually unsure of its identity, biography often plays an important role in the quest to define or understand Canadian identity.<sup>1</sup>



There are many signs that in Canada, as in many other countries, biography remains a popular genre with the general public. One classic, if anecdotal, marker remains shelf space. In large bookstores such as Chapters/Indigo the largest proportion of space given over to nonfiction is indeed most often devoted to biographies. Filling these shelves are books such as those in the *Extraordinary Canadians* series launched by Penguin Canada in 2009. Edited by the public intellectual John Ralston Saul, this series of short, accessible books earned wide praise and was eventually developed into a television show.<sup>2</sup> Biographies, and their continued popularity, are also the subject of discussion in the press. In the 2017 edition of the annual 100-best-books list compiled by the *Globe and Mail*, a national newspaper, four of the twenty nonfiction books were biographies of individuals, one was a collective biography, and seven were memoirs; yet another book was a reflection on the writing of obituaries, themselves a form of biography. The CBC's best-ten list that year included three

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1 David Marshall, 'Exceptional Canadians: Biography in the Public Sphere', in *Media and Politics*, ed. David Taras and Christopher Waddell, vol. 4 of *How Canadians Communicate* (Athabasca: AU Press, 2012), 233.

2 My thanks to Petra Teunissen-Nijse for drawing my attention to this series. For more information, see the publisher's website, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/series/B9X/extraordinary-canadians>; and on the show, <https://www.cpac.ca/en/programs/extraordinary-canadians/>. For an insightful critique of the series, see Philip Marchand, 'Extraordinary Canadians', in *The Walrus*, April 12, 2009, <https://thewalrus.ca/2009-04-books/>.

memoirs.<sup>3</sup> Although the Drainie-Taylor Biography Prize, a Canadian award dedicated to biography, was discontinued in 2006, several biographies have been nominated for other prestigious literary awards in recent years.

Assessing the state of biography on a national scale is difficult, especially given how broadly the term 'biography' is often used. Consequently, and in keeping with my ongoing interest in its scholarly form, I have generally limited my remarks in this chapter to what has been called 'historical biography.' Historical biography is simply a form of biography that examines a life that has ended, one that provides an account both of an individual's life and of the historical events and processes in which that person was involved.<sup>4</sup> I should also make it clear that I will be discussing 'biography in Canada' and not 'Canadian biography,' for the idea of an essentially Canadian biography is complicated by the country's great ethnic and cultural diversity, both historically and in the present. As there is no essential Canadian, so can there be no essentially Canadian biography. There are simply biographies written by Canadians and biographies written of Canadians (and most often sums of the two). So what is the state of the art of biography in this multicultural country? To answer this question, I turn to some pragmatic yet unanswered questions: How do academic publishers view biographies? How well do scholarly biographies sell? What is the primary market for serious biographies, and is it more expansive than those of other genres published by academic presses and trade publishers? Finally, how are historians approaching the art of biography?

The writing of biography in Canada has a long history that predates the country's Confederation in 1867. In the late nineteenth century, biography was a popular literary genre read 'in the home for leisure and popular education, and in school where it spanned the curriculum as a tool for intellectual and

3 'The Globe 100: Best Books of the Year', *The Globe and Mail*, November 24, 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/the-globe-100-these-are-the-best-booksof2017/article37071356/>; 'The Best Canadian Nonfiction of 2017', *CBC Books*, December 22, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/books/the-best-canadian-nonfiction-of-2017-1.4453296>. See also Charlotte Gray's recent musings about the genre's future in 'The Future of Biography', *The Walrus*, April 4, 2018, <https://thewalrus.ca/the-future-of-biography/>.

4 The vagueness of the term has been noted by Nigel Hamilton and Hans Renders in their *The ABC of Modern Biography* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 7. For another recent primer, see Birgitte Possing, *Understanding Biographies: On Biographies in History and Stories in Biography* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2017). On historical biography, particularly in the Canadian context, see Daniel R. Meister, 'The Biographical Turn and the Case for Historical Biography', *History Compass* 16, no. 1 (January 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12436>. Those interested in the broader field of life writing or auto/biography in Canada may wish to also consult Julie Rak, ed., *Auto/Biography in Canada: Critical Directions* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005).

personal development.' Particularly popular during this era were collective biographies, or biographical dictionaries, and the individual short biographies they contained were believed to be a means of imparting moral and cultural lessons. Biography became increasingly popular as a genre of history in the early twentieth century. This development is best evinced by the introduction of the 'Makers of Canada' series, which was designed to provide a history of Canada through a look at major political figures. The best-selling twenty-volume series, which ran from 1903 through 1908, has since been described as 'the climax of the Victorian practice of biography in Canada'.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1920s, professional historians shifted the practice of biography toward a new, more empirical, less hagiographic model. But these efforts were merely flawed in a different way; 'frequently these became totally depersonalized accounts; the protagonists lost their personalities and became merely products of their times.' The debunking spirit of Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* was, in the words of historiographer Carl Berger, expressed in Canada 'in a more tepid and limited fashion, leading in most cases not to full-scale biographical works but rather to revisionist essays.' Berger situated the growing respectability of biography within the context of a reaction against history being written as 'the sway of impersonal forces' during the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>6</sup>

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the dominant approach to biography shifted again, this time within a context of intensifying cultural nationalism. The publication in 1952 of the first volume of Donald Creighton's biography of the first Canadian prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, in many ways marked the beginning of the 'golden age' of biography in Canada. The book became the standard against which succeeding biographies were measured, and unleashed a thirty-year 'flood of biographies,' many of them political.<sup>7</sup> As the historian John English has wistfully remarked, in the 1950s 'Canada's finest historians wrote great political biographies' which 'express[ed] the spirit of their time, the fundamental debate about how individual character shapes

5 Robert Lanning, *The National Album: Collective Biography and the Formation of the Canadian Middle Class* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1996), 16; and Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing: 1900-1970* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976), 218.

6 Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 220; and P.A. Buckner, 'Canadian Biography and the Search for Joseph Howe', *Acadiensis* 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1984), 105. See also Donna Coates, 'The Makers of Canada', in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/the-makers-of-canada>.

7 Marshall, 'Exceptional Canadians', 236-244; Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, 222; and Donald Swainson, 'Trends in Canadian Biography: Recent Historical Writing', *Queen's Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (Autumn 1980), 414.

the circumstances of national experience.<sup>8</sup> According to Carl Berger, with the launch of the first volume of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (DCB) in 1966, 'biography became the dominant form in historical studies'. By 1973, some 1,200 biographies of Canadians had been published, the majority of which focused on the post-confederation period.<sup>9</sup>

But the heyday of political biography was not to last. Despite the seemingly endless supply of such works, they began to receive criticism. Stephen Henderson notes that by the 1970s such accounts were being satirized as 'little more than accounts of "dead white guys"'.<sup>10</sup> The supposed displacement of political biographies is typically attributed to the rise of social history, with its focus on doing history from the 'bottom up'.<sup>11</sup> But biography never fell from favor with the public and, perhaps owing to its enduring popularity, scholars would in time return to this historical methodology. Historian J.I. Little, citing Geoff Eley, argues that after the move toward social history, 'the subsequent rise of cultural history, with its turn to subjectivity, has led to a resurgence of interest in biography, though with the goal [...] of revisiting individual lives 'as complex texts in which the same large questions that inspired the social historians were embedded'.<sup>12</sup>

In 1980, Robert Craig Brown delivered the presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association on the subject of 'biography in Canadian history'. In it, he acknowledged the popularity of the biographical approach among

8 John English, 'Foreword', in Paul Litt, *Elusive Destiny: The Political Vocation of John Napier Turner* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), vii. See also Robert Bothwell and John English, 'Foreword', in Greg Donaghy, *Grit: The Life and Politics of Paul Martin Sr.* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015), esp. xi.

9 Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*, 221; and Swainson, 'Trends in Canadian Biography', 414.

10 Swainson, 'Trends in Canadian Biography', 415 and 418; and Stephen Henderson, 'Lives by the Left: Biography and Materialist History', *Left History* 10, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2004), 153. For an account of changing approaches to historical biography from the 1960s through the 1990s, see Brian Young, 'Cross-generational Biography as a Vehicle for Understanding Historical Process: a Canadian Example', in *La Création biographique/Biographical Creation*, ed. Marta Dvorak (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes et l'Association Française d'Études Canadiennes, 1997), 247–252.

11 English, 'Foreword', vii; Barbara J. Messamore, *Canada's Governors General 1847–1878: Biography and Constitutional Evolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 3; and David A. Wilson, *Passion, Reason, and Politics, 1825–1857*, vol. 1 of *Thomas D'Arcy McGee* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), xiii.

12 J.I. Little, *Patrician Liberal: The Public and Private Life of Sir Henri-Gustave Joly de Lotbinière, 1829–1908* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013); and Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

historians and made note of the longstanding complaint that biography had 'dominated' English-Canadian historiography. He also argued, somewhat paradoxically, that biography had to stand on its own but that historical biography, with its focus on the dialectic between the individual and society, was essential to 'all historical inquiry'. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s historians continued to write biographies, and scholars such as P.B. Waite and J.R. Mallory lectured and wrote about biography as a form of history. In these decades a number of political biographies were published as part of the Ontario Historical Studies Series (OHSS). The 1990s also saw conferences on biography and the subsequent publication of edited volumes, but these endeavors had significant connections to Europe. For instance, *Boswell's Children: The Art of the Biographer* (1992) emerged from a conference on biography in history held at the Centre of Canadian Studies at the University of Edinburgh, while *Biography and Autobiography: Essays on Irish and Canadian History and Literature* stemmed from the 1991 Conference of the Canadian Association for Irish Studies.<sup>13</sup>

By 2004, Henderson could remark that biography 'remains a powerful – and very popular – approach to history'.<sup>14</sup> That same year, in the introduction to her work on Canada's governors general, which took the form of a collective biography, the historian Barbara Messamore critiqued the hegemony of social history within the discipline. She cautioned that attempts to move away from an exclusive focus on 'dead, white males' should not lead historians to dismiss political and constitutional history, filled as it might be with 'extraordinary' individuals. 'Our understanding of change will not be complete if we focus solely

13 Robert Craig Brown, 'Biography in Canadian History', in *Historical Papers* 15, no. 1 (1980), 8; J.R. Mallory, 'Biography, History, and Social Science in Canada: Different Questions, Different Answers', in *Journal of Canadian Studies* 15, no. 4 (1980), 125–128; P.B. Waite, *Reefs Unsuspected: Historians and Biography in Canada, Australia and Elsewhere* (Sydney: Macquarie University, 1983); Waite, 'Invading Privacies: Biography As History', *Dalhousie Review* 69 no. 4 (1990), 479–495; R.B. Fleming, ed., *Boswell's Children: The Art of the Biographer* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1992); and James Noonan, ed., *Biography and Autobiography: Essays on Irish and Canadian History and Literature* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993). Swainson, 'Trends in Canadian Biography', provides a valuable overview of the field as it stood in 1980. Bill Harnum (conversation with author, June 27, 2018) first drew my attention to the OHSS, which sponsored biographies of such figures as G. Howard Ferguson, Leslie M. Frost, Sir Oliver Mowat, Sir James Pliny Whitney, John P. Robarts, and Mitchell F. Hepburn. For a review from the period, see H. Blair Neatby, 'Character and Circumstance': Political Biography in the 1990s', in *Acadiensis* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1993), 154–160. The 1990s also saw ECW Press launch a Canadian Biography Series, producing slim (roughly 80-page) biographies of literary figures. See Sandra Djwa's review of the first three volumes in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (Fall 1993), 214–217.

14 Henderson, 'Lives by the Left', 153.



on the disenfranchised many', she argued, for 'it depends upon our grasp of the lives of the few – those who held power and were able to shape the course of events.'<sup>15</sup> In 2007, the open-access *Journal of Historical Biography* (JHB) was launched with Messamore at the helm. In its inaugural issue Donald Wright, then in the midst of writing a biography of Donald Creighton, reflected on biography's 'enormous appeal and popularity'. In response to these developments, and conscious of the reality that such an approach was not really new, the 2010 annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association hosted three panels dedicated to the 'Biographical (Re)turn'.<sup>16</sup>

This brief overview has so far focused on Canadian scholarship published in English, but biography has a long history among francophone Canadians and, at least since the mid-twentieth century, francophone scholars have often been more apt than their anglophone colleagues to reflect on the art of biography. The historian Fernand Ouellet, in his 1970 presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association, though conceding the need for additional biographies of influential politicians, argued that biography should be utilized in a more systematic way to show a constant dialectic between the individual and society.<sup>17</sup> Brown, in his address delivered a decade later, repeatedly quoted Ouellet in discussing the biography's explicit role in French Canadian historical writing. This trend continued: in 1995, an interdisciplinary and bilingual conference on biography was held at the Centre d'Études Canadiennes in Rennes, France. Both English- and French-speaking Canadians contributed to the event, whose papers were published two years later as *La Création Biographique/ Biographical Creation*. Little wonder that in 1996 the literary scholar Shirley Neuman went so far as to argue that francophone auto/biographical writings were more sophisticated than their anglophone equivalents.<sup>18</sup>

15 Messamore, *Canada's Governors General*, 3.

16 Donald Wright, 'Reflections on Donald Creighton and the Appeal of Biography', in *Journal of Historical Biography* 1 (Spring 2007), 15–26; and 'The Biographical (Re)Turn', special issue of the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 21, no. 2 (2010). The JHB ceased publication in 2014 but remains archived at <https://www.ufv.ca/jhb/>.

17 Fernand Ouellet, 'L'histoire sociale du Bas-Canada: bilan et perspectives de recherches', in *Historical Papers* [of the Canadian Historical Association] 5, no. 1 (1970), 1–18; quoted in Brown, 'Biography in Canadian History'. In 1987, B.L. Vigod argued that French Canadian historians continued to abstain from writing political biographies. See his 'Biography and Political Culture in Quebec', in *Acadiensis* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1977), 141.

18 Dvorak, *Création biographique*; and Shirley Neuman, 'Reading Canadian Autobiography', in *Essays on Canadian Writing* 60 (Winter 1996), 1–13, cited in Susanna Egan and Gabriele Helms, 'Auto/Biography? Yes. But Canadian?' *Canadian Literature* 172 (Spring 2002), 6.

Francophone historians have continued their activity in recent decades. In 2000, the Quebec-based *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* published a special section on 'Biographie et histoire,' the introduction to which argued that biography, once considered a minor field of history, was making a marked comeback in Quebec, as in other places. Contributing to this trend, an edited volume on *Approches de la biographie au Québec* was published in 2004, and another on *Transformations de la modernité et pratiques (auto)biographiques* in 2012.<sup>19</sup> Since 1986, Quebec has also recognized excellence in biography with the Prix Maxime-Raymond, awarded every three years for the best historical biography published in French.<sup>20</sup>

Academic presses publish most historical biographies in Canada, so comparing the foregoing with an analysis of the number of biographies published by Canadian university presses during the past two decades is revealing. Before we turn to this analysis, a brief explanation of the context and methodology is in order. According to the Association of Canadian University Presses/Association des presses universitaires canadiennes (ACUP/APUC), its sixteen members 'publish more than 600 titles annually, primarily by Canadian researchers and on Canadian subjects in the humanities and social sciences.'<sup>21</sup> Beyond the

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For a listing of collective biographical works relating to Quebec, see Mary E. Bond and Martine M. Caron, comps., *Canadian reference sources: an annotated bibliography/Ouvrages de référence canadiens: une bibliographie annotée* (Vancouver: UBC Press, with the National Library of Canada and Canada Communication Group, 1996), 225–230. It lists more than thirty works, some dating back to 1876. Of course, biographical writing has longer roots that stretch back to hagiography; for one discussion see Allan Greer, 'L'hagiographie en Nouvelle-France: le cas de Kateri Tekakwitha', in *La Création biographique*, 267–274.

- 19 *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 54, no. 1 (2000), 67–131; Dominique Lafon, Rainier Grutman, Marcel Olscamp, and Robert Vigneault, eds., *Approches de la biographie au Québec* (Anjou, QC: Éditions Fides, 2004); and Danielle Desmarais, Isabelle Fortier, and Jacques Rhéaume, eds., *Transformations de la modernité et pratiques (auto)biographiques* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2012). Books similar to the latter include Céline Yelle, Lucie Mercier, Jeanne-Marie Gingras, and Salim Beghdad, eds., *Les histoires de vie: Un carrefour de pratiques* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2011), and most recently Manon Auger, *Les journaux intimes et personnels au Québec* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2017).
- 20 The Prix Maxime-Raymond is awarded by l'Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique française, with funding from la fondation Lionel-Groulx.
- 21 ACUP/APUC website, <http://acup-apuc.ca/>. For a recent look at scholarly publishing in Canada, see the 'Final Report' of the Canadian Scholarly Publishing Working Group (July 2017), [http://www.carl-abrc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/CSPWG\\_final\\_report\\_EN.pdf](http://www.carl-abrc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/CSPWG_final_report_EN.pdf). For an overview, see George L. Parker, 'University Presses', *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/university-presses>.

university presses, Canada also is home to several smaller, specialized academic presses such as Between the Lines, Fernwood Publishing, and the Canadian Scholars' Press, as well as a variety of regional presses.<sup>22</sup> However, it is worth noting that the three largest university presses in Canada – the University of Toronto Press, the University of British Columbia Press, and McGill-Queen's University Press – collectively publish roughly 70 percent of the nation's academic books.<sup>23</sup>

The statistics provided in the charts that follow are based on the publication history of all the members of the ACUP over the past two decades. The titles were compiled from individual publishers' websites, and there are likely errors resulting from works being miscategorized on these sites. Nevertheless, I hope this initial study can be used to persuade publishers to collect and organize such data and make them available to researchers in the future. One of the most notable findings is that despite the widespread assumption of biography's cyclical popularity, the data suggest a more complicated pattern. For instance, discussions of biography's 'return' occurred during a period of decreased publication, and fluctuations in recent years have been quite large.

Even among the three largest publishers there is no single stance toward biography as a genre. At UTP, Acquisitions Editor Len Husband stated frankly that he would not turn down a biography, as he believed in biography as a form of scholarship. However, Randy Schmidt, a Senior Editor at UBC Press, was equally frank in stating that, as a general rule, the press did not publish traditional, life-to-death biographies. In his words, many biographies were 'just life stories of an interesting person or a person who has had an interesting life. There is nothing wrong with that... but it's not something that we feel fits our current mandate as a university press.' Biographies were better suited to publication in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* or as articles, he suggested, but not as monographs. If the press were to publish a biography, it would have to

22 Of course, some Canadian authors choose to publish with large international presses or smaller American publishers, but this chapter limits its scope to biographies published with Canadian firms. Recent examples include Adele Perry, *Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Kurt Korieski, *Race, Nation, and Reform Ideology in Winnipeg, 1880s–1920s* (Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); and Nina Reid-Maroney, *The Reverend Jennie Johnson and African Canadian History, 1868–1967* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013).

23 These presses are referred to hereafter as UTP, UBC, and MQUP, respectively. The figure of 70 percent is taken from Randy Schmidt, 'A Session on Scholarly Publishing', Osgoode Hall Law School, April 3, 2013, <https://youtu.be/OIFbh4ZBjgg?t=8m50s>.

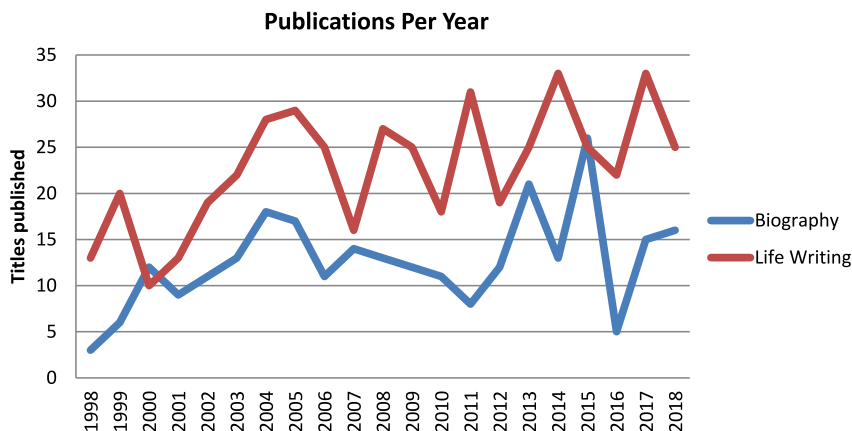


FIGURE 1 Works of biography and life writing published per year

Note: In the 'life writing' category I have included memoirs and autobiographies; correspondence, diaries, and journals; edited collections; auto/biography; and theoretical works about life writing.

engage with the existing literature and make a clear scholarly contribution.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps landing between the two positions, Philip Cercone, the Executive Director of MQUP, suggested that the main consideration for the press was the degree to which the subject of a potential biography was well known. If the subject was not well known, an author had to provide a strong case for why the figure should *become* well known.<sup>25</sup>

Cercone also suggested that one important factor when considering the market for a biography involved determining whether its audience would be limited to the academy or whether the book would appeal both to academics and the 'educated general public.' David Larsen, Sales and Marketing Super-

24 Schmidt stressed that this view was not official company policy but rather his understanding based on his long experience with the press. Yet it aligns with the 2018 Subject Area Grid released by the Association of University Presses (formerly the Association of American University Presses), which reports that UBC may have a significant backlist but is not actively acquiring in the area of 'Biography and Memoir'. The report is available at [http://www.aupresses.org/images/stories/documents/2018Subject\\_Area\\_Grid\\_final\\_20180115.pdf](http://www.aupresses.org/images/stories/documents/2018Subject_Area_Grid_final_20180115.pdf). That said, UBC is home to the C.D. Howe Series in Canadian Political History, which encourages the publication of books on all aspects of Canadian political history including 'biographies of key public figures'. On the series, see its first book: Donaghy, *Grit: The Life and Politics of Paul Martin*, ii, ix-xi; and also the UBC website, <https://www.UBCpress.ca/the-cd-howe-series-in-canadian-political-history>.

25 Len Husband, conversation with the author, May 29, 2018; Schmidt, correspondence with the author, June 27, 2018; and Cercone, conversation with the author, May 29, 2018.

visor at the University of Manitoba Press (UMP), was quite forthcoming (and optimistic) about the market for biographical works:

Our readers, to the best of our ability to identify, are academics across gender and age categories and, outside of that the principal audience, among general readership are women and among them there is a sizeable cohort among 30–60 year olds. This follows general trends within the publishing trade.

This aligns with BookNet's research, which suggests that the average buyer of biographies is a married, university-educated female, 49 years of age. (BookNet is a nonprofit organization that tracks book sales in the country.) By comparison, BookNet's research on history books found that the average buyer was a university-educated male, 54 years of age.<sup>26</sup>

However, the market for academic books as a whole is not well understood. While some in the academic publishing industry believe 'there is a highly educated segment of the reading public that does not work in academia and is not particularly well served by trade publishers', others dismiss the idea of the educated general reader as 'apocryphal'. Bill Harnum, a former senior executive at UTP, explains:

I actually once had t-shirts made which said, "I'm an EGR\*" on the front, and on the back it said, "\*Educated General Reader". The educated general reader... It's [someone] we know is out there, and we all seek, but [is] very hard to find. But that was certainly what our market was, the general educated reader: someone who was not themselves an academic but was interested in ideas.<sup>27</sup>

The question requires further research, but the recent success of the University of Regina Press (URP) in marketing to this segment suggests it does in fact exist. Formerly operating as the Canadian Plains Research Centre, in 2013 the

26 David Larsen, correspondence with the author, March 15, 2018; and BookNet Canada, *Deep Dive: The History Book Buyer, 2017* (BNC Research, 2018), 4, which adds: 'History generally appeals to older buyers; there is a slightly higher following among those aged 65+ (35%)'. The sample size for the study was 243 respondents compared with 3,047 for all nonfiction.

27 Cercone, quoted in Bronwyn Chester, 'The press that's a success', in *McGill Reporter*, January 14, 1999, <http://reporter-archive.mcgill.ca/Rep/r3108/cercone.html>; Schmidt, 'A Session on Scholarly Publishing', <https://youtu.be/OlFbh4ZBjgg?t=51m16s>; and Bill Harnum, conversation with the author, June 27, 2018.

press was transformed under the leadership of Bruce Walsh. Walsh has been critical of academic publishing's norms and practices and has made the press an innovative player in the industry. 'The humanities and social sciences are withering within the academy and I think academic publishing is part of the problem', he has observed. Describing URP's approach as 'transformative', he stated that their goal is to publish books that speak to the zeitgeist, books that will be read '100 years from now' and that will encourage young people to study the humanities and social sciences. While this is a huge goal, the press has the results to back it up: URP has released seven national bestsellers in the past five years.<sup>28</sup>

Regardless of the market, it is difficult to generalize about the state of historical biography from a publishing perspective because Canadian university presses do not keep statistics on how well biographies or historical biographies sell as a genre. Although each publisher collects sales data on individual titles, they view their scholarly books as distinct works rather than as representatives of any particular category or subcategory. (The two trade presses whose representatives I spoke with also organized sales information in this way.) One of the few publishers willing to offer anecdotal remarks was MQUP, whose Susan McIntosh suggested that 'how well biographies sell is dependent on the profile of the author as well as how well known the subject of the biography is'. Many of the smaller presses felt that they had simply published too few biographies to fruitfully compare them to other books. One exception was the UMP, where according to Larsen

'the categories of memoir and biography generally sell more copies than our monographs and certainly more than most of our collections. Recently we have published more memoirs than biographies and both combined are approximately one eighth of our average output.' Biography, he

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28 Bruce Walsh, conversation with the author, July 3, 2018; and Ashley Martin, 'U of R Press director Bruce Walsh believes in changing the narrative', *Regina Leader-Post*, October 8, 2017, <https://leaderpost.com/news/local-news/u-of-r-press-director-walsh-believes-in-changing-the-narrative>. See also Natalie Samson, 'Standing out in the world of scholarly publishing', in *University Affairs*, March 9, 2016, <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/standing-out-in-the-world-of-scholarly-publishing/>; and Ed Nawotka, 'Canada's University of Regina Press: More Than the Little Publisher on the Prairie', in *Publishers Weekly*, March 31, 2017, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/international/international-book-news/article/73237-canada-s-university-of-regina-press-more-than-the-little-publisher-on-the-prairie.html>. In the time between the writing and publication of this chapter, Walsh and the URP parted ways.

added, 'remains a subset of the general interest market and the academic market'.<sup>29</sup>

Almost everyone at the publishers I spoke with directed me to BookNet, but this organization does not provide sales data for authors, students, or the general public, with the exception of published reports. Their *Deep Dive* series in particular provides helpful information not otherwise available, and in a 2016 report about biography the organization noted that 'the Biography category continues to increase while Non-Fiction overall has seen a notable decline'. The growth is relatively small, however, as biography's share of the overall print market has increased by only one percent in the last decade.<sup>30</sup>

Scholars increasingly make the case for biography as an academic discipline or subdiscipline and see it as distinct from Life Writing, but this distinction is not always made within the publishing industry.<sup>31</sup> A number of examples have already been mentioned, such as UMP's placement of biography and memoirs into one category, which BookNet does (with autobiography also included) as well. The inclusion of memoirs could explain the increase in popularity that they have tracked, as the genre is currently quite popular: recall that the *Globe and Mail's* list of best nonfiction had nearly double the number of memoirs as biographies. Similarly, Larsen of UMP noted that in recent years they have published more memoirs than biographies. All this suggests that the memoir 'boom,' detailed by Julie Rak in 2013, shows no signs of abating.<sup>32</sup>

29 Susan McIntosh, correspondence with the author, March 15, 2018; and David Larsen, correspondence with the author, March 15, 2018. (McIntosh has since retired.)

30 BookNet Canada, *Deep Dive: The Biography & Autobiography Book Buyer, 2016* (BNC Research, 2017), 13–14, 15. It also found that biography was 'fairly backlist heavy', meaning that such books stay on the market for quite some time. However, it is important to note that their sample size is small; this particular report was based on a sample of 213 buyers representing 272 book purchases, compared with 2,330 nonfiction book buyers (see pages 3 and 11 of the report). Harnum estimated that a historical biography would sell in the range of 1,500 to 2,000 copies, which is high for an academic book (conversation with the author, June 27, 2018).

31 On the distinction between the two areas, see Hans Renders and Binne de Haan, eds., *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

32 David Larsen, correspondence with the author, March 15, 2018; and Julie Rak, *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013). Other publishers increasingly see the value of the two genres: Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa / University of Ottawa Press recently introduced a new series entitled 'Biographies et memoirs/Biographies and Memoirs': see <https://press.uottawa.ca/series/contemporary-society/biographies-and-memoirs.html>.

In recent years there has been little agreement among historians about the state of the art of historical biography in Canada. In 2011, a year after the CHA's discussion of biography's 'return,' Béatrice Craig argued that as a general rule 'academic historians do not write biographies'. Two years later, David MacKenzie countered that biography, and especially political biography, remained popular, and in 2013 the social historian Suzanne Morton remarked that was 'no denying the current fascination with biography by historians.'<sup>33</sup> But popularity aside, there remains a continuing timidity toward historical biography. Signs of this attitude include a lack of biographical approaches to history in the classroom and a continued belief that biographies are unsuitable for history dissertations. Reflecting on his twenty-two years with the University of Toronto Press, Bill Harnum remarked: 'if your first book is a popular biography, that's not going to be considered legitimate or significant enough from a tenure committee or a hiring committee. You're far better off to do something that's more monographic in its focus *than a biography of any kind*.' He continued: 'I've never seen a biography come in that had been a thesis... I'm sure it's happened, but I can't recall any. But I think that's certainly a prejudice that would exist.'<sup>34</sup>

Biographers themselves also express some ambivalence about their craft; some recent reflections have spent more time cautioning about biography's limitations than discussing its benefits.<sup>35</sup> Although historical biographies that

33 Béatrice Craig, 'The Art of Biography', in *Acadiensis* 40, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2011): 146; David MacKenzie, 'Where Character Meets Circumstance: Political Biography in Modern Canada', in *Acadiensis* 42, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2013): 182–194; and Suzanne Morton, *Wisdom, Justice, and Charity: Canadian Social Welfare through the Life of Jane B. Wisdom, 1884–1975* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 7–8. Thanks to Len Husband for drawing my attention to Morton's work.

34 Harnum, conversation with the author, June 27, 2018 (emphasis added). The only such example I could find was T. Stephen Henderson, *Angus L. Macdonald: A Provincial Liberal* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), which began as 'A Provincial Liberal: Angus L. Macdonald, 1890–1954' (PhD diss., York University, 2003). Bruce Walsh, reflecting on the long path that one particular book took to reach publication, suggested that perhaps students were warned away from biographies simply because of how difficult they were to write well (conversation with the author, July 3, 2018), while one historian suggested to me that a biographical dissertation would leave prospective historians with difficulties defining their fields of expertise on the academic job market.

35 See for example Jason Sean Ridler, *Maestro of Science: Omond McKillop Solandt and Government Science in War and Hostile Peace, 1939–1956* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 7, 9; Roderick J. Barman, 'Biography as History', in *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 21, no. 2 (2010), 61–75; and MacKenzie, 'Where Character Meets Circumstance', 182. By contrast, see a recent defense of biography from an editor at an Ameri-



open with a lengthy discussion or defense of the biographical method are increasingly rare, many biographers continue to feel it necessary to justify their choice of subject. In his biography of the Canadian astronomer J.S. Plaskett, R. Peter Broughton begins by answering the question: 'Why should a biography of an astronomer, albeit a celebrated one, arose much interest?' Richard Kaplan lists the early life accomplishments of justice Ivan C. Rand before remarking that none of it 'would merit a biography', and then suggests that only Rand's contribution to the law as a judge justified the biography. And the historian Robert Wardhaugh admitted quite honestly that, when asked to author a biography of the civil servant William Clifford Clark, he was initially 'unsure if Clarke was deserving of a full-length biography'.<sup>36</sup> The question of who merits or deserves a biography has no easy answer. The practical issues related to publication discussed above, such as the potential publisher, market, funding, and sales, are doubtless considered. However, one of the primary considerations seems to be whether a study of the subject will also explore a broader sociohistorical context. Indeed, this larger view is what distinguishes historical biography from other forms of biography.<sup>37</sup>

When writing biographies, historians are always considering two elements: the life and its context. The terminology often changes – some prefer 'life and times' and others 'character and circumstance' – but the underlying goal is generally the same: to illuminate some aspect of the past. Some historians will target more life, others more context; perhaps most will aim for the middle of the continuum defined by these poles. On the occasion of the sesquicentennial of Confederation, the flagship journal of the Canadian historical profession, *The Canadian Historical Review* (CHR), organized a feature on 'Confed-

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can university press: Michael J. McGandy, 'Arguing Biography', in *Uncommon Sense* [blog of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture] October 23, 2018, <https://blog.oieahc.wm.edu/dh3-arguing-biography/>. Thanks to Katelyn Arac for bringing this to my attention.

36 R. Peter Broughton, *Northern Star: J.S. Plaskett* (Toronto: University Press, 2018), xiii; Richard Kaplan, *Canadian Maverick: The Life and Times of Ivan C. Rand* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for the Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, 2009), xii; and Robert A. Wardhaugh, *Behind the Scenes: The Life and Work of William Clifford Clark* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), ix–x.

37 Meister, 'The Biographical Turn and the Case for Historical Biography'. For some classificatory schemes relating to biography, see Birgitte Possing, 'Biography: Historical', in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd ed., ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (London: Elsevier, 2001), 2:644–649; and Thomas Söderqvist, 'The Seven Sisters: Subgenres of Bioi of Contemporary Life Scientists', in *Journal of the History of Biology* 44 (2011), 633–650. Thanks to Allan Hildon for directing me to the latter.

eration, Biography, and Canadian History'. The resulting pieces revealed some of Canadian historians' varied approaches to historical biography. Adele Perry, the president of the CHA, admitted that her comments about the two subjects amounted to 'something close to an argument against both'. When researching her most recent work Perry was confronted with the unevenness of the archival record of her biographical subjects and as a result 'reject[ed] the total project of biography'. 'The practice of biography fractures in practice,' she argues, 'and points us to more modest and expansive approaches to [...] putting human lives into history, and history into them.'<sup>38</sup>

Historians who seek a balance between life and context often invoke Barbara Tuchman's famous 'prism' metaphor. The idea is that by looking through a life, the historian can reveal previously unnoticed aspects of a historical period or subject. But it is worth remembering that Tuchman was not aiming for such a balance; as she put it, her use of biography was 'less for the sake of the individual subject' than 'exhibiting' an age, nation-state, or situation.<sup>39</sup> (Alice Kessler-Harris has offered a similar metaphor of life as a 'lens' and has more accurately described her approach as 'anti-biography'.) Donald Wright asked in his piece in the *CHR*, 'Why would any biographer want to see through the life?' Aiming for that middle ground, he rightly argued that 'lives do not preclude or even get in the way of, a deeper or new understanding of historical circumstances and historical processes.'<sup>40</sup>

38 Adele Perry, 'Beyond Biography, Beyond Canada', in *Canadian Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (June 2017): 329 and 336.

39 Barbara Tuchman, 'Biography as a Prism of History', in *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art*, ed. Marc Pachter (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 133. For recent examples, see Linda A. Ambrose, *A Great Rural Sisterhood: Madge Robertson Watt and the ACWW* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 8; and Michael Gauvreau, *The Hand of God: Claude Ryan and the Fate of Canadian Liberalism, 1925–1971* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 5. A historical biographical approach dominates even the formatting of the subtitles of scholarly biographies, where the prevailing model is 'x and the y', where x is an individual and y is a period, organization, or theme (note the titles listed above).

40 Alice Kessler-Harris, 'Why Biography?' in *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009), 625–630; and Donald Wright, 'His Macdonald, My Creighton, Biography, and the Writing of History', in *Canadian Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (June 2017), 354. For one recent use of the lens metaphor, see Patricia Roy, *Boundless Optimism: Richard McBride's British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012), 1. For another discussion of the varying approaches, see Craig, 'The Art of Biography'. Other Canadian historians have offered shorter but promising reflections. For instance, in a letter to the editor, Michael Gauvreau offered an insightful description of the biographical project: 'The standard of successful biography remains the full elucidation and presentation of the subject's self-understanding in the context of his or her society and culture.' Gauvreau, 'Re: 'Quiet,

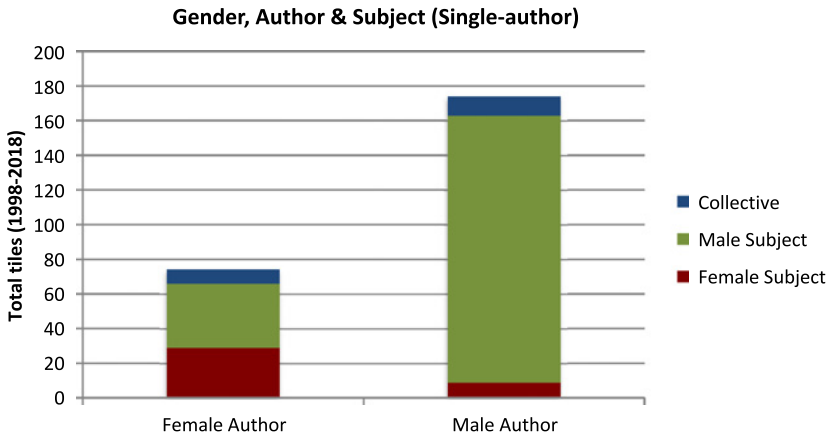


FIGURE 2 Gender of biographers and their subjects

Absent from these discussions has been much engagement with international writing on biographical theory and methods, although many historical biographers are now paying attention to feminist historians' powerful critiques of the way biography has traditionally been written.<sup>41</sup> However, women continue to be underrepresented in biographical writing (see figure 2). Similarly, biographies of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds continue to be underrepresented within the historiography. And when such peoples are addressed, often only the stories of the elites are told. As the historian Barrington Walker argues about Black Canadian historiography in particular, much of this literature has been overtly filiopietistic (a term that refers to the excessive veneration of one's ancestors).<sup>42</sup> Ironically, despite political historians' continued concerns about the decline of political biography,<sup>43</sup> the publication history suggests that

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and Not Entirely a Revolution', by Graham Fraser (February 2018), in *Literary Review of Canada* 26, no. 2 (March 2018), 32.

41 See for example Carmen Nielson, 'A Much-Fathered Nation: Feminist Biography and Confederation Politics', in *Canadian Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (June 2017), 356–374; Ambrose, *A Great Rural Sisterhood*, 8–9; Little, *Patrician Liberal*, xii; Ridler, *Maestro of Science*, 7–9; and Morton, *Wisdom, Justice, and Charity*, 4, 7–8.

42 Barrington Walker, *Race on Trial: Black Defendants in Ontario's Criminal Courts, 1858–1958* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press and the Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, 2010), 7. He returned to this theme in his 'Critical Histories of Blackness in Canada', Annual Faculty Lecture, Department of History, Queen's University (November 29, 2018).

43 John English, the general editor of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography/Dictionnaire biographique du Canada*, wrote in 2011 that it was 'extremely difficult to find authors to write biographies of prominent political figures'. English, 'Foreword', x. A year later, Philip Buckner argued that Canadian historians had 'largely abandoned full-scale political biog-

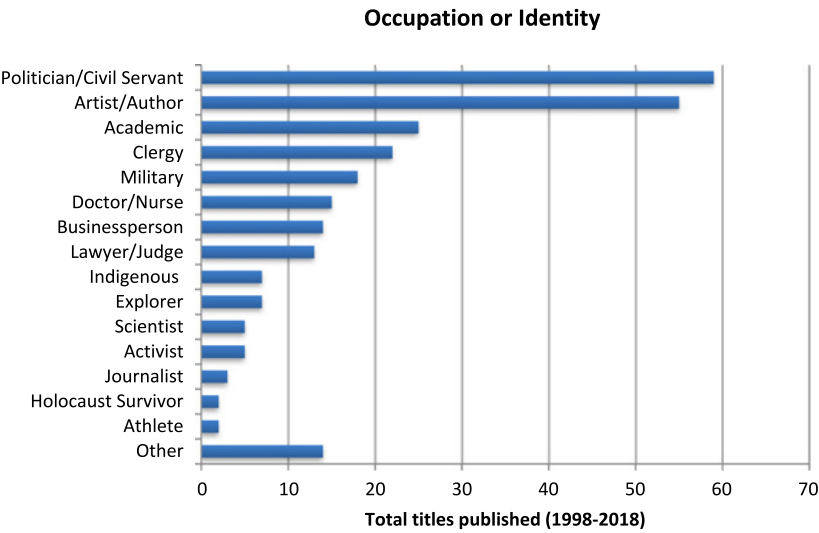


FIGURE 3 Occupations of biographical subjects

politicians – who are, at least historically, statistically most likely to be male and racialized as white – remain the most frequent recipients of biographical treatments. (Authors are the second-most written-about group, mainly owing to the efforts of literary scholars; see figure 3).

Finding non-traditional biographical subjects in Canada requires looking beyond biographies to autobiographies and memoirs. Fernwood Publishing, for instance, has released biographies and memoirs of political activists but does not publish historical biographies. Athabasca University Press (AU Press) eschews biography altogether in favor of other forms of life writing. Their ‘Our Lives: Diary, Memoir, and Letters’ series, introduced with the aims of social history in mind, seeks to ‘make available voices from the past that might otherwise remain unheard’ and to ‘foregroun[d] the experience of ordinary individuals’. Similarly, at UMP, several memoirs have been published as part of their ‘First Voices, First Texts’ series, dedicated to out-of-print or neglected works by Indigenous authors. In light of the increasing interest in Indigenous studies among the general public in Canada, this series no doubt contributes to UMP’s sales of biographies and memoirs.<sup>44</sup> In short, while publishers are increasingly favoring the memoirs and autobiographies of diverse figures, we still find

raphy’. See MacKenzie’s dissenting article (which argues political biography is alive and well), ‘Where Character Meets Circumstance’, quote at 182.

44 Beverly Rach (Managing Editor, Fernwood), correspondence with the author, June 26, 2018; Larsen, correspondence with the author, March 15, 2018; and AU Press,

historians opting for the traditional subjects of academic biographies: men, politicians, and middle-to-upper-class people of European descent.

Persons considered subaltern and those racialized as nonwhite are often challenging to tackle as biographical subjects, due to factors such as a lack of traditional source material. Such challenges should be viewed not as deterrents but rather as opportunities to think, research, and write in creative and innovative ways.<sup>45</sup> This effort is a necessary part of the ongoing struggle to unseat Eurocentrism within the academy. As Mary McCallum writes, 'In history, as in other forms of work, there is a significant and seemingly irreconcilable dualism that divides Native people as the target or object of labour and Native people as workers. In the field of history, this split divides Native people as history and Native people as historians.' The same has occurred in relation to biography; Alice Te Punga Somerville and Daniel Heath Justice argue that, for far too long, people of European descent have considered Indigenous peoples to be only the subjects, and not the authors, of biographies.<sup>46</sup>

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'Series', <https://www.aupress.ca/series/our-lives-diary-memoir-and-letters/>. A review of their catalogs suggests that one to two of the dozen or so works they publish each year are in this series. (AU Press is notable for being Canada's first open-access scholarly press; it sells print books but the texts of these works are all freely available as .pdf files on its website.) The University of Calgary Press formerly ran a similar series, 'Legacies Shared', which was designed to preserve personal histories of 'pioneer' and immigrant life. Nunavut Arctic College Media also publishes a number of memoirs, as well as genre-stretching works that consist of transcribed oral life histories of one or more Inuit people. See also Alana Bell, 'Truth and Reconciliation in Life Writing: The Year in Canada', in *Biography* 39, no. 4 (Fall 2016), 585–591.

- 45 Reid-Maroney's *The Reverend Jennie Johnson and African Canadian History* exemplifies these challenges. Johnson left behind very few papers, making her a difficult biographical subject. The book received mixed reviews; one reviewer argued that the study should have been article-length, given that in the book gaps in Johnson's life history were filled with background information, biographical sketches of other figures, and discussions of events and organizations that were 'quite frankly off topic'. See Dann J. Brody's review in *The Journal of African American History* 100, no. 2 (Spring 2015), 330. Nevertheless, as Lisa A. Lindsay argues, life histories belong 'firmly in our repertoire of approaches into the African and diasporic past'. See her 'Biography in African History', in *History in Africa* 44 (2017), 11–26.

- 46 Mary Jane Logan McCallum, *Indigenous Women, Work, and History 1940–1980* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014), 231; and Alice Te Punga Somerville and Daniel Heath Justice, 'Introduction: Indigenous Conversations About Biography', in *Biography* 39, no. 3 (Summer 2016), 240–241. Some recent biographies of Indigenous people include Jean Barman, *Abenaki Daring: The Life and Writings of Noel Annance, 1791–1869* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016); Ronald W. Hawker, *Yakuglas' Legacy: The Art and Times of Charlie James* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Tolly Bradford, *Prophetic Identities: Indigenous Missionaries on British Colonial Frontiers, 1850–1875* (Van-

Biographical methods used by Indigenous people are valuable for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences and, while much has yet to be written on this subject, it is fruitful to consider how aspects of these approaches might be used to complicate Euro-Canadian approaches to biography and to challenge the continued undervaluation of oral history in the historical profession. Indeed, Te Punga Somerville and Justice note that one common thread through their conversation on the subject was ‘an insistence on Indigenous biographies as more than past-tense histories of study, but rather, as meaningful and ongoing living relationships in the world.’<sup>47</sup> Of course, one must be cautious not to be deterministic or construct a rigid binary. As Deanna Reder argues, ‘while it is true that different epistemologies will provide different ways of seeing the world, I would not claim that this will result in identical expression by one group and the opposite expression by another.’<sup>48</sup> In short, all people living in Canada should strive to learn from people whose cultural backgrounds are different than their own, and should do so without preconceptions.

This advice can be applied more broadly: as the present volume no doubt illustrates, there are differences in how lives are written about in different countries and, as I have argued with regard to Canada, there are also differences *within* these countries. One of biography’s benefits is that it provides a way of learning from and about one another. The sociologist Richard Day has documented how diversity in Canada has long been presented as a problem to be

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couver: UBC Press, 2013); Peggy Brock, *The Many Voyages of Arthur Wellington Clah: A Tsimshian Man on the Pacific Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012); Richard Daly and Rena Bolton, *Xwelíqwiya: The Life of a Stó:lō Matriarch* (Athabasca: AU Press, 2012); and Jeanne MacKinnon, *The Identities of Marie Rose Delorme Smith* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2012).

47 Te Punga Somerville and Justice, ‘Indigenous Conversations About Biography’, 246. One of the first collections to explore such approaches is Peter Read, Frances Peters-Little, and Anna Haebich, eds., *Indigenous Biography and Autobiography* (Canberra: Australian National University E Press and Aboriginal History Incorporated, 2008). See also Thomas Peace, ‘Indigenous intellectual traditions and biography in the northeast: A historiographical reflection’, in *History Compass* 16 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12445>, which examines the concept of Indigenous intellectual traditions and argues that scholars must look beyond print culture.

48 Deanna Helen Reder, ‘*Acimisowin* as Theoretical Practice: Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition in Canada’ (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2007), 28. There are plenty of unanswered questions in this subfield. While Te Punga and Justice argue for keeping the term ‘biography’ (as opposed to ‘life writing’) on the grounds that it is ‘well known in Indigenous circles’ (243), Reder’s research suggests that much of the writing done by Indigenous authors in Canada has been autobiographical in nature.

solved. But diversity itself is not the problem: the problem is prejudice, and biography can play an important role in breaking it down. As Morton suggests, biography's focus on an individual 'not only liberates the historian from isolating and reifying aspects of identity; it also creates space for personal agency and empathy.'<sup>49</sup> And perhaps therein lies its greatest promise. In a country of great diversity, and especially in this age of increased intolerance around the world, biographies from and about figures from a multiplicity of backgrounds can play an important role in bringing people together. Biographies can help illustrate the injustices of the past and tell the stories of those who fought to correct them. They can also reveal the injustices of the present, illuminate their historical lineages, and – one hopes – inspire positive change.

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49 Richard J.F. Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); and Morton, *Wisdom, Justice, and Charity*, 9.