
Telling Lives

"A well-written life," wrote Thomas Carlyle, "is almost as rare as a well-spent one." Even so, biography has lately become a literary growth industry in America, perhaps because the modern novel no longer satisfies the popular appetite for life stories presented in their entirety. Here Edmund Morris, the prize-winning author of *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, discusses the appeal of biography and recalls his own apprenticeship.

by Edmund Morris

I guess I should have known I would one day write biography when, at the age of 10 or so, I discovered that the heroes I most craved to meet were not taxpaying residents of Nairobi, Kenya.

Alexander the Great, Tom Sawyer, Winston Churchill, and test pilot Chuck Yeager lived in "a world elsewhere," and seemed unlikely to visit mine, except perhaps on safari. Lacking their company, I was forced to improvise novels in which tow-headed aviators fought confusedly with Prime Ministers wearing Macedonian plumes. I made no distinction between the true and imaginary characters: Their common remoteness made them equally real to me.

Later, I developed an adolescent passion for Brigitte Bardot. But that divine *vision pneumatique* never swam further south than St. Tropez, let alone the equator. Lacking her flesh—and what flesh!—I began to write erotic fantasies with lines like "And the ripe mulberries rose in Brigitte's breasts."

Thus diverted, I paid little atten-

tion to the face of Theodore Roosevelt, which grinned at me one day from the pages of a civic history entitled *Nairobi: The First Fifty Years*. The caption said something about a former U.S. President who had made an expedition to British East Africa in 1910, and decimated most of the local wildlife. I stared briefly into his kindly, bespectacled eyes, and forgot about him for the next quarter of a century.

My first serious interest in biography as literature came when I decided to be a famous pianist, and checked Dent's *Master Musicians* series out of the school library. These excellent short studies introduced me to men who still loom large in my life: Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, and Brahms. I memorized every detail that would enable me to see, hear, feel, and smell them (that regrettable chamber pot beneath Beethoven's Broadwood piano, those Lisztian cigar stumps moldering on the bosoms of adoring matrons).

Desperate for even closer ac-

quaintance, I combed the iconographical resources of the Nairobi Library, i.e., a few illustrated encyclopedias. I flicked impatiently past reproductions of painted and drawn portraits; it was the reality of photographs I craved. Curiously enough, only the oldest and blurriest of these excited me—a haunting daguerreotype of the seated Chopin, hawk-nosed with a furrow of pain between his eyes. It was taken in 1849; he had but 10 months to live. For some reason, the picture overpowered me with a sense of loss, of regret that Chopin's vanished, soft-hued Paris—so palpable all around him—would be forever denied me. Here was I, 100 years later, imprisoned under the harsh African sky.

Weekends with Tolstoy

My quest for *le temps perdu* did not, however, become active until I was 30 years old and living in New York as a freelance copywriter (*The Heat-rae Natural Gas Boiler: A User's Guide*). To while away the time between assignments, I began to research the life of Josef Lhévinne (1876–1944), an obscure Russian pianist whose few recordings are among the glories of the RCA archives. I discovered that his 92-year-old widow Rosina was still alive and teaching at the Juilliard School of Music.

On impulse, I went to interview her with a tape recorder. She began to talk casually about Josef's private recitals in Chekov's apartment, of

evenings with Tchaikovsky and Scriabin, and about weekends together “with the Tolstoy's at Yasnaya Polyana.”

The Rooseveltian Oak

I listened enraptured, and came away from her apartment determined to create a biography of Lhévinne in sound. For six months, I interviewed his surviving friends and pupils, compiled a chronology and discography, studied microfilms of his press clips, and pored over photographs until I could at last envision him shambling onstage, with his sleepy eyes and loose red wig. The resultant three-and-a-half hour *Josef Lhévinne: A Radio Portrait* was broadcast by WNCN, New York, in December 1971, and elicited the greatest listener response in the station's history.

Even then I never thought that I could make a living doing this sort of thing. Furthermore, as a college dropout, I felt unqualified for scholarly research. Was that not the province of Ph.D.s? I should have taken heart from Harry Graham, who wrote in *Misrepresentative Men*:

All great biographers possess
Besides a thirst for information
That talent which commands
success,
I mean of course Imagination;
Combining with excessive Tact
A total disregard for Fact.

Instead, I tried to become successively a travel writer, a journalist,

Edmund Morris, 42, a current Wilson Center Fellow, is the author of The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt, which won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for biography in 1980. Born in Nairobi, Kenya, he briefly studied music and history at Rhodes University in South Africa. Mr. Morris immigrated to Britain in 1964 and then to the United States in 1968, supporting himself by freelance writing. He is now at work on the second volume of his projected three-volume life of Theodore Roosevelt.



"I have a constant plan to write the life of Mr. Johnson," vowed James Boswell in 1772. Samuel Johnson agreed to provide all particulars "for twopence."

and a screenwriter. Then, in 1974, President Nixon resigned and made his tearful farewell to the White House. Like millions of other Americans watching on television, I was mystified to hear him read a 19th-century eulogy, written in a moment of high emotion by one of his predecessors: "She was beautiful in face and form . . . as a flower she lived, and as a fair young flower she died."

"Well," said Nixon after a pause, "that was TR."

At this, a forgotten, bespectacled face floated up from the depths of memory, and I was consumed with curiosity about the circumstances in which Theodore Roosevelt wrote those words. I dug out Noel Busch's *TR*, learned that the circumstances were extremely moving, then searched and found much more in Carleton Putnam's *Theodore Roose-*

velt: The Formative Years, a neglected masterpiece. It occurred to me that this period of TR's life, beginning with the death of his first wife, Alice Lee, in 1884 and ending with his marriage in 1886 to his childhood sweetheart, Edith Carow, would make an excellent screenplay, comprising his cowboy years out West, his conquest of melancholy and ill health, and his discovery that he was destined for the Presidency.

I wrote the screenplay (still unproduced, alas), doing massive research simply because I wanted to make it as authentic as possible. Then my agent made a fateful remark, "Since you've done all this work, why don't you write a short, popular biography?" In 1979, the first volume of this "short" work appeared—886 pages of it. By an odd coincidence, I counted 886 gray hairs in my beard

on the day of publication. I am now writing a second volume covering TR's Presidency (1901–1909), and will have to write a third before I am through—by which time, no doubt, my beard will be snowy.

I suppose I should be grateful to Nixon, because like a passing traveler who treads an acorn into the ground, he has afforded years of shade and comfort to someone lost by the wayside. My Rooseveltian oak is sturdy now (although I wish to God it didn't grow so slowly), and it may possibly survive me. I count myself lucky to have become a biographer at a time when biography is once again becoming a serious art form, as it was in the late 18th and mid-19th centuries.

The Hairy Hand

The gentleman-biographer, so elegantly personified by James Boswell and John Lockhart, is reappearing at the toniest dinner parties, although often as not "he" is now a woman. Indeed, one of New York's *plus chic* hostesses, Arianna Stassinopoulos, is the biographer of Maria Callas, and is now working on a life of Picasso. Barbara Tuchman (*Stillwell*) rates pretty high at any table, and Antonia Fraser (*Mary Queen of Scots*) is no stranger to caviar.

Women, come to think of it, are naturally suited to biography, with their natural intuition, flair for live interviews, and love of reading other people's mail. When femininity is allied with real literary ability, as in the case of Judith Thurman (*Isak Dinesen*), Jean Strouse (*Alice James*), or Cecil Woodham-Smith, whose *Florence Nightingale* is one of the greatest biographies ever written, the combination is pretty hard to beat.

Which is not to say that the hairy hand may not occasionally wield a

competitive pen. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* has yet to be surpassed for depth of sympathy, wealth of detail (those mysterious bits of orange peel!), and tragicomic power. Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria* ends with the most poignant flashback in non-fiction, and Richard Holmes's *Shelley* begins more beautifully than any novel I recall. George Painter's *Proust* is almost as good as Proust's Proust.

Painting the Truth

What are the reasons for the newfound popularity of biography, apparent on both sides of the Atlantic? One seems to be that a good biographer courageously tackles what Thomas Beer called "that most dangerous of materials, ourselves." Modern novelists largely lack this courage. They also, to my mind, lack the energy to write sustained narrative—the literary equivalent of running a marathon. Biographers *have* to be storytellers, in that their subject is the organic growth of character perceived in action. When the story is well told, and the character original enough to engage our sympathy, we can still feel that sense of final-page regret which used to be the sign of great fiction.

I confess that Boswell remains the master against whom I vainly measure my own efforts. I also shamelessly imitate him, particularly in the dramatization of dialogue, a quite legitimate device that for some reason has seldom been used by other biographers:

Roosevelt. I appointed him because he was the best man, regardless of race, color, or creed. Isn't that so, Mr. Schiff?

Jacob Schiff (rather deaf). Dot's right, Mr. President, you came to me and said, "Chake, who is der best Choo I can put in my Cabinet?"

It is just as legitimate, in my opinion, for a biographer to use the narrative techniques perfected by Tolstoy and Dickens (and in our own century, the movie serial), such as rhythmic cross-cutting, dramatic exit and entry, symbols, clue-planting, and cliffhangers. There is no reason either why the modern biographer should not indulge in metaphors as freely as the novelist or poet. For example, I used a subtextual metaphor of climbing throughout *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (having discovered that TR could never resist scaling any mountain in his vicinity, even when he was ravaged by asthma attacks). Chapter after chapter, as he rises through life, finds him cresting this or that cliff or mountain, sinking occasionally into valleys, yet always reaching higher plateaus, searching out purer air and wider vistas.

On the final page, he is Vice-President of the United States, picnicking atop Mount Marcy, the loftiest point in New York State, at the very moment President McKinley begins to die of an assassin's bullet. He sees a ranger running up the slopes of the mountain, clutching the

yellow slip of a telegram. "Instinctively," the last sentence reads, "he knew what message the man was bringing."

Now that sentence, I submit, is as dramatic as any a novelist might write. I get letters from readers who say it makes their skin prickle. Yet I do not assume undue credit for it, because it is grounded in fact: Theodore Roosevelt's own testimony, twice repeated. What I did was recognize a moment of supreme drama for what it was worth, in obedience to TR's own injunction, in his great essay, "History as Literature":

He [the historian] must always remember that while the worst offense of which he can be guilty is to write vividly and inaccurately, yet that unless he writes vividly, he cannot write truthfully; for no amount of dull, painstaking detail will sum up as the whole truth unless genius is there to paint the truth.

I make no claim to be a historian, much less a genius, but the vivid truth tantalizes me as much now as it did 30-odd years ago, when I first shaded my eyes against the equatorial glare, and saw those Macedonian plumes tossing under the baobabs.

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COMMENTARY

We welcome timely letters from readers, especially those who wish to amplify or correct information published in the Quarterly and/or react to the views expressed in our essays. The writer's telephone number and address should be included. For reasons of space, letters are usually edited for publication. Some of those printed below were received in response to the editors' requests for comment.

Homelands for Exiles

Re "Israel" [WQ, New Year's 1983]:

No discussion of Zionism and the State of Israel can omit the Jews of the Golah ("Exile"), those who do not live there.

There is no Zionist theory of the Golah. We who do not live in Israel are in Exile and should take steps to go home. Herzl's original theory paid slight attention to the Jews who in time to come would not need the salvation provided by a Jewish state. Today, no Israeli thinker will concede "legitimacy" to the Golah. As a first-rate Zionist historian told me, "If you are right, we are wrong." If Jews could build a stable and constructive community for themselves in the Western democracies, then the rationale for a Jewish state, in his view, would prove false.

If, however, Zionist theory cannot account for the endurance of the Jews outside the State of Israel, we must account for our relationship to our homelands and to the State of Israel. Clearly, we place our highest loyalty to our homelands. Equally clearly, we care very deeply for the welfare of the Jewish state. These loyalties need not come into conflict. But an uneasy truce between them—and equivalent concerns of other Americans for their countries of ancestral origin—hardly constitutes an answer. American Jews cannot explain who they are as Jews in the world in which there is a Jewish state, and what it means to be a Jew after the murder of six million Jews in Europe. What explanation do American Jews give themselves for continuing to live under those very conditions in which, in our

times, six million Jews of the Golah were wiped out? And if, as we all suppose, America is different, the issue of what it means to be different in America, to be Jews in a gentile society, still demands attention.

Jews are practical people. They have had for too long to solve only concrete problems of politics: of state-building in Israel, of community-building in this country. But in the end, ideas do matter. What we think about ourselves governs what we do. It must follow that problems of intellect and soul must engage once again the Jews who wonder who they are, and why they are where they are, and what they should become.

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Realpolitik in Zion

Shlomo Avineri's summary of the history of Zionism ["The Roots of Zionism"] is generally sound and persuasive, but one could not possibly imagine Menachem Begin arising from the movement and the history that Avineri has described. Avineri's Zionism appears to be composed of liberal nationalism, social revival, and the recovery of a Hebraic identity. But the pogroms in Russia (1881) and Central and Western European anti-Semitism (the 1890s) turned Leon Pinsker and Theodor Herzl to Zionism. Zionism contains both the spacious, positive dream that Avineri describes and *ressentiment*, which the Nazi years increased.

Don Peretz asserts ["A Different Place"] that Begin's second electoral victory in 1981 proved "the Conservative trend in Israeli politics" and that it had nothing to do with the economic situation of the country. On the contrary. In the run-up to the 1981 election, the Likud was losing, despite Begin's "charisma" and Peres's lack thereof. What persuaded the floating vote (mostly Sephardic) to go with Likud was a sudden easing by the Ministry of Finance of restrictions on consumer goods. It is reasonable to argue the reverse of Peretz's assertion: The half of the electorate