SHOULD RENAISSANCE HISTORIANS STILL WRITE BIOGRAPHIES?

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As a historian and a biographer, I have become increasingly aware that biographical writing is not in the best of odors in our time. It seems more and more to fall in that strange no-man's-land between history and literature. Though I freely confess that my own tendency is to see biographical writing more from the historian's point of view than from that of the literary man, I do not intend to continue here the long and bitter battle the nature of biography in the abstract . . . a battle which draws its lines of opposition variously between history versus literature, craft versus art, or reason versus imagination. This battle has often reached such a crescendo of bitterness that even its truce agreements are little more than thinly veiled shifts in the tactics of controversy. “Diplomacy can win,” it is reasoned, “when vigor has dulled its cutting edge.” I would prefer not to enter the controversy, but to deal with it as a historian from the perspective of the actual occurrence and its implications to historical relations. Since I am relatively at home with Caterina Sforza, and since she was a historical person of Renaissance time, I shall use her and what we know of her relations to her world in dealing with some of the more challenging arguments I hear directed against the writing of historical biography.

Perhaps before I proceed to a systematic review of these arguments as I understand them, I should explain precisely what I mean about my own view of biography being influenced by my profession as a historian. I believe I can make myself clear without entering the lists of battle between “men of art and men of science.” Sir Harold Nicolson’s rules for a proper biography (“pure biography,” as he called it), provide a good point of departure. He requires accuracy, no didactic purpose, and a style appropriate to literature. In my view the historian can have no argument with the first stipulation, and would hope fervently to satisfy the third. It is the second demand which is particularly bothersome because there is a problem as to just what it means. Was it formulated merely to discourage the biographer from preaching, from constructing an ideal person, a saint of one stripe or another? If so, there would be little quarrel from me in accepting it as a stipulation for “pure biography.” Foisting moral judgments on any aspect of a historical period is, indeed, a-historical. I
remember reading once a review of my biography of Caterina Sforza. It appeared in the pages of one of those English dailies not usually reserved for descriptions of the great deeds of saintly persons. The reviewer asked why had Breisach devoted six years of his life to the study of a murderess, thus suggesting that a concentration on the "pure in heart" was more appropriate if one were interested in the construction of "pure biography." I smiled ruefully remembering that Caterina Sforza, as far as we can tell, ordered twelve persons executed after the murder of her first husband, and forty-six after the murder of her lover. Noting that biographers of Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin seem to have no qualms, I reasoned I could rest easily. I thought further that I could assure Sir Harold Nicolson that I had never pictured Caterina Sforza as an ideal person living an ideal life, so I could rest comfortably under the umbrella of his requirements for "pure biography."

And yet my satisfaction with Sir Harold's second commandment in the interests of purity is a tenuous one. A biography of a person does stand as a monument of sorts to that person, or to something. In seeking some clarification of Sir Harold's admonition against didacticism, I hereby reaffirm my rejection (and I think his) of moral quality as precondition in choosing the subject of a biography. But how would Sir Harold choose a subject, and which would he reject as unworthy? I reached the conclusion that he would choose that life which, when polished with the best tools of literary style, might promise a fine work of art for art's sake. It seems to me that the historian choosing a subject for biographical study is in a much more complex situation, even if he belongs to that school of history which seems to exist for the sake of the truth and nothing but the truth.

As a professional who searches the past in order to recreate it, the historian is committed ipso facto to the analysis of contexts. Thus the historian as biographer will always be influenced in his choice of a subject for biographical study by his understanding of the historical context in which the subject stands. There is, quite simply, the question of the historical significance of the subject. The concern is not the possible literary merit, or aesthetic significance of the subject. The historical biographer is concerned with historical content, not significant form. He must ask himself if a study of this person will enlarge our understanding of the historical context in which he or she stands.

It is indeed tempting for the writer of historical biography to blame its low status among contemporary professionals on its misusers. Indeed they are legion, and they range in character from the pedantic eulogies of Roger North written about 1700 to the historical distortions of The Agony and the Ectasy and its numerous companions on the current commercial scene. However, the truly serious challenge to historical biography comes today