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Scott E. Casper. *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xii + 331 pp. $27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4765-7; $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2462-7.

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Biography at Work

As a genre, biography is often spurned by historians as well as literary scholars. Nevertheless, with distinguished roots in the ancient world and a long and busy life of service, biography ignores the snubs and continues to thrive; witness the trail of scathing reviews and popular criticism that followed *Dutch* all the way to best-seller lists.

This was hardly the case in the nineteenth century, argues Scott Casper, associate professor of history at the University of Nevada, Reno, in his learned and profound new book, *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America.* Hundreds, even thousands of biographies were written and published between 1790 and the turn of the twentieth century. We know nothing about these books, Casper argues, because we think we know all about them. But a great difference exists between nineteenth-century biography and our own. In the nineteenth century, biography had to work for a living; contemporary life-writing merely satisfies our curiosity. With the exception of a small selection of biographies, written by and for a narrow scholarly audience, late twentieth-century biography has strayed far from its nineteenth-century roots.

The work that nineteenth-century biography did was cultural; it helped to form identity for several generations of descendants of the Founding Parents. For more than half a century, it taught about the spirit of Revolution and the revolutionary generation. It illuminated traits of character that would shape future citizens in a time of building the nation and national identity. Later on, it recounted the lives of men and women, who by virtue of industry, self-education, and morality achieved success, either in the world of politics, the economy, or the church. Biography had didactic work to do; it was teacher in a school that continually changed its curriculum.

Casper's book is complex, though its framework is organized by simple chronology. Five chapters, representing four different eras, trace the evolution of biography over the long century. Despite chronology, however, the motives and methods of life-writing overlapped within the boundaries of time, and conflicting approaches coexisted within a single period. Most uniquely, however, Casper, a cultural historian, inspects nineteenth-century biography from a number of different perspectives, prob-

ing deeply into the intent of authors, publishers, critics, and readers. While the issues that emerge appear modern, they had different cultural meanings and significance in the century after the Revolution. One concern, for instance, was whether public activities or private behavior best reflected "character," and "private behavior" meant something altogether different, tame by our standards, in that earlier period. Another issue developed around sources: whether to rely upon the reports of family members and friends to best reflect a subject's life as opposed to the use of documented records. Critics and readers read for yet other agendas. This is a multi-faceted approach that overlaps and circles around its subject, the book. The research is exhaustive; the notes read as a sixty-page subtext to the narrative.

How, then, does one capture such a chameleon, a genre that refuses to behave in predictable ways and move in a discernibly progressive pattern? Not easily. Casper distinguishes between American biography and American biographies, for the earliest biographies in the new Nation were often written by and about Englishmen. The earliest biographical theory was imported as well. Following the Revolution, roughly between 1790 and 1820, while English topics prevailed in the biographical marketplace, military heroes and founding fathers became the primary subjects of domestic biography. The function of these works was didactic and nationalistic, one-dimensional embodiments of the revolutionary spirit that would shape good second-generation citizens. Parson Weems's George Washington represents the paragon of this type of life-writing, incorporating myth as easily as fact to delineate its subject's desirable character. This class of life-writing entertained and idealized, but mostly it moralized and taught. Close to the surface of this school of life-writing were the theories of Samuel Johnson, who advocated the inclusion of incidents from private life to demonstrate aspects of public virtue. In contrast, during the same period, John Marshall wrote his five-volume biography of Washington, panned by critics and readers alike as a history of the deeds of an era rather than a hero's story.

Reacting to this inflated version of heroism, the historian Jared Sparks in turn advocated a more difficult task for the biographer, the search for and use of documented facts. If the didactic and nationalistic purpose of biography was the same, his methods demanded rigorous adherence to truth. In pursuit of his own ideal, Sparks inaugurated a series of biographies, written by eminent authors, based upon research. Not surprisingly, given Sparks's own Harvard connection, as well as that of his chosen authors, the ideal heroes of these stories were New Englanders, who, quite exclusively, founded and built the nation. That was the first edition. In a second and then third round, reacting to critics from other parts of the country, Sparks discovered heroes from the South and even the West, but no women.

It would not be until the middle of the nineteenth century that a literary woman wondered if there were not female revolutionary heroes as well, and she found them. Elizabeth Ellet considered herself a disciple of Sparks when she set out to write her incomparable *Women of the American Revolution*, first published in 1848. Ellet, too, had a didactic motive, and a nationalistic one, though her examples were domestic women, whose heroism was demonstrated on the home front. Some, like Mercy Otis Warren, author of patriotic plays, poetry, and a history of the Revolution, were known; others, more obscure, made bandages, raised children, and prayed. Ellet's women rarely violated the early nineteenth-century ethos of domesticity and piety, but Ellet redefined these activities as patriotic commitment and sacrifice. In a world where wives of the heroes hardly appeared in their biographies, Ellet produced a series of profiles that reversed the dominant picture and promoted an equally valuable didactic portrait for women.

Women in the public sphere during the early nineteenth century were not discernibly visible as a biographical topic, yet Scott Casper has mined an interesting and little-known source to demonstrate women's role in the biographical project. Pious memoirs were not uncommonly written by women, though their purpose was individualistic and private, and their publication not intended for public market. Autobiographical though they were, intended to chronicle a personal religious journey en route to spiritual redemption, these memoirs also served, on occasion, as the bases of biographies, written by the bereaved friends and relatives, often a husband, to commemorate the life of a loved one. Not only did they commemorate, but they served as models for virtuous living, as didactic exemplars for the younger generation.

Casper insightfully pairs pious memoirs of the mid-nineteenth century with biographies about men who achieved public success. These stories of immigrants who became wealthy farmers and poor boys who might become presidents, followed much the same pattern as the pious memoir, narrating the odyssey of individuals whose qualities of industriousness, integrity, and clean living led to certain fortune and possible fame.

During the third biographical period, roughly the

third quarter of the nineteenth century, critics and readers alike encouraged the development of biography as an art form, joining together the craft of life-writing, journalism, and the novel. No longer wed exclusively to history and didacticism, biography would move closer to the fine arts. The first professional biographer, journalist James Parton, created a new "American biography," seeking to explore the inner lives of subjects, doing so "con amore." Romanticism, not republicanism, defined character. Parton recognized his audience as the "literate middle class, whose tastes lay somewhere above dime novels and somewhere below fancy European literatures and esoteric science and philosophy." (243)

Finally, realism guided the fin-de-siecle biography. This was best exemplified in the widespread production of "mug books," collections of local biographies, so named because they included portraits of their subjects, primarily folk in small western towns and cities, whose achievements were chronicled for local consumption. These "mug books" survive in local archives as relics of a former era. At the same time on the national scene, two biographical series were commissioned by the Boston publisher Houghton, Mifflin and Company that contributed to the pantheon of great men, the "American Statesmen" and "American Men of Letters." These series, in turn, inspired a series of "Famous Women." Scott Casper's research in the archives of Houghton Mifflin, demonstrating the developing negotiations around these series, is just one small example of the depth and range of his exploration for this massive topic.

So comprehensive is this book, so complex in its execution, that a brief review can only propose its salient topics. I have neglected to describe, for instance, the methods, style, and reception of campaign biographies and inspirational biographies. Yet as a cultural history and a closely focused study of biography, there is scant attention paid to the major political and economic developments of the period, not even the Civil War. There are a few other problems. *Constructing American Lives* suffers some inevitable repetition, such as the oft-stated didactic purposes of early nineteenth-century biography. The historical problem of chronology, when it cannot be neatly compartmentalized, leads to a sometimes problematic circularity. The author has also included an arrangement of illustrative interludes between the major chapters, perhaps intended to make the work more adaptable for classroom use, that seems otherwise unnecessary.

Clearly a paradigmatic work in cultural history, *Constructing American Lives* will be mined for information and ideas for some time to come. It will be some much longer time still before it will be emulated much less surpassed.

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