

## **Writing People's Lives: Reflections of an Amateur Biographer**

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In recent years I have had reason to reflect from time to time on the nature of the biographer's work—not least because, in three instances and for a variety of reasons, I have found myself engaged in that work. Etymologically, of course, the word biography simply means 'life-writing'; what is interesting to note is that, when the word *biographie* was first coined in France from the medieval Greek *βιογραφία* and imported into English in the seventeenth century, it referred solely to the genre, the branch of literature which dealt with the lives of individuals. Not until the end of the eighteenth century do we see reference to 'a biography', that is, an individual written record of someone's life. Before that time, and even after it, individual works of biography were generally known as 'lives',<sup>1</sup> as in the case of the most celebrated biography in English, Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, published in 1791.

The question I want to explore here is what it means to write the life of someone else—that is, their life-story. I use the three biographies I mentioned, or rather the writing of them, as examples of the kinds of general issues that are raised by the attempt to write the life-story of another person. I want, first, to explore the motivation that one might have for writing a biography; second, to look at biography as what would modishly be called *praxis*—looking, in other words, at the process of investigation and decision-making which is at the basis of biographical writing;

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and third, to suggest that a successful biography is in a sense something more than just a life-story, that it goes beyond the externalities of narrative to take us into the mind and character of its subject.

I need to provide a few very basic facts about the subjects of my three biographies. The first in date was initially published in 1995 (with a second edition in 2000), and was the life-story of Professor Kelter Hartley, my predecessor as Professor of French at the University of Newcastle.<sup>2</sup> Briefly, Hartley was born in 1909 and studied at the University of Sydney and then at the Sorbonne in Paris, arriving back in Australia with a doctorate in the mid-1930s. Unable to find an academic position, he spent the next 20 years as a schoolteacher before being appointed to the then Newcastle University College as Senior Lecturer in French and later promoted to an Associate Professorship.

When the University of Newcastle gained its autonomy in 1965, Hartley applied for and was appointed to the Foundation Chair of French. Retiring at the end of 1968, he spent the next twenty years living in retirement in Sydney. In the early 1980s, he sold his apartment in Edgecliff and invested the proceeds and all his other assets in a share portfolio, moving to the cheapest accommodation he could find and living the rest of his life as a kind of tramp, his shabby trousers held up with string as he walked the streets of Sydney. He had developed the ambition of amassing a million dollars, to be bequeathed to the University of Newcastle in order to create a travelling scholarship scheme for graduates in French.

By July 1987, his share portfolio had reached the million dollar target. Then came the stock market crash of October 1987, which, together with the death in December that year of one of the few former colleagues with whom he ever communicated, plunged him into a deep depression as he saw his portfolio sink well below the million dollar mark. In the mistaken belief that it would not recover, he took his life in February 1988. By the time his will had been tested in the courts, his portfolio was valued at over two million dollars. In order to implement his wish that a

scholarship scheme be created, the Hartley Bequest Program was established, with myself as its first Director (a post I continue to occupy in retirement). The Bequest Program sends a number of students to France each year on what are, by any measure, very generous scholarship benefits.

Hartley was an extraordinary character, a great eccentric and a kind of Walter Mitty personage. He constantly gave people incorrect or misleading information about himself, and appeared to have, if not a split personality, at least a double identity. Unmarried and possibly never having had a sexual liaison, he imagined himself a great and experienced lover; a minor writer, he imagined himself a major philosopher whose words would alter the course of civilisation; a millionaire, he lived as a pauper. He was a great subject to write about.

My second biography, published in 2000, was the life-story of Professor James Auchmuty, Foundation Vice-Chancellor of the University of Newcastle.<sup>3</sup> Born in 1909, the same year as Hartley, Auchmuty was a Northern Irishman and the son of a Church of Ireland clergyman. He studied at Trinity College Dublin and took out his PhD in 1935. Like Hartley, he could not get a full-time academic position, but worked as a schoolmaster by day and managed to pick up some university tutoring in the evenings.

After World War II, Auchmuty left Ireland and took up an Associate Professorship in History at Farouk I University in Alexandria, Egypt. Here he stayed until 1952, when Farouk was overthrown and Auchmuty, a British Government employee, was expelled and all his financial assets confiscated. Penniless and with a young family, he managed to find a position in Australia, becoming a Senior Lecturer at the New South Wales University of Technology at Ultimo (later to move to Kensington and become the University of New South Wales). He was sent to Newcastle to found a Faculty of Arts at the Newcastle University College, at that time a College of the NSW University of Technology, and in due course he became Deputy Warden and later Warden of the College. On autonomy in 1965, he became Foundation Vice-Chancellor and eventually had a distinguished career as Chairman

of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. He retired at the end of 1974, and became the author of a number of major reports for the Commonwealth Government before his death in 1981.

An imposing and ebullient Irishman, Auchmuty was another great character to write about. Anecdotes abounded concerning his legendary rudeness, his large, ungainly body surmounted by a massive head, his political manoeuvrings, his womanising, his supposed authoritarianism. I had the good fortune to serve under him for the first five years of my time at Newcastle, so he was a subject (unlike Kelter Hartley) I knew personally.

My third biography appeared in 2002, and was the life-story of my own former Professor at the University of Sydney, Ian Henning.<sup>4</sup> Of my three subjects, he will be the one best known to members of the Arts Association, a considerable number of whom were taught by him; and it was partly under the Association's auspices that the biography was launched in Sydney. A brief account of his career may nonetheless be helpful. Born in 1905, he studied at Sydney under the professoriate of the formidable George Gibb Nicholson—a man legendary for his severity and austerity, and for the high standards he demanded of students, of whom he characteristically failed the majority. Henning was a brilliant student, who went on to undertake doctoral studies in Paris, then returned to Australia and held a succession of short-term positions until he at length gained a tenured Lectureship, by which time he was already in his 40s. He became Nicholson's successor in the McCaughey Chair of French in 1946, and retired from the Chair in 1970. He died in 1975.

Of my three subjects, Henning would appear on the surface to be the least interesting to write about. He tended to come across as a somewhat formal, rather distant academic, very traditional in his views and with few of the endearing eccentricities of a Hartley or an Auchmuty. Like many another person in a similar situation, he was also rather denigrated by some members of a younger generation of academics who wished to place their own mark on the discipline by 'type-casting' him as hopelessly out-of-date and out-of-touch. He was often seen, particularly by those who knew

him only by repute, as merely a clone, or at least a fervent disciple, of his predecessor Nicholson.

Having provided a minimal background, let me come to the first of the general issues I want to raise about writing biography: the author's motivation. It is, I believe, a significant issue, since the reader is entitled to know what the author believed to be the point of writing this particular life-story. Motivation undoubtedly varies from one biographer (and indeed one biography) to another, but obviously I can indicate what it was in my own case.

Kelver Hartley was a man who had left a huge legacy to the University which had employed him, and had left it 'in perpetuity' (to quote his will). Despite the fact that he was an immensely private man, I felt it important that students who—in, say, a hundred years' time—might be the recipients of a Kelver Hartley Scholarship, should know something about the life of their magnanimous benefactor. If I did not write this account while some of those who had known him were still alive and could give me information, then it would be very difficult for any future biographer to discover anything more than written, and usually somewhat impersonal, records.

This immediately raises two issues. The first is what might be called an ethical issue, one of many which arise in the field of biographical writing. In this case, the issue is that, to some extent, the biography had to be a kind of 'homage', a memorial volume which would celebrate Hartley's remarkable bequest. To what extent, then, was it proper to refer to the man's foibles, his eccentricities? To what extent should a memorial volume of this kind veer towards hagiography (or at least a eulogy) as distinct from a critical study of a life? I shall return to this question in a very specific way a little later.

The second issue raised by the Hartley biography was that I had met the man only once, and had had only the briefest of correspondence with him. Whilst I was, thankfully, not totally reliant on written records (as one may be when writing the life of a person long dead), and thus I was able to talk with people who had known Hartley, nonetheless I felt this severely limited

the extent to which I could paint the kind of picture I would have wished to paint had I known him at all well. I was almost entirely reliant, for a portrait of his character, on the impressions others had formed. For that reason, I limited myself to what I called a 'biographical sketch', to which I was able to append a number of accounts by Hartley's former colleagues and students. These accounts varied between the relation of events illustrating some of his more bizarre oddities and the occasional attempt at coming to grips with some deeper issues of character.

In the cases of James Auchmuty and Ian Henning my motivation was somewhat different. I felt they had been rather unfairly treated by the judgment of later years (it is perhaps too grandiose to call it the judgement of history), and I felt the need to set the record straight. The fact that, unlike Kelper Hartley, I had known both men reasonably well and had formed a more favourable judgement based on my own reactions and impressions, lay behind my motivation. In turn, of course, it raised the question whether my own judgement was to be preferred over the conventional wisdom; but a biographer who allows self-doubt to intervene is doomed to frustration, or to silence. One needs always to remember that there will be plenty of critics out there to assure you that you got it wrong.

So I have gone some way towards dealing with this question of motivation. Yet, in all three cases, there was no *need* for me to write the biography. Behind the motivations I have mentioned, there was perhaps a deeper motivation lurking, and I want to refer to it briefly. Let me introduce it by saying that people sometimes ask me whether I intend to write my autobiography, to which I have a standard reply: 'No, I'm not interested in writing fiction'. It is, of course, a flippant response, even if based on my serious belief that autobiography is always to some extent fictitious, in that it attempts to portray us in the way we want to be portrayed, to produce the image we would like other people to have of us. Even on a less cynical view, it remains true that, even if we are sincere and frank, our memories remain selective.

And yet, while I would want to make the point that autobiography differs in that respect from biography (though not entirely, since there is always an element of fiction, or at least invention or conjecture, in biography), nonetheless I would have to concede that to some extent biography is inevitably a form of autobiography. What I mean is that, even though you are writing about someone else, the choice of your subject, the choices you make in deciding which facts are important, what you will put in and what you will leave out—all these things are to some extent a reflection of your own interests, of your own views, of your own character, even of your own prejudices. And I have to admit that the world my three subjects inhabited is one for which I have a very personal nostalgia. It is a world now lost to us, especially since the Dawkins era of the 1980s. A world in which traditional university values had not yet been swallowed up by economic rationalism and demagogic corporatism, where academics from the most senior administrators to the most junior tutors thought of one another as colleagues rather than as ‘senior executives’ on the one hand and ‘human resources’ on the other—the function of the former being to manage the latter. To some extent, then, each of these biographies is a *recherche du temps perdu*, and in the case of the Henning work I deliberately sub-titled it ‘A Man and his Times’.

So I readily admit that my choice of these subjects, and the ways in which I presented them, to some extent reflects my own views, my own prejudices even, and my nostalgia for a world we have lost. But, for just this reason, I thought it important to record, to put down on paper, the lives of these people—precisely because they run counter to the prevailing orthodoxy of today. If past time is not to be lost time, it needs to be given a continuing presence; and if the stories of these men were not told, then the values that they represented would, to that extent, be buried with them.

I mentioned earlier the issue of how far biographers can be objective in their portrayal of their subject. Complete objectivity is, of course, impossible: biographers must depict their subject

as they see him or her, and this is inevitably a subjective matter. Acknowledging the subjective nature of much of one's work, one can but try to produce, not some impossibly 'definitive' portrait, but at least an honest approximation to the truth. To return to where I began—the former description of a biography as a 'life'—one might observe that, even if the author uses the title 'The Life of...', the most that one can hope for is to write 'A Life of...', since there is no such thing as the definitive 'life' of anyone.

Even if total objectivity is impossible, the biographer can at least try to avoid both adulation on the one hand and denigration on the other. One can readily think of cases in which it is all too clear that the author is inclined to idolise his or her subject: an example that comes to mind is Colleen McCullough's biography of Sir Roden Cutler, a work widely criticised on the ground that the author was clearly dazzled by the great man.<sup>5</sup> At the other end of the scale, we think of the squalid 'butler-at-the-keyhole' school of biography, whose subjects are typically Hollywood celebrities or British royals. Whenever authors set out either to debunk or to puff their subject, the biography inevitably suffers.

Naturally, there are times when one needs to exercise one's imagination, in order to piece together a narrative for which one doesn't have complete documentary evidence. Should one make things up, when one doesn't know something for certain but can assume that it must have happened? There is, indeed, a kind of biography which is openly fictionalised—one thinks, for example, of Robert Graves' largely invented life of the Emperor Claudius, in his books *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*—and the word 'pseudobiography' has been coined to refer precisely to such hybrids of fact and fancy. But that is not what I am referring to here. I am suggesting that even in a biography which attempts at least a measure of objectivity, it is legitimate—even at times necessary—to guess, to surmise, provided that one indicates to the reader what one is doing, and the reasons for it.

Although biographers will already have some sort of appraisal of their subject in their own mind when they set out, they need

always to be open to the unexpected discovery, the one that shatters their theory. Similarly, they must give up on the desire to reduce their subject to a single, conveniently grasped, persona. Human beings are simply not like that. If we had not already grasped this point intuitively, we would need only to refer to the work of psychologists and novelists over the last century or so, who have given us a picture of the human personality, not as something monolithic, but rather as a collection of personas, often mixed together in unlikely or hard-to-reconcile ways.

An example of this is my life of Ian Henning. As I set about the numerous interviews I conducted with people who had known him, a curious pattern emerged: I became more and more struck by the different portraits people painted of him. On the one hand, the general consensus of the academics to whom I spoke was of a reserved, shy, rather remote if impeccably polite, old-fashioned academic. On the other hand, when I interviewed family members and others who were close to him, the entire consensus was of a warm, funny, loving man with a devastating sense of humour and selfless devotion to the members of an at times almost dysfunctional family which he held together at great personal cost. Which was the real Ian Henning? Had I not known him personally, I should have despaired of ever getting a handle on him.

But I had known him. And, although my relationship with him was that of a student and later an academic colleague, I had had glimpses of the warm and funny man lurking behind the formal and at times forbidding professorial persona. As I came to piece his life together and was fortunate to gain access to some correspondence from the 1920s, one of the interesting things to emerge was that in his younger days he was seen by his peers as something else again: a rather brash, at times cynical, even smart-alec, postgraduate student, to whom his peers nonetheless warmed. So, were there not just two, but perhaps three, Ian Hennings?

Piecing together this information with the fact that as an undergraduate he had revealed himself as a highly talented actor, it seemed possible to develop a theory. A man of high sensitivity, he found himself burdened with a difficult family: his father,

who gave up his job to live on the proceeds of his inventions and thus condemned the family to poverty since none of the inventions ever sold, would in a later age probably have been diagnosed as suffering from Asperger Syndrome,<sup>6</sup> a behaviour pattern linked to autism. The entire family suffered terribly under this ‘domestic tyrant’, as one family member described him. As the oldest of his siblings, Ian Henning had to assume this burden on their behalf, yet because of his acting ability he was able to hide the family shame behind a convenient persona: at first, that of the bright young academic, upstaging his fellow students; and later, that of the reserved professorial personage, invulnerable in his occupancy of the McCaughey Chair. Only amidst his family could he let down his guard, to allow the warm, sensitive and yet still vulnerable self to find its expression. Such at least was my theory, though here again I needed to remind myself of the perils of attempting to reduce a person to a single formula. We are all complex people—some of us are masses of contradictions, and it is even arguable that this is what makes us interesting, rounded human beings rather than cardboard cutouts.

To achieve such a rounded picture of one’s subject it is, of course, necessary to delve into their private life, and this in turn sometimes raises ethical questions. To what extent, in Henning’s case, should I discuss his father’s bizarre psychological dysfunction? Reveal that Henning felt responsible for his sister’s children because they were born out of wedlock (a fact zealously concealed within the family)? These are the sorts of questions with which the biographer constantly has to deal. Mrs Gaskell, in her celebrated biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, simply omitted unfortunate facts, such as her heroine’s obsession with a Belgian schoolmaster, and frequently excised significant passages from Charlotte Brontë’s correspondence: in so doing, she helped create the myth of the Brontës which still lingers among the readers of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

In the case of Auchmuty, to whose womanising I referred earlier, there was a similar issue. In respect of some of his amorous dalliances, I had to ask whether I was delving unnecessarily into

his private life. Curiously, opinions that have been expressed to me by readers of the biography have ranged from a query as to why I needed to raise the sexual issue, to a query as to why I was so coy and delicate about it.

I would not want to claim that being criticised from both sides means that I must have got it right. I would nevertheless defend the mention of his sex life on the grounds that it was common knowledge, or at least common supposition and gossip around the University and city of Newcastle, and thus conditioned people's reactions to him. More particularly, it seemed to me relevant because it threw into relief the admirable restraint of his wife Margaret, who knew about it and took a very adult approach to it. But there is more to it than that: I think that, in this as well as a number of other areas, the most revealing aspects of a personality are sometimes shown, not by the grand outline of their career or their public persona, but by the unexpected small detail, the mundane things of everyday life, the little anecdote that someone remembers, the hand-written note that one comes across amidst a stack of official papers.

To some extent, then, I felt that one needed to view the sexual peccadilloes in that context—as revealing sidelights. Sidelights, to be sure, and not to be overemphasised, but revealing nonetheless. James Auchmuty was a passionate man—a Celt, it should be remembered, and not a reserved Anglo-Saxon. He loved passionately, just as he read passionately and worked passionately; and his amatory adventures provide an additional insight into precisely that side of his character.

In the case of Kelter Hartley, a different issue arose, equally of an ethical nature. In this case, it was a question of how far one should bring out the darker side of his nature, especially in what was, to some extent at least, a memorial volume. The event which sparked off this issue was my receipt, from a distant relative, of a letter written by Kelter Hartley to his mother just before she died. (She was in Sydney, being looked after by her niece Mrs Lesbia Leslie, and was very ill; Hartley himself was in Newcastle.) This is what he wrote, in a letter dated 8 June 1957 :

Dear Mother,

I am sorry to hear from Mrs Leslie of the trouble you are in, at least as far as it concerns you. My father has never discharged any of the duties of a father; all I had from him was neglect, varied by occasional cruelty, as I grew up toward the age when I could (he thought) begin to work to keep him in idleness. Since he never cared what happened to me, why should I care about him?

Your case is different. You did at least work to keep me when I was a child and I feel a certain obligation. But my own health is bad, I have to work week-ends and Sundays, so I cannot come down. Nor do I see what I could do if I were there. I gave you (in all) £50 last time I was down, and can send more if you need it. Hoping you will take care of yourself and thank Mrs Leslie for me—

Kelver

Hartley's mother died three days later, on 11 June 1957. One can only hope she never received the letter. It is so appallingly unfeeling and heartless that one can understand why it had been kept in the family for nearly 40 years. Family members must have been aghast that a son could write in such a way.

For myself as biographer, it raised a significant question. What sort of biography was I writing? Even if the biographer is not usually bound by *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*, should a different principle apply in the case of a memorial volume? Surely discretion should prevail? On the other hand, there is the requirement of truth and accuracy: the parental relationship was not only important in Hartley's life, but a vital element in forming the man's idiosyncratic character—and the letter was a significant clue to it. Having agonised at length over my motivation, I believed that I could justify inclusion of the letter in terms of Othello's injunction: 'Nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice'. I included the text of the letter, but hidden away among the notes and references, with only a slight hint at it appearing in the main text. As to whether or not this was the right decision, others will make their judgment.

The issue of one's responsibility towards one's subject versus one's responsibility to the truth<sup>7</sup> is one that I have only rarely had

to face full-on, though in the case of the Henning and Auchmuty families I was conscious of the need not to cause them undue embarrassment. Fortunately, in both cases I was given the family's permission to portray my subject as I saw him, 'warts and all', and for that I was deeply grateful.

Let me return to this question of the revealing detail. This is not the place for an account of the entire process of writing a biography. I would simply mention that (as you would expect) it involves a long process of accessing archives, reading institutional histories, writing to people and institutions (and sometimes receiving no reply or a refusal), approaching colleagues and family members for their reminiscences, taping them if they permit, listening to the tapes and sorting out the material, and then filling in the gaps as best one can. This all has to be done, and to be frank it can be highly tedious. But there are moments, too, of real joy, when one comes across something unexpected—something which, however minor it might be in itself, throws new light on a question that has been puzzling you for months. While at one level biography is hardly dramatic work, the drama takes place in the mind, as the jigsaw takes shape.

Let me quote a couple of examples. First, there is the detective work. In the case of James Auchmuty, there was a question that had been persistently going around in my head: why did he leave Ireland for Egypt after World War II? And why did he then leave Egypt in 1952 when Farouk was overthrown, since most other British did not leave until the time of the Suez crisis in 1956? It began to dawn upon me that there must have been more to him than met the eye—or at least the public record, as found in his *Who's Who* entries and his published *curriculum vitae*. Also, I would occasionally pick up a hint here, a remark there, about the sort of work he might have been doing for the British Government. And at last the penny dropped. Of course, it was obvious. He was a spy, a British agent employed by MI6.

But this was no more than a hypothesis, which I would need to check out. I attempted to find confirmation in British Government records, but found that they were embargoed. I attempted to obtain

information from the Irish Government, but did not even get a reply to my enquiry. Then a friend drew my attention to the fact that one of the earliest members of staff at Newcastle was a man by the name of Bernard Share, who had written a book entitled *The Emergency: Neutral Ireland 1939–45*.<sup>8</sup> I thought I should at least skim through it, since the public record stated that Auchmuty had been a strong opponent of Irish neutrality (or ‘non-belligerence’, as it was called) during World War II. There I came across an illuminating passage. It recounted the aftermath of an address given at Trinity College in late 1944 by Dr Masaryk, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Czechoslovakia in exile, under the aegis of the so called ‘Irish Institute for International Affairs’, of which Auchmuty was a leading member. Share makes it fairly clear that this Institute, of markedly pro-Allied sympathies, was set up on the model of the British Institute, which (as it subsequently emerged) was a front organisation for MI6. Eamon de Valera (at that time Taoiseach or Prime Minister) considered that the invitation to Masaryk was a breach of Irish neutrality, and referred in the Dáil to the Institute’s ‘leading lights’, ‘these four or five gentlemen who put themselves above the Government’, namely Senator Douglas, Donal O’Sullivan, James J. Auchmuty and J. T. O’Farrell. He concluded, ‘I am satisfied beyond doubt, from the information at my disposal ... that the Irish Institute has become a focus of propaganda devoted entirely to furthering and encouraging a particular point of view in relation to the present war’.

Even though a certain amount of ‘reading between the lines’ was necessary, it seemed obvious that the phrase ‘the information at my disposal’ used by de Valera referred to intelligence information. It is a well-attested fact that, at the end of the war, de Valera continued his policy of neutrality by expelling *all* the spies—British and German—who had worked in Ireland during the War, and the only explanation that makes sense is that Auchmuty’s voluntary departure from Ireland was intended to head off either an enforced departure or even internment. When I put this proposition to Auchmuty’s daughter, now an academic in

England, she rejected it completely, saying that her father would not have been engaged in any such thing. The following year, I visited her in England again, and found her reaction very different. 'I've been reflecting on what you were saying about Daddy's work during the War, and actually it would account for a lot of things that I didn't understand at the time.'

So, in this case, largely by chance, I came across a detail which helped me to put together a coherent and plausible picture of Auchmuty's double life, and of the almost superhuman effort that it must have taken for this man—the soul of indiscretion—to keep his undercover Intelligence work secret from those around him, including his family.

Let me interpolate here that I was very grateful he grew up in a culture in which paper was in relatively short supply, and certainly not to be wasted. Amongst the documents in the University Archives one can find a large number of clues by simply knowing where to look. For instance, when Auchmuty gave a speech, he would write his speech notes on the back of old invitation cards. This sometimes enabled me to do two things at once: give an approximate date to an otherwise undated speech, and at the same time see what his social contacts were at that particular time. No scrap of paper, no old envelope dating from the 1920s or 1930s, fails to yield some useful piece of information—where he was living at the time, who was writing to him and to whom he was writing. Similarly, in the case of Hartley, I should have had little idea as to his intention in writing his long politico-philosophical tract entitled *Optimism* had he not retained the manuscript, still wrapped in the brown paper in which it had been returned to him (presumably with a rejection slip) by the American publishers to whom he had sent it; even the date of postage was still legible. And finally, in the case of Ian Henning, during his Paris years he had written letters home no less than six times a week—one letter to his father, one to his mother, one to each of his three siblings, and one which he called his 'Dear Everybody' letter, to be read by other family members. All of these letters had been preserved, and were kindly made available to me by his

widow Mrs Pat Henning. I mention this because my generation is probably the last of those for whom such discoveries will be possible. I can only echo the lament of those who think about the relative paucity of material available to the biographers of our successors, for whom so much information is exchanged by email or SMS and then erased for ever.

A final question which arises for biographers, as for other writers, is the question of when they feel they have enough information in order to declare their manuscript complete. It is, of course, to some extent an arbitrary decision, and it is always predictable that once one has sent off the manuscript to the publisher, some new information will come to hand too late to be included. That cannot be helped. Indeed, the very appearance of the book in the public domain will lead some readers to come forward with information of which the author was not previously aware. That, too, is a fact of life. Nonetheless, the question still remains as to where one should stop one's search for further information about one's subject.

Let me quote an example from the Hartley biography. Having found Hartley's birth certificate in the South Australian Register of Births, I noted first that the child in question was registered, not as Kelter Hartley, but as Hayward Jones. In fact, his full registered name was Hayward Kelter Hartley Jones, his parents being Frank Hartley Jones and Clara Jones, née Vickery. Yet he always told people he was an orphan, born in South Africa—a ploy presumably intended to put people off the scent of getting to know the 'real' person as distinct from his invented persona. So a theory emerges: as well as changing the place and circumstances of his birth, he had also changed his name. Add this to what people said about him as a Walter Mitty character, and one can see the name-change as a significant part of his personality—a split personality, in the literal sense. If our search stops there, we have a fine theory. And if our lack of time, or of resources, or perhaps mere whim, make us stop there, we will get a picture which is plausible, but quite false. As it happened, subsequent searches in the records of the New South Wales Department of

Education indicated that the name-change from Jones to Hartley was not Kelper's decision at all, but one made by his parents during his infancy. And so our theory crumbles.

Another example: I happened to note, from his birth certificate, the ages of Hartley's parents when he was born. I noted it only because the parents were relatively old—his mother 40, his father 39. On the basis of this information, I again felt able to add to my picture of him: the son of aged parents, perhaps a lonely child whose father was too old to play with him or bond with him. What purpose would be served by my looking further into the family record?

No purpose, perhaps, except that of curiosity. In any case, I commissioned a search for his father's birth certificate. As it turned out, this proved extremely difficult to obtain, since there was no record of it in the decade which the Registry Office was asked to search. On the one hand, I was tempted to give up at that point. Yet, on the other hand, this very fact made the search all the more fascinating. So I ordered a search of the preceding decade and the decade following, only to find that the father was in fact ten years *younger* than as shown on his son's birth certificate. Hartley's mother was in fact some twelve years older than his father.

Was this a mere curiosity, or was it significant? It seemed to me that the discrepancy of age could well be significant in terms of the marriage relationship, which appears in some respects to have been distant. Perhaps even more significant, however, could be the *reason* for the falsification of the father's age on his son's birth certificate. Collating this information with what others had told me of the characters of the mother and father, I concluded that it was understandable that a socially ambitious mother (for it was she who had the family name changed from Jones to Hartley) would not have wanted it known—perhaps even, in later life, by her son—how great was the difference in age between her husband and herself. Perhaps there was, in her mind, some shame in this breach of the social conventions of the time. Whether or not my conclusion was correct can only be a matter for

speculation. The point I am making, however, is not whether I was right or wrong. I am simply quoting some examples to show that, although the detective work (the chasing of records, the drawing up of hypotheses and theories) has to stop somewhere, one can never be sure where the trail will peter out, never be sure that there isn't another document, somewhere, that will confirm or destroy your theory of the man.

I referred earlier to my motivation as a writer (albeit an amateur writer) of biographies. By way of conclusion, I want to look briefly at a related question: what is the motivation of those who *read* biographies? They are, after all, a very popular genre, notably in English-speaking countries where they sell almost as well as gardening books and self-help books. I would like to suggest a couple of answers. First, of course, we may enjoy reading about the lives of others because they are, in themselves, interesting lives—perhaps a good deal more interesting than our own. Some people just seem to lead lives in which a lot of interesting things happen, whereas most of us think our own life-story would make rather boring reading. But I think there is more to it than that. After all, if we want to read about interesting and remarkable things happening to people, we can always read fiction—and indeed, romantic novels, murder mysteries and science fiction all have their devotees. What is the particular attraction of reading about real lives, the lives of actual people, as distinct from invented characters?

I want to suggest that, because they are real lives—even if we did not personally know the people being written about—we may perhaps discern in them something relevant to our own lives. We read biography, in other words, to compare these lives with our own, to try to discern a pattern in them, something that may reflect our own experience and illuminate it, something that might give us a deeper insight into the meaning of our own experience. The lives of others touch our own; John Donne's celebrated dictum that 'No man is an island' was taken up more recently by the Australian poet John Whitworth, who wrote in his poem entitled *Where*:

It's a dumb thing, it's a rum thing, how we're all a part of something,  
Everyone's a part of something. I'm a part of you.<sup>9</sup>

In short, we have a sense that we share a common humanity, and because of this we can find in the pattern of other people's lives some clue as to the meaning of our own.

After all, our lives—as we live them from day to day—are usually without structure and shape. Most of us don't have a life-plan to which we work, because we realise that if we did, we would be bound to be disappointed. There is always an element of the unexpected, the unplanned: practically every day of our lives, something happens to us that we didn't foresee, from the relatively trivial, like getting stuck in a traffic-jam and being late for an appointment, to the major catastrophe, like the car accident that maims you for the rest of your life, or the pleasant Sunday afternoon you planned to spend at Port Arthur, the beach holiday in Bali in 2002. These unplanned, unexpected events can change our lives completely, or indeed bring them to an unexpected close. What, then, we need to ask, is the role of sheer chance in our lives, as distinct from what we ourselves may plan and will for ourselves? How far do we undergo our destinies, and how far can we, on the contrary, make our own destinies? How far can we see in someone's life the interplay of character on the one hand with external events on the other?

To return to where I began, I believe that a good biography is more than just a life-story, even an interesting life-story. It involves an evaluation of that life, and must inevitably contain an element of judgment. Otherwise, to reiterate my earlier point, it is not a biography but a hagiography. Whether we like to acknowledge it or not, we are always judging others, indeed we secretly enjoy judging others. And biography provides a means whereby we can exercise judgment at one remove, as it were, on other people's behaviour, their motivations, their character.

Only when a life is over can we seek (even if we do not find) answers to these questions, only then can others look back on the life and try to put it into some order. One recalls Søren

Kierkegaard's celebrated remark that, while life has to be lived forwards, it can only be understood backwards. On the one hand, the biographer must avoid the temptation to 'plane the life smooth', as it were—to impose on it a false unity, as if the subject never had inconsistent thoughts or failed to follow his own counsel. Yet on the other, if the biographer does not search for a 'guiding story', a framework for making sense of a life or weaving some meaning around it, there will always be (at least to my mind) a sense that an opportunity has been lost. I can sympathise with the critic who accused the celebrity biographer Christopher Anderson of simply 'scrap[ing] up every bit of information about his subject, no matter how trivial, and throw[ing] it on the pile in chronological order'.<sup>10</sup> A good biography, I believe, is not simply a chronicle of events, but in some sense a human drama. As Renée Ventresque has written, a biography is not just a chronology, but what she aptly calls 'la mise en discours d'une vie'.<sup>11</sup> At its best, a best to which I make no pretension, biography can transform information into illumination.

#### Notes

- 1 The term 'history' was also used, especially in relation to royalty as in More's *History of Richard III*. In the eighteenth century the term 'character' was also used to denote a written portrait (after the fashion of La Bruyère's *Les Caractères*).
- 2 *Kelver Hartley: A Memoir. Reminiscences and documents relating to the life of Emeritus Professor Kelper Hayward Hartley (1909–1988)*, ed. Kenneth R. Dutton, Newcastle, The Hartley Bequest Program, 1995; 2nd edn, Mt Nebo, 2000.
- 3 Kenneth R. Dutton, *Auchmuty: The Life of James Johnston Auchmuty (1909–1981)*, Mt Nebo, 2000.
- 4 Kenneth R. Dutton, *Ian Henning (1905–1975): A Man and his Times*, Mt Nebo, 2002.
- 5 See, e.g., the review of Colleen McCullough, *Roden Cutler, VC: The Biography*, 1998, by Michael McKernan in *The Weekend Australian*, November 14–15, 1998.
- 6 Asperger Syndrome (AS) is named from the Viennese physician who first described its symptoms in 1944. I am conscious that not all professionals are agreed on the subject of AS, and its diagnosis is by no

means universally accepted by psychiatrists. The fact is, however, that a number of characteristics of the syndrome described by Asperger are congruent with the behaviour displayed by Ian Henning's father and by a number of other members of the Henning family.

- 7 The issue of responsibility towards one's subject versus responsibility to the truth arises in stark form in popular biography, which in recent years has seen the emergence of a sub-genre known as the 'unauthorised biography', the aim of which is to stay just this side of the libel laws. The biographies of the rich and famous by Kitty Kelley, or Wendy Leigh's biography of Arnold Schwarzenegger (which revealed his father Gustav's membership of the Nazi Party), are examples of this sub-genre. It is intended to differentiate itself from the 'authorised biography', to the appearance of which the (usually still living) subject has given his or her consent. It may obviously tend towards a eulogy, though this is not necessarily the case: David Marr's biography of Patrick White, authorised by White himself, was widely acclaimed by critics.
- 8 Bernard Share, *The Emergency: Neutral Ireland 1939–1945*, Dublin, 1978.
- 9 John Whitworth, 'Where', in *Quadrant*, January-February 2004, p.67.
- 10 Frank Campbell, review of Christopher Anderson, *Jackie after Jack: Portrait of the Lad*, in *The Weekend Australian*, May 23–24, 1998.
- 11 Renée Ventresque, 'La Biographie de Saint-John Perse dans l'édition de la Pléiade: d'un masque l'autre', in *Les Mots la Vie: Revue sur le surréalisme*, No. 9, p.73.