

History & Biography in France

by Antoine Capet
Professeur émérite à l'Institut d'études anglophones
Université de Rouen

Courtesy of the author and of *Reviews in History*
(Institute of Historical Research, London University)
March 2013

The relationship or relationships between History and Biography in France are extremely complex. Each has its own 'history' as a discipline, gradually emerging from *Belles Lettres* and slowly and painfully finding its independence from them. And whereas History has established its autonomy and legitimacy as an intellectual pursuit, Biography continues to live in an unspecified 'No Man's Land' at the confines of literary fiction, gossip, journalism and academic History.

It is not easy to identify the first work of Biography published in France. Many people would agree that the first to have been preoccupied with historical truth was *Histoire de Charles XII* (of Sweden) by Voltaire (1731). *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1752), though not a Biography proper, has so many biographical vignettes, with of course long disquisitions on the Sun King, that it may be included in the early manifestations of the *genre* without extending the definition too much. Interestingly, Voltaire himself benefited from a Biography written by another famous Enlightenment philosopher, the marquis de Condorcet, in 1789.

The great post-1815 successor was Jules Michelet (1798-1874). The French title of his great work of 1835, which went into many subsequent editions and translations, does not seem to indicate that it is a biography of Luther – only the subtitle suggests a text of a biographical nature: *Mémoires de Luther écrits par lui-même. Traduits et mis en ordre par J. Michelet. Précédés d'un essai sur l'histoire de la religion et suivis des biographies de Wicléff, Jean Huss, Érasme, Mélanchton, Hutten et autres prédécesseurs et contemporains de Luther*. The main point of interest for us, however, is that the English translation has no hesitation upon the nature of the book: *The Life of Luther. Written by himself; collected and arranged by M. Michelet, translated by William Hazlitt* (1846).

Setting the trend for a series of innumerable biographies – 'serious' or 'popular' – of her, Michelet offered a *Jeanne d'Arc (1412-1432)* in the recent 'library' launched by the great publisher Louis Hachette for railway travellers, the Bibliothèque des chemins de fer. This was published in 1853, and curiously, considering the popularity of the Maid of Orleans in Britain, no English translation appeared until 1957 – and this by the University of Michigan Press.

In the 19th century, the other great name in the field is undoubtedly Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893), best known in France for his *Les origines de la France contemporaine* (5 vol. 1875-1893) and in Britain for his *History of English Literature* (1864) and his *Notes sur l'Angleterre* (1870) / *Notes on England* (1872). He wrote however four major

works of a biographical nature: *La Fontaine et ses fables* (first published 1853 as *Essai sur les fables de la Fontaine*), *Essai sur Tite Live* (1856), *Le positivisme anglais : Étude sur Stuart Mill* (1864) / *English Positivism : A Study on John Stuart Mill* (1870) and *L' idéalisme anglais : Étude sur Carlyle* (1864), apparently never translated. It seems ironical that his study of the man who did a lot to propagate the notion of individual heroes in history was not translated, and therefore not published, in Carlyle's own country.

Taine's close contemporary was Ernest Renan (1823-1892), an advocate of 'scientific atheism' (as he called it) whose *Vie de Jésus* (1863)¹ / *The Life of Jesus* (1863) could not go unnoticed at a time when *L'histoire sainte*, as the phrase went, was felt to be out of bounds for lay historians. Renan had just contributed the 'Calvin' entry in J.R. Beard's *The Progress of Religious Thought* (1861). In his youth he had written on a little-known Arab philosopher of the 12th century: *Averroès et l'Averroïsme : Essai historique* (1852) and it is only posthumously, far later, in 1926, that his essays, *Sur Corneille, Racine et Bossuet*, were published. By then, of course, the biographies of 'great men', 'great thinkers' or 'great authors' were being accepted in the canon of serious writing.

In fact, it seems that all these early 'serious' biographies had a militant dimension – the 'agenda' behind them, as we would now say, being that by describing the lives of these great men you disseminated their important thought, which was long forgotten or had been distorted by their opponents. 'Setting the record straight', to use another modern phrase, was of course intended to do justice to the people themselves – but perhaps above all to their ideas.

'Militant' Biography took a new turn with Ernest Lavisse (1842-1922), one of the great late 19th-c. French historians who believed that they should orientate their teaching towards preparing their disciples for 'la revanche'. He also produced biographies of high historical quality, but curiously on the imperial elites of new 'hereditary enemy': *Trois empereurs d'Allemagne : Guillaume I^{er}, Frédéric III, Guillaume II* (1888) and their ancestor, Frederick II (Frederick the Great), King of Prussia (1740-1786): *La Jeunesse du Grand Frédéric* (1891) and *Le Grand Frédéric avant l'avènement* (1893). He also published a monumental multi-volume *Histoire de France depuis les origines jusqu'à la Révolution* (1900-1911), and interestingly, with the current revival of interest in the serious discussion of great historical figures, the well-known old-established French publishing house, Librairie Jules Tallandier, which specialises in history books for the educated public outside the academic profession, felt in 1978 that there would be a market for *Louis XIV*, extracted from Lavisse's copious tomes, as part of its *Monumenta historiae* series.

A curiosity in the field of 19th-c. Biography is the *Histoire de Jules César* (2 vol., 1865-1866) whose title-page bears 'par Napoléon III' – but it seems that it was largely ghost-written by a specialist of ancient history, a great figure of the academic world of the time, Victor Duruy (1811-1894), who had himself written a semi-biographical monograph on Tiberius, *De Tiberio imperatore : État du monde romain, vers le temps de la fondation de*

¹ Part of his 7-volume undertaking (1863-1882), *Histoire des Origines du Christianisme*, which in fact also ended with a biographical dimension: *Marc-Aurèle et la fin du monde antique* (1882).

l'empire (1853). Now, Duruy, together with Taine and Renan, encouraged another prominent historian, Gabriel Monod (1844-1912), who was a close friend of Lavisser's, to found the *Revue historique* in 1876. As its current Editors, Claude Gauvard and Jean-François Sirinelli, put it in their editorial commemorating the centenary of his death,

Today's historians approach Gabriel Monod and his influence with the weapons which he recommended: a search for the sources, a proving of evidence, conclusions impregnated with a truth which the scholar knows to be relative and accepts it to be so. This quest leads to a reconstruction of reality which is not as dry in the bone as is commonly heard and written, and does not either encourage a deconstruction of History paralysing its presentation as a narrative².

This reference to the 'narrative' (or 'récit' in the French original) is of the highest importance, not only for History, but also for Biography. In Italian, there is only one word, *storia*, for 'story' (narrative) and 'history' (the succession of events and the discipline). Gauvard and Sirinelli suggest that the scholar must not write only 'a good story', with little respect for the facts. But at the same time History texts must be a good read, 'a good story'. Of course Biography must also reconcile the two exigencies.

Arguably, in France, Biography as a form of History suffered a long eclipse after the great learned precursors of the 19th c. The next generation, with great names like Charles Seignobos (1854-1942) or Charles-Victor Langlois (1863-1929) were increasingly to distance themselves from the *genre*. With the foundation in 1929 of the journal, *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, and the 'school' that soon gravitated around it, by Lucien Febvre (1878-1956) et Marc Bloch (1886-1944), the distance became a veritable rejection. It was clear that if History was governed by *longue durée* phenomena, no transient human life could durably make a mark upon it. Paradoxically, Febvre's doctoral thesis of 1911 was entitled 'Philippe II et la Franche-Comté'³ – but then the subtitle left no doubt that it was not one more study of the great King of Spain: 'La crise de 1567, ses origines et ses conséquences : Étude d'histoire politique, religieuse et sociale'. The last word said it all: it was acceptable to speak of individual 'heroes' à la Carlyle – but only within a framework which made room for 'histoire sociale'. Speaking derogatively of the 'école positiviste' or 'école méthodique' to describe the approach advocated by Gabriel Monod, his *Revue historique* and its followers, Febvre wanted to give precedence to explanation over description.

But then the temptation to 'best' his ancestor Michelet – who is often considered as having introduced methodical history-writing based on primary sources in France – must have been too strong, and he offered another biography of Luther (naturally somewhat of a bugbear for the French Roman Catholic Right which dominated most official

² Les historiens d'aujourd'hui traitent de Gabriel Monod et de son influence avec les armes dont il a recommandé l'usage : recherche des sources, administration de la preuve, conclusions empreintes d'une vérité que le chercheur sait et veut relative. Cette quête restitue la réalité d'un positivisme qui est loin d'être desséché comme il est si courant de le dire et de l'écrire, mais qui n'encourage pas non plus à une déconstruction de l'Histoire paralysant sa mise en récit. ('Retour sur Gabriel Monod'. *Revue historique* 664:4 (2012), p. 787).

³ Originally published by Honoré Champion (lvi-783 p., Paris, 1911), it has benefited from several reprints since 1970. Recently reissued with a Preface by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (Paris: Éditions Perrin, 2009).

institutions in the inter-war years): *Un destin : Martin Luther* (1928)⁴. 'Militant' Biography had not disappeared among academic historians with 'scientific' ambitions...

In a remarkable article on the evolution of the *genre* since then⁵, Guillaume Piketty of Sciences Po makes the point that it suffered an eclipse between 1930 and the mid-1970s. He quotes the damning judgement of Pierre Goubert (1915-2012), one of the staunchest keepers of the *Annales* flame, in the opening remarks of his celebrated *Louis XIV et vingt millions de Français*⁶ – which of course he did not want to be mistaken for another biography of the Sun King – referring to Biography as a 'trade', linked to 'anecdotal history', which made the prosperity of 'some publishers and television companies'⁷. In this indictment, the *coup de grâce* is not so much of course the assimilation of Biography to the quest for the 'quick buck' as the allusion to the general moronisation of society which great French intellectuals like him saw lurking behind the popularity of television among the amorphous masses of uneducated people.

Yet, evidently, Biographies of great men were published at the time – and not all of them written by despicable people. Pierre Goubert might have been thinking of Jean Tulard (b. 1933), the specialist of Napoleon, who was a 'historical advisor' for French television at the time. Tulard has impeccable academic credentials, with a Chair at the Sorbonne – but one may fairly accuse him of running a Bonaparte industry, starting in 1964 with *L'Anti-Napoléon : La légende noire de l'Empereur*, with a sideline on Talleyrand and Fouché.

Another remarkable case is that of the *belle-lettrist* Max Gallo (b. 1932), a former Lecturer in History at the University of Nice, a former Junior Minister under Mitterrand and a popular 'television personality'. His output is also considerable, often with several books, including novels, or rather 'factional' sagas, published every year – but on widely different topics, although most have to do with 20th c. History. The list of his Biography work is impressive. To quote only a selection in recent years: Napoleon in 4 volumes (1997); de Gaulle, also in 4 volumes (1998); Rosa Luxemburg (2000); Victor Hugo in 2 volumes (2001); Roman Emperors in 6 volumes (2003-2006); Louis XIV in 2 volumes (2007) and Voltaire (2008). All his most recent biographies are published by Librairie Arthème Fayard, another long-established publishing house specialising in heavy tomes of History, including Biography. Now, Fayard was the publisher of Goubert's *Louis XIV et vingt millions de Français* at one extreme⁸ and Gallo's 'popular' biographies at the other – so it is very difficult to draw conclusions from the publishing house as to the market aimed at, 'popular', or 'academic'. Ideally, of course, biographers – and historians – aim at both. For the 'Gallo phenomenon', the analogy in Britain would be Sir Martin Gilbert and his prodigious output on Churchill in various forms. There might of course be an element of jealousy among less commercially-successful colleagues.

⁴ With an almost immediate English edition: *Martin Luther: A Destiny* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1929 / London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1930).

⁵ 'La biographie comme genre historique ? Étude de cas'. *Vingtième Siècle* 63 (1999), pp. 119-126.

⁶ Continuously in print since its first edition in 1965.

⁷ 'La biographie comme genre historique', p. 119.

⁸ In its academically prestigious series, 'L'histoire sans frontières', edited by François Furet and Denis Richet.

What academic historians like Pierre Goubert particularly resent, however, is the intrusion of 'outsiders' – not necessarily low-class pulp writers who specialise in what the French call 'la petite histoire', or 'les dessous de l'histoire'⁹, often with spurious 'State secrets' and 'secret love affairs': in other words with objectives of titillation rather than edification of the reading public. The unwelcome competition in Biography can also come from academics who are not historians: people who do not have the right credentials¹⁰ and therefore are *prima facie* suspect of not knowing, let alone respecting, 'la méthode historique'.

Here, the most remarkable case is that of de Gaulle. There is a minor cottage industry in books of reminiscences on the leader of the Free French and later President of the Republic by those who served under him, many of an anecdotal nature, as Goubert would have put it, and many others with a hagiographic aspect by the Gaullist keepers of the Resistance and Fifth Republic flame, the general theme being 'de Gaulle as I knew him'. Among these hundreds of 'biographies', it can be argued that only three emerge from the mass, two from distinguished political journalists, and the third from the ubiquitous Max Gallo, as we saw.

Chronologically, the first of the three to appear was Jean Lacouture's *De Gaulle*. His first offering came in a single volume in 1969 for Éditions du Seuil¹¹, a middlebrow publisher. But there appeared a greatly expanded edition in three volumes fifteen years later: (1) *Le rebelle: 1890-1944*; (2) *Le politique: 1944-1959*; (3) *Le souverain: 1959-1970*¹². This impeccably archive-based *magnum opus* was widely acclaimed, even by historians who could have started a 'demarcation dispute' – and Lacouture (b. 1921) is regularly invited to speak in academic conferences: in fact he appears as the father figure of de Gaulle studies outside Gaullist / Resistance circles, and perhaps the undisputed authority on the subject. Lacouture is also a prolific author, and besides his de Gaulle trilogy and other non-fiction books, he also wrote biographies of Nasser (1971), André Malraux (1973), Léon Blum (1977), François Mauriac (1980), Pierre Mendès-France (1981), John F. Kennedy (2000), with a title *à la* Goubert in between: *François Mitterrand: Une histoire de français* (2 vol., 1998).

Considering the high standards achieved by Lacouture, it is not quite clear why another respected journalist and commentator, Paul-Marie de la Gorce (1928-2004) felt that another biography of over 1,500 pages was needed¹³. The obvious answer could be that Lacouture was associated with the centre Left and de la Gorce was associated with the Gaullist 'progressives' of the Left, 'les gaullistes de gauche'. But then both biographies strive to be fair – they do not try to demonstrate that de Gaulle was always right and his

⁹ With a deliberate ambiguity: both the 'hidden strata beneath visible History' and 'History's undies'.

¹⁰ The hallowed 'agrégation d'histoire' being the *sine qua non*. Ironically, Tulard passed with flying colours – first of his cohort when he took that annual competitive examination.

¹¹ English edition: *De Gaulle*. Translated by Francis K. Price. Revised and enlarged edition, with additional material translated by John Skeffington. London: Hutchinson, 1970.

¹² Paris: Le Seuil, 1984-1986. English edition in two volumes: (1) *De Gaulle: The Rebel, 1890-1944*. (2) *De Gaulle: The Ruler, 1945-1970*. London: Collins Harvill, 1990-1991.

¹³ *Charles de Gaulle*. (1) 1890-1945. (2) 1945-1970. Paris: Perrin, 2000. (Paperback reissue, 2008).

opponents always wrong, or vice-versa. Indeed, the de la Gorce version seems to have had good sales since it recently benefited from a posthumous paperback reissue.

And this in spite of the competition from the best-selling Max Gallo, whose four volumes were also soon reissued as cheap paperbacks, in 2000, and are still available: (1) *L'appel du destin*; (2) *La solitude du combattant*; (3) *Le premier des Français* and (4) *La statue du commandeur*¹⁴. Gallo sales are easily explained: he catches academic historians like Sirinelli at their own words, in that he mixes impeccable research ('history') with an attractive style of writing which makes for a good 'story'.

In fact, the colleagues in the *Annales* tradition finally decided to abandon their own prohibitions and they entered the fray, the most unexpected example being that of Marc Ferro (b. 1924), whom Fernand Braudel designated as his successor at the head of the *Annales* in 1970. Ferro created a stir in the world of academic historians when he published his *Pétain* in 1987. Not that he was deemed incompetent, as he was a prominent French historian of the troubled 20th century – but because this lapse into a minor *genre* seemed to be in flagrant breach of the *Annales* philosophy. Once again, popular success followed, however, and Fayard (again) published a long series of paperback reissues, the latest appearing in 2012. The same held good for his *Nicolas II* of 1990¹⁵: it is still available in paperback, with a reissue 'with new material' in 2011. The claims made in it about the tsar's descendants smack very much of the 'petite histoire' or 'dessous de l'histoire' denounced by Goubert – but no matter¹⁶.

Ferro was not the first of the *Annales* historians to compromise with 'the world of trade', however: he was preceded by the medievalist Georges Duby (1919-1996) and his biography of William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke (c.1145-1219), *Guillaume le Maréchal, ou, le meilleur chevalier du monde*, published by Fayard (again) in 1984, appropriately in its series entitled 'Les inconnus de l'histoire'¹⁷. After Ferro and Duby, the gates were open for the rediscovery of Biography as a legitimate tool of the historian. After all, in the Preface to his *Luther*, Febvre had justified his excursion into the *genre* by the two-way approach between the individual and society which it made possible, 'this problem of the relations between the individual and the community, of personal initiative and social necessity which is, perhaps, the capital problem of History'¹⁸. Jacques Legoff (b. 1924) followed suit with *Saint Louis* in 1996 and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (b. 1929) in 1997 with *Saint-Simon, ou, Le système de la cour*. Outside of the *Annales* team, but still a friend of Febvre and Braudel, Pierre Chaunu (1923-2009) had written *Christophe Colomb ou La logique de l'imprévisible* in 1993. Even the next generation finally yielded to temptation. One can think of Michel Winock (b. 1937), the founder in 1978 of the respected magazine *L'Histoire*, a specialist of 20th c. French History, who

¹⁴ Paris: Presses-Pocket, 2000.

¹⁵ English edition. *Nicholas II : Last of the Tsars*. Translated by Brian Pearce. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

¹⁶ Ferro also wrote a book with the 'commercial' title *Les tabous de l'histoire* (Paris : Nil, 2002).

¹⁷ English edition. *William Marshal : The Flower of Chivalry*. Translated from the French by Richard Howard. London: Faber, 1986.

¹⁸ 'Ce problème des rapports de l'individu et de la collectivité, de l'initiative personnelle et de la nécessité sociale qui est, peut-être, le problème capital de l'Histoire'. See 'La biographie comme genre historique', p. 120.

wrote a *Clemenceau*, which indeed was in his field of predilection, in 2007, but also a *Madame de Staël* in 2010, which was not.

It became therefore increasingly difficult for the guardians of the academic temple to refute the value of Biography, and to deny 'lay' people using the same sources and methods the right to share the lucrative cake. Two 'amateurs' of Russian origin – both later elected to the French Academy – offered good-quality and highly readable biographies of their former compatriots. Hélène Carrère d'Encausse (b. 1929), well known in France for her books which predicted the 'explosion of the Soviet Empire', as she put it, from the late 1970s, thus wrote *Staline : L'ordre par la terreur* (1979), *Nicolas II : La transition interrompue* (1996), *Lénine* (1998), *Catherine II : Un âge d'or pour la Russie* (2002) and *Alexandre II : Le printemps de la Russie* (2005).

The other was Henri Troyat (1911-2007). His list of publications is absolutely prodigious, and even his list of biographies is much too long to allow reproduction here. Suffice it to say that he alternated between lives of famous French people, notably writers (e.g. *Flaubert* (1988); *Maupassant* (1989); *Zola* (1992); *Verlaine* (1993); *Baudelaire* (1994); *Balzac* (1995)) and Russian royalty (e.g. *Catherine la Grande* (1977); *Pierre le Grand* (1979); *Alexandre I^{er}* (1981); *Ivan le Terrible* (1982); *Alexandre II* (1990); *Nicolas II* (1991)¹⁹; *Alexandre III* (2004); *Boris Godounov* (2008)). His biographies were extremely popular and sold very well, but he was the object of suspicion on the part of his competitors, who could not understand how he could research his books so fast. Still, a nasty affair of plagiarism over his biography of Victor Hugo's mistress in 1997, which resulted in a law suit, did not impair his popularity or his output.

Finally, as in Britain, there is a tendency for politicians to take advantage of their (provisional) fame to publish lives of the predecessors whom they admire for their ideas or their political struggle. The first instance that springs to mind is that of *Condorcet (1743-1794) : Un intellectuel en politique*, written by Élisabeth Badinter (b. 1944) and Robert Badinter (b. 1928), two typical representatives of the 'liberal Left' in the American sense – he was the Minister of Justice who abolished capital punishment in Mitterrand's first mandate. One could also mention the former Prime Minister (1993-1995), Édouard Balladur (b. 1929), who published *Jeanne d'Arc et la France : Le mythe du sauveur* in 2003, or the former Europhobe Gaullist minister Philippe Séguin (1943-2010) and his *Louis Napoléon le Grand* (1990). In all these cases, there is however a suspicion that the authors have an axe to grind, settling contemporary accounts through their chosen dead heroes. Still, there is obviously a public for these biographies, probably bought more for the name of the author than that of the subject. Apart perhaps from the Badinters' *Condorcet*, possibly because of their impeccable 'liberal Left' credentials, academic historians would not touch these 'amateurish' biographies with a barge pole – and they ignore them in their own books (at least in their lists of 'Recommended Reading' or 'For Further Reading' at the end).

In parallel with the biographies of great figures of the past, there also developed a tendency to publish 'instant history', even before the protagonist was dead. The movement was particularly visible over Mitterrand, who died in 1996. It would be too

¹⁹ Thus there were at least three biographies of Nicholas II on the French market after 1990.

long here to list all the books of a biographical nature which appeared on him before 1996, but perhaps one can quote the title of the third volume of the trilogy written by a fashionable journalist who used to claim support for the Left, Franz-Olivier Giesbert, *François Mitterrand, ou la tentation de l'histoire*. That 'final' volume, published in 1993 (two years before the end of Mitterrand's second Presidency and three years before his death) was called *La fin d'une époque*. He also wrote a controversial portrait of Chirac, full of 'revelations', in 2006, again before the end of his Presidency in 2007: *La tragédie du président*.

The murky world of 'revelations' has long been associated with Biography – hence the diffidence of those who insist that they are only interested in writing History. The suggestions of voyeurism, prurience and titillation are never far behind this notion of 'revelations' – and yet when one writes a 'new' Life of someone, the presumption is that it will contain material not present in earlier biographies. An extreme case of titillation is provided by the 'blurb' of a fairly recent (2006) biography published by a reputable house, formerly known as Librairie académique Perrin, *Le goût du roi : Louis XV et Marie-Louise O'Murphy*, by Camille Pascal:

'Of Marie-Louise O'Murphy, history remembers neither her name nor her face – only her arse. An arse to which Casanova, Boucher [the painter] and Louis XV, three fine connoisseurs, each paid tribute in turn in his own way, marvelling at it' – It is with these deliberately provocative words that Camille Pascal, breaking with the usual tone of historical biography, presents his heroine²⁰.

The borderline between 'new material' and 'revelations' is all too often tenuous, which justifies the attitude of those who continue to abstain from writing Biography. But the lines seem to be increasingly blurred: the rigid attitude of those who wanted to found a French historical school firmly based on the best 'scientific' principles was not only occasionally ignored by the early 'founding fathers', as we saw – it is increasingly in danger of being thrown overboard for good by the self-appointed guardians of the flame. The ivory tower of those French historians who refuse to have any truck with Biography is not only under threat from without – the enemy is now within.

Antoine Capet
Professeur émérite à l'Institut d'études anglophones
Université de Rouen

²⁰ 'De Marie-Louise O'Murphy, l'histoire n'a retenu ni le nom ni le visage, mais le cul. Un cul auquel Casanova, Boucher et Louis XV, trois fins connaisseurs, ont rendu tour à tour et chacun dans leur genre un hommage émerveillé'. C'est par ce propos délibérément provocant que Camille Pascal, rompant avec le ton habituel de la biographie historique, présente son héroïne.