

Book Review

Thomas Söderqvist (ed.): *The History and Poetics of Scientific Biography*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2007, xv+270 pp., ISBN 978-0-7546-5181-9

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At the end of his novel *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), Paul Auster let his protagonist Nathan Glass develop the interesting business idea to write book-long biographies of ordinary people when they are about to die, rather than the brief and standardized newspaper obituaries. Such biographies would perfectly meet the needs both of those who pass away, because they do not want to be forgotten and like to be honored through a book, and of their descendants who might be proud and curious about the life of their ancestors. Auster reminds us that there is a very basic demand in each of us for historiography in the form of biographies that is neither satisfied by elitist life writing nor by social and cultural histories.

To be sure, scientists do not differ from anyone else in that regard. Their primary interest in the history of science, both as readers and authors, has always been in biographies. Moreover, of all history of science scholarship, scientific biographies first reached the status of canonized knowledge as entries in general encyclopedias and dictionaries. Scientific biographies have frequently been bestsellers, vastly outdoing the sales of other history of science books. And yet, as Thomas Söderqvist points out in his Introduction to this most welcome volume, inversely to their public presence and demand, biographies are almost absent, if not treated with hostility, in the professional discourse about the historiography of science.

Although it is not the first such approach (see e.g. M. Shortland & R. Yeo (eds.), *Telling Lives: Essays on Scientific Biography*, Cambridge UP, 1996), this volume makes scientific biography subject to scholarly investigations from a variety of angles, including its history and place within the historiography of science and the general cultural context as well as the methods, problems, and uses of biographic and metabiographic studies.

Following the idea that biographies tell us more about the biographers and their time than about the biographee, several chapters each explore the evolution of biographies of a single scientist. Among these, Helge Kragh's analysis of Tycho biographies is the most fascinating one, not only because Gassendi's account of Tycho was the first modern scientific biography that set standards for both form and content of scientific biographies for several centuries, but also because Kragh looks at his subject from the required international perspective – unlike the stories of English Newton biographies and Danish Steno biographies by Rebekah Higgitt and Signe Lindskov Hanson, respectively. From a history of chemistry point of view, the biographers' neglect (or suppression) of Tycho's extensive alchemical studies, which was largely repeated in the biographic traditions about Newton and others, is particularly interesting.

Several case studies convincingly argue that scientific biographies along with autobiographies and public self-staging have been powerful tools to create and shape scientific personae and entire research fields. Stephen Gaukroger even claims, with reference to Descartes and Bacon, and indirectly borrowing from Shapin and Schaffer's treatment of Boyle, that the biographical shift in emphasis from moral virtues to methodological virtues enabled modern natural philosophy. Rena Selya adds to the already intense debate on the origin of molecular biology the eagerly historiographic and autobiographic efforts by James Watson and others in shaping the field by founding myths. As Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent points out from her own experience as biographer of Lavoisier and Langevin, historians should better take such founding myth seriously to understand the cultural history of science, rather than fighting

windmills and trying to correct them. The chapter by David Aubin and Charlotte Bigg stands out because it compares the simultaneous self-staging of two protagonists in the 19th-century creation of astrophysics in France and England, and thus introduces a new metabiographic approach to cross-cultural comparative studies.

In what I think is, besides Söderqvist's very useful introduction and concluding chapters, the best paper, Thomas L. Hankins, who in 1979 stirred the history of science establishment with his seminal paper 'In Defense of Biography' (*History of Science*, 17, 1-16), compares life writing with patent granting. Not only are they two forms of the established award system of science, they also try to honor individuals in what is actually a collective enterprise; and Hankins shows that defenders of the patent system were also fervent advocates of scientific biographies.

A thread that runs through all the chapters is the historical and systematic discussion of the various uses of biography: as eulogy, glorification, or reward of (great white) scientists; as a means to establish moral models, to shape and popularize a research field or discipline, and to point out the "human face" and emotional side of science; and as a literary form for reading pleasure and entertainment. These uses are juxtaposed with the academic demands for cultural contextualization and, more recently, social embedding according to the "new social history" school, to the extent that many authors observe a severe hostility against biography writing from the history of science establishment.

What makes this volume extremely valuable is that it provokes thinking about the foundations of the history of science in several regards. Is biography writing, whether hugely contextualizing or not, a scholarly or popular form of the historiography of science? Is the necessary focus on individuals, the micro rather than the macro perspective, legitimate to capture science, or does it serve (and ride on) individualism rather than collectivism in the endless ideological struggle? Does it cater to the scientists with their needs for glorification, popularization, and highlighting objective truth (instead of social construction)? And, most importantly in my view, is scientific biography a historian's or scientist's way of dealing with the history of science, keeping in mind that the history of science was not long ago exclusively written by scientists and in biographic style? The issue of biography thus touches on the maturity of the discipline of history of science, such that hostility towards biography is mostly expected where and when the discipline matures. It appears that the conflict arose largely from people in established academic positions, that it has been more severe in history of medicine than in history of science, more in the US than elsewhere, and least in the history of chemistry. Thus, if historians of chemistry fail to obtain one of the few academic positions in their field, they need not worry much about envy from their academic peers if they find a way to make a living from writing inspiring scientific biographies.