

# Past President's Address 1998

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## In Defense of Western Literary Biography

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According to a saying popular in the nineteenth century, “God created men and women, and then the Devil made biographers.”

I do not propose to discuss the ethics or aesthetics or epistemology of literary biography, mostly because I do not know anything about those topics, partly because I could not make them interesting if I did. Any of you can read Hayden White’s “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” as well as I can. Instead, I want to discuss something more elementary—in the sense of both “simple” and “basic.” In a word, I want to describe my own brand of scholarship. When I am asked what it is I do, if only to save a good deal of long-winded explanation, I reply I am a teacher and a literary biographer. I believe, in fact, that the two are related, that teaching, like scholarship, is at its best a form of storytelling. Perhaps that is what we all do, at its lowest common denominator: we tell stories.

Western American literature has, after all, always been about storytelling, from Native American oral traditions to the folktales of such humorists as John Phoenix and Artemus Ward and the yarnspinning of Mark Twain to the narratives of Willa Cather and John Steinbeck and Wallace Stegner. My plea here is for a particular form of western story, literary biography, at the so-called decadent end of literary studies. In the midst of an academic reformation whose most ardent protestants declare the death of the author, I plead the case of the literary biographer, especially of the western literary biographer. I sail in the backwaters of the mainstream. I am so old-fashioned, I am an unreconstructed believer in the idea of authorial intention—which is not to say that I think a literary text means *only* what its author meant, but that its many possible meanings may include what its author intended.

To be sure, I do not presume to defend what might be called the mausoleum school of biography. Thomas Sargent Perry once disparaged this traditional method of memoir. “‘The biographer,’” he complained, “‘gets a dustcart into which he shovels diaries, reminiscences, old letters, until the cart is full. Then he dumps the load in front of your door. That is Vol. I. Then he goes forth again on the same errand. And there is Vol. II’” (qtd. in Edel 18). The subject of this brand of biography is embalmed like a fly in amber. Or as Thomas Carlyle once remarked, “a well-written Life is almost as rare as a well-spent one” (3).

Nor would I defend only the magisterial or the monumental brand of literary biography. The late Mark Schorer allegedly lost much of his reputation, if not his mind, as the result of his long labor on the biography of Sinclair Lewis. It was, according to his colleagues, behavior unbecoming a Berkeley professor. Or in his aptly titled book *Inventing Mark Twain*, Andrew Hoffman speculates that Samuel Clemens had a series of homoerotic experiences, including a love affair with Dan De Quille, in the mining country of Nevada and California in the early 1860s. In rhetoric familiar to readers of supermarket tabloids, Hoffman allows that his speculation “can never be proven” (518)—but then it cannot be disproven either. Here’s hoping he never writes a book about the Kennedy assassination.

Still, I believe the western American literary landscape must include western biography as both literature and history. As better scholars than I have argued, western writers are regional historians and may even be better at recounting western history than the professional historians are. In any case, we have inherited and helped to promote a tradition of new western literary biography which fits hand in glove with the new western history, revisionist in its assault on the myths and codes of westward expansion. Certainly western American writers, and so western literary biographers, challenged these myths and codes long before the historians did so.

This tradition of new western literary biography may indeed have originated in the Boise State Western Writers Series founded a generation ago by our WLA’s Wayne Chatterton and Jim Maguire. Certainly it includes over the past fifteen years or so Jim Woodress’s biography of Willa Cather, Esther Lanigan Stineman’s biography of Mary Austin, Roger Austen’s Charles Warren Stoddard, Susanne George’s Kate Cleary, Carol Petersen’s Bess Streeter Aldrich, William Holtz’s Rose Wilder Lane, Annette White-Parks’s Sui Sin Far, Emily Leider’s Gertrude Atherton, Dorothy Parker’s D’Arcy McNickle, Lee and Gifford’s William Saroyan, Helen Stauffer’s Mari Sandoz, James Parins’s John Rollin Ridge, Charlotte Goodman’s Jean Stafford, Joan Givner’s Katherine Anne Porter, Thurman Wilkins’s John Muir, James Bishop’s Edward Abbey, Jack Benson’s John Steinbeck and Wallace Stegner, Barry Silesky’s Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Keith Abbott’s Richard Brautigan. It is a distinguished list, no doubt incomplete, but all the more remarkable because few of these figures were the subjects of earlier biographies.

To its everlasting credit, the members of this organization have pioneered a new canon of American literature while engaged in a type of rearguard action against the erosion of the humanities as traditionally taught and studied. More than any other group I know, certainly more than any other group to which I belong, the Western Literature Association has nurtured a tradition of iconoclasm. Well I remember the first meeting I attended, in St. Paul in 1983. Rather than read his paper as scheduled in the program, one of the most prominent members of this group instead read aloud the letter of resignation he had sent to the New York offices of the Modern Language Association. I did not realize at the time that his reading of this letter was an annual event, that in fact he had quit the MLA many years before and read the same angry letter every year in sublime defiance of the conference program.

May I evoke his spirit in arguing for the integrity and importance of western literary biography. The genre not

only survived the New Criticism, it thrives today despite—perhaps in response to—the austerities of theory. To be sure, I do not minimize the challenges biographers must face, including the temptation to succumb to what I might call “Parson Weems disease.” I think here of a biography of Abraham Lincoln written for the 1860 campaign. John Locke Scripps reported how the young railsplitter had been profoundly influenced by Plutarch’s *Lives*. “What fields of thought its perusal opened up to the stripling, what hopes were excited in his youthful breast,” Scripps wrote. Young Lincoln “resolved to pattern” his own life after these “worthy models” (37). Unfortunately, Scripps had failed to ask Lincoln whether he had ever read the book before he wrote these words. After the biography was published, he wrote Lincoln, “I take it for granted that you have read Plutarch. If you have not, then you must read him at once to make my statement good” (Scripps 37). There is no record Lincoln replied to this letter, though soon someone in the White House ordered a copy of Plutarch’s *Lives* from the Library of Congress (Mearns vol. 1, 266). He wasn’t called Honest Abe for nothing.

And I am certainly sensitive to the constraints on the biographer, above all to the question of when and if sufficient sources exist to recreate a life. As that noted western American author Herman Melville wrote of the scrivener, “I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and, in his case, those are very small.”

I think here of such obvious problems for the literary biographer as the prohibition on publishing Willa Cather’s letters and other glaring lacunae in the historical record. The field of literary biography is black with the ashes of burned letters. Like Dickens, Henry James, and even the egomaniacal Walt Whitman, both Cather and Frank Norris did “the great thing,” in the words of Miss Tina in James’s “The Aspern Papers,” by burning private papers. The last extant file of the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise* for the years 1865-66, containing almost daily dispatches from its San Francisco correspondent Mark Twain, was destroyed by the San Francisco earthquake of 1906—literally dozens of columns, certainly well over a hundred of them, are forever lost to scholarship. So too is Bret Harte’s relationship with his patron and lover Madame Van de Velde lost in a biographical blindspot because after Harte’s death, she apparently destroyed all the letters they exchanged over a period of more than twenty years. Of course, none of these obstacles has deterred biographers: each of the figures I’ve named is the subject of a serviceable if not a first-rate life.

At the other extreme are those authors who become collaborators with their biographers. For every private bonfire that is lit, for every archive that is sealed or newspaper morgue that is lost, there are dozens of scrapbooks preserved and suitcases full of manuscripts and boxes of personal effects bequeathed to libraries and archives. While still a young writer, Hemingway began to save virtually every scrap of paper his hands touched, if only because he believed in his own importance in the history of American letters. A decade before his death in 1968, Upton Sinclair donated eight tons of material, two moving vans full, including such memorabilia as a plaster cast of his teeth and more than a quarter million of his letters. One of his biographers estimates that “even if one were able to read sixty letters an hour for eight hours a day, it would take five hundred working days just to read” Sinclair’s extant letters (Gottesman; Harris 4). And Charlotte Perkins Gilman “carefully

preserved” her diaries dating back to the age of fifteen, unpublished autobiographical stories, and hundreds of letters in boxes stored in her garage in Pasadena—where they remained until 1972, thirty-seven years after her death—“as though she realized” how she might assist her future biographer (Hill 6-7). It is far more likely that a researcher will uncover a surfeit of sources than be forced to track a subject by a thin trail of bread crumbs.

I have deferred until now perhaps the most vexing question of all: whether the art of the biographer is ever legitimate, whether biography ever re-creates character, is ever more than mere shadow or dim projection. Clemens insisted that biography “is but the clothes and buttons of the man” (vol. 1, 2), and Scott Fitzgerald averred that it is the falsest of the arts (177). Arnold Rampersad allows that “all aspects of biography are problematical, with biography itself being problematical in that it purports to do something—recover a life—that is patently impossible to do” (7).

Which of course says nothing about the value and worth of the attempt. I believe that literary biographers are uniquely able to re-create the past, to officiate as it were at the marriage of Clio and Calliope. As Kenneth Silverman argues, the biographer creates “a simile, a resemblance, a composite police sketch” based on observation (116). Consider, for example, Wallace Stegner’s novel *Angle of Repose*. The narrator and protagonist Lyman Ward, a western historian past middle age, wheelchair-bound with a withered leg, writes a biography of his grandparents, loosely modeled upon Mary Hallock Foote and her husband. “What interests me in all these papers,” Ward explains, “is not Susan Burling Ward the novelist and illustrator, and not Oliver Ward the engineer. … What really interests me is how two such unlike particles clung together, and under what strains, rolling downhill into their future until they reached the angle of repose where I knew them. That’s where the interest is. That’s where the meaning will be” (211). “It is not enough … [for Ward to] look back to the late nineteenth century, and write about his ancestors,” according to Richard W. Etulain. “Instead, he must place himself alongside his grandparents and, in a sense, live their lives with them” (156). And lest we forget: before *Angle of Repose*, Stegner had written a “biographical novel” about Joe Hill, a biography of John Wesley Powell, and a memoir of his own boyhood in Saskatchewan; and his next projects after *Angle of Repose* would be a biography of Bernard DeVoto and an edition of DeVoto’s letters. The task of the literary biographer, as Stegner proved by example, is to discover and to contemplate—not solve, not unlock—the mystery at the heart of a life. In the end, rather than shovel diaries and letters into the dustcart, the biographer ought to peel an onion, removing layer after successive layer of skin, to find the story in the life.

And so, in closing, let me illustrate what I mean by telling a story. For the second issue of the *Overland Monthly* in August 1868, Bret Harte wrote a subtle parody of the gospel accounts of the nativity which he set in a mining camp, with a mixed-blood named Cherokee Sal, an ironic Virgin, who gives birth to a transcendentally blessed child named Tommy Luck. The story prompted a crisis borne of the western provincialism Harte disdained. A proofreader, one Sarah B. Cooper, a religious zealot, was offended by Cherokee Sal’s vices and by the miners’ cursing. She protested to the printer, who in turn convinced the publisher that any controversy over the tale would doom the magazine. Only Harte’s insistence that “The Luck of Roaring Camp” appear without the change of a word, else he would resign as editor of the *Overland*, saved the day. Over the years Sarah B. Cooper

has become the bête noire in Harte scholarship—she has been variously described as a “foolish female” (Bartlett, “Reminiscences of a Co-Worker” 231), a “chaste … nymph” (Harte 6), the “specter of Mrs. Grundy” (Morrow 11), a “prude” possessed of a “meddlesome impertinence” (Bartlett, “Overland Reminiscences” 45), and “a vestal virgin” (James 10). Harte himself wrote that she “‘frantically excommunicated [my story], and anathematized it as the offspring of evil’” (qtd. in Brooks 203). According to legend, when Cooper later submitted a story of her own to Harte for publication in the *Overland*, he returned the manuscript to her with the dismissive comment, “I am not editing a Sunday School paper.”

So much for Sarah B. Cooper, at least in the conventional view. The poet Charles Warren Stoddard scarcely rehabilitated her reputation in his memoir of the early years of the *Overland*: she was an “enthusiast who ran an independent Bible class and was excommunicated by many of her own sect” (264). Imagine my surprise, then, one day as I was reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s autobiography to come upon this statement: “Sarah B. Cooper, always a friend, [gave me] a half-price ticket [to Chicago] … which she had somehow obtained” (179). In the summer of 1895, out of work and virtually destitute, Gilman was living in San Francisco but had been invited to visit Hull House in Chicago before launching her career as a lecturer on behalf of such progressive causes as professional child care and the economic independence of women. The very person who was excoriated as a “prude” and “vestal virgin” for her strictures on the proof of “The Luck of Roaring Camp” twenty-seven years earlier was, in truth, a far more complex and interesting figure than her reputation in Harte studies would suggest. Sarah B. Cooper, it turns out, was a cousin of the religious skeptic Robert Ingersoll, who inscribed a copy of his book *Ghosts* to her: “If all Christians were like you, this book would never have been written” (Stoddard 264-65). She corresponded with the likes of Susan B. Anthony, Adolph Sutro, and Jane Stanford, wife of Leland Stanford. She was president of the Golden Gate Kindergarten Association, instrumental in the introduction of preschools in San Francisco and Oakland at the turn of the century. She was an active suffragist and delegate from California to the Congress of Women at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. She was a regular contributor to the pages of the San Francisco *Call* and the *Impress*, the magazine of the Pacific Coast Women’s Press Association. And she befriended the thirty-year-old Charlotte Perkins Gilman and boosted her along. Hers was, from all I can gather, a quite remarkable career. By recovering a few salient details about her later years, we may at least correct her caricature in Harte scholarship and resurrect her from that literary hell, the footnote. Still, I do not suppose there will ever be a complete life of Sarah B. Cooper. As with Bartleby, the materials simply do not exist for a full and satisfactory biography of her. It is, may I suggest, an irreparable loss to literature.

There is an old business school adage: no one wants to talk to an accountant when there is an economist in the room. At the risk of sounding like a raving paranoid, I might paraphrase this adage for my purposes: no one wants to talk to a biographer when there is an ecocritic in the room. Like steak tartar or catsup on eggs, literary biography is an acquired taste. I readily confess to a footnote fetish. The words Stegner gives Lyman Ward are apropos here: “In the papers my grandparents, especially my grandmother, left behind, I get glimpses of lives close to mine, related to mine in ways I recognize but don’t completely comprehend” (17). In teasing out the

story of a life from the traces it has left, the literary biographer, especially perhaps the western literary biographer, plumbs the most basic, most elemental sources of scholarship and tries to make sense, in literature as in life, of the personal and possessed past.

#### Note

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