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Literary Biography and its Critics

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Literary Biography and its Critics

by
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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of
PhD**

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Abstract

This thesis analyses Anglo-American criticism of biography, during the late twentieth century from within and outside the academy. It moves on to discuss the work of three contemporary British biographers, Claire Tomalin, Richard Holmes and Hermione Lee, in the context of recent debate about the genre. Claire Tomalin, is an independent freelance biographer; Hermione Lee, is a lifelong academic who writes biography for the general and academic reader; and Richard Holmes has had a foot in both camps in his experience both as an independent biographer and an academic. The aim is to make the case that contemporary British biography since 1970, literary biography in particular, has not only responded to objections from some academic critics but, at least in the biographies by Tomalin, Holmes and Lee, embraces aspects of recent academic literary theory, New Historicism and Feminism in particular. It is not within the remit of my thesis to provide an overview of literary theory or weigh up its arguments. It is rather the intention to argue that objections to the genre have been influenced by aspects of recent theory, and that critics have not acknowledged the extent to which biographers have also been aware of, and have responded to comparable influences. I will also consider the extent to which objections to the genre are reflected in reviews of biographies by Tomalin, Holmes and Lee, as well as recent developments in the academic study of the genre.

The first chapter will identify major objections to biography influenced by academic theory, drawing on both British and American sources. The next chapter will discuss how biographers, within and outside the academy, have responded to these objections. A study of Claire Tomalin's biographies in Chapter Three will explore the extent to which she considers 'truth' as mediated and provisional; how she approaches autobiographical evidence; her use of anecdotes and chronology; and the use she makes of speculation. Richard Holmes, the subject of Chapter Four, is often associated with debates about identification in biography and the chapter devoted to him will explore the extent to which his approach can be seen as 'Romantic' in its treatment of the subject as an isolated individual, a great

man or autonomous genius; the extent to which he places his biographical subjects within their social, political and cultural contexts; and his approach to historiography, influenced by the ontological and fictional focus important to Ira Nadel. Hermione Lee, the subject of Chapter Five, is a distinguished academic whose biographical writing negotiates the balance between fact and fiction and ontological and historical knowledge differently from that of Holmes, in ways more congruent with academic practice. Chapter Six will consider the critical reception of biographies by Hermione Lee, Claire Tomalin, and Richard Holmes in academic journals and the reviews of academics in the quality press. Chapter Seven will discuss the extent to which biography as a written narrative has been subsumed within the academy into the wider field of life-writing, and how this subsuming has affected its status and character as a literary genre.

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