

REVIEWS

Jeremy D. Popkin. *History, Historians, and Autobiography*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005. 328 pp. ISBN 0-226-67543-2, \$35.00.

A book on “historians’ autobiography” is a bit unexpected. To be sure, many historians take an interest in the autobiographies of their fellow historians. If the present reviewer is any indication, historians typically give passing attention to the autobiographical writings of historians whom they have encountered in person or whose historical works they know. Accordingly, over a span of years this reviewer has read Arthur R. M. Lower’s *My First Seventy-Five Years* (1967), Sir Keith Hancock’s *Professing History* (1976), Saul Friedländer’s *When Memory Comes* (1979), Hans A. Schmitt’s *Lucky Victim: An Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times, 1933–1946* (1989), H. Stuart Hughes’s *Gentleman Rebel* (1990), Martin Duberman’s *Cures: A Gay Man’s Odyssey* (1991), Deirdre McCloskey’s *Crossing: A Memoir* (1999), and George L. Mosse’s *Confronting History* (2000). These are, respectively, historians of Canada, Britain, Germany (with a focus on the Third Reich and the Holocaust), Germany, Europe (intellectual and political history), the United States (cultural history, gay history), Britain (economic history), and Germany (intellectual and cultural history). This reviewer has also just finished *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (2005), whose author has written many books on the history of the United States.

But aside from a few classic works, such as Edward Gibbon’s *Memoirs* (1796) and Henry Adams’s *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), it is hard to think of historians’ “life writing” as constituting an especially interesting subgenre. It appears that no one before Jeremy Popkin has written a book on the subject, and the absence is surely indicative. One problem is the often uneventful character of historians’ lives. The historian’s craft requires that much time be consecrated to the sedentary tasks of reading and writing. If some part of the historian’s life story happens to be rich in incident and excitement, this is usually the result of circumstances, such as being drafted into a war, that are separate from a scholarly career. While it is tempting to say that any life can be interesting if it is well told, only a few historians lead lives that are likely to resonate widely in the retelling. In this regard, two of the autobiographies mentioned in the previous paragraph stand out: Friedländer’s *When Memory Comes* and John Hope Franklin’s *Mirror to America*. Friedländer’s book recounts how, as the young child of refugee Czech Jews, he managed

to survive World War II under the assumed identity of a French Catholic. As for *Mirror to America*, which was published in John Hope Franklin's ninety-first year, it has a far wider subject than Franklin himself, for the real story that it tells is of an American racism so rigid and pervasive, during most of his life, that his triumphing over it seems nothing short of miraculous.

However, a more important question is not whether historians' autobiographies are interesting but whether we ought to think of them as a subgenre at all. It is a matter of existential priority: in other words, we need to ponder the question, "How deep an aspect of the self is 'being a historian'?" Marcus Mosely recently published a 650-page study of Jewish autobiography, *Being for Myself Alone: Origins of Jewish Autobiography* (2006). If someone is Jewish enough to write a "Jewish autobiography," that author's Jewishness surely exists deeply enough that it can be said to be a fundamental identity. Our imagined author of a "Jewish autobiography" would see herself as *being* Jewish in a quite profound sense of "being." By way of contrast, in most cases "being a historian" seems more an activity one carries out than an identity one inhabits (although, to be sure, one cannot entirely separate doing and being). Consider Franklin's *Mirror to America*. Franklin has much to say about his struggles to establish himself as a historian (he was eventually elected president of the American Historical Association), but his book is far more compelling as an account of the life of an extraordinarily talented African-American in a deeply segregated and racially discriminatory society. Popkin himself suggests the problematic nature of the subgenre when he observes that "in many cases" readers of historians' autobiographies "learn that the author is a historian only from remarks in the book's preface or on its cover" (151).

As Popkin emphasizes, history and autobiography are related, for both involve an attempt to reconstruct and to come to terms with the past: in his words, they are "two ways of narrating and preserving the past" (4). Indeed, there is an autobiographical dimension to the two founding works of Western historiography, Herodotus's *History* and Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*. There is thus justification for studying history and autobiography in a comparative perspective, although one could quite reasonably compare history with autobiography without taking historians' autobiographies as the comparison set. But in spite of the questionable nature of the subgenre, there is some reason for proceeding as Popkin has done, examining autobiographies written by historians. In some instances, close connections exist between the historian's life writing and his historical writing. For example, one might think of Friedländer's *When Memory Comes* as giving us the existential background to his historical writings on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Although few historians' autobiographies offer as clear a connection between

the historian's life and his historical research as in Friedländer's case, Popkin's research shows that most historians' autobiographies do attend to how the historian's own life is related to larger historical events or processes.

A brief survey of Popkin's book may be useful. Chapter 1, which is informed by his reading of such theorists of autobiography as Georges Gusdorf, Philippe Lejeune, and James Olney, discusses the similarities and differences of the two genres. History and memoir were long related to each other, but in the nineteenth century, with the scientization of historical scholarship and the emergence, after Rousseau, of a highly subjective conception of autobiography, they were pulled sharply apart. Chapter 2 considers the implications of theories of narrative offered by Hayden White, David Carr, and Paul Ricoeur for an understanding of the history/autobiography relation. Popkin finds that many historian-autobiographers agree instinctively with Ricoeur, who insists that there is a dialectical relation between reality and narrative rather than a simple opposition or a reduction of one to the other. In chapter 3 Popkin argues that historians' autobiographies constitute a distinctive subgenre, and he reflects on the potential threat that autobiographical writing, because of its personal and behind-the-scenes revelations, poses to "the professional historian's hard-won authority as a re-constructor of the past" (62).

In subsequent chapters Popkin turns to concrete examples. In chapter 4 he discusses Gibbon's *Memoirs* and Henry Adams's *Education*, which, he suggests, "define two limiting positions" between which most historians' memoirs are located (117). Historians and history graduate students will probably be most intrigued by chapters 5 and 6, which deal with two themes that characteristically arise in historians' autobiographies: choice of a vocation and the progress of the historian's career. Chapter 7 deals with historian-autobiographers' accounts of their "historical experience"; that is, their involvement with the public events that we usually think of as "history." He finds that the autobiographical writings of the German historian Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954) are something of a prototype for professional historians' discussions of all three of these themes. Chapter 8 deals with a subset of the "historical experience" theme: autobiographies by historians affected by the Holocaust. Popkin finds that historians are less inclined than other Holocaust survivors who have written of their experience to see themselves as defined by Jewish identity. He suggests that commitment to historical scholarship may have helped these historians "free themselves from the weight of their personal histories" (242).

Chapter 9, on historians' "reshaping of personal narrative," deserves some extra attention. While Popkin finds that the overwhelming majority of historian-autobiographers practice "standard forms of autobiography," a few

have “deliberately set out to test and expand the parameters of autobiographical writing in general” (249, 8). Henry Adams, who used third-person narration and who presented an idiosyncratic theory of history in his autobiography, is the prototype of the innovative historian-autobiographer. The East German Marxist historian Jürgen Kuczynski found inspiration in Adams’s use of third-person narration (which Kuczynski alternates with first-person narration). Kuczynski thus distances himself from aspects of his earlier life. Other authors, Popkin suggests, have diverged from the conventional first-person narrative form of autobiography because of their wish to produce autobiographical texts “that would throw new light not only on personal experiences but also on aspects of collective experience” (250). Some of these (Carolyn Steedman, Ronald Fraser, Luisa Passerini) wish to cast doubt on the notion of an autobiographical self that emerges “from within,” and instead want to emphasize the formative role played by social milieu in the emergence of personality (252). Two authors (Saul Friedländer, Inga Clendinnen) write about selves fractured by circumstance—in Friedländer’s case, by the conditions under which he escaped the Holocaust; in Clendinnen’s case, by a life-threatening disease. Finally, Martin Duberman’s and Deirdre McCloskey’s memoirs bring “the reality of ‘deviant’ bodily desires into the staid precincts of historians’ autobiographies” (269)—Duberman writing about being homosexual at a time when there was a strong taboo against this, and McCloskey about the experience of crossing from male to female.

In the last thirty years or so, the historical discipline has changed in some quite striking ways. Most important has been the retreat of the notion that there is any definable “grand” or “master” narrative under which all history must be subsumed. There have been other interesting developments as well, notably an increased interest in such forms as film, interactive museums, and archives devoted to audio and video testimonies, as well as the emergence of digital media. These developments have led to a greater concern with the relation between conventional historical scholarship and other forms of engagement with the past (or with its residues). It is no doubt symptomatic of this context that Popkin has turned to historians’ autobiography. But his book is more than a symptom: it is also a highly intelligent examination of its chosen subject, one that offers food for further thought and reflection. An important question these days is how history differs from the myth, tradition, and memory that so often dominate the new forms. (Some, indeed, would argue that there is little or no difference.) Popkin’s excellent and unpretentious book is perhaps best read as a contribution to what one hopes will be the continuing discussion of this question.

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