

Conversation with Zachary Leader, general editor of the *Oxford History of Life-Writing*

par Jean-Louis Jeannelle, Bruno Tribout

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Bruno Tribout : Thank you, Zachary, for agreeing to talk to us as general editor of the *Oxford History of Life-Writing*. This series of seven volumes (of which the first two have been published in 2018) considers a range of life-writing genres and texts in English, from the Medieval to the contemporary period. We are particularly interested in this series as part of a project currently mapping out research into autobiography across Europe.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : Sorbonne Université (CELLF XVI-XXI) is putting together a research group, 'Écrits de soi', bringing together researchers working on autobiography from the 16th to the 21st century. As part of this, with Françoise Simonet-Tenant (CÉRÉdI, Rouen), a website entitled 'ÉcriSoi' is currently being developed, with a view to complementing the *Dictionnaire de l'autobiographie* (edited by Prof. Simonet-Tenant, Champion, 2017).

Zachary Leader : Does the *Dictionnaire* concern itself with autobiography only ?

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : In fact, it deals with all life-writing genres, but we used '*autobiographie*' in the title of the book as it is a notion which is more easily recognisable by the intended readership. We would now like to expand on the work initiated around the *Dictionnaire*, this time in a European context. Our objective is to focus in the first instance on linguistic issues, looking at the continuum of terms used by researchers (such as '*autobiographie*', '*Mémoires*', '*témoignage*'), applied to different time periods from the

16th to the 20th century, comparing various European languages. We would like to warn against quick, misleading translations, such as with 'autofiction', a term which has been used across Europe in very different ways. We would aim for something akin to Barbara Cassin's *Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004), which made it possible to re-examine philosophical concepts such as '*être*' or '*vérité*' that had become untranslatable between European languages, by looking at the numerous layers of meaning constituted through their linguistic use in various national traditions. For life-writing, a good example is the term '*Mémoires*' which, in French, refers to something very different from 'Memoirs' in English, which in turn we would translate as '*récits de vie*'. So, in this context, we are organising reviews of large-scale projects on autobiographical writing in the U.K., Germany, Italy, etc., which will be complemented by interviews, in particular for works which have not been published yet.

Zachary Leader : I can tell you that the last volume of the *Oxford History of Life-Writing*, which takes us from 1945 to the present, is about to be published. This may be the most radical, theoretically engaged volume of the series. Its author is Patrick Hayes of Oxford and it should come out in 2021. It contains all sort of writings which are not conventionally thought of as life-writing, such as works of philosophy which we would not think of as autobiographical or biographical, but which present philosophical notions of the self or of personal identity. I will be interested in the reception that it gets. For your project, comparing European traditions, you might be interested to talk to Juliette Atkinson, who teaches in the Department of English at UCL but who is French. She is currently working on the nineteenth century volume of the *Oxford History* and will make much use of continental examples or of contrasts between British and European practice. Her volume should be published in 2022 or 2023.

Bruno Tribout : Looking at the project as a whole, we are interested in how it came about and what your main objectives were.

Zachary Leader : The main aim of the project was to gather together and interrogate current academic thinking about life-writing, a term that dates back to 1906, but has gained currency in the last decade or so – an umbrella term which has managed to confer academic credence to forms of writing previously undervalued in British and American universities. When 'life-writing' began to take the place of biography and autobiography as a literary genre, somehow it managed also to gain the interest of theoretically minded academics (partly because it broke down distinctions between 'literature' and 'writing'). I thought : why not establish a history of the forms life-writing has been thought to encompass, a benchmark history for critics and scholars to aim at or undermine ? I wanted each volume to tell the story of the nature and evolution of life-writing forms in its period. The idea came to me because I had PhD students who wanted to write about life-writing, or various forms of life-writing, but who couldn't find the kind of overall

history they sought. I should say that, when I came up with this idea, and proposed it to Oxford University Press, I was very fortunate in the fact that the literary delegate at OUP (the person who passes judgment on English literature proposals) was Professor Hermione Lee, a distinguished literary biographer, who had no prejudice against studies of biography, autobiography, or 'narrative'. Hermione became consulting editor for the *History* and having her support meant that the project was going to happen. When she stopped being the literature delegate for OUP, her place has been taken by Professor Laura Marcus, unfortunately deceased in the meantime, who had written influential theoretical accounts of autobiography. So she, too, would have be on board, so much so that she had agreed to write the penultimate volume of the *History*. As a consequence, I had a lot of help from the beginning from the authorities who were being asked to green light this project. I also ran a conference at the Huntington Library in California on life-writing, which brought together a number of people who were interested in the project, several of whom went on to become volume authors.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : When would you say that life-writing became an institutionally recognised and legitimised field of study within British universities ?

Zachary Leader : The students were coming to me in the late 1990s. I got involved in this because I had written a biography of Kingsley Amis (2006) and one of Saul Bellow (2015). The conference I organised at the Huntington Library was in 2012 and, by then, the idea of the *Oxford History of Life-Writing* had already been approved by OUP. So, I think it is probably the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : So, it is a rather old project in fact.

Zachary Leader : Yes. A big project like this takes a while to get off the ground. It has taken a while to find the right volume authors, people at the right moments in their careers. My great hope at the beginning was that the volumes would be written not just by scholars, critics and literary theorists, but by non-academics, biographers or authors of autobiographies or memoirs. However, non- academics make their living by advances and OUP, an academic press, was unable to produce the sorts of advances they needed. We almost got Adam Sisman, a freelance biographer, who wrote terrific biographical studies of William Wordsworth, Hugh Trevor-Roper, John Le Carré, among others, and a wonderful book about Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson. We almost had a different medieval author, who was seduced away by a trade press which offered him a larger advance to write a biography of Chaucer. These practical considerations played a part in selecting volume authors, as did the need to find people at the right stage of their careers, which is partly to say, the right time in relation to the REF (the Research Excellence Framework, a national exercise assessing research at UK universities every six years). For the 18th-century volume, a crucial volume, we had two authors who had

to give up on the project, and only now, just a few months ago, have we signed someone to take on the job. The two earlier prospective authors had produced detailed proposals and excellent sample chapters, but their circumstances prevented them from continuing with the project.

Bruno Tribout : I was wondering if you could tell us more about your role as general editor. What part did you play in setting the overall direction for the series ? How important were theoretical considerations in selecting and accompanying volume authors ? What was your approach to possible discrepancies between volumes ?

Zachary Leader : I had a sense of the different topics that I wanted discussed, different areas having to do with audience, history, politics, notions of the self and so forth, but I did not want authors to feel they had to cover the same areas with the same degree of thoroughness. I wanted there to be variety in the approaches. At the same time, in choosing what to write about, I wanted my authors to give readers a sense that behind their choices lay a sense of the field as a whole, that 'they could if they would' not 'they would if they could' – that absences were conscious choices, no product of ignorance. If an author decided that the kind of life-writing she was interested in, or that mattered most in her period, was narrative non-fiction, and that she would say little about, say, correspondence or writs or wills or depositions, as long as she made clear that she was aware of these other forms, and explained briefly her reasons for omitting discussion of them, that was fine by me. The other thing I wanted to make sure of was that the *History* would be taken seriously by both the theoretically inclined readers and those unfamiliar with or suspicious of theory. On the one hand, I was eager to avoid specialist vocabulary, works written for adepts only. On the other hand, I did not want somebody to write who was unaware of the theoretical questions the term 'life-writing' raises. I wanted to find a middle ground in some way. On the whole, however, I was not very directive. When I wrote the general proposal for the *History*, several readers wanted me to be more directive. But I was terribly concerned that the formats of the volumes would end up being boringly predictable : there would be a chapter on biography, a chapter on memoirs, a chapter on letters, etc. The first two volumes are quite different in character. Karen Winstead, the author of the Medieval volume, focuses on narratives pretty much, whereas Alan Stewart, the author of the Early Modern volume, takes us all over the place. Among his most interesting chapters is an account of the life of an Elizabethan official of the Exchequer as it emerges not from memoir or correspondence but from his account books. These are two quite different approaches to the field.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : Did you think of one author per volume from the start or did you envisage volumes with multiple authors ?

Zachary Leader : No, I wanted to have one author per volume from the outset. I

think you are more likely to get a strong and useful response to a single-author volume than you are to a handbook. Also, I wanted the narrative. I did not want little chunks of information. I wanted a story presented, and then I was happy to have someone attack the story or find flaws in it.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : Were there in the Anglo-Saxon world any existing books you used as a reference for your project ?

Zachary Leader : No, there wasn't a multi-period history of life-writing in English. There were histories of biography and histories of memoirs, and then there were histories of life-writing and memoirs for specific periods, but there wasn't a multi-volume history of life-writing in the way there are multi-volume histories of the novel or poetry. There were single-author, one-volume histories, such as Richard Altick's *Lives and Letters : A History of Literary Biography in England and America* (1965), Nigel Hamilton's *Biography : A Brief History* (2007) or Donald Stauffer, *English Biography Before 1700* (1930), but there was no history that went from the Medieval period onwards.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : In France, researchers do not study biography and autobiography alongside each other the way Anglo-Saxon researchers do, thanks to the term life-writing, which encompasses both biography and autobiography. In her general introduction to the three-volume *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* she edited, Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf chooses not to use the term life-writing, which does not translate into German. The same is true for French.

Bruno Tribout : Life-writing might well be one of these untranslatable notions which Jean-Louis mentioned earlier, referring to Barbara Cassin's work. '*Récits de soi*' or '*récits de vie*' individually do not convey the whole meaning of life-writing.

Zachary Leader : So, you don't have a sense of one form blending into the other ; there is a clear sense of demarcation for you ?

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : Precisely, we are either looking at biography or autobiography. And we cannot unite the two using just one term.

Zachary Leader : But taking, for instance, Rousseau's *Confessions* or Wordsworth's *Prelude*, neither is a biography, but they played crucial roles in shaping biography in and after their period. You could not write a history of biography without talking about them. You don't see this as a problem ?

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : In literary studies as they developed in France, we do not have the same tradition about biography, which generally is less studied than autobiography. And within a history of biography, I don't think we would really discuss Rousseau, who is associated with autobiography to us. We never really consider both genres together and as forming a whole.

Zachary Leader : For many years I taught a course at my university called Classical Greek Literature in Translation. In it, I had a terrific problem convincing my students of the differences between our notions of personal identity and those of the Greeks. If you wanted to produce an account of who a person was in fifth century BC Athens, some have argued, it was enough to produce an account of what this person had done, of his or her acts, whereas our notion of the interior life, of the things that went on inside someone's head that then resulted in acts, these things were largely immaterial to the Greeks. We would not say today that there is no difference between the person who agonised over whether to send his child to a private school and the person who didn't. To the Greeks they were both people who sent their children to private schools. Do the French not consider the history of biography or autobiography as being effected by evolving notions of the self or personal identity as depicted in non-biographical works ? This is not a concern for you in France ?

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : I don't think so.

Bruno Tribout : If this approach is sometimes pursued in French studies, it is only on a very limited scale. Looking at early modern French literature, for instance, there is little research on biography, and it is generally considered distinct from other genres of life-writing, such as '*Mémoires*', mostly due to long-standing scholarly traditions.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : Yes, there isn't a similar tradition of researching biography in France. And Philippe Lejeune's theory of the '*pacte autobiographique*', developed in the 1970s, which created a new field of research in France, did so by leaving biography out, and this had a long-lasting impact on how research was constituted around these issues, meaning biography is often a blind spot of our research in this field. Going back to your role as general editor, I was wondering if you worked with volume authors on life-writing terminology. Was everybody happy with the term life-writing ? Were there discussions on how to name the various genres across the series ?

Zachary Leader : As I say, I wasn't directive, everyone was free to do what they would. I am currently writing a book, which is a biography of a biography, looking at Richard Ellmann's biography of James Joyce (1959), which Anthony Burgess considered the finest literary autobiography of the 20th century. I am writing a biographical account of how this book was written. I don't know if this is true in France, but, in the UK and the US, if you put the word biography in the title of a work of history or criticism, then you are more likely to get it sold. So, you have books at present called *Chicago : A Biography* (by Dominic Pacyga, 2009) or *Cod : A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (by Mark Kurlansky, 1999) or *"England in 1819" : A biography of a poem.* It is thought that biography sells, that it reaches beyond an academic or specialised audience. Does biography have that power in France ?

Bruno Tribout : It seems to me that there still is a prejudice against literary biography in French universities. Things are different in other areas, such as History, where biographies play a greater part due to evolving conceptions of historiography. In terms of wider readership, I think the situation in France is fairly similar to that you described for the UK and the US, and biographies sell well.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : In History, biographies sell well, but are not always well received in the academic world, and this is due to the history of historiography in France, and a conception of history influenced by the Annales school.

Zachary Leader : There is the same prejudice in literary studies in the UK and the US, but there is less of it now. The professors who hold named chairs in Britain and the US are now perfectly likely to be writing biographies as well as works of academic criticism or theory or literary historical scholarship. I think there isn't as much of a sense of it being a lesser thing. Biography has more critical prestige than it used to have. This has also something to do with the gradual loss of prestige of theory, which in Britain and in America is thought by some to have removed the Humanities from any influence on the general public. There is also increasing governmental and institutional support for works that reach out to wider audiences and biography is thought to do just that. The existence of a non-academic audience for biographies is recognised by the fact that, in the US, you can get a Pulitzer Prize for Biography or a National Book Award in the category of biography ; in Britain, you could win the Samuel Johnson Prize for a biography. In France is there a prize for biography equivalent in stature to a Prix Goncourt, as the Pulitzer Prize in Biography is equivalent in prestige to the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction ?

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : There are prizes, but less prestigious ones, such as the Prix de la Biographie. Going back to the *Oxford History of Life-Writing*, you mentioned that the next volume to be published will be the last one, authored by Patrick Hayes. Was it meant to be like this or is it because he wrote more quickly than the other authors ?

Zachary Leader : It is just accidental. I would have liked for the next volume to be the 18^{th}-century volume, but, as I told you, this is the volume for which two authors were approved, both of whom had to give up because of personal and other circumstances. The current author, a brilliant young eighteenth-century scholar, has only just signed on. The order in which volumes are going to be published is not the ideal order, but the order in which they are finished. This is not unusual for a large series.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : Are volumes discussed with you only or as part of a team involving other volume authors ?

Zachary Leader : Every volume has to be approved by the literature delegate of Oxford University Press, and what they approve first of all is a proposal, which has been

sent out to readers. The readers' comments are then responded to by the author and often result in alterations in the proposal. Only then is the proposal sent out to the literature delegate. When the work is finished, it is again sent out to readers. Every volume author gets the proposals of all the other volume authors. For instance, the young American scholar who has taken on the 18th-century volume, Jacob Sider Jost, has been given the early modern volume by Alan Stewart, which has just been published, as well as Julian North's proposal for the Romantics volume, which has not yet been published. I read every proposal ; every reader's report ; every response to the readers' reports, and then, when the work is finally commissioned, I read the finished volume and make suggestions before it goes again to readers. So the volumes are checked a number of times. If, for instance, the person who does the 18th-century volume wants to write about something that was published in 1791, which is also within the remit of the author of the Romantics volume, and he wants to say something quite different from what is said in the Romantic volume, I would make sure that he knew what was said in the Romantics volume. If he disagrees, that's okay by me. If he makes an argument that is going to be answered by the later volume, I will remind him of this fact. So far I've had no insurmountable problems of overlap or conflicting interpretation.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle : For volumes 6 (Modernist) and 7 (Later Twentieth Century and Contemporary), did you have writers difficult to allocated or authors discussed in both volumes ?

Zachary Leader : There could very well have been problems, but both volume authors are from Oxford. One, the author of volume 6, Laura Marcus, had taught Patrick Hayes, the author of volume 7. They were friends and had consulted together about their volumes. The Oxford Centre for Life-Writing (Wolfson College), founded and presided over by Hermione Lee, has organised three conferences about the *Oxford History*, where volume authors have been able to discuss their plans : one to celebrate the publication of the first two volumes, one to celebrate the publication of a volume of essays I edited called *On Life-Writing* (OUP, 2015), and one, after this series had been commissioned, to celebrate the publication of the second volume of my biography of Saul Bellow (2018). Each of the volume authors came along and we had dinner afterwards and they talked to each other about how they were getting on. So, there is contact between volume authors. But no attempt has been made to make their volumes compatible in every respect. You can see that the first two volumes are very different, Karen Winstead's, on the Medieval period, is quite different from Alan Stewart's, and that is okay by me.

Bruno Tribout : In the outline proposal that you very kindly shared with us, you refer to a consensus around the historical development of life-writing, which the series would help to test and complicate. Now that the first volumes have appeared, in what ways would you say they challenge this consensus and some of the assumptions behind

it ?

Zachary Leader : Karen Winstead struggled heroically to get out from under the notion that Medieval life-writing has no complexity or interiority, is solely hagiographic, and I think she does make a clear case that this is not so. You can think of that as a challenge to a sort of "Whig" interpretation of literary biography, where things just get better and fuller, until they reach an apotheosis in works like Richard Ellmann's biography of James Joyce. The Patrick Hayes volume will atomise everything. It will emphasize the constructed nature of all supposed improvements and their historically determined character. Whether or not the 18th-century volume, covering the period which is often associated with a flowering of biography, will be shown as such, I don't yet know. From the proposal by Jacob Sider Jost, it looks like here, too, the conventional account will be called into question and complicated. So, I believe clichéd notions of biography and autobiography in different periods will be complicated by these works. A good thing, I think.

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