

TREAD SOFTLY FOR YOU TREAD ON MY LIFE

Biography and Compassionate Truth

MICHAEL KING

BIOGRAPHERS CAN'T HELP but be aware that some of their potential subjects are terrified of the genre. As Sir Charles Wetherell remarked, biography adds a new zone of horror to the business of getting dead and being dead. One only has to reflect on the delight with which biographers fall upon inappropriate, or – even worse – appropriate last words: Florence Nightingale's, 'I smell something burning', for example; or Nancy Astor's, 'Am I dying or is it just my birthday?'.
Consider the formerly stainless reputations of men such as Gordon of Khartoum and Lord Kitchener besmirched by writers with a fraction of their subject's talent, panache or experience: pontifications on what decisions the biographee *ought* to have made in the heat of battle, politics or relationships; disclosures of a prurient nature about unusual sexual proclivities; revelations that the Reverend Public Figure, loved by all who came into contact with him professionally, was a tyrant and a

bully at home. (I hasten to add that I am not being sexist in my choice of examples and pronouns; the



Frank Sargeson. Alexander Turnbull Library PA Coll-
1581, Sargeson family photo.

conventions laid down by the practitioners of English Victorian biography ensure that the inflated reputations so perforated by 20th-century biographers are almost entirely those of men.)

Of this, the more tawdry aspect of modern biography, Janet Malcolm notes:

'It is the medium through which the remaining secrets of the famous are taken from them and dumped in full view of the world. The biographer at work, indeed, is like the professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to believe contain the jewellery and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away ... The more the biography reflects the biographer's industry, the more the reader believes that he or she is having an elevating literary experience, rather than simply listening to backstairs gossip and reading other people's mail'.

Is it any wonder that as distinguished and experienced a biographer as our own Antony Alpers – who knew the score on such matters – announced that he planned to destroy his family papers on the basis that copyright laws were insufficient to preserve reputations. 'Under the present New Zealand Copyright Act all copyright protection is withdrawn from unpublished writings only 75 years after

the author's death', he wrote in *Confident Tomorrows*, an anthology of his father's writings. 'Unauthorised copies can then be exploited by anyone for any purpose. Against that odious possibility the destruction of private papers alone can give full protection'.

What provoked this threat to destroy biographical evidence – and this from a man whom some would identify as New Zealand's most distinguished biographer? His letters to me suggest that he was affronted by the spectacle of no-holds-barred biographies, possibly including his own latter one on Katherine Mansfield, in which it is assumed that there is no longer any meaningful distinction to be drawn between public and private lives; and in which it is further assumed that anything a subject has left evidence of doing is a legitimate object for the voyeurism of biographers and readers.

One supposes that Alpers was mindful of the group of so-called 'Bloomsbury biographies', which more than any others challenged what had previously been the boundaries of acceptability and good taste: those on Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, Venessa Bell, John Maynard Keynes, Bertrand Russell, Ottoline Morrell, and others. He may also have been thinking of what is in the process of becoming a tradition of current American biography: not simply a frankness about subjects' private lives but a considerable degree of coarseness as well (and who, having read it, can forget Robert Caro's description of Lyndon Baines Johnson forcing his staff to talk with

him while he was defecating and inspecting his own ordure?).

Eighty years have elapsed since Lytton Strachey remarked that discretion was *not* the better part of biography. But what Strachey regarded as publishable indiscretion wilts like candy-floss before a bonfire in comparison with biographical texts of the late twentieth century. And so it is worth asking: are there or should there be ground rules for biographers in this area? Should any facts about a subject's life be regarded by the biographer as being beyond justifiable scrutiny? And, if so, should this be out of consideration for the biographee, the biographee's family and associates or readers?

In relation to readers, one is inescapably reminded of those warnings on television in which 'viewer discretion' – whatever that may be – 'is advised'. Should biographies carry similar warnings? I think not. In the relatively open societies that make up Western countries and their cultures in the late twentieth century we can – in this context at least – disregard the welfare of readers. They must be subject to the *caveat emptor* proviso that applies to all purchasable commodities. And if they expect to be damaged or unduly shocked by a biography they can snap it shut or choose not to open it.

Let me refer to the other parties in the equation, however – the biographer, and the biographee's family and friends – because they do, I believe, have rights which the ethical biographer ought to take into consideration.

Given that one of the major and

wholly legitimate aims of biography is to re-create the life of the subject, to assess such things as character, motivation and mannerism, and to set the subject in the context of his or her times, then almost everything known about a biographee's life that furthers these aims is justifiable grist to the biographer's mill – provided the subject is dead. Live subjects are in a different category and I shall refer to them separately.

A biographer writing about dead subjects decides to withhold or overlook evidence on two grounds.

One is where that evidence suggests behaviour so far out of character with other evidence that it is highly suspect. One informant insisted to me that Frank Sargeson had stolen jewellery from him. This was wholly at odds with other evidence, which showed consistently Sargeson's lack of interest in material possessions and his inclination to give away money or luxury items on the rare occasions he had them. Any doubts I may have had on the matter were dissolved when a member of the informant's family warned me that he was a liar, and cited other instances when that same person had invented anecdotes about other events which had never occurred. All biographers encounter such stories. They are not rejected on grounds of prejudice or taste, but as part of an informed evaluation made in the context of other evidence; as part of the biographer's conscientious pursuit of what actually occurred.

The other category of evidence that may be withheld is that relating

to sexual behaviour. Sex has the potential to pose problems for biographers when they ask of evidence: is this relevant? It is a problem because almost everybody is interested in sex and there is consequently a temptation to use all such material in the legitimate pursuit of an engaging narrative. It is also a problem because the relationship of sexuality to the rest of life is profound; but the process of measuring that relationship in individual lives, and ascribing cause and effect, is an exceedingly inexact science.

In the case of Sargeson, I made an early decision simply to treat his homosexuality the way I would have dealt with heterosexuality. And that judgment alone solved some potential problems of selectivity. I also adopted a useful maxim of David Marr, Patrick White's biographer, that the biographer has the right to go as far as the bedroom but not as far as the bed – in other words, to convey the nature of the biographee's sexuality and indicate who sexual partners were; but not to describe the mechanics of sexual acts. By chance, I *did* know what kind of sexual acts Sargeson liked and disliked. But I believed that this category of information was the business of Sargeson and his sexual partners, not that of the biographer or readers.

The analogy with heterosexuality is not *quite* the whole story, however. Because, clearly, being homosexual at a time when the society in which you live generally abhors homosexual acts, and dispatches the guardians of the law to snoop and pry in search of

evidence of such acts, and sends you to prison if you are caught committing them – all this made life perilous for active homosexuals and imposed stresses to which heterosexual people were not subject. It led Sargeson to refer to homosexuality, in conversation and in writing, in an oblique and allusive way; and that habit of obliqueness infiltrated other areas of his life

I had also to deal with the enduring and pervasive effects of his conviction in 1929 for indecent assault on a male – an episode which turned out to be crucial to an understanding of his decision to stay with his uncle on a King Country farm for eighteen months, and to change his name. In other words, sexuality affects far wider areas of life than the simple committing or the nature of sexual acts.

Next I come to the question of the biographee's surviving relatives and friends. In the past I have quoted with approval a maxim of Voltaire's: 'To the living one owes respect; to the dead one owes the truth'. It is true that nothing one says about the dead, true or false, positive or negative, can affect them; it is also true that the dead cannot take action for libel or defamation – and some less than scrupulous biographers have capitalised on this to invent allegations about their subject or to purvey rumours and half-truths as if they were verified or verifiable information. These are frequently the characteristics of unauthorised 'celebrity biographies'.

I should stress here, perhaps, that I take it as axiomatic that any biographer with aspirations to-

wards professionalism is in the business of seeking truth as it emerges from verifiable evidence and not that of inventing 'facts'. I also take it as axiomatic that the scholar has a duty – as far as possible – to tell the truth about the dead subject's character and motivations. Should that duty be in anyway limited or constrained by the first part of Voltaire's maxim, 'to the living one owes respect ...'? Are there facts about a biographee's life that might unjustifiably hurt or offend relatives or associates? And should information about such matters be withheld? My answer to both questions would have to be a qualified Yes, there might be ...

Frank Sargeson had no spouse or offspring, and that to some extent made discussion of his sexual life a more straightforward task than it might have been. Further, homosexuality had been decriminalised for a decade in New Zealand by the time I came to publish the biography. He did have two surviving siblings, sisters; but they had long since come to terms with the nature of their brother's love life.

Sargeson's partner Harry Doyle, on the other hand, had relations who were anything but relaxed about the relationship between the two men. I made strenuous efforts to contact them prior to publication of the book. Since they were almost all, by this time, female, and their surnames were no longer Doyle, it was a difficult task and one that I eventually abandoned. Soon after the biography appeared, however, I received a letter from a niece of Doyle. It was addressed to me and asked me to tell the Sargeson Trust

that if Harry Doyle's name was ever again mentioned publicly in connection with that of Frank Sargeson, 'there would be consequences'. The warning was underlined.

Their objection was that Doyle was revealed publicly as homosexual. Had I known of this feeling before publication, I would probably not have changed anything I said in the book. I had written about the Sargeson-Doyle relationship with care and, I hoped, sensitivity. But I felt I owed it to the Doyle family to do what I had done in the case of the Sargeson family: to prepare them for what was to appear in print; and to show them what I proposed to say so that I could give due consideration to any reservations or suggestions they had prior to publication. That would have been how I exercised 'respect for the living' in this instance.

In a climate in which homosexual acts were now decriminalised, however, and public attitudes towards them changed considerably since the time of Doyle's death in 1971, I would not have been prepared to exclude discussion of the fact that the Sargeson-Doyle relationship had been, among other things, homosexual. Besides, Sargeson himself had already made reference to the fact in print, albeit in oblique terms, in his autobiography; anybody with a degree of nous would have understood from that text that he was connected to Doyle sexually.

When I published a biography of the late Dame – indeed, the Great Dame – Whina Cooper in 1983, I

withheld information that would have been a source of embarrassment and distress to her had it been published in her lifetime. The higher you rise in public esteem, the further you have to fall if your *curriculum vitae* is found to contain evidence of less than creditable behaviour. And the Mother of the Nation did some highly questionable things long before she knew that she would come to be regarded as worthy of this title.

Three years after her death I would still withhold this information. Not out of concern for Whina, who is now subject to the judgment of a higher court, but out of continuing consideration for her family. The knowledge that the canvassing of certain episodes would cause *them* embarrassment and distress is sufficient to constrain me, because that constraint is how in this instance I exercise respect for the living.

There is more to the equation than this consideration alone, however. These same family members have assisted me, ransacked their recollections and their attics for information and documents, persuaded otherwise reluctant witnesses to talk to me, and offered me frequent and warm hospitality – which I have accepted. Some might say – indeed, *have* said in the case of Michael Bassett's biography of Gordon Coates – that acceptance of co-operation and hospitality of this kind compromises biographers, because their primary focus then moves from the pursuit of truth to the maintenance of good relations with informants. There is some truth to this allega-

tion. Acceptance of such assistance implies a trade-off: an assumption that biographers are unlikely to bite the hands that feed them by publishing information of a damaging character.

Alongside that factor, however, one should place two others. The first is that the biographer may have decided to withhold such information anyway, as part of the 'respect for the living' consideration. And the second is that the co-operation of family and associates enables biographers to locate and make use of a range of evidence that might not otherwise have been available to them, to speak with people who might have held their peace, and to have copyright clearance to quote extensively from the biographee's writings and make use of his or her photographs. A denial of these opportunities, particularly in a country the size of New Zealand, could mean that the range of material available to the biographer would be too thin to justify the writing of a book-length study.

Clearly, I am identifying and commending a trade-off in which the biographer gives away some rights; but in doing so gains access to materials and opportunities that enrich and enhance the resulting book.

Circumstances which may cause a writer to hesitate to publish evidence, at least in a primary biography written within decades of the subject's life, include instances (or the effects) of alcohol abuse, incest, illegitimacy, insanity and suicide. Anne Stevenson, one of several biographers of Sylvia Plath, wrote: 'Any biography of Sylvia

written during the lifetimes of her family and friends must take their vulnerability into consideration, even if completeness suffers as a result'. I agree. But I note also with concern that Stevenson was pilloried as a consequence of this scrupulousness and accused of having sold her integrity as a scholar in exchange for the regard of Ted Hughes, his sister and his children.

Almost every biographer at some time encounters instances of this kind that create dilemmas of this kind. Even to discuss them in anything like specific terms is to draw attention to the very factors one has agreed not to make public, out of consideration for the feelings, and possibly even the physical or mental health, of those affected. One can say no more – except to affirm that there are times when revelation of previously unknown circumstances can precipitate problems of a far more serious nature than a temporary gap in the historical record.

In the case of a biography of a living person the equation changes from that which applies to dead subjects: because the laws of defamation do apply; and because the biographee becomes one of those to whom the biographer owes respect in addition to truth (unless one is setting out to write a wholly debunking book).

The objects of biography in this instance do not change. With living subjects the biographer is still trying

to locate them in their social, cultural and historical contexts; one is still trying to indicate to readers what makes the biographee 'tick'; one is still trying to shed light on motivation and character, and to identify and evaluate achievement.



Frank Sargeson and Harry Doyle uncharacteristically dressed up, in Queen Street heading for the races, late 1930s. Photograph, Phyllis Glad.

But one is trying to accomplish these objectives within certain constraints. One aims at what publisher Christine Cole Catley has called 'compassionate truth': a presentation of evidence and conclusions that fulfil the major objectives of biography; but without the revelation of information that would involve the living subject in unwarranted embarrassment, loss of face, emotional or physical pain, or a nervous or psychiatric collapse.

Here too the biographer may enter into an implied or explicit

contract of the kind I mentioned before. In return for not revealing the sorts of things living subjects might regard as inappropriate in their lifetime – and the nature of these circumstances might well vary from subject to subject – in return

for that assurance, the biographer may be given access to a wide body of evidence that only the biographee can release; and, in most instances, permission to quote from the published or unpublished writings of the biographee, a huge advantage in the case of literary biography.

Although the biographer may feel at times restrained and restricted by such an arrangement, the compensations from a literary and scholarly viewpoint almost always outweigh the disadvantages. 'Compassionate truth' implies working from the record and following evidence to whatever conclusions it indicates; but having at the

same time regard for the sensibilities of living people, including the biographee, who may be characters in this narrative. And that consideration conditions *what* evidence is cited and *how* it is cited, and what conclusions are reached and how they are expressed.

The whole process is analogous to tightrope walking. But the resulting tension frequently tightens one's narrative and increases its vibrancy. And the additional balance that can result from communication and trust between

biographer and biographee can achieve worthwhile professional objectives.

Which is not to suggest that a biography of – say – Janet Frame published in the year 2000 would be the same as one published in 2050. It could not be. Even apart from the greater freedom to publish which inevitably follows the deaths of all protagonists, the questions asked and the themes selected by another biographer in another era would be different. In this sense, subjects deserving of biography never die: they go on growing and changing with the interests and perceptions of successive generations of readers. Hence, as Virginia Woolf said, biographies of major figures need to

be rewritten for each generation.

There is nevertheless much of value that *can* and *should* be said in the writing and publication of that initial ‘primary’ biography. Antony Alpers, speaking in a very different context from the one I quoted previously, and mindful of his *two* biographies of Katherine Mansfield, saw the business of biography as a continuous process rather than the sporadic publication of individual books: ‘That process may be spread over decades ... [and] leads to the emergence of an historical view of rather more than the subject alone; and this is merely set in motion by the book that I have called the primary biography. That book has

to be followed by books from later writers ...’.

Indeed. And it may also be the task of later writers to colonise the narrative and analytical spaces left vacant by the primary biographer. And in this manner ‘compassionate truth’ is, eventually, compatible with and complemented by the dispassionate and disinterested variety. ☞

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