

DEBATE AND REFLECTION

HOW TO WRITE JOURNALISM HISTORY

*On the occasion of honoring Dr. Margaret Blanchard, Professor, University of North Carolina, posthumously, with the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Eleanor Blum Distinguished Service Award, four former students delivered essays on the writing of journalism history. These four essays are reflections that help explain the importance and strategies of historical journalism research, by recognizing the unique talents of a highly gifted and influential scholar. Blanchard published *Exporting the First Amendment and Revolutionary Sparks*, nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in history. She edited the *Mass Media History Encyclopaedia*, named one of the 20 best reference books of the year by the New York Public Library. Her articles appeared in *The Supreme Court Review*, *William and Mary Law Review*, *Journalism Monographs*, *Journalism Quarterly* and others.*

IT'S PRIMARY

The importance of primary documents in conducting research

David A. Copeland

The following is a whale of a tale, but it is true. Most of us know the Jonah story—at least the crux of it. Jonah is swallowed by a giant fish. He stays there wandering about, hoping only to make his way out. Finally, Jonah is thrown up onto the shore. He is free; he has seen the light. Don't worry about the reason Jonah was there in the first place; worry only about the fact that Jonah learned his lesson.

Now flash forward. We're not in the gut of a giant fish. We're in the bowels of Davis Library on the University of North Carolina campus. There, in the basement of that repository of knowledge are thousands and thousands and thousands of pages of government documents. I have been sent there by Peggy Blanchard. I'm wandering around, lost, but I have been sent there for a purpose, though. Using a coding system that only the federal government could concoct, I am to find the original conversations conducted by public officials on matters relating to freedom of expression in the USA from the early 1950s through the 1980s. For nearly three years, I work at this task. When I finish, I have photocopied enough documents to fill several boxes. On one of the last times that I left Peggy's office in Howell Hall, I looked at those boxes stacked behind the door. I walked up to them. They were as tall as I was. Their purpose, according to Peggy, was to help her as she prepared to write another book with her mentor and friend John Semonche. (*One she never finished because she spent so much time working with me and students just like me.*) That, of course, is true, but there was another aim in my doing all of this leg work. Peggy was training me. To paraphrase actor John Houseman, for all of you old enough to remember the classic movie *The Paper Chase*, "You come in with a skull full of mush. You leave thinking like a scholar."

For Peggy Blanchard, the primary source was of paramount importance. I told her as I took a seminar in colonial American history that the texts all seemed wrong when talking about America's first newspapers. "What do the sources say?" she asked me, meaning, "Go to the primary documents and prove your point." That advice has guided me since

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then. It has affected my research, and it has affected my teaching. I send students to the primary sources in media history first and then have them read the secondary sources. Let the original enlighten you before you apply the interpretation.

The advice on primary sources was not lost on me. Even though still the apprentice, I began using primary documents as the pillar of everything, and I followed another Peggyism: you must read all that you can on the subject—primary and secondary—in order to write well-founded and well-reasoned pieces. I think all of Peggy's students still apply these lessons, and they are valuable. Let me give you an example from just last week.

I am working on a book, *The Idea of a Free Press: the enlightenment and its unruly legacy*, a topic, I am sure, Peggy would approve highly. In a secondary source, I found an interesting reference to something published in the *New-England Courant* on a specific date. Great quote, perfect for the point I was making. I decided to look at the paper to see exact capitalizations, punctuations, etc. (*Sidebar: Over the years, I have photocopied thousands of pages of papers so looking is not a problem. Add to that the Readex files of early American papers. You can find almost anything you need.*) Problem was, on the date cited in the book, the paper didn't run a copy of the 1721 treatise mentioned; it ran excerpts from the Magna Carta. Bummer? Well, yes, but England's founding governmental document had a more poignant and vital paragraph for my intention. The result: going to the primary source kept me from repeating an error, and it gave me a substantially stronger quote with which to make my point.

The significance of primary documents for our understanding of media, history and society has, consequently, shaped the direction of my research for the past six years. Realizing that the documents tell a story that allows each reader to make a connection with the time, the situation and the people of the era, I began work on documentary media histories. I started with what I knew best and the documents that I believe most people have the least access to and knowledge of—the papers of the colonial era. After having read nearly half of the 36,000 papers of the colonial period—*thanks, Peggy, for the glasses and never-ending material that uses f's as s' and has sentences that are paragraphs long*—I knew the content of America's first papers was much richer on issues and events than anything I had written previously or that most others had written. From the beginning, printers, essayists, and correspondents used papers to effect public opinion on any issue that was of importance to people. Using this premise and what I had read in papers and noted, I created a book titled *Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers*.

According to the publisher, the book was one of its most successful publications. This led me to propose a series based on the same principle, beginning the new books at the place I stopped—the Declaration of Independence—and continuing through World War I. The resulting series covers nearly all important issues in America from early in the 18th century through the early 1920s. Before you think that doing this kind of research and writing is easy, you need to realize that the author has to become a mini-expert on the subject of each chapter. You must do that first, so that you write an overview that is detailed, accurate, and helps readers understand the perspective of the times in which the press articles were created. Second, you must become well-rounded so that you can select the best articles to demonstrate the press' arguments on issues. This type of research also requires breadth. You cannot use one or two papers solely. Since you are covering a nation, your sources must come from all regions and all sizes of papers to represent accurately the people's ideas. This is where Peggy's advice of going to the sources is the baseline of your work. As we know from work with students, some primary sources are

easily accessible—the *New York Times*, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. While they are surely representative of the press at certain times in our history, they do not provide the complete picture. That is why, I believe, these documentary histories are so vital.

In doing the debating series and in spending five years researching and reading the papers of the French and Indian War period, I realized just how much war affects people and a country. “Your Country is in Danger,” a writer to the *Virginia Gazette* said in 1756. “I repeat, Your Country is in Danger.” The catastrophic events of 9/11 only confirmed this. An entire nation stopped what it was doing because of an act that the president said was one of war. To this end, I developed and proposed a series of books covering all major American wars from the French and Indian through the war in Iraq. The proposal called for 15 manuscripts, including two on the Civil War and World War II and one on the Indian wars of the 19th century. Such a massive undertaking required my contacting experts on media and the specific war. Here, again, my Peggy Blanchard training came into play. Peggy insisted that her students do research worthy of sharing. When you share, you receive criticism and direction. From the moment I began my studies with her, Peggy insisted I present at conferences. I’m here today as much because of that lesson as I am to honor her legacy. At conferences, you meet people with great expertise, so I used those contacts to find people to write the books.

The finished product includes eight volumes with two manuscripts per volume. It contains more than 4500 pages of primary documents, commentary, and images. The result is a source that gives people direct access to the information in the style, manner, and language of the time it was produced. As I explained in the series forward: these books offer readers a chance to experience war as those who lived through those conflicts did. Some of the wars are removed from us by centuries, and the language and images from them will, at times, seem odd to us. For the people of that time, the language conveyed powerful images. Other wars and conflicts will be chillingly familiar to readers because they still remember them. The imagery and language of those wars will evoke emotions and thoughts that may be similar, yet each will be unique. These volumes also demonstrate to us the power of media in our lives and the lives of those Americans who lived before us. Truly, as Walter Cronkite said, media reports are the first line of our history. And, as a *New York Times* correspondent said nearly a century and a half ago, they bring the events of war to our doorsteps, and, into our living rooms.

Because I believe in the power of the source, David Sloan and I are in the final stages of producing a media history text that teaches from the documents first and then from analysis.

My current project that is directly related to Peggy’s lessons on sources is one aimed at digitizing more than 1.5 million pages of 19th-century newspapers. As chief editor of this project by Thomson Gale Publishing, I have asked experts in areas of 19th-century history to work with me. In collaboration, we are selecting papers that will be digitized and placed online. Institutions may subscribe to the database, and the cost will be based on the type of institution, liberal arts colleges paying less than research one institutions. The newspapers from the collections of the Library of Congress, New York Public Library, Boston Public Library, Wisconsin Historical Society, and numbers of other collections will be a part of this database. Papers will continue to be added to the database over time. As with other digitization projects, this one seeks to enhance accessibility to the primary documents, not compete with other online collections. You will be able to search the database by subject, paper, date, and other keys.

All of the projects, as you can tell, are based in the primary documents of media. These projects, though not a comprehensive list of my research, are the ones that deal most specifically with what Peggy said to me years ago. "What do the sources say?" I'm still finding out, and, in many ways, I'm still wandering about in the belly of the whale because there is so much more that is waiting to be revealed. I'll bet Peggy's saying, "Now, you're thinking like a scholar!"

SAVOURING THE PEGGY BLANCHARD MOMENT

Frank E. Fee Jr.

It was a day or two before my first PhD classes at Carolina in 1995 and the question was, as Peggy Blanchard put it, "What are you going to be when you grow up?"

I was in my fifties at the time, some in my cohort were starting to retire, and here were the two of us trying to figure out what I would be when I grew up; which of an array of fascinating research areas would become my new life's work. As we talked about my interests, she lit up. "You could be a historian!"

Peggy Blanchard said it with equal parts ebullient enthusiasm and mock revelation, and a twinkle in her eye if ever there was one. Being a historian was nearly the perfect answer. Naturally I resisted.

My Puritan self could not accept doing what I really wanted to be doing, plus, having just left more than 30 years of daily newspapering, I did have a keen interest and felt a responsibility to work on current and developing newspaper issues. Besides, this charming favorite-aunt-like figure made history sound so easy and too much fun. Better strength through misery, and all that.

But Peggy was persistent, and over time brought me to what I wanted to be doing all along. And, well, I got the *easy* part flat out wrong but I *will* say it has been fun!

Never One-dimensional

Peggy had fun. She knew better than most that scholarship is hard work and she instilled the work ethic in her best students. But she knew how to have fun, too, and often demonstrated the value in historiography of a well-developed sense of the absurd—it helps you see the things that just don't go together. Peggy was never one-dimensional, and even now when her friends compare notes on Peggy, we learn things about her that we never knew. Besides, she was the only person I ever knew who could make Anthony Comstock seem like a good time.

Through all, however, we saw her zest for facts and relevant details. Sometimes they made for articles, sometimes meaty footnotes, but understanding their importance sharpened the eye for detail.

"Read Everything"

Details can only be found if you know what you're looking for and when it is you've found something. "You must read everything," she would admonish at the outset of a

project, large or small. The phrase was exact but not original; I found it highlighted in one of Peggy's books from her student days. But those four words did sum up nicely the value of thoroughness that Peggy exemplified and instilled in her best students. It is what British historian G. M. Young meant when he said we should read and read until we can "hear people talking" (quoted in Obelkevich, 1987, p. 43).

The concept for this panel is an interesting and important one. Peggy's good friend Dr. Ruth Walden and I have talked on a number of occasions about the need to recognize that someone's research productivity must include the scholarship of his or her students. In that, Peggy had a superb record, one that inspired those of us who came afterward. I remember hearing Peggy talk about David Copeland's dissertation work—the depth and precision that went into his study of colonial-era newspapers—and thinking, that's what I want to be.

In mining her experience with David for teachable virtues, Peggy demonstrated her enthusiasm for learning. Although not a quantitative researcher herself, she was fascinated that multitudes of historic facts could be tamed and managed by quantitative means, such as periodic sampling or constructed periods of time. The lesson was to be open not only to new ideas but to new ways of knowing.

Behind Every Discovery, New Questions

Historiography the Peggy Blanchard way means learning enormous amounts about untold numbers of things. At every turn in the trail or the tale, I find myself confronted with things I don't know, or don't know enough about. As Wilson Jeremiah Moses says—and I offer it as a warning—"Biographers are often forced to supply missing details in the lives of the saints" (Moses, 2004, pp. 29–30). When I have found that some of my secondary sources have taken liberties with the truth, or just misunderstood it, I often see behind the errors their inability to get to—or grasp—the primary sources or even to recognize what it is they could know with just a little more effort.

By design, Peggy's course pack in media history contained some exceptionally fine journal articles and some that were, well, thudders, and it was our job to evaluate them for the good and the bad. Thus, by the end of every class our bloodlust was high—much to the dismay of poor Dr. Jane Brown, who had us for theory right after Peggy's class. We were ready, willing and, so we thought, able to tear into any article or chapter. Tear we did with unsurpassed enthusiasm.

Simple Ingredients, Savory Results

From one perspective, a list on paper of the skills and attributes Peggy instilled in us doesn't seem all that remarkable. They were important, to be sure, but mostly good, solid scholarship: Thoroughness. Writing only what you know and can support. Not being blindsided by what you don't know or didn't ask about. Not falling into the trap of presentism when evaluating the past. Avoiding "what if" historiography. But as in any good morsel, the difference is how you blend the ingredients.

In last Sunday's *New York Times* Book Review section, the cover review is of two histories having to do with race and slavery. While generally approving of both, the reviewer does chide one of the authors for misreading "certain facts as evidence of . . . [the subject's] eccentricity when they were actually quite ordinary in the context of their time"

(Goodheart, 2005). Peggy would have jumped all over that in a student paper. You quickly learned not to open up a line of inquiry if you did not have the facts AND the context. And how she disliked presentism.

Although she was as keen as the next person for a straightforward historical narrative, the so-called “ripping yarn,” Peggy continually challenged us to think about what our findings meant, to get beyond the surface facts and make sure that our work was contextually accurate and thorough, not just a collection of interesting—to us—facts and anecdotes. You need look no farther than the work of David, Linda, and Mark to see careful, painstaking historiography of the Peggy Blanchard style. My friend Robin Gallagher was Peggy’s last doctoral student and, in fact, Peggy died just weeks after participating in Robin’s hooding at Carolina in 2004. Robin and I sometimes fantasize on that thoroughness run amok, as when a footnote that just incidentally mentions “New York” prompts us to launch into a full-blown treatise on the subject of New York. “Oh, New York, let me tell you about New York!” as Robin puts it.

Be Open to the Possibilities

As any of us does, Peggy had her likes and dislikes among different periods of American history, but it is doubtful that any of us would have known which ones were which as we embarked on our various projects. And through the tolerance she showed to any of her students’ interests, I’ve learned to be open to the possibilities myself. Recently, it occurred to me that without really knowing it I’d come to focus much of my work time on a period I’d never really cared for, the antebellum years. With the same wisdom as King George III when he wrote in his diary for July 4, 1776, “Nothing of importance happened today,” my interest had always sort of leaped from the knitting together of the republic in the 18th century to the moments when, with the Civil War, the Republic began to unravel in earnest. By applying some of Peggy’s interest in interesting questions and never minding whether the period itself caught my fancy, I now appreciate Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, for instance, and I know two definitions for Locofoco, and can tell you the difference between a Hunker and a Barnburner.

This forum gives Peggy Blanchard the recognition as a researcher that she so richly deserved, yet in a way it runs counter to her modest, self-effacing manner. Yes, she did like the rewards and yes, once or twice felt slighted at a lack of recognition along the way. But sometimes the spotlight could shine too brightly for Peggy’s tastes. Picking up on that, I’m always ready to tell about what I have found, but somehow talking about articles and papers seems to risk immodesty, calling attention to one’s self rather than the new things we now can add to an understanding of the past.

It is true, too, that one could pick up some of Peggy’s “bad” habits as well. She could never turn a student away, was always willing to listen and advise, and would read and comment copiously on manuscript drafts under the tightest of timetables, putting aside her own work for someone else’s. As I’ve tried to repay my debt by continuing in her footsteps, my admiration for her selflessness grows daily. Strict emulation of Peggy’s selflessness might not be a recipe for tenure, for instance. And of course, Peggy and I shared a fondness for brie-and-bacon sandwiches over which we discussed historiography, teaching, and the ways of the academy. That custom has now been visited on my advisee and research assistant, who has picked up on brie-and-bacon right well—the bad-food habit lives on.

The Peggy Blanchard Moment

Over the time I spent working with her, I came to recognize what I call The Peggy Blanchard Moment. Each of us has them. I'm not talking about those times when we wish Peggy were here to supply an answer and wonder what she would do in our places. Those certainly come often enough, but the true Peggy Blanchard Moment is that instant of insight when you know that *this* is what Peggy would do and that she would be proud of us for doing it. It's a moment of satisfaction, reassurance, and reaffirmation.

I had a Peggy Blanchard Moment this summer in a small village in Cambridgeshire, England, when it occurred to me that I had a sudden, desperate need to know local burial customs for non-conformists (i.e., Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, etc.) in the late 19th century. Only then could I explain—probably in no more than one of those rich footnotes Peggy relished and encouraged—why the subject of a biography I hope to write lies buried in the same grave as her stepdaughter, who died eight years earlier, the two of them as close in death as I hope they were in life. And under a single headstone that names only the stepdaughter. Hmmm, Peggy loved a mystery but she loved good explanations, too. I'm still looking, but hey, let me tell you about the Church of England's rules on double graves in the 19th century?

The Peggy Blanchard Moment comes when you're about to be a little more thorough, a little more complete, and when, because of that thoroughness, you discover that you now know more than some of the established "experts" in your field. Ah, the importance of primary sources.

The Peggy Blanchard Moment gives you the confidence to wade into the arena in which EVERYONE else has had something to say or one in which NOBODY has trod—both pretty scary at times.

They're the moments when you just have to tell somebody what you have been up to, what you have found—and you just wish it could be Peggy you're telling it to.

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THE JOURNALISTIC BIOGRAPHY: METHODOLOGY, ANALYSIS AND WRITING

Mark Feldstein

*Four years ago, I approached Peggy Blanchard about putting together a paper about journalistic biography. She was intrigued but also reluctant; although an accomplished historian—Oxford University Press had published her pathbreaking work *Revolutionary Sparks* and nominated it for the Pulitzer Prize—her instinctive modesty made her hesitant to take on a subject in which she had no previous expertise. But her intrinsic*

desire to nurture budding young scholars like myself outweighed her concerns and she soon agreed to the project. Here is part of what I learned along the way about biographical methodology and analysis. My only regret is that Peggy is no longer alive now to see the fruits of her mentoring.

**Bi-og-ra-phy n. A written account of a person's life
A life history, derived from ancient Greek: *bio* = life + *graphia* = history**

Biography is one of civilization's oldest forms of recorded history. Five thousand years ago, the first known biographies described the lives of the Pharaohs in ancient Egypt. By modern standards, these earliest biographies were really hagiographies; their purpose was to preserve not history but power by documenting dynastic legitimacy. Medieval biographies had a more religious motive: to celebrate the glory of God by describing the virtues of saints. Later biographies—like those of British writers Samuel Johnson and James Boswell in the 18th century or Thomas Carlyle in the 19th—were secular but similarly written to instruct and inspire. As Carlyle put it: "The history of mankind is the history of its great men: to find out these, clean the dirt from them, and place them on their proper pedestals."¹

The "Great Man" school of biography—and they were indeed almost always "great" *men*—continued well into the 20th century. "These monumental tributes were almost always respectful, if not reverential," biographer Jean Strouse wrote.

They told about the "good reasons" and didn't fool around with questions of motivation or conflict. They took people's word for it, whatever "it" might be, and did not venture into interpretive waters. Most of these writers simply ignored disturbing facts that didn't fit in with their notions of decorum. (1986, p. 170)

The problem with the "Great Man" biography was not just that it approached hagiography; it also oversimplified the past, ignoring the importance of larger social, economic, and political forces that usually shaped history more forcefully than any single individual. "History regarded biography as trivial or, in kinder moments, fragmentary," noted one writer.

The historian surveys the great scene. He deals with church and state, with the mighty issues of war and peace, with the growth of constitutions and the fall of kingdoms. The biographer contents himself with a single individual and the slight thread of happenings that form his life. (Kendall, 1986, p. 32)²

Nonetheless, by the end of the 20th century, biography had become the most popular form of reading in the USA. "For one thing," explained writer Stephen B. Oates, "it personalizes events, demonstrates that the individual does count—which is reassuring to people in our complex, technical age, who often feel caught up in vast impersonal forces beyond their control." Biographer Nancy Milford offered another explanation: "[P]eople are naturally curious about lives. What we really want to know is, 'How do I live?' So to read about other people's lives is a sort of guide" (Oates, 1986, pp. ix–x).

In general, scholars have differentiated between two fundamental types of biography:³

First, are so-called critical or scholarly or "Augustan" biographies that focus not on the person as a whole but on a key part of the subject's life, usually his or her work. Here,

the individual is used largely as a case study to illustrate a larger theme. Often, this kind of biography is really an “and” biography that concentrates on the relationship between the protagonist and a particular topic, institution, or individual. This type of biography is frequently academic in nature and “inclines toward the archival, the archeological” (Backscheider, 1999, pp. xvii–xix). The critical biography views “the life in the works” of the subject, often with a view that “the work is the life” (Lomask, 1986, pp. 2–3). This type of biographer, commented writer Stephen B. Oates:

analyzes his subject with appropriate detachment and skepticism, comparing his subject with similar lives in other eras, offering judgments about significance and consequence . . . The action here is almost entirely intellectual; our minds are engaged, not our hearts; our focus is on the author, not the subject . . . The narrative voice is dry and detached, the prose informative—and utterly lifeless. We read the scholarly chronicle to gain information about its subject, not to be swept up in a powerful story. (Oates, 1986, p. x)

The second kind of biography, in contrast, sweeps the reader up in just such a powerful story, covering the subject “from cradle to grave, though not necessarily in that order.” This type of biography has variously been labeled pure, narrative, life, or “Romantic” biography. The narrative biography “celebrates the member rather than the species, investigates the particular case” (Edel, 1984, p. 14). Instead of using the individual as a case study to illustrate a larger theme, the narrative biographer’s “approach is exactly the reverse, searching the work for clues to the life” (Lomask, 1986, p. 2). Here, the protagonist is selected not for typicality but for uniqueness. “Few ordinary lives are written,” one scholar observed. “One supposes that readers do not want to read about the ordinary but the extraordinary” (Pachter, 1979, pp. 6, 64). Oates, a practitioner of this biographical form, argued that this biographical genre:

lets his subject have the whole stage, with just enough historical backdrop for us to understand the subject in proper context . . . By telling a story, the pure biographer hopes to engage our hearts as well as our minds. [This type of] biography humanizes history; it helps us live through the times ourselves. But we have also witnessed another’s long journey through the vicissitudes of life. We have seen how somebody in another age suffered personal dilemmas like our own—identify crises, ambivalences, hurts, setbacks, even a loss of will—which he anguished over and tried to work his way through. We have felt the subject’s struggle, his failures, his triumphs and glories, as though they were our own. We close the book feeling uplifted, for our emotions and our minds have both been edified. (Oates, 1986, pp. x–xi)

To be sure, the differences between these two forms of biography are not always clear-cut. Barbara Tuchman, one of America’s most acclaimed biographers, has combined the two approaches by using her protagonist to explain the role of larger historical forces:

In so far as I have used biography in my work, it has been less for the sake of the individual subject than as a vehicle for exhibiting an age . . . to encapsulate history . . . [B]iography is useful because it encompasses the universal in the particular. It is a focus that allows both the writer to narrow his field to manageable dimensions and the reader to more easily comprehend the subject. (1979, pp. 133–4)

In both types of biographies, as in other forms of historical research, serious writers ask similar sets of questions:

- First, how worthy is the subject for a biography? How significant and interesting is the person's life and work? Why does any of it matter? How has the protagonist or his or her work shaped the world in which we live?
- Second, can a biography shed new or original light on the topic? How does it fit into existing scholarship? How would people use a new biography? Would it endure over time?
- Third, is a biography practical? How accessible are archives, interviews, or other essential materials? Does the author have the skills and knowledge to research and write it? How long will the project take and how much will it cost?
- Finally, is there a market for such a biography? Who is the audience? Will the book attract reviews or bring the publisher prestige? (Backsheider, 1999, pp. 37–8).

Methodology

Biography uses the traditional research methods of historical scholarship. The biographer's information can come from several basic kinds of sources. Most common is the written word: books, articles, manuscripts (including dissertations, theses, and papers), letters, diaries, memos, reports, notes, calendars, appointment books, websites, email. Second, the spoken word: interviews by the author, oral history archives, radio and television broadcasts, musical tapes, records, CDs. Third, graphics or artwork: photographs, videotape, films, paintings, illustrations, maps, sculpture, models, coins, medals. Fourth, personal observation, often during site visits to locations that were prominent in the subject's life. And finally, artifacts: archeological findings or possessions of the protagonist (Lomask, 1986, p. 30).⁴

Methodical excavation of information is crucial to biography. "Finding a single fact can take an hour, a month, years, or elude the seeker forever," one scholar of biography observed. "One of the peculiarities about writing biography is that only about 20 per cent of the time taken to 'write' it is spent writing. The rest is spent collecting evidence, organizing and filing it" (Backscheider, 1999, pp. xvi, 62). For that reason, said Steve Weinberg, investigative reporters make particularly good biographers because they are trained in digging out information. Weinberg, who is himself a muckraker-turned-biographer, cited award-winning works by journalist-biographers Taylor Branch, Seymour Hersh, and Neil Sheehan as examples:

good biographers go the extra mile to check out everything, never settling for secondary data when additional effort might uncover primary data. (Weinberg, 1992, p. 30)

Analysis

But what is to be done with all the data once it is collected? The biographer must carefully sift through the evidence, analyzing and synthesizing the information; after all, even the most voluminous data with the most rigorous methodology ultimately must be digested. "Biography, of all the literary genres, might seem to be the one least in need of explanation, analysis, and justification," wrote Catherine Parke.

For biography, after all, tells the stories of our lives . . . We are born, live, and die in a world where event follows event. Biography narrates life, plotting the circle of existence from birth to death. As the secretary to our existence, biography might seem to have a self-evident poetics. (Parke, 1996, p. xiii)

But it is not quite so simple. “Research,” pointed out William Zinsser, “. . . is only research. After all the facts have been marshaled, all the documents studied, all the locales visited, all the survivors interviewed, what then? What do the facts add up to? What did the life mean?” (1986, pp. 17–8).

Beyond this most central of questions lie many others: How and why did the subject do what he or she did? How did the protagonist’s private life affect the public one? How did childhood shape the adult life? How, in turn, did the subject’s life affect others? What is the historical context in which all of this took place? How did this historical context mold the protagonist? Even a single piece of evidence—a letter, for example—is subject to similar questioning: What does it state directly? What does it imply? How does its version of reality compare with what others said at the time? With later descriptions? What other sources shed light on the matter? (Lomask, 1986, pp. 32–4; Parke, 1996, p. xiv).

Many of these questions may be unanswerable; writings may be scarce, witnesses long dead. “Every life leaves gaps in the public record,” biographer Steve Weinberg explained. “Gaps can lead a biographer to overemphasize periods for which there is ample documentation and underplay important periods for which the documentation is sparse.” For this reason, Weinberg wrote, available evidence must be carefully weighed and evaluated:

Gaps or incomplete information can tempt biographers to rely on newspaper clippings, hearsay, and autobiographical writings without subjecting them to rigorous examination. A good biographer will tell readers that secret, specifying the possible over-emphases and unreliable evidence: newspaper clippings frequently are factually incorrect; hearsay might be motivated by spite and fraught with ignorance; autobiographies are often more significant for what they omit than what they include. (Weinberg, 1992, pp. 28, 30)

Disclosure is essential when evidence is missing or weak or contradictory. “Be honest,” warned biographer David McCullough. “Take the reader into your confidence. If you don’t really know something, if you’re hypothesizing, be honest about it. Say so” (McCullough, 1986, p. 57; see also Weinberg, 1992, p. 28).

Yet even with many 20th-century subjects, when documentation is abundant, truth can still be elusive. “[T]he sheer weight of evidence now available to the biographer does not necessarily make a successful biography,” one scholar observed, “but may even handicap that achievement” (Edel, 1984, pp. 28–9, 98). Too much material can overwhelm a biographer, who must put it all in order and extract a coherent story. Not only that, “a biographer must analyze his materials to discover certain keys to the deeper truths of his subject . . . to understand man’s ways of dreaming, thinking and using his fancy . . . to see through the rationalizations, the postures, the self-delusions and self-deceptions” of the protagonist (Gettings, 1978, p. 68). After all, argued *Washington Post* book critic Jonathan Yardley, biography may be “among literature’s most interesting and appealing endeavors but [it is] also among its most elusive. We can know the facts about another person’s life, but we can only guess about the person within” (Yardley, 2004, p. 2). This does not mean amateur psychoanalysis, but it does require a thorough mastery—almost a visceral understanding—of the subject.

At the same, it may require self-examination by the biographer as well. “It is familiar folklore that biographers have an ‘affinity’ for their subjects, may have long ‘identified’ to some extent with them, and ‘like’ them,” one practitioner found. “It is not uncommon for people to remark on the similarities between a biographer and the subject and to believe

that the biographer at some level recognized the affinity and was influenced by it." One scholar warned of psychological "transference," pointing out that "biographers must struggle constantly not to be taken over by their subjects, or to fall in love with them" (Backscheider, 1999, pp. 33, 35, 41). The danger, said another, is that biographers may resist "discovering unpleasant truths [or admit] what their secret selves are up to in shaping the materials" (Edel, 1984, pp. 29, 67). This is particularly true when the biographer is a friend or relative of the subject.

Although such a special relationship may give the biographer "a unique intimacy" that ordinary biographers "can never match," said Barbara Tuchman, "the historian—whether or not the biographer—needs distance" (Tuchman, 1979, pp. 142–3). Otherwise, argued writer Jimmy Breslin (also in Tuchman, 1979), biographers may "project themselves onto their subjects, [and] write their autobiographies in the form of biographies".

At the opposite extreme, some biographers may grow not too fond of their subjects but too critical of them. Oscar Wilde famously commented that while every person may have disciples, "it is usually Judas who writes the biography" (Backscheider, 1999, p. xv). Robert Caro was no Judas—he won the Pulitzer Prize for his scathing form of biography—but he was also accused of "reducing a complex person [Lyndon Johnson] to a caricature . . . imputing motives for that person's actions that overreach the available evidence, [and] relying too heavily on biased sources" (Weinberg, 1992, p. 42, *passim*). Similar criticisms have accompanied other biographies, especially those written by investigative reporters. In an era obsessed with celebrities, when biography has also become a form of popular entertainment, biography has often descended into what writer Joyce Carol Oates dubbed "pathography," the demonizing of its subjects. Paradoxically, even biographies that dig up dirt on their protagonists serve to reinforce the "Great Man" worldview, focusing on (often overblown) individual idiosyncrasies at the expense of larger historical forces (Pachter, 1979, p. 11; Parke, 1996, pp. xxv, 27–8).⁵

Biography faces other challenges as well. "Part of the complexity biographers must recognize," noted Steve Weinberg

is that human beings are not static. That is true for the protagonist, and also for the supporting cast. In the best biographies, the people who surround the main subject evolve as he or she evolves; they change over time, and thus affect the actions of the protagonist. A biographer must try to understand all the characters in the play, not just the leading role. Complexity is the watchword. (1992, p. 27)

Yet even the most complex and nuanced biographies may never be able to arrive at one definitive truth. For example, Theodore Rosengarten's classic work, *All God's Dangers*, was drawn from the reminiscences of an elderly black sharecropper. Rosengarten listened to his subject:

tell a particular story five or six times to different people. He would vary a mood, add or omit a detail, shift himself from foreground to background, to produce the effect he wanted. He had one version for his family, one for the neighbors, one for traveling salesmen, and one for me—and they were all the same story, each told with the personality of the listener in mind. (1979, p. 117)

But which one was true? Even the subject himself may not know for sure, as Doris Kearns Goodwin discovered over time listening to Lyndon Johnson's shifting versions of

reality: "the biographer finds that the past is not simply the past, but a prism through which the subject filters his own changing self-image."⁶

In the end, truth may be more a goal than a destination for the biographer. As one scholar wrote, "at best, biography is only a plausible, inevitably idiosyncratic surmise and reconstruction, severely limited by historical materials that are loaded with duplicities and evasions" (Rosengarten, 1979, p. 117).⁷ Like history itself, biography is intrinsically inexact, unknowable in all its detail, "the preserved part of the recorded part of the remembered part of what happened."

Writing

How, then, to write the biography? This is no easy task, either. "A well-written life is almost as rare as a well spent one," said that booster of "Great Men," Thomas Carlyle (Weinberg, 1992, p. 154). Another writer joked that "[t]here are three rules for writing biography, but unfortunately, no one knows what they are" (Backsheider, 1999, p. 163). Partly, of course, it depends on the genre: a critical biography will usually be more academic in style, using the subject to illustrate a larger theme. A narrative biography will be more focused on the protagonist and will use more vivid writing.

Bad biographical writing is often easy to spot. "Unhappily," observed Barbara Tuchman:

biography has lately been overtaken by a school that has abandoned the selective in favor of the all-inclusive . . . We are presented with the subject's life reconstructed day by day from birth to death, including every new dress or pair of pants, every juvenile poem, every journey, every letter, every loan, every accepted or rejected invitation, every telephone message, every drink at every bar. The result is one of those thousand-page heavies in which all the hard work has been left to the reader. (Tuchman, 1986, p. 145)⁸

Good biography comes in many versions, and different biographers emphasize different approaches. For Jean Strouse (1986, p. 168), "the single most important element in biography [is] the delineation of character . . . [I]n biography, character isn't everything—it's the only thing." For David McCullough, the central goal is "to bring people and events and other times back to life" (1986, p. 40; see also Weinberg, 1992, pp. 19–20). For Milton Lomask, what biography needs most is some overarching (usually dramatic) purpose:

Like a short story or a novel, a biography needs a central tension around which the material you assemble can be organized so as to leave in the mind of the reader some dominant impression or statement, some major theme with which the subsidiary themes resonate, to which they contribute even as small streams contribute to the making of a river. (1986, pp. 1–2, 37–71)

In classic literary fashion, this central tension can pit the subject against another person, against nature, or against himself (or herself). Lomask advocated using literary devices like foreshadowing, flashbacks, and scene-setting to heighten dramatic tension.⁹

Heightening dramatic tension was just one of the reasons that Barbara Tuchman gave for telling a biography chronologically:

It also has inherent validity: it is the spine of history and the key to causation. Events do not happen in categories—economic, intellectual, military—they happen in sequence. When they are arranged in sequence as strictly as possible down to month, week, and even day, cause and effect that may have been previously obscure, will often become clear, like secret ink. (1979, p. 144)

Stephen Oates said that biographers should not be afraid to imitate fiction “as a narrative art . . . to evoke and dramatize a life through novelistic techniques but not invention itself . . . [using] painstaking research . . . [to] add up to a fascinating portrait of biography as a form of art” (1986, p. xi). Oates advocates making the subject “come alive through graphic scenes, telling quotations, apt details, character development, interpersonal relationships, intellectual and emotional struggle, and dramatic narrative sweep” (1986, p. x). Leon Edel compared biography to an artist’s canvass: “Both portrait painters and biographers are permitted [a] few liberties. The demand is for a studied likeness, no prettying up, no retouchings, softenings or hardenings, no pastiche. The artistic statement is most powerful when it is asserted with clarity, lucidity and no vestige of ambiguity” (Edel, cited in Weinberg, 1992, p. 45).

The danger in all of this, of course, is that fictional devices may interfere with historical accuracy, that truth will be sacrificed for drama just as it was for hagiography or pathography. Yet biography need not be so crudely executed. “Good biographers,” pointed out Jean Strouse, “combine the arts of the novelist, the detective work of the historian and the insights of the psychologist” (1986, p. 164).

The Journalistic Biography

Biographies of journalists face special challenges. One is drowning in a sea of verbiage. Even more than most writers, journalists often leave behind voluminous amounts of written materials. For example, investigative reporter Jack Anderson, the subject of my own forthcoming biography, authored 18 books and more than 100,000 syndicated columns during his 50-year career, as well as innumerable radio and television broadcasts, newsletters, speeches, memos, and letters; along with thousands of articles and government documents about the columnist, they fill more than 400 cubic feet of library space.

But quantity should not be confused with quality nor words with deeds. Journalistic articles or broadcasts can be highly perishable products, important and immediate at the time but irrelevant with historical hindsight. Muckraker Anderson’s life, for example, proves far more interesting in retrospect than his columns. Other writers had the opposite problem. “Mark Twain is one of those authors who is, invariably, more interesting to read than read about,” noted fellow writer Larry McMurtry (2004, p. 29).

All too often, writers are less interesting than the subject they profile. “Journalists often create a great stir as they pass through life,” one journalistic biographer wisely observed, “but nobody bothers much about them after they are gone” (Pilat, 1973, p. 1). The same might be said of journalistic biographies as a whole, and for similar reasons: for the most part, individual journalists tend to reflect the world rather than affect it; their glory is largely derivative, the mirrored reflection of much larger events, issues, historical forces, and personalities that for the most part they merely witnessed and chronicled.

Ultimately, then, journalistic biographers, like all other biographers, must recognize the limits of their individual subjects and place them in proper historical perspective; for in

the end, the journalistic biography is governed by same rules of rigorous research and scholarly analysis that apply to all other forms of history—including an inevitable reliance on the essential honesty and integrity of the scholar who writes the final word.

NOTES

1. Despite the crudeness of Carlyle's conception, the "Great Man" biographies at least acknowledged that individuals were not wholly at the mercy of God, unlike medieval biographies. As one writer put it, "[t]he belief that man could control events was a wedge of secular optimism thrust between the traditional view of the divine role in history, and our own sense of the impersonality of society" (Pachter, 1979, p. 11).
2. At the opposite extreme from biographers are determinists who seem to believe that one individual can have no real impact on history. For a levelheaded analysis of this back and forth debate in media history, see Nord (1984).
3. See Edel, 1984, p. 176; Pachter, 1979, p. 3; Parke, 1996, p. 29. Besides these two archetypes, other biographical genres do exist: commercially popular "quickie" biographies of celebrities; first-person accounts by friends or relatives of the famous; lengthy essays that attempt to psychoanalyze the subject; and anthologies that combine mini-biographies of many people with a common theme. However, in terms of serious historiography, the critical and narrative genres are the two real archetypes.
4. Another writer, perhaps in search of junkets, argued that the "biographer needs to know the significant houses, gardens, even rooms, the vacation spots, major trips, and favourite restaurants, front porches, and friends' entertainment spaces" (Backsheider, 1999, p. 72).
5. Lytton Strachey, who profiled prominent figures in Victorian England, is generally credited with developing the modern form of biography that allows for criticism as well as praise. But it took more recent sensationalist biographers like Kitty Kelly to pave the way for genuine "pathography".
6. Goodwin then went by her maiden name (Goodwin, 1979, p. 101).
7. Another writer explained it differently: "Only a small part of what happened in the past was ever observed . . . And only a part of what was observed in the past was remembered by those who observed it; only a part of what was remembered was recorded; only a part of what was recorded has survived; only a part of what has survived has come to historians' attention; only a part of what has come to their attention is credible; only a part of what is credible has been grasped; and only a part of what has been grasped can be expounded or narrated by the historian" (Louis Gottchalk, *Understanding History*, cited in Ritchie, 1995, p. ix).
8. Pointing out that "biography is not an engagement book," Leon Edel listed some of the worst biographical offenses: "A tendency to bog down in trivia. No distinction is made between what is primary and what is secondary [importance] . . . A tendency to adhere rigidly to chronology instead of shuttling back and forth within the materials whenever warranted" (Edel, 1984, pp. 102–4).
9. Other practical suggestions advocated by Lomask and other writers: minimizing the narrator's voice by leading the reader to a conclusion, showing rather than telling; writing during the research, in piecemeal fashion, rather than leaving all the writing for the end of the project; and limiting chapter length to 6200 words (approximately 25 pages double-spaced) (Lomask, 1979, pp. 27, 52).

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HOW PEGGY TAUGHT ME TO WRITE A BOOK

Linda J. Lumsden

For the last few years of her life, every time I saw Professor Margaret Blanchard she asked, "So how is the most beautiful-est suffragist?" She meant Inez Milholland, the glamorous suffrage martyr. Peggy directed my dissertation about how suffragists used the

right of assembly to win the vote. She and I puzzled over this Milholland, who seemed to be at the head of every suffrage parade. With the foresight that marks a fine scholar, Professor Blanchard suggested that I start a folder on Milholland. The folder grew fat and I filled more. Years passed. I graduated, got a job in Kentucky. Whenever I saw her in Chapel Hill or at conferences or, for what I didn't realize would be the last time we met, at her 60th birthday party, she wanted to know what was new with Inez.

Peggy's enthusiasm for her students' work was one quality that made Peggy a wonderful teacher. She sat beaming at me from the tiny audience at conference panels on which I presented papers on Inez, for example, long after I graduated and even though she hadn't been involved with their research. Another valued quality was her empathy; when no publishers pounced on my Inez manuscript, she counseled faith and patience. So, as last year's AEJMC convention approached, I could hardly wait to show Peggy my hot-off-the-press biography of Inez. When I got news she died, I was crushed. No one's opinion mattered more to me. I had really wanted to hear Peggy Blanchard tell me, "Congratulations—I think it's good."

I've had precious few mentors in my life. Peggy Blanchard was the most important. A lot of her later students called her "Ma Blanchard," a play off her e-mail address, but I have to admit that in the early 1990s we students did not share the familial relationship she later did with students. She was all business—a no-nonsense scholar—which was great.

I'll give you a few examples. How many of you tackled the Emery and Emery surveys of journalism history? You're nodding and smiling because these tomes are like bibliobowling balls. Professor Blanchard announced the first day of her history class that we would read the first half during week one and finish it the next week. Then, we'd get down to seriously studying press history. She taught us that scholars read—a lot. When I signed up for an independent study class with her, it took me a week to stop by her narrow second-floor office in the old journalism building. "Where have you been?" she asked, then delivered a short lecture of the responsibilities of independent study. Believe me, every Monday after I knocked on her door promptly at 1 p.m. with something to show her. She taught this old newspaper reporter that scholars meet deadlines, too.

The focus of all of her graduate classes was that we each produce a paper worth presenting, or even better, publishing. That was a great lesson for me, as I guess it was for all her students. The academic life was not about navel gazing but about producing something tangible. Scholars were carpenters who instead of nails hammered footnotes. Seek a subject no one has written about before, she advised. Or find a new frame for analyzing old ideas. Look here for that document. Look there for another. She was a font of practical advice.

Another practical lesson from Peggy was on the importance of footnotes, something journalists tend to scoff at. Hers were meticulous. When I graduated, she presented me with a *Chicago Manual of Style*. Now notes are the first part of a book that I turn to.

My main goal in going to graduate school was to learn how to write a book. Professor Blanchard—and that's who she was to me until I earned my PhD—holds UNC's record for the number of mass communication students whose dissertations are published as books. She was the perfect person to guide my dissertation on suffragists taking to the streets because she loved the unusual, multi-faceted questions that arose out of inquiry into the often-overlooked right of assembly. Peggy painstakingly read each chapter. She made comments, suggestions—and criticisms. Always, it could be better. "Unclear" she'd scribble after a conclusion I had sweated blood over. I learned that the cryptic "TR" meant

a transition sucked. She once underlined in big letters “purple prose” below a glob of candy cotton I believed passed as scholarship.

My favorite Peggy Blanchard story exemplifies her demand for quality and how she pushed students to do their best work. I handed in a plodding chapter about suffrage parades. I was so caught up in their spectacle that I churned out page after page describing the floats, the banners, the costumes, the tubas. I thought it masterful. When Professor Blanchard returned the chapter, she wrote on it something like: “If all you do is keep listing every little detail about every parade you will never have a book. Synthesize. Organize. Analyze.” That smarted but I revised—again and again, another important lesson. Her emphasis on analysis was a key lesson in historical scholarship for a journalist like me trained to simply state the facts. She turned me into a historian. The punch line to this story is that my dissertation did become a book, *Rampant Women: Suffragists and the right of assembly*.

The Blanchard effect has filtered through me to students at Western Kentucky University. Professors at my school are very nurturing, very encouraging, wonderful teachers. I’m the least nice. Last year I helped direct the honors thesis of a senior from Beaver Dam, Ky, first in his family to attend college. Sam grew up watching pro wrestling and dreamed of studying the cultural significance of media and pro wrestling at some big-name graduate school in the East. Sam can spout statistics on every wrestler since Gorgeous George and name acronyms for every wrestling conference from the AWC to the WWF. He turned in a thesis chapter listing them all.

I wrestled with how to respond, worried I’d quash the dreams of Beaver Dam’s favorite son. Then . . . in the aura cast by my titanium Apple G4, an apparition appeared. The snowy-haired ghost was small, round, bespectacled. A fluffy little dog hovered at her heels . . . I knew what to tell Sam: “If ALL you do is keep on listing every little detail about every wrestling match ever staged . . . you will never get into graduate school.” Sam starts next week in MIT’s graduate program in media studies, working with the nation’s top wrestling scholar.

I hope I will be as dedicated and positive an influence on students as Margaret Blanchard was on me. I know I can never be as accomplished a scholar. You all know her contributions to journalism history and the history of the First Amendment. *Revolutionary Sparks*, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, showed her commitment not only to exhaustive research but also to freedom of expression. In these troubled times, I think we doubly recognize the fragility of that freedom. Behind Peggy Blanchard’s quiet demeanor dwelled a radical.

Let me conclude briefly with a description of my current research because it remains tied to lessons Peggy taught me and I hope will be my next book. Almost at random, since Inez I’ve researched women journalists in every decade from 1900 through the 1950s. I did a paper on women World War I reporters, an article on women journalists in the 1920s and 1930s, read the papers of one of them, Irene Corbally Kuhn, whom I wrote up for the new edition of *Notable American Women*. On my sabbatical in 2003, I went up to the Schlesinger Library to read the papers of Associated Press reporter Ruth Cowan, another pioneering member of the post-suffrage journalists. Last year I did a paper here analyzing Cowan’s paradoxical pursuit of the “woman’s angle” in World War II, and I will present a paper at the AJHA convention here in October that traces the complexities of Cowan’s career as the AP’s “woman’s reporter” in Washington, D.C. in the conformist 1950s. Most recently I read the papers of Ethel Payne, perhaps the most prominent woman among the

black press from 1950 through the 1980s. It's gradually hit me that the woman's angle embodies the debate about essentialism that some scholars say was the biggest conundrum of 20th-century feminism: beyond biology, are women and men essentially different? If you treat them the same, women risk becoming invisible in a male-dominated culture. If you treat them differently, women remain captive to restrictive negative stereotypes.

My research about all of these individuals has evolved into a larger project to use the woman's angle as a prism for a feminist history of women in journalism. The next step is to explore how women journalists during the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s debated the meaning and value of the woman's angle, women's pages, and the essentialist notion of "feminist journalism." Indiana University Press, which published Inez, has expressed interest, but I am still stumbling on how all of this fits together. I appreciate any suggestions!

I wish Professor Blanchard were still around so I could ask her. I thank her for introducing me to the joys of scholarship. Besides being a professional role model, Peggy also served as a personal role model in her courtesy, integrity, and the independent way she charted her life as a single woman. Thank you, Elizabeth and other members of the Blum Award committee, for reuniting me with Ma Blanchard's family on this panel of scholars. For one thing, it fulfils my Oscars fantasy of delivering a speech in which I can say, "It's truly an honour just to be alongside these hugely gifted and accomplished members of my profession." More importantly, it lets me share the important ways in which Peggy Blanchard shaped my life. Thank you all very much.