



WHAT'S NEXT?



History, Historians, and Autobiography Revisited

By Jeremy D. Popkin

ABSTRACT

By the last years of the twentieth century, autobiographical memoirs by professional historians had become relatively common, reflecting the aging of a generation whose lives had been shaped by the dramatic events of that era. Since 2000, however, such publications seem to have become less common. The changing nature of the historical profession may be one reason for this; another is the changing nature of life-writing itself.

In 2005, I published a volume, *History, Historians, and Autobiography*, on the relations between my academic discipline of history and the genre of autobiography. Part of the book discussed theoretical questions arising from comparisons between these two different ways of narrating the past—one supposedly objective, dealing with collective experience and not limited to events experienced by its author, the other subjective and focused on the individual experiences of the writer. The bulk of the book, however, dealt with autobiographical texts written by professional historians. I noted that such enterprises had important historical precedents, particularly the two examples that had been canonized as literary classics: Edward Gibbon's *Memoirs* and Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams*. I also reported that attempts to emulate Gibbon and Adams had remained rare until the late twentieth century. I observed a marked increase in such enterprises starting in the late 1960s, however, and the curve seemed to rise steadily until 2003, the date when I finished my manuscript.

Anyone familiar with the growth of life-writing studies will note that this chronology parallels that of our subdiscipline itself. One is tempted to conclude that the same zeitgeist that inspired Philippe Lejeune, James Olney, and Paul John Eakin to undertake their pathbreaking studies of autobiography around 1970 was also influencing historians. Even though most historian-autobiographers were blissfully unaware of the new theoretical perspectives

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being developed by the literary critics who were taking up the subject, both groups agreed that autobiography and memoir should no longer be considered dubious genres unworthy of the attention of serious academics. From the point of view of historians, this acceptance of autobiography coincided with the linguistic and cultural turns that reshaped the discipline in the wake of Hayden White's *Metahistory* and the work of scholars like Natalie Zemon Davis, who had fallen under the influence of Clifford Geertz and other cultural anthropologists. Not all the historians who set down their own life stories identified with these new forms of history; in fact, most of the historian-autobiographers whose works I read were from an older generation that had lived through the era of the two World Wars and was reaching retirement age in the 1970s and 1980s, as opposed to their successors, who contributed to the reshaping of historiography during the same period.¹

Since 2003, the date of the last publications included in *History, Historians, and Autobiography*, the steady stream of historians' memoirs, in the narrow definition of first-person narratives dealing with at least a major part of their authors' lives, seems to have slowed.² This lull may be only temporary; the largest generation of scholars to enter the profession, my own cohort of baby boomers, is approaching retirement, and some will undoubtedly succumb to the temptation to write about themselves. But there may be reasons why fewer of us will write traditional autobiographical accounts of our own lives. The generation that furnished the bulk of the memoirs in my own study was the group that had been born in the 1920s and early 1930s. They had been conscious of living through an age of great historical upheavals—the era of Nazism and communism, of World War II and the Holocaust. Many of these authors had had to flee their European homelands because of those events. Others had served in the American or British armed forces, or been active in resistance movements during the War. Our general culture has authorized anyone whose life was touched by these events to bear witness to them, and historians have not been immune. As I noted in *History, Historians, and Autobiography*, the single largest subgroup of historian-memoirists I identified were European Jews whose lives were wrenched out of shape by Hitler. Although hardly any of them actually experienced the camps, their memoirs form part of the enormous corpus of Holocaust-survivor literature. Younger historians who grew up in the more stable period after 1945 do not have the same sort of cultural authorization to tell the public about their lives.

Historians' memoirs may also be becoming less common because of the very success of the historical discipline. The ranks of professional historians have grown considerably in the past half-century, and our disciplinary community has become larger and more anonymous. The historian-memoirists who wrote in the last decades of the twentieth century included many who truly had a worldwide reputation, or at least dominated a national historical community: Eric Hobsbawm, Peter Gay, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, C. Vann

Woodward, Gerda Lerner, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Manning Clark. As the historical discipline has become larger and more diverse, it is harder for any single historian to achieve the kind of status and visibility that these stars of the profession enjoyed.

Perhaps most significantly, however, historians' memoirs in the traditional sense may be losing their appeal because the nature of life writing itself is being transformed. As all of us who have attended the various meetings of the International Auto|Biography Association and other groups in the field for the past few decades know, autobiography has increasingly dissolved into a larger nebula of life writing that encompasses everything from biography to blogging. The prestige of the printed word has been thrown into question by the dramatic success of graphic memoirs, and the retrospective recollection of an author's life sometimes seems less engaging than the in-the-moment record captured in a diary. Historians can be found on YouTube recounting their experiences for the camera, or on Facebook creating multimedia archives that change every day. The University of Michigan history professor Juan Cole's widely read blog, *Informed Comment*, for example, features an online account of his own life as well as reflections on current events. The structured, book-length life narrative, in the style of Gibbon or Adams, now seems like only one of many possibilities for recording one's experiences.

The completion of my monograph on historians' autobiographies left me facing the question of whether to write about my own life and career. It seemed somewhat unfair for me to have commented, often critically, on the memoirs of so many other members of my discipline without having what has come to be called "skin in the game" myself. On the other hand, however, my research had made me acutely aware of the many risks that self-revelation involves. At one time, I thought of posting a list of "the ten worst things you can do in an academic autobiography," such as telling embarrassing stories about your children, settling old scores with ex-spouses, or trying to interest readers in the details of your service on departmental committees. I did respond to an invitation from Alan Munslow, editor of the journal *Rethinking History*, to publish a short piece about my childhood and education ("History"), but rather than launching me on a longer narrative of my own life, that exercise pointed me in a different direction, one that has also attracted a number of historians and other academics in recent years: a family biography that combines the stories of parents and other relatives with reflections on one's own experiences and how they have been shaped by the family's past.

My engagement with the International Auto|Biography Association has certainly encouraged me in this direction. I recall a lunch with colleagues at the conference in Hawai'i in 2008 at which everyone at the table was doing something similar. So far, this family-history project has resulted in a few articles on my father, the historian of philosophy [Richard Popkin](#), and on his mother,

Zelda Popkin, a novelist. As it happens, they both published accounts of their own lives, so writing about them from my own perspective seems in some ways a continuation of their own projects. As a historian, I was thrilled to realize that my parents had kept all of my grandmother's many letters to them over a forty-year period, and that when she died, they had recovered most of the letters they had written to her. Not only does this treasure trove constitute a matchless source for the reconstruction of their lives, but it also provides a chronicle of my own growing up, as my parents (particularly my father) saw it.

A tougher problem is posed by the papers left by my mother, who died in 2015 after a long decline into senility. As I struggled through several rounds of organizing and disposing of her possessions, first when she had to be moved out of her own apartment and eventually when she passed away, I discovered something I had not known before: my mother was the most dedicated life writer in the family. Although she had not published anything, she had labored over numerous autobiographical essays, rewriting some of them a half dozen times. And she had kept diaries, sometimes filling thirty pages in a single night. I have them now in a filing cabinet in my study, and they impose a heavy responsibility on me. If I do not read them, no one else may ever do so. Not only am I one of the handful of people alive who can hope to decipher my mother's execrable handwriting, but I am one of the few who will have any idea who all the many people she refers to in them are, and what the context of her writing was. I know the broad outlines of the story the diaries tell: my mother's struggle to cope with the most difficult years of my father's battle with bipolar disorder. We have many memoirs from writers who have suffered from this condition; my mother's diaries offer the perspective of someone who had to cope with a spouse in the grip of it, and I have no doubt that what she had to say would resonate with many other people who have been in a similar situation. But I have not yet convinced myself to put aside my career as a history scholar to give her diaries the concentrated attention they require.

My own engagement with life writing shows some of the possibilities and dilemmas that can confront a historian who also happens to be engaged with life-writing scholarship in our current cultural environment. I am concluding this essay at a particularly fraught moment: tomorrow, Donald Trump will be sworn in as president of the US. The federal budget he has proposed would drastically cut funding for the few government programs that support historical research, such as the National Endowment for the Humanities. He clearly has no personal interest in either history or autobiography; his ghostwriter claims that Trump never even read the supposedly autobiographical best-seller, *The Art of the Deal*, published with his name on it in 1987. Will his policies plunge us into a new era in which historians, among others, will find themselves constrained to bear personal witness to the impact of historical events on individual lives, as the generation of scholars who lived through the

era of the World Wars did? And if historians do write about themselves, will they do it in the form of retrospective narratives or will they, like Trump, leave the traces of their lives in 140-character tweets? Trump and the other uncertainties of the political moment are just some of the uncertainties hanging over historians today. The stable academic careers that the historian-autobiographers of the past century have either embraced or rebelled against may no longer be an option for the coming generation of scholars, and a model of personal narrative that takes universities for granted may no longer correspond to their experiences. The fate of the world, the fate of academia, and the fate of the classic historian's autobiography all seem far harder to forecast than they were when I wrote *History, Historians, and Autobiography*.

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Notes

1. For a brief overview of trends in historiography, see [Popkin, *Herodotus*](#).
2. Among those that have come to my attention are [Fitzpatrick](#); [Franklin](#); [Friedländer](#); [Gleason](#); [Judt](#); [Rosenstone](#); and two collections of shorter essays, [Banner, Jr. and Gillis](#) and [Downs and Gerson](#). Studies of historians' autobiographies as a genre include [Aurell](#) and [Munro and Reid](#).

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