

HISTORY THROUGH BIOGRAPHY  
A REVIEW ESSAY

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Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream. By Doris Kearns. New York, New American Library, 1976. xiv + 463 pp. Notes and Index. Paperback reprint of hardcover edition published by Harper and Row. \$2.50. Men, Money and Magic: The Story of Dorothy Schiff. By Jeffrey Potter. New York, New American Library, 1976. 337 pp. Photographs and Index. Paperback reprint of hardcover edition published by Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc. \$2.25. Where Have You Gone, Joe Dimaggio? The Story of America's Last Hero. By Maury Allen. New York, New American Library, 1975. 180 pp. Photographs. Paperback reprint of hardcover edition published by E.P. Dutton and Company. \$1.50. Muhammad Ali, A Portrait in Words and Photographs. By Wilfrid Sheed. New York, New American Library, 1975. 352 pp. Photographs and Acknowledgements of Sources. Paperback. \$2.50.

Is biography a legitimate form of history? Over the years biographers have had to defend against the charge that it is not. Biography, the critics say, is too narrow, too simplified, and often too biased to contribute properly to history's concern with the understanding of civilizations, institutions, or at least broad chronological periods. Defenders reply that, however complex history may be, it is the product of the lives of innumerable individuals, some of whom were vital in shaping the past. Biography, they argue, makes the past more vivid and better understood by humanizing it, by breaking down the complexities of historical eras, and by presenting history from the perspective of leading or representative persons. Thus, by emphasizing what might be called its "human element," biography may be defended as a worthy branch of history.

In recent years biography has gained increasing appreciation as an especially valuable ally to historians in the teaching of their discipline. People are interested first in other people, it seems, and accordingly teachers find that students are more easily attracted by the biographical approach. The benefits are two-fold. The lives of many historical figures are worthy of study in themselves, and they serve to draw the student into a more general examination of the past. For example, a course in the American Revolution that introduces students to Sam Adams, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington in some depth has an excellent chance of building the interest necessary to learning about the entire era. The increasing popularity of the biographical approach to history is witnessed by the appearance of texts such as Roderick Nash, From These Beginnings: The Biographical Approach to History (2nd ed., New York, 1978) and Howard H. Quint and Milton Cantor (eds.), Men, Women, and Issues in American History (Homewood, Illinois, 1975).

There is a tendency, or at least there appears to be, for history courses taking the biographical approach to rely very heavily on the study of individuals whose chief importance was political. This is certainly defensible in light of the overriding importance of political leadership at so many points in our history. But we should not overlook the possibilities of the biographical approach for areas that are not primarily political. Both of the texts mentioned above encourage us to consider minority group spokesmen, social reformers, representatives of the intellectual community, business and financial leaders, and others.

As historians broaden the biographical approach to teach about individuals from many areas of American life, they will find themselves facing an increasing array of popular biographies. Biography, because it interests people, always has been more susceptible to popularization than have other forms of

history. And popular biographies have been noted for a tendency to deal only with matters on the surface and to slip away from historical accuracy. Writers wish to create readable, marketable books on figures of current interest, and the reading public apparently is happy not to be burdened with scholarship. Popular biographies of political leaders are not uncommon, but the lives of individuals prominent in areas of popular culture such as sports and entertainment are even more likely subjects. In any case, the value of popular biography as history is especially hard to judge.

Another problem facing teachers who would employ the biographical approach is how to deal with what might be called "first generation" biographies, that is, biographies of subjects published during or shortly after their lives and written by authors who were personally acquainted with their subjects. Biographies of this sort have an excellent chance to offer special insights; at the same time they run special risks of being too personal, too biased, etc. Nevertheless, "first generation" biographies will have to be considered for courses in recent history, and many will have to be dealt with even after the passage of time allows a better researched and more detached view of the subject.

A potpourri of recently published biographies illustrates some of the opportunities and problems facing the historian who would take the biographical approach to the mid-twentieth-century United States. Lyndon B. Johnson, Dorothy Schiff, Joe DiMaggio, and Muhammad Ali represent widely divergent aspects of American life. It is not easy to imagine four more dissimilar people; yet the story of each is a comment on first generation popular biographies and on what such biographies can reveal about this age.

Doris Kearns met President Lyndon Johnson in 1967, served as a White House Fellow for the rest of his administration until January 1969, and worked intermittently with him in the preparation of his memoirs for the four years remaining until his death in 1973. Based heavily on years of personal contact and conversation when Johnson felt attacked and then beaten and rejected, Kearns' portrait is essentially sympathetic. She presents Johnson as the product of a mother whose love was conditional upon his achievement of great things and a father who scorned intellect and culture as unmanly. Thus Johnson strove for achievement in the sense of winning power and control, especially in public life. There could be no question of his success in politics, and his power proved manliness. This drive, combined with Johnson's tremendous energy and intelligence, took him to the heights of public life. And at the same time it left him frustrated and defeated when the American people did not love him for his success in domestic policy and rejected him when he could not control the situation in Vietnam.

This summary, which hardly does justice to Kearns' portrait of Johnson the man, indicates that the book falls into what is commonly called psychobiography. Whether or not Kearns was qualified to analyze the president and the validity of psychobiography in general are debatable matters. I find her portrait believable; others may not. Some of the parallels with the career of Richard M. Nixon are striking. Johnson, like Nixon, for example, organized a club of the social-political "outs" to defeat the "ins" at his college. How much presidential history has been shaped by whether the chief executive was an "in" (Roosevelt, Kennedy) or an "out" (Johnson, Nixon)?

Psychobiography aside, there is much more to Kearns' book. Her account of Johnson's rise in politics from aide to Congressman Richard Kleberg to United States Representative to Senate Majority Leader is excellent. Her sympathetic account of Johnson's vision of the Great Society and his interest in civil rights is an instructive account of the southerner as liberal. Even the story of the Vietnam War is reasonably balanced. We can once more

see Johnson in the White House, living with dreams of unlimited American power to save people from communism and do good in the world, listening to advisors assure him that a little more pressure will accomplish his objectives, and reacting in anger and hurt as the protestors yell "Hey, hey, LBJ; How many kids did you kill today?"

React as you will to Kearns' study, it is remarkably full-scale for a first generation biography. Johnson's entire career is explained, a view of his character and personality is presented, and an effort is made to assess his historical significance. Future biographers will be unable to overlook this work.

In a sense, Dorothy Schiff represented all of the things that Lyndon Johnson was not and apparently resented so much. She was a northeasterner, born to wealth, and a member of the liberal establishment. Her grandfather Jacob H. Schiff, as head of the investment banking firm of Kuhn, Loeb, & Co. from 1885 into the early twentieth century, had amassed a fortune that made everything his granddaughter did into Social Register material. (The family's being Jewish presented only a minor problem.) Dorothy Schiff's biography might be little more than a story of an heiress, her four husbands, and other amusements were it not for the fact that in 1939 she became the majority stockholder and then eventually the publisher and editor of the New York Post. By inheritance a Republican, she had become a Democrat during the New Deal (and very much under the influence of Franklin D. Roosevelt at the same time), and her newspaper became famed for its crusading liberalism.

Jeffrey Potter's biography is not exactly the "scandal-filled" account promised on the cover, nor does Dorothy Schiff seem to be "the most fabulous female of our times." Basically, Potter strings together quotations from interviews, memos, and diaries made available by the subject to let her tell as much as possible her own story. The result is good reading, but there is no real attempt at critical analysis of Ms. Schiff as a personality or of her historical significance as a newspaper publisher. There are many tidbits on how the elite lived (as a child Dorothy dined with her parents once a week-- at Sunday lunch) and interesting observations on the rich and powerful from Roosevelt to Johnson. But Men, Money and Magic misses a chance to do a great deal more.

Americans have had a love affair with professional athletes for at least fifty years now, and Maury Allen, a sportswriter for Ms. Schiff's New York Post, provides us with the biography of perhaps the greatest object of affection in the whole story, Joe DiMaggio. Allen sets the tone on page one by telling his readers when he first touched the man he calls "America's last hero," and this worshipful approach lasts throughout. He chronicles DiMaggio's career from his humble origins as the son of a San Francisco fisherman through his brilliant career with the Yankees (1936-1951) and his tormented relationship with Marilyn Monroe. The story is liberally sprinkled with remembrances of DiMaggio from other ballplayers, but it moves along reasonably well.

DiMaggio is consistently described as a man with "class," but the reader must render his own meaning for the term. The man behind the brilliant ballplayer was painfully shy and apparently something close to just plain dull off the field. He was terrible at small talk, had no particular interests, and was involved in no causes. It seems that he did not even understand the requirements of Marilyn Monroe's profession. Allen tells of his anger at a "cheesecake" photo session involving his wife. In short, Joe DiMaggio did one thing brilliantly and he said or did little else. Perhaps his "class" lay in his athletic ability, his pride in that ability, and his lack of any other qualities that would have made him controversial. He was not a trouble

maker nor was he too "straight." Babe Ruth and other spectaculars to the contrary, is there a better hero for a nation of spectators than one who performs brilliantly on the field and does nothing off the field to detract from his manly heroic image?

Wilfrid Sheed's biography of Muhammad Ali, born Cassius Clay, provides an interesting contrast with DiMaggio's story. Both were (should we at this date use the past tense in referring to Ali as a fighter?) incredibly skilled athletes, but Ali always had all the flamboyant personality and willingness to be controversial that DiMaggio did not. As Sheed points out, had Ali conducted himself with the good manners and closed mouth of Joe Louis he would have avoided the condemnation of millions of Americans. In fact, he would probably have come as close as a black athlete can come to being an American hero. But, in the beginning, Ali was the "Louisville Lip," a wild combination of boastfulness and media freak foolishness that amused, puzzled, and angered. Then he joined the Black Muslims and refused in 1967 to be drafted to fight in Vietnam. Sheed, while admitting that it is frequently impossible to judge the meaning of Ali's words and moods, believes that the champ's conversion and his conviction that all wars were wrong were sincere. In any case, while Ali has been around so long that he has become somewhat more respectable, his refusal to be drafted and his subsequent punishment knocked a huge hole in the career of probably the greatest fighter in our history.

Sheed's biography is much like its subject, frenetic and often confusing. Perhaps it is unfair in the first place to consider the book as biography. It seems that instead of presenting an organized and analytical account of Ali's personality and career the author meant instead to try the more ambitious undertaking of finding the meaning of the man. "What is he for?" asks Sheed. "What need does Ali service?" (p. 25). At one point he calls Ali "a rallying point for Black Americans and a link between them and the Third World" (p. 13). But he concludes: "He worshipped at the shrine of fame a long time before he heard of Allah, and he still bows in that direction every time he sees a Brownie or a typewriter. So the kind of Ali we get is still up to us, a reflection of what he thinks he sees on our faces" (p. 318). Apparently, then, the most certain conclusion we have is that Ali is a "media freak" determined to stay in the public's spotlight.

Professional sports occupy such a large place in our society that it seems incumbent upon historians to study and evaluate the phenomenon. What does it mean when games constitute a multibillion dollar business, and star players are worshipped as heroes? Should these modern-day heroes, whether they are "class guys" like Joe DiMaggio or spectaculars like Muhammad Ali, be taken seriously, or should they be dismissed as essentially pop entertainers? If sports and sports heroes are worthy of serious study, popular first generation biographies of the sort reviewed here will at least be a place to start.

In summary, these first generation biographies should be labelled "handle with care" when they are employed as a form of history. Although all contain some scholarly accouterments, such as lists of sources and footnotes, they also depend heavily on first-hand contacts between author and subject. Kearns' study of Johnson constitutes a major contribution to recent United States history, while Potter's account of Dorothy Schiff skims too lightly over the career of a reasonably important secondary figure. The stories of Joe DiMaggio and Muhammad Ali are highly popular in their treatment, but perhaps this is all that is deserved. In general, historians have yet to decide whether to make sports history a field of serious investigation. At the very least, none of these books is dull. This is entirely appropriate since the humanization of the past with the interest thus created is the primary argument for the biographical approach to history.