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*English Biography in the Seventeenth Century: A Critical
Survey (review)*

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tualized persona (115), Connor examines H.D.'s interest in the concepts of ritual and community inherent in popular spiritualism, especially in relation to the unpublished typescripts "The Sword Went Out to Sea" and "Majic Ring." Spirit transmissions allowed H.D. to reach a wider social community and to contest the dominant ideologies and power hierarchies that are bound up in heterosexual desire and orthodox Christianity (121–22). Tantalizing the reader with the links between the visual and the spiritual, Connor's study does not as successfully probe the depths of H.D.'s interest in popular spiritualism, especially in relation to her spiritualist narratives "The Sword Went Out to Sea" and "White Rose and the Red."

Connor freely acknowledges that H.D.'s challenges to normative formulations of sexuality and gender are undercut by a conservatism that can limit their radical potential: "What is revealed if we look at H.D.'s oeuvre is a *spectrum* of viewing experiences, containing within it a number of co-existing but conflicting political positions in relation to spectatorship" (109). H.D.'s exploration of film and spiritualism undoubtedly highlights the contradictory nature of her relationship to high modernism: although her interest in Hollywood cinema distinguishes her from the "aestheticised purism" (7) of some of her colleagues, her preference for European avant-garde film (with the preference given to form over content) is entirely in keeping with the at times elitist interests of canonized modernists.

H.D. and the Image is a brilliant addition to interdisciplinary analyses of H.D.'s oeuvre, however. In its examination of the interconnections between the visual, the spiritual, and the political, Rachel Connor's study provides important observations of H.D.'s involvement with *Close Up* and with popular and avant-garde filmmaking in general. Lucidly argued, *H.D. and the image* would be of use to any reader interested in H.D. and the visual and to most university libraries.

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Allan Pritchard. *English Biography in the Seventeenth Century: A Critical Survey*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. ISBN 0-8020-3889-1. \$63.00.

This is such a rewarding subject that I'm surprised that no one has thought to tackle it in modern academic times; the last book entirely devoted to this topic was by Donald Stauffer back in 1930. One reason for neglect might be the lack of good editions of seventeenth-century biographies,

which are often hard to come by in their original form. Another might be a general lack of awareness of the richness of available material, for many biographies were printed as prefaces to collected works or concealed in funeral sermons. Allan Pritchard has trawled through hundreds of lives in a spirit of judicious appreciation, with results that convince one that early modern biography is a field full of hidden treasure.

Consider how little known these works are. Who wrote the life of Francis Bacon, for example, or Lancelot Andrewes? The life of John Williams, Thomas Fuller, Matthew Hale, or Dudley North? Pritchard's discussion of these biographies brings out their intrinsic merits, using them to illustrate the conventions of the genre, and shows how they enlarge those conventions. He reviews the evolution of life writing from the cautious, inhibited exercises at the beginning of the century, mainly eulogistic and wary of offending authority, to the shrewd, indiscreet, and vividly evocative sketches produced by John Aubrey and Anthony Wood at the end of this period. Notions about what a biography might reveal changed enormously over a hundred years, moving from stolid uncritical admiration of eminent figures to imaginative and insightful assessments of character and motive that are recognizably modern. The scope of biography altered greatly in this time, as dutiful regard to statesmen and grave divines slackened, and individuals of all kinds came to be seen as worthy of record. A vast amount of social history is concealed in these biographies, and as an index of changing attitudes toward public accomplishments and private worth they are invaluable.

The most familiar seventeenth-century lives are those by Izaak Walton (which still, incidentally, lack a modern scholarly edition). Reverential, affectionate, almost saccharine at times, they preserve the memories of Donne, Herbert, Hooker, Wotton, and Sanderson in ways that the Victorians admired. They say nothing very critical of their subjects, who are represented as model Anglicans, mild, peaceable, and exemplary. Donne stands apart from the other figures with his reckless and licentious youth, but he is easily smoothed into the mould provided by St Augustine, where youthful worldliness was converted into a saintly middle age. Pritchard points up the shortcomings and deficiencies of Walton's practice in ways that show him to be more of a writer of fiction than a biographer. Walton gives virtually no dates in his accounts, he invents the speeches of his characters, he offers little detail in descriptions of their personal appearance, and he idealizes them into virtuous, patient Christians who might all have qualified for sainthood in the Restoration Church, had that Church decided to create its own Anglican saints. Their similarities are empha-

sized, their distinctiveness played down. Even though all of his subjects wrote extensively, their writings are virtually ignored. Inconvenient facts are utterly unwelcome: we never hear that Herbert's stepfather was one of the regicides, that his mother's remarriage was resented by his family, or that his brother Edward was notable for duelling and dissipation. We learn nothing of Donne's sensualism and skepticism, of Hooker's wealth (which would compromise Walton's picture of pastoral simplicity), of Wotton's militant Protestantism or of Sanderson's trimming to the Cromwellian regime. Men of great complexity and sophistication are simplified down to unworldly pietists.

In many ways, as Pritchard makes clear, Walton's lives are the continuation and the culmination of the earlier tradition of life-writing in England, in which the statesmen always had judgment and gravity, and the divines were always earnest, learned, devout, and unworldly. Among the stereotypes of the genre we meet: the preacher whose ambition is to die in the pulpit, the divine who is so preoccupied with matters of the spirit that he doesn't notice that his house is on fire, the student who cannot leave his books for a moment, such as John Preston who would read Aquinas in the barber's chair, or the statesman ever musing upon policy. Personal failings or vices are rarely mentioned; Pritchard notes that only anger amongst the vices was admissible, for this often arose from hatred of sin or from an aristocratic temper. Marriage, wives, and children have little or no part in early biographies. Parentage is mentioned only cursorily, especially if it is humble: it is not uplifting to know that Wolsey's father was a butcher or Laud's a clothier. Childhood is usually ignored ("all children are alike in their Long-coats"), youth is rapidly passed over, but the last days, even hours, of a subject's life are attentively dwelt upon. The protracted death-bed scenes that are characteristic of seventeenth-century biographies, which reached their zenith in Burnet's account of Rochester's end, were important because they revealed the condition of the soul, the depth of faith that gave proof of salvation. Had salvation, the great purpose of life, been achieved? "The last dayes are the best witnesses of a Man," remarked Jeremy Taylor.

Religious and secular biographies had distinct limitations, as well as conventions, because of the need for reverence toward the subject. There was also the problem, when dealing with eminent men, that the life of the individual became obliterated by the account of public affairs: history all too easily overwhelmed biography. In Heylyn's life of Laud, for instance, there is scarcely more than a paragraph or two about Laud's personal life in a folio of five hundred pages. Criticism of great men was

not easy, either. Heylyn was unwilling to suggest that Laud might have been the architect of his own disasters and those of his church and king. A powerful and damaging figure such as the Duke of Buckingham could not be assessed in his lifetime, and he largely escaped criticism for two generations afterward.

The breakthrough to a more liberal, expressive kind of biography came after the Restoration. Thomas Fuller's *Worthies* (1662), his record of the notables of England, had an unprecedented social inclusiveness, admitting porters, mechanicks, musicians, and alchemists into the company of the traditionally great. In Lincolnshire, James Yorke a blacksmith appears along with Robert Cecil the statesman. David Lloyd's bulky *Memoires* (1668) of the casualties of the Civil War on the royalist side also spread its net very wide. But there is no doubt in Allan Pritchard's mind about where the palm of honour should be bestowed among Restoration biographers: John Aubrey, with Anthony Wood as a close second.

Aubrey's unflagging curiosity about his contemporaries and near-contemporaries was aided by his vast and miscellaneous acquaintance of family and friends, by his natural inquisitiveness, and by his delight in all things odd and surprising. He started collecting biographical information to help his friend Wood with his encyclopaedic account of Oxford authors, so it may have been the freedom from the direct responsibilities of publication that allowed him to write so frankly about individuals, and his habit of jotting down details of lives as they came to him may have produced his terse anecdotal style in which a sharp phrase registers some unforgettable impression. He had few prejudices, was willing to record impartially all kinds of idiosyncrasy, and expressed a wonderful liveliness, informality, and candour in his brief lives. His fascination with the physical appearance of his subjects—Bacon with his viper eye, Falkland's "blackish haire, something flaggy," Thomas Randolph's "pale ill complexion, pock-pitten," Venetia Digby's damask cheeks—makes these people immediately imaginable. Aubrey's unprecedented interest in their sexual behaviour, their private foibles, their afflictions and hopes, gives his observations a fullness and depth and psychological complexity without parallel in English biography and causes Pritchard to suggest links between Aubrey's way of recording character and the emergence of the novel at this time.

The beneficiary of Aubrey's gleanings was Anthony Wood, the industrious and cantankerous Oxford antiquary, who wanted the material for his great compendium of literary biography, *Athenae Oxonienses* (1691 and 1692). He compiled lives of many hundreds of Oxford writers, which are entirely secular in character, frank, opinionated, and quite lacking in

moral commentary. In general, he was well disposed toward High Church and Catholic authors and scornful of the Puritans. His lives owe much to Aubrey's information but are rendered in a businesslike plain style, and although they lack many of Aubrey's engaging touches, they nonetheless offer shrewd character sketches. They are factually detailed and reliable, wonders of compression, and remain invaluable to literary scholars: indeed, they are the foundation of many of the seventeenth-century entries in the *New Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

Allan Pritchard rounds off his survey with accounts of the group biographies of the Holles and the North families. In the course of his book, he has put a vast miscellany of lives into a serviceable framework and has established the categories and conventions of these works. He has made accessible large numbers of biographical exercises that have undeservedly fallen into obscurity. There are some omissions, inevitably. I would have liked to hear more about biographies of unusual women, for example—John Evelyn's *Life of Margaret Godolphin* merits more than a few lines, and the funeral sermons for Lady Magdalen Herbert and Lady Anne Clifford yield much that is memorable. Nevertheless, anyone interested in the cultural history of the seventeenth century would benefit from reading this book, which is full of jewels twinkling in the grass on ancient graves.

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Ton Hoenselaars, ed. *Shakespeare's History Plays: Performance, Translation, and Adaptation in Britain and Abroad*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.
ISBN 0-521-82902-X. 287 pp. + illus. \$80.00 cloth.

Ton Hoenselaars has assembled a valuable collection of essays examining Shakespeare's most politically enquiring plays. Despite the (implicit or explicit) keynote of celebration which frequently sets the tone of English major institutional theatrical revivals of Shakespeare's Histories—as when the Royal Shakespeare Company uses them as a rhetorical vehicle of self-definition—the plays themselves are, and often remain, intrinsically episodic and politically skeptical in their dramatization of hopes and disappointments which do not outlast a single lifetime, and so thwart a conventionally heroic sense of conclusion. Dennis Kennedy pertinently asks in his Foreword to the volume: “What is a nation? What is a national