theguardian

The art of biography is alive and well

Five years ago, after the appearance of several lacklustre lives, it seemed the biography was dying. But thanks to a number of striking innovations, the patient has made a complete recovery

Amanda Foreman, author of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. Photograph: Graham Turner for the Guardian

By Kathryn Hughes
15 February 2013

In 2008 I wrote a piece for these pages in which I declared that biography, if not quite dead, was in a terrible state. It seemed to me that the publishing industry, never a sprightly beast, had slowed to the point where it barely had a pulse. For the past 10 years publishers had been timidly churning out me-too versions of the last mega hit, Amanda Foreman's excellent Georgiana, which had appeared a whole decade earlier. The bookshelves were full of biographies about vaguely naughty Georgian duchesses with skyscraper hair and a bad gambling/drink/marriage habit.

The worst thing was the way these knock-offs were written. Foreman's book, in addition to being based on impeccable scholarship, was composed with an ear for the rhythm and cadence that makes rereading it a pleasure. The endless counterfeit Georgianas, by contrast, showed all the tendencies that the critic Janet Malcolm has identified as the mark of so much biographical writing: a sense that, as long as the facts are there, it doesn't matter how badly or baldly they are set out.

The biographies that Malcolm had in her sights were written in leaden, journeyman prose, and usually entailed a marathon trudge from cradle to grave, punctuated with all the familiar biological stopping-off points. I was becoming shifty about telling people I was a biographer: it felt tantamount to admitting that I was an undiscriminating hack.

But it turns out I was wrong. It wasn't that biography was in terminal decline, it was that I wasn't looking for it hard enough or in quite the right places. Last weekend the University of East Anglia hosted a conference entitled Turning Points at which such masters and mistresses of their art as Claire Tomalin, Richard Holmes, Charles Nicholl, Miranda Seymour,Jeremy Treglown and Frances Wilson took biography's pulse and made the cheering diagnosis that it is, in fact, in rude health. What has happened, these expert practitioners explained, is that biography has changed its shape, and is now sailing under new colours. The subtitle of the conference said it all really: instead of tracking the life story of a great man or occasional great woman, biography is now concerned with "the event, the collective and the return of the life in parts".

This shift towards new ways of telling lives is not a lunge after faddish novelty. It emerges rather from a growing sense that biography as it used to be done was not getting us close to the experience it was trying to describe. We all know that life isn't actually comprised of a stately march through the decades in which loose ends, false trails, and those periods where nothing much happens are tidied away out of sight. Mostly our lives feel shapeless, coming into focus only when a particular event makes us feel, for a few minutes at least, tinglingly and fully ourselves.

It is these crystallising moments that are increasingly used to structure the best of the new biographies. The "event" approach is a sort of first cousin to micro-history, where something small – a deserted hamlet, two rusty muskets in a field – is used to tell a bigger story about the plague or the Battle of Culloden. Frances Wilson demonstrated how effective this approach can be in her recent How to Survive the Titanic (2011). She focuses on the moment when J Bruce Ismay, the ship's owner, took the fatal decision to jump into a lifeboat while the rest of the first-class men gallantly allowed women and children to take the available spaces. Pressing hard on Ismay's split-second decision to leap to safety, Wilson tells a story not just about one man's lost honour, but about a layered drama of class, nationality and technological modernity.

Another new way of doing biography is to organise your narrative around the objects that carried a particular emotional charge for your subject. In her new life of Jane Austen, for instance, Paula Byrne pulls out an East Indian shawl, a barouch and a bathing machine that figured in both Austen's own life and her fiction, and weaves a new narrative around them. Neil McGregor does the same thing in Shakespeare's Restless World.

The new "collective" approach to biography, meanwhile, challenges the assumption that the best way to make sense of an individual's life is by hooking it out of its social context and putting it under an isolating microscope. Rather it acknowledges that we are always connected to others, even to people we can't stand or don't know personally, through familial and professional networks. Only by looking at the group as a whole can we make sense of the constituent parts. It's an approach taken by Amanda Foreman in her follow-up to Georgiana. Instead of going for another single subject, she opted to write A World on Fire, an epic history of two nations divided which tells the story of Anglo-American relations during the American civil war by using mini-biographical case histories.

It's an approach followed by another of UEA's conference speakers, Miranda Seymour, in her forthcoming Noble Endeavours: Stories from England and Germany, in which she uses scores of micro-biographies to dramatise relations between the two countries over the past 200 years. This isn't simply a case of dredging up all those Nazi-sympathising uncles without which no English aristocratic family would be complete. Seymour digs deeper to bring us cameos of well-known people in unsuspected situations. She tells us, for instance, about the time Elizabeth Fry, the Quaker prison reformer, bustled over to Hanover, stamped her foot and insisted they had better sort out their gaols or she would be very cross indeed.

Marshalling a cast of up to 100 characters like this requires an extraordinary degree of technical skill. While in a classic single-subject biography it's clear where you need to go next (just keep inching forward, basically) in a group biography you are required to keep many plates spinning while making it all look effortless.

In his forthcoming Falling Upwards: How We Took to the Air, for example, Richard Holmes floats across the world like Phileas Fogg in pursuit of a disparate group of pioneering hot air balloonists. In terms of organisation and subject matter, Falling Upwards is a clear successor toThe Age of Wonder (2009), in which Holmes explored how "the romantic generation discovered the beauty and terror of science". It is a canny move for a biographer who has built his reputation by writing about literary men, for if any particular kind of biography can be said to be teetering on the edge of the grave, it is those that take writers as their subjects. By turning to scientific matters and shifting from single to multiple subjects Holmes has evaded the fate of many literary biographers, who are struggling to stay in the game.

The third type of new biography identified by the UEA conference concerns "the life in parts". In this case the speaker was Charles Nicholl, whose 2007 The Lodger:

Shakespeare on Silver Street was a deft attempt to conjure up the Man from Stratford out of a signature he scrawled on a legal document in 1612. Grafting elements of "event" biography on to a partial life, The Lodger gets us closer to Shakespeare than many of the more exhaustive (and exhausting) biographies. The fact that Nicholl started life as a rock journalist suggests that he knows how to grab his readers' attention.

The advantage of writing a partial life, of course, is that you are not obliged to include the boring bits. Your subject's non-eventful schooling or the long holidays by the sea can be compressed into a few terse paragraphs so that you can spend more time on the bits that matter. It was an approach showcased brilliantly in 2011 by Matthew Hollis. InNow All Roads Lead to France Hollis concentrates on the defining moment when the Anglo-Welsh writer Edward Thomas gave up his "jobbing" journalistic career in favour of the poetry he had never quite got round to making. Under the pressure of the looming war and a friendship with Robert Frost, Thomas finally became the kind of writer he was meant to be, producing in the last five years of his life poetry that would change the music of the English language for ever.

It would be disingenuous to claim that these new ways of telling lives are entirely driven by intellectual concerns. The pressures are commercial too. Virtually anyone whom you might think worth a biography already has two or three to their name, which makes it tricky for biographers to know who to do next. People have shorter attention spans, too, which means that those doorstop biographies of 400 pages can start to seem like a looming threat rather than a delicious promise.

And money is tight. Advances have tumbled since 2008 so that the author who used to get £100,000 might now reasonably expect £15,000. And £15,000 doesn't go a long way towards supporting you for the five years that a large biography requires. For the self-employed, professional biographer it makes sense to go for a smaller project – something that can perhaps be written from printed sources. In the age of Wikipedia, you can hardly expect readers to pay £25 for a book composed mainly of Gradgrindian "facts". What the biographer brings is added value, sparkle, an entirely original way of looking at the subject.

All the signs of biography's imminent change were already there when I wrote my 2008 piece. Alexander Master's Stuart: a Life Backwards(2005) had shown what you could do if you started with a death and worked backwards. Kate Summerscale's The Suspicions of Mr Whicherhad used an event – the murder of a toddler in a Victorian family house – to structure her 2008 bestseller. In the process she unwittingly triggered a deluge of listless me-too books. Mathematicians and scientists were already being fascinatingly covered in Simon Singh'sFermat's Last Theorem (1997) and Brenda Maddox's Rosalind Franklin: the Dark Lady of DNA (2002).

I gave honourable mentions to some of these in my 2008 piece, handing out gold stars to their authors for bucking trends and refusing cravenly to follow the market.

But what I had failed to spot was that these books were harbingers of a bigger change rather than a clutch of maverick outliers. Each year since 2008 more and more interesting books have been published which deal with the lives of others. They may not announce themselves as "biographies" but that doesn't mean they aren't. The genre is in fact alive and well, you may just need to look a bit harder to identify it on the shelves. But you will be so glad you did.

• *Kathryn Hughes is professor of lifewriting at the University of East Anglia and author of The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs Beeton (Fourth Estate).*