



Life Writing “from Below” in Europe: Authors, Archives, Avenues, Arenas

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a large body of scholarship from the last forty years, this article offers an overview of the diverse forms of life writing “from below” (by authors from low down in a class or status hierarchy) in Europe since the early modern period (including autobiographies, diaries, letters, as well as transcripts of oral testimonies); and the varied and developing national traditions of collecting and archiving which have developed since the mid-twentieth century. It locates such writing within a field of force between an exteriority pole constituted by the state (or by organisations of civil society, or informal community pressures) which compel or otherwise elicit life writings from below, and an interiority pole of the impulse of someone hitherto excluded to narrate their life in some public sphere; and examines diverse ways (state compulsion or solicitation; citizen engagement, challenge or resistance) in which these pressures give rise to the production of texts. It identifies the roles of intermediaries within civil society (patrons, sponsors, commercial publishers, collaborators) as links between individual (potential) authors and the public sphere.

Keywords: life writing from below; workers’ writing; peasant writing; labouring-class poetry; auto/biographical practices; autobiographical injunction; patronage; archives

This article offers an overview of the diverse forms of life writing “from below” in Europe since the early modern period: the changing patterns of authorship since the early seventeenth century; the varied and developing national traditions of collecting and archiving such

texts which have developed since the mid-twentieth century; the field of force between the poles of state and subject within which narratives were produced; the intermediaries within civil society who created avenues to publication; and the various public arenas which these authors addressed.¹

As regards genre, at the core of life writings are autobiographies (usually written later in life), which offer a retrospective and cumulative account; and diaries and letters, which are contemporaneous (in the case of diaries often, though not always, so), and offer more immediate and episodic accounts of life events.² From there, the category of life writing can be extended outwards, through account books, family or memory books, travel narratives, etc., even to commonplace books (where, it could be argued, a form of autobiographical portrait is assembled through a collage of other people’s words).³ My main focus will be on those three core genres (autobiographies, diaries, letters), but awareness both of the porous boundaries between them, and of that wider penumbra of other texts, is important to understanding the full range of life writing possibilities from below, and the generic forms from which they might be constructed.⁴ Moreover, life writings arise out of what Liz Stanley terms “auto/biographical *practices*, that is the myriad of everyday and frequently fleeting social practices concerned with the articulation of (often competing, sometimes discontinuous) notions of ‘selves’ and ‘lives.” (2000, 40; original emphasis) Only a fraction of these everyday, often spoken, life narratives are transcribed and written down.⁵ So I will refer both to life narratives, and to that written sub-set which comprise life writings.

1. THE RANGE OF LIFE WRITINGS FROM BELOW

In a pattern parallel to that which once occluded the corpus of women’s writing, the assumption that there had been little if any life-writing from below accompanied a failure to look for it.⁶ Once such texts were actively sought and found, they opened up new scholarly questions, and new ways to approach existing debates. Tim Hitchcock celebrated Thomas Sokoll’s pioneering edition of *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731–1837* as an example of a new willingness by historians to seek out sources (including also court records, or settlement examinations) which, read with “a newly-keen ear for real speech and subtle meaning”, would make it possible to write “a history from below” in which “the lives, the suffering, the authority and the emotions of some of Britain’s poorest inhabitants are fully chronicled.” More, it would demonstrate that the poor “recognized and utilized a powerful sense of agency in their dealings with the British state.”⁷

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND DIARIES

Diaries emerged gradually from those mixed-genre texts which Martyn Lyons (12–13, 222–44) refers to collectively as memory books. These were originally a combination of account books and a record of property, of what was owned and how it was managed, intended to be handed down in families; as well as (increasingly) some personal information about life events. Discussing seventeenth-century Puritan self-writing in Britain, Andrew Cambers (802–4) has stressed that there were no clear distinctions between autobiographies and diaries, the boundaries between them being fluid.⁸ Memory books and related forms continued to be produced in some countries until the end of the nineteenth century.⁹

Autobiography gradually consolidated as a distinctive form from the matrix of account and family books, and diaries. The history of autobiography from below can be traced to the early-modern artisans whom James Amelang (1998) has studied. He comments (1993, 32) that: “one of the more remarkable, if little studied, aspects of the early modern era was the expanding resort to formal literary expression by writers of humble extraction. The transition from Middle Ages to modernity not only saw the rise of autobiography. It also witnessed, more specifically, the rise of *popular* autobiography.” Amelang’s research on Miquel Parets (1610–1661), a master tanner, who wrote a detailed chronicle of his native city of Barcelona from 1626 to 1660, led him to identify 230 such texts across early-modern western Europe (2002, 114). Already in these early texts, he identifies three themes that were to recur across the centuries: (1) autobiographers were ambivalent about their right to speak out; (2) despite their situation being relatively low in the social hierarchy, these authors were not entirely subordinate, e.g. as men they exercised power vis-a-vis women; (3) they had the status of citizens, and their apparently private texts in fact had a public aim.¹⁰

The post-Reformation religious and political controversies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led to new forms of life writing from below, with the publication of many conversion narratives, telling how the author had found the true path of faith.¹¹ This created conditions in which some individuals from low in the social hierarchy—women as well as men—found reasons to write, and on occasion to publish, about their lives and beliefs.¹² Two striking British examples were Nehemiah Wallington (1598–1658), a wood-turner living in London, who was a committed Puritan¹³; and Anna Trapnel (*floruit* 1642–1660), the daughter of a London shipwright, who as a Particular Baptist and a Fifth Monarchist made a series of radical political statements during the English Civil War (1642–51) while in a state of prophetic trance.¹⁴ This religious impulse continued into the eighteenth century. Bruce Hindmarsh has shown

the fluidity between genres in such conversion narratives: oral accounts given in sermons were reported contemporaneously by the laity in letters, and later in the published journals or memoirs of Methodist leaders and preachers. He notes (133), of a collection of manuscript conversion accounts written between 1738 and 1741 by lay Methodists (including two women who were schoolmistresses and several men who were apprentices to trades such as joinery):

With these narratives we are able to view the Evangelical Revival in its origins ‘from below’. The voices of the preachers who would stand ‘upon a little eminence’ and address the crowds are heard in their journals and sermons; the voices of the hearers in the crowds who followed are heard in these letters. And because the letters were contemporary accounts written in the initial ardour of the experience, there is an immediacy and artlessness in these narratives that sets them apart from the more carefully circumscribed conversion accounts in the published journals of the leaders or the retrospective memoirs of the lay preachers published during the 1780s.¹⁵

Alongside this religious impulse, more secular life writings were also composed, continuing the pattern of the earlier artisan autobiographies identified by Amelang.¹⁶

Prose was not the only medium for life writing. The mid-eighteenth century saw the emergence in Britain of a significant group of what came to be known as “labouring poets”, some of whose work was explicitly autobiographical.¹⁷ This tradition continued for well over a century, producing a very substantial body of writing, and dying out only in the later decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ During the eighteenth century, these rurally-based poets wrote mainly about agricultural life; but authors also emerged among the urban artisan trades, notably shoemakers.¹⁹ Key developments in the early stages of industrialisation, especially coal and mineral mining, occurred in otherwise rural settings; from these communities, in the nineteenth century, came poets who wrote about their lives as coal or lead miners.²⁰ Women also played a prominent part in this tradition, some writing memoirs as well as autobiographical poetry.²¹

From the early nineteenth century, accelerating industrialisation and urbanisation disrupted established rural communities, causing major population movements (within and across national borders) to new or expanding towns and cities where new ways of living and working had to be created. Meanwhile, the growing complexity of state action and the demands of a more differentiated economy created an increasing need for a population with basic literacy. Following its early industrialisation and growing urbanisation from the 1780s, Britain produced a very rich tradition of workers’ autobiographies. In the 1980s, John Burnett, David

Vincent and David Mayall identified and catalogued *c.*2,200 such autobiographies (published, and in manuscript), written by *c.*1,900 authors.²² In this large corpus, a marked gender difference is apparent. Some 10% of the nineteenth-century British worker autobiographies were written by women, rising to 30% in the twentieth century. Working women had later and more limited access to full literacy on the one hand; and, less prominent in public life, could find fewer avenues leading to publication in political or religious arenas. These British texts have been the subject of historical (Vincent) and literary (Gagnier) monographs focussed on their genre; and have been used as significant source material for specific historical studies, including on political mobilisation (Griffin), social mobility (Miles), child labour (Humphries; Honeyman, ch. 10), masculinity (Lee), fatherhood (Strange), literacy (U. Howard), working-class reading (Rose; Mays; Murphy), even clothing (Richmond).²³

In the industrialised regions of France, Belgium and Germany, a comparable though much smaller body of such autobiographies appeared from the later nineteenth century, in the French case developing the tradition of urban artisan autobiographies which had emerged in the eighteenth century.²⁴ The social structure of most other European countries (outside those industrialised regions) differed significantly from that of Britain through most of the nineteenth century and in some cases well into the twentieth. Nevertheless, by the 1800s, diaries and autobiographies were beginning to be produced in significant numbers even in predominantly pre-industrial societies. In Denmark, a 1980 survey identified *c.*270 pre-1920 peasant diaries and account books, most written in the nineteenth century, but some in the late eighteenth, a few as far back as 1770. A few eighteenth-century texts contained more or less detailed autobiographies. The nineteenth century diaries came from all parts of country, and from many social groups and levels (big farmers, but also smallholders, fishermen, craftsmen, even some labourers) (Stoklund, 191–4). Britt Liljewall collected 265 autobiographies by Swedish peasants. About half were children of farmers who owned their land; the other half, children of crofters, carpenters and soldiers (31–2). Following the pattern of developments elsewhere, early Finnish examples retained generic traits from family inscriptions, devotional books and oral poetry. In Anna Kuismin's sample of nineteenth-century grass-roots life writings, almost a quarter were written in verse, mostly in the *Kalevala* metre of the national epic.²⁵ For Iceland, a very rural country until well into the twentieth century, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon reports a database of 1,089 life-writing texts (from the late nineteenth century to 2004), written especially by rural smallholders and tenant farmers (2013, 64). For Russia, Julia Herzberg (2009; 2013) has identified more than three hundred peasant life narratives (published and unpublished) written between emancipation

of the serfs in 1861 and the collectivization of agriculture in the 1930s.²⁶ Some were produced for the public sphere: for the “thick journals” of the press, or in response to calls from publicists with specific social or religious projects, about the experience of serfdom, the restrictions peasant life imposed on their talents, or religious conversion. Others were compiled as memory books or diaries documenting everyday life, kept as a cross-generational tool within the family.

LETTERS

Letters differ from diaries and memoirs, both in the breadth of their authorship, and in their very diverse motivations. Lyons (7–8) has argued that letters are a better source for a true history from below, since they were written by a much broader range of the common people than the exceptional individuals who kept a diary or wrote an autobiography.²⁷ In contrast with aristocratic, and later bourgeois, families, the survival of private and family correspondences is much rarer among the common people.²⁸ Nevertheless, some significant bodies of letters do survive, in substantial numbers, among which three major categories have received considerable scholarly attention. The first comprises those written by paupers in search of benefits—to state authorities, private charitable organisations or individual benefactors. In describing the circumstances which led them to appeal for help, the authors construct autobiographical vignettes.²⁹ A second major category is migrants’ letters, often preserved in families and only collected and archived much later. From the mid-nineteenth century, population movements became increasingly trans-oceanic, as waves of migration took peasants and landless rural workers, artisans and labourers, from across northern, eastern and southern Europe to the Americas, South Africa and Australia.³⁰ Soldiers’ letters comprise a third important category. The mass mobilisation of millions of men into the armies of the First World War created a situation which elicited hundreds of millions of letters between soldiers at the front, and their families and friends at home. This in turn generated a commensurate effort on the part of states both to enable, and at the same time to monitor and control, this flood of writing, mostly “from below.”³¹ Lyons has linked the mass emigration of the later nineteenth century with the upheavals caused by mass conscription in the First World War as together meaning that, in period 1860–1920, “[t]he democratisation of writing ... took a quantum leap forward.” (1, 3, 8 (quoted), 11, 51–2, 245–7) Other, smaller but important, categories of letter generated by engagement with the public sphere—forced or willing—included the correspondence of prisoners (both civil and political), and that of political activists (Shtakser 2009; 2014; Sierra Blas 2011; 2016).

TRANSCRIPTS

Finally, there are those oral *life narratives*, initially spoken in the course of various legal or administrative procedures, which were then transcribed and (sometimes) preserved in the relevant records (such as settlement and bastardy hearings, legal and ecclesiastical interrogations or trial reports).³² Writing about trials for infanticide, Sonja Boon suggests that, for the early modern period, “trial records are sometimes the *only* spaces in which marginalized women’s voices and stories emerge.” Such documents “might be considered under the rubric of autobiographical ‘traces,’ iterations of selves which, read together through the lens of theories of life writing, allow us to excavate life narratives.” (57–8).³³ Ian Duffield (2001) has demonstrated how, through detailed contextualisation, the brief “statement of offences” demanded of transported convicts newly arrived in Australia (which he terms “micro-narratives”) can yield a speaking “I.”

2. ARCHIVES

The survival of such life writing from below, and its availability to scholars, varies not only with the history, social structure, and culture of different countries, but also with their collecting and archival traditions.³⁴ In some cases, considerable state resources have been devoted to collection, preservation, and interpretation as part of the nation-building or nation-sustaining project. In contrast, some correspondences from below have been preserved ‘incidentally’ by state archives. Such letters may have been directly addressed to those in power (such as officials of the English Old Poor Law, or the Tsarist government in the Grand Duchy of Finland), or collected by the state for its immediate interests (such as the soldiers’ letters read by the French military postal censors during the First World War). In these cases, the writings of many different correspondents can be read comparatively: for common linguistic patterns or ideological investments which they share, for paupers’ knowledge of their legal rights, or for the morale of front-line soldiers. Other letters, written in pursuit both of the everyday (love, money, employment), and of the extraordinary (a criminal or political conspiracy), might be seized or intercepted by agents of the legal system. In Portugal, the *PostScriptum* project collects and publishes Portuguese and Spanish informal letters (c.1500–1800), particularly those from “common” men and women, which were used as evidence in civil, inquisitorial and ecclesiastical proceedings.³⁵ As well as intercepting correspondence, the judicial and prison systems could also generate it—from those imprisoned or condemned. The prison autobiography of

Pierre Rivière, a French peasant who killed his mother and siblings, was edited by Michel Foucault as part of his critique of discourses of madness (Cf. Morgan).

State archives could also preserve the life narratives produced—again incidentally—in the course of legal or welfare processes, such as trial accounts (*Old Bailey Online*), or settlement and bastardy examinations (English Old Poor Law).³⁶ Organisations within civil society could similarly generate and retain ego-documents.³⁷

During the twentieth century, archival collections were increasingly created by organisations within civil society, especially those of the labour movement, and later by universities and research institutes.³⁸ Lyons (ch. 2) has sketched the ways in which challenging the post-Second World War and post-Civil War national master narratives (in Italy and Spain respectively) has created opportunities for new types of archives, often with significant local support, largely outside existing institutions and disciplines.³⁹ More recently, scholars have begun to identify bodies of life writing from below which are dispersed across different archives, or still held privately.⁴⁰ They have also helped to create new institutions to collect and preserve (and sometimes to encourage the writing of) these texts.⁴¹

All these new archives of popular writing are subtly different, but they all express a political agenda. They exist to promote respect for popular writings, to validate popular memories, and to offer a radical alternative to the official records found in other administrative and institutional depositories. Many other projects reinforce the new interest in the intimate or family writing of people of modest social origins (Lyons, 19).

Another important development has been the identification of life writings from below within archives constructed for quite different purposes. Prominent among these are the conversion narratives kept by religious organisations such as the Salvation Army and the Baptist church, which have been used to explore topics including changing gender roles in Britain and Sweden, and innovations in popular religion in Russia, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴² (P. Walker 2001, ch. 3; Lundin 2013a, 2013b; Coleman) In France, Philippe Artières has retrieved life writings from the records of early social science: the publications of the criminologist Cesare Lombroso, and the private archives of the Lyon professor of legal medicine Alexandre Lacassagne.⁴³ (Artières 2002; 2000) Mental asylums generated life writings for a variety of reasons.

Some patients wrote down their past for themselves to order their thoughts or for their doctors to give proof of their mental sanity. Some of the *curricula vitae* were written in response to a task set by the doctors, who used

them as a diagnostic and probably also as a therapeutic tool, as well as a source of information about a patient's former life.⁴⁴ (Schiegg 2016, 51)

Outside such state and civil society archives, the chances of preservation for life writings from below were much less than for those of aristocrats (with their family repositories) or members of the middle-class; while even published works are vulnerable to loss.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, some memoirs and diaries were handed down within families, sometimes to be donated later to museums or archives. Correspondences could also survive as family collections (love letters; letters exchanged with their families by soldiers, prisoners of war or emigrants), in which case they may allow the tracing of changes in the lives of individuals or families over a period of years.⁴⁶ Preservation may not mean ready availability, particularly in the case of women's writings. Maria Tamboukou (2017) has analysed the history of a group of nineteenth century French seamstresses—feminist and socialist activists—showing how their papers were dispersed across, and hence invisible within, the various fonds of different archives, with the result that “the seamstresses’ narratives have not been properly analysed as ‘documents of life.’”⁴⁷ Nor are all archives, once created, secure.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, new bodies of material continue to be identified today, and texts to be retrieved from obscurity.⁴⁹

3. STATE AND SUBJECT

In recent decades literary scholars have come to recognise, beyond traditional autobiographies, a much wider range of texts which narrate the self. They have traced the hybrid forms in the early modern period out of which the genres of diary and autobiography crystallised. This wider understanding has challenged previous narrower models—based on canonical literary autobiography—of the motivations, intentions and value (or—as they were sometimes seen—the inadequacies) of self-narratives from below.

From a different perspective, within the discipline of sociology, Liz Stanley has questioned the assumption that the writing of an autobiography necessarily arose from an inner drive to express the self. “Many of these [auto/biographical] practices occur because of the requirements of organisational regulatory systems and are characterised by constraint or necessity, rather than by any inner felt need to provide an autobiographical account of the self.” Most examples of such practices “occur as aspects of ‘other’ kinds of behaviour and event, such as applying for a state benefit, making a will or registering a death, rather than being set-piece presentations of the ‘here is my life from birth until now’

kind” (2000, 41). These “auto/biographical practices” form a complex meeting ground between compelled acts which comprise the “exteriority project of audit.” Stanley wants “both to retain a sense of women’s articulations of a variety of means to ‘speak’ and so possess a sense of self and interiority, and also to focus on organisation, regulation and audit in compelling exteriority” (2000, 44, 45).⁵⁰

Stanley refers here specifically to women; I would add: this analysis applies to subjects of *either* gender trying to speak “from below.” So it is valuable, in reading life writings from below, to think about their authors’ motivations as located within a field of force between two poles: an exteriority pole constituted by the state (or by organisations of civil society, or informal community pressures) which compel or otherwise elicit life writings from below, and an interiority pole of the impulse of someone hitherto excluded to narrate their life in some public sphere.

STATE COMPULSION

There is a range of different relationships between state and subject which can give rise to the production of life narratives, and hence life writings, from below. Firstly, examples of *state compulsion*. A requirement by the state to provide a narrative of one’s life could be associated with the need to secure welfare benefits. In Britain from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, under the regime of the Old Poor Law, such narratives could be required from two groups in particular among the labouring poor who needed assistance. Paupers applying for relief under the Poor Law had to establish which was their parish of settlement; and an unmarried mother requesting support either from the father of her child, or from the parish, had to establish either who the putative father was, or which was her parish. Since it was in the financial interest of the ratepayers in the district where such a pauper or unmarried mother resided to resist such a claim (and in the latter case, in the interest of the putative father as well), the claimant needed to provide a convincing narrative of at least such a part of their life as would substantiate their request (Tomkins, 368). Much documentation of such settlement and bastardy claims has survived in the archives of local government. In Stanley’s and Steedman’s terms, the autobiographical injunction of the Old Poor Law set in motion an exchange of stories for sustenance.

Another major source of such forced narratives is the legal system.⁵¹ For scholars of the early modern period in particular, records of legal proceedings provide a prominent source of life narratives from below. The website *Old Bailey Online* displays the Proceedings of the Old Bailey, London’s central criminal court, 1674–1913. It claims to be the largest

body of texts detailing the lives of non-elite people ever published, containing records of nearly 200,000 criminal trials. The website provides detailed guidance for researchers on the specificities of this genre: “how to read a trial transcript.”⁵² Convicts transported from Britain to Australia between 1788 and 1868 produced various forms of ego-documents: letters home (paralleling emigrants’ letters) and life stories (sharing characteristics with the traditional genre of criminal biographies) (Millar; Frost and Maxwell-Stewart; Duffield 1997). Compulsion could arise from administrative as well as legal procedures: early modern armies increasingly required recruits to provide written accounts of their military careers (Harari 2007, 293).

In the early modern period the role of the church was closely intertwined with that of the state, as the site of parallel legal processes which could also order people to tell of their lives. Ecclesiastical proceedings produced the life narratives at the centre of several of the landmark texts of microhistory: those by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (fourteenth century), Carlo Ginzburg (sixteenth century) and Natalie Zemon Davis (1983; seventeenth century).⁵³

Communist Parties in power were technically separate from the state, though in fact controlling it. Hence membership of the Party was closely monitored, in part through inspection of life narratives. Thus in the Soviet Union after 1917, the Communist Party—fearing an influx of opportunists—required applicants for party membership to prove their prior proletarian consciousness. “One way to furnish such proof was to write a proper, well-executed autobiography that would reveal the Communist world outlook of the student-author, and prove its credibility in a set of ritualistic interrogations designed to probe into the soul of the autobiographer and to evaluate the state of his consciousness.” The applicant “narrated events within the development of individual consciousness as prescribed by the master narrative. The recounting of sins, that is, of anti-Bolshevik acts, attributed a confessional framework to communist autobiographies.” Igal Halfin has analysed typical examples of such narratives by which a worker or peasant would seek to demonstrate their fitness for membership (1997: 211, 218; Halfin 2011; Hellbeck 2006).

In the countries of Eastern Europe after 1945, the newly-established Communist regimes demanded life narratives from party militants, as part of the effort to legitimise the party’s identity and role, as both national and proletarian. For the ruling Romanian Communist Party in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the submission of an autobiography was a crucial part of the process of verification of membership (Friedman). Here, it might appear, was an extreme example of Stanley’s “requirements of organisational regulatory systems ... characterised by constraint

or necessity, rather than by any inner felt need to provide an autobiographical account of the self.” (2000, 41). However, careful analysis of these party ‘bios’ (as well as those written in countries where the Communist Party was not in power) suggests that many party members sincerely sought to align their experience with the implicit, and sometimes explicit, model life trajectory which the Communist system presupposed.⁵⁴

STATE SOLICITATION

As well as compelling narratives, from those accused of a crime, seeking benefits, or joining the ruling party, states also *solicited* life narratives in support of projects to build, or legitimise, the nation.⁵⁵ In nations-in-formation in the nineteenth century, such as Finland and Iceland, texts from below were actively collected to this end. The growing nationalist movement in Finland from the 1830s aimed to build a national literary identity rooted in “the people” (collecting the folk songs and stories which came to comprise the national epic *Kalevala*), against the pressure of Russian political hegemony and the use of the Swedish language by the elite; it thereby opened a space for popular voices to gain an audience. The Finnish Literature Society (FLS), founded in 1831, sought and archived texts by writers from a wide social range, thereby establishing a tradition which continues to the present (Salmi-Niklander, 78; Kuismin, 104–5, 112–5; Kauranen, 120–3; Mikkola). Kuismin (115) notes that many Finnish autobiographers were driven by ideals of progress, criticising old ways in contrast to what was rational and new.⁵⁶ In Iceland, texts began to be collected in the late nineteenth century as part of the movement for independence from Denmark. The underlying political imperatives shaped which texts were welcome, and how they were catalogued (Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon 2013, 70). Soldiers’ letters in Britain were collected at the Imperial War Museum as part of efforts to memorialise the world wars and their participants (A. Richards, vi-vii).

Such state sponsorship of life writings could, however, provoke contradictions. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, there were extensive efforts, both official and unofficial, to record the memories of ordinary workers and peasants: Mark Steinberg (2002, 128) refers to “the widespread early Soviet-era obsession with autobiography.”⁵⁷ However, by the mid-1920s, official memory campaigns, such as that conducted by the Commission on the History of the October Revolution and the Communist Party (Istpart) had begun to determine a precise template into which such narratives by those who had participated in the revolution must fit (Corney 1998, 399–407). The imposition of the Stalinist Terror from 1937 swept away the regime’s preceding effort to consolidate itself by encouraging the writing and publication of revolutionary, workers’

and Stakhanovite lives, such Gorky's "History of the Factories and Plants" project (S. Fitzpatrick and Slezkine, 5).

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

A third category of state/subject interaction comprises those situations where citizens took the initiative of *actively engaging* with state authorities. Again, this might be in pursuit of benefits. There is now a substantial body of scholarship in Britain editing and analysing pauper letters. It reveals the ways in which the poor, knowing both their legal rights, and the informal norms governing the dispensing of charity, addressed those with power, wealth and authority over them, tailoring their language to fit the requirements of state, municipality or local nobility as dispensers of assistance. The poor could in some circumstances use such knowledge and command of language to force through their claims.⁵⁸ Comparative study has shown that similar practices of pauper letter writing existed in other European countries.⁵⁹

As well as immediate financial or material benefits, individuals or groups could also petition the authorities to intervene more broadly in their favour. Lyons has pointed to the many different tones that could be used by the weak in "writing up" to those in authority, as historical circumstances and the balance of power changed (22). Such petitioning could spill over into denunciation of enemies.⁶⁰

CHALLENGE AND RESISTANCE

Letters deploying fragments of life narrative could also be the product of political actions *challenging* the state. Inna Shtakser has used letters written by working-class Jewish militants in Russia during the revolutionary period and the pogroms of 1905–7 (from the archives of the Tsarist political police), in conjunction with retrospective autobiographical accounts (from the Society of Ex-Political Prisoners and Exiles, written under the Soviet regime), to build up a picture of how they obtained a new identity as Jewish revolutionaries.⁶¹

Finally, life stories could be composed as a means of *resisting* the state, providing a counter-narrative to official history at times when it was impossible to challenge this openly. Under the Soviet regime in Russia, though many life narratives were written in response to its demands, or to take advantage of opportunities it might offer, others were written against the grain: oppositional texts destined "for the drawer."⁶² Thus members of the Tolstoyan agricultural colonies which were permitted in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, then dissolved and persecuted in the 1930s, wrote memoirs in secret which were not published until the era of *perestroika*.⁶³

4. CIVIL SOCIETY: INTERMEDIARIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Authors writing from below could keep hand-written diaries for themselves, or compose manuscript memoirs to pass on to their children; but if they wished to enter the public sphere by publishing a life narrative, they would have to negotiate with various intermediaries, the gatekeepers of the literary world.⁶⁴ “Issues of mediation and reception are central in considering working-class writings, whose authors were seldom able to publish without some form of financial subvention or patronage—subscription, sponsorship by a political or religious organization, or the favor of an editor, often motivated by political concerns.” (Boos 2013, 136) Within the field of force extending between the poles of state and individual, both single patrons and sponsoring organisations of civil society played a role in creating avenues through which life stories entered the public arena. Patrons and sponsors, whether individuals or organisations, inevitably intervened in ways which helped shape what was written and select what was published.

PATRONS AND SPONSORS

For the labouring poets of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these intermediaries were often individual patrons—aristocratic, or increasingly bourgeois—who frequently had their own ideas about what constituted appropriate authorial personas, as well poetic subjects and verse forms.⁶⁵ The expansion of the commercial publishing industry in the early decades of the nineteenth century saw on occasion the merging of the roles of patron and publisher.⁶⁶ It was difficult for working-class authors to achieve a broad enough readership to be able to make a living from the publishing market, and so they continued to depend on the influence of sympathetic editors or publishers.⁶⁷

Such intermediaries, whether individual patrons, newspaper editors, or religious, temperance, political or cultural organisations (such as the Finnish Literature Society) were often necessary for a worker-writer to reach an audience.⁶⁸ But such writers were not guaranteed to be welcome within wider cultural circles. Their painfully-won literacy might be thought insufficient for addressing political, administrative or literary audiences; or it could encounter direct threats from members of elite society who felt their status or values under attack.⁶⁹ Some authors, nevertheless, were sufficiently confident enough to answer back, challenging professional writers and intellectuals.⁷⁰

From the seventeenth century onwards, religious sects actively solicited and published conversion narratives as a way of winning adherents,

a practice which continued into the twentieth century (Hindmarsh; P. Walker 2001; Lundin 2013a, 2013b; Coleman; Herzberg 2009, 9; cf. Herzberg 2013, ch. 2.3 on reconversions to Orthodoxy). Such efforts might include instances of cross-class collaboration: T. C. Smout described the contemporary recording of testimonies of the 1742 religious revival in Cambuslang (almost all from people of low social status) as “the first Scottish oral history project” (115).⁷¹

From the mid-nineteenth century, the development of secular voluntary organisations (temperance and political) created new institutional forms of sponsorship (similar to earlier religious ones) through which conversion narratives and other testimonies were published.⁷² (Yeo) In these cases, the narratives clearly had to fit a broad template shaped by the organisations’ overall goals.⁷³ In the twentieth century, the sponsor/convert relationship sometimes involved elements of compulsion. Communist parties wanted to (re-)shape their militants for the role they were to play within the movement. Hence the writing of party “bios” was neither designed nor understood simply as performing an external policing function. They were intended to be lived as authentic, central to the Communist drive to create a “new man”, a demand accepted by many militants (Penetier and Pudal 1995).

When life narratives were created or elicited to challenge both public opinion and state policy, intermediation became still more complex, as with the autobiographies written by Black British slaves to oppose the institutions of slavery and racism (Edwards; Carretta). *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, related by herself* (1831) is the first surviving life story by a female British slave. Since the 1980s, much attention has been given to the complex process of mediation by which this oral narrative was transformed by (white, middle-class, Methodist) intermediaries: first transcribed by Susanna Strickland, and then edited by Thomas Pringle for publication by the Anti-Slavery Society.⁷⁴

A different form of sponsorship came from varied forms of social investigation, at first journalistic, later increasingly professionalised. Already by 1850 the socially concerned journalist Henry Mayhew was recording life stories among the London poor. He claimed: “It surely may be considered curious as being the first attempt to publish the history of a people, from the lips of the people themselves—giving a literal description of their labour, their earnings, their trials, and their sufferings, in their own ‘unvarnished’ language.” (Cited in Seed, 538) Yet despite his intentions, here too there was a process of intermediation.⁷⁵

In the twentieth century, this tradition was revived within the emergent discipline of sociology. A foundational text of the Chicago School was William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki’s *The Polish Peasant in Europe*

and America (1918–20), based on personal documents, memoirs and letters.⁷⁶ From this there developed in inter-war Poland an extensive tradition of autobiographical competitions, many of them initiated by research institutes, which included previously ignored subjects (farmers, workers, the unemployed, emigrants) who were playing an increasingly important role in the newly-independent nation.⁷⁷ This tradition was continued under the Communist regime.⁷⁸ In Britain, a group of amateur researchers, inspired partly by the emergent discipline of social anthropology which was then focussed on the peoples of the colonial empire, founded Mass Observation in 1937. MO encouraged its supporters to keep diaries and respond to qualitative questionnaires, with the aim of producing an "anthropology of ourselves." Its legacy is a large archive of writing, with many working- and lower-middle-class contributors (Hinton). The terms in which such calls for life narratives were couched inevitably influenced the form and content of the texts received (Gullestad, 33, 35–6; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett et al., xiv, xxii–xxiv; Moseley, 29–34; Soyer, 224–33).

COMMERCIAL PUBLISHERS

Commercial forces also helped create a market for particular categories of life stories. Soldiers' life narratives began with the standardized martial CVs of Renaissance armies.⁷⁹ However, although a few junior officers and common soldiers of humbler origins compiled memoirs during this period, it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that they wrote in significant numbers. After the Napoleonic Wars, they became much more prominent (Harari 2007, 295–303; cf. Harari 2008, 190–3; Ramsey, ch. 4). There are substantial numbers of memoirs by British former common soldiers (from the Napoleonic Wars to contemporary conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq) (Woodward and Jenkins; Steedman 1988).

By the late nineteenth century, there was a market in Germany for working-class autobiographies which "catered to the desire of bourgeois audiences to read about 'foreign' cultures" (Gerstenberger, 101–3, 108–9, quoted at 103). With the expansion of the media during the twentieth century, the role of the publishing market both in creating opportunities for stories to be told, and shaping their forms, grew. The expanding leisure industries allowed talented individuals from humble backgrounds to achieve exceptional social mobility and fame; so publishers were ready to solicit and promote the memoirs of stars of show-business and (a little later) sport.⁸⁰ In Britain, many politically-sponsored workers' autobiographies of the mid-twentieth century were by coal miners, who had been at the centre of several major industrial struggles (W.S. Howard; Gildart). But later in the century, a new niche commercial market appeared for nostalgic accounts of the golden age of (steam) railways, within which a

significant cluster of railwaymen found a space to publish life narratives (Ashplant 2011).

Publishers' marketing developed tie-ins with mass media, including TV book shows, feature films, and even product advertising. In France, a group of texts which Sarah Farmer terms "peasant memoirs" were published between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s. Their authors all grew up in peasant communities, but moved upwards socially in adult life. Farmer links the great success of these texts to:

a cultural trend in France that reflected intense interest in peasant life and peasant society. ... the memoirs and their authors were transformed into nationally known figures by the media.The format of such shows, predicated on the idea that the writer is as interesting (if not more so) than what he or she has written, played a cardinal role in the democratization and commercialization of the culture of reading and writing (363, 368, 369; cf. Reed-Danahay 1997, 125–128; 2002, 97).

Towards the end of the twentieth century, there appeared what might be termed a literature of abjection, which included memoirs of grief, illness and approaching death, but also what have come to be called "misery memoirs" of lives lived in poverty—a sub-genre which has produced major best-sellers. The misery memoir, suggests Barbara Korte, "has a testimonial quality and professes to tell 'true stories' of personal suffering. It is predominantly written in the first person, so that it appears—and appeals—as a literary form in which the poor speak for themselves, even though some books have been heavily edited before being given access to the book market." (Korte, 81–2; cf. Korte and Zipp, ch. 3)

COLLABORATORS

The twentieth century saw the development of new forms of intermediation, collaborative across class lines, which aimed to create spaces for voices from below freer from the control of patrons and sponsoring organisations, or commercial pressures. For Britain in the 1930s, Christopher Hilliard (43, 55) contrasts the practice of the journal *Left Review*—where "publicizing the realities of working-class life and giving workers an opportunity to express themselves in print formed part of the project of developing 'a literature of the struggle for socialism'", but "empowering worker-writers was not a stated goal", with the magazine *New Writing* under John Lehmann, whose "approach to both literature and politics was fundamentally liberal", and who "worked for the elevation of gifted working-class writers without lowering the standards of entry to the franchise of authorship."

In Britain in the 1970s a significant number of community publishing groups developed, many linked together (from 1976) in the Federation

of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP). Drawing in middle-class activists (often inspired by the ideals of 1968), and sometimes developing out of local political or industrial disputes, these groups aimed to break down barriers between writers and readers. They published autobiographies and memoirs, as well as poetry and fiction. These groups achieved considerable success in the 1970s, with some books selling thousands of copies within their own locality. In the 1980s they faced considerable difficulties. The decline of class politics and the labour movement, and the parallel rise of identity politics, undermined some existing audiences and distribution networks, while creating a more diverse pattern of writing and a fragmented readership.⁸¹ Against claims that many of these autobiographies presented a nostalgic vision of a lost era of working-class neighbourliness, Ben Jones has argued that reading these texts with attention to the gender and generation of their authors, and the context of their publication, shows that many of them in fact record the ‘hidden injuries of class’ and contest contemporary narratives which denigrate life in working-class housing estates.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I will highlight three main themes arising from this survey of recent scholarship:

- there is much more material that can be termed life writing “from below” than was believed until quite recently, to be found in many genres: autobiographies, diaries, letters; as well as their precursors; and analogous forms;
- research on these texts contributes to rethinking questions about *autobiographical practices* in general, and the possibilities of self-representation from below in particular;
- within this very diverse range of texts, a drive to assert the presence and value of the self, and of the community from which one comes, is recurrent across many centuries and societies.

Martyn Lyons has suggested that what he calls the “New History from Below” gives a new importance to the experiences of individuals, placing them in wider contexts (245–6, 253–5). Recognising that to be subordinate(d) did not mean to be inarticulate, it refines the linguistic turn in contemporary historiography by exploring how official discourses were accepted, modified or rejected. Recent scholarship demonstrates ways of reading the substantial and diverse body of life writings from below which bring out the creative subjectivity—in action and in writing—which their authors displayed.

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Dokumentation lebensgeschichtlicher Aufzeichnungen

<http://wirtschaftsgeschichte.univie.ac.at/vereine/doku/>

Sammlung Frauennachlässe

<http://www.univie.ac.at/Geschichte/sfn>

Belgium

Archives du patrimoine autobiographique Belgique

<http://www.apabel.be/>

Britain

Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies

<http://www.brunel.ac.uk/services/library/research/special-collections/collections/burnett-archive-of-working-class-autobiographies>

Great Diary Project

<http://www.thegreatdiaryproject.co.uk/>

People's History Museum

<http://www.phm.org.uk/>

Working Class Movement Library

<http://www.wcml.org.uk/>

France

Association pour l'autobiographie et le patrimoine autobiographique (APA)

<http://autobiographie.sitapa.org/>

Germany

Deutsche Tagebucharchiv

<http://www.tagebucharchiv.de/>

Fritz-Hüser-Institut für Literatur und Kultur der Arbeitswelt

http://www.dortmund.de/de/leben_in_dortmund/bildungswissenschaft/fritz_hue-ser_institut/start_fhi/

Institut für Geschichte und Biographie

<http://www.fernuni-hagen.de/geschichteundbiographie/>

Walter Kempowski Archiv

<http://www.adk.de/de/archiv/archivbestand/literatur/index.htm?hg=literatur&we-objectID=336>

Italy

Archivio della scrittura popolare

<http://www.museostorico.tn.it/index.php/Archivi-e-collezioni/Fondi-e-collezioni/Archivio-della-scrittura-popolare/>

Archivio ligure della scrittura popolare

http://www.dafist.unige.it/?page_id=1068

Fondazione Archivio Diaristico Nazionale

<http://www.archiviodiari.org/index.php/home.html>

Netherlands

Nederlands Dagboekarchie

http://www.edac-eu.eu/?page_id=133

Spain

Archivo de Escrituras Cotidianas

http://www.siece.es/siece/escritura_cotidiana.html

Arxiu de la Memòria Popular

<http://www.memoriapopular.org/>

Switzerland

Archives de la vie ordinaire

<https://archivesdelavieordinaire.ch/>

Archives de la vie privée

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Other Websites

America Letters Project

<http://archives.ihrc.umn.edu/vitrage/all/am/ihrc149.html>

Écrits du for privé en France de la fin du Moyen Age à 1914

<http://ecritsduforprive.huma-num.fr/presentation.htm>

International Institute of Social History

<https://socialhistory.org/>

Laboring-Class Poets Online (LCPO)

<https://lcpoets.wordpress.com/>

Mass Observation

<http://www.massobs.org.uk/>

Old Bailey Online

<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>

Pauper Letters and Petitions for Poor Relief in Germany and Great Britain, 1770–1914

http://www.ghil.ac.uk/research/solidarity_and_care/pauper_letters_and_petitions.html

PostScriptum: a Digital Archive of Ordinary Writings (Early Modern Portugal and Spain)

<http://www.clul.ul.pt/resources/462-post-scriptum-home>

QueenSpark

<http://www.queensparkbooks.org.uk/theme/4.html>

Red de Archivos e Investigadores de la Escritura Popular

<http://redaiep.es/>

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NOTES

- 1 This paper is a revised version of my keynote address at the Fourth IABA Europe Conference, "Dialogical Dimensions in Narrating Lives and Life Writing" (Centre for Atlantic Studies, Funchal, Madeira, 27–29 May 2015); I am grateful to Professor Alberto Vieira and Cláudia Faria for this invitation. I wish to thank Julia Herzberg, Neil Jenkins, Anna Pellegrino and Markus Schiegg for making copies of their publications available to me; and Florence Boos, Keith Gildart, Stuart Howard, Karin Schweißgut and Mark Steinberg for answering my queries. A revised and expanded version of this article, also exploring the different modes of analysis and interpretation which have been developed for reading life writings from below, and the ambitions which have motivated the substantial efforts of preservation, publication, and outreach in recent decades, will be published as part of the introduction to a reader on life writing from below which I am editing.
- 2 The average age at writing of Kuismin's sample of nineteenth-century Finnish autobiographers was fifty (106). Exceptionally, the Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO) in Vilna launched three autobiography competitions (in 1932, 1934 and 1939) specifically for young Jews (aged 16 to 22), with the aim of understanding a generation coming of age immediately after the traumas of the First World War, and in the newly-independent

- Poland. Moseley, 40–1. They elicited some 627 texts. “The majority of these autobiographies were written in conditions of grinding poverty, several in conditions of utter destitution.” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett et al., xx–xxi; Moseley, 6 (quoted), 15–16.
- 3 For an overview of definitions of “life writing”, see Woods, 2–3; Mascuch et al., 11–13. The term “ego documents”, introduced by the Dutch historian Jacques Presser, has been widely adopted to cover this extended category of life writings. See Dekker, 7–20. For historians’ use of ego-documents, see the special issue of *German History* 28.3 (2010). On commonplace books, see Darnton, ch. 10. Hopkin 2012, ch. 2, suggests that the chosen folk-song repertoire of an individual can be understood as commenting indirectly on their life situation through the impersonal mask of fiction. Stanley 2004, 203, comments, about letters: “all writing genres contain internal distinctions, exist on a spectrum from the most to the least like the genre ‘norm,’ and are characterized by their intertextuality, all of which suggests that remaining within the framework of genre conventions can be unnecessarily limiting”.
 - 4 Some authors wrote in several formats: Moss 2014, 232; Moseley, 16–18, 27–28.
 - 5 Hinds 2002, 181, quotes the seventeenth-century religious radical Anna Trapnel: “I could not have related so much from the shallow memory I have naturally, but through often relating these things, they become as a written book, spread open before me, and after which I write.” The Methodist convert Sarah Ryan often repeated her confession narrative to the “sympathetic audience of young women who might benefit from her example”: Culley 2014, 52–53. The Sicilian worker Vincenzo Rabito’s autobiography is a story that he “had begun to rehearse aloud long before he put it down on paper”, recounting his life to fellow workers in a wartime shelter: Moss 2014, 226. See also Baggerman and Dekker in this cluster.
 - 6 Amelang 1993, 34–5: “by narrowing the range of autobiographical evidence to elite sources, historians have by and large reproduced a world of political attitudes and behaviour limited to those of the dominant classes. That politics can look quite different when viewed from the bottom instead of the top comes as no surprise. What is surprising is the reluctance by scholars to consult the popular political diaries that do exist.” Hopkin 2012, 6–14, gives a concise overview of historians’ post-war approaches to “voices from below”.
 - 7 Hitchcock 2004, 295, 294, 297. “This mass of documentation represents an extraordinary archive of everyday suffering, covering the lives of perhaps a majority of all eighteenth-century British men and women”: Hitchcock 2008, 240–1. Keith Snell (1985) had already used such sources: see 9–14. Subsequently a group of scholars edited a documentary collection, *Narratives of the Poor in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, which brought together many life narratives of the poor from the archives of state and charitable institutions. Research based on such materials includes Hitchcock, King & Sharpe; and McEwan & Sharpe. Cf. Tomkins, 365, 369.
 - 8 “Both diaries and autobiographies frequently included other material—prayers, sermon notes, history, poetry, meditations, lists of providences, and so on—that demonstrate the error in calling the books in which they were contained simply diaries or autobiographies. The abiding characteristic of autobiographical and diaristic writings was fluidity. These memoirs were heavily intertextual. Lives relied on diaries, and both frequently relied on other books written by their subjects, such as books of family history, account books, and other volumes of diaries”: Cambers, 802–3. Cf. Booy 2001, 1–4. For the diverse forms of seventeenth century women’s personal writings, Ottway.
 - 9 “In Italy, the practice seems to have been in decline after the sixteenth century, but in Spain it persisted into the modern period, although it was mostly limited to Catalonia and Valencia.” Castillo Gomez, 616. Even as late as the second half of the nineteenth century, Swedish peasant diaries were close to such memory books, their contents focussed

- especially on the work and finances of the farm. Significant numbers of these survive; Bo Larsson's 1992 register records 363 peasant diary keepers in Sweden: Edlund, 89. Cf. Kuismin, 106, 116 (Finland).
- 10 Amelang 1998, 234–5, stresses that many pieces of artisan self-writing “occupied a middle ground between public and private intentions and outcomes” and were “often a form of involvement in circles beyond one’s immediate existence”.
 - 11 “In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries devout Protestants were encouraged to keep a diary as a means of spiritual self-examination. By recording their daily successes or failures in living a godly life, these diarists could ascertain the extent to which they had been granted divine favour, and the likelihood of their eternal salvation.autobiographical writings by women belonging to Nonconformist sects, such as Baptists and Quakers, were important vehicles for the spiritual reassurance of their fellow sectarians.” (Ottway, 234, 238) “Baptist churches required would-be communicants to examine their own lives for evidence that God had saved them personally. The practice of narrating these ‘conversion experiences’ led first to the publication of collections of many such short accounts, and longer individual narratives followed.” (Hobby, 171) Cf. Cambers.
 - 12 Spufford, 407: “The spiritual autobiographies of the seventeenth century include the first subjective accounts, written by men from the countryside from yeoman parentage or below, of childhood, education, the importance of literacy and the importance that their religious convictions had for them....” Magro, 430: “During the revolutionary period, the struggle over what counted as writing and authorship produced an opening for nonaristocratic women’s entry into the public sphere of religious-political debate. In the case of Anna Trapnel and other sectarian women, this historical conjuncture established the conditions of possibility for the joining of class and gender in a radical oppositional politics”. Surviving diaries are few. Among the 372 currently-known English diaries written between 1500 and 1700, of the 246 where the author’s occupation could be identified, McKay found only a handful who had not received a formal education.
 - 13 Oswald, 1–5; Booy 2007; Cambers, 804, 817.
 - 14 Magro; Hobby 170; Hinds 2002; 2009, 244.
 - 15 The transition from spoken to written testimony in conversion narratives can be found also in the Salvation Army in the later nineteenth century in both Britain (P. Walker 2004, 251) and Sweden (Lundin 2013a, 249, who notes that “it was customary for all who had been ‘saved’ to ‘witness’ their conversion repeatedly at meetings. This meant primarily that the written narrative was preceded by a public oral version. The person who witnessed thereby had the opportunity to develop the narrative in interaction with the audience”); and among Dutch pietists in the nineteenth century (Baggerman and Dekker in this cluster), and Russian Baptists in the early twentieth (Coleman, 96).
 - 16 Early British secular texts included sailors’ travel narratives (Helgerson; Fumerton). In France, authors included the Lille textile artisan, Pierre Ignace Chavatte (1633–93), who compiled a “Chronique memorial des choses memorables” which offers an entry to a world shaped by a strong craft guild culture, and a devout and active lay Catholicism (see Chavatte; Lottin); and Jacques-Louis Ménétra (1738–c.1812), a Parisian glazier who wrote (from 1764 onwards) an account of an adventurous life—lived mostly in Paris, but starting with the artisan’s traditional tour de France (1757–63) (see Ménétra). Cf. Thamer. Also in the eighteenth-century: Brändle 2013 for Swiss artisans’ autobiographies and diaries; Jarrick (Sweden) and Ransel (Russia) for merchant’s diaries.
 - 17 On this terminology, William Christmas writes: “Many descriptors for the poetic tradition I am describing here have been proffered over the years, but ‘laboring-class’ strikes me as the most inclusive and least vexed term. Other current terms include ‘self-taught,’ ‘autodidact,’ and ‘plebeian.’ Older, potentially derogatory terms like

- ‘uneducated’ and ‘peasant’ have by and large dropped out of circulation, and still others, like ‘working-class’ or ‘proletarian,’ have been shown to be ahistorical impositions on the eighteenth-century tradition.” (193 n1 and references cited there). Authors of full-scale autobiographical poems include Edward Anderson whose 32-page poem *The Sailor* (1792) was “probably the first purpose-written labouring-class autobiography of the Romantic period” (Binfield, 162), the Cornish tin-miner John Harris (Keegan and Goodridge, 226–237), and the shoemaker James Woodhouse (Keegan 2001, 210–211; Van-Hagen).
- 18 Boos 2005, 2, comments, of the Victorian era, that “most working-class Britons who managed to publish anything seem to have drafted verse and memoirs rather than fiction”; she emphasises “the surprisingly wide and heterogeneous range of nineteenth-century working-class poetry—its dialects, registers, verse-forms, and other evocations of the individual lives and collective *Lebensformen* in the writings of poor nineteenth-century Britons”. *Labouring-Class Poets Online (LCPO)*, at Nottingham Trent University (U.K.), is a database of (in April 2015) 1,854 named poets living and publishing 1700–1900 (of whom about 13% were women), plus supporting materials. There is now a rich critical literature on these poets: see Christmas; Boos 2005.
 - 19 Goodridge, ch. 1 (on the rural poets Stephen Duck and Mary Collier). Keegan 2001, found almost 50 shoemaker poets from the later seventeenth to the late nineteenth century (195). By 2015, *LCPO* had identified 130 shoemaker poets, and 230 weavers. Cf. the manuscript autobiography of Breton weaver Jean Conan (1765–1834), written in 7054 rhyming couplets: Hopkin 2004, 192. “News from Russia”, by the serf “Petr O.”, was written in verse: Mackay 2009, 7, 38–117.
 - 20 Keegan and Goodridge, 225–6, suggest that “for mineworkers especially, labor is not just the context these poets wrote within (and often against). Rather, the activity of mining actively shapes the verse’s content and form”. They have identified 45 poets associated with the mining industry. Cf. Keegan 2011.
 - 21 Landry, 225–8; Boos 2008, 31. On the tambourer (silk-embroiderer) Janet Hamilton (1795–1873), see Boos 2012; on the power-loom weaver Ellen Johnston (c.1835–1874?), see Rosen; on the factory worker (and Chartist) “E.H.”, see Timney; on the agricultural labourer Mary Collier, see W. R. Jones.
 - 22 Other texts from that period will have surfaced subsequently; while many new texts have been published since the mid-1980s. For example, Burnett et al. catalogued 63 autobiographies written by railway workers; I have found a further 158 published subsequently: Ashplant 2011.
 - 23 Stollberg uses German workers’ autobiographies to analyse their changing attitudes towards medical treatments in the nineteenth century.
 - 24 The comparative importance of this British corpus is shown by the fact that the published autobiographies catalogued by Burnett et al. include c.975 by authors born before 1900, compared to 400 French- or German-speaking worker autobiographers (from four countries: France, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland) which Maynes, 7, found for the same period. Cf. Traugott (France); Kelly, (Germany); Bonnell (Russia). Many of the texts excerpted in Harte are by Irish workers or rural labourers.
 - 25 As late as the 1930s, Pekka Huuskonen (1880–1975), a gardener, embarked on a life story in verse which eventually totalled 3,600 lines. Kuismin, 106, 116; cf. Davið Ólafsson, 46 (Iceland).
 - 26 MacKay noted that scholars have so far located about twenty life narratives by serfs; but this refers to published texts (2005; 2009, 3–4, 18 nn.5–6).
 - 27 Lyons borrows Daniel Fabre’s term “écritures ordinaires”, commenting (14): “[i]n my definition, the ‘ordinariness’ of ordinary writings derives from the lower-class status of their authors”.

- 28 Examples of correspondences from below preserved by families include those of the Clifts, kept because one son of the family rose of eminence (Austin); the Loughs, Irish emigrants to America (Moreton); and the Solas, Italian emigrants to Argentina (Baily and Ramella).
- 29 Pauper letters are now much studied: see above. Private charities in England included the Refuge for the Destitute (King). The records of the London Foundling Hospital include “petitions presented by desperate mothers seeking admission for their child to the hospital. ... full of pathos, emotion and the details of lives run into the sands of misfortune” (Hitchcock 2008, 243; Levene). Letters were similarly written to those in authority both by petitioners seeking benefits (Lyons, 22), and by those denouncing supposed malefactors (Suodenjoki). A related phenomenon were letters written to famous people: S. Fitzpatrick 1997a, 2 & n.8.
- 30 Migrants: Lyons, chs 10–11. For an introduction to the strengths and limitations of the letters of emigrants to Australia, see E. Richards; D. Fitzpatrick 1995. Shipboard diaries written by emigrants to Australia are a related genre, which Andrew Hassam describes as a form of journal-letter since they were often intended to be read by the families left behind (1995, xiii–xv, 66, 160–1). For the narratives of peasant settlers in the Russian hinterland, see Sunderland.
- 31 Lyons, chs 5–9; Hanna; Stiaccini. For the Second World War, Hellbeck 2009.
- 32 Amelang 2011 analyses the distinctive character of the *traza*, or transcribed oral narrative by a prisoner before the Spanish Inquisition.
- 33 “Trial records, which record selves shaped and formed under extreme duress, can be problematic sites for the articulation and excavation of matters of identity and subjectivity..... Most Old Bailey trial accounts offer only limited access to the spoken words of the charged mother herself. Rather, her story—her identity—emerges in fits and starts, not only from the words she speaks—for sometimes she says absolutely nothing at all—but from the things she does and the way she is perceived by those around her. Autobiographical traces exist in the ways that others in her environment perceived her burgeoning body, her physical comportment, her attitudes, her work habits, and her actions.” (Boon, 57, 61). Gowing 1996, examines the testimony given in cases of sexual insult, contracts of marriage and marriage separation which came before the church courts in London between 1560 and 1640; Gowing 1997 analyses evidence given in trials for infanticide.
- 34 Boos 2013, 134: “one could argue that the range of working-class writing is only beginning to be explored. The relatively lower esteem in which its authors were held meant that many primary materials—letters, manuscripts, contemporary recollections, and ephemera—more often preserved for writers of higher social classes, were seen as disposable.” For analysis of the development of an archival tradition, see Iuso.
- 35 Such documents could enter the legal system in various ways: “by voluntary deliverance; thanks to denunciation; by seizure; through intercepted mail (private or public)”. Leitão, 253. Rutten and van der Wal analyse 15,000 Dutch private letters, which were confiscated by the British authorities during the wars fought between The Netherlands and England (c.1660–1800). For letters seized by the Soviet secret police, see Izmozik.
- 36 For approaches to the interpretation of such trial transcripts, see Schulte 12–16 (Bavaria); Chaytor, G. Walker (England).
- 37 Several thousand letters from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries survive in the archives of two mental asylums in south-west Germany, written by hundreds of different patients, since they were never delivered but were kept by the institutions’ censors in patients’ files: Schiegg 2015, 72–6; cf. Beveridge, 436 (“a large number of letters from pauper patients have survived” in the Royal Edinburgh Asylum). More marginal examples would include “poignant failed petitions to the Royal Literary Fund” in Britain: (Boos 2005, 5, cf. Boos 2008, 31–35, 234–5, 251; Ashton and Roberts, 4–57); and the

- biographical questionnaires sent to the Estonian Literary Society when it was preparing a reference work: Möldre 2016.
- 38 International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam, founded 1935); Mass Observation (founded 1937); cf. the interwar Polish initiatives discussed below.
- 39 Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, efforts have been made to collect and archive ordinary people’s memories of famine, repression and the Gulag: Paperno 2002, 578 n.3; she notes (602–6) an apocalyptic dimension to the expressed aim of the People’s Archive: the “total collection of personal documents of the masses”.
- 40 The ambitious French project “Les écrits du privé en France de la fin du Moyen Age à 1914” has carried out a census of all life-writings held in French public archives. Pellegrino has analysed the reports written, on their return, by Italian workers who were sponsored to visit international expositions.
- 41 Over the past twenty years, APA (*L’association pour l’autobiographie et le patrimoine autobiographique*) has built up an archive of almost 3,500 (mostly twentieth-century) texts. These and similar collections embrace a range of texts stretching beyond even the broadest definition of working-class/popular writing “from below”, but they still constitute major repositories for such writing. See also the websites listed under Works Cited.
- 42 Harari 2007, 296 & n.32, points to “one extremely rich source of early modern memoirs written by junior officers and common soldiers, namely early modern spiritual autobiographies and conversion narratives”, noting that “in the Moravian archive of Herrnhut in Germany alone, about 10,000 unpublished manuscripts of religious autobiographies from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries are extant.”
- 43 In nineteenth-century France, forensic scientists, psychiatrists and neurologists elicited (or received unbidden) autobiographical narratives from homosexual men, including some workers: see Peniston and Erber, 1–5 (on Arthur Belorget). Hopkin 2004, 195, notes that the archives of nineteenth-century folklorists can also be explored for forms of life-narrative.
- 44 After examining 6,500 patient files, Schiegg (2016, 51–53) located some 21 life narratives (2 quasi-diaries, 19 autobiographies).
- 45 “Many working-class writers published their works in regional or other periodicals now literally crumbling into decay undigitized, or in small pamphlets or limited editions of which few or, in worst cases, no copies remain.” Boos 2013, 134. There might also be reasons to destroy material: “Spanish Civil War letters have always been obscured—if not destroyed—by individual families for fear of possible reprisals.” Sierra Blas 2011, 172. Some papers of Luigi Sola, a socialist militant, were destroyed by his family during fascism in Italy: Baily and Ramella, 17. Cf. Moss 2014, 232.
- 46 Burnett et al. catalogued 132 British diaries, a mere 6% of the number of autobiographies they found. Lyons, 54–6, 178, discusses the circumstances in which correspondences may survive. Cf. Herzberg 2009, 10–13; 2013, ch. 4 (Russian peasant and family books); for diaries: Feely, 93–6; for memoirs: Steedman 1988, 1–2; Hébrard. Hassam suggests that the scarcity of surviving shipboard diaries written by the steerage (poorer) British emigrants results from a combination of more difficult writing conditions on board, greater geographical mobility once settled in Australia (making accidental loss more likely), and (until recently) little interest in such diaries by official archives (1994, 12–14; 1995, xv–xvi, 90–3, 125–6). Cf. Moss 2014, 232. Few writers had the confidence of Franz Göll, who left his massive archive to the German state: Fritzsche, 220–1.
- 47 Tamboukou 2016, 211, comments that: “What also stands out in research and study of women’s archives in the world of work is the amount of ‘memory work’ that many women had to do in collecting and preserving their personal and political documents and literally creating their own archives”, and cites the example of Jeanne Bouvier (1865–1964) who “worked tirelessly to ensure that her memories and personal documents of a long

- life as a worker, intellectual and activist would find a place in the archives and possibly histories of the future". Gudny Hallgrimsdottir, 134–5, 142–4, shows that the way manuscripts in the Icelandic National Library were catalogued in the early twentieth century obscured women's important role as authors and scribes since they did not accord with "the self-image fitting for the new Icelander" (144).
- 48 Rodak, 82, reports that after the 1989 transition from Communism, more than 95% of the massive archive of Polish memoirs was dissipated or damaged.
- 49 Boos 2013, 135: "Doubtless there are also hundreds of unexplored materials still waiting in local and regional libraries, often classified not as 'working-class' literature but simply as documents of nineteenth-century life." The Great Diary Project, a recent initiative now housed at the Bishopsgate Institute Library in London, is collecting diaries by non-elite authors: Ashplant 2013.
- 50 Similarly, the historian Carolyn Steedman, querying the assumption that "this process [of writing one's life] is a voluntary one, that there is an urge to tell the self, that it comes from within, and that the impulsion to do so, in spoken or written language, is part of the very process of self construction", has urged scholars "to consider the history of what we may come to call 'the autobiographical injunction': a history of expectations, orders and instructions rather than urges and desires" (2000, 25, 28).
- 51 In extreme cases, a life might be narrated to ward off a death sentence: Maxwell-Stewart (for a transported convict in Australia); MacKay 2005, 64–8, 84 n.31; 2009, 23–37 (a Russian serf); or to avoid retaliation by a fellow prisoner (Frost).
- 52 For an example of its use, see Boon (quoted at note 33 above).
- 53 Franceschi and Tourres use the transcriptions of oral judicial depositions, as well as diaries written by artisans, as sources for the study of 'popular memory' in Florence. Perry uses Spanish Inquisition records to investigate the life of a Muslim slave woman; Kagan and Dyer, chs 2, 3 and 5, to reproduce the interrogations of a slave, a tinker/soldier, and a meat-cutter.
- 54 Awareness of the specific political configuration in which they were produced, as well as the broader Communist genre, is necessary to understand these party autobiographies. As Friedman points out (11), whereas in the early 1920s "Soviet society was saturated with a narrative richness that made certain self-presentations almost overdetermined ... in 1950s Romania, however, contradictory messages, especially surrounding the place of the small industrial working class, made the writing of a Party autobiography fraught with hazards." For rich analyses of party bios in a country where Communists were not in power, see Pennetier and Pudal 2002; Boarelli.
- 55 Steedman brings out the dual role of the state: citing David Vincent's argument that "families came to be seen as poor when they could no longer keep their stories private—were forced to tell them ... in order to obtain state benefits" (1997, 113), while in the post-1945 state school system there developed "a particular pedagogical practice, in which a form of writing and a critical reading were designed ... to bring the life stories of the previously unconsidered into the commonweal" (122; cf. 113–5).
- 56 The crofter Kustaa Brask likewise associated himself with the Finnish national project, using his texts to advocate agricultural improvement and educational provision: Kauranen, 122–6, 130. Vilho Itkonen (1872–1918), a socialist and temperance advocate, interpreted the folklore he collected through the lens of Theosophy as opening the way to a new era of innovation: Mikkola, 149–51.
- 57 Steinberg instances Zavolokin's appeal to "almost every major worker and peasant poet in Russia to submit an autobiographical essay" (2002, 128–9). Before 1917, some workers were able to publish life narratives in the mainstream (Bonnell, 33), trade union (Steinberg 1992, 107) or revolutionary press (Bonnell, 32–3).
- 58 See the discussion of pauper letters above.

- 59 See the Anglo-German research project “Pauper Letters and Petitions for Poor Relief in Germany and Great Britain, 1770–1914”. Earner-Byrne studies letters sent to the Archbishop of Dublin in the early years of the Irish republic. More unusual (British) examples include appeals to the Bank of England for temporary charitable relief from convicted forgers prosecuted by the Bank itself and now awaiting transportation (Palk).
- 60 For petitions by Finnish tenants, small farmers and agricultural labourers to the Russian Governor-General in the early twentieth century, denouncing local power-holders for conspiratorial activity against the government, thereby attempting to gain a more favourable response, see Suodenjoki. For Russian peasant women who sought divorce before 1917 circumventing the very restrictive policy of the Orthodox Church by appealing to the Tsar’s Chancellery for Receipt of Petitions, see Engel, 118–9. For denunciation during the Soviet period in Russia, see S. Fitzpatrick 1996; 1997b (with an example).
- 61 Shtakser 2009; 2014, 16–18, 153–159 on sources. Scriven discusses the correspondence of the leading British Chartist Henry Vincent (1813–1878). Rowe analyses the letter-writing activities of French worker activists in the early nineteenth century. Sierra Blas on imprisoned Spanish Republicans.
- 62 Taking advantage of opportunities: Paperno 2002, 581, 593, 595 (Kiseleva, a semi-literate working woman who sent her life story to a Moscow film studio). Oppositional: Garros et al. (diaries of the peasants Frolov and Arzhilovskii).
- 63 Two of these memoirs were written by men born peasants (Morgachev, Dragunovsky); for their composition, Edgerton, xviii, 181.
- 64 In what follows, I distinguish loosely, among intermediaries, between *patrons*, who had some (direct or indirect) personal link with an individual author (as with aristocratic patrons of labouring poets in the eighteenth century); and *sponsors*, organisations (e.g. churches, political parties, newspapers) and their members which helped create publishing opportunities for forms of life writing from below.
- 65 Boos 2001, 105; Christmas, 189. For nineteenth-century working-class poets, see Rosen; Boos 2013; Maidment, 281–9; Ashton & Roberts.
- 66 On the poet John Clare’s relations with his editors, see Bate, chs 9–10.
- 67 On the role of such facilitating editors, see Boos 2012 for the poet, essayist and memoirist Janet Hamilton (1795–1873); Boos 2003 and Rosen, 211–12 for the Scottish “Factory Girl” Ellen Johnston (c.1835–73), a power-loom weaver.
- 68 Kuismin, 115–6, on middle-class mentors who helped plebeian writers enter Finnish literary circles.
- 69 Kauranen, 124–5, 127, on the Finnish crofter Kustaa Brask’s vulnerable position vis-à-vis his landlord. Cf. Salmi-Niklander, 81, 86, on hostility to editors of hand-written newspapers.
- 70 Mikkola analyses two self-taught folklore collectors who challenged the authority of the FLS professionals. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon 2013, 70–1, notes that ordinary Icelanders with limited formal education would argue with scholars who questioned the historical veracity of the sagas.
- 71 Culley reports “the as-told-to life story of domestic servant and Methodist preacher Sarah Ryan [1724–68], purportedly recorded in manuscript by her middle-class friend Mary Fletcher. This fragile textual record is contained in a folder with extracts from Ryan’s diary and letters and recounts experiences of family break-up, domestic service, marital abuse, bigamy, spiritual conversion and religious community.” 2015, 8; cf. Culley 2014, 32–5, 47–53.
- 72 Working men active in the British temperance movement published life narratives in its press, or later as autobiographies: Harrison, nos 24, 127, 131, 141, 166, 181, 235, 240, 270, 378; *The Commonwealth* (journal of the Scottish Temperance League), 1856–7.

- 73 In the early twentieth century German Social Democratic Party (SPD), “[s]ocialist cultural theorists such as [Karl] Kautsky and Franz Mehring hailed personal accounts of working-class life as harbingers of a distinct socialist literature with a readership and a distinct literary practice of its own”, which they distinguished from both “lengthy descriptions of misery devoid of revolutionary optimism ... characteristic of exoticizing renditions of lower-class life for a bourgeois audience” and texts edited and published by a former Protestant minister and member of the SPD “with humanitarian intentions directed mainly at a sympathetic bourgeois audience”. Gerstenberger, 100–5, 109–10 (quoted at 103, 104, 105).
- 74 For a modern edition, with substantial supplementary material, see Prince. For an introduction to the extensive scholarly literature, often drawing on feminist and postcolonial theories, and the different “Mary Princes” constructed therein, see Ferguson, 281–298; Whitlock, ch. 1; McBride, chs 1, 3; Todorova; Rauwerda.
- 75 On which see Seed, 536, 538; Murphy, 26.
- 76 Znaniecki collected letters through an appeal in the emigrant press (offering a small payment); 764 appeared in the first two volumes. He commissioned an autobiography from a peasant who had emigrated in the early twentieth century; half his manuscript was published in volume 3. Rodak, 76.
- 77 From 1918 to 1939, more than 20 competitions produced *c.*10,000 personal documents, published in *c.*20 volumes. This developing tradition also inspired the YIVO competitions. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett et al., xx–xxii.
- 78 After 1945, under the Communist regime, this practice continued on an expanded scale; by the end of the 1980s, the Society of Friends of Memoir-Writing held *c.*900,000 autobiographical documents from 1,600 competitions organised in the twentieth century. Rodak, 77–81; cf. note 48 above. For other sociological competitions, see Abel (Nazi recruits in the 1930s, cf. Merkl); Gullestad, 320 n.5 (Norway from the 1960s); Rotkirch (Russia in the 1990s).
- 79 Harari 2007, 293: “Elis Gruffydd, a Welsh common soldier from the English garrison of Calais ... produced a mammoth chronicle of the world in Welsh, beginning with creation, which devoted particular attention to Gruffydd’s own adventures and military campaigns. ... though Gruffydd adds little to our knowledge of events in the Garden of Eden, his supposedly ‘world’ chronicle is a mine of priceless information about the lives of common soldiers in the early sixteenth century.” (294)
- 80 Stein and Butler note the absence of significant scholarship on popular musical autobiographies; Fleiner is a case study of the recollection of a working-class childhood in both autobiography and pop song. Taylor analyses the development of the British sports memoir as a popular form of autobiographical writing from *c.*1800 to the 1950s; Woolridge traces the development of footballers’ autobiographies, 1945–1980. Free locates some of these texts within the wider corpus of autobiographies by Irish emigrant manual labourers, and relates individual examples to wider Irish cultural concerns in the 1990s and 2000s.
- 81 Woodin 2005 explores how questions of intersectionality problematised a sole focus on class; cf. Woodin 2009. One of the most successful of these groups was the Brighton-based QueenSpark.