



Sarah Herbe and Gabriele Linke (eds.). *British Autobiography in the 20th and 21st Centuries* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2017, ISBN 978 3 8253 6848 7)

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Drawing boundaries around autobiography is always an impossible exercise. The size of the field, already vast and uncontainable, has expanded exponentially (and is continuing to expand) in the twenty-first century with digital forms of life writing. Approaches to past forms of autobiography, meanwhile, have also been extended and reinvigorated in recent decades by moving far outside the confines not only of the ‘canon’ but of ‘literary’ studies altogether. In an essay from *On Diary* (2009) first published in 1993, Philippe Lejeune noted that “the entire field of ordinary, everyday writing remains very much unknown in France. Too often historians become interested in such documents only for the information they contain, neglecting the history of the writing practice itself. Literary interpreters, as for them, would seem to overlook texts of little value” (141). Literature, for Lejeune however, “never stops” (141). It is everywhere.

The fresh areas examined by critics and theorists of autobiography, life narrative, and life writing generally in the last twenty-five years have done much to align with this realisation, but this expansion of the field brings its own corresponding problems and dilemmas. How to cover and make sense of it all, or even of a tiny part of it? Increasingly, how to map it? This question also becomes acute with another area of growth in autobiography studies, as attention has moved, as Sidonie Smith puts it, “from the local to the national to the transnational and back” (xviii), and the manifold global forms of life writing come into play.

The parameters of this collection of essays edited by Sarah Herbe and Gabriele Linke are defined, in its title, by period and nationality, bringing together eight chapters by different scholars from British, Austrian and German universities. Yet even these boundaries leave an enormous field; and *British Autobiography in the 20th and 21st Centuries* does not aim at definitiveness or totality in providing an overview. As the editors write in their introduction, this is “no complete survey” (14) but a collection bringing

together “exemplary studies of different media, forms and issues... testifying to the creativity and diversity of both autobiographical texts and analytical angles” (9).

Despite the wide temporal focus of the title, the majority of the essays, in fact, cluster around the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. They deal deliberately with non-canonical and “marginal” texts, and “autobiographies on which there has not been much scholarship so far” (14). These are mainly published works, rather than what Lejeune calls “ordinary, everyday writing”. While they obviously have some inevitable gaps in overall scope and representativeness, they explore a number of revealing directions, surveying a range of subgenres, including graphic memoirs, disability autobiographies or ‘autosomatography’ (“an umbrella term that covers autobiographical accounts of illness and disability”) (137), football fan autobiographies, autobiographical narratives from rural Scotland, and blogs. Topics which have long been mainstays in criticism about autobiography, among them the First World War, and the ethics of autobiography, are also covered.

One of the central unifying threads of this extremely heterogeneous collection lies, then, in its very variety. This resonates intriguingly with its focus on nationality and society, a theme “immanently present” (9) in all the contributions, even when it does not explicitly appear to be so. Simone Herrmann, in the chapter dealing most obviously with nationality, “Graphic Isolation? Imagining Contemporary Britain in Graphic Memoirs”, writes that “in autobiography, an author is the producer of not only life-history, but... also of national history” (81). At a time when the concepts of Britain and Britishness are undergoing radical schisms and divisions in the wake of the 2016 EU referendum, the issues raised by Herrmann at the opening of her chapter are particularly pertinent, and also enter the political sphere. “The question arises where the UK and its citizens position themselves,” writes Herrmann. “Where do they belong? Who are their associates? What does being British mean?” (79).

Although the other chapters don’t address such questions as directly, the view of Britain in this volume as a whole is all the more interesting for being largely from ‘outside’, from the perspective of mostly European scholars. What emerges most strongly from the several essays which tilt towards social and cultural studies in their analysis is an image of a highly fragmented society, marked by a multiplicity of sometimes contradictory affiliations, in which, increasingly, people identify themselves not so much in terms of nationality as of shared interests, social groupings, and experiences.

The volume begins with the chapter which reaches furthest back historically. In “The Autobiography of the First World War”, Ralf Schneider

provides one of the few essays to tackle the period before the mid-twentieth century. Its placing at the outset helps us to see how, in the context of the later chapters, the war was a crucible of twentieth century British identity, even in—and one might add, perhaps *above all* in—its incommunicability. Schneider expands our sense of British First World War autobiography by mapping a large number of texts, which continued to be written not only in the 1920s and 1930s, but throughout the century, “as long as there were survivors of the war” (19). Hence the “canon” of First World War autobiography—including, as Schneider notes, “Edmund Blunden’s *Undertones of War* (1928), Robert Graves’ *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Siegfried Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) and Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* (1933)” (18)—is seen in a much larger frame. The war, Schneider writes suggestively, was also pivotal in changing forms of British life writing and retrospection, as “for the first time in the history of autobiography, large numbers of texts were written by men and women in their late twenties and thirties” (17); and many of these texts also focused on a much shorter time span than was usual in previous autobiographies. There are surprising similarities, indeed a “remarkable uniformity” (30), Schneider asserts, between these texts. The shared experience of the war also created strong alliances and divisions in society. As Schneider puts it, “almost all the authors claim... that they feel an unbridgeable gap between those who experienced the war themselves and those who did not” (23).

Class-consciousness has long been another deep source of division and affiliation in British society, although one whose markers have undergone large shifts, as Herrmann notes in “Graphic Isolation?”, tracing the depiction of national identity in four graphic memoirs published between 1998 and 2012, stretching across the twentieth century with the depiction of the protagonists’ parents in particular. Examining Raymond Briggs’s *Ethel & Ernest* (1998) and Mary M. and Bryan Talbot’s *Dotter of her Father’s Eyes* (2012), Herrmann draws out how they engage with British social and political history, as well as making global cultural connections. The other graphic memoirs Herrmann analyses, Marc Ellerby’s *Ellerbisms* (2012) and James Harvey’s *A Long Day of Mr. James-Teacher* (2011), point to more recent, fluid conceptions of self, nation and setting, and the ways in which contemporary British identity interacts with European and global contexts in the twenty-first century—despite the isolationist shadow of Brexit which has been splitting the country during the last two years, and propagating malign new mythologies of ‘Britishness’, especially perniciously around race. The gap between generations proves decisive in the approach to some of these issues in Herrmann’s four examples; and indeed, this was one of the many fault-lines in British society revealed

so starkly by the EU referendum, which had remained more latent and invisible until then, exacerbated by austerity and the straitened economic conditions of the last decade in the UK.

Further nuanced forms of group identity and its relation to British nationality are assessed in Cyprian Piskurek's chapter on British football fan autobiographies, Katrin Röder's essay on British women's disability autobiographies, and Gabriele Linke's chapter on autobiographical narratives from rural Scotland since the Second World War, all of which highlight "cultural and historical particularities" (8) extremely well. Beginning with the influence of Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* (1992), and citing Raymond Williams's assertion that "culture is ordinary" (163), Piskurek traces how, in the subgenre following in Hornby's wake, "a supposedly profane cultural practice, the lifelong support of a football team" became "the framework to narrate life stories that are not necessarily extraordinary" (163). The democratisation of autobiography demonstrated by this turn, Piskurek suggests, was revolutionary, signalling a "clear break" (177) from celebrity autobiography. Football, in Hornby's text, "is not only an integral part of the narrator's life, but it is the principle that structures his memory" (168). Moving further towards cultural studies, Piskurek also tackles the subgenre of the "hooligan autobiography" (173), noting how "these books overflow with class markers" in their portrayal of "tough forms of masculinity" and recurrent social "disadvantaging" (174).

Dealing with a similar period, Katrin Röder argues that Lois Keith's anthology of memoirs, poems, stories and essays by "mostly British women with disabilities" (141), *Mustn't Grumble* (1994), was "a significant part of early feminist disability activism in Great Britain" (141). The collection challenged and subverted not only "stereotypes of passivity and helplessness" (137) associated with disability, but also societal norms and prejudices in Britain, and 'comic' and 'tragic' modes of narrative. The texts in *Mustn't Grumble*, Röder avers, using a term also favoured by G. Thomas Couser, "can be described as 'quality-of-life writing'" (144): "they expose and criticise the social causes of suffering and call for their removal" (150). The anthology "generates a flexible community of female authors who cherish their multiple layers of identity instead of repressing them" (142). Contemporary Britain appears as in a mirror here, as too in Gabriele Linke's chapter, which brings together an equally diverse discussion of nine texts by eight authors, written both by writers native to Scotland, and those who have moved there, often in flight from the mechanisation and urbanisation of Southern England. The focus in many of these texts on social practices and local customs—especially in those texts written by autobiographers new to them—is, Linke suggests, often "ethnographic" (186); while in other texts ecology is the central theme.

Another thread, clustering around new forms and genres, is more evident in the chapters on blogs and teaching autobiographical comics. The title of Markus Oppolzer's essay "Teaching (British) Autobiographical Comics" parentheses nationality; and Oppolzer's chapter is most illuminating in its reflections on the way in which the mixed visual and verbal nature of comics and graphic memoirs challenges the portrayal of the autobiographical "I" and the illusion of veracity. The requirement in autobiographical comics to repeatedly draw oneself externally makes for a type of narration which works, in Charles Hatfield's words, "*from the outside in*", unlike prose narration "which works from the inside out" (122). This results in more of a concern with embodiment, and greater narrative distance. Meanwhile Sarah Herbe, in her chapter on Jeanette Winterson's online "column" on her website from 2000 to 2014, traces how Winterson experimented with digital life writing, beginning at a time when "websites were still fairly new environments for online self-presentation" (59). The column, Herbe argues, "describes a trajectory of initial enthusiasm about the possibilities offered by the new medium over a phase of disillusionment and eventual abandonment of the column format in favour of a new form of online self-presentation" (61). A tension between privacy and self-promotion emerges as a particularly vexed issue in online autobiography.

Privacy also forms a central theme in James Fenwick's chapter on "the ethics of betrayal" in Frederic Raphael's memoir of his collaboration with the film director Stanley Kubrick, *Eyes Wide Open* (1999). Once again, the temporal focus of this piece is on the late twentieth century, and there is also an emphasis on form, and the interplay between the visual and the verbal, as Raphael experimented with five different writing styles within his book: "a non-fiction prose form, a screenplay formatted style, a talking-heads dialogue style, journal entries, and letter extracts" (40). Fenwick's case study of what he argues was a deliberate betrayal of Kubrick by Raphael is particularly revealing, as it juxtaposes two completely different attitudes towards privacy: Kubrick's deep reserve and distrust of disclosure, versus Raphael's self-professed openness, being "as candid as the libel law allows" (43). Ultimately, Fenwick suggests, Raphael's memoir gestures too far towards the fictional in its mixture of styles to justify its exposure of its subject; and the limitations of Raphael's friendship with and knowledge of Kubrick also undermine his account. Fenwick also links *Eyes Wide Open* with "a strain of British memoir that has a rhetorical focus and a sarcasm that lends itself to the gentle mocking of its characters by its authors", and more recently, "a turn in British memoir towards post-modern sensationalism" (41–2).

Although, as in Fenwick's essay, the theme of national identity throughout *British Autobiography in the 20th and 21st Centuries* is fairly intermittent at

times, it never disappears entirely. In this valuable and varied collection, with its arrangement of multiple perspectives and subjects proving especially useful in their strong focus on the contemporary period, nationality offers a highly illuminating lens through which to study autobiographies, even if it does present some extraordinary challenges. Claire Lynch, in *Irish Autobiography: Stories of Self in the Narrative of a Nation* (2009), writes that “autobiography is arguably the most underhand of all literary genres, consistently avoiding the definitions fashioned for it and eluding the genre boundaries expected of it”; yet, “for all the complexities involved with defining autobiography, Irishness presents a seemingly infinite enigma” (1–2). The same applies for Britishness, which, as this volume shows, pointing the way towards many further avenues for research, is an extremely multifarious, relational and diverse concept, and one which is changing all the time.

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