

Volume 51 Number 1
More to explore



Stephen Album Virginia Stephen behind Leslie and Julia Stephen reading, 1893. Image courtesy of Special Collections, Smith College.

Life sentences - Keeping biographies in the family

Some families seem to have a lot of writing talents. Melanie Nolan explores one such family, Sir Leslie Stephen and his daughter, Virginia Woolf.

Sometimes in biography, family relationships have had wider repercussions. Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), the first editor of Britain's *Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB) between 1882 and 1891, used to drop tomes onto his study floor after having consulted them when writing one of his biographical entries or biographies. His daughter, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), working in her room below, later said she developed a headache - literally and figuratively - as a consequence of her father's work.

The DNB is seen as the epitome of Victorian biography. Some have characterised national dictionaries as triumphant ships sailing "through the second half of the nineteenth century unshakably confident" of their 'values and virtues', 'legitimising unified national identity'. Lawrence Goldman, a subsequent DNB editor and a recent Visiting Fellow at the ANU's National Centre of Biography (2019), has noted, however, that "while inevitably marked by some of the attitudes of its age in some of its articles" the DNB "was surprisingly free from many supposedly quintessential late-Victorian opinions".

Stephen substituted moral laws for earlier theological explanations of lives. Unlike his successors, he welcomed variations of style. Less well known is that he was one of many Victorians who saw special usefulness in including minor lives. In his lecture, later published, *Forgotten Benefactors* (1896), Stephen discussed the importance of hidden lives: those who lived "in obscurity; whose very names will soon be forgotten, and who are entirely eclipsed by people whose services, though not equally valuable, are by their nature more public (pp. 245-6). So while Stephen commemorated 'great lives' - he wrote 35 DNB articles, as well as biographies of his friend Henry Fawcett and his brother James Fitzjames Stephen - he also argued "that the grateful acknowledgement of hidden labour benefits the nation".

Stephen's daughter Virginia Woolf went on to expose what she believed to be the fiction or impossibility of writing narrative biography. She attempted to find 'deeper truths' about lives. Her methodology, 'The New Biography' sought to combine 'granite-like solidity' of facts with 'the rainbow-like intangibility' of personality. Her practice though was mostly literary, with her explanations being cultural and contingent. By 1939 in "The Art of the Biography" she argued that "the biographer must accept the perishable, build with it, imbed it in the very fabric of his work. Much will perish, little will live. And thus we come to the conclusion, that he is a craftsman, not an artist; and his work is not a work of art, but something betwixt and between" (p. 168).

Woolf believed that the biographer was tied, while the novelist was free. Her Bloomsbury friends in the Modernist movement, Harold Nicolson (Vita Sackville's husband) and Lytton Strachey, loathed historians' biographies, their "sullen cloud", their "globs" of "fat volumes ... of undigested" material and were even more trenchant in their critique of biographies historians wrote. Virginia herself wrote 'experimental biographies': *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) loosely about her lover Vita Sackville-West; *Flush: A Biography* (1933), told by *Flush, Elizabeth Barret Browning's dog*; and *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940) about her friend. In her 'Lives of the Obscure' published in *The Common Reader* (1925), Woolf wrote essays on forgotten characters, disturbing the sleep mainly of women in "nameless tombstones". Not surprisingly, she never wrote one DNB article.

Woolf was ambivalent about her father. He was domineering in private, a Cambridge don who did not send fragile Virginia up to his alma mater. He tutored and nurtured her in biographical and historical greats: Pepys, Macaulay, Lockhart and Carlyle. In 1932 when Virginia was offered the Cambridge Clark lectureship, she was flattered "the first time a woman has been asked ... [an] uneducated child" at that. Nevertheless, daunted by the scholarship she would need to do, she refused the invitation noting with filial affection that that father had accepted the selfsame chair in 1883: "father would have blushed with pleasure could I have told him 30 years ago that his daughter- my poor little Ginny- was to be asked to succeed him: the sort of compliment he would have liked". Deeply connected yet full of unease, Katherine C Hill concluded that Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf ushered in new ages in biography and literature, respectively.