

Revealing Literary Lives: Frank and Forthright British Literary Biographies in the
Late Victorian Era, 1870–1901

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes how several well-known biographies of popular nineteenth-century British literary figures overturned and upset the usual heroic literary biographies that typified the genre during the Victorian era. Popular public opinion in the nineteenth century was that literary biographies existed as moral guideposts—designed to instruct and edify readers. Richard D. Altick’s theory of biographical conventions of reticence—which contends that ultimately literary biographies were committed to establishing or preserving an idealized image of the author—is utilized to explore the nuances of how certain radical biographies in which the biographer is forthright about the subject’s private life displeased and disturbed the public. In order to illustrate this study’s central argument, several literary biographies that were considered among the most radical of the late Victorian period—John Forster’s *Life of Charles Dickens*, James Anthony Froude’s *Life of Carlyle*, Mathilde Blind’s *George Eliot*, and John Cordy Jeaffreson’s *The Real Shelley*—are analyzed as case studies. These biographies of writers’ lives made heroic figures appear human, vulnerable, petty, et cetera by exposing private life matters in a public biography—something that was not done in an age that called for discreet biographies of its literary icons. Victorian periodicals such as magazines and newspapers assist in ascertaining just how the British public reacted to these biographies, and the ramifications they possessed for worshipping literary idols. Additionally explored are the implications that candid literary biographies had for Victorian author-worship and the role of literature, authors, and biography in British society. This study

concludes with a discussion of the implications that these candid literary biographies had into the early twentieth century with the publication of Lytton Strachey's "deflated" biography, *Eminent Victorians*, published in 1918, and summarizes overall findings and conclusions.

DEDICATION

To Helen LeTourneur—for sense and sensibility

To Jack LeTourneur—for all the big books

To Mimi LeTourneur —for her unflagging, deep well of support, encouragement,
devotion, and love.

To Brian Bax—for his love, humor, patience, support, and brilliant cooking skills.

To Ashley Martin—for helping me to figure out what I want to be when I grow
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INTRODUCTION

“How delicate, decent is English biography, bless its mealy mouth! A Damocles’ sword of *Respectability* hangs for ever over the poor English life-writer, and reduces him to the verge of paralysis . . . The English biographer has long felt that if in writing his biography he wrote down anything that could possibly offend any man, he had written wrong. The plain consequence was that, properly speaking, no biography whatever could be produced.”¹ These words of Thomas Carlyle, contained in his 1838 review of John Gibson Lockhart’s *Life of Scott*, may seem quite innocuous to a modern reader, but to a Victorian audience the idea that a biographer might put pen to paper something that might “possibly offend any man” was downright indecent; indeed it was considered most offensive and disrespectful by the majority of the British public. It is those “radical,” “offensive,” and sometimes outright “scandalous” biographies which are the subject of this study.

This thesis analyzes how several well-known late Victorian biographies of popular nineteenth-century British literary figures overturned and upset the usual heroic literary biographies that typified the genre throughout the Victorian era (1837–1901). Popular public opinion in the nineteenth century was that

¹ James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life, 1795–1835*. 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1882), 1:vii–ix.

biographies ought to be the "art of moral portrait painting,"² and that biographies existed as moral guideposts—that a life-narrative existed to instruct readers.³ In the face of such disruption I examine how the British reading public reacted to these "violations and betrayals," and discuss the implications that candid and radical literary biographies had for Victorian author-worship and the role of biography in British society.

While many scholars have studied the ways in which British Victorian literary biographies contributed to the trend of purposely constructing a life and suppressing a writer's more private particulars, very few have analyzed how some literary biographies were in fact forthcoming with the more salacious and personal details of the writer's life. This trend was particularly prevalent in the late Victorian period—from the 1870s onward—paving the way for biographies published in the early twentieth century that were more forthright about the subject's personal life, such as Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, published in 1918. For these reasons, my analysis is confined to the period of 1870–1901. The 1870s saw more forthright literary biographies begin to appear in the marketplace, and as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, the trend towards revealing one's subject "warts and all" became increasingly common—although the British public by and large still bristled at the idea of biographers deflating

² Margaret Oliphant, "The Ethics of Biography," *Contemporary Review*, July–December 1883, 75, in regards to James Anthony Froude's publishing Jane Welsh Carlyle's papers in 1881.

³ Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact, and Form* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 18.

their literary heroes by exposing their flaws and proverbial skeletons in the closet. By the end of the First World War, and with the publication of Lytton Strachey's biography, *Eminent Victorians*, in 1918, the Victorian trend towards reverential and respectfully discreet biographies had officially come to a close.

In order to illustrate my central argument, several literary biographies that were considered among the most radical of the late Victorian period are analyzed as case studies. They are (in order): John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens* (1871–1873), Froude's *Life of Carlyle* (1882–1884), Mathilde Blind's *George Eliot* (1883), and John Cordy Jeaffreson's *The Real Shelley* (1885). These biographies of writers' lives made heroic figures appear human, vulnerable, petty, et cetera by exposing private life matters in a public biography—something that was not done in an age that called for discreet biographies of its literary icons. Additionally, utilizing primary periodical sources such as magazines and newspapers allowed me to ascertain just how the British public reacted to these biographies, and what ramifications they possessed for worshipping literary idols.

Each of these literary biographies was chosen to serve as a case study for several reasons. First and foremost, each biography took for its subject a British man or woman who lived and wrote during the nineteenth century. Second, each of the biographers themselves were also British persons who lived and worked in nineteenth century Britain (Mathilde Blind, author of *George Eliot*, was in fact born in Mannheim, Germany, but emigrated to and settled in London when she was eight years old). Third, each biography was published, read, and reviewed within the time frame that this study is confined to. Fourth, each literary

biography was written about an author—or poet, in the case of Shelley—who was well known to the British public, and whose works, be they novels, poetry, or nonfiction, were bestsellers during the author’s lifetime. The subject of these biographies’ prominence and visibility to the British public is essential to this study, for the British public would be far less likely to read, or respond to, a biography of a lesser-known, idealized, and beloved author. Fourth, each biography sold very well, or was a best seller—as was the case especially with Froude’s *Life of Carlyle* and Forster’s *Life of Dickens*; that each biography reached a large reading audience is important to understanding how the wider public across Britain reacted to these works. Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, each of these literary biographies was considered radical at the time of their publication by Victorian readers and provoked virulent reactions within the public, which were expressed through newspaper and periodical editorials, reviews, and letters. Each of these biographies provides an excellent example of a literary biography counter to the idolatrous, reverential, and discreet biographies that characterized the genre throughout Victorian Britain. Finally, for though each of these literary biographies share characteristics that led to their incorporation in this thesis, they also possess key differences that led to their inclusion as well; it would make for a poor representative study if each biography was exactly alike. In order to fully understand just how pervasive hero-worship of authors was, the extent to which literary biographies were viewed by the British public as type of moral compasses, and just how these candid biographies upset the usual heroic literary biography, I chose biographies that represented different kinds of writers

and biographers. Charles Dickens, considered the bestselling and most famous author of the nineteenth century,⁴ wrote fiction and nonfiction which found their publication in several of the most popular publishing forms of the Victorian period—serials, newspapers, single – and three-volume novel publication. Thomas Carlyle was one of the nineteenth century’s most publicly visible and prolific writers, and Froude’s multi-volume biography of his life is considered by many scholars to be the most radical of the long nineteenth century. As for the inclusion of Mathilde Blind’s biography of George Eliot (the pseudonym of Marian Evans), I thought it essential to include a biography about a woman, authored by a woman. Inclusion of such a biography was nothing to do with gender politics, however, not for the purposes of this thesis. With Blind’s biography, the desire is to demonstrate that the British public’s reaction to such forthrightness about a writers’ private life was fairly universal whether or not the subject of a biography happened to be a male or female writer. In order to illustrate the pervasiveness of Victorian author-worship and the public’s reaction to what it deemed inappropriate lacks of discretion in literary biographies as it applied not just to novelists, but to poets as well, Jeaffreson’s biography of Percy Bysshe Shelley—one of the most adulated and beloved poets of the Romantic and Victorian epochs—was an apt inclusion within this study.

Richard D. Altick’s epistemological monograph, *Lives and Letters: The History of Literary Biography in England and America* serves as the theoretical

⁴ Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens [A Life Defined By Writing]* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 622.

foundation of this thesis.⁵ Although the subtitle indicates that this is a wide-ranging study of literary biography across time and the Atlantic, Altick in fact confines the bulk of his analysis to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literary biographies. He studies the evolution of both the theory and practice of literary biography, then shows how this development was affected by diverse influences such as contemporary notions of the purpose of biography; attitudes towards the literary writer and his or her role in society; and the “conventions of reticence,”⁶ which for the past hundred-odd years dictated how much of an author’s life and character should be publicly revealed and how much should be hidden from sight. Altick argues that literary biographies were ultimately committed to establishing or preserving an idealized image of the author. Readers of literary biographies expected to be given fresh grounds for their reverence produced in a culture that worshipped its literary deities. As a result, biographers dedicated themselves to maintaining the “wishful image” with the utmost circumspection, omitting elements in writers’ characters and episodes in their life which exposed “the common clay.”⁷ By using Altick’s theory on conventions of reticence, I was able to explore the nuances of how these radical biographies displeased and disturbed the public.

⁵ Richard D. Altick, *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965).

⁶ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 147–48.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

It is not my intention to study these biographies from a literary or gendered perspective; thus any theoretical foundation applicable to narrative, literary, or gendered attributes of these biographies will not be included herein. To address how some literary biographies in this period upset the usual heroic literary biography, it is vital to understand how the British public felt about biographies, and what role they believed biographies should play in society so as to better understand the public's reaction to those biographies which they considered radical. Such studies have been confined to a close reading of an array of nineteenth-century British book reviews and editorials contained within periodicals of the day.

Those works that have influenced the development of my central argument and form the historiographical foundation of this thesis are many, and their authors' research and insights have strengthened my own arguments and ideas throughout the research and writing process. Richard D. Altick's discourse on the social factors that contributed to the development of an increasingly literate British society in nineteenth-century Britain, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900*, analyzes the educational, cultural, technological, and social factors that combined together created a new entity—which he refers to as “the British reading class.”⁸ In *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America*, Altick argues that Victorian literary biographies were committed to establishing or preserving an

⁸ Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1957).

image of the writer not as they were, but as it was most inspiring for people to think they were. Indeed, literary biographies presented readers with a depiction of the writer as the public wanted, even needed, to think authors were. This argument provides a historiographical context from which to analyze just how the British public felt about biographies, and what biography's proper role in society was felt to be. In *Lives and Letters* Altick addresses the essential question of "how much of the writer's personal life should the biographer publish in their biography?" Altick, however, studies this issue from the perspective of how most nineteenth-century literary biographies "characteristically softened into something homely and affectionate."⁹ The subject of how some literary biographies—considered by much of the British public to be radical at the time of their publication—upset the typical heroic biography that prevailed throughout nineteenth century Britain is hardly addressed. Nigel Hamilton seeks to address this deficiency by briefly touching upon those nineteenth-century literary biographies that were not considered appropriately discreet with their subject's peccadilloes, but even they are merely given a fleeting mention in the author's larger study.¹⁰ In chapter two of her monograph, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century 'Hidden' Lives*, Juliette Atkinson further explores these societal developments and examines Victorian social conditions that contributed to a culture of celebrity and hero-worship surrounding

⁹ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 131, 136.

¹⁰ Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

authors as well as military heroes and monarchs.¹¹ In his article, Richard Salmon explores the development of celebrity surrounding professional authors through the advent and subsequent popularity of author interviews in various newspapers, magazines, and periodicals.¹² Walter Houghton's widely respected monograph, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830–1870*, serves as the platform from which to explore what he refers to as one of the defining characteristics of the Victorian mind—hero-worship.¹³ Houghton's in-depth analysis into how hero-worship permeated nearly all aspects of Victorian British culture provides a critical key in applying this phenomenon to author worship in the nineteenth century. Additionally, Houghton's monograph provides essential insights into the Victorians' thoughts and feelings about a myriad of social, cultural, and economic issues. Leo Braudy's celebrated comprehensive history of fame and the famous, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*, explores the nuances of and cultural conditions which contributed to the development of fame and celebrity from ancient times to the mid-twentieth century. His sections on fame in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain provides key insight into the book as a “new place of fame,” and the effects that literary biographies had upon the “raid

¹¹ Juliette Atkinson, “Victorian Hero Worship,” in *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century ‘Hidden’ Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹² Richard Salmon, “Signs of Intimacy: The Literary Celebrity in the ‘Age of Interviewing’” *Victorian Literature and Culture* (1997): 159–77.

¹³ Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

of literary celebrity” on the part of the biographer.¹⁴ Additionally, David McKitterick’s multi-authored tome, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume 6: 1830–1914*, provides an invaluable resource into background information on technological innovations in Victorian book publishing, the increased availability of books and the ways in which they were distributed, and the value of the book to Victorian British culture.¹⁵ While all of these resources provided essential background information, as well as a foundation from which to develop a research question, the essence of this thesis will be based upon Altick’s theory regarding literary biographies, Houghton’s insights into Victorian hero-worship and culture, and literary biographies themselves.

This thesis contains three chapters as well as an introduction and conclusion. In chapter one, “Creating a Victorian Reading Public,” the aim is to establish a foundation from which to will analyze the ways in which some literary biographies and published collections of letters upset the traditional heroic, adulatory biography by exploring the unique cultural conditions and technological innovations that arose in nineteenth-century Britain, creating an environment that led to the lionization and veneration of professional authors in Victorian Britain. Also included in this section is a discussion of Victorian hero-worship. As demonstrated in this section, hero-worship permeated Victorian society, and its effect upon literary biographies and the British reading public was a profound

¹⁴ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 361, 383.

¹⁵ David McKitterick, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Vol. VI: 1830–1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

one, granting the “curiously nineteenth-century phenomenon”¹⁶ close study within these pages.

Chapter two, “Biography in Victorian Britain,” begins with a discussion of the attributes that epitomized conventional, circumspect Victorian biographies, utilizing Elizabeth Gaskell’s literary biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), as an example of a typical Victorian literary biography that adhered to biographical conventions of reticence, in which the author suppresses the more personal details that they possessed knowledge of. Additionally explored within this chapter are the British public’s feelings and opinions regarding the role of biography in Victorian life and culture. This analysis serves as a historiographical foundation from which to analyze the ways in which specific indiscreet and radical literary biographies upset usual circumspect Victorian literary biographies by understanding just what the characteristics that typified most Victorian literary biographies were, and how the British reading public felt about biographies in the nineteenth century.

Chapter three, “Revealing Literary Lives: Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle,” address how two of the most popular and bestselling literary biographies of the Victorian era violated the typical heroic literary biographies of the age. Here I follow a chronological approach and begin with John Forster’s commissioned biography *The Life of Charles Dickens*, published in three volumes between 1871 and 1874. With this biography, as with the three others analyzed in this study, I evaluate specific passages and discuss how they deviated from the

¹⁶ Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 305.

typical discreet art of moral portrait-painting. Utilizing periodicals and newspapers from this period, I also study the British public's reaction to Forster's biography. The same approach is utilized for James Anthony Froude's two-volume literary biography, *Thomas Carlyle; A History of the First Forty Years of His Life, 1795–1835*, along with his biography of Carlyle's later years, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London, 1834–1881*, published in two volumes in 1884.

Chapter four, "Revealing Literary Lives: George Eliot and Percy Bysshe Shelley," specific passages in Mathilde Blind's *George Eliot* (1883), and John Cordy Jeafferson's *The Real Shelley: New Views of the Poet's Life* (1885), are discussed, and those passages are used to discuss how each biography was considered a betrayal of privacy and discretion. Employing periodicals and newspapers from this period, I also study the British public's reaction to Blind's and Jeafferson's biographies through a selection of reviews and editorials published in the press.

This study concludes with a discussion of the implications that these candid literary biographies had into the early twentieth century with the publication of Lytton Strachey's "deflated" biography, *Eminent Victorians*, published in 1918, and summarizes overall findings and conclusions.

Chapter 1: CREATING A VICTORIAN READING PUBLIC

Innovations in Publishing and Victorian Culture

In order to establish a historical foundation from which to understand the landscape in which literature and writers were venerated to a heretofore unprecedented degree, as well as the cultural environment in which literary biographies flourished, I begin by exploring the cultural and social conditions, and the technological innovations that developed in nineteenth-century Britain, which all together created a British “reading class” (Altick’s term),¹⁷ a culture of literary celebrity, hero-worship, veneration of the professional author, and the public’s interest in writers’ personal lives. Literary biography’s popularity was coterminous with a serendipitous chain of events that made literary texts—newspapers, periodicals, and novels, most notably—available to more British people than ever before. This “communications revolution” (Vincent’s term)¹⁸ forever altered Britain’s publishing and cultural landscape. Nineteenth-century technological developments in printing, paper manufacturing, book binding, and distribution; the popularity of railway travel; the serialization of fiction in popular weekly and monthly periodicals; the repeal of “taxes on knowledge”¹⁹; the successful and increasing commoditization and professionalization of authors; a rise in literacy due to a myriad of educational reforms after 1833; and increased

¹⁷ Altick, *The English Common Reader*, 3, 7.

¹⁸ David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 271.

¹⁹ Graham Law and Robert L. Patten, “The Serial Revolution,” in McKitterick, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 146.

leisure time all contributed to a rich environment in which authors were lionized and venerated as they had never been before in British society.

The rise in fiction's popularity and subsequent interest in authors' lives did not occur within a vacuum; rather part of its foundation is built upon the professionalization of the author which occurred during Queen Victoria's reign from 1837 to 1901. A critical moment in the development of professional authorship was the founding of the Incorporated Society of Authors in 1883. The Society's three main objectives were the maintenance, definition, and defense of literary property; the consolidation and amendment of the laws of domestic copyright; and the promotion of international copyright. By educating authors about literary property and methods of publishing, the Society contributed to a growing sense of authorship as a professional activity.²⁰ Throughout the Victorian era writers were also becoming more conspicuous members of society, as well as more numerous in numbers.²¹ According to a census compiled in 1861, those who identified their professional status as "author, editor, or journalist" on the census list numbered 687. Twenty years later with the 1881 census, those included under the heading "author, editor, writer" numbered 1,673, and by 1911, those who made their living as "authors, editors, journalists, publicists" numbered a staggering 13,786.²² Prior to the 1861 census, those whose occupations fell

²⁰ Ibid., 205–9.

²¹ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 41.

²² Patrick Leary and Robert Nash, "Authorship," in McKitterick, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 173.

outside the clergy, law, or medicine were confined to a category described as “other educated persons”²³ The 1861 census was the first to include a separate section under which a person might classify their professional status as a man of letters, reflecting the cultural shift occurring in the Victorian period that respected those earning their living by their pen as an educated, professional class in their own right. Publishing historians Leary and Nash argue “only in Victorian Britain do we find a significant number of authors themselves claiming the mantle of professional status . . . the ubiquity and persistence of these claims reflect a significant shift in authors’ roles in the literary marketplace over the course of the nineteenth century.”²⁴ For the first time, many authors found themselves living in an age in which they could earn their primary living by their pens. A lucky few did extraordinarily well financially.²⁵ Often when there is money to be made, professional societies follow in their wake. With more writers making a successful living by their words alone, societies and professional organizations working in the interest of professional writers formed in increasing numbers as the nineteenth century progressed, leading to the formation of a new culturally and governmentally recognized profession that had not before existed in Britain—the full-time author.

²³ W. J. Reader, *Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1966), 147.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁵ Upon his death, Charles Dickens’s estate was valued at just over £90,000. See Slater, *Charles Dickens*, 615.

Full-time authors weaving stories for readers to enjoy are wonderfully exciting, but with a largely illiterate population, those stories do the majority of the population more good as fodder for the fire, rather than fireside reading. Educational reforms made through the nineteenth century were perhaps the most important social reforms that contributed to a nation containing an increasingly educated and literate population than Britain had previously ever possessed. In 1839, 77 percent of the British public was illiterate. The percentage of illiterate persons fell to 44 percent 1879, and 14 percent by 1899. By 1914, only 1 percent of the population was illiterate.²⁶ The reasons for such rapid developments in literacy are primarily due to a myriad of changes in the British school system. Prior to 1833, no public funds were allotted for education, and prior to 1830, teacher-training institutes did not exist in England.²⁷ A lack of trained teachers often led to poor teaching techniques, which students referred to as “principles of interrogation,” which according to several education scholars bred a deep distaste for the printed word in countless pupils.²⁸ Prior to the passage of several educational reform bills in the mid-1850s, no provisions were made for any silent reading in British classrooms. Lessons were introduced, practiced aloud, and students were eventually orally tested. Says Richard D. Altick, “most pupils never learned that the primary usefulness of a book resides in its ability to bring writer and reader together without the peevish intervention of schoolmaster or monitor.

²⁶ Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, 97.

²⁷ Altick, *The English Common Reader*, 145, 150.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

As a matter of fact, many children who went to school in the earlier nineteenth century never even touched a book.”²⁹ At the elementary level, according to publishing historian John Feather, “the real boom [in literacy] came after 1870, when the Education Act of that year made primary education compulsory in England and Wales for the first time and created elementary school boards at local level to manage the schools. The number of elementary school attendance rose by half a million in the first four years after the passage of the Act.”³⁰ Reforms made in elementary education were incredibly vital to literary rates—and future readers—for “if a child is to be started on the road to being a regular reader . . . a number of elements must be present in his early education.”³¹ The climax of educational reforms came in 1870 with the passage of the W. E. Forster Act, referred to as a great landmark in the enlargement of the British reading public because it established governmental responsibility for teaching very poor children—mostly those living in slums or remote regions—how to read.³² With the drastic reformations in the British school system and increasing literacy rates, Victorian Britain possessed more people with the skills to enjoy the proliferation of stories being produced by the literary men and women of the age.

²⁹ Ibid., 151–52.

³⁰ John Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 115–16.

³¹ Altick, *The English Common Reader*, 149.

³² Ibid., 171–72.

According to Altick, there are three great requisites of a mass reading public—“literacy, leisure, and a little pocket money.”³³ Between 1860 and 1880, all three became the possession of more and more people, leaving more time for reading—for one cannot read without some leisure time in which to do so. Reforms in skilled and unskilled workers’ laws—primarily among retail shopkeepers, factory workers, miners, textile workers, and mill-hands—and the heretofore unheard of establishment of a weekend among middle-class workers left British people more leisure time to spend pursuing what pleasures they could afford—reading being chief among them.³⁴ “Books were the answer to the pressing problem of the workingman’s amusement. Reading calls for no bodily exertion, of which he has had enough, or too much. It relieves his home of dullness and sameness . . . with books, the dreary clouds of despair and loneliness could be driven away.” Even the greater availability of cheaper manufactured products and processed goods such as soap, candles, paper, windows, and even food left people with more leisure time with which to indulge themselves. Reading provided an affordable—and often morally edifying—diversion.³⁵

The most remarkable Victorian innovation that resulted in an unquestionable increase in enforced leisure, and subsequently, reading, was the development and unparalleled popularity of the British railway system. A

³³ Ibid., 306.

³⁴ Ibid., 86–87.

³⁵ Ibid., 85; see also Law and Patten, “The Serial Revolution,” in McKitterick, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 146.

relatively comfortable journey by train meant enforced leisure time whilst the passenger was bound for their destination. Travelers were longer at the mercy of fickle, pernicious British weather in open-air carriages as they journeyed from and between home; trains provided comfortable transportation that protected its passengers from the elements, and allowed businessmen and workers alike to travel swiftly and cheaply. In order to escape the inevitable boredom of watching the countryside pass outside the window, reading while aboard became the go-to activity of rail passengers. Reading while riding the rails was encouraged by the proliferation of bookstalls and newsstands present on railway platforms and in stations from the 1840s onward.³⁶ It is no coincidence that from the 1850s on, an entire class of cheap books referred to as “railway literature,” or “yellow-backs” proliferated throughout the retail book trade in Britain. In 1848 W. H. Smith opened his first railway station bookstall, which, James Raven argues, “transformed the market for British mass-produced books, newspapers, and print . . . W. H. Smith’s bookstalls helped popularize reading in trains where it was much easier than in horse-drawn coaches.”³⁷ And as railway journeys became longer, thanks to the network of lines left by the speculative frenzy of the 1840s, novels reigned among railway book stalls.³⁸ Scholars of British publishing and Victorian

³⁶ Stephen Colclough and David Vincent, “Reading,” in McKitterick, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 308.

³⁷ James Raven, “Steam and Stamps: Nineteenth-Century Transformations,” in *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade 1450–1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 331–33.

³⁸ Altick, *The English Common Reader*, 89, 299, 301.

readers/reading agree that the effect the railway system had upon the British public's reading habits were profound, but Richard D. Altick goes so far as to say "perhaps no other single element in the evolving pattern of Victorian life was so responsible for the spread of reading."³⁹

The repeal of "taxes on knowledge"—duties imposed on newspapers, advertisements, and paper—had much to do with increasing the number of printed materials available and the number of readers in Victorian Britain.⁴⁰ Taxes on houses possessing more than six windows were abolished in 1851, allowing homeowners to glaze previously bricked-up openings, allowing more daylight into their rooms, thereby providing more light with which to read. Duties on paper were abolished in 1861, and postal services improved in the 1850s, making national circulation of print materials far easier than it previously had been. The Stamp Act—a charge levied on stamps used for newspapers and pamphlets, which dramatically increased publication costs for publishers—was gratefully repealed in 1855.⁴¹ James Raven argues that "the industrial, mass production of books accelerated after the mid-nineteenth century, before which the older practices remained visible . . . this is due in part to so-called taxes on knowledge being repealed around this time."⁴²

³⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁴⁰ Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, 112–13.

⁴¹ Law and Patten, "The Serial Revolution," in McKitterick, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 146–47.

⁴² Raven, "Steam and Stamps," in *The Business of Books*, 321–22.

Having explored how social and cultural innovations led to a larger British reading public, I now turn my attention toward Victorian reading habits. In order to understand how and why readers reacted to literary biographies, it is essential to explore just what the British public was reading, in what format, and the extent to which fiction permeated and influenced British Victorian society.

As for what exactly the public was reading, the most easily obtained books were certain standard classics and books that had been popular a generation or more earlier. Travel, history, religious tracts, and classic fiction—primarily eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century novels—inexpensive reprints of contemporary literature, and cheap periodicals that printed new works by popular writers saturated the Victorian publishing landscape.⁴³ “Penny dreadfuls”—lurid, graphic fictional stories appearing in weekly serials which cost just one penny—sensational crime novels, and sentimental, or domestic, novels were the most popular reading material amongst working-class Britons.⁴⁴ Between 1814 and 1846, 16 percent of annually published titles were fiction; by the 1890s and throughout the decade, 31 percent of annually published titles in Britain were fiction. History, travel, and biographies dominated the remaining majority of the literary marketplace.⁴⁵

⁴³ Altick, *The English Common Reader*, 254, 259.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 289–90, 292, 299.

⁴⁵ Simon Eliot, *Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing 1800–1919* (London: The Bibliographic Society, 1994), 45–51.

Published stories in nineteenth-century Britain took place in several formats, but the leading form in which fiction was published was the serial periodical. The form of publication in which most Victorian readers consumed their stories has everything to do with how readers related and responded to fiction. The first indication that the serial was an important cultural force in Victorian Britain was its sheer pervasiveness. Graham Law and Robert L. Patten assert that novels took on a central role in the construction of mid-Victorian culture, as their regular appearance in installments promoted public airings of fiction.⁴⁶ Rising literacy rates, increasing urbanization, and growing prosperity all played an essential role in making the serial a characteristic nineteenth-century literary form. But beyond the fact that serialization made literature more affordable to a mass audience, the serial was “attuned to the assumptions of its readers.”⁴⁷ Scholars Hughes and Lund assert that “a work’s extended duration—oftentimes months or even years—meant that serials could become entwined with the readers’ own sense of self and lived experiences as time passed . . . individual Victorian readers existed within a community of readers whose voices in person and print augmented understanding of literary works. Communities of readers shared a number of elements in their literary experience.”⁴⁸ Word of mouth and

⁴⁶ Law and Patten, “The Serial Revolution,” in McKitterick, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 151.

⁴⁷ Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8, 10.

notices in newspapers heavily contributed to the spread of readership of popular stories contained within serials. “Magazine Day”—the first day of each month when new issues of periodicals appeared in bookstalls throughout the country—was met with excitement and anticipation; on those mornings shopkeepers were often greeted by a queue of readers, impatiently awaiting the latest installment.⁴⁹ Stories by Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and many others made their way into the homes, hearts, and minds of millions of Victorian readers by way of the serial.

A progressively more literate and growing community of readers across Britain meant that the connection readers felt to books, and subsequently their writers, became all the more important. James Raven argues that as books metamorphosed from elite luxury items into diverse, popular, and generally available commodities they became all the more important in the lives of English men and women.⁵⁰ Altick refers to the emotional connection and worship of literature as “secular bibliolatry,” and argues that in the Victorian era books came to have a “magical glamour” about them—that men and women alike “emotionalized the very idea of literature and its creators.”⁵¹

The quantity of affordable serials, books, and other reading materials available in Victorian Britain with which readers could—and did—connect,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁰ Raven, “Steam and Stamps,” in *The Business of Books*, 355, 359.

⁵¹ Altick, *The English Common Reader*, 139.

would not have been possible, though, were it not for the enormous advancements and developments in publishing technology that occurred throughout nineteenth-century Britain. These developments had to do with mass production techniques, specifically paper making, typesetting, printing, binding, and distribution. Up until the nineteenth century, printing processes in Britain had remained largely stagnant since Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 1440s, but throughout the 1830s and '40s steam replaced hand-based operations throughout the entire book-printing trade.⁵² Typesetting, printing, binding, and papermaking were all labor-intensive, handcraft processes, making books prohibitively expensive to all but the wealthy—and literate—elite. In the nineteenth-century, however, the tide was turning. Publishing historian John Feather asserts that “the growth in demand for reading matter provoked a search for technological innovations which would facilitate the fulfillment of that demand. In the longer term, there was to be a circular effect: technological innovations in publishing which made book-production faster and easier, and thus cheaper, stimulated a further demand-led growth in publishing.”⁵³

Transformation of the paper trade was the first direct impact of the industrialization on the book trade, Feather contends.⁵⁴ The introduction of a water-powered papermaking machine, called the Fourdrinier, revolutionized the paper industry by increasing the speed at which paper was made, thereby reducing

⁵² Ibid., 277.

⁵³ Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, 86.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 88.

the cost at both a labor and manpower level. The widespread use of the Fourdrinier machines made paper plentiful, cheap, and manufactured on an extraordinarily large and rapid scale.⁵⁵ Alexis Weedon asserts that “machine-made paper reduced the time of manufacturing from five weeks to five days. Not only that but the paper was steadier in supply and of better quality. By 1825 over half of all paper in England was made by machine.”⁵⁶

Books would be nowhere without the words upon the page, and so modernizations in typesetting were crucial to the abundance of cheap editions in the Victorian marketplace. The nineteenth century saw the development and implementation of stereotyping—a process in which a mould is made which is the exact reverse image of a page of type. Stereos enabled printers to reuse their type, and reprints could be made from them, further reducing costs. Weedon contends that stereotyping reduced publishing costs in three ways: “it saved on ready-made fees, it allowed for reimposition for new ‘editions’, and it preserved the setting, avoiding the expense of recomposition. It was also durable.”⁵⁷ Feather goes so far as to assert that stereotyping was so vital to publishing market, that “the ‘cheap’ edition, which was an important commodity in many domains of the nineteenth-

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Alexis Weedon, *Victorian Publishing: The Economics of Book Production for a Mass Market, 1836–1916* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003), 64.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 73.

century publishing industry, was possible only because of the adoption of this important technique.”⁵⁸

The mechanization of book printing occurred early on—within the first thirty years of the century, and was due in large part to one of the greatest developments of the Industrial Revolution—steam-powered technology. Before steam technology, though, came the swap of metal type for wood on a traditional hand press. Metal type became *de rigueur* in printing shops by the 1840s, and with the steam-driven presses utilized from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, printing had developed into a fully fledged industrialized activity.⁵⁹

The evolution of book bindings helped significantly reduce the cost of books in the second half of the nineteenth century. By replacing leather bindings for paper boards, and by utilizing glue, whereas in the past books’ bindings had been hand-sewn, publishers significantly reduced their costs while subsequently saturating the marketplace with cheap series’ and editions. Feather describes the bookbinding process as thus: “The traditional, hand craft process involved various stages of cutting, folding, sewing, trimming and gluing was barely capable of mechanization. Eventually a whole new process of binding was invented in which an outer case of boards covered in cloth (or other material) was made by one machine, and the book itself was folded, trimmed, and sewn in another, before case and book were brought together in the final stages of the process.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, 89.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 91–92.

As the railway system provided readers with an abundance of leisure time with which to indulge their literary pastime, so too did it supply publishers with a method of rapid and reliable distribution. The completion of inner-urban railways systems in the 1850s, along with the creation of a national rail network, improved the ease and lessened the expense at which publishers could distribute their products throughout Britain.⁶¹ “A transport system which offered speed, reliability, and cheapness was an unadulterated blessing for all the distributive trades. Publishing and bookselling were among the major beneficiaries.”⁶²

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the landscape of the British publishing industry looked very different than it had when the century had dawned. Technological developments and progress in bookmaking throughout the century led the British book trade to become a modern industry in every way. Says John Feather, “the real revolution in British publishing in the reign of Queen Victoria was that it became a fully fledged industry.”⁶³ Both social and technological changes transformed British society and contributed to an environment in which books were more widely available, desired, and accessible to more people than ever before. The public’s subsequent interest in writers’ lives, too, was the result of a “curiously nineteenth-century phenomenon”—hero-

⁶¹ Ibid., 94.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 141.

worship.⁶⁴ Coupled with a flourishing culture of celebrity in Victorian Britain, Victorian hero-worship was a catalyst that triggered the reading public's veneration and worship of its literary icons.

Victorian Hero-Worship and Literary Celebrity

“The Victorians . . . carried admiration to the highest pitch. They marshaled it, they defined it, they turned it from a virtue into a religion, and they called it Hero Worship.”⁶⁵ When the Victorian era began in 1837, all of the prerequisites for hero-worship were present in British society. “Enthusiastic temper, the conception of the superior being, the identification of great art with the grand style, *the popularity of Scott and Byron* (emphasis my own), and the living presence of Napoleonic soldiers and sailors all led to the worship of the hero being a major factor in English culture throughout Queen Victoria's reign.”⁶⁶ For the Victorians, a hero was required to be a man of the highest moral stature, especially in an age when the increase of commercialism, rapid industrialization, religious doubt—and subsequent declining church attendance—made moral inspiration a primary need in society. Says Houghton, “for when God was dead, the gods and heroes of history or myth could take his place and save the moral sum of things.”⁶⁷ Juliette Atkinson agrees, arguing that venerating great men, and

⁶⁴ Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 305.

⁶⁵ Edmund Gosse, “The Agony of the Victorian Age,” *Edinburgh Review*, July–October 1918, 295.

⁶⁶ Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 310.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 322.

sometimes women, provided the public a means of reaffirming faith in the individual at a time when rapid scientific advancements and hits to religious institutions “threatened to reduce human action to a set of impersonal laws.”⁶⁸ Richard D. Altick further contends that most important of all the reasons for the great surge in hero-worship was the Victorians’ desire for reassurance.⁶⁹ Increasing nationalism and military pride in the nineteenth century, thanks in large part to sweeping imperialism and successful military campaigns, brought with it the glorification of English heroes of all kinds—not just military heroes. Houghton claims, “as long as patriotism aroused heroic attitudes of devotion and self-sacrifice, it could be utilized for moral purposes.”⁷⁰ James Anthony Froude contributed to the notion of hero-worship as a check to the commercial spirit of the age when he introduced the notion that modern heroes might be suitable for modern inspiration, notably through biographies, which Froude declared could serve as “memorials of past nobleness and greatness.”⁷¹ Biographies of great Englishmen, therefore, could—and did—provide a type of moral, inspirational, and aspirational guidepost to Victorian society. Houghton argues that Victorians wanted, indeed needed, to think about heroes; that it satisfied a purely emotional need “as imperious as any desire for didactic inspiration.”⁷² The public’s specific

⁶⁸ Atkinson, “Victorian Hero-Worship,” in *Victorian Biography Reconsidered*, 47.

⁶⁹ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 85.

⁷⁰ Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 324.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 317, 322.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 331–32.

attraction to biographies of writers and artists specifically, was the result of “when feeling small and inconsequential in the face of great change, creative power becomes enormously attractive.”⁷³

The British public’s attraction to creative power, their desire for moral inspiration and guidance, and figures upon which to focus their reverence created an environment in which biographies flourished. Stories of heroes gave the Victorians comforting assurance that the individual could “prove the master of brute circumstance, that he does have the freedom to make of his life what he will.”⁷⁴ Biographies offered one of the most appropriate means of engaging the cultural obsession of hero-worship, and a thriving literary culture meant that there were opportunities to celebrate new kinds of heroes such as writers. As hero-worship’s importance in society grew, so did the belief that great men could be emulated by their worshippers.⁷⁵ Thomas Carlyle, considered by some to be *the* Victorian advocate of hero-worship, considerably added to the public’s interest in heroes—chief among them, writers—by celebrating writers as a new race of hero and object of curiosity within his published series of lectures titled *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* (1840). In his lecture, “Hero as a Man of Letters,” Carlyle called for the man of letters to be “regarded as our most important modern person. He is the soul of all. What he teaches, the whole world

⁷³ Ibid., 336.

⁷⁴ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 86.

⁷⁵ Atkinson, “Victorian Hero-Worship,” in *Victorian Biography Reconsidered*, 50.

will do and make.”⁷⁶ Carlyle goes on to passionately extol the virtues of writing and books in nineteenth-century Britain. Phrases such as “the Art of Writing is the most miraculous of all things man has devised”; “All that mankind has done, thought, gained, or been: it is lying as in magic preservation in the pages of Books. They are the chosen possession of men”; “Do not Books accomplish *miracles*, as *Runes* were fabled to do? They persuade men”; and “The thing we called ‘bits of paper with traces of black ink’ is the *purest* embodiment a Thought of man can have.”⁷⁷ infuse the essay with fervent vigor for literature and those who produce it.

This passion for writers as a new type of hero to be venerated and appropriately worshipped was not confined to Carlyle; indeed the public’s celebrating the writer as a new race of hero and object of curiosity gained momentum as the institution of literature took on a quasi-religious importance as it never had before. The public’s worship of its literary men and women manifested itself in a variety of ways. Literary pilgrimages were a common and popular way by which the public sought closer understanding of writers’ lives. People journeyed en masse to the homes, tombs, and “haunts” of literary lions past as present such as Shakespeare, Dickens, Bronte, Wordsworth, Austen, and

⁷⁶ Thomas Carlyle, “Hero as Man of Letters,” in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, ed. Michael K. Goldberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 134.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 138, 142.

Milton;⁷⁸ established and visited museums commemorating individual writers' lives;⁷⁹ devoured books such as the bestselling *Homes and Haunts of the Most Eminent British Poets* (William Howitt, 1847);⁸⁰ and sought out relics of writers such as locks of their hair, handkerchiefs, miniatures of their likeness, and even flower petals that fell from their bouquets or boutonniere;⁸¹ established book clubs and literary societies—which Altick refers to as “communal exercises in writer worship”;⁸² and readily purchased periodicals whose pages contained interviews with the most beloved and popular authors of the day.⁸³

A relatively new and flourishing culture of celebrity in Victorian Britain significantly contributed to the “frenzy of renown” that now surrounded authors in the Victorian era, as Leo Braudy explores in his magnum opus, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (1986). Fame, Braudy declares, is made up of four elements: a person and an accomplishment, their immediate publicity, and what posterity has thought about them ever since.⁸⁴ Braudy asserts that by the

⁷⁸ Nicola J. Watson, “Placing the Author,” in *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic & Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 8–9.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁰ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 117–18.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 121–22.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 119.

⁸³ Salmon, “Signs of Intimacy,” 159–77.

⁸⁴ Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*, 15.

nineteenth century the book was defining itself a new prime place of fame.⁸⁵ The rapid diffusion of reading materials played a critical role in introducing the famous to the fan, thus creating “a new quality of psychic connection between those who watch [readers] and those who perform [authors].⁸⁶ Writers uncomfortable with newfound celebrity and the public’s interest in their personal, private lives, whether they liked it or not (and most did not) had to carry on their evasion within the public eye; the cultural landscape was changed, and now the writer’s presence before his or her audience had become a crucial issue.⁸⁷ Until the nineteenth century, living authors had seldom been highly regarded in Britain, but literature—now more popular than it had heretofore been—provided the nation with a new crop of celebrities for the public’s veneration. Altick refers to this trend as “literary lionization.”⁸⁸ Victorian readers eager for a closer acquaintance with literary life were rewarded by editors of weekly and monthly periodicals who devoted generous space to articles about writers—the age of the author interview had begun. From then on, press relations were a normal complication of the new English literary life, as well as an ever-present sign of the new relationship between author and audience.

During the Victorian period, British journalism experienced significant changes in its organization, editorial focus, technological basis, and format. These

⁸⁵ Ibid., 361.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 380.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 436.

⁸⁸ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 126, 127.

changes, says Richard Salmon, were important in shaping popular representations of authorship, literary celebrity, and “programming a popular iconography of literary culture which was both distinctive and far-reaching in its effects.”⁸⁹ The proliferation of literary interviews taking place during the Victorian period bore witness to the definition of authors as celebrities worthy of laud and idolatry. Interviews with authors both satisfied and whetted the British public’s voyeuristic impulses to know all they could about a writers’ life. “The celebrity interview was conceived, above all, as a medium through which both the journalist and the reader might hope to discover the authentic ‘nature’ of famous individuals.”⁹⁰ The intimacy an interviewer could evoke within a reader was a result of new journalistic techniques with which the journalist would evoke the reader’s sense of being present at the interview itself. Essential to this journalistic device of providing the reader with a more powerful and intimate sense of presence at the event was the physical location of the interview itself, so whenever possible reporters conducted author interviews within the author’s home. Newly implemented photographic techniques also enhanced the visibility of the author, and heightened the perceived intimacy and connection between author and audience.⁹¹ Within this burgeoning culture of literary celebrity and author worship, readers responded to writers with powerful feelings of fascination,

⁸⁹ Salmon, “Signs of Intimacy,” 159.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 164–65, 169–70.

desire, and even love. Especially besotted fans wrote letters to authors, sought author autographs and souvenirs, and in some cases even adopted an author's style of dressing.⁹²

The serendipitous chain of cultural, social, and technological innovations that occurred throughout nineteenth-century Britain, combined with a flourishing culture of adulatory hero-worship and literary celebrity, all came together to create a verdant environment in which literary biographies thrived. Yet the age's literary temper and social decorum insisted that biographies, dedicated to furthering hero-worship and wholesome morality, should be selective, discreet, and "striving toward idealized portraiture."⁹³

⁹² Eric Eisner, "Systems of Literary Lionism," in *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Literary Celebrity* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.

⁹³ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 144.

Chapter 2: BIOGRAPHY IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN

Typical Attributes of Victorian Biographies

“If biographers will put a mask over their hero they must be content with the consequences of robbing from us the sight of the human face.”⁹⁴

Victorian Britain’s burgeoning culture of celebrity and newfound admiration for its authors that provided literary biographies with fertile soil in which to flourish also contributed to one of the form’s greatest issues—the question of how much should biographers share with their readers. The answer: not much. Richard D. Altick states that “Victorian biographers would not have been Victorians had not most of them sympathized with, and been governed by, the current passion for privacy.”⁹⁵ Victorian hero-worship and the lionization of writers in a time of religious doubt and spiritual turmoil meant that authors substituted saints as moralistic guideposts from which the average person should take lessons in humility and grace. Archetypal literary biographies established or preserved the image of a writer not as he or she actually was, but as it was most inspiring for the British reading public to think the author was; indeed as they wanted and needed to think he was.⁹⁶ Victorian biographers obliged the public’s desire for aspirational portraits of literary lives, dedicating their biographies to maintaining the “wishful image”⁹⁷ that the public possessed. Those elements in a

⁹⁴ George Bentley, “Sincerity in Biography,” *Temple Bar*, August 1881, 334.

⁹⁵ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 163.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

writer's character or those episodes his or her life which could—or would—be considered scandalous, offensive, distasteful, or shocking were wholly omitted, or in some cases, at least treated with the utmost circumspection. Painful topics, or aspects of an author's life and character considered too sacred to be set down in a biography included family troubles; moral dereliction; insanity, either in oneself or their spouse or family member; drinking; sexual promiscuity; illegitimate children; and marital issues/troubles, including extramarital affairs.⁹⁸ "Market-driven by a society obsessed with reputation, biographers were sucked into a Victorian vortex where veneration was extolled, but criticism of a man's private life and, above all, good name threatened to tarnish the whole Victorian edifice of work, empire, and medals," asserts Nigel Hamilton.⁹⁹ The result of such biographical circumspection and reticence was a mythologized, inaccurate portrait of a lived life, yet a myth that was necessary, says Altick, for "in the Victorian era, the British threshold of pain was at its lowest point in history. Never had sensibilities been so easily offended; never had people's right to privacy—especially the right of the celebrated, whose privacy was most imperiled—been so insisted upon."¹⁰⁰

Letters and journals were the means by which most Victorian biographers obtained the most intimate secrets of a writers' life, and their inclusion or exclusion within a biography comprised an essential conundrum on the part of the

⁹⁸ Ibid., 165, 166, 167, 169.

⁹⁹ Hamilton, *Biography*, 122.

¹⁰⁰ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 149.

biographer whose job was to provide the reading public fresh grounds for their literary idolatry.¹⁰¹ The prevalence and popularity of biographies within British society, coupled with the interest in the private and internal lives of authors, was so great in Victorian Britain that many writers took it upon themselves to ensure that their carefully crafted public personas would not be violated and to perpetuate the mythologized public images they possessed. Authors, along with their family members or friends, fearing inappropriate revelations often laid an eradicating hand upon their personal papers, composed of journals, letters, bills, and bank statements. Authors themselves took steps to ensure their privacy in some rather idiosyncratic ways; most though, simply relegated their letters and other private papers to the blazing inferno of the sitting room fireplace, or instructed their family members to consign their letters to the flames upon their death. “The odor of burning papers permeates the literary history of the nineteenth century,” says Altick.¹⁰² Destroying letters was the most common and deliberate form of destruction that authors took in order to ensure their privacy and keep their secrets safely confined within them and/or their families. Those letters which did manage to escape a fiery fate and made their way into publication were regarded by many as an “unforgivable lapse in discretion.”¹⁰³

Authors, along with their families and spouses, also took steps to ensure the privacy of their intimate secrets by personally selecting their biographers, who

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 160–63.

¹⁰² Ibid., 162.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 161.

were close friends and/or professional associates in the majority of instances. This, in fact, is a standard trait of Victorian literary biographies, for in the nineteenth century, the idea of a person taking on the task of writing a biography of someone with whom they were not intimately acquainted was simply preposterous to most.¹⁰⁴ Authors, especially, felt that their posthumous fame should not be entrusted to “alien” and possibly unsympathetic hands. Therefore, nearly all literary biographies in Victorian Britain were written by friends of the deceased author, some of whom were successful and respected writers in their own right, such as John Forster, James Anthony Froude, and Elizabeth Gaskell.

Victorian conventions of reticence, hero-worship of the author, and biographers intimately connected with—and sometimes chosen by—their subjects simultaneously united to create a landscape in which archetypal Victorian literary biographies omitted the more intimate particulars of a writers’ life, thereby painting a moral portrait of an idealized and mythologized public persona. One of the best examples of a literary biography that typified these attributes is Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

The Life of Charlotte Brontë is one of, if not the most, well-known British Victorian literary biographies. Published by Smith, Elder in 1857, it remains in print 154 years later, and is one of the more accessible nineteenth century British literary biographies in issue today, both in terms of its readability and availability within the marketplace. In addition to being Brontë’s biographer, Elizabeth

¹⁰⁴ A. O. J. Cockshut, *Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century* (London: William Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., 1974), 38–39.

Gaskell (1810–1865) was a successful novelist in her own right. Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855)—initially known by readers, critics, and even her publisher George Smith by her *nom de plume*, Curer Bell—was a critically celebrated and bestselling novelist hailing from Yorkshire, whose literary claims to fame include *Villette* (1853), *The Professor* (1857), and of course, the novel for which she is most known for, *Jane Eyre* (1847). Becoming acquainted when Brontë was in her thirties, Gaskell and Brontë maintained a close friendship for many years—in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell describes Brontë as “my dear friend Charlotte Brontë.”¹⁰⁵ Just mere months after Brontë’s death on March 31, 1855, Elizabeth Gaskell contacted Brontë’s publisher and close friend, George Smith, regarding a biography of Brontë, saying in one of her first letters to Smith in 1855, “my children, who all loved her would like to have what I could write about her, and the time may come when her wild sad life, and the beautiful character that grew out of it may be made public.”¹⁰⁶ Gaskell’s desire to memorialize the life of her “dear friend” through a biography was realized soon afterwards. Shortly following Charlotte’s death, her father, Patrick Brontë, contacted Gaskell, asking her to take on the task of creating Charlotte’s biography, stating:

Finding that a great many scribblers, as well as some clever and truthful writers, have published articles in newspapers and tracts respecting my dear daughter Charlotte since her death, and seeing many things that have been stated are true, but more false; and having reason to think that some may venture to write her life

¹⁰⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 17.

¹⁰⁶ J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, eds., *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1966). Letter to George Smith, 4 June 1855.

who will be ill-qualified for the undertaking, I can see no better plan under the circumstances than to apply to some established author to write a brief account of her life and make some remarks on her works. You seem to be the best qualified for doing what I wish should be done.¹⁰⁷

Undertake a biography of Brontë Gaskell did, and profitably. Published on March 23, 1857, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* sold well enough to merit two further printings in quick succession—the initial print run of 2,021 sold out within a month, and an additional 1,500 copies were produced on April 22, with another 700 on May 4.¹⁰⁸

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life* was not without its controversies, however, least of all the ways in which Gaskell constructed a very specific life of Brontë, focusing not on Brontë as she was, but instead as Gaskell, as well as Charlotte Brontë's father and husband, wanted the public to see and remember Brontë. Such purposeful, discreet biographical constructions characterized the majority of Victorian literary biographies. Throughout *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell adheres to Victorian conventions of reticence, which legislated that nothing offensive about the subject should appear in print. "She [Gaskell] avoided paths she wished to avoid," asserts Linda H. Peterson.¹⁰⁹ By her own admission, Elizabeth Gaskell made a decision that profoundly affected *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*—resolving to purposely construct a life according to Victorian feminine

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., letter from Patrick Brontë, 16 June 1855.

¹⁰⁸ Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, xxxvii.

¹⁰⁹ Linda H. Peterson, "Parallel Currents: *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* as Myth of Mid-Victorian Authorship," in *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 136.

and domestic ideals, telling readers “[I will] honour her as a woman, separate from her character as an authoress.”¹¹⁰ Gaskell goes on to say:

The difficulty that presented itself most strongly to me, when I first had the honour of being requested to write this biography, was how I could show what a noble, true, and tender woman Charlotte Brontë really was, without mingling up with her life too much of the personal history of her nearest and most intimate friends. After much consideration of this point, I came to the resolution of writing truly, if I wrote at all; of withholding nothing, though some things, from their very nature, could not be spoken of so fully as others.¹¹¹

From this passage onward, Gaskell emphasizes Brontë’s romantic life and states that “one of the deepest interests of her life centres naturally round her marriage [to Arthur Nicholls].”¹¹² At the time of the biography’s publication in 1857, few readers likely batted an eye at such a statement, but in the mid-twentieth century, previously unstudied correspondence written by Brontë proved Gaskell’s statement to be wholly false. Brontë had in fact refused Arthur Nicholls twice over the course of several years before finally accepting his proposal, and in the weeks leading up to her wedding, Brontë exchanged several letters with close friend Ellen Nussey, expressing her trepidation and fear at her impending nuptials. Gaskell had had access to these letters and in fact had read them, but purposely discarded their contents for the purposes of protecting her biographical construction of Charlotte Brontë.¹¹³ Such omissions of fact and purposeful construction of Brontë’s life were not limited to her marriage, though; scholars

¹¹⁰ Ibid., xiii.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 396.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., ix, xxviii; see also Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 182, 207–8.

reviewing hundreds of letters penned by Brontë have found evidence that Gaskell, omitted, edited, and distorted details so that they might more accurately reflect her imaginative concerns. It was necessary for Gaskell's purposes to emphasize Brontë's private and domestic life, for example, rather than to examine her professional career in proper detail. By minimizing Brontë's romantic aspects—aside from her marriage—Gaskell presents Charlotte Brontë as wholly dedicated to family values. There is scholarly evidence that Gaskell's biography suppressed known particulars detailing her heroine's obsession with and deep love for a married Belgian schoolmaster, Monsieur Heger, and that Gaskell omitted significant details from Charlotte Brontë's correspondence that pertained to Brontë's (possibly reciprocated) feelings for Heger. Gaskell also chose to emphasize the endurance and courage of the three sisters—Anne, Emily, and Charlotte—at the expense of downgrading their unhappy brother, Branwell.¹¹⁴ "Gaskell's *Life*," asserts Peterson, "does not end with a triumphant literary career, but with a wedding and a funeral."¹¹⁵

Evidence of Gaskell's subversion of those elements of Brontë's life which might have caused embarrassment and controversy to not only her family, but her literary legacy, exist courtesy of contemporary biographies about Charlotte Brontë such as Rebecca Fraser's *Charlotte Brontë: A Writer's Life* (2008). Within *A Writer's Life*, Fraser analyzes Gaskell's relationship with Brontë as well as Gaskell's *Life*, discussing the ways in which Gaskell subverted details of

¹¹⁴ Rebecca Fraser, *Charlotte Brontë: A Writer's Life* (New York: Pegasus, 2008).

¹¹⁵ Peterson, "Parallel Currents," in *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, 148.

Brontë's intimately private life, especially in regards to her relationship with her married professor in Brussels, Monsieur Heger—"Mrs. Gaskell would deliberately obscure this part of her subject's life, fearing how she would come across to readers of the time."¹¹⁶ Fraser's biography also chronicles the steps that Charlotte's father, Patrick Bronte, and her husband of just eight months, Arthur Nicholls, took to ensure that the biography Gaskell created would be one entirely to their liking, and that no more intimate details than they desired would be contained within its pages.¹¹⁷ Following Charlotte's death, Arthur Nicholls wrote to her closest friend, Ellen Nussey, with whom Brontë had exchanged hundreds of letters over the course of many years, asking her to destroy them. Thankfully Ellen Nussey disregarded Nicholls's request, so that hundreds of letters between Brontë and Nussey survive today, providing critical insight into the purposeful biographical constructions and literary licenses that Brontë's biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell, took when creating her biography.

Biography and the British People

The British public's feelings and opinions regarding the role of the purpose and role of biography in Victorian life and culture is bound up in a myriad of strictures that governed personal morality and the phenomenon of hero-worship. Victorians seeking emotional comfort, moral instruction, and inspiration turned to biographies to fulfill these needs.

¹¹⁶ Fraser, *Charlotte Brontë*, 489.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

As Walter Houghton points out in *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, simultaneous revolutions in technology and society confronted the people of the nineteenth century with problems insolvable by ordinary means—i.e. the church—and so people turned not to heaven, but to the streets around them for hero-messiahs.¹¹⁸ Darwinism, fledgling church attendance, and the rapid technological accelerations brought on by the Industrial Revolution were all shaking the foundation of previously held religious beliefs, and so in the absence of religious icons to turn to for comfort, the British public turned to great men—literary icons among them—as modern-day heroes.¹¹⁹ Biographies—considered to be inspiring stories of heroes—reassured and comforted Victorian readers, providing the answers for which society was groping. “Lives of great men oft remind us, We can make *our* lives sublime.”¹²⁰ Samuel Smiles had this to say about the instructive, moral uses of biography in 1859:

Biographies of great, but especially good men are most instructive and useful, as helps, guides, and incentives to others. Some of the best are almost equivalent to Gospels—teaching high living, high thinking, and energetic action for their own and the world’s good. British biography is studded over with illustrious examples of the power of self-help, of patient purpose, resolute working, and steadfast integrity, issuing in the formation of truly noble and manly character; exhibiting in language not to be misunderstood, what it is in the power of each to accomplish for himself; and illustrating the efficacy of self-respect and self-reliance in

¹¹⁸ Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 310.

¹¹⁹ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 85–86.

¹²⁰ James Field Stanfield, *Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (London: Sunderland, 1813), 224.

enabling men of even the humblest rank to work out for themselves an honourable competency and a solid reputation.¹²¹

In short, Victorian biographies were seen as a kind of “how-to” manual for living, providing the reader with an idealized life of a great man.

Victorians also utilized biographies for moral guidance, and to legislate an individual’s personal morality by reverentially venerating an honorable man’s life. “Biography,” says Richard D. Altick, “earned its way by being on the side of virtue against vice, by providing examples of honest, wise, generous, prudential, or profitably inventive conduct.”¹²² By the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of biography of an instrument of edification was all-pervasive. In fact, early Victorian literary biographies were seen as being so respectable that women were encouraged to read them as opposed to “rotting” their delicate minds with penny dreadfuls and disreputable, salacious novels.¹²³ Many nineteenth-century readers rallied around the concept of biographies as a condensed life with a moral purpose, contained within a volume or series’ of “anecdotal illustrations of personality.”¹²⁴ “Biography out to be . . . the moral art of portrait painting,” declared Margaret Oliphant in 1883, in regards to James Anthony Froude’s publishing Jane Carlyle’s papers in 1881, describing the publication as “the

¹²¹ Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help; With Illustrations of Character and Conduct* (London: John Murray, 1859), 5.

¹²² Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 86.

¹²³ Atkinson, “Victorian Hero-Worship,” in *Victorian Biography Reconsidered*, 14–15.

¹²⁴ Nadel, *Biography*, 19.

betrayal and exposure of the secret of a woman's weakness."¹²⁵ In 1847, Francis Jeffrey described biography as "the most instructive and interesting of all writing . . . teaching us . . . great moral lessons, both as to the value of labour and industry, and the necessity of *virtues*, as well as the intellectual endowments, for the attainment of lasting excellence."¹²⁶ As for the moral instruction that literary biographies, specifically, provided the public, Walter Scott wrote, "from the lives of some poets, a most important moral lesson may be derived, and few sermons can be read with so much profit as the *Memoirs of Burns*, of *Chatterton*, or of *Savage*."¹²⁷

The British public's view that biography's primary roles were to provide them with unblemished pedestals upon which to place authors, while concurrently morally guiding and instructing readers meant that biographers were expected to adhere to the strictures of reverential, discreet biographies. Victorian British readers did not desire to see their literary idols humanized, imperfections laid bare. The public yearned that authors to be aspirational, flawless, and demanded that literary biographies reflect that desire. When especially beloved and immensely popular authors such as Dickens and Carlyle were pushed from their pedestals by an indiscreet biographer; their humanity and imperfections exposed,

¹²⁵ Oliphant, "The Ethics of Biography," 74.

¹²⁶ Francis Jeffrey, "Memoirs of Sir James Mackintosh," *Edinburgh Review*, October 1847, 209.

¹²⁷ John Gibson Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*. Complete in One Volume (New York: Connor & Cooke, 1838), 5.

disillusioned and outraged readers reacted vociferously. Margaret Oliphant's conviction that should a biographer discover any unfavorable facts or events that might undermine the reputation or harm the image of his subject, it was the biographer's "duty" to all together refrain from writing the biography was not considered outrageous by the standards of the day.¹²⁸ The issue of what, and how much, personal details of an author's life to share within the pages of a literary biography was "a weighty question" that stayed many the pen of a biographer fearing public condemnation for their lack of appropriate discretion. Within archetypal literary biographies virtues such as the family were upheld; vices such as unfaithfulness, criticized. Kindliness, manliness, and wholesomeness brought praise, while selfishness, effeminacy, and immorality brought with it condemnation.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Oliphant, "The Ethics of Biography," 90–91.

¹²⁹ Nadel, *Biography*, 41.

Chapter 3: REVEALING LITERARY LIVES: CHARLES DICKENS AND
THOMAS CARLYLE

The Life of Charles Dickens by John Forster

Born on February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, England, Charles Dickens is widely considered to be the most popular and most prolific of all Victorian authors; indeed of the long nineteenth century. Novelist, editor, journalist, and publisher, Dickens was involved in all aspects of nineteenth-century literary life, producing a vast opus of stories which were beloved by Victorian readers across a myriad of social classes, and whose popularity has continued well into the twenty-first century.¹³⁰

John Forster (1812–1876), the son of a Newcastle cattle-dealer made his name in nineteenth-century literary society by making a living as a literary critic, essayist, and biographer. Forster’s main contribution to Britain’s literary life, however, was made through his friendships—the most famous of which being with Charles Dickens.¹³¹

Dickens and Forster’s friendship was quickly made. The two met in 1837 just prior to the death of Dickens’s beloved sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, which while emotionally devastating Dickens, “was the perfect moment for the foraging

¹³⁰ Michael Slater, “Dickens, Charles John Huffman (1812–1870),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn. May 2011.

¹³¹ James A. Davies, “Forster, John (1812–1876),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2004.

of their bond.”¹³² Dickens and Forster remained intimate friends, colleagues, and confidantes until Dickens’s death in 1870.¹³³ The two men were so close, in fact, that from 1837 on, Forster read everything Dickens wrote, whether in proof or in manuscript form.¹³⁴ In 1859 Dickens chose Forster to represent him in the arrangements relating to Dickens’s separation from his wife, Catherine, and in 1869, sensing that his life was drawing to a close, Dickens named Forster as the executor of his literary estate, as well as the executor of his last will and testament, and bequeathed upon Forster all of Dickens’s remaining manuscripts.¹³⁵ Owing to the immense popularity that Dickens and his work enjoyed throughout Victorian Britain—he has been referred to as a literary “rock star”—¹³⁶ and in conjunction with a flourishing age of biography and colossal interest in Dickens’s personal life, Dickens knew that following his death biographies chronicling his life would bombard the literary marketplace. (This in fact did occur, as within just two months of Dickens’s death in 1870, three biographies of the novelist were published.)¹³⁷ Fearing for his reputation, which he had so carefully cultivated, Dickens in 1869 requested of Forster that he be the

¹³² Ian Hamilton, “John Forster, of Dickens Fame,” in *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* (London: Hutchinson, 1992), 153.

¹³³ James A. Davies, “Forster, John (1812–1876),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹³⁴ Nadel, *Biography*, 86.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Slater, *Charles Dickens*, 591.

¹³⁷ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 143–44.

one to take on the task of writing his biography. “There was never any question,” says historian Ira Bruce Nadel, that Forster ‘the only person who has the material—the knowledge and the power’ would write his [Dickens’s] life.”¹³⁸

Scholars assert that undertaking the biography was a task Forster performed out of obligation to his and Dickens’s friendship;¹³⁹ a most astute judgment, for Forster himself describes working on the dense three-volume *Life* as “a task more painful and heavy to me than I could ever hope to convey to you.”¹⁴⁰

Painful a task though it might have been, John Forster’s *Life of Charles Dickens* was a smashing sales success. In telling Dickens’s life story, Forster reached his largest audience through his most popular work, with volume one going through twelve printings within the first three months of its publication.¹⁴¹ Understanding that he had a daunting task ahead of him, and eager to carry out his friend’s wishes, Forster set to work on the biography within just weeks of Dickens’s death. The following year, Forster entered into an agreement for the biography with London-based publishing house Chapman and Hall. *The Life of Charles Dickens* was to be published in three volumes—the conventional format in which Victorian biographies were published. The contract for volume one, dated 7 November 1871, called for 5,000 copies to be printed. When the contract for volume two was signed one year later on 6 November 1872, the initial print

¹³⁸ Nadel, *Biography*, 86.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ James A. Davies, *John Forster, A Literary Life* (Leicester, England: Leicester University Press, 1983), 258, n75.

¹⁴¹ Nadel, *Biography*, 89.

run called for a staggering 10,000 copies, reflecting the success that volume one enjoyed. When the contract for volume three was signed on 28 January 1874, 10,000 copies were also called for in the first printing.¹⁴² Bourgeoning sales said it all: *The Life of Charles Dickens* was a bestseller. Healthy sales figures, though, do not tell the entire story of this biography's impact upon and resonance within British Victorian society. Forster's *Life* elicited an outcry from the British reading public for its candor about the more intimate details of Dickens's private life; the biography does not put, as one critic commented, "a halo around Dickens's head, a harp in his hand, and make wings sprout from his shoulders."¹⁴³

The foundation of *The Life of Charles Dickens* was simultaneously the source of its popularity as well as its criticism—Forster's insistence upon factual detail in presenting Dickens's life to the public. "Forster includes all, showing the paradoxes of Dickens's life," Ira Bruce Nadel declares.¹⁴⁴ "Although his main purpose was to honor an exemplary life, Forster also wanted to write a biography that [Thomas] Carlyle, his one surviving hero, would not be able to dismiss as 'mealy-mouthed,'" asserts literary historian Ian Hamilton.¹⁴⁵ Rather than rely upon outside documentation or interviews with those whom Dickens had been close to in life, Forster instead built the foundation of his biography exclusively

¹⁴² Ibid., 73–74.

¹⁴³ John B. Castineau, "Forster's Fictions," *Dickensian* XII, 10 (October 1916): 264.

¹⁴⁴ Nadel, *Biography*, 94.

¹⁴⁵ Hamilton, "John Forster, of Dickens Fame," in *Keepers of the Flame*, 155.

upon the letters Dickens had left in his care, and, controversially, upon what had been confided in him throughout the course of their thirty-three-year-long friendship.¹⁴⁶ Nearly a thousand letters belonging to Dickens are quoted or reprinted in their entirety in biography's three volumes and nine-hundred-plus pages. Ironically, though, shortly following completion the third volume of *The Life of Charles Dickens* Forster himself burned all but fifty-five of the one thousand letters Dickens had bequeathed upon him, declaring them to be "too private."¹⁴⁷ Prior to his own death in 1876, Forster left his own fiery instructions for his executors, declaring "it is my express wish that all letters coming under the denomination of merely private correspondence shall at once be destroyed."¹⁴⁸ The upbraiding that Forster received at the hands—and letters—of the British public in reaction to his candid biography of Dickens had affected him so greatly at the end of his life that he consigned all evidence of its creation to the flames.

Yet what exactly did Forster, dedicated in his duty to a wholly factual representation of Dickens's life, reveal in his biography that brought the ire of the British public upon him? There were several aspects of Dickens's personal life that were deemed unpalatable by middle-class sensibilities and which Forster "tells much and implies more when he could have chosen silence."¹⁴⁹ Dickens's unfortunate childhood; his treatment of his first wife, Catherine; his battles with

¹⁴⁶ Nadel, *Biography*, 87–88.

¹⁴⁷ Hamilton, *Biography*, 126.

¹⁴⁸ Davies, *John Forster*, 259.

¹⁴⁹ Nadel, *Biography*, 94.

depression; his insensitivity, egotism, narcissism, and determination to “get his own way” were laid bare for all the British public to read about—bitter pills to swallow for many who idolized, adored, and worshipped Dickens.¹⁵⁰ All these aspects of Dickens’s life were considered too sacrosanct to be set down in a biography, especially by such a longtime intimate friend and colleague. Victorian British social decorum mandated that a person’s feelings and personal issues be kept to themselves; private matters were not for public exposure, especially not in an age of extensive hero-worship and authors-as-celebrities culture. By exposing the psychic, even physical costs of such a Victorian success story, expressed in the novelist’s hubris, nervous breakdowns, and marital messes, Forster violated the commandments that dictated literary biographies must be discreet, adulatory, sanitized when necessary, and perpetuate hero-worship. Such frank truth-telling resulted in widespread condemnation not of Dickens—who was a literary hero—but of the biographer, John Forster. “The ludicrous egoism of the biographer! The writer does not fail to hesitate to expose the moral failings of the deceased novelist and remarks on his overweening vanity, complacent ignorance, and his perpetual quarrels with publishers. All together one would judge that Dickens made a most unlucky choice in the Boswell whom he selected to write his life,” declared one reviewer.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Davies, *John Forster*, 253; Hamilton, *Biography*, 122; Hamilton, “John Forster, of Dickens Fame,” in *Keepers of the Flame*, 149.

¹⁵¹ “Magazines,” *Graphic*, May 17, 1873, 466.

British readers were shaken early on in *The Life of Charles Dickens*. In chapter two of volume one Forster describes Dickens's bleak childhood by including fragments from Dickens's own (abandoned and never published) autobiography. "Dickens's fans had no idea that the bleak elements and events in his early life so closely mirrored events in his fiction—notably David Copperfield, "Michael Slater declares.¹⁵² The passages possess emotional resonance that upset sympathetic fans who loved Dickens so.

It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age. It is wonderful to me, that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion enough on me . . . to suggest that something might have been spared . . . No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position [working in a blacking factory] . . . My whole nature was so penetrated with grief and humiliation, that even now, famous and caressed, I often forget in my dreams; and wander back to that time of my life . . . that never to be forgotten misery of that old time, bred a certain shrinking sensitiveness in a certain ill-clad ill-fed child, that I have found come back in the never to be forgotten misery of this later time.¹⁵³

In order to understand just how sensational the revelation of this information was to the majority of Dickens's readers—many of whom felt themselves to be intimately connected with the author—it is essential to know that the public knew virtually nothing of Dickens's life prior to his late teens when he became a journalist. From his stories, most surmised that Dickens enjoyed a solidly middle-class childhood of "nursemaids, children's parties, story-books, academies, and so

¹⁵² Slater, *Charles Dickens*, 619.

¹⁵³ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*. 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), 23, 25, 38.

on.”¹⁵⁴ Reactions to these revelations into Dickens’s melancholy boyhood vacillated were mixed. “Never perhaps has a fragment of biography wakened more interest and amazement than the first two chapters of Mr Forster’s biography,” wrote Scottish poet and critic Robert Buchanan in the February 1872 issue of *St Paul’s Magazine*.¹⁵⁵ “It is distasteful of him [Forster] that Forster tells of him [Dickens] things that should disgrace him . . . but Forster himself is too coarse-grained to know what is and what is not disgraceful,” quipped fellow novelist Anthony Trollope.¹⁵⁶

The British public’s most vociferous hullabalos, however, were reserved for Forster’s remarkably candid remarks regarding Dickens’s “troublesome” personality traits—which he referred to as “those defects of temperament,”¹⁵⁷ along with forthright passages about Dickens’s artistic frustrations, disappointments, and subsequent (possible) nervous breakdown.¹⁵⁸ Realistic, as opposed to idealistic, aspects of Dickens’s unhappiness preceding and following his separation from his wife are apparent:

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 620.

¹⁵⁵ Robert Buchanan, “Forster’s Life of Charles Dickens,” *St Paul’s Magazine*, February 1872, 130.

¹⁵⁶ Letter from Anthony Trollope to George Eliot & George Henry Lewes. Reprinted in Slater, *Dickens*, 621, n11.

¹⁵⁷ Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 698.

¹⁵⁸ Some Dickens scholars disagree on whether or not Dickens definitively suffered a nervous breakdown as defined by clinical psychology, but most agree that he likely suffered from a form of clinical depression.

An unsettled feeling greatly in excess of what was usual with Dickens became at this time [1857–58] almost habitual, and the satisfactions which home should have supplied, and which indeed were essential requirements of his nature, he had failed to find in his home . . . he was led to appear frequently intolerant in opinions and language . . . it was during the composition of *Little Dorrit* that I think he first felt a certain strain which brought with it other misgivings. Never before had his teeming fancy seemed to want such help; but it is another proof that he had been secretly bringing before himself, at least, the possibility that what had ever been his great support might some day desert him. He had lost the free and fertile method of the earlier day, and he had frequently an apprehension of some possible break-down, of which the end might be at any time beginning. There came accordingly, from time to time, intervals of impatience and restlessness.¹⁵⁹

On the heels of such emotional turmoil, Dickens in 1858 formally separated from his wife, Catherine, after twenty-two years of marriage and ten children, attributing the separation to a deep and established incompatibility between himself and Catherine. “He did so brutally and publicly,” Claire Tomalin asserts,¹⁶⁰ and Forster’s interpretation of the marriage’s dissolution was no less stark. “Thenceforward he and his wife lived apart” begins Forster’s account of Dickens’s separation from Catherine.¹⁶¹ Forster then goes on to recount the couple’s custody arrangement—in with Dickens demanded and retained custody of all their children, save for their eldest son, Charley, who defied his father and went with his mother—as well as recounting of the “miserable gossip” regarding their arrangement printed in the periodical *Household Words*.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 698–701.

¹⁶⁰ Claire Tomalin, *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 8.

¹⁶¹ Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 711–12.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 712.

Such blunt disclosure of emotional distress and marital woes wrought the public's condemnation. Specifically of Forster's recounting Dickens's separation, one person said: "as it is the lovers of scandal only have their appetites for a Barmecides feast, and a half-forgotten incident is revived" [the incident being an "astonishing" letter Dickens wrote to Forster describing his unhappiness with Catherine and their incompatibility].¹⁶³ Reviewing volume three of the biography, critic R. H. Hutton had this to say:

We have here a melancholy close to a book which, in spite of many traits of astonishing perceptive power, and prodigal generosity, and unbounded humour, contained in it, will certainly not add to the personal fascination with which Dickens is regarded by so many of his countrymen, The closing volume contains more evidences than any of the others of the very great defect of character which seems to have grown from the very roots of Dickens's genius.¹⁶⁴

Even Forster's inclusion of Dickens's will within the appendix of *The Life of Charles Dickens* created controversy and disconcerted the British public. While Ellen ("Nelly") Ternan—Dickens's supposed (later confirmed) longtime mistress—was excluded from Forster's biography, the inclusion of Dickens's last will and testament his *Life* confirmed the existence of the relationship. Speculative gossip on the nature of Ternan and Dickens's relationship had been bandied throughout society and in the press for years, and so the disclosure of Dickens's will in Forster's biography was kindling for the fire of literary gossip. In the very first sentence of his will, Dickens names Nelly as his first legatee,

¹⁶³ "Literature: Principal Articles in the Magazine," *Manchester Guardian*, February 13, 1874, 7.

¹⁶⁴ R. H. Hutton, "A Review of Vol. III of Forster's Life," *Spectator*, February 7, 1874, 174–76.

granting her £1000.¹⁶⁵ By granting Nelly a “sufficiently eyebrow-raising sum,”¹⁶⁶ Dickens posthumously substantiated a relationship that he had taken pains to conceal from the public for fear of the ensuing scandal and damage to his reputation. “Dickens wished to be, and was, generally worshipped—a man who evoked comparisons with Christ at the time of his death—a man of unblemished character, the incarnation of a broad Christian virtue and at the same time of domestic harmony and conviviality . . . Nelly was a blot on Dickens’s good name and the Dickens machinery for PR [public relations] was unrivalled,” says Dickens biographer Claire Tomalin.¹⁶⁷ Though explicit details pertaining to the relationship between Dickens and Ternan were excluded from the biography, Forster’s decision to not so much as name Nelly within its pages left an observable emptiness in the chapters covering the last years of Dickens’s life, which did not go unnoticed by readers.¹⁶⁸

Such revelations of Dickens’s personal life and character in Forster’s biography left a bad taste in the mouth of the British public, some of whom expressed their especial displeasure and disgust at Forster’s lack of discretion and

¹⁶⁵ Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 949.

¹⁶⁶ Hamilton, “John Forster, of Dickens Fame,” in *Keepers of the Flame*, 155.

¹⁶⁷ Tomalin, *The Invisible Woman*, 4.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 5; Hamilton, “John Forster, of Dickens Fame,” in *Keepers of the Flame*, 155. Dickens and Ternan were involved in theatre productions together over the course of several years (she was an actress) and shared mutual acquaintances. The public was aware of Dickens’s and Ternan’s working relationship within the theatre world, which is why Nelly’s absence in Forster’s biography was all the more noted. Interestingly, no letters between Dickens and Ternan survive.

appropriate reverence in reviews and editorials. “It is not without a shock that we are admitted behind the curtain of the good Genie’s private life. All is so different from what we had anticipated,” declared Robert Buchanan.¹⁶⁹ “The publication is for all purposes and for all persons to be regretted. At most times it [the biography] has a great leaning towards those sensational flourishes which were certainly below the need and unworthy of the ability of his [Forster’s] pen . . . and Mr. Forster has allowed himself, without calm or sufficient examination, to reproduce the inconsistencies as if they were all verifiable and consistent statements,” declared a reader in an *Observer* editorial.¹⁷⁰ In a seventeen-page review of the entire opus of *The Life of Charles Dickens* that ran in the popular periodical *Temple Bar* in 1873, the author laments Forster’s representation of Dickens, and places the onus of the “blows to the memory of Dickens” not upon Dickens, but squarely upon his biographer’s shoulders.

It may be gravely doubted whether the little poet dealt the great one’s memory a more cruel blow, than Mr. Forster has dealt the memory of Dickens . . . was it also characteristic of Mr. Dickens to act, in all the grave circumstances of life, with a hard self-assertion, an utter ignoring of everybody’s rights, feelings, and interest except his own? If not, then his biographer has to answer for producing the impression upon the mind of the reader, who looks in vain throughout these volumes for any indication that Mr. Dickens’s fine writing about human relations has any but a Pecksniffian sense . . . the biographer shocks yet more profoundly the moral sense of persons who believe that genius is not less, but more, bound by the common law of duty in feeling and in action.¹⁷¹

The same author deals an overall blow to the biography, declaring “we protest against this story not only because it gives an impression of the character of Mr.

¹⁶⁹ Buchanan, “Forster’s Life of Charles Dickens,” 147.

¹⁷⁰ “Mr. Forster’s Life of Charles Dickens,” *Observer*, December 31, 1871, 2.

¹⁷¹ “The Life of Charles Dickens,” *Temple Bar*, July 1873, 170, 171–72, 174.

Dickens extremely disappointing to the admirers of his genius—but also for a much more serious and far-reaching reason. Everything of the kind which is believed and adopted by the public as true of literary men, is degrading to their status and demoralizing to their class.”¹⁷²

“In all the circumstances, he [Forster] was as forthright as we could hope for,” claims Ian Hamilton.¹⁷³ While many modern scholars praise Forster for his candor and unfettered chronicle of Dickens’s years within the pages of *Life of Charles Dickens*, Victorian readers denounced him for it. So greatly revered, beloved, popular, and deeply invested within the Victorian culture of celebrity and hero-worship was Charles Dickens that when he died on June 9, 1870, the public’s grief was palpable. “In his own land it was as if a personal bereavement had befallen every one. Her Majesty the Queen telegraphed from Balmoral ‘her deepest regret at the sad news of Charles Dickens’s death;’ and this was the sentiment alike of all classes of her people.”¹⁷⁴ When a biography penned by one of Dickens’s longest and closest friends appeared in the literary marketplace, readers anticipating fresh grounds for their passionate reverence were sorely disappointed. Many felt that Forster had disrespected Dickens’s memory, and publicly expressed their anger and anguish in print. Not with *The Life of Charles Dickens* did Forster provide the British people with a typical literary biography,

¹⁷² Ibid., 182.

¹⁷³ Hamilton, “John Forster, of Dickens Fame,” in *Keepers of the Flame*, 156.

¹⁷⁴ Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 945.

presenting readers with an inspirational, unblemished, and idealized portrait of Dickens's life.

Thomas Carlyle by James Anthony Froude

Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) was one of the nineteenth century's most prolific writers. Essayist, biographer, historian, and beloved member of Britain's literary culture—his eightieth birthday in 1875 had been a national celebration—Thomas Carlyle is best remembered for three things: for his epistemological tome *The French Revolution* (1837), which heavily influenced Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859); for being the subject of James Anthony Froude's radical biography which turned the genre of literary biography on its head; and for his published series of six essays, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), which significantly influenced and perpetuated hero-worship in Victorian society.¹⁷⁵

James Anthony Froude (1818–1894), a Victorian man of letters—historian, biographer, and essayist like his friend Carlyle—is most recognized to literary and historical posterity for the nine volumes of correspondence, reminiscences, and biography he published about Thomas and Jane (Thomas's wife) Carlyle—for which he was vehemently excoriated by the British public.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Fred Kaplan, "Carlyle, Thomas (1795–1881)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn. October 2008.

¹⁷⁶ A. F. Pollard, "Froude, James Anthony (1818–1894)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn. May 2009.

Carlyle and Froude's friendship and professional relationship began on a June evening in 1849 when the two were introduced by James Spedding.¹⁷⁷ Though Froude was living in Wales at the time and Carlyle in London, Froude frequently visited London in order to consult historical documents for his histories, and while in town called upon Carlyle. Following their introduction by Spedding, the friendship between the two men quickly advanced to the point where Froude solicited Carlyle's advice on his manuscripts. So went their friendship until the autumn of 1860 when Froude left Wales and made London his home. From then on, Carlyle and Froude were greatly involved in each other's lives personally and professionally. Both Carlyle and his wife, Jane, liked Froude so well they frequently invited him to their home for parties and private dinners—such a relationship provided Froude the opportunity to know Jane and Thomas quite intimately.¹⁷⁸ Carlyle's grief following Jane's death in 1866 was so profound that for a long time he wished to see no one, save for a few friends, Froude among them.

In the years that followed, Carlyle learned that whether he wished it or not—he did not, stating “express Biography of me I had really rather that there should be none”¹⁷⁹)—a biography of his life was sure to be written; in fact, Carlyle learned that several people were awaiting his death so that they might

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Waldo H. Dunn, *Froude & Carlyle, A Study of the Froude-Carlyle Controversy* (London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1930), 10–11.

¹⁷⁹ Quote contained within Thomas Carlyle's will, dated February 6, 1873. Ibid., 17–18.

publish.¹⁸⁰ In light of these revelations, Carlyle concluded that “if he was to figure before the world at all after his death he preferred that there should be an authentic portrait of him,” and designated that Froude should be the one to write his life story.¹⁸¹ Carlyle’s choice of biographer having been made, in 1873 he “thrust” upon Froude a mass of material: “his own and his wife’s private papers, journals, correspondence, reminiscences, and other fragments, a collection overwhelming in its abundance.”¹⁸² Carlyle’s instructions to Froude were clear and simple: “Take these for my sake; they are yours to publish, as you please, after I am gone. Do what you will.”¹⁸³ From then on, until the time of his death on February 5, 1881, Carlyle did all he could to assist Froude in the preparation and completion of the work. Froude, though, was not wholeheartedly enthusiastic about the project, proclaiming “I felt at the time that he was laying a cruel test of friendship upon me, though he did not mean to be cruel . . . I had not sought it, but I did not refuse to accept it.”¹⁸⁴ Even Carlyle’s will stipulated that Froude was responsible for his biography, along with the publication of his late wife Jane’s papers and reminiscences:

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 11–12.

¹⁸¹ James Anthony Froude, *My Relations with Carlyle* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1903), 13.

¹⁸² Ibid., 17.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸⁴ James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London, 1834–1881*. 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1884) 1:2, 3.

of that Manuscript my kind, considerate, and ever-faithful friend, James Anthony Froude (as he has lovingly promised me) takes precious charge in my stead; to him therefore I give it with whatever other fartherences and elucidations may be possible; and I solemnly request of him to do his best and wisest in the matter, as I feel assured he will . . . the Manuscript is by no means ready for publication; nay, the questions How, When, are still dark to me; but on all such points James Anthony Froude's practical summing up and decision is to be taken as mine.¹⁸⁵

Carlyle's personal feelings regarding biographies were well known to Froude—Carlyle abhorred discreet, reverential biographies that typified the Victorian age. He strongly believed that the flaws of heroes should be openly discussed in biographies, and tasked Froude to adhere to such principles when he took to writing the biography of his life. "Since a Life of him there would certainly be, he wished it to be as authentic as possible."¹⁸⁶ By commissioning Froude to pen his biography; freely bequeathing of his and Jane's personal, private papers; along with his final instructions contained within his will, it is clear that Carlyle died fully knowing and understanding that Froude was dispatched with publishing the most intimate details and secrets of Carlyle's life. By carrying out Carlyle's wishes, James Anthony Froude doomed himself to years of public condemnation and voluble public ire with a "protracted, sordid, acidulous battle of the books that displayed the Victorian character more often at its obscurantist worst than at its courageous best."¹⁸⁷

The frankness of Froude's *Life of Carlyle* was unheard of by the usually respectful standards of nineteenth-century biographies. Within the pages of the

¹⁸⁵ Froude, *My Relations with Carlyle*, 72–74.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁸⁷ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 234.

biography's four volumes, Froude reveals that Carlyle was an exceptionally flawed man. Selfish, cantankerous, melancholy, irritable, and even at times violent—Froude presented Victorian readers with private details of an unhappy and unpleasant domestic life and marriage. Forthright details of the latter, in fact, greatly violated conventions of reticence in a society that extolled marriage and domestic life. Froude himself, though, declared to readers in the preface to volume one in 1882 that this biography would not be an indulgence in discreet reverence:

Of a person whom malice must acknowledge so much as this, the prickly aspects might fairly be passed by in silence; and if I had studied my own comfort or pleasure of my immediate readers, I should have produced a portrait as agreeable, and at least as faithful, as those of the favoured saints in the Catholic calendar. But it would have been a portrait without individuality—an ideal, or, in other words, an 'idol,' to be worshipped one day and thrown away the next. Least of all men could such idealizing be ventured with Carlyle, to whom untruth of any kind was abominable. If he was to be known at all, he chose to be known as he was, with his angularities, his sharp speech, his strange peculiarities, meritorious or unmeritorious, precisely as they had actually been. He has himself laid down the conditions under which a biographer must do his work if he would do it honestly, without fear of the man before him; and in dealing with Carlyle's own memory I have felt myself bound to conform to his own rule.¹⁸⁸

Throughout the four volumes of the *Life of Carlyle*, Froude's commitment to present the public with an accurate portraiture of Carlyle's life—warts and all—lead to a biography inundated with letters, journal entries, and biographical narrative describing, sometimes in excruciating detail, Thomas Carlyle's prickly nature. Froude justifies such inclusions, declaring "I have dwelt more fully on these aspects of Carlyle's character because the irritability which he could not or

¹⁸⁸ Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life, 1795–1835*, 1:viii–ix.

would not try to control followed him through the greater part of his life.”¹⁸⁹

Forthright accounts of Carlyle’s tempestuous personality abound throughout each of the biography’s volumes: “it is perfectly true that Carlyle would have been an unbearable inmate of any house where his will was not absolute. ‘Gey [grey] ill to live ‘wi,’ as his mother said”;¹⁹⁰ “when miserable he made all around him miserable.”¹⁹¹ Most illuminating and candid of all such passages, though, was

Froude’s plainspoken account of Carlyle’s character flaws:

He was fierce and uncompromising . . . he was stern in his judgment of others. The sins of passion he could pardon, but the sins of insincerity, or half-insincerity, he could never pardon. He would not condescend to the conversational politeness which remove the friction between man and man. He called things by their right names, and in a dialect edged with sarcasm. Thus he was often harsh when he ought to have been merciful; he was contemptuous where he had no right to despise; and in his estimate of motives and actions was often unjust and mistaken. He, too, who was so severe with others had weaknesses of his own of which he was unconscious in the excess of his self-confidence. He was proud—one may say savagely proud . . . his temper had been ungovernable since his childhood.¹⁹²

Froude, however, justifies including such unflattering vignettes about Carlyle’s personality, asserting that “such faults are inseparable from the nature of the man. They have to be told because without them his character cannot be understood . . . the more completely it [Carlyle’s life] is understood, the more his character will be seen to answer for his intellectual teaching.”¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 1:204.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 1:347.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 2:325.

¹⁹² Ibid., 2:471–72.

¹⁹³ Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London, 1834–1881*, 1:5, 6.

While the British public found much to fault in Froude's detailed descriptions of Carlyle's less savory personality characteristics, they reserved especial condemnation for Froude's meticulous accounts of Carlyle's and Jane's domestic and marital strife. Episodes such as "Carlyle, who never checked his own irritabilities, was impatient and sarcastic when others ventured to be unreasonable. She [Jane Welsh Carlyle] had observed and justly dreaded the violence of his temper which when he was provoked or thwarted would boil like a geyser,"¹⁹⁴ pepper the biography. Froude does not shy away from sharing just how much Jane Welsh Carlyle was much put upon by Carlyle. Jane was expected to entirely sacrifice her happiness for her husband's comfort; indeed such passages illustrating Carlyle's beliefs on this subject permeate the biography. "His wife he would expect to rise to his own level of disinterested self-surrender, and be content and happy in assisting him in the development of his own destiny; and this was selfishness—selfishness of a rare and elevated kind, but selfishness still, and it followed him throughout his married life."¹⁹⁵ "He could leave his wife to ill-health and toil, assuming that all was well as long as she did not complain . . . Carlyle saw [Jane's suffering], and yet he was blind."¹⁹⁶ "To Mrs. Carlyle, Craigenputtock had been a less salutatory home . . . her life there, had been a life of menial drudgery, unsolaced by more than an occasional word of

¹⁹⁴ Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life, 1795–1835*, 1:314.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:285.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:286–87.

encouragement or sympathy or compassion from her husband.”¹⁹⁷ Froude’s close relationship with the Carlyles meant that he witnessed interactions between the two over the course of twenty-plus years, and in his *Life of Carlyle*, Froude did not hesitate to share with readers his own opinions and impressions of their troubled marriage:

The married life of Carlyle and Jane Welsh was not happy in the roseate sense of happiness. Miss Welsh had looked forward to being Carlyle’s intellectual companion, to sharing his thoughts and helping him with his writings . . . the reality was not like the dream. She had to work as a menial servant. Bravely she went through it all; and she would have gone through it cheerfully if she had been rewarded with ordinary gratitude. But if things were done rightly, Carlyle did not inquire who did them . . . Miss Welsh, it is probable, would have passed though life more pleasantly had she married someone of her own rank in life.¹⁹⁸

Despite the inclusion of episodes that portray Thomas Carlyle in an inarguably unflattering light, Froude contends that “in the thousands [of letters] which I have read, either written to Carlyle or written by him; I have found no sentence of his own which he could have wished unwritten, or a single action alluded to by others which those most jealous of his memory need regret to read, or his biographer need desire to conceal.”¹⁹⁹ The British public, however, disagreed with Froude.

James Anthony Froude’s biography of Thomas Carlyle, encompassing four volumes and published between by London publishing firm Longmans, Green, and Co., between 1882 and 1884, was published to great public anticipation when volume I was released in 1882, but it was at once branded an

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 2:418.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 1:364, 365–66.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 2:473.

exposé, and Froude was denounced as a traitor to his friend's memory. "No deplorable or shameful detail has been spared; a minute and exhaustive anatomical demonstration has been made of every morbid structure, the scalpel of the biographer has been ruthlessly employed to lay bare and exhibit all the ravages of disease," wrote one reviewer.²⁰⁰ The public's outcries were consistent in their condemnation of Froude's lack of respectful discretion concerning the more unsavory aspects of Carlyle's life and character. They wondered: "How could Froude have allowed Carlyle's dark domestic secrets to be advertised in such appalling detail; why had he not censored certain off-the-cuff acerbities; why had he been in such a hurry to blacken Carlyle's name?"²⁰¹ Margaret Oliphant, the great defender of discretion in biography, who believed that biographies above all should contribute to author worship, acerbically said of Froude's *Life of Carlyle*:

No man [Thomas Carlyle] ever left this world more full of honours, more completely possessed of respect, veneration, and proud recognition of his countrymen. Unfortunately this high regard did not last long, for within a year or two after his death his reputation had been torn to rags and thrown to the dogs, at the mercy of every dirty cur in England. This occurred in spite of a blameless and honourable life because of the artificial sense given to his most private sentiments and domesticities.²⁰²

Julia Wedgwood, in a long editorial in the *Contemporary Review*, had many things to say of Froude's biography, among them "What is absolutely certain is that Mr. Carlyle would have condemned their publication. We cannot believe that

²⁰⁰ "Froude's 'Life of Carlyle,'" *Saturday Review*, September 6, 1884, 598.

²⁰¹ Hamilton, "Froude's Carlyle, Carlyle's Froude," in *Keepers of the Flame*, 170.

²⁰² Margaret Oliphant, *The Victorian Age of English Literature*, 2 vols. (New York: Tait Sons & Company, 1890), 1:106.

Carlyle would have consented to give pain this book has inflicted. Of Mr. Froude it is difficult to believe that he wished to present to the world, in an unlovely light, one who regarded him with love and trust.”²⁰³ Writing on the development of English biography in 1927, Harold Nicholson, recalls the British public’s reaction to the biography:

A yell of dismay arose from the Victorians. The polemics that ensued reverberated like thunder; the smoking room of the Athenæum seethed with elderly, outraged indignation. Froude, it was universally admitted, had shown execrable taste: he was a Judas, he was a traitor, he was a ghoul. It [the biography] desecrated, they said, the sanctities of private life; it revealed secrets with should remain for ever hidden in the grave; it was disturbing, it was unpleasant, nay, more, it was positively heartless.²⁰⁴

The most vocal and surprising of Froude’s critics was Thomas Carlyle’s niece, Mary Carlyle, who considered Froude’s biography to be defamatory, and publicly protested Froude’s biographical conduct in the press, namely in the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. The war between Mary Carlyle and Froude began in 1881 with Froude’s publication of *The Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, the first volume of which appeared on March 5, 1881.²⁰⁵ In a letter to the *Times*, dated May 5, 1881, Mary Carlyle demanded the return of all of Thomas Carlyle’s papers in Froude’s possession so that they could be examined by a panel of Carlyle’s friends. Furthermore, Mary claimed that “at the end of this MS, I find the following words in my uncle’s handwriting: ‘I still mainly mean to burn this

²⁰³ Julia Wedgwood, “Mr. Froude as a Biographer,” *Contemporary Review*, May 1881, 837.

²⁰⁴ Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927), 129–30.

²⁰⁵ Hamilton, “Froude’s Carlyle, Carlyle’s Froude,” in *Keepers of the Flame*, 170.

book before my own departure . . . I solemnly forbid them, each and all, to publish this bit of writing as it stands here.”²⁰⁶ While this letter pertains to Froude’s publication of *The Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, it possessed ramifications for Froude’s biography of Carlyle, as Froude and Mary Carlyle possessed very different opinions of biography. Following the publication of her aunt’s private life in *Reminiscences*, Mary Carlyle insisted upon a discreet, respectful, adulatory biography of her uncle—one in which his marital troubles and character flaws would be artfully painted over with the brushstroke of biographical prudence. Froude, however, as has been discussed, was committed to portraying a wholly accurate portraiture of a complex and complicated man. Suspecting—rightfully so as it turned out—that Froude planned to be no less restrained in his biography of Thomas Carlyle, Mary attempted to make it impossible for Froude to finish writing his biography by removing the materials from Froude’s possession by claiming that her uncle had gifted his personal papers to her in 1875.²⁰⁷ When the first volume of the *Life of Carlyle* was published in 1882, Mary Carlyle’s animosity intensified, and increased with the publication of each subsequent volume. The battle between the two waged on for the next two decades, carried out openly in the public as letters between the two were often printed as letters to the editor in *The Times*.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Mary Carlyle, “Letter to the Editor,” *Times*, May 5, 1881, 34–35.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ A large selection of these letters and editorials are printed in their entirety in Waldo H. Dunn’s *Froude & Carlyle, A Study of the Froude-Carlyle Controversy*, 277–360

Historian Ian Hamilton claims that Froude had expected to be attacked “indeed he had made sure that he was out of the country when the book appeared” but he was “hurt and alarmed” by the ferocity with which the British public criticized him and the hostility that he faced.²⁰⁹ A few years after the publication of the last volume in the biography’s series—the last volume was published on October 6, 1884—Froude sat down between March 12 and 15, 1887 and penned a seventy-nine-page pamphlet in which he defends his biography and the decisions he made in regards to its creation and contents. Published posthumously by his children in 1903, Froude discloses the more disturbing matters he omitted from his books on the Carlyles—such as allegations and physical proof of domestic violence—and ardently justifies his decisions as a biographer.

I was not prepared for a passionate and angry challenge of my right to make the revelations which were left to me to make or not to make. I was not prepared for attacks on my character as a gentleman and a man of honour . . . from the first time in 1871, when he [Carlyle] placed the manuscripts in my hands, did he ever indicate in the slightest degree that he himself had any reluctance of doubt about the propriety of the publication . . . those tender and suffering passages which I was universally reproached for having published, I thought and I still think, were precisely those which would win and command the pity and sympathy of mankind . . . I am told that Mary Carlyle possessed documents which show parts of Carlyle’s story in another light. If so, they ought to have been commissioned to me. She says now that they were considered too sacred. I cannot help that. I could judge only by what Carlyle put into hands.²¹⁰

The British public’s outcry against Froude’s *Carlyle* was so fervent on account of two fundamental issues—its violation of author worship and the role of biography as a moral guide—and the conventions of reticence that dictated what,

²⁰⁹ Hamilton, “Froude’s Carlyle, Carlyle’s Froude,” in *Keepers of the Flame*, 170.

²¹⁰ Froude, *My Relations with Carlyle*, 28, 32–33, 38.

and how much, of a person's personal character and life stories should be shared with the public within the pages of a biography. It was Froude's account of Carlyle's brutish personality and his insensitive, harsh treatment of his wife, Jane, "a woman with a will of her own," that most shocked a Victorian society that cherished its illusions about the moral dignity of authors-as-heroes and the "blissful" sanctity of marriage.²¹¹ Carlyle as the "often ranting husband"²¹² of Jane violated Victorian moral specifications about marriage, and by sharing painfully detailed accounts of Carlyle's flaws and ill-treatment of his wife, Froude violated the principle that literary biographies ought to provide the public with an idealized, aspirational, morally upstanding representation of an author. Few could worship or find moral a man described by his biographer as "impatient, sarcastic, and possessing a violent temper . . . a perverse mortal to deal with."²¹³ And although the general atmosphere of Britain was slowly becoming more socially and culturally progressive as the nineteenth century progressed toward the twentieth, biographies continued to be governed by the laws that had been laid down by *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1849—"whatever refers to the public life is public, and may be printed: whatever refers solely to domestic existence is private, and ought to be held sacred."²¹⁴ The established spirit of

²¹¹ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 235.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 238.

²¹³ Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life, 1795–1835*, 1:314, 358.

²¹⁴ "Modern Biography—Beattie's *Life of Campbell*," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, July–December 1849, 222.

biography, steadfast in its obedience to traditional principles of reserve and in biographers' anxiety not to offend readers, was smashed by Froude's *Carlyle*, bringing to a heated head the long-standing arguments over biographical candor. The ultimate significance of the Carlyle-Froude affair lays in the fact that James Anthony Froude rebelled against the prevailing biographical policy of concealing flaws by unapologetically relating Thomas Carlyle's character, struggles, woes, and domestic life in conscientious detail.

Chapter 4: REVEALING LITERARY LIVES: GEORGE ELIOT AND PERCY
BYSSHE SHELLEY

George Eliot by Mathilde Blind

Best known by her pseudonym—George Eliot—Marian Evans (1819–1880)²¹⁵ was the author of some of the nineteenth century’s most popular, best-selling novels—*Silas Marner*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*, and *Adam Bede* among them. Considered in her lifetime to be one of one of England's finest living novelists, Eliot enjoyed notoriety for her literary work, and was both a critically admired and commercially successful novelist. During her lifetime, too, Eliot was known to the public for her exceptionally unconventional personal life.²¹⁶

Eliot’s biographer, Mathilde Blind (1841–1896), is unique among those biographers discussed in this study, as she is not a native Briton. Born in Manheim, Germany, the daughter of a Jewish banker, Blind and her family emigrated to Hampstead, London in 1848–49. Poet, biographer, essayist, and novelist, Mathilde Blind was regarded in her own lifetime as an author of great repute.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Although she was born Marian Evans, for the purposes of consistency and clarity, I will refer to Marian Evans by her pseudonym, George Eliot, throughout this study.

²¹⁶ Rosemary Ashton, “Evans, Marian [George Eliot] (1819–1880),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn. May 2008.

²¹⁷ Patricia Srebrnik, “Blind, Mathilde (1841–1896),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Published in a single volume in 1883—unusual for a nineteenth-century literary biography, which were usually published in two or three volumes—Mathilde Blind’s *George Eliot* was part of a series of fairly brief biographies focused upon women. Published by British publishing firm W. H. Allen, the Eminent Women Series comprised twenty-two biographies of British and French women of “eminent” note—with the inclusion of one American. The series was published between 1883 and 1895, during the prime of biography’s popularity in nineteenth-century Britain.²¹⁸ Shortly following Eliot’s death in 1880, Blind was commissioned by the publishing house to write a biography of Eliot’s life, which was atypical of standard Victorian literary biographies on two counts. Blind and Eliot were not close friends and confidantes, and typically literary biographies were written by close friends or family members.²¹⁹ Also, the majority of British Victorian literary biographies were published as the result of the biographer approaching the publisher, and not the other way around; biographies commissioned by a publisher were not the norm for literary biographies.²²⁰ The inclusion of a biography about a female writer, written by a fellow woman, within this thesis has nothing to do with gender theory, therefore none shall be included. My goal is to illustrate that literary biographies by and about women could also be forthright, candid, and unapologetic about the subject’s personal life, as Blind’s

²¹⁸ Alison Booth, “Collective Biographies of Women,” the University of Virginia, <http://womensbios.lib.virginia.edu>.

²¹⁹ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 187–89.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

George Eliot is, and to explore the ways in which Blind's biography upset the usual heroic biographies that epitomized the Victorian age.

Were Mathilde Blind inclined or pressed to compose a sanitized biography of George Eliot's life, she would be hard pressed to do so, as Eliot's whole life, even from an early age, was unique and unusual. Described as "strong-minded and racy, curious, skeptical, critical, and even rebellious by nature,"²²¹ Eliot's life was a difficult one, but also a brave and extremely interesting one that Blind sought to fully capture. Eliot's religious doubts and unconventional beliefs, intellectual pursuits, and controversial, exceptional love relationship are all unapologetically disclosed for the reader in Blind's biography.

Born into and raised by a pious Anglican family, at the age of twenty-two, George Eliot renounced Christianity and refused to attend church—an act that infuriated her father, Robert Evans, so much that he ordered his daughter to leave his house. He later relented, but Eliot held firm to her beliefs that Christianity was "based on mingled truth and fiction,"²²² and continued to associate with liberal thinkers Charles and Cara Bray. Blind openly discusses Eliot's religious misgivings, as well as the painful altercation with her father:

Her intimacy with the Brays began about the time when these new doubts [about Christianity] were beginning to ferment in her. Her expanding mind . . . began to feel cramped by dogmas that now lost their vitality . . . Marian's views had undergone a complete transformation, and their intercourse was constrained and painful; for the young evangelical enthusiast, who had been a favorite in clerical

²²¹ Ashton, "Evans, Marian [George Eliot] (1819–1880)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

²²² *Ibid.*

circles, was now in what she afterwards described as a “crude state of freethinking” . . . by far the most trying consequence of her change of views was that now, for the first time, Marian was brought into collision with her father, whose pet she had always been. She, after a painful struggle, wanted to break away from the old forms of worship, and refused to go to church. Under such conflicting tendencies, a rupture between father and daughter became imminent.²²³

Although the Victorian era was characterized by religious doubt and spiritual turmoil in the face of rapidly advancing technology and pliable cultural mores, Blind’s inclusion of Eliot’s crises of faith was potentially upsetting to the British public who turned to biographies as a means of spiritual nourishment and guidance. “The decline of Christianity and the prospect of atheism had social implications. It was then assumed that any collapse of faith would destroy the sanctions of morality; and morality gone, society would disintegrate,” Walter Houghton pronounces.²²⁴ Additionally, Blind’s forthrightness in discussing domestic strife between father and daughter was an element that most biographers would sweep under the proverbial rug, as domestic harmony and filial obedience were of paramount importance in Victorian society. Daughters were told to remember the needs of “world-weary men,” and told to “pray, think, strive, to make the home something like a bright, serene, restful, joyful nook of heaven in an unheavenly world.”²²⁵

In 1851 George Eliot moved to London in order to pursue a career in journalism—highly unusual for a woman in the nineteenth century. She dwelled

²²³ Mathilde Blind, *George Eliot* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 188), 43, 44, 49.

²²⁴ Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 58.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 345, n11.

on the upper floors of 142 Strand, the home and workplace of publisher John Chapman, owner of the radical periodical the *Westminster Review*. Between 1851 and 1854, Eliot was in all but name the editor of the *Westminster Review*, to which she contributed dozens of articles.²²⁶ George Eliot's social position as a single working woman in London in the early 1850s was extremely unusual. Generally, Victorian women of small means either married (whereupon their income promptly became their husbands' property under the law) or took jobs as governesses or live-in companions to rich relations or acquaintances—all female, of course. “She was in a society entirely composed of men, and though it was intellectually stimulating to associate with them freely, she was risking her reputation in doing so,” asserts a twentieth-century Eliot biographer.²²⁷ While Eliot's unique social position was not scandalous per se—at the very least it distressed most prim Victorians—many literary biographies of women authors deemphasized their subjects' independence and literary careers, as Elizabeth Gaskell did in her biography of Charlotte Brontë. Mathilde Blind, however, honors Eliot's unconventionality and highlights her literary livelihood with passages such as: “The articles she contributed from the year 1852 to 1858 are among the most brilliant examples of periodical literature,”²²⁸ “rarely has a novelist come to his task with such a far-reaching culture, and with an intellectual

²²⁶ Ashton, “Evans, Marian [George Eliot] (1819–1880),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ Blind, *George Eliot*, 79.

grasp, as George Eliot . . . compared with such qualifications, who among novelists could compete? What could a Dickens, or a Thackeray himself, throw into the opposing scale?”²²⁹ Celebrating such an unconventional lifestyle for a woman in Victorian Britain within the pages of a biography was a bold move in a society that dictated biographical subjects be aspirational. Victorian social and cultural customs dictated that women belonged in the home, tending to their families, not in a boarding house, tending to printed pages. “The woman’s intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision,” declared John Ruskin in an 1865 sermon.²³⁰ Blind’s celebration of Eliot’s career was revolutionary in that Blind devoted so many pages of her biography to emphasizing Eliot’s literary life, while downplaying her traditional feminine qualities.

What truly makes Mathilde Blind’s biography of George Eliot radical, however, was Blind’s daring decision to chronicle—and even defend—Eliot’s controversial, extraordinarily unconventional love life. While living and working in London, George Eliot made the acquaintance of a man names George Henry Lewes—a man two years Eliot’s senior, a frequent contributor to the *Westminster Review*, and, like Eliot, an atheist. The two met in a bookshop in October 1851, and by evidence based upon letters between the two, became lovers in late 1852

²²⁹ Ibid., 140.

²³⁰ Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 349–50, n26.

or early 1853.²³¹ Lewes, though, was a married man, having married a woman named Agnes Jervis in February 1841. The couple enjoyed an open marriage, but because Lewes condoned his wife's adultery by registering the births of her children fathered by another man, Thornton Hunt, he was unable and ineligible to sue for a divorce.²³² By 1853, Ashton argues, Lewes had grown tired of his arrangement with Agnes Jervis, and wished to marry George Eliot, but he had unfortunately disqualified himself from doing so.²³³ Sometime in 1853 Lewes and Eliot decided to openly live together as husband and wife, despite the fact that they were not legally married. Eliot changed her name, though not legally, since she was prohibited from doing so. Henceforth Eliot began addressing herself either as Marian Evans Lewes or Mrs. Lewes.²³⁴ Although it was not uncommon for Victorian men to keep mistresses—even literary men such as Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins—such arrangements were nearly always kept quiet for fear of scandal and public condemnation. Eliot and Lewes, though, made no secret of their relationship and domestic arrangement, which they considered a true marriage, not a tawdry affair to be shamefully hidden from public sight. It was Eliot's reputation, though, that suffered the most from the couple's unique partnership. Says Blind, sympathetically, "In thus defying public opinion and

²³¹ Ashton, "Evans, Marian [George Eliot] (1819–1880)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

forming a connection in opposition to the laws of society, George Eliot must have undergone some painful trials and sufferings. Conscious of no wrong-doing, enjoying the rare happiness of completest intellectual fellowship in the man she loved, the step she had taken made a gap between her and her kindred.”²³⁵

Mathilde Blind made no attempt to discreetly sanitize Eliot’s relationship with Lewes; in fact an entire chapter titled “George Henry Lewes” is devoted to the couple’s relationship. Within it, and throughout the entirety of *George Eliot*, Blind supportively chronicles intimate details of Eliot and Lewes’s life together. Blind even goes so far as to defend the two’s decision to treat each other as husband and wife, declaring “persons who were privileged enough to be admitted to the intimacy of George Eliot and Mr. Lewes could not fail to be impressed by the immense admiration which they had for one another.”²³⁶ Blind does not cloak the relationship in unobtrusive language; rather she explicitly narrates that Eliot and Lewes took to living together in conjugal union, though unlawfully so:

Such a union, formed in the full maturity of thought and feeling, was now contracted by Marian Evans and George Henry Lewes. Legal union, however, there could be none, for though virtually separated from his wife, Mr. Lewes could not get a divorce. Mr. Lewes appears to have written a letter in which, after a full explanation of his circumstances, he used all his powers of persuasion to win Miss Evans for his life-long companion; that she consented, after having satisfied her conscience that in reality she was not injuring the claims of others; and that henceforth she bore Mr. Lewes’s name, and became his wife in every sense but the legal one.²³⁷

²³⁵ Blind, *George Eliot*, 116–17.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 280.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 115–16.

Mathilde Blind's candid account of an extraordinarily unconventional and controversial relationship was radical in Victorian culture, which venerated marriage as a cornerstone of society; abhorred moral depravity, adultery and premarital sex being considered depraved and immoral behavior; and worshipped women as paragons of chastity. "After marriage, the Victorian ethic made fidelity the supreme virtue and sexual irregularity the blackest of sins. For a man to be called a moral person came to mean, almost entirely, that he was 'not impure in conduct.' Adultery, especially in the case of a wife, and no matter what the extenuating circumstances, was spoken of with horror. A 'feeble and erring woman' became, in fact, a social outcast."²³⁸ Victorian prudery and biographical conventions of discretion were wholly violated in Mathilde Blind's *George Eliot* with the inclusion of such forthright details about a relationship that violated Victorian customs of marriage, morality, and sexual relations. Although the British public knew a great deal about Eliot's personal life prior to the publication of Blind's biography—Eliot in fact chose the protection of a pseudonym as the public knew Marian Evans as the "other woman" living with a married man—*George Eliot* violated biographical conventions of reticence and public feeling that biographies served as moral guides to readers. Even though Eliot's relationship with Lewes was a large part of her life, other Victorian biographers sanitized and discreetly painted over those parts of a woman's life that might shock or offend prim Victorian readers, such as Elizabeth Gaskell did with Brontë's romantic relationship with her married Belgian professor, Monsieur

²³⁸ Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 356.

Heger, in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* in 1857. In fact, in 1885, Eliot's husband, John Cross, published a three-volume biography of his late wife in which he sought to portray Eliot as a respectable, moral woman. In doing so, Cross altered passages in Eliot's letters and journals, and "omitted much," including a relationship with another man, John Chapman, with whom Eliot had lived with and worked for on the *Westminster Review*.²³⁹ Cross's censured widower-biography is the epitome of taciturn literary biographies that abounded throughout Victorian Britain.

Despite the openness of Mathilde Blind's *George Eliot*, the British public by and large did not react with the same vehement condemnation that greeted Forster and Froude. George Eliot's literary work was no less popular than her male contemporaries; in fact she was one of the nineteenth century's bestselling authors, and although less publicly prominent than Charles Dickens, Eliot enjoyed public notoriety. Interestingly, one reviewer expressed a prurient desire to know *more* about how Eliot and Lewes's relationship came to exist: "We do not say that this sketch of George Eliot, by Mathilde Blind, in the "Eminent Women Series," quite comes up to our expectations. Some would like, for instance, to know all the circumstances which led Miss Evans to link herself to Mr. Lewes when she could not legally take his name . . . in the case of George Eliot, the world knows so much that it wants to know more."²⁴⁰ Reactions to Blind's *George Eliot* generally

²³⁹ Ashton, "Evans, Marian [George Eliot] (1819–1880)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

²⁴⁰ "George Eliot," *Literary World*, July–December 1883, 10.

praised the biography, which may be because the public already knew so much about Eliot's unique life. It may be because Victorian Britain indulged in "woman worship," and criticizing a female biographer in a public forum would violate dictates that women's "feminine nature" was less emotionally stable than a man's.²⁴¹ Regardless of the specific reasons as to why the British public failed to excoriate Blind for failing to provide them with an idealized biographical portrait of an angel in the attic, there is no doubt that *George Eliot* contravened conventional Victorian author worship and biographical conventions of reticence. The same public reaction, however, would not be enjoyed by Shelley biographer John Cordy Jeaffreson.

The Real Shelley by John Cordy Jeaffreson

While he did not live during Queen Victoria's reign (1837–1901), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) is one of the long nineteenth century's most celebrated and famous poets. While the prevailing author-as-hero worship trend and the burgeoning culture of literary celebrity was explored earlier in this study, nineteenth century poets—Percy Bysshe Shelley chief among them—experienced a similar kind of worship and veneration that actually began early in the nineteenth century, prior to the Victorian era. The implications for such poet worship, even poets who did not live to see the Victorian epoch, carried on even into the late nineteenth century, affecting and propelling adulation of literary idols. Beginning in the early years of the nineteenth century, star-struck Romantic

²⁴¹ Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 350, 352.

readers were enthralled by the blending of the poetry and poet's personality, and invested poets with a kind of glamour and religious idolatry that persisted into the middle of the nineteenth century.²⁴² "Shelley became famous as a lyric poet whose widely anthologized verse proved capable of surprisingly intimate effects," asserts literary scholar Eric Eisner.²⁴³ Shelley's lasting renown, literary influence, and glamour were not only bound up in his poetry, but also in the public's fascination with his controversial life story. Following Shelley's death in 1822, a wave of biographies and reminiscences by his friends crested over the next several decades, each devoting energy to disputing or opining on the more troubling passages and aspects of Shelley's life.²⁴⁴ John Cordy Jeaffreson would assail each one of these "mythmaking" biographies in his own biography of Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Very little is known about John Cordy Jeaffreson (1831–1901) and how he came to write a biography of Shelley. Jeaffreson made his living as an archivist, biographer, teacher, essayist, and author of some dozen three-volume novels.²⁴⁵ Jeaffreson's greatest contribution to literary posterity, however, was his biography

²⁴² Eisner, "Systems of Literary Lionism," in *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Literary Celebrity*, 23.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 94–95; Michael O'Neill, "Shelley, Percy Bysshe (1792–1822)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn. January 2009.

²⁴⁵ G. H. Martin, "Jeaffreson, John Cordy (1831–1901)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn. January 2008.

of Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Real Shelley: New Views of the Poet's Life*, published in two volumes in 1885.

Percy Bysshe Shelley's life was certainly not without its scandals and controversies, yet the majority of the British public indulged in worshipful adulation of a glamorous poetic genius.²⁴⁶ The romantic myth of Shelley was perpetuated by a myriad of biographies that downplayed Shelley's controversial personal life, and emphasized his poetic acumen. In doing so, Shelley's early biographers contributed to the cult of literary celebrity and hero-worship that surrounded his reputation, even into the Victorian era. In his biography, Jeaffreson refers to those who indulged in Shelley worship as "The Shelleyan Enthusiasts"—"vehement admirers of Shelley's poetry, who, without ever thinking about his social views, delight in imagining that the poet's character and career resembled his genius in its grandeur, and his song in its loftiness and beauty."²⁴⁷ John Cordy Jeaffreson, however, railed against those biographies, and sought to smash the romantic images that made a "myth" of Shelley, declaring:

The work of creating the romantic Shelley, and endowing him with personal and moral graces, never conspicuous in the real Shelley, was begun not long after the poet's death . . . to commend him to lovers of truth, the Shelleyan idolaters declare the poet to have been, from his boyhood till his death, daringly, unfalteringly, unwaveringly, invariably truthful . . . misrepresenting the poet's story in the smaller matters, the Shelleyans have misrepresented it even more

²⁴⁶ Eisner, "Shelley's Glamour," in *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Literary Celebrity*, 91–114.

²⁴⁷ John Cordy Jeaffreson, *The Real Shelley: New Views of the Poet's Life*, 2 vols. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1885), 1:2.

daringly in the larger matters . . . were there not another and very different side to the story, this book would not have been written.²⁴⁸

Jeafferson certainly succeeds in destroying any illusions that the British public possessed about Shelley's "idealistic" life. From beginning to end, throughout all 800-plus pages of the two-volume biography, Jeaffreson unremittingly, contentiously, attacks Shelley's character flaws and highlights the scandalous, controversial, and shocking episodes of Shelley's brief life. Jeaffreson, though, does not see such detailed narration as a violation of polite discretion, declaring: "In respect to the Real Shelley, I shall merely bring to light what has been hurtfully withdrawn, or hurtfully withheld from view. As for the fictitious Shelley, with which the Real Shelley has been replaced, I mean to demolish it."²⁴⁹ Jeaffreson's case for biographical candor is rooted in his belief that the public should, indeed, needs to know the "real" Shelley; misconceptions about the poet are in fact harmful, he contends. "To see the real Shelley, as he appeared during life to persons who regarded him through no such disturbing medium as romantic glamour, it is needful to get the better of misconceptions, arising from the delusive portraiture of him, to be found in familiar biographies—the fanciful pictures."²⁵⁰ In *The Real Shelley*, certainly, no reader could vest Shelley with any "romantic glamour." Detailed accounts of moral perversity in his youth, claims of

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 1:2, 3, 5, 8.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 1:12.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 1:33.

mental illness, callous behavior in his marriages, premarital sexual relations, and adultery pervade Jeaffreson's "truthful" account of Shelley's life.

From a young age, Percy Bysshe Shelley sported controversial and questionable behavior, which Jeaffreson imprudently describes as "mental and moral perversity."²⁵¹ Sent to Eton College in 1804, Shelley indulged in inappropriate activities such as taunting authority figures; engaging in experimental, unauthorized studies; and writing threatening letters to his father, cursing his name and insinuating violence.²⁵² On account of his misbehavior and misconduct, Shelley was expelled from Eton, averring that he was sent away "for striking a penknife through the hand of one of his school-fellows, and pinning it to a desk."²⁵³ Over the course of several chapters, Jeaffreson narrates Shelley's contempt for the school's authority, flirts with atheism, vitriol for his father, and disregard for serious academic pursuits. In a society that demanded biographies serve as moral guides to readers, Jeaffreson's exposures of moral illness and familial disrespect upset such dictates. Additionally, there was Shelley's contempt for his schoolmasters and teachers. Victorian Britain stood and relied upon a firm foundation that mandated submission to authority; indeed the hierarchical structure of society in government and social classes drove the whole of society,

²⁵¹ Ibid., 1:89–90.

²⁵² O'Neill, "Shelley, Percy Bysshe (1792–1822)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

²⁵³ Jeaffreson, *The Real Shelley*, 1:108.

culture, and economics in Victorian Britain.²⁵⁴ While Jeaffreson's inclusion of this aspect of Shelley's character did not strictly violate biographical standards of discretion per se, such candor about Shelley's flagrant recoil to authority would most certainly distress the average Victorian, "who was much more likely to defer to the opinions of his 'elders and betters' than to question them or think on his own."²⁵⁵ Also, it was likely to call into question the concept of author-as-hero worship, as how could the average reader be expected to adulate such a man who did not respect his betters? Jeaffreson at one point pauses in his exposition, wondering how the "Shelley enthusiasts will deal with the record of Shelley's habit of cursing his father, when the public shall have been educated to approve every act of the poet's life."²⁵⁶ Despite Jeaffreson's speculations as to how readers will react to such revelations, he continues on, diving into deeper and more a potentially much more shocking disclosure—that of insanity.

Insanity was a painful subject that "called for all the tact the biographer could muster."²⁵⁷ Biographical conventions of reticence dictated that instances of insanity—whether in the subject themselves or a family member—called for a judicious application of euphemism or outright silence, for even insinuations of insanity could, and did, distress readers. Jeaffreson completely disregarded such directives, and regaled the reader with incredibly forthright passages.

²⁵⁴ Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 102–4.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁵⁶ Jeaffreson, *The Real Shelley*, 1:93.

²⁵⁷ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 166.

The Shelleys resembled the eighteenth and nineteenth century Byrons in having a distinct strain of madness . . . the nervous boy who was hunted and baited in the Eton playing-grounds, by a multitude of lads, shouting at the top of their voices, “Mad Shelley, Mad Shelley, Mad Shelley!” had good reason to suspect that something in his behaviour and idiosyncrasy must have suggested the imputation of insanity . . . to the present writer, indeed, it is conceivable that there were times when the poet’s mind got the better of the most hideous of delusions that troubled it from time to time. There were times when the poet sustained his belief in the delusion, and the morbid fancy haunted him through life.²⁵⁸

Not only did blunt discussions of insanity violate dictates that biographies should cloak insanity in a shroud of darkness, lest readers become distressed, but piece by piece, Jeaffreson was tearing asunder the idealized, romantic portrait of Shelley that Britons could worship.

Following his expulsion from Oxford University—which Jeaffreson chronicles the scurrilous details of—Shelley fell upon hard times, as his relationship with his father deteriorated as Shelley refused to renounce atheism. In August 1811, Shelley seduced and eloped with a sixteen-year-old girl, Harriett Westbrook, the daughter of a prosperous coffeehouse owner.²⁵⁹ Jeaffreson meticulously chronicles the couple’s marital disharmony and Shelley’s ill-treatment of Harriett, caused in large part by Shelley’s disregard for marriage (he believed that it “fettered free inquiry”²⁶⁰), which Jeaffreson makes no secret of: “Had he in May or June made Harriett his mistress *without* marrying her, he

²⁵⁸ Jeaffreson, *The Real Shelley*, 1:104, 106.

²⁵⁹ O’Neill, “Shelley, Percy Bysshe (1792–1822),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

would have acted in accordance with his notions of morality.”²⁶¹ Describing the marriage as “disastrous,” Jeaffreson bestows the blame entirely upon Shelley, ascribing it to defects in his character. “From first to last he seems to have assumed that his own feelings were the only sensibilities for which he was required to think.”²⁶² In 1814, Shelley abandoned his wife and refused to communicate with her; the finer points of which are recounted by Jeaffreson, in which he calls Shelley an unchivalric man:

He deserted her. After determining to remain away from Harriett, Shelley, omitted to give her a timely notice of his purpose to keep away from her. He told her neither of his intention, nor sent her his address so that she might be able to communicate with him. Besides withdrawing from her, he concealed himself from her. A chivalric man does not leave his wife and her child-in-arms [Shelley and Harriett had children] without any care whether or no she has money for her immediate necessities. Shelley did thus leave and keep away from his wife for a considerable period.²⁶³

The marriage having been dissolved, a distraught Harriett committed suicide. Found dead in the Serpentine River on December 10, 1816, the sad episode is detailed in *The Real Shelley*; the fault of which, Jeaffreson asserts, is entirely Shelley’s. Radically deriding the public’s worship of Shelley, he proclaims: “of late years it has been the fashion of the Shelleyan enthusiasts to refer to Harriett’s depravation as though it gave a certain colouring of justification to the poet’s withdrawal from her. My view of the matter is that Shelley alone is to be blamed

²⁶¹ Jeaffreson, *The Real Shelley*, 1:325.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 1:348, 349.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 2:215.

for the offences.”²⁶⁴ Such a statement is radical indeed in an age where the British public venerated its literary icons. For a biographer to condemn his own subject is an act that was unheard of. Furthermore, as in the case of Froude’s biography of Thomas Carlyle, frank accounts of marital disharmony were considered by the public to be a grave violation of discretion on the part of the biographer. Marriage was considered to be a thread that held the fabric of Victorian society intact, and relations of discord within that sacred union upset British Victorian readers.

Further illustrating Shelley’s ill-treatment of his wife, Jeaffreson reveals that far from being a faithful husband, Shelley indulged in extramarital dalliances with other women, most famously Mary Godwin. The details of their affair and subsequent relationship were vividly chronicled over the course of several hundred pages and both volumes of *The Real Shelley*, giving readers an in-depth look into an extramarital affair on the part of both Shelley and Mary Godwin. Although Mary Godwin and Percy Bysshe Shelley later married, the timing of their wedding was in itself scandalous. “Three full weeks had not passed since Harriett’s corpse was fished out of the water when (on 30th December, 1816) Shelley was married privately to Mary Godwin.”²⁶⁵ Outright admissions of premarital sex and unfaithfulness towards his bride-to-be follow Jeaffreson’s account of Godwin and Shelley’s marriage, as he related that “Shelley married Mary Godwin within a fortnight of the day on which Claire [Claire Clairmont]

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 2:298.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 2:301–2.

gave birth to Allegra [her child by Shelley].”²⁶⁶ In Victorian Britain, “sex was a secret.” Considered by most wives to be a duty, and by men an act yielded to in accordance with their baser nature, premarital sex “frightened” the Victorians, as it violated moral order and could lead to spiritual downfall—adultery and premarital passion were declared to be “utter scoundrelism.”²⁶⁷ All manner of adultery, premarital relations, and illegitimate children were considered by the Victorians to be subjects too taboo to disclose to readers in the pages of a literary biography—especially in a biography of a writer so widely admired and adored, as Shelley was. By making such a heroic, beloved literary figure appear selfish, insensitive, callous, and morally depraved by exposing shocking private matters in a public biography, Jeaffreson wrought the ire of the British public.

Immediately following its publication in 1885, *The Real Shelley* and Jeaffreson received a hostile reception. Jeaffreson was branded as “a calumniator, slanderer, toad, bat, venomous snake, poisonous reptile, Thersites, and Caliban.”²⁶⁸ Although Jeaffreson’s stated goal with *The Real Shelley* was to debunk and correct inaccurate romantic myths surrounding the poet’s life, many felt that Jeaffreson acted as sort of prosecuting attorney—berating, judging, and condemning Shelley throughout the biography. “That Mr. Jeaffreson believes he is in the right, and thinks that in holding up to contempt the youthful Shelley he is

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 2:303.

²⁶⁷ Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 353, 364, 365.

²⁶⁸ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 179.

fighting on behalf of truth, honour, morality, and decorum, may be granted . . .

The better that Mr. Jeaffreson accomplishes his task the more distasteful does the task become.”²⁶⁹ William Michael Rossetti expressed his horror over the biography for “failing to keep Shelley’s character at something of the same level as his poetry.”²⁷⁰ And while Jeaffreson’s *Shelley* “performed a useful service in calling attention to the sentimental mythmaking that had obscured some of the hard truths about Shelley,”²⁷¹ ultimately the supreme problem came down to biographical candor and what the British Victorian public felt biography’s role in society ought to be. The Froude-Carlyle controversy had brought to a head the old arguments over how much truth it was permissible for a biographer to tell—very little, and nothing offensive to Victorian sensibilities²⁷²—and *The Real Shelley* further fanned the flames. The British reading public wanted literary biographies that gave them kind, moral, (nearly) flawless portraits of those literary men and women whom they lionized. Biographical representation of men and women of letters were expected to be aspirational, providing readers with an emulative model of an ideal creative life. All these things, Jeaffreson’s *Real Shelley* failed to

²⁶⁹ “Notes on Books: *The Real Shelley: New Views of the Poet’s Life*,” *Notes and Queries*, January–June 1885, 519.

²⁷⁰ Roger W. Peattie, ed., *Selected Letters of William Michael Rossetti* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1990), 150, diary entry dated 17 May 1886.

²⁷¹ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 179.

²⁷² As discussed in chapter two, offensive topics considered taboo and off-limits included family troubles; moral dereliction; insanity; sexual promiscuity; alcohol abuse; illegitimate children; adultery; and marital troubles. All but one of these—drinking—were openly discussed in Jeaffreson’s biography of Shelley.

do. The debate over forthrightness in biographies was nothing new; indeed it had been going on for decades. In an article in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1864, Charles Allston Collins protested candor in biographies, telling biographers "You tell me a great many things that I have no desire to know."²⁷³ Jeaffreson's biography of Shelley contained such intimate details of the poet's private life that readers, so used to sanitized biographies that glossed over a person's unpleasant characteristics or disreputable episodes in their life, reacted with a collective chorus of disapproval. Such feelings about the purpose of biography in Victorian Britain—to provide readers with fresh grounds for their reverential author worship—and biographical conventions of reticence were so deeply ingrained into Victorian culture, they persisted well into the first two decades of the twentieth century.

²⁷³ Charles Allston Collins, "Biography at a Discount," *Macmillan's Magazine*, May–October 1864, 159.

CONCLUSION

Victorian Britain was a time and place of extraordinary change. A plethora of many fantastic developments in technology, culture, and society all together created a fertile environment in which literary biographies blossomed.

Technological developments in printing, paper manufacturing, book binding, and distribution resulted in cheaper reading materials that were available to more classes of Britons—not just the wealthy. A myriad of educational reforms produced a sharp rise in literacy rates, which coupled with an increase in leisure time meant that more citizens had the means and the time to devote to reading. The serialization of fiction in inexpensive serial publications, available courtesy of flourishing bookshops and railway book stands, also made literature available to more Britons than they had heretofore experienced. All such developments and changes throughout Victorian Britain heavily contributed to the public venerating literature and its creators. As the availability of literature became more widespread, so did the public's desire for it. Readers' interest in the lives of those men and women creating their beloved stories naturally followed, significantly aided by hero-worship and culture of celebrity.

The Victorian phenomenon of hero-worship, a burgeoning culture of celebrity, and a thriving literary culture meant that there were opportunities to celebrate, worship, and idealize new kinds of heroes, such as authors. Stories of heroes provided the Victorians with comforting assurance, spiritual and moral guidance, and an emulative idealized description of a life lived. When biographers deviated from the public's desires for reverential, discreet literary biographies—as

those biographers analyzed in this study did—readers did not hesitate to ardently criticize biographers, sometimes quite viciously. The public’s attraction to creative power and figures upon which to focus their reverence shaped their views of how much intimate, private information they felt it was permissible for a biographer to share with readers in a public biography. Additionally, the feeling that biographies served as a moral, instructional guide for readers further inflamed sore sensibilities when writers were exposed as vain; selfish; flawed; sometimes even immoral, men and women. Reviews, editorials, and letters alike all provided insight into the British public’s reaction to the radical literary biographies discussed in these pages.

Richard D. Altick’s theory of biographical conventions of reticence provided essential insights into understanding the attributes that characterized the majority of Victorian literary biographies. Biographers understood that the British public expected to be provided with circumspect, respectful biographies of its literary lions, and most obliged, as was exemplified by Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Not all biographers, however, adhered to the strict dictates of reticence and sought to provide readers with a truthful, wholly fleshed out representation of their subject. Those biographers discussed in this study—Forster, Froude, Blind, and Jeaffreson—refused to hide their subjects’ skeletons in the closet or conceal their warts and flaws from sight. The implications that these radical biographies possessed for British society were manifold. First, it demonstrates how deeply ingrained hero-worship was in the British mind, for people did not passionately berate biographers who adhered to biographical

standards of discretion. It is telling that when scandalous revelations were made about each of these writers, it was their biographer who was excoriated, not the author themselves. This suggests that the British public found biographical indiscretion and disrespect to the authors' memory just as offensive as the revelations themselves. Second, reception to and criticism of these biographies illustrate Victorian sensibilities about a multitude of issues that each of these biographies narrated in depth—marriage, sexuality, family, religion, and morality—chief among them. Finally, it reveals the power that literature, writers, and literary biography possessed in British Victorian culture and society, as readers turned to biographies of their favorite authors them for spiritual succor and moral guidance. The radical literary biographies discussed within this study provide keen insights into Victorian standards of morality and discretion, social issues, the role of literature, and the pervasiveness of hero-worship and celebrity culture in Victorian Britain.

There are questions that remain to be answered, however. Where did literary biographies go from here, especially in the early years of the twentieth century? How were British public opinions on the role of biography and biographical conventions of reticence affected by the onset and conclusion of the First World War? How was author worship affected by further evolutions in technology, educational reforms and rapid social changes that permeated Edwardian Britain? This study concludes as the Victorian era is drawing to a close, bringing with it the all the horrors that the First World War (1914–1918) wrought upon British men and women, and all the extraordinary changes that

British society endured as a result. With the publication of Lytton Strachey's biography, *Eminent Victorians*, in 1918, a new age of literary biography was heralded in with a vigorous blast of Strachey's horn. Gone were the Victorian conventions of reticence that dictated biographers must provide readers with discreet, reverential portraits, as *Eminent Victorians* liberated biographies from common practices of restraint and timidity on the part of the biographer. Although *Eminent Victorians* did not entirely topple the edifice of biographical discretion and sanitization overnight, after its publication, biographies could never be—and never were—the same. The four narrative portraits that Strachey paints in his biography are graphic and intimate as the biographies which served as case studies in this thesis. The difference, however, was the critical reception that *Eminent Victorians* received, as readers embraced Strachey's candor and praised his sardonic wit. The impact of the significant technological, societal, and cultural changes that were heralded by the dawn of the twentieth century, further developed throughout King Edward VII's reign (1901–1910), and dramatically affected by the First World War, offers further opportunities to explore the relationship between British society and literary biographies.

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