Sources

Michael Millgate
University of Toronto

I TAKE MY CUE FROM A VICTORIAN ANECDOTE about an immensely learned scholar, Fellow of an Oxford college, being wheeled out on his ninetieth birthday to share his accumulated wisdom with the assembled student body. Peering down at the upturned expectant faces the ancient sage uttered only five words: "Gentlemen: Always check your references." "References" isn't quite the term one might now use, and "Gentlemen" are notoriously a thing of the past, but in all essentials that is a pretty good summary of what I myself want to say here. Sources are of course the indispensable fountainheads of all biography, the word itself suggestive of clear, pure, and inexhaustible springs. But because such promised clarity and purity can so easily become in some way corrupted, betrayed, or downright befouled, I thought I might reflect a little on the problematic aspects of some of the sources most commonly invoked—and on the difficulties and responsibilities of biographers when engaging with them.

In pronouncing upon such matters I don't lay claim to much in the way of accumulated wisdom. Nor do I think of myself as "a biographer," let alone a theorist of biography. But I can at least claim or confess to having committed biography in the past—long-term with Thomas Hardy, more flirtatiously with Browning, Tennyson, Henry James, William Faulkner,

ESC 32.2–3 (June/September 2006): 55–62

Millgate.indd 55 2/24/2008, 3:56 PM

Michael Millgate is University Professor of English Emeritus of the University of Toronto. His publications include the seven-volume *Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, co-edited with Richard L. Purdy (1978–88), *Testamentary Acts: Browning, Tennyson, James, Hardy* (1992), and *Thomas Hardy: A Biography* (1982), revised and reissued as *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited* (2004).

and Robert Louis Stevenson. I have thus done some service on, so to speak, the frontlines of biography and become familiar with the kinds of skirmishes and even full-scale battles that can readily occur there. Not too much should therefore be inferred from my having in the past delivered papers entitled "On Not Writing Literary Biography" and, more specifically, "On Not Writing a Biography of Robert Louis Stevenson": I have a fondness for negative titles even when they are not altogether justified by the content that follows. I once toyed with "On Not Giving a Lecture" but found it hard to get started.

Given biography's need for evidence as direct, as specific, and as authentic as possible, an ideal authenticity might reasonably be expected to follow from the biographer's occupying—or having once occupied—a position of intimacy with the subject, as, say, child, spouse, lover, or personal servant. In practice, unsurprisingly, there's a strong tendency for such privileged access to be productive either of egregious panegyric or joyous assassination: every great man has his disciples, said Oscar Wilde, and it is always Judas who writes the biography. Of course, biographies based upon otherwise inaccessible private sources—or upon archives known to have been subsequently destroyed—are almost automatically liable to suspicions of special pleading, either for or against, and any prospective biographer encountering a living subject should keep it keenly in mind that the latter is an intensely—indeed, supremely—interested party and hence, as with autobiographies, not wholly to be trusted.

Most literary biographers, however, are by the nature of things less likely to encounter their subjects in the flesh than to find themselves dealing with families, friends, executors, lawyers, agents, servants, and so forth, and such relationships can present difficulties of their own. My former colleague Richard Purdy, Thomas Hardy's distinguished and (let me assure you) always dignified bibliographer, kept a secret on-the-spot record of his important conversations with Hardy's widow in the years immediately following Hardy's death but was deeply embarrassed, so he once told me, by the need to excuse himself for the frequent washroom visits that gave him his only opportunities to jot down whatever had just been said. The English poet and playwright Henry Reed spent several years working on an eventually abandoned biography of Hardy and later drew upon that experience in an aciduously amusing radio play called *A Very Great Man Indeed*, dedicated to the proposition that the friends of the deceased, though ostensibly helpful, may prove in practice to possess not just defective or selective memories but their own personal agendas, ranging all the way from simple self-promotion to active revenge.

Millgate.indd 56 2/24/2008, 3:56 PM

Researchers early in the field often have access—for good or ill—to just such a roster of first-hand and even intimate witnesses, what might be called the usual suspects. As time passes, however, deaths occur, and as new researchers enter the field they typically resort to rounding up a series of second-tier players much less closely connected to the subject. Thomas Hardy's reputation, for one, has suffered a good deal from the publication of belated interviews with townsfolk whose memories yield up little more than ancient gossip and with former servants still incapable, forty and fifty years later, of forgiving a great man's small tips.

Interviews are unfortunately among the most difficult of all sources to evaluate. The professional interviewer was originally a mid-Victorian phenomenon, busily catering to the insatiable appetite for book-related gossip developed by the proliferating newspapers and literary and sub-literary magazines of the period. Tennyson, Hardy, and Stevenson were among the writers most frequently targeted, and the published results have been diligently traced, collected, and republished by scholars contemporary with ourselves. That inherently useful exercise, however, has been too rarely accompanied by questions as to how—in those days before mechanical recording devices—the actual words of the interviewee could have been at all adequately recorded and reproduced (Scott and Thesing, 37–42). Some interviewers presumably had shorthand skills, but others clearly eked out their scrappy notes by plagiarizing interviews already published, and some seem to have depended entirely on memory or even on pure invention: Hardy sometimes kept cuttings of interviews with himself but wrote "Faked" or "Mostly faked" on a good many of them.

Interviewing, of course, continues to be widely practised by journalists and biographers alike. It's the standard tool for accumulating information from the surviving friends, relatives, lovers, employees, and other victims of subjects not too distantly deceased, and while the technology for recording such materials has enormously improved, anyone with experience of being interviewed for radio, TV, or film—let alone the popular press—is likely to have discovered how readily manipulable the results can prove to be. But it is also common for more serious set-piece literary interviews—such as those commissioned and published by *The Paris Review*—to be submitted to the subject for correction and revision. That may in some respects be "a good thing"—it certainly prevented me from quoting the Catholic poet Allen Tate as seeking a "papal solution" to his problems when what he had meant, and said, was a "paper solution." It remains even so an intervention to which a biographer needs to be alert.

Millgate.indd 57 2/24/2008, 3:56 PM

In my own interviewing I have found it essential to try to discover whether or not—or, alas, how often—the person I'm addressing has been previously interviewed. It is almost inevitable that a much-consulted witness will have developed a series of prepared and standardized replies—witness the element of repetition in so many of William Faulkner's published interviews. So also in the mostly unpublished interviews of Gertrude Bugler, the young and beautiful Dorset actor, playing such parts as Eustacia Vye and Tess Durbeyfield in stage-versions of the Wessex novels, with whom Hardy in his eighties became distinctly infatuated. Famous for this relationship in her own old age, she was so frequently interviewed that such occasions became themselves performances of a well-learned part. She once wrote to me to say that she had again been visited by a television crew, adding: "The answers I know by heart nowadays."

Most first-time interviewees have in my experience been happy to be asked and eager to deliver informational satisfaction—to the point of pushing ever harder at the limits of actual memory, seizing upon the vaguest of impressions and eventually toppling over the furthest brink of recollection into the open seas of pure invention. When, back in the mid-1960s, I was interviewing men who might have encountered William Faulkner while serving with the Royal Air Force in Toronto in 1918, it was noticeable that the few who were aware of Faulkner's subsequent major-league fame were especially apt to make the shift from genuine reminiscence to what I felt sure was partial or even absolute fabrication. It was to just such cheerful but treacherous impulsions that Hugh Kenner, in a harsh review of Richard Ellmann's revision of his Joyce biography, attributed the creation of what he called the "Irish Fact, definable as anything they tell you in Ireland, where you get told a great deal" (1383).

With biographical subjects who died at a time beyond the reach of living memory, the bulk of the available evidence is likely to take the form of personal and professional documents supplemented by such official and public records as may have been relevant to the subject's socio-economic background and subsequent career. The nature, quantity, and biographical usefulness of such materials of course varies greatly, and in Thomas Hardy's case the obscurity of his early circumstances had implications going a good way beyond the simple facts of his having been conceived out of wedlock by an impecunious rural couple and brought with difficulty to birth in a lonely mud-walled cottage adjacent to what Shakespeare might have called a blasted heath and that Hardy himself liked to imagine might indeed have been the setting for *King Lear*. People of the time, class, and background of Hardy's parents typically wrote very few letters, if indeed

Millgate.indd 58 2/24/2008, 3:56 PM

they could write at all; nor, unless they fell foul of the law, were their names likely to appear in local newspapers or in any official records other than the most basic registrations of births, marriages, and deaths.

Direct and unmediated evidence of Hardy's early years therefore remains extremely sparse, and even in young adulthood he made so little impact on the world that fewer than ten of his letters are known to have survived from the years prior to his thirtieth birthday. As his fame grew from his mid-thirties onwards, he of course came increasingly into public view, writing successful novels, making famous friends, sending letters that were kept, and marrying not just one indiscreet letter-writing wife but two in succession. But at the same time his concern with privacy, at once inherited, instinctive, and shrewdly politic, became over the years increasingly intense, and his destruction in old age of a mass of personal and working papers was both deliberate and extensive.

Such biographically hostile acts of late-life pre-death destruction are common enough among writers, but Hardy was unusual in deliberately leaving behind him a secretly written narrative of his own life and times disguised as the work of his second wife—over whose name it was indeed published shortly after his death. It was a work clearly created with a view to its serving as an "authorized" and as it were official biography, capable of anticipating and even pre-empting the publication of more intrusive biographies written by outsiders. And what made that pre-emption seem all the more secure was Hardy's insistence upon the destruction of almost all the materials used in the book's composition, most notably the large number of diary-notebooks that he had accumulated over the course of his lifetime.

After Hardy's death, his widow, Florence Hardy, worried about the autobiographical biography and her own responsibilities as its ostensible author, allowed herself to be persuaded ahead of its publication both to delete several passages that Hardy had written and to insert several anecdotes he had chosen to omit. Ironically enough, the eventual discovery of the book's true provenance resulted from Florence's failure to burn ahead of her own death the typescripts she had made from Hardy's original manuscript pages—pages that Hardy had systematically destroyed as soon as she had typed them up. Those transcripts have since made it possible to reconstruct with some confidence the text as Hardy himself had left it. But from the biographer's point of view the real crime was and is the loss of the irreplaceable evidence contained in those diary-notebooks. It was just such a destruction of the original documents that had compromised some thirty years earlier the status and usefulness of Hallam Tennyson's

But from the biographer's point of view the real crime was and is the loss of the irreplaceable evidence contained in those diary-notebooks.

Millgate.indd 59 2/24/2008, 3:56 PM

biography of his father, placing subsequent Tennyson biographers in a situation of inescapable dependence on a rich but deeply suspect source.

Discovery of the true nature of what Hardy called—what is now again called—*The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* condemned Hardy biographers to hard scrabbling among those public records of births, marriages, and deaths that I've already invoked. Not altogether a bad thing, perhaps, since such records, patiently explored, can sometimes yield unexpected bonuses—as when someone of interest turns up as a witness to someone else's marriage or as the reporter of someone else's (as it necessarily would be) death. There are also those early Victorian censuses—the first conveniently dating from 1841, a couple of months before Hardy's first birthday, and the fourth, in 1871, unkindly revealing his fiancée, Emma Lavinia Gifford, as having claimed to be four years younger than she actually was. But it's harder and immensely more time-consuming work than looking up aristocratic pedigrees in the pages of Burke's or Debrett's and very different from dealing with writers such as Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Louis Stevenson, who were born into families not only economically secure but already highly literate.

What biographers of James, Woolf, and Stevenson consequently have available is a much greater quantity of personal records of all sorts—Stevenson's mother even kept a diary of his babyhood—and a mass of family and friendly correspondence. That's certainly fortunate, in that personal letters are universally recognized as constituting a peculiarly important source of biographical information and insight. Yet the intimacy and authenticity such letters seem to offer can sometimes prove illusory. Letters may be written for purposes of concealment as well as of open communication (think letters of recommendation), and while Faulkner's mother lovingly preserved the letters her son wrote home from Toronto in 1918, what they now mostly reveal is how spectacular a fabulist their author had already become, telling boastful tales of flying exploits that can never in fact have occurred, Faulkner's Royal Air Force cohort not having progressed beyond ground school by the time the war ended in November 1918. With letters—and, indeed, all documentary materials—it's of course important to check as to the provenance and probable accuracy of the text being consulted, a process rendered more difficult by the occasional failure of editions of letters to be either as accurate or as comprehensive as their titles or scholarly formats would seem to claim. The only collection of Faulkner letters so far published reproduces some of them only in part, and it was Henry James himself who so radically shortened and rewrote—he would have said "improved"—the letters by his brother Wil-

Millgate.indd 60 2/24/2008, 3:56 PM

liam that he had selected for inclusion in *Notes of a Son and Brother*. That process and its result might say much about Henry but could have been of little value to students of the equally famous William.

A brief comment, finally, on the biographical issue of place or, rather, places. My own instinct—strengthened by the stirring example of Richard Holmes's autobiographical *Footprints*—has always been to go where my subject has been, gather impressions at first hand, and supplement and solidify those impressions through background research. Faulkner and Hardy, essentially regional novelists, presented only occasional difficulties, but Stevenson I found myself dutifully following ever farther afield–from his modest birthplace in Scotland to his mountain-top tomb in Western Samoa—only to realize one day that his tracks led everywhere. In the first volume of the early *Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* by his friend Graham Balfour I came across a list, compiled some ten years before Stevenson's death, of the places he had already visited, including no less than seventy-four towns in France, thirty-one of them more than once, ninety-six towns in England and Scotland, forty-two of them more than once, and forty towns in the rest of Europe, sixteen of them more than once (Vol. I, 126n). North America, Australasia, and the Pacific were still to come. Despite the rapidity of modern travel, months and even years of research time could clearly be consumed in journeying to all or even most of the known locations worldwide, especially if in the interests of biographical thoroughness it seemed necessary to go beyond a simple visit—to actually undergo the rigours of a Saranac winter, say, or thrash a resistant donkey through the Cevennes, smoking continuously the while and rolling one's own cigarettes. And any such visits, lagging so long after the actual biographical event, would be almost pointless by comparison with Stevenson's having, so to speak, been to these places contemporaneously with himself—and then written about them with a brilliance impossible to match.

It was at that moment that the paper "On Not Writing a Biography of Robert Louis Stevenson" had its effective beginning, and although I have since completed and published the extensive revision of my Hardy biography I have not embarked on any new projects of a biographical nature. That is not, however, because I despair of biography but rather because I am shirking the sheer hard labour that serious investigative biography unquestionably demands. The Beinecke Library at Yale mounted some years back a very interesting exhibition of authorial revision processes that carried the subtitle "The Inexact Science of Getting It Right." That strikes me as quite an appropriate term for the struggle in which any serious biographer is also likely to be engaged. No source, after all, whether

Millgate.indd 61 2/24/2008, 3:56 PM

direct or documentary, can be assumed to be entirely free of bias, if only of the kind inseparable from historical, cultural, class, gender, or economic circumstance, and some sources can be guaranteed to prove even more biased than others. The available evidence, however earnestly and persistently pursued, is never sufficient to fill in all the gaps in one's knowledge. When the narrative line falters, connections may have to be made, sometimes involving the employment (and acknowledgement) of imaginative and indeed speculative leaps. What must not be compromised is the integrity of the evidence actually assembled, analyzed, and effectively verified. That is a principle sometimes tough to hold on to, a responsibility painful to bear. But it is virtually identical with the one I so cheerfully enunciated earlier on and now emphatically re-invoke: "Always check your references."

What must not be compromised is the integrity of the evidence actually assembled, analyzed, and effectively verified.

Works Cited

Balfour, Graham. *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*. 2 vols. London: Methuen, 1901.

Kenner, Hugh. "The Impertinence of Being Definitive." *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 December 1982: 1383.

Scott, Patrick G., and William B. Thesing. "Conversations with Victorian Writers: Some Editorial Questions." *Documentary Editing* 11.2 (June 1989): 37–42.

Millgate.indd 62 2/24/2008, 3:56 PM