



BIOGRAPHERS ARE ONLY HUMAN

By JOHN A. GARRATY

Whether biographers adhere to the fictional, intuitive, psychological, debunking, or conservative schools, their aim is always to come to terms with "the elusive human equation." John A. Garraty, who teaches history at Michigan State College and is the author of a recent biography of Henry Cabot Lodge, analyzes here the various paths that biographers take to arrive at a just and enlivening portrayal of their subjects.

"I CAN'T tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my little hatchet!" Most school children are no longer subjected to Weems's anecdote of Washington and the Cherry Tree, but for generations the Parson's fantastic story gave the average American his picture of the Father of His Country. Our ideas about the great men of history come largely from the pens of biographers, and these biographers have ever been puzzled by the elusive human equation. They have had not only a story to tell but also a character to re-create. The task of breathing life into a dead man's personality has always presented the life writer with his greatest challenge. It has also led him into all sorts of arguments with his colleagues.

The rapid expansion of the science of psychology in recent times has led to a greater interest in the dynamic portrayal of personality in life stories, but this is merely a trend, not an innovation. Since the time of Plutarch

biographers have been aware of the challenge of personality and have met it with varying success. Even in the Victorian era, the heyday of reticence, when the typical subject was pictured, as Edmund Gosse once said, "in a tight frock-coat, with a glass of water in his hand, in the act of preparing to say, 'Ladies and gentlemen,'" there were some biographers who penetrated behind the façade and came up with frank and well-rounded portraits.

The techniques that biographers have applied to the task of describing personality have ranged from the ridiculous to the pedantic, from the wildly imaginative to the coldly scientific. On one extreme have been the fictional biographers, those who have created artificial "facts" whenever reality was hard to come by. Works of this kind shade gradually from pure fiction to books that claim to be serious biographical "interpretations" of historical figures. Somerset Maugham's "The Moon and Sixpence" is ob-

viously based on the life of Gauguin, but it is clearly a novel (and a very good one) not a biography, for even the hero's name is changed. The books of Irving Stone, such as his "Lust for Life" (Van Gogh) and his "Immortal Wife" (Mrs. Andrew Jackson) are a little closer to biography, because they utilize the names of historical characters, but a librarian would have no hesitation in classifying them as novels.

Other writers, still clearly novelists, have developed pretensions that bring them perilously close to biography. In "The Conqueror," for example, Gertrude Atherton attempted to "write a sequential and detailed life of [Alexander] Hamilton . . . so presented that any reader might delude his lazy mind with belief that he was reading a novel." Here the line between fiction and biography is finally crossed.

Hardly different from the biographical novelists have been the sensation-mongering hack biographers, of whom Francis Gribble may be offered as an example. Gribble has described himself and his methods in "Seen in Passing," his engagingly frank autobiography. "Work which could be quickly finished and immediately disposed of was the only work I could afford to do," he explained. In such productions as "Mme. de Staël and Her Lovers" he manufactured anecdotes and other material freely. But Gribble took himself seriously. "My object," he wrote, "was . . . the analysis of characters and the drawing pictures. . . ." He argued that he had

made himself an expert on the French Romantics, and defended the sensationalism in his books as being necessary and truthful. The people he wrote about had made love "an integral part of the liberal education of a man or woman of letters," so he had to describe their amours in detail!

THE deliberate invention of material, however, has not often been practised by modern biographers. Most have remained at least within shouting distance of some source. But many, without consciously deviating from verifiable evidence, have depended upon intuition and even upon inspiration in the use of facts. Biographers of this "intuitive" school have been primarily interested in the man, not in his works. "History I have never studied," one practitioner has written, "Human nature always." Among these writers have been some of the most commercially successful biographers of recent times, men like Emil Ludwig, André Maurois, Stefan Zweig, and Gamaliel Bradford, but again the basic technique is old. The French critic-biographer Sainte-Beuve, for instance, achieved his often brilliant word pictures by intuition. Shutting himself up with the works of the person he sought to describe, he would read and meditate until suddenly the revealing trait, the key to character would appear to him. At this point Sainte-Beuve recorded: "The portrait . . . speaks and lives; I

have found the man!" This is essentially what Maurois has called "understanding by a *coup d'état*." Emil Ludwig's method of shutting himself up with a painting or photograph of his subject was based on the same philosophy. Prolonged brooding over the picture would lead to a revelation baring the "meaning" of the person's life. Thus, according to Ludwig, the biographer "begins with a concept of character and searches in the archives for what is at bottom corroboration of an intuition."

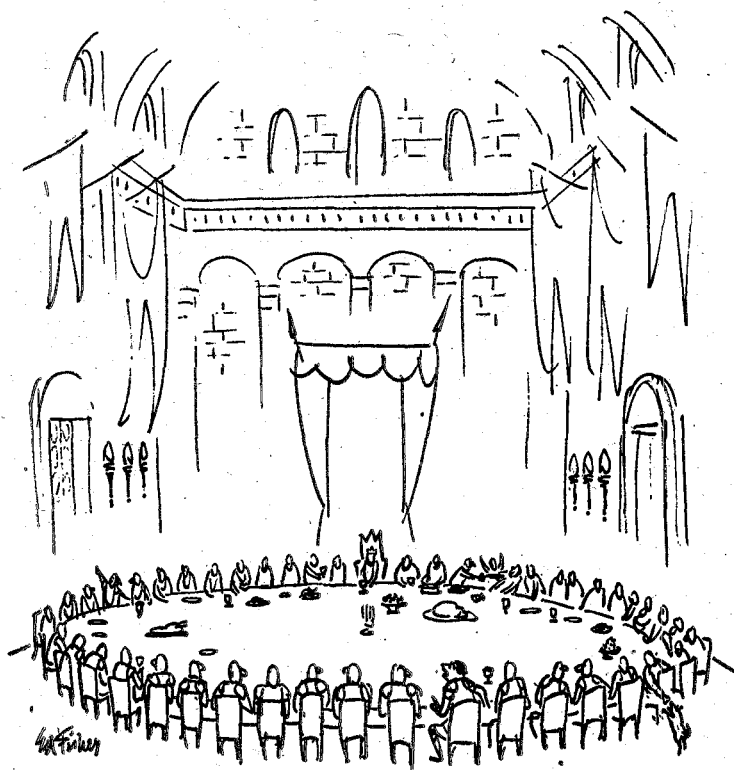
Beyond "intuition," along the road to a more rational approach, has come the use of the science of psychology in probing historical characters. Of course, psychological insight is as old as biography itself. It can be seen operating in the works of Plutarch, for example, quite clearly. But the real father of "scientific" psychological biography was Freud, who tried to apply his clinical theories of psychoanalysis to the study of famous men.

In 1910 he published a life of Leonardo da Vinci, in which he explained the artist's whole career in terms of his early history. Freud himself was careful to point out the limitations of his technique. The "deduction of the psychological writer," he wrote, "is not capable of proof," though in the case of his book on Da Vinci he felt that the evidence was very strong. "We must mark out the limits which are set up for the work-

ing capacity of psychoanalysis in biography," he cautioned.

But many of the biographers who have adapted psychoanalysis to their own uses have lacked Freud's humility. In the shadow of his pioneering work, psychoanalysts, particularly in Germany, produced a rash of interpretive articles "explaining" historical figures from Amenhotep IV to Richard Wagner in Freudian terms and with dogmatic certainty. In the period after World War I, Freudian studies like Joseph Wood Krutch's life of Poe and Katharine Anthony's "Margaret Fuller" vied for public attention with biographies based on the work of Freud's critics within the psychoanalytical world, such as Dr. Leon Pierce Clark's "Lincoln: A Psycho-biography," and the many glib sketches of Harvey O'Higgins and Edward H. Reede. The great interest in psychoanalytical biography was part of a broad trend toward interdisciplinary research which affected many fields in the early twentieth century. An eye doctor named George M. Gould wrote seven volumes of "Biographic Clinics" explaining the personalities of a long list of great men in terms of eye strain. "At any time in his life a proper pair of spectacle lenses would have relieved [Thomas] DeQuincey of his sufferings," the good doctor proclaimed in a typical essay. An Australian medico published two volumes in the early Twenties diagnosing the ills of many of history's famous figures, and others joined in.

Nearly all the psychoanalytical and medical biographies, notwithstanding their show of "science," have been highly speculative, and many frankly sensationalistic in their approach. But despite (or perhaps because of) this similarity to the "intuitive" school, most "intuitive" biographers have been scathing in their attacks on the "psychoanalysts." Of course, the devotees of intuition have fancied themselves experts in psychology, but they have attempted to be psychologists in the artistic, non-professional sense. Emil Ludwig once claimed to have discovered the Oedipus complex, but he wrote a book on Freud in which he reviewed a good deal of the psychological-biographical literature and found it uniformly worthless. "When Freud inspects a figure out of history he resembles a physician who instead of examining his patient's whole body looks at a single organ, usually the genitals," he wrote. "In the some thousands of pages of my works you will find no conception or phrase born of psychoanalysis." Maurois, in spite of his theory of the *coup d'état*, considered psychoanalytical biography impractical on the ground that the necessary evidence was never avail-



"I say! Sir Gawain!—prithce pass the salt!"

able. Most other writers of the Ludwig-Maurois variety would agree.

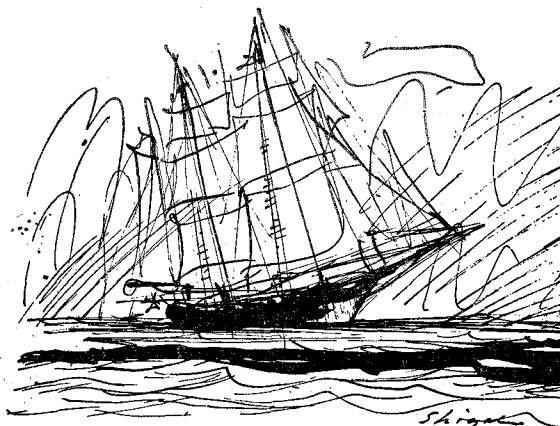
BIOGRAPHERS who have found themselves lacking in intuition and without faith in psychoanalysis have employed less pretentious means of revealing personality. Some have stressed the role of the times and the environment in molding character. Others have relied upon detail, describing their hero's clothing, the design on the wallpaper in his bedroom, his dietary habits, and similar petty trivia, the theory being that in this manner the man is made "real" in the reader's mind.

The famous school of the "debunker" belongs in this category, for the deflating of any great man is most easily accomplished by a careful description of his everyday activities and small faults. Unfriendly biographers have always seized upon the weaknesses of their subjects, but after World War I this approach was developed and refined until it became a type in itself. Lytton Strachey, naughtily lowering his sly "little bucket" into a "great ocean of material" in search of "some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity," gave the new form a model. His "Eminent Victorians" (1918) demonstrated perfectly how to blast a reputation by the shrewd selection and subtle slanting of evidence.

The word "debunker" was coined by William E. Woodward, who first used it in the novel "Bunk." Woodward conceived a character, Michael Webb, who studied the family of an automobile tycoon in order to "take the bunk out of that family by showing it up in its true relations." Woodward went on to remove the "bunk" (and a good deal else) from George Washington and U. S. Grant. Soon a veritable army was in the field, demolishing the conventional images of the great. No one—not even the sainted Lincoln—was safe. "The time is coming," one critic warned in 1927, "when the biographers ain't going to the records, but to the neighbors."

Another method of presenting personality in biography, difficult to classify because it draws from all of the others already mentioned, has been developed by writers like Catherine Drinker Bowen, Louise Hall Tharp, and Madeleine B. Stern. This method is fictional, intuitive, and psychological; it also makes use of "local color" and detail to create the impression of reality. But (and here it differs from all these others) it is usually based on extensive research in manuscript and other primary sources. And for some strange reason it seems

(Continued on page 55)



The Best Advice I Ever Had

By JOHN MASEFIELD, *Poet Laureate of Great Britain, who celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday last June.*

APPROPRIATELY for a poet, the best advice I ever had came to me in the form of a sententious little quatrain. It has been of inestimable value to me, and, so I have been told, to hundreds of others to whom I have passed it on.

I was only seventeen or eighteen. I had quit my life as a seaman and was working in a carpet factory in Yonkers, New York, while trying to learn to write. Having just read Keats and Shelley for the first time, I was on fire to be a poet, but, as everyone knows who has tried to compose a poem, the new task I had set myself was far more difficult than climbing masts or painting decks. I had almost despaired when I came upon this homespun sentiment:

Sitting still and wishing
Makes no person great.
The good Lord sends the fishing,
But you must dig the bait.

This easily remembered stanza somehow gave me the courage I needed to go on. I dug bait for months—and finally caught a publisher who accepted my first poem.

This counsel helped me every day and stood me in especially good stead on a particular occasion after I had returned to London. An admirer of the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats, I had written to him and he had replied with an invitation to one of his Monday evenings. The tall, stooped, cadaverous-looking Irishman with his pale hands and pince-nez seemed like a caricature of a poet. But his short-sighted eyes were full of fun; and witty, illuminating conversation cascaded from him like a cataract. Dozens of writers and artists crowded into his

small quarters to sit at his feet and share his inspiration.

That night he urged us younger poets not to be content with writing fragments of verse but to attempt something long enough to have a beginning, middle, and end. Our minds must be stretched, he said, forced to produce an extended work. Then all our writing would come easier.

I went away intoxicated with ambition. Tomorrow I would begin to do great things. But the next night and many nights following found me still at my writing desk—without the anticipated masterpiece even started.

I GREW terribly discouraged. I simply lacked the power, I told myself. I could not compose a large work requiring scope, imagination, and control.

But the prosaic quatrain kept singing in my brain. So, while continuing with poems and short stories, I turned to the vast sea for inspiration for a larger project. For background I read hundreds of accounts of voyages and tried to recall every character and conversation met with in my own years as a sailor. In picture galleries I studied innumerable seascapes to help me describe the ocean in its various moods. I walked up and down lonely streets until late at night, plotting my story.

Eventually, after some ten years of continual digging, I completed a novel which found favor with the critics and—more important to me—with Yeats himself.

It would have been very easy for me to sit and dream of being a writer, but I would never have been one without a constant goad. "You must dig the bait" gave it to me. To this day I do not know the name of the author of the simple lines. But I have been indebted to him many times for helping me see a job through.