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# BIOGRAPHY: “HAVE LECTURE; WILL TRAVEL”

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People teach, of course, and processes like research teach. Libraries teach because they house, on the shelves, the great faculty, always assembled and ready, a faculty far superior to any living faculty. And the disciplines themselves teach, each in its own way.

Of the many powerful and persuasive teachers, biography has few rivals for inclusiveness of scope and meticulousness of method. A teacher of remarkable depth and range, biography instructs in three major ways; it is method, mirror, and mentor.

Biography means method; it teaches resourcefulness and responsibility in research, diligence and design in organization, and substance and style in presentation. From the finding of the data to the finishing of the document, the biographer develops and, in many cases, perfects the tools of scholarship that apply to any discipline.

Biography teaches care and commitment in locating and verifying information. Boswell complains, on occasion, that he has to chase over all of London to fix a date. But he chases; the task demands it.

Biography teaches anticipating and addressing questions. From Alexander Pope's comments to his first biographer Joseph Spence, we know that a cow stepped on the young Alexander. Maynard Mack in the 1985 biography of Pope attempts to explain why a cow was loose on that particular road at that particular time.

Biography teaches persistence in establishing truth. R.W.B. Lewis redefines Edith Wharton by including in the 1975 biography sexual passages previously ignored.

Biography teaches style, force, and appeal in communication.

James L. Clifford, for years a leading practitioner and teacher of biography, stressed his practice of learning all that he could about his subject but then writing with the audience and its response as his focus.

Those of us who are in the classroom try to inculcate care with sources, wisdom in organization and interpretation, and a thoroughgoing methodology in examination, analysis, sifting, and presentation. Biography joins us as teacher of these



infinitely applicable and permanently valuable skills. We work toward questions and answers, toward finding the X and fixing the hypothesis. So does biography.

In its second M, mirror, biography teaches about ourselves, our communities, our culture. Describing life and times or simply dissecting a life reflects trials and dreams and ambitions that each of us experiences. As we look in the mirror of biography we see humankind and nations and understand both more clearly. The commercialism of America is a commonplace, but we understand that commercialism and its development by working through Justin Kaplan's *Mr. Clemens and*

*Mark Twain*. We may come to the book expecting anecdotes of Huck and Jim, but we leave it calculating the force of money in America. In this case, a biography factors forward to VISA's bottom line.

That biography is a mirror explains its continuing popularity as a genre and the very positive associations most people have for it. We like knowing about people and we like to learn anything that may help us understand ourselves. The proper study of mankind is man, Pope noted, and biography invites and enlivens that study.

As mentor biography has long, but not always admirable, roots. Early biography was intended to teach moral lessons whether the material was true or not. Many so-called biographers adjusted emphases and omitted important details in order to teach what they thought the public or a part of that public needed to know. Parson Weems made up the story of Washington and the cherry tree so that youths would have a model for honesty. In a happier example of biography as mentor, Harry Truman's mother gave her young son a collection of biographies about great men. Her purpose was to set before him examples of greatness and to motivate him to succeed. Her plan worked. Moreover, President Truman remained a reader of biographers.

At its best, biography both illuminates people and their pursuits and exemplifies the procedures of sound analysis, rigorous thought, clear judgment, and effective presentation. To vary the old saying a bit: all we need to have the ideal university is a log with biography on the other end.

Joining the Kennesaw faculty this spring and remaining in residence through spring 1989 is biography. The professional title is BIO-FEST. 🍎

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