Truth and Biography

Nigel Hamilton

[Keynote speech, given at the Awards Ceremony for the Erik Hazelhoff Prizes, Amsterdam, 23 April, 2012]

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests, fellow biographers: don't, I implore you, allow yourselves to be seduced by *anyone* – especially French critics – who seeks to deconstruct or belittle *truth*. Truth can be difficult to establish, as anyone serving on a jury or listening to a trial, will know. But if we ever abandon the concept and the pursuit of truth, we can bid farewell to the sort of society we live in, or would want to live in.

Seeking the truth about a fellow human being's life's journey is what drives the biographer. For the person who undertakes it, and for our democratic society, I doubt there is a calling, a profession, an enterprise that is more challenging and more rewarding than biography today.

Chronicling a real life is not as easy to do in our modern society, let's be frank! We live in a Western culture that demands constant entertainment. The wakeful biographer cannot therefore ignore the sheer range of story-telling techniques that have evolved in recent decades in fiction and drama to meet that demand. As a result, most modern biographers no longer begin their books with accounts of the subject's birth, for example. We pick an episode in the life – even the death – of our subject, and often use that to draw the reader into our domain, employing it in the manner of a detective story in our investigation. We even write shorter books than we used to – for we can no longer take for granted the reader's patience, or curiosity. Or stamina! And since the art of successful narrative is the withholding of information, so too do we now employ *that* technique: teasing the reader or

audience today by withholding facts or conclusions in order to deliberately cultivate *suspense*.

Modern biographers, then, have increasingly learned to incorporate new story-telling techniques into their work. Erik Larson's recent book, *In the Garden of Beasts*, is just such a work. Larson had already written, some years ago, a best-selling fictional work, set in the context of the Chicago Colombian Exposition of 1893: *The Devil in the White City*. What he subsequently came to understand about the life of the innocent American professor and diplomat, William Dodd, who went to Hitler's Berlin as U.S. Ambassador in 1933, was that he didn't need to fictionalize the story in his new book. By piecing together the records of a real American family facing up to the actuality of evil, he had all the elements necessary for an extraordinary life story. In fact he had more elements in the story than he could possibly use. More even than that: he had elements that, in their way, exceeded even the potency of fiction. For non-fiction is not only often stranger than fiction. It contains a power, a core component that fiction doesn't and can never possess: namely the haunting quality of truth: the truth about a real life, about real loves, a real death.

Truth is the opposite of fantasy, of escapism, of make-believe. You remember the famous passage in Boswell's biography of Dr. Samuel Johnson, the father of modern biography. "After we came out of the church," Boswell wrote, "we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the nonexistence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it – 'I refute it *thus*.'"

Truth, Ladies and Gentlemen, has that hard, often uncomfortable, but fascinating and compelling quality. Truth is the rock on which the writer builds his house, and which cannot be wished away without imperiling it. Truth is the knowledge, if the

biographer proves to be an effective researcher and narrator, that this was how a chosen life really was – *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*! We may wish it otherwise – and Holocaust deniers continue to deny it – but Hitler did actually exist, as did his henchmen; millions died in the Holocaust he unleashed; and in Erik Larson's true story of an American family coming face to face with the early evidence of that phenomenon, less than eighty years ago, we ourselves come face to face with that tragic reality - not with make-believe.

Fiction can never, ever have that hard, inescapable quality of truth: of lives that were really lived, and which all end, inescapably, in death. However much fiction may try and make up for its absence, however much it may weave its spell by literary or dramatic artistry, however much it may distract and transport us until we suspend our disbelief, however much it may beguile us through fictive sophistry, fiction can never, ever replace that hard stone beneath our feet: the stone of truth, of reality.

Fiction, then, is make-believe. Biography, by contrast, is a journey into reality: a journey to discover and explore the verifiable truth. The biographer is required to establish the facts of a real life, then attempt to interpret those facts for us. The details which a biographer seeks are not invented to offer a pretense of truth, a way of getting us to suspend our disbelief, as in the work of a good or great novelist. A biographer's details – the luncheon on board the battleship on which President Roosevelt signed with Winston Churchill his historic Atlantic Charter in 1941, or the barbecue, say, being planned on the day of his death in Warm Springs in 1945 – those details are the means by which the biographer seeks to establish the credibility of truth: to get the reader to face up to the truth by researching and presenting the inescapable nugget, or stone, of hard evidence. Ouch! We say as we follow a real life, and try to make sense of it. This is how, for good or ill, it was – not a fictional version of how we wish it might have been. From micro to macro, from small detail to the larger context and canvas, the biographer weaves his or her own magic to give us an idea of the richness and reality of a real life.

That search for truth, that journey of discovery in recording a real individual's whole life, or part-life, that struggle to present it in a way that readers will respond to, is surely one of the noblest undertakings. In my view we still don't give biography enough credit for that contribution – for in underestimating the compelling contributions of biography to our society we are overlooking one of the great treasures of Western society. Though it is traditionally the least studied and least respected of the serious arts, biography is arguably one of the most important skills we have inherited from classical times. We can marvel at the engineering genius of the Pyramids, or the beauty of the Acropolis, or the Great Wall of China, but without a knowledge of at least some of the actual *individuals* who lived in those times – men and women chronicled in the pages of the Greek and Roman writers, from Xenophon and Plutarch to Suetonius - we can only gawp from an unbridgeable distance. The fiction writer may try to take us there, imaginatively – but it is the biographer who still today does the work, the research, and who then takes us on a journey of discovery to the truth, or the nearest we can get to the truth, about an actually lived life. Who, we ask ourselves, were they really, those actual men and women of ancient times, of medieval, renaissance, reformation, enlightenment, revolutionary, modern times? For that, we rely on biographers: men and women who for thousands of years in the West have made it their business to reconstruct the facts about a chosen human life - and to interpret those facts: presenting them to the public in a way that the public will tolerate. For establishing the truth about real individual's lives is only the first of biography's many challenges. The *reception* of biography has always been biography's second greatest challenge.

Suetonius – author of the *Twelve Caesars* – was exiled from Imperial Rome for his frankness; Sir Walter Raleigh, author of a *History of the World* that mocked King James I of England, was beheaded for his impertinence; thousands of biographers have been sued for criminal libel over past centuries, or deliberately denied access to documentation, or permission to use it, as individuals have sought to protect their reputations, or their widows and families have attempted to suppress or mislead the

truth about them. Thus the family of Thomas Jefferson – the third U.S. President – for centuries resisted with fury and disdain the notion that Jefferson had seduced his young slave, Sally Hemings, and had sired some seven children by her; only in 1998 was a DNA study able to expose the bigotry of denial that had underscored Southern racism, in the United States, for so long.

Truth, in other words, is not always easy for people to take! As my namesake, Ian Hamilton, once wrote in his classic book *Keepers of the Flame*, reputations are fiercely defended by families for the most understandable of human motives: as demonstrations of family loyalty, of fealty to those who have been admired, to those on whom we project our fantasies, and in whom we invest our own pride. The biographer's task is therefore, from the very start, a challenge as to how much truth we, its audience, are willing to tolerate.

Establishing the truth is hard enough for the biographer. Interpreting the truth, however, is just as tough as establishing it: how to *use* the facts we learn about a human being to help us paint it, understand it, judge it. The Netherlands is rightly famous for its contribution to real-life portraiture in art: portraits by Van Eyck, Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Vermeer, Hals – we marvel at the sheer beauty of such paintings and are made to wonder about the personalities and lives of the sitters. Only the biographer can, however, find out and tell us the truth about their lives: not only the facts, but something about those individuals as moral, mortal beings.

This moral imperative has been true of biography since the art of biography first began. Although medieval biographers were forced by pressure of the Church to produce only hagiography, or the lives of saints, the renaissance cleared away such restrictions, and the modern biographer cannot escape his or her duty to interpret both the "beautiful and base" aspects of an individual's life, as Dr. Johnson – the father of modern biography - noted two hundred and fifty years ago. Biography is, Johnson wrote, an *ethical* undertaking in the end: the author's confrontation with the moral dimension of a chosen individual, dead or alive. Inevitably, as we struggle

with the truth of someone else's life story it becomes, most biographers would agree, the most consuming, often vexing, certainly relentless of challenges in our *own* lives: not only struggling with its facts, as far as we can establish them, but its significance, its merit, its moral journey. Which causes us to think upon our own moral journey. Bruegel's great painting of *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* shows Jesus pointing to the words, "*he that is without sin among you, let him first cast the stone at her.*" It is a parable serious biographers think about every working day, as they apply a critical lens to their subject, but leave room for compassion, too. For we are all human: reader, writer and subject.

Serious biographies take time: time not only to establish the facts of a life, but its meaning, its significance, its stone-like reality that can't be changed into make-believe, into fiction, yet which can move us to tears – as in the life, say, of Anne Frank, whose home you keep in honor of her memory - enrage us, as in the life of a tyrant! No serious biography, I would say, can be completed in less than two or three years, and often they take longer, much longer. My own three-volume life Field Marshal Montgomery, *Monty*, took *ten* years – and twenty years after that I was still rewriting it as *The Full Monty*!

Although I have never served in the military, beyond a school cadet corps, I have served, so to speak, in the trenches of biography – having been successfully sued for libel, and having had my mail secretly opened, and my access to documents halted and my requests for copyright permissions denied; and having had my work attacked, even trashed, by opponents of my biographical interpretations. I therefore have enormous respect for those who still choose to undertake the business, the challenge of serious biography.

For all our deference to modern techniques of story-telling, the biographer remains as he or she has always been: the sentinel of the *truth* about actual human beings; the historian of an actual, not invented, human heart; the archivist of a actual individual's journey through life; the registrar of actual birth and death, the

celebrant of real marriage, the notary of real death; the careful documentarian and interpreter of a life lived - for good or ill. Tracking down the sources, establishing as best we can the facts, evaluating the truths that we learn – in archives, interviews, other works - and then interpreting those truths for a larger audience than oneself is the biographer's challenge: a challenge on which our very democracy rests. Like checking our watches to tell the time, we can measure the truthfulness of a society by the extent to which biography is practiced – and how. Where, for instance, would the Court of Human Rights, here in this country, be without a determination to research and present before the public the truth of the doings of real individuals, be they ever so powerful or wealthy? Would we be content to live in a country like North Korea, with no human rights, no respect for truth, only a veneration for an "Eternal President," or "Great Leader," followed by "Dear Leader" - and now his youngest son, the "Great Successor"…?

Kicking the stone and telling the truth, as best we can, about *real* individuals: that is what biographers *do*. It's been my pleasure and privilege to stand before you tonight and extol the virtues and challenges of biography in our society. That this country prides itself not only on the imagination of novelists and fictional writers, but on the work of its own serious seekers-after-truth in the field of biography – and expresses that pride in Biography Prizes like these ones, today - is something which, as current President of Biographers International Organization, I deeply applaud.

One day I believe there will be a Nobel Prize for Biography. If and when that happens, it may be said to have had its origin in the respect shown here today for those inveterate seekers-after-truth in our society: biographers.

Thank you very much.