

The History and Poetics of Scientific Biography

Edited by

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ASHGATE

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Chapter 13

Pas de Deux: The Biographer and the Living Biographical Subject

Vassiliki Betty Smocovitis

Stuff comes out, and they'd rather be dead. It's far easier to do dead people. There's plenty of them. (Rowley, in Stright, 2004)

It must be like marriage, with all the commitment and slog but none of the sex or comparing catty notes after dinner parties. (Handy, 2005)¹

Introduction: The Death of the Subject

It isn't exactly customary to receive sincere condolences from family, friends, students and colleagues on the death of one's biographical subject, but that is precisely what one can expect when one chooses to work on a still living, but aged, biographical subject whose life comes inevitably to its end. So close does the identification between biographer and biographical subject become that the death of the subject (this double meaning is intentional here) is experienced not only as a personal loss by the biographer, but one that is recognised and shared by the wider community who have identified the biographer with their subject. The more famous the subject, furthermore, the more attention given to the biographer, enhancing even more the identification of the biographer with their subject.

On 19 January 2000 the calls, notes, letters of condolence and requests for interviews and personal recollections began to literally pour in following the death of G. Ledyard Stebbins. He was the American botanist, geneticist and evolutionist whose life between 1906 and 2000 spanned major developments in the twentieth century that included historical events like the 'evolutionary synthesis'. Stebbins was clearly a major figure in the history of twentieth-century science, and interest in him was further increased by the fact that his passing coincided with beginnings of the new century and millennium, which many had already hailed as the 'century of biology'. His passing was therefore an opportune time to reflect on the end of one historical epoch and the beginning of another, even more promising epoch for the history of biology.

Without surprise, his death made the front-page notices in places like the *New York Times*; the obituary that followed was about a third of their standard page

¹ Bruce Handy was reviewing the new biography of actor David Niven by Graham Lord (2004).

(Yoon, 2000). Written by Carol Kaesuk Yoon – a well known science writer for the *New York Times* – it drew more than a bit from my own publications and insights. I had, in fact, been instrumental in helping to prepare it, since I had been consulted on it well before his death at the age of 94. Just one of the kernels of knowledge I gleaned from being the biographer of a living subject was the disturbing fact that major figures had such ‘skeleton’ obituaries prepared for them by media agencies well in advance of their actual death. Nothing had prepared me, however, for the small avalanche of notes and requests that followed within hours of his passing. The *Los Angeles Times* shortly followed with a phone-in interview, as did a number of other smaller newspaper or Internet sources responding to the breaking story. This was followed by requests for interviews or information by more focused groups interested in Stebbins, like the University of California (he was associated with that university), the California Native Plant Society, along with scientific venues that needed obituaries, like *Nature*, or more specialised scientific journals which published in his areas. With time, a virtual Stebbins ‘death industry’ arose that included not only obituaries, as well as tributes, memorials and retrospectives in honour of the man, his life and work, but also annual reviews, encyclopaedia and dictionary entries, and the official ‘fellows’ memoirs published by the National Academy of Science (he was an elected member) and the Royal Society. The death of this particular subject therefore drew considerable attention to his biographer, who had been closely associated with him for many years.

The fact of the matter is that well by 2000, I was considered the ‘Stebbins person’, or the ‘expert’ on Stebbins, having worked on him (and with him) as a biographical subject since I began graduate work in the history of science in the mid-1980s. Then approaching the fifteen-year mark, this had been a long association.² I had given numerous presentations on him, had published major articles about him, and had even made a number of public appearances accompanying him all through the late 1980s and 1990s. Though I bore little resemblance to the man, and had little of an intellectual pedigree traced back to him (other than a background in botany and evolutionary biology), bore no familial ties and had never engaged in any kind of conventional joint working collaboration with him, the association, and I think identification, was so close that to many in the community, the subject’s name brought up the biographer’s name. Even a casual attempt at Googling Stebbins drew up ‘Smocovitis’ (and vice versa).

More remarkable, however, was the fact that people showed sincere sympathy in expressing their condolences. I was so close to Stebbins – in their perceptions – that I must have had a serious personal loss. Thus, it was not just the number, but also the sincerity of condolences that were striking to me as biographer. The ‘death of my subject’ thus forced me to reflect once again on the special identification between biographer and living biographical subject, and on what this meant in historiographic terms. Elsewhere, I began to explore the advantages and disadvantages of work with

2 Biographies of major figures generally take a considerable length of time. Robert Caro’s efforts to write a biography of Lyndon Baines Johnson now approach the third decade of research. Three volumes under the general title of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* have already appeared: Caro (1982), Caro (1990) and Caro (2002).

a living biographical subject by concentrating on problems critical to the researcher pertaining to archival sources, and the reliability of oral history interviews as well as issues pertaining to distance and privacy (Smocovitis, 1999).

Here, I wish to explore more fully the personal dynamic of the interaction between the biographer and living subject with an eye to understanding the relationship that develops and the process of identification that takes place, and to then explore what the death of that subject entails. My argument will be that biographical projects on living subjects lead to an increasingly complex relationship that involves an intensified identification process. This in turn raises a set of special concerns that become even more apparent with the death of the subject. By identification, I mean the process by which we come to 'identify' with our subjects, that is, feel a 'union' with them, or empathise with them, or come to share the same kinds of values, concerns and attitudes, or perhaps even demonstrate similar behaviours as they do. As the case I explore suggests, furthermore, the process of identification involves the wider community engaged in an act of witnessing and validating the shared identification. The process does have some notable resemblance to what we might recognise as the traditional relationship known as the 'marital union', though as Bruce Handy points out in the opening epigraph above, there are some notable differences too. In my mind, a more appropriate relationship for this process draws on a metaphor borrowed from classical ballet involving the intricate choreography between two principal dancers known as the *pas de deux*.

'When Writers Wish their Subjects were Dead': The Celebrity Figure as Living Biographical Subject

Although biographers have explored the kinds of relationships that develop between them and their subjects, especially with an eye to problems of distancing and voice employed, they have only recently begun to explore the process of identification and the kinds of relationships that develop with living subjects.³ Much of the literature exploring the special problems and challenges that emerge with work on living subjects is associated more generally with what are known as 'literary biographies', but especially – and sometimes amusingly – in the genre known as celebrity biography.⁴ Thanks in part to the growing diversity of media that actively invent them, and thanks in part to a culture eager to consume them, celebrity figures seem to be increasing in number and diversifying in type. With this growing interest, there has grown a market keen to capitalise on celebrity figures. Included here are not only paparazzi and tabloid journalists, but also serious biographers following a

3 The best recent source on biographical methods and issues is Backscheider (1999); see also earlier classic works on biography, for example Edel ([1959] 1984). Biographers have suffered much anguish over the issue of subjectivity and their feelings towards even their long-dead their biographical subjects. See, for instance, Baron and Pletsch (1985) and Edel (1984); for one example from the history of science, see Westfall (1985); see also Söderqvist (1996). The peculiar identification of biographer with subject has been the subject of interest in popular works of fiction as well: see Byatt (1990).

4 For one analysis of the genre, see Collins (1998).

lucrative pursuit. Some of the best literature exploring the complex dynamic between biographer and living subject thus concentrates on celebrity figures.

Celebrities, can of course, come from all walks of life (art, sports, politics, religion and science, as well as the more obvious stage and film), but by definition they become celebrities through a process of projection or identification, playing the full range of human roles – lover, leader, saviour, healer, artist or scientist – and embodying and evoking the full range of human emotions: love, hate, fear, hope and the like. Serving at times as idealised or heroic living figures, their celebrity image oftentimes bears little resemblance to their flesh and blood existence. Biographers of such living celebrity figures thus may have an especially acute sense of their subject's allure, fame, status, notoriety, wealth or infamy as well as sheer power; the power dynamic of the relationship is thus inevitably skewed, favouring the subject. For some biographers, this very imbalance in the power dynamic may result in a happy union (especially if they are accustomed to playing passive observer in the hope of writing an 'authorised' biography the subject likes), but more often than not it leads to serious problems between the biographer and subject that must be handled with care.

So problematic are these relationships that they were the feature of a 1996 *New York Times* article with the amusing title, 'When writers wish their subjects were dead: moving from ancient lives to modern ones, biographers meet hostility and worse' (Scott, 1996). Charting the course of the relationship between living biographical subject and biographer, Marion Meade, the biographer of comedian Woody Allen described a series of appropriate emotional stages that biographers inevitably follow: first 'they adore the subject, then despise the subject, then wonder whatever possessed them to choose that subject at all'. Eventually, she noted, they 'work through their hostility and come out in the proper place'. The 'proper place', unfortunately, may be a kind of 'twilight zone' where the biographical subject exists in a kind of reality/unreality, but always linked inextricably to the biographer. Biographers of living subjects, the article notes, thus exist in a kind of 'living purgatory', where their subjects are neither 'consenting nor dead'.

The tumultuousness and volatility of this relationship is perhaps best known from the notorious 'collaboration' between sportswriter Al Stump and the controversial baseball player Ty Cobb (also known as the 'Georgia Peach'). In 1960, Stump was invited to serve as a ghostwriter for Cobb's autobiography. A difficult (in fact, probably pathological) individual famous for regularly bloodying opponents with the spikes on his shoes in his famous 'Cobb's Kiss', Cobb proved to be a ghostwriter's ultimate nightmare figure. He was abusive, manipulative and deceitful, and regularly toyed with Stump, who frequently found himself a captive audience to his celebrity figure. Stump's role, as it turned out, was to serve as witness to a range of bizarre performances, some of which were staged solely for his 'benefit'. Initially attracted to the famous pro, Stump quickly grew to despise Cobb, and by Stump's own admission, the completed book he co-authored with Cobb entitled *My Life in Baseball: The True Record* was anything but true (Cobb, 1961); it was a much-sanitised, self-serving account, the kind only an egocentric (and indeed narcissistic) figure like Cobb would produce. It took over thirty years to recover and gain both courage and distance from his biographical subject before Stump could continue

with the project. It therefore took the death of his subject (and the relationship) to complete his own telling account of Cobb's life, based on what he had observed and what Cobb had told him. Describing the curious relationship that developed between them as a result of the proximity, he wrote the following:

During the long stretches of time we spent together, my feelings for Ty Cobb were often in flux. My respect for greatness, my contempt for his vile temper and mistreatment of others, my pity for his deteriorating health, and my admiration for his stubbornness and persistence produced a frustrating mix of emotions. With so much material left over, there was need for another manuscript, but it wasn't until three decades later that I finally felt compelled to put the real Ty Cobb to rest. (Stump, 1994)

Biographies of Living Scientists: Are Scientists Different?

Celebrities are, of course, renowned for being 'difficult' people. Stars (or 'stahs', as they are referred to in Hollywood celebrity culture) are oftentimes associated with temperamental, volatile or unstable personalities. Would the same kinds of difficulties emerge with figures far outside traditional 'celebrity' culture, say in politics or religion, or especially science, areas which are traditionally not associated with the kind of glamour or high visibility usually associated with actors or sportsfigures? Should we expect the same kinds of difficulties to emerge with scientists, in particular, those supposedly rational, bloodless creatures of mind? My own sense is the answer is a strong yes. Though it is not always true, scientists selected for biographical study are usually major figures and celebrities in their own right, complete with the quirks and quarks and tendencies towards narcissism that one sees within any celebrity group; we may in fact be drawn to them precisely because of these tendencies.

Scientists are, moreover, human beings, and interactions between any two human beings that take place over a prolonged period result in what we recognise as 'a relationship', though we may ascribe different meanings to the kinds of interactions that we may have. In a close, and indeed intellectually intimate, interaction such as that between living biographer and subject, it is very likely, and I think inevitable, that it will bring out the best and worst in both sides. So close can the relationship become, and so heavily dependent can it become, that it can be viewed as classic 'co-dependency' that makes critical perspective or detachment difficult, if not impossible. Even between scientists, those famously detached or disembodied beings, and their biographers, who may be well trained to seek historical objectivity, a similar difficult and complex relationship develops. In fact, I would argue that as living biographical subjects, scientists are like any other human being – why should they be any different?

For historians especially, and not so much for science writers or journalists, the relationship may be made more problematic by the kind of temporal transgression encountered by work with living subjects. Although history, by definition, is concerned with the past, the biographer's subject is of interest historically for his or her contributions; yet the living subject is not yet a part of history, unless one can easily accept the notion of 'living' history, a fundamental contradiction in terms. This is the reason that biographers of living subjects experience discomfort: there

is something very strange and fundamentally unnatural about facing and interacting with a historical subject. The idea is so disturbing to historians that some purists hold the view that all historical actors must be dead before one can even think of proper historical analysis. In their view, only after all the actors have died, and only after a reasonable amount of time has passed, is it possible to attain proper scholarly distance. Other historians, however, argue strenuously against this point of view. For them, living subjects are invaluable sources of information; instead of lending historical 'distance', time lapsed really means that historical documents and historical memory are irretrievably lost.⁵ This is a well-known debate some historians relish; but others view such debate as wasteful because opportunities and documents are lost.

Despite the predictable reluctance from historical purists, many historians have already turned to detailed studies of living biographical subjects; and nowhere is this more prevalent than in the history of science. In recent years, a number of scholars have turned to work with scientists as biographical subjects, many of whom are still alive. The reasons for this are fairly simple. More scientists are alive today than have ever lived in the past (this was first recognised by sociologist of science Derek de Solla Price in his famous statement that '80 to 90 per cent of all scientists that have ever lived are alive now').⁶ This is certainly the case for those of us following the history of modern biology, a science which is still so recent that many of its great figures are still alive. This is especially true for newer areas of the biological sciences like molecular biology, genetics, biochemistry, developmental biology and immunology, areas which became growth industries in the second half of the twentieth century (Provine, 1986; Söderqvist, 1998; Keller, 1983; Kevles, 1998; Judson, 1979).

Despite the growing interest in the recent history of science,⁷ and despite growing interest in science biography as a unique genre,⁸ biography of living science remains largely uncharted terrain. It is thus useful to rely on those accounts from either literary biography or celebrity biography as historiographic or methodological models for the history of science. Marion Meade's characterisation of the 'emotional stages' that biographers inevitably follow may be especially useful for us here. Additional stages might be helpful and give a more nuanced picture, especially if identification is the subject of interest. If it does not take place at the front end of Meade's emotional stages, then it might generally emerge in the middle or perhaps even towards the tail end of those same stages – it may indeed involve a gradual process, a kind of evolutionary choreography between biographer and the biographical subject. It is this complex process that I wish to explore further with some concrete grounding from my experiences as biographer of Ledyard Stebbins.

5 See, for instance, the comments in the Preface to Provine (1986).

6 He made this famous observation in 1963: de Solla Price (1986; includes the text of *Little Science, Big Science* originally published in 1963).

7 The historiography of recent or contemporary science was the subject of conferences held at Stanford University and in Göteborg, Sweden in 1994. For a discussion of some of the unique problems encountered in writing the history of recent science, see Doel and Söderqvist (2006), Söderqvist (1997) and Lindee, Speaker and Thackray (1994).

8 See Shortland and Yeo (1996).

Pas de Deux: Choreographing the Relationship with G. Ledyard Stebbins

My project did not originally begin as a biography, and I most certainly did not find Ledyard Stebbins an attractive, celebrity-like personality I was keen to explore. In my mind, immediate identification (if it existed at all) was as weak as it could possibly be. He was fifty years older, came from an entirely different class and ethnic background, and we had obvious gender and other notable personality differences. As the central figure bringing botany to the intellectual event known as 'the evolutionary synthesis', however, he played a critical role in shaping modern evolutionary biology. That made him important to me, as I was keen to understand its history and the role that botany had played in it. I therefore understood his importance and had pored over his own reflections on the subject of 'botany and the evolutionary synthesis', but I had no initial intention to concentrate on him for my research (Stebbins, 1980).

That all started to change after my first meeting with him and what amounted to three weeks of close interaction. Early in the winter of 1987 or so, Ledyard delivered a set of important lectures at Cornell University, where I was an advanced graduate student; the lectureship required him to stay in Ithaca for a three-week period. His wife Barbara was unable to accompany him, and as the student closest to his interests who was keen for the interaction, I was placed in charge of guiding him around the campus. Ledyard was fairly far along in age, and his eyesight was poor so that he required considerable attention. Up to meeting with him, the name Stebbins had existed only in my textbooks, and was especially meaningful since my first exposure to evolutionary biology at university level came in the way of his little textbook, *Processes of Organic Evolution* (Stebbins, 1966). I vividly recall the excitement I had initially felt as I anticipated my finally meeting such an object of scientific wonder.

That came in the way of a formal dinner organised by William B. Provine, but it was anything but exciting. As the evening wore on, I was horrified to see his manners at the dinner table: he was spooning the soup of the day into his eyeglasses that he kept suspended on his chest with cords. Worse, his voice was monotonous, and he spoke in what seemed like endless chains of long paragraphs with an annoyingly pretentious 'preppie' New England accent. He struck me as overbearing, interested in hearing only himself speak, and did not seem keen to actually engage anyone else at the dinner table. I was therefore not drawn to Ledyard as a person, and not only could I not identify with him, but I was nearly repulsed by that initial interaction.

Things changed gradually over the course of that initial three-week period, however. I not only guided him across the campus, drove him in my car and served as his official 'escort' to nearly all social occasions held in his honour, but I also spent my evenings with Ledyard, tape recorder in hand, interviewing him on the topic dear to both of us, botany and the evolutionary synthesis. After three weeks of listening to him answer my questions (again in those endless chains of spoken paragraphs), I grew acquainted with the details of his life and work. I also grew to appreciate Ledyard as a person, especially as I increasingly saw him as an aging and infirm individual in need of assistance and care; his 'preppie' humour actually began to make me laugh. We went for drives in upstate New York. I got a personalised tour

of his ancestral home town of Cazenovia, and I touched the remnants of the peonies he once worked on at the old Saunders house next to Hamilton College. In that three-week interval of time, I began to 'connect' with Ledyard on both the personal and professional level and to relive his own history first-hand.

The sense of connection gradually grew during the next six months, as I transcribed all the interviews I had recorded into textual form, listening attentively to every inflection and intonation in his voice over and over again, as I completed what became compiled as an oral history interview. It was largely the result of this concentration on the details of this one person's life, his insights into his work, and his insights and recollections of the field as a whole, repeated over and over again on the tapes, that started to shape my project on botany and the evolutionary synthesis. I could engage those wider issues, it dawned on me, by concentrating directly on him. The project thus shifted towards a well-established genre in the history of science, whereby a central figure is chosen as an 'organisational pivot', for getting at a wider complex dynamic in scientific culture; and the subject of 'botany and the evolutionary synthesis' was indeed a hopelessly complex and indeed unworkable project until that point. With that in mind, the completed dissertation in 1988 was organised around Ledyard Stebbins, and so could be construed as 'biographical' in terms of genre, but nevertheless bore little in the way of details into the life or inner world of Ledyard Stebbins. For at least two chapters, the figure of Stebbins dropped out entirely. It was, in short, no 'real' biography, as I have come to understand that term.

The interactions continued after his departure, and unexpected elements were introduced, especially after I reciprocated the visit by being a guest in the Stebbins households in Davis and Berkeley, California. In no time, I realised that I was working on not just one biographical subject, but in fact two: included in my biography from that point on was Barbara, Ledyard's wife. Witnessing their relationship – at an uncomfortably close range – may have made some biographers dance with glee, but I felt only acute discomfort. I saw at first hand what amounted to a 'food fight' in the kitchen, and was then witness to a series of interactions resembling the breakfast scene out of the Hollywood film *Citizen Kane*. By the end of that visit, I knew more than I ever wanted to know about the both of them, and as a young scholar, that familiarity made me confront a number of issues pertaining to trust, confidence and the dignity that both had a right to (in my view), especially since I was a guest invited into their homes.⁹ No less a concern were the interactions with Ledyard's other family members, and close friends – all of whom seemed to come out of the woodwork when they learned of the project. Living with a biographical subject, I quickly discovered, meant living with a family of biographical subjects, all of whom may feel some special relationship with the primary biographical subject; in a sense, all wanted to claim some kind of 'ownership' in him. Dealing with Stebbins also meant considering the needs and wishes of the Stebbins family, along with some of his colleagues and friends, which at times contradicted each other.

It was during one of my initial visits to California, moreover, that the gradual 'witnessing' began to take place that further legitimised the relationship. Ledyard took

9 I discuss some of this in Smocovitis (1999).

me to his place of work at the university, introduced me to his friends and colleagues, and importantly enough invited me to accompany him to the 'Biosystematists', an organisation of people in the Bay area with joint interests in evolutionary biology and systematics. They were the individuals who began to draw on me for expertise into their own areas of interests and to designate me as the 'Stebbins expert'. They invited me to dine with them, talk to them and to explore California botany with them. A number of them (and other colleagues who knew him outside the Bay area) allowed me to interview them with tape recorder in hand, serving both as witnesses but also participants to the process taking place. At one point, the 'Biosystematists', then meeting at Stanford University, invited me to give a formal lecture on my project, namely Ledyard. Nothing could hold Ledyard back, and even though he didn't feel altogether well, he came for the dinner, reception and talk. We all held our breath as we anticipated some kind of outburst, if not repeated 'correctives' to my interpretation of his 'life and work'. It came, of course, but in a manner so amusingly conversational that I was subsequently told by one of the audience members that 'I interrupted the speaker a bit too much.'

The longer I worked with Ledyard, the wider the circle of acquaintances that came to recognise the relationship between us. In the course of the following decade, a full-blown public 'relationship' ensued. We grew together and grew apart. I would fly to California often, and even spent two years of my life close by in the Bay area, close to my sources (and to him). Ledyard was hospitalised, and I went to visit with an armful of his beloved California wildflowers. Thinking his life was coming to end (it didn't for some eight years), he became 'miffed' with me for not doing more to preserve his memory. I grew frustrated at his meddling and interventions and the absence of proper historical documentation (he was sloppy, and threw away too much). Ernst Mayr grew to be a friend as I continued to delve into evolutionary synthesis publishing my first book. Ledyard did not approve much of my new relationship with his old rival, Ernst. He wanted more time devoted to him. Barbara died suddenly, leaving Ledyard in the care of a group of caregivers, all of whom eventually became my own friends. I was with them all, continuing my work with Ledyard, tape recorder in hand, just a couple of weeks before his end. Hospice came and went as we sorted through his papers and collected important documentation we feared would be lost. Just a few minutes before his death, I was on the phone checking up on him. Magnified by a breathing machine next to the phone, I heard him draw his last breaths.

Up until this very end, the relationship involved a complex choreography, much like a *pas de deux*. Though the identification did not exist at the outset, it came as the result of intensified interactions of the kind that can only take place between two living subjects. It isn't exactly easy to share laughter or even negative emotions like anger or frustration with the dead. Ledyard had actually been one of the better kinds of living biographical subjects. He was co-operative, interactive and talkative, and best of all, trusting enough to share his insights, his documents and some of his personal life. That did not always make it easy – he could throw temper tantrums at the drop of a hat and was at times overly helpful, but it was probably the best that it could get between two such different human beings.

The sheer length of time – some thirteen years – which allowed us time to get to know each other, combined with the focus on the understanding the minutiae of his life, no doubt intensified the process of identification further. Over the course of this long period, the narrative of our two lives had slowly begun to converge; I had become part of his memory, as he had become part of mine. As a stunning demonstration of this sharing or mingling of historical narratives, my own existence made its way eventually into the Stebbins archives at the Shields Library at the University of California, Davis. Our shared histories were now preserved and contained in the boxes that contained letters to and from each other, photographs, and drafts of my manuscripts – all traces of our shared existence. The most striking, and poignant, sign of this was the inclusion of my name in the Stebbins date-book, noting the appointment of our first meeting at Cornell. Reciprocating the relationship, some of Ledyard's own traces became part of my own life as treasured possessions: some books, some photographs, a trophy and other memorabilia are now part of my own life. Even his unpublished autobiography, eventually entitled *The Lady Slipper and I*, drew on my understanding of the critical turns and events in his life as I was writing them in my biography. Finally, the shared narratives became public, by the appearance of a number of publications on Ledyard that drew on our interactions and jointly linked our names. News of his death saddened and disoriented me, and that's probably also when I realised that the biographical project that had started in 1988 had at some point given way to a full-scale biography – a full-scale involvement with the writing of Ledyard's life.

'True to Life?' Closing Thoughts on Biographies of Living Subjects

Given that there is always some kind of interpersonal dynamic in work with living subjects, some kind of attachment and identification is inevitable. Conflicting feelings like those described by Stump, if explored and integrated into the writing of the biography, may even enhance the quality of the biographical product. It may even be the case that some of the very best biographers give way to exploring those feelings evoked by their encounters with their subject. In his recent biography of immunologist Niels K. Jerne, for instance, Thomas Söderqvist has used his biographical subject as a way of extending his own life-experiences.¹⁰ According to Söderqvist, such identification may prove to be 'edifying' and 'may provide us with opportunities for reorienting our familiar ways of thinking about our lives in unfamiliar terms' (Söderqvist, 1996). That much appears certainly true with my experience of work with Ledyard Stebbins. Although identification with Ledyard Stebbins was not immediate, furthermore, it did happen with time, largely through the kinds of interactions that take place between two individuals. He was not my teacher, colleague, friend, nor was I his student or caregiver, yet at times we appeared to be playing with all these roles. He was my living biographical subject, the so-called 'object' of my study as it evolved. Though it may on occasion test

¹⁰ How biography can be edifying is discussed in Söderqvist (1996), Söderqvist (2003) and Söderqvist (2006).

the emotional resilience and social skills of the biographer, working on a living biographical subject in fact provides abundant – and special – gratification for the biographer. Not only can it be an opportunity to engage in a special relationship where trivial questions can be answered readily and difficult questions can at least have the possibility of an answer, but one is far less lonely knowing that there is at least one person who is more than likely as committed as the biographer to the project. Talking (and interacting) with the biographical subject also permits the historical biographer to explore the possibility of living history.

What, if anything, happens when the living subject dies? Does it aid the process of detachment so that subjective attitudes and feelings can be put aside or behind? Does it lead to a more ‘objective’ historical account? If some of my recent writing is any indication, Ledyard’s death does not somehow allow me to gain objectivity, but it does seem easier to paint a portrait that rings true. A recently published reminiscence of Ledyard drew so heavily on my experience of him that Ernst Mayr’s response to reading it was sheer delight: ‘there you have him,’ he said, ‘Ledyard, warts and all’. Another student of Ledyard’s enthusiastically wrote me to say how much I seemed to capture someone he knew. My sense from these reactions, and the project itself as it is still unfolding, is that the death of the subject does bring forth detachment, but does not necessarily lead to a more objective or neutral account. What it can do for the biographer is to permit them to paint a more vivid picture, one that may be much more ‘true to life’. As Thomas Söderqvist has concluded, ‘one can hardly set out to write a biography without being emotionally involved with its central figure, but on the other hand, one has to work hard on establishing distance in the process of writing. The final result should emerge as a happy divorce, a certification that the writer has freed himself from the central figure’ (Söderqvist, 2003, p. xxi).

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