



Living with Your Biographical Subject: Special Problems of Distance, Privacy and Trust in the Biography of G. Ledyard Stebbins Jr.

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Abstract. This paper explores the special problems encountered by the biographer of a living scientific subject. In particular, it explores the complex of problems that emerges from the intense interpersonal dynamic involving issues of distance, privacy and trust. It also explores methodological problems having to do with oral history interviews and other supporting documentation. It draws on the personal experience of the author and the biographical subject of G. Ledyard Stebbins Jr., the botanist, geneticist and evolutionist. It also offers prescriptives and recommendations for future research.

Keywords: science biography, recent science, Stebbins, G. Ledyard Jr., oral history, historiography of biology

Author's Note

My relationship with Ledyard Stebbins ended not with my completion of the last chapter of his biography, but with his death on January 19, 2000, after a long battle with cancer. I had become accustomed to hearing his assisted breathing in the background when I called his home. Only now that I can no longer hear it do I understand just how close we had become. The very hardest part of living with you biographical subject turns out to be saying goodbye forever.

Introduction

A feature article in the *New York Times* dated October 6, 1996 makes the bold statement that “writers of living subjects are almost a breed apart.” In the article, biographer Janny Scott reveals the unique problems encountered by writers whose subjects are still alive.”¹

¹ Scott, 1996, p. 19.

The article paints a vivid picture of the pressures biographers face when choosing living biographical subjects. The subject is very much there looking over the writer's shoulder. Given a market keen on living figures, an increasing number of writers are turning toward living biographical subjects and, the article contends, entering into a kind of "living purgatory" where the biographical subjects are neither "consenting nor dead." Such biographers, especially of major celebrity figures (the most lucrative of biographical subjects), find themselves playing conflicting roles: though they may see themselves as scholar/writers, others view them as "scandal mongers," "hangers-on," "parasites," or "literary paparazzi." As is often the case, they must work with an uncooperative, if not downright hostile subject. Telephone calls remain unreturned, letters are unanswered and serious interviews derailed. Stories of rude or atrocious behavior abound. One biographer describes the fate of a letter to the former husband of his biographical subject. Asked if the ex-husband knew why their marriage failed, the husband shooed him away by quoting Macbeth's dismissal of Banquo's ghost: "Hence horrible shadow!/Unreal mockery, hence!" The interviewee then signed the letter "insincerely yours." *Only* armed with attorneys, who they pay generously to keep them out of trouble, do biographers of living subjects dare to enter what one of them describes as terrain "where angels would have feared to tread."²

No less noteworthy are the emotional stages through which biographers of living subjects inevitably pass. According to Marian Meade – one biographer of comedian Woody Allen – biographers "follow a predictable course": first "they adore the subject, then despise the subject, then wonder whatever possessed them to choose that subject at all." Eventually 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 un/reality. Biographers of living subjects agree: there is something very strange about facing the subject or object of your immediate research.³

This strange behavior is not, furthermore, confined to the "difficult" literary or artistic biographical subjects. One of the most well-known examples of a tumultuous relationship between a biographer and his subject is the celebrated collaboration between sportswriter Al Stump and the controversial baseball player Ty Cobb (also known as the "Georgia Peach"). Stump was invited by Cobb in 1960 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

² Ibid., p. 19.

³ Ibid., p. 19.

“Cobb’s Kiss” – Cobb proved to be the biographer’s ultimate nightmare figure: abusive, manipulative, and deceitful, a subject who frequently turned on his biographer. Working closely with his biographical subject, Stump witnessed a range of bizarre performances, some of which were solely for his “benefit.” Initially attracted to the famous professional baseball player, Stump quickly grew to despise Cobb. According to Stump, the completed book he co-authored with Cobb, entitled *My Life in Baseball: the True Record*, was anything but true: it was a much sanitized, self-serving account, the kind only an egocentric figure like Cobb would produce.⁴ Requiring both courage and distance from his biographical subject, Stump waited over 30 years after his subject’s death – and their collaboration – 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.⁵

Biographies of Living Scientists: Are Scientists Different?

One may be tempted to think that such difficulties characterize the relationships between biographers and notoriously temperamental literary figures, celebrities, or sport stars, or that such relationships are more likely to be rocky. Are scientists as biographical subjects much different? Although there may well be a special set of issues confronting the science biographer,⁶ the *relationship* between biographer and *living* scientific subject remains by definition an interpersonal dynamic like any other. Any relationship between biographer and living biographical subject is a profoundly complex interaction that is likely to bring out the best and worst in *both*. Such a relationship, which can, furthermore, best be described as a classic “codependency,” makes

⁴ Cobb, 1961.

⁵ Stump, 1994, p. 17. A feature film was made dramatizing the complex relationship: see *Cobb*. Warner Brothers, 1994; Warner Brothers Home Video, 1995.

⁶ Science biography as a historical genre has been the subject of enormous interest. See the recent volume devoted to the subject by Shortland and Yeo, eds., 1996. This volume includes a fine bibliography of the genre.

a properly critical perspective, or any sort of detachment, nearly impossible. Even between scientists, those supposedly rational bloodless creatures of mind, 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 much like any other human being – why should they be any different?

For historians, and not so much for science writers or journalists, this relationship is made more problematic by the kind of temporal transgression encountered by work with living subjects. Although history is, by definition, concerned with the past and although the biographer's subject is of historical interest because of his or her contributions to historical events, the living subject is not yet a part of history, unless one accepts the self-contradictory notion of *living* history. Hence the biographers of living subjects often feel 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 giving historical "distance," the passage of time really means that historical documents and historical memory are irretrievably lost.⁷ This well-known debate is relished by some, while others view such debate as wasteful because opportunities and documents are lost.

Despite the predictable reluctance of purists, many historians have already turned to detailed studies of living biographical subjects. Making Derek J. de Solla Price's famous observation that "80 to 90 percent of all the scientists that have ever lived are alive now" into a kind of dictum or a rallying call,⁸ historians of recent science have already begun the process of preserving the documentation and memories of notable twentieth-century scientists for future reference. In the life sciences alone, this has led to a body of scholarship that includes notable projects like: William B. Provine's now-classic study of the theoretical population geneticist Sewall Wright in *Sewall Wright and Evolutionary Biology*; Thomas Söderqvist's biography of the immunologist Niels K. Jerne, *Hvilken Kamp for at Undslippe [What Struggle to Escape]*; and Evelyn Fox Keller's feminist biography of geneticist Barbara McClintock, *A Feeling for the Organism. The Life and Work of*

⁷ See for instance the comments in the preface to Provine, 1986.

⁸ de Solla Price, 1986; includes text of *Little Science, Big Science*, orig. pub. 1963, quotation on p. 1.

Barbara McClintock; in addition to the pioneering “collective biography” of Horace Freeland Judson’s *The Eighth Day of Creation*.⁹

Nor is it much of an accident that historians of modern biology have been especially quick to respond to the need for such documentation.¹⁰ Since the life sciences properly came of age in the twentieth-century, it is very likely that historical actors are still alive to recount their life experiences. Certainly, in the newer areas of the biological sciences like molecular biology, genetics, biochemistry, developmental biology, and immunology, it is more than likely that a considerable number of the scientists are alive at present.

Despite the growing interest in the recent history of science¹¹ and despite growing interest in science biography as a unique genre,¹² biography of living science remains a largely uncharted terrain. Potential problems in dealing with living subjects, and the possibility of viable solutions have not been clearly articulated, let alone a clear policy defined. In the remainder of this essay, I would like to use personal experience to highlight just some of the problems historians and especially biographers of living subjects may encounter. I offer some insights, prescriptives, and words of encouragement for other scholars.

A Case Study from the Recent History of Biology: Some Problems in the Biography of G. Ledyard Stebbins, Jr.

For well over a dozen years, I have been working on a biography of one scientist, the noted botanist, geneticist, and evolutionist G. Ledyard Stebbins, Jr. He turned 93 years of age on January 6, 1999, and is currently an emeritus professor of genetics at the University of California, Davis. Stebbins’s claim to fame was to have served as the botanical “architect” who helped bring botany into the wider synthetic theory of evolution.¹³ The “synthesis,” which saw the restoration of Darwinism in the modernized version sometimes referred to as “neo-Darwinism,” reconciled Darwinian selection theory with the new science of genetics, gave a plausible account of the origins

⁹ Provine, 1986; Söderqvist, 1998; Keller, 1983; Judson, 1979.

¹⁰ See for instance the recent account of the “Baltimore case” in immunology by Kevles, 1998.

¹¹ 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: Söderqvist ed., 1997; Lindee, Speaker and Thackray, 1994.

¹² See Shortland and Yeo, eds., 1996.

¹³ Ernst Mayr and William B. Provine, eds., 1980. For an examination of G. Ledyard Stebbins, Jr. and the evolutionary synthesis, see Smocovitis, 1997.

of biological diversity, and saw the emergence of the unifying discipline of evolutionary biology.¹⁴

Unlike Ty Cobb or Woody Allen, Stebbins is not a celebrity figure whose name would be instantly recognized in American households. He is, however, instantly recognized by all botanists, and by most biologists who remember the 1960s. Unlike Cobb or Allen, Stebbins, furthermore, is a cooperative biographical subject, eager and in fact enthusiastic to help the completion of his biography. He has allowed himself to be interviewed at length, made family correspondence, documents, and photographs readily available, provided addresses of his friends, and pointed to sources that might be helpful. He has even provided hospitality in his home to facilitate research. There is no reason to complain, but only to celebrate my good fortune at choosing such a “user-friendly” biographical subject. But just because the biographical subject is friendly and cooperative does not necessarily make for a relationship that is any less complex. In fact, it may even increase the intensity of involvement and in turn the complications that are inevitable in human interactions. I am not a friend in any conventional meaning of the term, not a family member, or caregiver, or even a student; and yet I have found myself playing all those roles at some point in the relationship. Since, every conversation – every interaction – no matter how trivial, with the biographical subject is potentially loaded with meaning, the relationship is unlike any other. Like readers of traditional textual documents found in archives, the biographer of the living subject reads meaning into every gesture, word, or movement of their subject, who functions as a kind of “living document” in addition to being a flesh and bones human being. The relationship can only be best described as falling into the “strange but wonderful” category.

Personality characteristics, age, gender and class differences – whichever way one wants to carve up personal identity – of both biographer and living subject figure prominently, and in fact are critical to the interpersonal dynamic. In my case, the fact that I was a female graduate student some 50 years his junior at the time of our meeting helped set up the initially positive dynamic. It was clearly slanted to his side. So too did the fact that Stebbins visited me on my own turf during a series of lectures he gave for the Division of Biological Sciences at Cornell University in 1987 (that helped to redress the imbalance). Up to that point, I had used conventional published sources to understand Stebbins’s contributions to the evolutionary synthesis and had no personal contact with him. But with his wife unable to travel (she had recently begun suffering from heart disease), and with difficulty seeing because of glaucoma, my biographical subject was no longer the scientist of lofty ideas, a textual presence known only through the medium of print, but became

¹⁴ Mayr and Provine, eds., 1980; Smocovitis, 1996.

instead an elderly person, heavily dependent on others for daily basic care. The intense three week stay was filled with prolonged visits, during which I began to conduct formal oral history interviews, along with numerous side trips, parties, and receptions. It was during some of those visits that I began to see the pitfalls of working so closely with a living subject.

First, there is the inevitable shock or let-down that comes with seeing the subject of so much of your attention become a mere human. I cannot decide if this happened during my first formal meal with Stebbins, after I saw him spooning the soup-of-day into his eye-glasses which he kept on cables suspended on his chest, or when I saw him helpless and close to tears at the prospect of packing his suitcase without his wife, Barbara to assist him. Then there are the inevitable disagreements that take place, not only over the significance of influences, events, papers and ideas (a kind of who did what when where) but over trivial matters, like the exact directions to get to reception halls (left or right). In one instance I received a minor scolding at not following the directions that I had never received. Should one here defer to the biographical subject's authority (it is his life, or science, or field after all) on *all* counts? Exactly when – and how – does one tactfully disagree about any of these points?

An even more difficult part of working with living subjects, I quickly discovered, is the oral history interview, which is filled with more than the obvious dangers. In an interview (which first must be granted) the biographical subject can consciously or unconsciously deny, distort, omit or deceive. These dangers are known to nearly all historians, and for this reason oral history interviews have been the subject of a lively debate.¹⁵ Less well known are the immediate problems encountered during the interview: what does one do about the biographical subject who wanders aimlessly, refuses to shut up, falls asleep, sings, recites poetry and verse? How does one actually transcribe the interview, interpret difficult and obscure phrases, or capture nuances or meaningful inflections?¹⁶ And how ultimately will the oral history be used? What do I do for instance, with entire personal interviews that were granted on the condition that they be used only for my work and to be used “judiciously,” as was the case in the Stebbins interviews – no other word and its interpretation has given me more problems. The truth is that historians of science have had little real experience with the formal methods of oral history;

¹⁵ See for instance Prins, 1991; Seldon and Pappworth, 1983; Thompson, 1988; and see Lummis, 1988. For critical discussion of oral history in a range of disciplines, see Dunaway and Baum, eds., 1983.

¹⁶ For pointers see: Davis, Back and MacLean, 1977; Ives, 1980; Baum, 1977; Yow, 1994. See also: McMahan, 1989; McMahan and Rogers, eds., 1994.

certainly, oral history is not yet a formal part of the historian of science's training.¹⁷

The use of such "interpersonal" documents leads to yet another problem: what is to be done with all the information gathered, especially under the condition of "judicious" use? Does this mean that the oral history interviews cannot be deposited in archival holdings for future scholarship? Do I hoard this material? Make provisions in my will? Can I show the interviews to my students, my former thesis advisor, or colleagues with similar interests? And how is this material really to be "used" freely in publications, which by definition, means to make given information "public"? Some of these problems can be addressed, in fact, by careful negotiations that are formally recorded *well before* the interviews are granted; but even then, there remains the possibility of misunderstanding.¹⁸

These are standard problems for most biographers using oral history interviews; yet for the most part, interviews do not only facilitate research, but they also stimulate the interviewer and take research into unexpected directions. In the case of the Stebbins interviews, most exciting was the recognition that historical figures who have been relegated to obscurity (here botanists and geneticists who lived for me only in William B. Provine's musty reprint collection) took on a vitality in my discussions with someone who was familiar with their work and most often had known them personally. Those conversations brought an immediacy and vitality to the history of plant evolutionary biology that would otherwise not be possible, in addition, of course, to the invaluable information, insights and details that would have been totally erased from the historical record.¹⁹

Unexpected problems developed, however, as the relationship continued, especially during and after a visit to California in 1987, when I was a guest in the Stebbins household. In no time, I realized 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 was presented not only with the acute discomfort of finding myself immediately in a situation reminiscent of the breakfast scene out of the Hollywood film, *Citizen Kane*, but also with yet another problem for the biographer – how much is *too* much of the personal side of the scien-

¹⁷ For a discussion of this point, see de Chadarevian, 1997. For a good overview, see Thompson, 1988. See also Ritchie, 1995. For historiographic considerations, see Tonkin, 1992; Henige, 1982; Jeffrey and Edwall, eds., 1994.

¹⁸ Formal oral histories that are deposited in archives must, for instance, have signed permission from the biographical subject deposited with the copy of the interviews.

¹⁹ See also Provine's discussion of the usefulness of his oral history interviews with Sewall Wright and how they helped to create a more accurate historical record (note 7 above).

tists? Some biographers – some of those featured in the *New York Times* for example – believe that biography by definition involves the “exposure” of the biographical subject, but I would disagree. I do not think we need become the “Hedda Hoppers” of the history of science. Inclusion of intimate details might help us understand a figure like Woody Allen or even Ty Cobb, but do they really shed light on someone like Ledyard Stebbins? Is detail about personal matters – marital relationships, family etc., all *that* important, especially in the biography of a scientist? How much light *does* it shed on chromosomal botany to know details about reasons that Stebbins’s first marriage failed? ²⁰ And should not biographical subjects who trust you enough to invite you into their home be naturally entitled to privacy or at the very least some measure of discretion? How can the biographer maintain a trusting relationship, yet be candid in a biography – which by definition is the writing of that person’s life? All of these concerns fed into the ultimate question that all biographers must ask: what kind of biography is being written? Is Stebbins all that interesting, for instance, as a person or a personality, apart from his contributions to the evolutionary synthesis? Although biographers of scientists have begun to sort through some of these issues, they have not yet properly addressed the special problems of *trust* that always enter into work with living biographical subjects.²¹

The presence of Barbara – and consideration of her needs for privacy and dignity were thus an added concern. 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, means living with many biographical subjects, all of whom may feel some special relationship with the primary biographical subject – in a sense, all want to claim some kind of “ownership” of the subject. Dealing with Stebbins also meant considering the needs and wishes of the Stebbins family, which at times contradicted each other.

The presence of rivals and enemies, or of passive-aggressive “friends,” all of whom might wish to be involved in the biography, is yet another added and frequently unpleasant complication (I call this the problem of the typewriter for reasons that will be become apparent). Some of the drearier aspects of working on living subjects includes the constant intervention – and meddling – of gossiping friends and acquaintances. In addition to being

²⁰ For a discussion of the separation of personal and scientific lives and the different modes of biography, see Hankins, 1979; Sheets-Pyenson, 1990.

²¹ Shortland and Yeo, eds., 1996. The problem of trust and how trust relationships operate between living biographical subjects and their historians would make a fine subject for future historiographical exploration.

subjected to the usual kind of “anecdotal history” commonly told and re-told by scientists,²² it is not uncommon for biographers of living subjects to receive e-mail messages, letters, phone-calls, or even business cards second hand from someone with a special “story” that they wish to relate; often, it is a variation of the same story. On at least twenty different occasions (when I last counted), I have encountered at cocktail parties, lectures, through correspondence and at interviews people who have a “Ledyard story” and then proceed to tell me about “the time that Ledyard threw a temper tantrum” and “threw his typewriter out the window.” The fact that there seems to have been only one eyewitness (the alleged typewriter-thrower) and the fact that the story is now at the *n*-th hand of retelling, in no way seems to diminish the story; in fact, it only seems to enhance the dramatic nature of the episode.

Then there are the unique problems that come with having a *too* cooperative biographical subject. Two instances of this come to mind in working with Ledyard Stebbins. The first is an experience familiar to some biographers of living subjects. In 1991 at a meeting of the west coast Biosystematists at Stanford University, I gave a paper assessing Ledyard Stebbins’s contributions to plant evolutionary biology. Where some biographers might find it unnerving to talk formally about their subject with them sitting visibly in the front row (what could be a more socially awkward experience), I was delighted to learn that Ledyard was driving some distance to be present at the meeting – he could after all answer questions any one in the audience might raise. It gave me comfort, and it was flattering to have no less than the subject of my talk present. But after only three minutes or so into the lecture, I found myself listening to Ledyard’s version of himself. From small points of clarification to outright disagreement, I was repeatedly interrupted by the living subject – this was Ledyard’s way of helping me with my work. The interruptions were so frequent that one of the audience members later told me: “Nice work; but you interrupted the speaker a bit too much!”

Earlier in 1987, I probably had what would be a nightmare experience for an archival historian. It might have come close to tragedy, if the outcome were different. I had asked Ledyard for his correspondence and his files, which he had placed in storage following his retirement. But like many scientists too busy with research or having more important things to care about than the minutiae of administrative work and record-keeping, Ledyard had sloppily bundled his old papers and placed them in the most readily available spot on the UC Davis campus – the potting shed of the greenhouse next to Briggs Hall (the site of the former Genetics department) after one of his many moves.

²² For a discussion of anecdotal histories in recent science, see Söderqvist, ed., 1997. Many of the papers in the volume directly address problems with anecdotal histories and how they function in scientists’s histories.

After days of searching feverishly for the materials (because he so wanted to be helpful), Ledyard happily appeared one afternoon in his large laboratory carting the soil-encrusted documents in one of the old, rusty potting-shed wheelbarrows. I was, of course, delighted and proceeded to sort through the precious – but grimy – historical treasure. Keen to please and to help the research, Ledyard sat next to me to help sort through relevant documents, and for a few days we sat side by side busily reading the papers. But I quickly became horrified when I stopped my work long enough to take note of his activity – his “sorting” meant throwing away everything that was potentially uninteresting to his biography. At the end of each day of sorting, the large industrial-strength trash can in the corner of the laboratory would be filled to the rim with discarded paper – all documents nearly lost because the subject did not think them important enough for his own biography! Included here, I need note were nearly all the documents from the 1970s on, and correspondence with figures like Peter Raven, Friederich Ehrendorfer, and Arthur Cronquist. The documents *were* nearly lost, but for the fact that each evening I returned to the laboratory and removed the discarded items from the trash, placed them in neat piles on our lab desks, and then replaced them with bunched-up paper toweling, lest Ledyard notice that the trash bin seemed to eat up his labor for the day. The documents are now safely deposited in the Department of Special Collections in the Shields Library of the University of California, Davis to be used by researchers interested in a number of projects, some of which bear little relation to the Stebbins biography.

But the documents are not yet organized or properly catalogued. This is an added problem that historians of living subjects may encounter: the lack of proper or conventional cataloguing of the documents. There are no detailed guides or “finding aids” or any such assistances usually available in major collections. Work is not only inevitably slowed, but record-keeping for citation purposes may be rendered chaotic, especially if collections are sorted in mid-stream. Locating documents previously examined, and noting accurate citations with respect to boxes, cartons, or file folders, can be an exercise in frustration, especially when new documents keep turning up.

Nor do the surprises abate with time; when one works with living subjects, there are entirely new challenges to face every day. Only one week after completing the first draft of this paper, for instance, I encountered yet another surprise that can potentially confront any biographer of a living subject – the discovery of a new Stebbins “archive”: over fifty boxes of personal effects deposited for storage in the Stebbins garage (where attics used to serve as repositories for family treasures, garages now occupy that spatial “niche”). Thus, just when I thought that my primary research had come to an end, I found myself armed with a high-powered flashlight (the kind seen in searches



Figure 1. The newly discovered "Stebbins archive" located in the garage of the Stebbins residence (north view). Photograph taken January 1999.

for missing persons or used by field biologists specializing in nocturnal creatures), running my fingers through spider nests (of the black widow kind) to sort through the latest "discovery." The photographs in Figures 1 and 2 graphically reveal the state of manuscripts and materials not uncommon in work with living subjects (and even though the documents in the Shields Library are located in a less hazardous physical environment, they are not yet much better organized).

A final problem that needs to be noted is that institutional documents may not be readily available for living biographical subjects. Where such documents as, for instance, academic transcripts, personnel files, and financial or medical records are located in the hands of formal institutions, it is generally impossible to secure them for historical use without the subject's written permission. In still other cases, documents may not be obtainable at all, unless the subject has been dead for a number of years: historians of biology need note that they may not thus have access to the superb record of documents in the Anne Roe (Simpson) Papers located at the Library of the American Philosophical Society. These documents comprise the full record of her psychologically-motivated interviews conducted in the early 1950s with leading biologists for her project published as *The Making of a Scientist*.²³ Roe's agreement with the interviewees was that her records not become avail-

²³ Roe, 1953.



Figure 2. The newly discovered “Stebbins archive” located in the garage of the Stebbins residence (south view). Photograph taken January 1999.

able until ten years after the subject’s death. Like her other notable subjects, Stebbins was closely interviewed by Roe and put to all manner of psychological tests, but this insightful material lies in forbidden historical territory for the time being. Knowing that this crucial documentation on Stebbins exists but being prevented from examining it has proven to be a major source of frustration.

Why Work on Living Subjects? Some Insights, Prescriptives and Conclusions

These then are just some of the problems that biographers of living subjects can expect to encounter. Although I suspect that the type and range of problems will prove idiosyncratic, i.e., will be unique to each interpersonal dynamic, there may be some general issues that can be addressed. How can historians work more comfortably with living biographical subjects, and what means can we use to get the most out of our interactions? The following insights can serve as prescriptives for further research.

All interviews, performances, tattle-tale remarks and even gossip may be *potential* sources of useful information, but such means of data-collection requires hyper-vigilance on the part of the biographer. Special techniques can be employed in the case of interviews whereby repeated rounds of

questions are asked at different times of the day and in different interview contexts. William B. Provine, in preparing his biography of Sewall Wright developed just such critical interview skills to get more precise and accurate information.²⁴ Common sense “detective-work” or “triangulation” involving multiple checking of statements of fact with other sources is also a requirement. Biographers of living subjects would do well to explore some of the growing body of literature from criminology, social psychology, and the health sciences that deals with “eyewitness testimonies” or “selective memories.” Even though it may not help directly with their project, this literature may sensitize interviewers to potential ways that humans distort – deliberately or unconsciously – recollections of the past.²⁵ Historians might also benefit from the recent historical and sociological literature emerging on the role of gossip, rumors, and hearsay and their operation in different cultural contexts;²⁶ so too, they may also wish to explore some of the vast related literature on celebrityhood in not only the entertainment and sportsworld, but also the political world.²⁷ The story of “Ledyard and the typewriter,” for example, bears a remarkable similarity to the notorious “Hillary and the lamp” story popular in Washington political circles.²⁸

Given that there is always an interpersonal dynamic involved in work with living subjects, attachment or subjective attitudes towards the biographical subject are perfectly appropriate. Conflicting feelings like those described by Stump, if explored and integrated into the writing of the biography, may, furthermore, 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, Thomas Söderqvist has, for instance, used his biographical subject as a way of extending his own life-experiences. According to Söderqvist, such identification may prove to be “edifying” and “may provide us with opportunities for reorienting our

²⁴ Provine, 1986.

²⁵ See the excellent resources outlined in Ross, Read, and Toglia, eds., 1994; see Haught and Webster, eds., 1995.

²⁶ For the best survey of the “rumor” literature see Kapferer, 1990. This includes a good bibliography. For the “gossip” literature see Bergmann, 1993; Levin and Aluke, 1987. See also Rusnow and Fine, 1976.

²⁷ See Collins, 1998.

²⁸ The “Hillary and the lamp” story refers to an alleged incident where Hillary Clinton “threw a lamp” at her husband in the White House. The set of circumstances triggering the incident change with each retelling of the story. See the note above for the full significance of this incident, why such stories are told and how such stories function in maintaining cultural norms.



Figure 3. The author (left) with the biographical subject (right). Photograph taken June 1998.



Figure 4. The author (left) with the biographical subject (right). Photograph taken June 1998.

familiar ways of thinking about our lives in unfamiliar terms.”²⁹ Although identification with Ledyard Stebbins, the much-indulged child of the New England landed gentry, was not altogether easy, I did in fact have the rare opportunity to experience vicariously a social world vastly different from mine. The punch line here is that there is little point fighting attachment or even identification with the biographical subject because detachment and indifference is well-nigh an impossibility.³⁰

After considering the range of problems, one may ask the obvious question: If work with a living biographical subject poses as many problems and is the source of the constant discomfort that I have described, then why choose a living biographical subject at all? I have two responses to this question: 1) though it takes extra effort to develop a critical perspective, the scholarly community gets access to sources that would otherwise be lost; 2) though it tests 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 to the project as the biographer. Who else is likely to care more for the history of plant evolutionary biology, or for the contributions of G. Ledyard Stebbins, Jr. than Stebbins himself? Talking – and interacting – with the biographical subject also permits the historical biographer to explore the possibility of living history (Figures 3 and 4). Though it is clearly fraught with difficulties, working with a living biographical subject, in fact, provides greater rewards for *both* the biographer and the scholarly community than work with dead biographical subjects does. In my view there *are* no subjects who are “nice and dead,” only vital or living documents lost.

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²⁹ Söderqvist, 1996.

³⁰ Biographers have suffered much anguish over the issue of subjectivity and their feelings towards even their long-dead biographical subjects. See for instance Baron and Pletsch, eds., 1985; Edel, 1984; 1st edn., 1959; for one example from the history of science see: Westfall, 1985; 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.

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