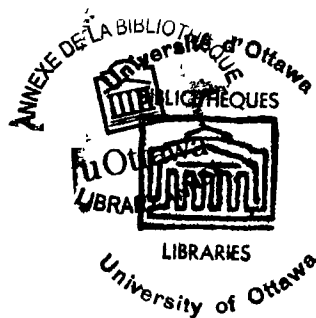


BIOGRAPHY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE AS
SEEN IN THE WORKS OF MARCHETTE CHUTE

by Patrick Joseph Griffin

Thesis submitted to the Faculty
of Arts of the University of
Ottawa in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts.



Ottawa, Canada, 1962.

UMI Number: EC55753

INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI[®]

UMI Microform EC55753
Copyright 2011 by ProQuest LLC
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest LLC
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis was prepared under the guidance of
Dr. Emmett O'Grady, Chairman of the Department of English.
Gratitude is here expressed for his interest and help.

CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

NAME: Patrick Joseph Griffin
BORN: June 24, 1931, Alma, Quebec, Canada.
B.A. University of Ottawa, October, 1959.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
	INTRODUCTION	v
1.	THE THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY	1
2.	MARQUETTE CHUTE'S THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY	13
3.	THE PRACTICE OF BIOGRAPHY	35
4.	MARQUETTE CHUTE'S PRACTICE OF BIOGRAPHY	48
5.	EVALUATION	69
	CONCLUSION	83
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	86
	ABSTRACT	

INTRODUCTION

Marchette Chute is a contemporary American writer of biography, as well as of stories for young people and small children. This study is concerned only with those biographies of Miss Chute that portray the lives of English writers: Geoffrey Chaucer of England, Shakespeare of London, Ben Jonson of Westminster, and Two Gentle Men. Marchette Chute has written a biography of Christ, entitled Jesus of Israel, but this work has not been included in the present study.

Marchette Chute's biographies are best described as popular biographies. They are not primarily intended for scholars but for the ordinary reader who is interested in things literary. Nevertheless, they are authoritative documents of no small literary merit and they have attracted the attention and won the approval of such competent critics as G.B. Harrison, J.B. Priestley and Mark Van Doren.

Work of such reputation is worthy of close examination. The purpose of this study is to examine the biographies of Marchette Chute with a view towards ascertaining their scholarly and artistic value. There is available a number of articles in which Miss Chute has exposed her views about biography. These articles amount to a theory of biography and are of significant use in reaching a conclusion about her biographies.

One cannot evaluate without a standard. The theory of biography that was found most plausible is that one developed by Harold Nicolson in his book The Development of English Biography.¹ It is this theory of

¹ Harold Nicolson, The Development of English Biography, London, Hogarth, 1927, 158 p.

INTRODUCTION

vi

biography, then, that is the standard upon which an evaluation of the theory and practice of Marchette Chute's biography is based. Similarly, one should have an overall picture of activity in the genre of his interest if he is to see properly the work of one of its practitioners. Things emerge more clearly by contrast. It is with this in mind that a chapter of this work is devoted to the practice of biography, to the various forms that biography has taken in the history of its development.

CHAPTER ONE

THE THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

On the front cover of the June, 1787, issue of the Gentleman's Magazine there appeared the following advertisement:

The Publick is respectfully informed, that Mr. Boswell's Life of Dr. Johnson is in great Forwardness. The reason of it having been delayed is, that some other Publications on that Subject were promised, from which he expected to obtain much Information, in Addition to the large Store of Materials which he had already accumulated. These Works have now made their Appearance; and, though disappointed in that Expectation, he does not regret the Deliberation with which he has proceeded, as very few Circumstances relative to the History of Dr. Johnson's private Life, Writings, or Conversation have been told with that authentic Precision which alone can render Biography valuable. To correct these erroneous Accounts will be one of his principal Objects; and on reviewing his Materials, he is happy to find that he has Documents in his Possession which will enable him to do Justice to the Character of his Illustrious Friend. He trusts that, in the mean Time, the Publick will not permit unfavourable Impressions to be made in their Minds, whether by the Light Effusions of Carelessness and Pique, or the ponderous Labours of solemn Inaccuracy and dark uncharitable Conjecture.¹

Boswell's Life of Johnson is generally regarded as the greatest biography in the English language. There are many ways in which biography may be written. Nevertheless, a biography is essentially a written record of a man's life. The advertisement is valuable because it is the expression of Boswell's ideals as a biographer. For Boswell, the keynote of biographical writing should be faithfulness to the truth. The advertisement speaks of "that authentic Precision which alone can render Biography valuable" and "the ponderous Labours of solemn Inaccuracy and dark uncharitable Conjecture" and states that "to correct these

¹ Advertisement, in Gentleman's Magazine, issue of June, 1787, quoted by Chauncey B. Tinker in Introduction, in Life of Johnson, by James Boswell, London, Oxford, 1933, p. ix.

THE THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

2

erroneous Accounts (i.e. of other biographers of Johnson) will be one of his principal objects." In such statements as these, Boswell is at the core of what biography really is, and much of the so-called biography that was written before and after his time failed simply because it lost sight of this fact. This is not to say that accuracy is the only standard by which biography is to be judged. Obviously, good biography must be more than a listing of facts about a man's life. But of all the qualities that make for good biography, accuracy is the basic one.

Harold Nicolson puts it this way:

The primary essential is that of historical truth, by which is meant not the avoidance of misstatements, but the wider veracity of complete and accurate portraiture.²

Nicolson also underscores the chief defect of biographers.

The suppression or evasion of the absolute truth is in fact the common error of biographers, who seek to palliate their deficiency by an appeal to irrelevant considerations such as "loyalty", "reverence", and "discretion".³

The Oxford Dictionary defines biography: "The history of the lives of individual men, as a branch of literature." As Harold Nicolson⁴ points out, there are three essential elements in this definition: "history", "individual", and "literature". The 'history' element indicates that a biography must be accurate and also that it

2 Harold Nicolson, The Development of English Biography, London, Hogarth, 1927, pp. 10-11.

3 Ibid., p. 11.

4 Ibid., pp. 7-8.

THE THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

3

must deal with its subject in relation to his time. The 'individual' element suggests that the biographer must capture the humanity and distinctiveness of his subject. The biographer is not writing about a type or a figure; he is not attempting to describe a paragon of either virtue or vice. Rather, he is concerned with the individual as such. The 'literature' element refers to the style of the biography. This is what differentiates biography from such 'curiosity' pieces as diaries, journals and confessions. Nicolson outlines the difference between "real" biography and biographical material which appeals only to the reader's curiosity:

The "pure" biography should stimulate a far deeper response. Curiosity will, of course, be both awakened and allayed; but this is incidental; the essential response will be something more complex even than acute psychological interest: sympathy and pity will be stimulated, intricate associations will be evoked - those "parallel circumstances and kindred images" to which, as Dr. Johnson saw, "we readily conform our minds."⁵

The "pure" biography has this impact on the reader:

There must be a consciousness of creation, a conviction that some creative mind has selected and composed these facts in such a manner as to give them a convincing interpretation; that in a word, the given biography is a work of intelligence.⁶

A biography, therefore, tells the story of a man's life accurately, with a feeling for him as an individual, and in a style that conveys this feeling to the reader. What, then, are the resources a biographer must have on hand if he is to produce a good biography? First, what does the biographer need in order to give an accurate

⁵ Ibid., p. 13

⁶ Idem.

THE THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

4

account of a man's life? Obviously, he must know his man and it is here that the contemporary biographer has the distinct advantage. Whereas the non-contemporary biographer can know his subject only with the aid of documents, the contemporary biographer, along with the aid of documents, has the advantage of knowing his subject by actual physical contact. Personal acquaintance with his subject will substitute for a great deal of digging into records, but not for all of it. Written material about the subject is still a major tool in the biographer's hands. The biographer must have at his disposal a large store of materials if he hopes to give a detailed and true account of his subject. Great pains must be taken to sift out the false and irrelevant, to weigh one bit of evidence against another so that the truth of the biographer's statements is assured.

Not only is it necessary that the biographer picture his man. He must place him against the background in which he actually moved. No man moves in a vacuum. John A. Garraty is concerned about this aspect of the biographer's task:

One cannot segregate an individual from his surroundings and study him, as one can analyse an unknown chemical in a test tube. Men interact with other men, and they are influenced by vague but vital social, cultural and economic forces in their environment. To tell the story of any man one must say something about the stage on which he acts out the drama of his life. Biographers call this kind of material "background" and there have been great variations in the amounts of it which they have employed.⁷

⁷ John A. Garraty, The Nature of Biography, New York, Knopf, 1957, pp. 3-4.

And this background must be pictured accurately, for inaccuracy here will reflect unfavourably upon the man. This cannot be avoided for there is at all times an "age-person" relationship and interdependence, and a mis-focusing on one brings about the same effect on the other. The biographer is primarily a historian and he must bring to his work the basic quality of that science - accuracy.

But although biography has its similarities to history it is more than history. The second quality the writer of biography must aim at is the representation of the subject's individuality. Garraty alludes to this part of the biographer's job:

The biographer must not deal only with the facts of his subject's career, with what he did, why he did it, and how he influenced his times and was in turn influenced by them. He must also describe the man himself, his personality and character, his individuality. This aspect of biography is of fundamental importance; indeed it explains the enduring popularity of the biographical form. For people are interested primarily in people. They have never had to be persuaded that "the proper study of mankind is man." And the convincing description of personality involves problems distinct from the accurate description of facts. It is this which makes the writing of biography a technique apart from that of history.

How is the biographer to get at this personality? It is a problem, and an acute one. Garraty states it thus:

At the heart of the matter is the fact that in describing personality, the biographer is dealing with qualities that defy absolute analysis (...). Absolute certainty in interpreting character is something that even the psychologist does not claim to achieve.

8 Ibid., pp. 8-9.

9 Ibid., p. 11.

THE THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

6

Of particular difficulty in attempting to get at a subject's individuality is the description of such aspects of personality as motives and feelings, for in doing this the biographer is dealing with matters of opinion. Garraty illustrates.

The records (...) may indicate over and over again that Mr. A. was egotistical, competitive and aggressive. Yet some will read from them that he was a self-confident extrovert and others that he was a timid soul "compensating" for some feeling of inferiority. None can say with complete assurance that his view of Mr. A. is correct.¹⁰

And there is great danger that the particular interpretation placed on the facts will be coloured by the biographer's bias, - if he likes his subject he will interpret facts in favour of him; if he dislikes him he will tend to make unfavourable conclusions.

There is another way, also, in which the biographer may satisfy his biases: by selecting from the welter of information available only those facts and incidents which are in keeping with his purpose. When applied to the description of personality this unscrupulous selection of evidence can be very effective. Garraty points out the case of Andrew Carnegie.

Little is known about the great steel baron's early career aside from what he himself wrote of it in his Autobiography. But his biographers, by selecting only part of what he said about himself and modifying the facts they pick out, have produced radically different images of the man.¹¹

10 Ibid., p. 12.

11 Ibid., p. 14.

Cases of this type can be multiplied. They all prove the need for a sincere approach to information about the subject's life on the part of the biographer. They also point to the necessity of the biographer of having a more than superficial knowledge of empirical psychology. With these two qualities: a wish and attempt to see the man as he really was; a deep knowledge of human psychology, the biographer will be able, for the most part, to give us some idea at least of his subject's personality.

John A. Garraty in a chapter entitled "The Problem of Personality" indicates some of the means the biographer has at his disposal for capturing the personality of his subject. "First, there are the subject's own introspective observations."¹² "A second source of information of this type consists of the comments of contemporaries."¹³ "Another, equally direct, approach is by way of the subject's specific actions."¹⁴ These are the traditional means; they are useful to a point. Garraty puts it this way:

Traditional methods of studying historical personalities are wholly satisfactory only in so far as they relate to facts and specific actions. Where motives and the internal dynamics of personality are concerned, they can provide only impressionistic answers to the students' questions. Other techniques are urgently needed.¹⁵

12 Ibid., p. 216.

13 Idem.

14 Idem.

15 Ibid., p. 218.

These other techniques that Garraty goes on to suggest as useful can be braced within the term "psychological means".

Many techniques being used by psychologists in their studies of living persons could be borrowed by biographers for a more revealing dissection of personal documents.¹⁶

Examples of such techniques are: handwriting study and analysis, the mechanical analysis of elements and ideas used in a person's writing, the measuring of tension as expressed in personal documents.¹⁷

Psychologists have come a long way in fields such as these and the biographer does well to examine the possibilities of such methods towards enabling him to make valid conclusions about his subject's personality.

Now what of the question of style in biography? By definition, biography is a branch of literature. To what extent is biography literature? The answer to these questions, indeed, the whole problem of the extent to which biography is literature, can only be determined if one has a definite concept of what literature is.

We may speak of literature in two senses. There is, first of all, a wide sense in which literature may be defined: "the written or printed productions of the human mind collectively; especially such productions as are marked by elevation, vigor, and catholicity of thought, by fitness, purity, and grace of style, and by artistic constructions."¹⁸ It is in this sense that a biographical work may be literature. In other words, if a biography measures up to this

16 Ibid., p. 219.

17 Ibid., p. 219-238.

18 New Standard Dictionary of the English Language, Funk and Wagnalls, 1960, p. 1446.

definition or similar definitions, it is said to belong to the body of literature. Garraty emphasizes the importance of this artistic element of biography:

All biographies must be historical and scientific in that they aim at truth and depend upon verifiable evidence. At the same time they must be imaginative and artistic because insight and felicity of expression are essential if the full three-dimensioned truth is to be transferred to the flat surface of a printed page.¹⁹

The second sense in which the word literature may be taken is as a fine art. Obviously, this is a more restricted meaning of the word. A piece of literature in this sense may be defined as the expression in words of a man's significant reaction to reality. Literature, here, is not the communication or expression of reality and therefore biography is foreign to it by the very fact that it is concerned with the representation of the actual. Virginia Woolf offers some valuable insight into this fact when she writes of the difference between biography and fiction:

(...) The art of biography is the most restricted of all the arts. He (i.e. the biographer) has his proof ready at hand. Here it is in the preface in which Smith, who has written the life of Jones, takes the opportunity of thanking old friends who have lent letters, and "last but not least" Mrs Jones, the widow, for that help "without which", as he puts it, "this biography could not have been written." Now the novelist, he points out, simply says in his forward, "Every character in this book is fictitious." The novelist is free; the biographer is tied.²⁰

Therefore, when we speak of biography as literature we have in mind the more extended sense of the word literature. We are speaking

19 John A. Garraty, Op. cit., p. 28.

20 Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography", in The Death of the Moth and Other Essays, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1942, p. 120.

of craft rather than of creative art. The good biography will be characterized by a certain elevation and grace of style, a certain excellence and felicity of expression, and above all, an appropriateness of manner to matter. Harold Nicolson has this to say about this aspect of biography:

(...) The intelligent reader also demands literary form. He asks that the details which are given him should be based on that "certainty of knowledge which not only excludes mistakes but fortifies veracity"; he asks for more and more of these details; and yet he insists that the mass of material be presented in a readable form.²¹

The ability to write in a good style, of course, is a basic necessity for any professional writer and it might seem that the stress that is being placed here on the necessity for good style in biography is unnecessary. But sometimes the obvious must be explained and in this case it seems necessary to say that this good style will spring from an enthusiasm and even an affection on the part of the biographer for his subject. Chauncey B. Tinker says: "The biographer must have a certain affection for the character who is the subject of his pages."²² If this affection is there and the biographer has mastered the techniques that first make him a good writer, there is every chance that the biography will be a successful one at least from the literary standpoint.

What has been said about the reason for the attraction biography has for people, is useful in analysing the biographer's need to love

21 Harold Nicolson, Op. cit., p. 142.

22 Chauncey B. Tinker, Introduction, in Life of Johnson, by James Boswell, p. xii.

his subject. About the reasons for the popularity of biography, Nicolson says this:

The very real pleasure which the intelligent reader to-day derives from biography, proceeds in general from no very active energy of thought; the responses are stirred by languid processes of identification and comparison. He identifies himself with certain characters in a biography, and he compares his own feelings and experiences with theirs. This process, as Lord Oxford has remarked, is very pleasurable. "It brings comfort, it enlarges sympathy, it expells selfishness, it quickens aspiration."²³

And just as the reader's pleasure is heightened by this identification with the hero, so the effectiveness of the biographer is increased by this same kind of fellow-feeling.

Having attempted to get at the nature of biography it may be now à propos to devote a few paragraphs to the importance of biography and to the contribution it has to make. Virginia Woolf mentions two large contributions of good biography. One is therapeutic:

(...) We are incapable of living wholly in the intense world of the imagination. The imagination is a faculty that soon tires and needs rest and refreshment. But for a tired imagination the proper food is not inferior poetry or minor fiction, - indeed they blunt and debauch it, - but sober fact, that "authentic information" from which, as Lytton Strachey has shown us, good biography is made.²⁴

Biography's second contribution is more significant:

By telling us the true facts, by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very greatest. For few poets and novelists are capable of that degree of tension which gives us reality. But almost any biographer, if he respects facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our

23 Harold Nicolson, Op. cit., p. 141.

24 Virginia Woolf, Op. cit., p. 125.

collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders. Of this, too, there is certain proof. For how often, when a biography is read and tossed aside, some scene remains bright, some figure lives on in the depths of the mind, and causes us, when we read a poem or a novel, to feel a start of recognition, as if we remembered something that we had known before.²⁵

Biography, therefore, is valuable not only because it is interesting. It is that. But it is more. It has a function beyond merely recording interesting information about important people in order to entertain us. Nor is it creative art. Its place is somewhere between the purely ephemeral and the purely artistic and tending in the direction of the latter.

25 Ibid., p. 126.

CHAPTER TWO

MARCHETTE CHUTE'S THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

Marchette Chute has made the statement: "I was apparently intended by nature to be a biographer."¹ That she has fulfilled nature's design for herself is amply shown by an examination of the biographies she has written, and this shall be the work of a succeeding chapter. The purpose in the present chapter is to attempt to ascertain Miss Chute's theories regarding her own profession, the writing of biography.

Marchette Chute has not formally set down a theory of biography: there is no one work in which one can find, neatly packaged, her concept of what biography ought to be. But she has written numerous articles in journals and magazines in which it can be seen that she has certain definite ideas about her art. Most helpful also towards a realization and understanding of Miss Chute's theories about biography are: the Forward of Shakespeare of London, and an appendix entitled "Walton's Biography of Herbert" in Two Gentle Men.

Miss Chute defines a biography: "the life story of a real person."² The definition appears so simple as to require no explanation. It is plain and seems very obvious. But it states some cardinal elements in its author's concept of the nature of biography. In calling biography a life story, Miss Chute points to the element of the historical that has previously been noted in this work as being essential to the

1 Marchette Chute, "America's Finest Library" in Holiday, Vol.23, issue of March, 1958, p. 49.

2 Marchette Chute, "Biographies Bring New Companions" in The Wonderful World of Books, ed. by Alfred Stefferud, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1953, p. 50.

form. The phrase "of a real person", seen in the light of other of Miss Chute's statements, is a pregnant one indeed, for it includes quite handily two basic notes of good biography: faithfulness to the facts, and the picturing of the personality of the subject. As such, therefore, the definition is consonant with Harold Nicolson's theory of biography. The third element that Nicolson believes necessary for pure biography is that it be artistic. And elsewhere in her theorizing about her life work, Marchette Chute leaves no doubt that she acknowledges the necessity that biography be artistic.

Before attempting to develop Marchette Chute's theories about biography it would be helpful to examine some of the ideas and facts she has stated about writing and books in general. It is amazing (and there is no better word to describe it) to note the time and effort that have gone into the writing of the Chute biographies. A few statistics can be mentioned in passing that establish this fact more effectively than any adjective. For Shakespeare of London she "handled, perhaps, ten thousand books and articles."³ Two Gentle Men took fifty months to write, and three months were spent in compiling the index.⁴ Such efforts demand an extraordinary sense of dedication to the job, and one might wonder how such rare qualities are developed in an individual.

In Marchette Chute's case, there seem to be two factors that have gone into making her the tireless and meticulous craftsman she is.

³ Marchette Chute, "From 'Bad Risk' to Best Seller" in Library Journal, Vol. 76, issue of Oct. 1, 1951, p. 1487.

⁴ Marchette Chute, "How a Book Grows" in Library Journal, Vol. 84, issue of Sept. 1, 1959, p. 2432.

One is environmental.

My sisters and I were always made to feel that the job was worth doing for its own sake, and that the amount of time and labor that had to be expended on it was irrelevant; and I think that is one reason why all three of us turned out to be professional writers.⁵

The other and more immediate factor is her great love of books, and reading, and libraries. In addresses to teachers and in articles in library magazines Miss Chute has emphasized the importance of these institutions and the tone of her messages leaves no doubt about her own attitude towards them. She has said, for example:

The child who has acquired this habit of omnivorous, delighted reading is no problem to his English teacher. If he enters high school, looking on books with a greedy, hopeful eye, the teacher can settle back and enjoy himself. Somehow the child has acquired the one great friendship for which nothing else can quite substitute.⁶

About libraries, Miss Chute has made some significant statements too.

Chaucer and Johnson would have gone wild with excitement in one of our modern libraries. The books are spread out - multitudes of them - and all of them are free.⁷

But probably the most significant is this one:

(...) The chief reason I became a biographer was that it was such fun to roam through the Library's vast collections, and then, little by little, turn all the accumulated facts into the shape of a man.⁸

5 Marchette Chute, "From 'Bad Risk' to Best Seller", in Library Journal, p. 1488.

6 Marchette Chute, "Lifetime Reading Habits", in Wilson Library Bulletin, Vol. 30, issue of April, 1956, p. 619.

7 Marchette Chute, "Books Are the Opening of Windows", in Wilson Library Bulletin, Vol. 31, issue of Feb., 1957, p. 446.

8 Marchette Chute, "America's Finest Library", in Holiday, p. 49.

This last statement does not only indicate the importance of the library to Marchette Chute. What is more important, it points to the reason why her bent for learning took the direction it did. For she might have chosen other fields in which her particular talents would have been put to satisfying and productive use. But she chose biography because she saw the challenge of shaping real people out of a mass of facts. The challenge is a real one, and a successful outcome after meeting it is gratifying for writer and reader alike.

If it is good biography it brings its hero as vividly to life as if he were standing in the same room. If you met him in person you would probably not get more than a polite handshake, and a "How do you do?"; but in a biography you can find out all about him - what he did when he was a small boy, the way he went about his work, the friends he made, even his taste in neckties. It is not so surprising that so many people like to read biographies, for they are a kind of window into a man's life; the better the biographer the larger and clearer the window.⁹

But what qualities must the prospective biographer bring to his work if he is to make a large and clear window? This is no easy task. In an address to the American Library Association Book Workshop in Chicago, Miss Chute mentions the three qualities most necessary for the successful writer. They are love, patience, and faith.¹⁰

There must, first of all, be love of the work: a genuine interest, on the part of the writer, in writing for its own sake.

If he is not in love with his job there is no reason whatever why he should have taken it up in the first place.¹¹

⁹ Marchette Chute, "Biographies Bring New Companions", in The Wonderful World of Books, p. 50.

¹⁰ Marchette Chute, "From 'Bad Risk' to Best Seller", in Library Journal, p. 1485.

¹¹ Idem.

Then there must be patience, the natural outcome of the love. The drudgery of research demands it.

A man who is digging for buried treasure will not complain about the amount of spade work he has to do, and neither will a writer who is trying to get something transferred out of his head and on to paper.¹²

But the most important quality is faith.

It takes a long time to write a book. There is a wide gap, sometimes of years, between the day when the book is first conceived and the day when it is finally finished, and the writer is going to be tempted over and over again, to think he made a mistake in starting the thing at all. The conviction that it will turn out all right in the end is essential equipment for a writer - as essential as for a mother who is bringing up a child. A writer, like a mother, has no guarantees, and since he cannot operate on guarantees he must operate on faith.¹³

Miss Chute illustrates from her own experience the need of the writer to have this quality of faith. She had estimated it would take her two years, working six days a week, to complete Shakespeare of London.

At the end of the second year I had collected a large pile of notes about Shakespeare and his times but I had nothing that could be turned into a book. I didn't want to write a biography that would be merely a collection of fragments arranged in correct chronological order with a little local color thrown in here and there to make things interesting.¹⁴

She therefore began a third year of research in the hope that she would find some clue that would bring order to the mass of facts she had accumulated. Finally she saw where the trouble lay: Shakespeare's contemporaries had written hardly anything about him; most of what

12 Ibid., pp. 1485-1486.

13 Ibid., p. 1486

14 Idem.

had been written about Shakespeare had been written after the Restoration and was unreliable.

They (i.e. the Restoration writers) had superimposed their own misconceptions on to the Elizabethan theatre and all subsequent biographies had echoed them.

The only thing to do was to disentangle this alien growth and throw it away. It was a mass of confusion - of legend and conjecture rather than of fact - and none of it was worth keeping because none of it could be trusted.¹⁵

The outcome was that she used only contemporary documents, which assured a more accurate, if less complete picture, of Shakespeare.¹⁶

And so, in the case of Shakespeare of London, Miss Chute saw fit to sacrifice perhaps interesting stories and theories in favor of accuracy. In this, of course, she is at the core of pure biography. A biography must present only those facts whose authenticity has been established. Marchette Chute has taken this as a fundamental dictum. She remarks:

It may seem like a good deal of extra work to read forty books in order to be able to write one sentence; but when you are finished with that one sentence you can be reasonably sure that it is reliable.¹⁷

There are certain dangers inherent in working with facts that Miss Chute realizes must be avoided. One of these dangers is brought on by a shallow interpretation of facts. What Miss Chute has said about this fault among readers certainly can be considered part of her biographical theory since so much of her work involves reading.

15 Idem.

16 Ibid., p. 1487.

17 Idem.

MARCHETTE CHUTE'S THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

19

We tend to run after facts the way chickens run after corn, but with less idea of what to do with them after we have them. It is a gossipy kind of curiosity about the top layer of the world. We are less anxious to look under the top layer and to take advantage of the kind of penetration that good books offer.¹⁸

The correct interpretation of the facts does not come from such shallow reading.

The reader must bring to it alert, vigorous attention and the willingness to follow a train of thought that is probably new and may even be upsetting.¹⁹

Another possible pit-fall for the biographer is that which springs from attempting to handle an over-abundance of facts. Miss Chute has met this problem.

Too much detail will overload a book and make it difficult to read and one of the problems in this kind of writing, where there is a large amount of material, is to keep the movement of the book under control. One way to do this is to focus an image from one special angle. For instance, the general theatre material in Shakespeare of London is divided into three points of view. The first presents it from the point of view of the man who built the first theatre... Then I described the problems of a young actor entering the theatre... Then later on I described the theatre from the production end (...).²⁰

How must the facts be used, therefore? Miss Chute offers this solution:

A book of this kind (i.e. a biography of a non-contemporary figure) is a mosaic, built up of a number of small facts that have meaning only when they are placed in juxtaposition to each other.²¹

18 Marchette Chute, "Books are the Opening of Windows", in Wilson Library Bulletin, p. 447.

19 Idem.

20 Marchette Chute, "Shakespeare of London" in Hornbook Magazine, Vol. 31, issue of February, 1955, p. 34.

21 Marchette Chute, Forward, in Shakespeare of London, New York, Dutton, 1949, pp. xi-xii.

MARCHETTE CHUTE'S THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

20

The greatest difficulties encountered by Marchette Chute in her work are those that arise because she is writing about non-contemporary figures, and in fact, about people who lived in far distant times. She realizes the restriction under which this puts her.

It is true that a biographer has an easier time of it if the man he is writing about is still alive. If the hero is no longer living and his life has to be reconstructed from documents, the biographer has a more difficult time of it.²²

The most obvious difficulty in writing non-contemporary biography is that of picturing a far away person and period, and care and time are needed to obviate this difficulty.

A writer should not attempt to reproduce a past age for a reader until he feels at home in it himself, and to be at home in a period means reading nearly everything you can get your hands on.²³

Another difficulty is the more complex one the biographer has of transporting himself into the period about which he is writing. Marchette Chute mentions this problem in describing her experience with the writing of Two Gentle Men, the lives of Herbert and Herrick, who lived in the seventeenth century.

The problem was to feel at home in the period, not to transplant my twentieth century ways of thinking into seventeenth century England, but to move into the period itself. This was obviously going to require a long stretch of close reading - letters, diaries, sermons, account books, parish records, memoirs, government reports and so on - since work of this kind cannot be approached at second-hand through the minds of later historians.²⁴

22 Marchette Chute, "Biographics Bring New Companions", in The Wonderful World of Books, pp. 50-51.

23 Marchette Chute, "From 'Bad Risk' to Best Seller", in Library Journal, p. 1487.

24 Marchette Chute, "How a Book Grows", in Library Journal, p. 2431.

The quotation above throws light on another aspect of the authenticity of biography, for the authenticity of biography involves more than the mere use of facts that have been proven correct. It is possible, for example, that "correct" facts be presented and yet the whole truth suffer. The search for truth involves the attempt to interpret facts objectively in the light of the facts themselves, free from any subjective colouring, whether conscious or not.

Marchette Chute, relating her experience in writing Ben Jonson of Westminster, illustrates just how elusive the truth can be. She wished to include in this biography a few paragraphs on Sir Philip Sidney and chose to tell the story of Sidney's death as an example of his chivalrous nature. Sidney had died of gangrene poisoning after a musket shot had shattered his thigh. He was not wearing leg armour when he was wounded and Sir Fulke Greville claimed that the reason was that the marshall of the camp was not wearing armour, and Sidney was unwilling to do anything that would give him special advantage. This would have suited Miss Chute's purpose ideally for it furnished example of chivalrous conduct by a man who was supposed to be the epitome of chivalry. But before using it she felt it would be better to check its authenticity. Another source, Thomas Moffet, claimed that Sidney had neglected to put on the leg armour because he was in a hurry. A third author, Sir John Smythe, a military expert who brought out his book a few years after Sidney's death blamed Sidney's neglect on the current craze among soldiers for going without leg protection. Miss Chute was faced now with three possibilities, and had to decide which was the

truth. She found that two of the authors had a thesis: Greville, that his friend had a very chivalric nature; Smythe, that soldiers should wear leg armour. Only Moffet had no thesis; he wasn't trying to prove anything. And Miss Chute concludes that his was the most trustworthy explanation.

For Moffet was without desire. Nothing can so quickly blur and distort the facts as desire - the wish to use the facts for some purpose of your own - and nothing can so surely destroy the truth. As soon as the writer wants to prove something he is no longer impartial and his evidence is no longer to be trusted.²⁵

There is another desire that threatens the truth of a biography even when individual facts have been authenticated, and that is the desire of the biographer himself.

A biographer is not a court record or a legal document. He is a human being writing about another human being, and his own temperament, his own viewpoint, and his own frames of reference are unconsciously imposed upon the man he is writing about. Even if the biographer (...) wants to write nothing but the literal truth, he is still handicapped by the fact that there is no such thing as a completely objective human being.²⁶

Miss Chute gives the example of how the nineteenth century biographers were moved by their point of view to misrepresent Shakespeare:

They had been reared in the strict code of nineteenth century gentility and they accepted two ideas without question. One was that there were few things more important than an English lord; the other thing is that there are few things less important than a mere actor. ... The notion that Shakespeare had spent all these years as a working member of a company of London actors was so abhorrent that it was never seriously considered. It could not be so; therefore it was not.²⁷

²⁵ Marchette Chute, "Getting at the Truth", in The Saturday Review, Vol. 36, issue of September 13, 1953, pp. 11-12.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

MARCHETTE CHUTE'S THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

24

Let it not be concluded, though, that Marchette Chute is against a point of view. She states, for example:

A biography must have a point of view and it must have a frame of reference. But it should be a point of view and a frame of reference implicit in the material itself and not imposed upon it.²⁸

How this imposed point of view and frame of reference might show itself

Miss Chute illustrates:

It is easy enough to make good resolutions in advance, but a biographer cannot altogether control his sense of excitement when the climax of his years of research draws near and he begins to see the pieces fall into place. Almost without his volition A, B, and D fall together and start to form a pattern, and it is almost impossible for the biographer not to start searching for C. Something turns up that looks remarkably like C, and with a little trimming of the edges and the ignoring of one very slight discrepancy it will fill the place allotted for C magnificently.²⁹

The most difficult aspect of this problem is the fact that this "slanting" goes on, most of the time, unknown to the biographer.

(...) A subconscious desire to push the facts around is one of the most dangerous things a biographer can encounter and all the more dangerous because it is so difficult to know when he is encountering it.³⁰

André Maurois has outlined the attitude the biographer must have towards his subject.

28 Ibid., p. 44.

29 Idem.

30 Idem.

The modern biographer, if he is honest, will not allow himself to think: "Here is a great king, a great statesman, a great writer; around his name a legend had been built; it is on the legend, and on the legend alone, that I wish to dwell." He thinks rather: "Here is a man. I possess a certain number of documents, a certain amount of evidence about him. I am going to attempt to draw a true portrait. What will this portrait be? I have no idea. I don't want to know before I have actually drawn it. I am prepared to accept whatever a prolonged contemplation of my subject may reveal to me, and to correct it in proportion to such new facts as I discover."³¹

Miss Chute echoes this attitude when she says that a book must be allowed to take its own course.

The book has its own idea of where it wishes to go, and sometimes no one is so surprised as the author at the way things turn out.³²

In an appendix to Two Gentle Men entitled "Walton's Biography of Herbert", Miss Chute shows how, in practice, Isaac Walton's didactic intention produced an image of the subject that was inaccurate.

His other motive (i.e. Walton's motive other than to please himself) in writing the little book on Herbert was to show the Restoration clergy what the life of a minister in the Church of England ought to be. Walton was troubled when he considered "how few of the clergy lived like him then, and how many live so unlike him now," and he wrote the biography to supply "a pattern of virtue to all posterity, and especially to his brethren of the clergy."³³

Miss Chute goes on to point out that since it was Walton's intention to set Herbert up as a model clergyman, the stress is on that part of Herbert's life, a three year period only, during which he was an

³¹ André Maurois, Aspects of Biography, trans. by Sydney Castle Roberts, New York, Appleton, 1929, pp. 14-15.

³² Marchette Chute, "How a Book Grows", in Library Journal, p. 2431.

³³ Marchette Chute, Appendix: "Walton's Biography of Herbert", in Two Gentle Men, New York, Dutton, 1959, p. 277.

Anglican minister at Bemerton. Walton, for example, merely skims over Herbert's political career, completely ignoring the fact that his hero had served in two parliaments, and this was not, Miss Chute stresses, because these facts were not available to Walton; it was because he was uninterested in these facts: they might have made his coloured image of Herbert less effectively didactic.³⁴

The whole element of authenticity, for Marchette Chute, is intimately bound up with the background writing. When we examine the kind of image of her subject Miss Chute is attempting to draw we realize how important, in her view of biography, the faithful representation of background really is. At least four times, in writing about her biographical approach, she has used the word "silhouette" to describe the picture she paints of her subject. For example, she writes:

The basic approach in all my biographies has been about the same. That is to say, in each case I have been faced with the problem of writing about a man whose personal life is relatively unknown. I cannot, for that reason, write a biography in depth, such as could be written, for instance about Henry James. My solution has been to acquaint myself so thoroughly with the background of the period that I can light up the man against it in silhouette, as it were, and while a silhouette portrait is less satisfactory than a three-dimensional one, it is at least better than nothing.

To take an obvious example of this technique in action, I know very little about Chaucer as an esquire. But by doing a good deal of research about the origins and functions of the office and the careers of other esquires, I can throw at least a direct light on Chaucer himself.³⁵

But this technique is more than a convenience, a way of arousing added interest and of expanding what would be, without it, too brief a study.

34 Ibid., pp. 278-279.

35 Marchette Chute, in a letter to the author, June 27, 1961.

It is a basic necessity in this kind of biography, for no one can understand a person without knowing as thoroughly as possible, the influence that went into shaping him. Miss Chute puts it this way:

No one can be wholly isolated from his background. Chaucer existed in relation to the diplomatic and social world of medieval England, Shakespeare in relation to the Elizabethan theatre, Jonson in relation to the Jacobean court. In the same way it was clear that Herbert and Herrick existed in relation to the religious world of seventeenth century England and that I could not write about the men themselves, until I knew something about their background.³⁶

It was this conviction of the necessity of placing the man in his actual background that impelled Miss Chute to disregard a great deal of material written about Shakespeare and to search for the most influential forces that acted upon him.

The more I went on with the research the clearer it became that the key to Shakespeare's life was the theatre. In spite of the efforts of many of his biographers, who seem to feel with John Stowe that the theatre was not quite respectable, Shakespeare had demonstrably been an actor as well as a playwright throughout the whole of his adult professional career, and he could not be separated from his environment without great danger to the truth. It was against a theatre background that the silhouette of Shakespeare would have to emerge if it was going to emerge at all.³⁷

For Marchette Chute the presentation of background includes more than description of family and surroundings. Writing of her research for the lives of Herbert and Herrick she says:

Of course, I wanted to be acquainted with their friends and families and the places in which they worked and lived, but

³⁶ Marchette Chute, "How a Book Grows", in Library Journal, p. 2431.

³⁷ Marchette Chute, "Shakespeare of London", in Hornbook Magazine, p. 31.

MARCHETTE CHUTE'S THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

28

above all I wanted to become familiar with the mental attitude and habits of thought of the early seventeenth century. This was a period in which politics and religion were almost inextricable and deeply tied with an emotionalism of which the causes were hard to find.³⁸

In other words, Miss Chute believes that a real attempt must be made to get beyond mere physical surroundings and to fathom the host of intellectual forces that must of necessity go into the formation of the type of men who are the subjects of her biographies. Earlier it has been pointed out that the main drawback Miss Chute encountered in writing non-contemporary biography was the difficulty of obtaining an adequate amount of information about the subject. But at the same time she believes that at least some of this difficulty can be obviated by an exhaustive study of the intellectual background of the period. Reasoning that a great deal can be learned about an individual by a study of the general influences prevalent during the period in which he lived is justifiable, and Miss Chute has put this theory to use.

Marchette Chute's purpose in doing such broad and intense research into the past is best expressed by her when she relates her experience in writing Shakespeare of England: "The purpose behind all this reading was to try to touch hands with the Elizabethan period."³⁹ To touch hands with such a distant time, though, is a real problem.

³⁸ Marchette Chute, "How a Book Grows", in Library Journal, p. 2431.

³⁹ Marchette Chute, "Shakespeare of London", in Hornbook Magazine, p. 30.

One may quite easily obtain an "official" picture of the period, but how close is this "official" picture to reality? The danger is that the period may not come alive. As Miss Chute says:

It is extremely difficult to catch the Elizabethans in their relaxed, unguarded moments, in the small things that make the period come alive.⁴⁰

Throughout her exhaustive reading of the period her intention was always to look "for the reality behind the official language and the people behind the acts."⁴¹

There can be no doubt that authenticity is the foremost note in Marchette Chute's theory of biography: a faithfulness to the facts about the subject's life and about the period in which he lived. This has been amply demonstrated already. But perhaps it is most effectively shown in Miss Chute's remarks about a biographer who did not **restrict** himself to the facts, namely Sir Isaac Walton.

Only a serious interest in facts for their own sake would have led a man like Walton to do research on Herbert's political career, and this was a quality that Walton did not possess. The four biographies that he wrote are riddled with minor inaccuracies which he could have easily corrected, and his dates frequently contradict each other. As he grew older he became increasingly attached to the fictional device of imaginary dialogues, and he admitted quite cheerfully in his life of Bishop Sanderson: "I have been so bold as to paraphrase and say what I think he (...) would have said."⁴²

40 Ibid., pp. 30-31.

41 Ibid., p. 31.

42 Marchette Chute, Appendix: "Walton's Biography of Herbert", in Two Gentle Men, pp. 277-278.

MARCHETTE CHUTE'S THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

30

The quality of authenticity may well be the most important single ingredient that goes to produce pure biography, but its mere presence does not ensure pure biography. Authenticity works hand in hand with the two other pre-requisites of pure biography: the depiction of the individuality or personality of the subject, and the artistic element.

Marchette Chute realizes the possibility that a biography may be in complete conformity with the facts of a man's life, yet fail to "bring back a living man."⁴³ She speaks, for example, of the decided advantage of writing over the plastic arts in this regard:

A good portrait can sometimes bring a man back to life, but even then it fixes him at just one moment of time. The pictures of Longfellow, for instance, show him with a beard, and it is hard to remember that he was once a small boy going to school, or a young man trying to work out his first rhymes. Cicero is a marble figure in a toga, and no one would guess what a complex, sensitive, brilliant, and irritating man he was in real life. A biography of Cicero brings him back as his friends in politics knew him, and a schoolroom bust turns him into an interesting person to know.⁴⁴

Obviously a good biography, for Miss Chute, does more than convey authenticated facts.

The depiction of personality involves getting beyond the single fact to the selection, combination, and interpretation of a number of facts to the point where one is able to establish certain things as being characteristic of the subject. Miss Chute puts it this way:

⁴³ Marchette Chute, "Biographies Bring New Companions", in The Wonderful World of Books, p. 51

⁴⁴ Idem.

The method I used in writing Shakespeare of London might be called picture writing. The story is not presented through explanations but through a series of images, leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions. It goes without saying that the details which make up each image must be carefully documented... but it is equally important that they should be characteristic. The choice of the final, single detail will be much more effective if you have found a dozen similar examples in your research than if you had to choose from only two or three.⁴⁵

For Marchette Chute, it is impossible to get at the personality of the subject unless he is seen in the surroundings in which he lived. The portrayal of background is therefore integral to the depiction of personality. "Any man will become incomprehensible if he is isolated from his background."⁴⁶ She illustrates:

In Shakespeare's case his background was the theatre. It is unfortunate that so many of the people who have written about him should have had no theatre experience, and even more important that out of a misplaced reverence they have been unwilling to remember that he was not only a professional playwright but a professional actor also.⁴⁷

The particular difficulties Miss Chute met in her attempt at portraying personality were those that arose from the fact that her subjects lived in such distant times. As she explains:

If no personal documents have survived, no letters, and no reminiscences, it is hard to reach back to the real human being who once lived and breathed, since it is out of small day-to-day matters that a clear sense of personality is built.⁴⁸

How she has dealt with this difficulty is more properly within the scope of Marchette Chute's biographical practice. It might be stressed here,

45 Marchette Chute, "Shakespeare of London", in Hornbook Magazine, p. 34.

46 Marchette Chute, Forward, in Shakespeare of London, p. ix.

47 Ibid., pp. ix-x.

48 Marchette Chute, "Shakespeare of London", in Hornbook Magazine, p. 28.

however, that she believes the only possible way out of this impasse is abundant research. In the case of Shakespeare of London she seems to have left few pages unturned in her efforts.

I read account books, law suits, parish records, government reports, diaries, ordinances, prison records, and everything else I could get my hands on.⁴⁹

With respect to the artistic quality necessary for biography, explicit statements by Miss Chute are few. But she does say enough to establish her belief in the necessity of this facet of biography. Of the biographer and his work she has this to say, for example:

He can see to it that he has written it in good, clear English, that the facts are reliable, and that they are all in their proper order; but this is not enough to make it a good book. A good book should no longer be a collection of facts neatly dovetailed together by careful carpentry: it should have succeeded in acquiring an organic life of its own, like a tree. It should come alive and enter securely into the imagination of the reader, and this is just as true of a good biography as of a good novel or a good poem.⁵⁰

It seems to this writer that this "organic life" that the successful biography must have is furnished by the depiction of the subject as an individual. In other words, the artistic effect is that which is produced by the moulding of known facts into a unified picture of the subject. Therefore, the depiction of the subject's personality and the artistic element must move along hand in hand: they are mutually complementary.

A valuable discussion of the artistic element in biography takes place in the Appendix to Two Gentle Men. Here, Marchette Chute is

49. Ibid., p. 30.

50 Marchette Chute, "From 'Bad Risk' to Best Seller", in Library Journal, p. 1488.

chiefly concerned with the problem of reconciling the elements of authenticity and art in biography and she sees in Isaac Walton an example of one who was unable to make the reconciliation.

A much more difficult problem lies in the fact that Walton was as much artist as biographer, and in order to produce a precise and vivid picture in the reader's mind he will sometimes manipulate his material in such a fashion that it is no longer reliable.⁵¹

She goes on to illustrate how, when Walton wrote his life of Hooker, there was reason to believe that the latter had been trapped into an unhappy marriage. Walton describes a scene in which two of Hooker's former students visit him at his country vicarage at Drayton Beauchamp and see him rocking the baby. Here Hooker is pictured as a devoted family man bearing the parental burden, without too much help from a disinterested wife. But as a matter of fact, later research proved that the scene must have been a complete fabrication, for he was married in London after he had left Drayton Beauchamp for good.

A great deal of malicious gossip had been current in Walton's circle about Hooker's wife, all of it apparently untrue. Walton had no special reason to disbelieve it, since some of it came from his own Cranmer relatives and he passed it on innocently enough. But all the vivid little touches that make the scene come to life, even to the name of the book in Hooker's hand, are Walton's own invention, inserted to give the scene the reality which he believed it already possessed. The whole thing, including Hooker's saintly and resigned speech, is beautifully conceived and executed. The fact that none of it took place does not detract from Walton as an artist, but it does make him suspect as a biographer.⁵²

⁵¹ Marchette Chute, Appendix: "Walton's Life of Herbert", in Two Gentle Men, p. 278.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 278-279.

Miss Chute's recognition of the excellence of Walton's work is adamant; her disenchantment rests on the basis of biography only. It seems clear that she will not accept the inclusion of half-truths or near-truths in biography. The artistic element must be present but it is always subservient to the principle of authenticity. Praise-worthy as is art it must be kept under the discipline of proven fact.

But there is a note of toleration and understanding in Miss Chute about such short-comings as these. She will not accept, for example, Walton's life of Herbert as pure biography. Then she continues:

Yet it must be added that Walton's life of Herbert is a beautiful piece of work. All Walton's gentle loving heart, all his literary skill, and all his reverent admiration for "holy Mr. Herbert" combine to produce a tender and luminous tribute that is very close to a complete work of art. If there are errors of fact and of interpretation, they are forgivable in the case of a biographer who saved so much that would otherwise have been lost and presented it so movingly.⁵³

Before closing this discussion of Marchette Chute's theories about biography it would be advantageous to look briefly at what she considers the uses of biography. Obviously, she looks upon the art as a means of bringing someone to life on the printed page. This is essential to biography and to her concept of it. But she sees in biography an additional accidental use:

Biography brings the times to life again, just as it brings the people; and it makes the world a more spacious and interesting place to live in.⁵⁴

53 Ibid., p. 282.

54 Marchette Chute, "Biographies Bring New Companions", in The Wonderful World of Books, p. 51.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PRACTICE OF BIOGRAPHY

In Chapter I of this study the principles of biography were laid down. Biography was defined as the history of the lives of individual men, as a branch of literature. Explicit in this definition, it was pointed out, are the three guiding principles that are the sound basis for good biography and which, in fact, have been implemented in those biographies that we consider our best. Ideally, all biographies should conform to these principles; actually, much of what we call biography does not conform to them. The history of the biographical form might best be described as a long line of bastard types interrupted infrequently by individual works of pure biography. In other words, in practice biography has not been, for the most part, in accord with its definition. What has been produced in its name has often been good, interesting, and even artistic, but not often pure biography.

The designation of biography as either pure or impure was made by Harold Nicolson¹ and is useful here for our purposes. A pure biography is a life that conforms to the three basic principles of authenticity, the portrayal of personality, and art; an impure biography is one that does not conform to one or more of them.

Nicolson enumerates the causes of impure biography, the factors that impell writers, perhaps unknowingly or unconsciously, to overlook the principles.

¹ Harold Nicolson, The Development of English Biography, London, Hogarth, 1927, pp. 8-9.

Such then are the main causes of "impure" biography - either an undue desire to celebrate the dead, or a purpose extraneous to the work itself, or an undue subjectivity on the part of the writer.²

What Nicolson is saying here is that when emotions are allowed to enter the biographer's view of his subject, impure biography results. Elsewhere in his study, Nicolson is more pronounced on this point.

So long as the intellect is undisturbed by emotion you have good biography. The moment however, that any emotion (such as reverence, affection, ethical desire, religious belief) intrudes upon the composition of biography, that biography is doomed.³

There are many kinds of impure biography: the ways in which authors have allowed their emotions to come to play in the writing of men's lives are various. This chapter is an attempt to examine the different kinds of impure biography, and pure biography, as they have occurred in practice. The treatment will be broadly historical, but this is not meant to be a history of biography. Rather, the historical method of presentation is followed because it seems to be a suitable way of maintaining unity, of avoiding the pit-falls easily come by in works of this nature where there must be a listing of things.

Men first began to write about other men out of a commemorative instinct. They wrote inscriptions for grave-stones, they delivered funeral orations and when they began to write complete lives of men they carried over into them the laudatory traits that had characterized

² Ibid., p. 10.

³ Ibid., p. 110.

less exhaustive material. The raison d'être of these lives was praise, and praise at the expense of truth, if necessary. In this tradition were many of the lives of the saints written during the Middle Ages. The manner persisted and the nineteenth century witnessed a high point in the history of this type of biography. At that time Thomas Carlyle wrote:

The history of mankind is the history of its great men: to find out these, clean the dirt from them and place them on their proper pedestal.⁴

Carlyle's statement gives the type its names of "pedestal" or "white-washing" biography. Virginia Woolf vividly dramatizes the effect this commemorative element can have on the finished product.

Suppose, for example, that the man of genius was immoral, ill-tempered; and threw the boots at the maid's head. The widow would say, "Still I loved him - he was the father of my children; and the public, who love his books, must on no account be disillusioned. Cover up; omit." The biographer obeyed. And then the majority of Victorian biographies are like the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey that were carried in funeral processions through the streets - effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin.⁵

Obviously this sort of thing is impure biography. It violates that first principle of pure biography: that it must present fact. If a biography sets out to be laudatory, it must of necessity disregard or change what was undesirable about the subject's actual existence. Nicolson considers this desire to eulogize the most frequent detriment to pure biography.

⁴ Thomas Carlyle, in Harold Nicolson, The Development of English Biography, p. 11.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography", in The Death of the Moth and Other Essays, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1942, pp. 120-121.

Predominant among these confusing elements was the desire to celebrate the dead - a desire wholly distinct from, and generally inimical to, the actual art of biography, but which can be traced as the main fact in "impure" biography (...)⁶

An outstanding example of this "pedestal" school of biography is Lady Burton's Life of her husband Sir Richard Burton. The consecration of the biography indicates the path the work must take.

To my earthly master
whilst waiting to rejoin you, I leave as a Message to the World
we inhabited, the record of the Life into which both our lives
were fused. Would that I could write as well as I can love,
and do you that justice, that honour, that you deserve! I will
do my best, and then, I will leave it to more brilliant pens,
whose wielders will feel less - and write better.
Meet me soon - I await the signal!
Isabel Burton⁷

With such a point of view an objective biography is impossible and the two volumes turn out to be a glamorized picture of the subject.

Closely related to "pedestal" biography is didactic biography. The didactic biography sets out to teach a moral lesson or make a moral point, and the danger is that in making the point the facts will be twisted around so that they reinforce it. The didactic element, Nicolson says, is a major cause of impure biography.

A second, and almost equally pregnant, cause of "impure" biography is the desire to compose the life of an individual as an illustration of some extraneous theory or conception.⁸

6 Harold Nicolson, Op. cit., p. 9.

7 Lady Isabel Burton, The Life of Captain Sir Richard Burton, 2 Vol., London, Chapman, 1893, Consecration.

8 Harold Nicolson, Op. cit., p. 9.

The same authority speaks more pointedly on this question.

The devout, as Dean Stanley has so convincingly demonstrated, are not gifted with a genius for biography; their preoccupation with the theology and the life after death somewhat blurs their interest in man and in the life that is ours, and theirs, upon this varied earth. For biography is essentially a profane brand of literature; its triumphs do not proceed from theological convictions.⁹

Although biography of this "pedestal" and didactic type made most spectacular appearances during the nineteenth century, its origins, as has been pointed out, are as old as biography itself. Of all the types of impure biography, these two were the most prevalent previous to the nineteenth century. But a more significant aspect of the history of biography previous to the nineteenth century was the occurrence of pure biography.

Allusion has already been made in Chapter I of this study to James Boswell's Life of Dr. Johnson. Boswell's biography is generally acknowledged to be the best in the English language. As an example of pure biography it serves as a standard against which the types of impure biography can be judged and found wanting.

As a matter of fact, Boswell's century, the eighteenth, gave English literature its first examples of pure biography.¹⁰ Before that, biography had been, even at its best, restricted by its commemorative and didactic purposes. It is true that the biographies of Cavendish and Roper in the latter part of the sixteenth century represented a

9 Ibid., p. 64.

10 Ibid., p. 79.

great advance from medieval hagiography. Nicolson outlines this improvement.

(...) The center of interest, the emphasis on their curiosity had shifted: they neither of them regard their subjects as types representative of institutions, but as individuals representative of human personality; they are more interested in the character than in action. It is owing to them that English biography was first differentiated as a species of literary composition distinct from history and romance.¹¹

Nevertheless undesirable elements remained.

They are imbued ... with the old commemorative instinct; their books are marred by no small portion of didacticism; they have not broken finally ... with the old runic inscriptions, with the long tradition of hagiography.¹²

In the seventeenth century little or no improvement took place in the development of the biographical art, although, as Nicolson points out, all the conditions essential to good biography were present.

(...) There was widespread public curiosity, acute psychological interest, accurate scholarship, immense capacity for industry, a real desire to produce creative and artistic history, and, as a vehicle, the perfection of English prose.¹³

Why pure biography did not flourish amidst such near ideal conditions, Nicolson attributes to three causes.

In the first place, the political condition of the country was too disturbed, and the moral conflict too intense, for writers to have either the leisure, the courage, or the detachment necessary for pure biography. In the second place, the potential biographers of the century tended to write journals, or, as

11 Ibid., pp. 36-37.

12 Ibid., p. 36.

13 Ibid., p. 38.

Clarendon and Bacon, to create an art of English history. And in the third place, the influence of Plutarch and of the Theophrastians inclined people to be interested rather in typical "characters" than in individual temperments; to write on the deductive rather than the inductive method, and therefore to caste their biographies in an artificial and unconvincing mould.¹⁴

A most significant influence in the coming to maturity of biography in the eighteenth century was William Mason's Life of Gray. This work made effective use of letters in biography for the first time.¹⁵ And Samuel Johnson, the real founder of pure biography, brought the method to its full development in his Life of Savage.¹⁶

Then came Boswell's Life of Johnson, the outstanding example of pure biography in the English language. Boswell's great work becomes the standard by which must be judged all biography written before and after it. Perhaps a brief examination of the elements that make the Life of Johnson pure biography would serve as a focal point for comparison to the types of impure biography.

Reference has been made in Chapter I to Boswell's habits of using only authentic material and of faithful transferring of data from document to manuscript. But such faithfulness is relatively superficial for it is possible for a biographer to be faithful in this way and yet produce a false account of a subject's life. The kind of faithfulness to truth that is most essential and most difficult to achieve derives

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁵ John A. Garraty, The Nature of Biography, New York, Knopf, 1957, p. 83.

¹⁶ Harold Nicolson, Op. cit., p. 79.

from an objective view on the part of the biographer upon his subject. Nicolson emphasizes that it is also in this sense that Boswell was faithful to the truth.

Boswell had no thesis, nor had Lockhart: they worked wholly on the inductive method and their literary skill was manifested solely in the arrangement and presentation of their specimens; they neither propounded or implied a theory; they merely, with the requisite degree of taste and selection, furnished facts.¹⁷

Boswell's adherence to the second requisite of pure biography, of course, has become a legend for if there is a character, an individual in English literature, it is Boswell's Johnson. It is this element that constitutes the charm of the book. Garraty remarks:

A reader can pick it up at almost any point, read a few dozen pages, and get almost as clear a view of the bluff, intense, yet kind-hearted Doctor as he would from a careful study of the whole.¹⁸

The third element necessary for pure biography, that the work be artistic, is fulfilled in the Life of Johnson. There is in it an element of the creative. Garraty explains it this way.

(...) Boswell ... loved life in all its aspects. While he did not manage his own life very well, he lived it to the full, tasting all its pleasures, delving into the meaning of existence with all its powers, observing everything and everyone he came in contact with. He managed to transfer this zest to the pages of his Johnson. As a result he produced a great work of art (...).¹⁹

Boswell's particular formula for achieving this work of art is outlined by Nicolson.

17 Ibid., p. 153.

18 John A. Garraty, Op. cit., p. 95.

19 Ibid., p. 96.

(...) He discovered and perfected a biographical formula in which the narrative could be fused with the pictorial, in which the pictorial in its turn could be rendered in a series of photographs so vividly, and above all so rapidly, projected as to convey an impression of continuity, of progression - in a word, of life. Previous biographers had composed a studio portrait, or at best a succession of lantern slides. Boswell's method was that of a cinematograph.²⁰

Biography had reached its peak in Boswell, but unfortunately it did not maintain the excellence he had brought to the form. The nineteenth century, an age prolific in biography as it was in most forms of literary expression, marked a decline, generally, from the standards of the previous century. The period from the time of Boswell to our own day has seen a great variety in the manner of attack biographers have chosen and consequently on the types of biography that arose and in most cases the differentiating marks among the schools lie in the peculiar means each took to get at the subject's personality.

Perhaps the most extreme of these schools is the fictional school. The fictional biographer manufactures facts either to fit his conception of what a character should be, or for the mere pleasure of making a story. Very often a work of this kind is more novel than biography, and at best fictional biography is only at the fringes of the form. Garraty analyses the fictionizer's methods this way:

The fictionizer invented "evidences" that fitted a conception of his subject drawn presumably from a reading of the actual experience. He made intuitive judgements of what his man was like and then created "typical" scenes based on these judgements. Whether he realized it or not, his imaginings sprang from some simplified view of his hero's personality.²¹

²⁰ Harold Nicolson, Op. cit., p. 87.

²¹ John A. Garraty, Op. cit., p. 129.

An example of this fictional biography is Somerset Maugham's The Moon and Sixpence. Obviously, even though the name is changed, this is based on the life of Gauguin. But it is clearly a fictional work.

Another school of biography has arisen which, although its products are often fictional or close to it, takes its name from its method. This is the intuitive school. Garraty illustrates:

The French critic-biographer Sainte Beuve, for instance, achieved his often brilliant word pictures by intuition. Shutting himself up with the words of the person he sought to describe, he would read and meditate until suddenly the revealing trait, the key to character would appear to him. At this point Sainte Beuve recorded: "The portrait ... speaks and lives; I have found the man!"... Emil Ludwig's method of shutting himself up with a painting or photograph of his subject was based on the same philosophy.²²

If the method of the intuitive school is more painstaking than that of the fictional school, this is no assurance of the authenticity of its facts. Garraty says:

The basic idea behind the intuitive school was that every personality is essentially simple once the key to character can be located. It may sometimes require long study, but when the key is found there comes a flash of insight, after which all the subject's actions fall into a pattern.²³

This appears, at best, a doubtful premise. Even if a long period of meditation and study were fruitful of this key insight, there is no assurance that this insight is the only element necessary for an interpretation of the subject's actions. The complexity of the human person and of the forces to which he is subject would seem to forbid

²² John A. Garraty, "Biographers Are Only Human", in The Saturday Review, Vol. 36, issue of March 20, 1954, p. 12.

²³ John A. Garraty, The Nature of Biography, p. 129.

such an interpretation.

Not far removed in ultimate product from intuitive biography but very different in method is psychological biography. Although psychological insight had gone into the making of biography for ages, it was Sigmund Freud who initiated the modern trend towards it in his life of Leonardo da Vinci, published in 1910. In this work Freud attempted to explain da Vinci's entire career in terms of his childhood.²⁴ Such a technique runs the same risk of over-simplification that the intuitive technique is prone to. Another source of danger for the psychological biographer is that one which plagues the practising psychologist: the difficulty of validating data of a psychological nature. Garraty quotes the master himself on this point.

Freud himself was careful to point out the limitations of his technique. "The deduction of the psychological writer," he wrote, "is not capable of proof," though in the case of his book on da Vinci he felt that the evidence was very strong. "We must mark out the limits that are set up for the working capacity of psychoanalysis in biography," he cautioned.²⁵

In practice, psychological biography has largely failed and Nevins points to the main cause.

The most reprehensible aspect of the re-evaluation and the pseudo-psychoanalysis, beyond doubt, is their shifting of the lens from the vital to the trivial - their distortion of the image. What was truly important in William Shakespeare was not the possible neurosis behind the bequest of his second best bed to his wife, but his authorship of Hamlet.²⁶

²⁴ John A. Garraty, "Biographers Are Only Human", in The Saturday Review, p. 12.

²⁵ Idem.

²⁶ Allan Nevins, "How Shall One Write of a Man's Life?" in The New York Times Book Review, issue of July 15, 1951, p. 1.

Out of the attempt to depict the whole personality of the subject has arisen another school of biography - the "debunking" school. Garraty explains the origin of the term "debunking".

The word "debunker" was coined by William E. Woodward who first used it in the novel Bunk in 1923. Woodward invented a character named Michael Webb, who studied the family of an automobile tycoon in order to "take the bunk out of that family by showing it up in its true relations."²⁷

The "debunkers" school is best seen as a reaction to Victorian pedestal biography. Virginia Woolf traces its growth in three eminent English biographers.

(...) For reasons not easy to discover, widows became broader-minded, the public keener-sighted; the effigy no longer carried conviction or satisfied curiosity. The biographer certainly won a measure of freedom. At least he could hint that there were scars and furrows on the dead man's face. Froude's Carlyle is by no means a wax mask painted rosy red. And following Froude there was Sir Edmund Gosse who dared to say that his own father was a fallible human being. And following Edmund Gosse in the early years of the present century came Lytton Strachey.²⁸

The "debunkers" techniques are described by Garraty.

The "debunkers" set out deliberately to undermine the fame of history's heroes, or inversely, to build up the reputation of her villains. They substituted an easy familiarity for the respectful awe of the Victorian writers, referring to their subjects for example, by their first names. They tried to make the intelligent seem stupid, the dignified foolish, the earnest hypocritical, and the humble vain. They dwelt upon petty idiosyncrasies, physical ailments, inconsistent or erratic behaviour, and so on, not to illustrate character in the manner of Plutarch, but to prove that great men were neither better than, nor even different from, the common run of mankind.²⁹

27 John A. Garraty, The Nature of Biography, p. 137.

28 Virginia Woolf, Op. cit., p. 121.

29 John A. Garraty, Op. cit., p. 36.

But this is the school at its worst. In its beginnings it might better be described as an ironical school, for then it had no intention of deflating reputations. It was merely trying to draw a picture of the whole man: his defects as well as his virtues. Certainly, at times, in his efforts to do this, the biographer tipped the scales unfavourably and the subject emerged with more emphasis placed on his vices than on his virtues. But the "debunkers" had no intention of drawing an accurate picture in the first place. They set out knowingly and willingly to destroy established reputations. But reprehensible as it was, "debunking" biography did away with those undesirable elements that had marked biography of a commemorative or didactic nature. It at least set the stage for a re-evaluation of the form in terms of seeing the whole man. Donald F. Bond refers to the influence the "debunkers" have had on modern biography.

At the present time, partly because of the example of Lytton Strachey, the aim of the biographer may fairly be said to be that of representing the whole man, "nothing extenuate or set down not in malice," and thus to revert to the aim of the greatest of all biographers, James Boswell, who could say confidently of his subject: "And he will be seen as he really was; for I profess to write not his panegyrick, which must be all praise, but his life which great and good as he was, must not be supposed to be entirely perfect. To be as he was, is indeed subject of panegyrick enough to any man in this state of being; but in every picture there should be shade as well as light, and when I delineate him without reserve, I do what he himself recommended, both by his precept and his example."³⁰

Today there is (and for some past years there has been) a conservative trend among biographers. While granting the necessity

³⁰ Donald F. Bond, "Biography", in Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 3, 1961 ed., p. 596.

of depicting personality these conservative biographers have condemned and avoided the techniques of their confreres of more liberal schools. Many conservatives do attempt to capture the individuality of their subjects, but by using the time-honoured methods. Garraty quotes Allan Nevins on this point.

(...) This can be done through conventional historical methods - by copious use of letters and anecdotes, careful delineation of social and economic background.³¹

Modern biography has also realized the short-comings of the pedestal and didactic schools, as Nicolson points out.

The modern biographer rightly discards the commemorative or didactic motive; the "spirit of the age" will have none of those things. It insists on absolute detachment from ethical or sentimental considerations, and this detachment becomes in itself the point of view. (...) ³²

However, to say that biography has become stabilized at its ideal position after years of fluctuation from extreme to extreme would be a gross over-simplification. What can be said with justice is that, if the fluctuations remain, they are less distant than ever from the ideal. Garraty's statement, "Perhaps even now, another Boswell is reaching for his pen,"³³ may be somewhat optimistic. But it is certainly indicative of the generally happy situation of contemporary biography.

31 Allan Nevins, in John A. Garraty, "Biographers Are Only Human," in The Saturday Review, p. 46.

32 Harold Nicolson, Op. cit., p. 142.

33 John A. Garraty, The Nature of Biography, p. 151.

CHAPTER FOUR

4/8 B

MARCHETTE CHUTE'S PRACTICE OF BIOGRAPHY

Having examined Marchette Chute's theories about biography we may now turn to an examination of her four biographies of literary persons: Geoffrey Chaucer of England, Shakespeare of London, Ben Jonson of Westminster and Two Gentle Men. The task of evaluating these biographies is left for the final chapter of this work. The purpose here is to examine the biographies as objectively as possible. The method will be the following: to see the general characteristics of technique shown in the individual works and to perceive parallels and differences among the four biographies.

Basically, Marchette Chute's biographies are written according to the "silhouette" approach, i.e., the subject is seen in outline moving against his background. This approach is taken not out of choice but out of necessity. Chaucer lived between 1340 and 1400; Shakespeare between 1564 and 1616; Jonson between 1573 and 1637; Herbert between 1593 and 1633; Herrick between 1591 and 1674. Understandably, facts about people who lived anywhere from three hundred to six hundred years ago are hard to come by. For one thing sources which were scarce in the first place on account of the unavailability of the very means of communication, are bound to be lost over the years. In the second place (and this holds especially in the case of Shakespeare) men often achieve fame only after their deaths; they may move through this world practically unknown. The best a biographer can do under such circumstances is accumulate the relatively few available facts about the subject and place them against an illuminated, detailed picture of the times in which

the subject lived. This is what Miss Chute has done. It is her means, if not of overcoming the difficulty, of accommodating herself to it.

Marchette Chute's first biography is Geoffrey Chaucer of England.

In retrospect, at least, Miss Chute looks upon this first work as a successful experiment.

I had written a biography of Geoffrey Chaucer, in which I had tried to make a rather obscure life-story come clear by lighting up the background vividly enough so that the figure in the foreground could be silhouetted against it. The book on Chaucer had not at that time been published, but I felt comfortable about it - I had succeeded in doing pretty much what I wanted to do - and I felt that if this method worked with Chaucer it might work with Shakespeare also.¹

Because it was a success, Geoffrey Chaucer of England became the model on which the subsequent Chute biographies were fashioned.

With Chaucer, direct information about the man himself was so sparse that it would scarcely fill a few pages. For example, the exact year of Chaucer's birth is not known. But a great deal of general information about the fourteenth century was available. The first chapter of Geoffrey Chaucer of England is a good example of how Marchette Chute uses available background information. A mention of the military affiliations of Chaucer's father leads to a detailed discussion of the campaigns in which the senior Chaucer engaged; mention of his occupation as a wine-exporter leads to a similarly detailed discussion of the economic and social significance of that occupation and then to a discussion of the Guilds. In the same way the mention of the Chaucer

¹ Marchette Chute, "From 'Bad Risk' to Best Seller", in Library Journal, Vol. 76, issue of Oct. 1, 1951, p. 1486.

family's home town, London, is the starting point for a look at the city covering everything from its geography and politics to its police force and water supply. Throughout the book, detail on interesting detail is multiplied so that few questions about the background remain unanswered.

Such detail is interesting for its own sake but it has the additional function of serving as a kind of reinforcement for the biography. What Marchette Chute cannot state positively as fact because of the lack of direct evidence, she can surmise from general evidence about the person. She does this often but it is always a safe kind of surmising, a logical progression from a fact to what is almost certainly true. And it is put to the reader as a surmising. Chapter II of the Chaucer biography illustrates this point.

John Chaucer's son was given the name of Geoffrey in a formal baptism that took place the day after his birth if the custom was followed, in his parish church. If John Chaucer was living in the Thames Street house Geoffrey was baptized in the Church of St. Martin's-in-the-Vinty, which stood in Thames Street only a few feet away.²

The point is that there is no infringement on truth because the situation is put as a probability and not as a fact.

A further illustration of this same habit serves as an example of another facet of this biography. Amid the general dearth of established fact about her man, there springs up occasionally a very insignificant fact. When this happens Miss Chute makes the most of it. She learns, for example, that young Chaucer as a pageboy was given a

² Marchette Chute, Geoffrey Chaucer of England, New York, Dutton, 1946, p. 28.

new outfit. Here is how she describes it:

The jerkin undoubtedly fitted him very tightly, for the age of buttons had dawned and the court tailors were using the new device to the full. His hose were also supposed to fit very tightly, and if Geoffrey Chaucer were a normal teen-age youngster he would have been gratified to find that he could bend over in his new clothes only with the greatest difficulty.³

Again the safe surmising is to be noted.

Occasionally, though, when the available facts do not warrant her doing so, Miss Chute will not take the liberty of even surmising.

In Chapter IV, regarding Geoffrey Chaucer's education she says this:

(...) It is possible that for the seven years for which there is no documentary information he spent most of the time finishing his education. The inference is plausible, but exactly where he went to school will have to remain a matter of conjecture.⁴

This constant necessity of explaining either her justification for making a certain point or her inability to make it has the effect of what might be called conscious biography. These factors make it impossible for Marchette Chute to keep herself withdrawn from the work; she cannot be the aloof observer who keeps her distance. The reader always has the feeling that he is reading a biography; he is always aware of the biographer's problems. There is a good example of this in Chapter X.

It is easy to write about Chaucer's friends; it is unfortunately more difficult to write about his family. There is no church registry extant to testify to the names of his various children

3 Ibid., p. 42.

4 Ibid., pp. 56-57.

as there are public documents to testify to his friends.

If Chaucer had been less like himself and more like Deschamps, his readers would have known a great deal about his sons and daughters.⁵

Often Miss Chute has a way of covering up so that her presence is not felt so keenly by the reader. Regarding Chaucer's trip to France she says this:

It was conceivably on the King's business that Chaucer went to Calais in July, but since he was given a year's leave it is more likely that he went for personal reasons. Chaucer must have been a privileged individual in Calais, for his friend, William Beauchamp, was captain of the town, and another friend of his, Sir Philip de la Vache, was Captain of the Castle.⁶

Words and expressions such as "conceivably", "more likely" and "must have been" betray the biographer's presence but not so forcefully. In any case the combination of a finely detailed background and a certain legitimate surmising makes possible the production of a biography that would not have otherwise been possible.

There are other ways in which the reader is made aware of Marchette Chute's presence. The mood of the biography, the attitude of the biographer towards the subject matter, deserves some discussion here. That Miss Chute has a love and enthusiasm for her work and her subjects is evident from what has been said in a previous chapter. This attitude shows itself in the actual work. Occasionally, for example, she sees fit to insert a wry remark about a person or situation. In Geoffrey Chaucer of England, speaking of Parliament's conviction of the necessity of raising money to finance the war with France, she remarks the

5 Ibid., p. 145.

6 Ibid., p. 218.

following:

A census was ordered so that the tax could be levied on all alike, and the immediate drop in the population of England was remarkable. In some villages hardly a man could be found who possessed a taxable aunt or sister-in-law.⁷

The humour is dry but pleasant.

Wholly aside from these occasional flashes of wit, the over-all impression one takes from the biography is one of pleasantness. Biographer and subject are on the best of terms. Not only does Miss Chute enjoy her subject; she likes his friends and his surroundings. The medieval period itself is a fascinating one for her.

Another aspect of Geoffrey Chaucer of England is its criticism of Chaucer's works. A reviewer has made this statement about the book: "Over half its pages are devoted to his reading and writing."⁸ This criticism includes detailed analysis of Chaucer's writing in general and of particular works. Marchette Chute talks at length of the writers and works that influenced Chaucer. Then she moves on to the works themselves. For example when dealing with the Romance of the Rose she speaks of the versions of this work written by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun and shows to what extent Chaucer adheres to or departs from them. Actual textual criticism of all the works is given. It is not relevant here to examine the criticism as such, however. What is important is the manner in which, where it is possible, the criticism is integrated with the biography.

7 Ibid., p. 196.

8 R.A. Pratt, book review, in Yale Review, Vol. 35, issue of June, 1946, p. 764.

The criticism begins unobtrusively enough in Chapter V but assumes more and more place as the book progresses. A good part of the time Miss Chute maintains the biographical attitude while she is writing criticism by speaking in terms of the writer rather than in terms of the work. A sentence such as the following demonstrates this technique: "As a good and obedient follower of the cult of the Rose, Chaucer placed The Book of the Duchess within the framework of a dream (...)"⁹. Miss Chute might have written: "The Book of the Duchess is placed within the framework of a dream." Her manner serves to maintain the focus on her subject rather than on his work. She does not do this all the time, but often enough to make the reader aware that he is reading what is supposed to be a biography and not a piece of criticism first and foremost.

Another technique whereby Marchette Chute integrates the criticism with the biography is the use of biographical or historical fact as a point of departure for a passage of criticism. The following passage illustrates this technique.

Chaucer mentions this residence over Aldgate in the only autobiographical remark concerning his surroundings to be found in his poetry. He says that as soon as his day's work was over he did not look for "rest and newe thynges" but hurried home at once and buried himself in "another book". He was not even interested, he says, in what his neighbors were doing. All he wanted to do was to read, and he behaved exactly as a hermit except that he was not precisely a man of "abstinence." Having a home of his own evidently made it possible for Chaucer to indulge in an orgy of reading, and he read with the passion of a man who suddenly realizes how many kinds of books there are in the world and how few of them he has read.

The poem from which this autobiographical passage is taken is called The House of Fame, and the mark of books is clear upon it even without Chaucer's testimony.¹⁰

9 Marchette Chute, Op. cit., p. 92.

10 Ibid., pp. 108-109.

The ensuing eight pages are devoted to an exposition and criticism of The House of Fame. The significant thing is that some element of integration is achieved by the use of this "point of departure" technique.

The Chaucerian criticism has a most significant position in this biography: it is, in the latter half of the book, the element that holds the biography together. The dearth of biographical material makes it necessary for Marchette Chute to fall back on Chaucer's work to achieve unity in her book. The probable order of writing of the Chaucer works therefore becomes the main thread upon which the story of Chaucer is woven. Earlier in the biography, where facts are a little more abundant and surmises a little safer, the movement can be roughly chronological; later on it cannot be chronological, and this is where the criticism assumes a unifying function.

With her second biography, Shakespeare of London, Marchette Chute found herself in a happier position with regard to the availability of facts. Although information about Shakespeare's life was relatively sparse, there was nevertheless a great deal more that could be said with certainty about Shakespeare than about Chaucer. Not only were there more facts available, but more documents were at Miss Chute's disposal from which legitimate conclusions could be made.

This factor gives rise to the presence of a significant difference between Shakespeare of London and Geoffrey Chaucer of England. The Chaucer biography must be termed a literary biography because of its high criticism content. This is what Miss Chute says about the Shakespeare biography:

This book is not a literary biography. It does not concern the part of Shakespeare that was immortal and for all time. It concerns only that part of him that was mortal and belonged to the Elizabethan stage.¹¹

In other words, the biography is primarily concerned with the man as he was known when he lived, and not with the writer, nor his works as such. This principle is never lost sight of in the book. Even before she describes that part of his life that has to do with the stage Miss Chute nevertheless has the stage in mind. In Chapter I, speaking of William's father, John, she writes: "He had also become the father of a son named William who had a considerable success on the London stage."¹² In those parts of the biography that describe Shakespeare's adult life the focus is on Shakespeare as an actor and only incidentally as a writer. Indeed, the order followed in tracing the subject's life is the probable order of the production of Shakespeare's plays. A great deal of the background is background of the theater. Chapter V, for instance, is devoted to a discussion of the art of acting, the difficulties involved, the techniques favored by the Elizabethan theater, the repertory system, etc. The result is that Shakespeare stands in silhouette against the vivid and detailed background of the world of the Elizabethan theater.

This is not to say that there is no criticism in Shakespeare of London. There is some discussion of Shakespeare's poems and there is an appendix devoted to the sonnets. As for the plays they are dealt

¹¹ Marchette Chute, Forward, in Shakespeare of London, New York, Dutton, 1946, p. ix.

¹² Marchette Chute, Shakespeare of London, p. 2.

with more as theatrical productions than as literary pieces. A good case in point is Romeo and Juliet which Marchette Chute discusses in Chapter VII.¹³ Every phase of the first production of this play is described: its licensing, its adaptation for the stage, the writing of individual actors' parts, the casting, the music, costumes and setting, rehearsals, fines and advertising. There follows a short criticism of the play - from the point of view of its effectiveness as a stage production. There is little textual criticism of any of the plays.

Through the chapters in which the plays are discussed, focus is maintained on Shakespeare as the writer of the plays, as an actor in them, or as the interested observer in their production. Where a direct fact about Shakespeare cannot be legitimately made, attention on him is maintained by statements of surmises about him. And again such statements are presented as surmises and not as fact. This is the case in all of Marchette Chute's biographies, for her concern, first and foremost is authenticity. To achieve this quality in Shakespeare of London she places herself under a particularly stringent restriction. She mentions this in the Forward of the biography.

In dealing with Shakespeare's life, I have taken what seems to me the safest course and have based it entirely on contemporary documents. I have used no evidence that is dated later than 1635; and I have accepted a document as late as this (nineteen years after Shakespeare's death) only because it records testimony given by Cuthbert Burdage, the last survivor of the original group of London theater men who had worked with Shakespeare.¹⁴

The necessity for such a move is subsequently explained.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 152-168.

¹⁴ Marchette Chute, Forward, in Shakespeare of London, p. xi.

It was not until the Restoration that anyone was sufficiently interested in Shakespeare's life to begin writing about it, and by that time all the men who had known him were dead and the conditions under which he had worked had completely disappeared. What the men of the Restoration wrote about Shakespeare has had an enormous influence on all subsequent biographies and cannot be altogether ignored. On the other hand, it has no documentary support and cannot legitimately be included in the body of this particular book.¹⁵

The effect of such a situation is that Marchette Chute more than ever finds it necessary to impose herself on her biography. The legends that have been built up about Shakespeare are mentioned and then either accepted or rejected. The exposition and explanation that this necessitates breaks in on the narrative. Examples of this show themselves constantly. Here is one.

It has been suggested that on one hot evening in July, when William Shakespeare was eleven years old, he was taken to the castle at Kenilworth to see part of the show with which the Earl of Leicester was entertaining Queen Elizabeth... It is very unlikely, in any case, that Shakespeare would have been allowed to leave school in July to make so long a trip. Fifteen miles in those days was a journey of real magnitude; and since no one in Stratford could have known how charmingly suitable it would have been for England's great future dramatist to meet England's great queen, it must remain exceedingly unlikely that he ever made the trip to Kenilworth at all.¹⁶

Mention has already been made of the great amount of time and painstaking research that have gone into this biography. The background here is particularly well illuminated. Facts are often chosen for their interest and entertainment value. The book is sprinkled with passages such as the following:

An inhabitant of Stratford was fined if he let his dog go unmuzzled, if his duck wandered, if he played cards "or any

15 Idem.

16 Marchette Chute, Shakespeare of London, p. 21.

other unlawful games", if his children were not at home by eight o'clock in the summertime, if he failed to sweep his gutters or if he borrowed gravel from the town gravel pits.¹⁷

As an occasion in Shakespeare's life or one closely associated with him is presented, Miss Chute will take the opportunity to talk about some relevant topic that is suggested. When she records the Christmas, 1594 stand of the Chamberlain's company at Queen Elizabeth's court, she takes advantage of the situation to open a discussion on Queen Elizabeth. Similarly, the following statement is a signal for the launching of a long discussion about James I: "From the point of view of Shakespeare and his fellow actors, the most important question about the new kind was how he felt about the theater."¹⁸

Frequent and lengthy presentation of background material, interesting as it is in itself, raises a problem. The danger is that the subject of the biography may be easily lost sight of. This danger is increased in biographies where the subject's life is obscure. Miss Chute maintains focus on her subject, despite the difficulty, by referring to Shakespeare in those chapters that do not deal directly with him. All but two of the chapters have in their last paragraph some significant statement about him; many of the chapters begin with paragraphs in which his name is mentioned. Thus, by alluding to her subject at such key points Marchette Chute keeps him constantly in view and incidentally achieves the continuity that is essential to the biography.

17 Ibid., pp. 2-3.

18 Ibid., p. 254.

Shakespeare of London is essentially the same type of biography as Geoffrey Chaucer of England, biography in silhouette. Marchette Chute writes in her Forward to the Shakespeare biography.

(...) There has been a tendency to take each aspect of Shakespeare's career separately and brood upon it, instead of setting his career as a whole against the background of his own day. Any man will become incomprehensible if he is isolated from his background.¹⁹

In the same Forward the following statement appears: "More is known about Shakespeare than about any other playwright of the period with the single exception of Ben Jonson."²⁰ Marchette Chute's next biography is Ben Jonson of Westminster. To say that more information is available about Jonson than about Shakespeare is not to say very much. With Jonson there is still the problem that plagued Marchette Chute in the two earlier biographies - lack of reliable information. Miss Chute refers to this lack.

Very little is known about Jonson's family or about his private life. The lives of most Elizabethan writers are shadowy enough, since the age of biography had not yet dawned, but Jonson was especially hard to trace since his name was so common.²¹

One senses that the voluminous research that went into Shakespeare of London provided Marchette Chute with a large segment of the material used in Ben Jonson of Westminster. It must have opened her eyes to the presence of another interesting subject. Information about the Jonson biography is not as readily available as for the previous two works. Whereas the other biographies have Forwards or Appendices that

¹⁹ Marchette Chute, Forward, in Shakespeare of London, p. ix.

²⁰ Idem.

²¹ Marchette Chute, Ben Jonson of Westminster, New York, Dutton, 1953, p. 44.

shed some light on the author's particular purposes, problems and methods, Ben Jonson of Westminster has none. Nor is there any periodical article in which Miss Chute talks about this book. One may justifiably conclude, therefore, that it presented no peculiar problems, and that a large bulk of the work was done even before a life of Jonson was thought of.

Ben Jonson of Westminster covers the life and times of a man who was a contemporary of Shakespeare. Consequently a great deal of the general religious, political and social background is the same. Jonson and Shakespeare were both poets and playwrights as well. As a matter of fact, identical pieces of information are used in the two books in many cases. The following material from Ben Jonson of Westminster might have been used, and is used (in a different way), in Shakespeare of London.

When Ben Jonson entered the theater, two great acting companies dominated the London horizon. Of these two, the Chamberlain's company had the more intelligent organization and the longer life, for the actors were close personal friends as well as experienced men of the theater and they operated as a self-contained democratic unit. William Shakespeare belonged to this company and remained with it as long as he stayed in the theater. Another member was Richard Burbage, who was rapidly becoming the most popular performer in London and who scored a personal triumph in the lead of Shakespeare's Richard III.²²

In this passage, of course, the focus is on Jonson, whereas Shakespeare and Burbage are mentioned in passing. But there is nothing new about any of the information itself.

There are, however, whole areas of background peculiar to Ben Jonson of Westminster. One of these is the Classics field. Jonson is

²² Ibid., p. 46.

seen against this background throughout, from his youth when his education was geared along Classic lines, to his writing which was the product of a mind steeped in the subject matter and discipline of the Classics.

Jonson is seen, too, against the background of the theater. As was the case in the Shakespeare work there is little textual criticism. The plays are criticized not as literary pieces but as theatrical productions with emphasis, where possible, on their biographical aspect. The criticism of Every Man in His Humour furnishes a good illustration of this last point.

Only once does Jonson's fierceness break through. This is towards the end of the play when the prose suddenly changes to verse and the hero launches into a long speech on the subject of poetry. Poetry is a holy thing, fit only to be seen by grave and consecrated eyes, and yet it was currently being travestied and misused in the theater. The men who wrote the plays were the ones Sidney had called 'poet-apes' and it seemed a shocking thing to Jonson

That such lean, ignorant and blasted wits,
Such brainless gulls, should utter their stolen wares
With such applause in our vulgar ears,
Or that their slubbered lines have current pass
From the fat judgments of the multitude.²³

Another area of activity that is particularly well detailed in Ben Jonson of Westminster is Jonson's career as a masque writer. The years during which Jonson collaborated with Inigo Jones at the commission of the Court are vividly portrayed. There seems to be more detailed information available regarding the masques than there is about the plays and Marchette Chute takes full advantage of it. In this biography the productions of the masques and the plays give the continuity to the story.

²³ Ibid., pp. 68-69.

they are the thread upon which the story is spun.

There is a constant attempt in Ben Jonson of Westminster to hold up Jonson in contrast to Shakespeare. The habit of Marchette Chute of drawing parallels and contrasts is nothing new. In both Geoffrey Chaucer of England and Shakespeare of London she devotes extensive space to the contemporaries of her subjects. However the contrast between the personality and writing of Jonson and Shakespeare in the Jonson biography assumes more than incidental importance. Miss Chute constantly refers to the paradox of Shakespeare and Jonson (the former, a disciplined man in behaviour but in his writing unhampered by the conventions of art; the latter, erratic in his personal life but conformist in his writing), because it is an effective way of portraying the personality of Ben Jonson.

Essentially, Ben Jonson of Westminster is in the tradition of Marchette Chute's two earlier biographies. Her next work, Two Gentle Men, is the same type of biography as well, but there are technical differences about it that require explanation. In other words, it is biography in silhouette but within this framework something new is attempted.

Two Gentle Men contains two separate biographies: Part I is the life of George Herbert; Part II the life of Robert Herrick. Marchette Chute explains why she wanted to write about these two men.

They are two of the loveliest poets in the English language and I thought they might be contrasted effectively since Herbert's religious poetry is that of a saint and Herrick's love songs are those of a delightful devil.²⁴

²⁴ Marchette Chute, "How a Book Grows", in Library Journal, Vol. 84, issue of September 1, 1959, p. 2431.

The statement also suggests why both lives are included between the same covers. In a way it could be said that Miss Chute is merely doing here in a much more organized and conscious fashion what she had done in Ben Jonson of Westminster with Jonson and Shakespeare: using the element of contrast to make the picture of her subject clearer.

It is interesting to note that the final product was not at all what Marchette Chute had planned at the outset. She writes in this connection:

It was not going to be the two brief, unlinked sketches I had originally intended. Instead I would place my two poets against a moving panorama telling the background material in straight chronological order and lighting up Herbert and Herrick against it.²⁵

The particular background against which Herrick and Herbert are seen is that of the contemporary Church of England in which both men were country parsons. The religious background of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century was an area of which Miss Chute, by her own admission, had previously not been too cognisant. Her previous research into this period had not necessitated a deep investigation of this area because Shakespeare and Jonson were not particularly religiously motivated men. With Herbert and Herrick though, religious background was essential.

In the opening chapters of the Herbert biography Marchette Chute relies heavily on background material. The opening chapter is taken up with an introduction to the Herbert family. George is not mentioned until page sixteen and then only briefly, and it is not until the end

25 Ibid., p. 2432.

of the chapter that he is mentioned again. The opening chapters deal with the school he attended, the situation at Cambridge when he was there and only occasionally are there direct allusions made to George Herbert. Again, the reason is the lack of authenticated fact about him, as Miss Chute explains.

The only available information about Herbert's childhood comes from Isaac Walton, who wrote a series of short Lives with the same affectionate care he lavished on fishing. The biography of Herbert was written nearly forty years after his death as a product of Walton's old age, and it is deliberately designed to be the life of a saint.²⁶

For the later chapters on Herbert, Marchette Chute was more fortunate for she had at her disposal a personal record of the highest value, Herbert's collected poems, The Temple. Miss Chute points to the biographical value of this book.

A gentleman keeps his emotions to himself, and there was evidently very little in Herbert's outward manner to show his loneliness, his restlessness, the anguish of a man who had lost his way. He kept this for the poems he wrote in English, the poems that were not published during his lifetime and in which he showed his heart.²⁷

That The Temple was autobiographical and intended by Herbert to be so, Miss Chute furnishes proof:

The book had one value in Herbert's eyes. It was a record of what he had gone through before he found peace, "a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that had passed betwixt God and my soul before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master in whose service I have now found perfect peace."²⁸

26 Marchette Chute, Two Gentle Men, New York, Dutton, 1959, p.22.

27 Ibid., p. 106.

28 Ibid., p. 148.

The information furnished in The Temple is not in the nature of facts about Herbert's life; rather it is the account of the psychological struggle within Herbert concerning his vocation. For those chapters in which the struggle is exposed Miss Chute relies heavily on the poetry. She quotes directly passages that illustrate aspects of the struggle. With regard to his career in the ministry, for example, Marchette Chute writes the following.

He experienced many times, for instance, a furious sense of having been trapped into giving his life to a service in which he could not succeed and from which he could not escape. All the worlds of love and courtliness and learning were open to him as an aristocrat, and it sometimes infuriated him to be bound by so tight a tether.

Full of rebellion, I would die,
Or fight, or travel, or deny
That Thou hast aught to do with me.²⁹

Marchette Chute's close reliance on Herbert's poetry for biographical purposes gives rise to a good deal of literary criticism of the poems. The two go hand in hand. One can hardly conceive of an author being aware of good poetry without saying it is good and why it is good. There is more criticism per se in the first half of Two Gentle Men than in either the Shakespeare or Jonson biography.

The Robert Herrick section of Two Gentle Men begins on a significant note. The first paragraph emphasizes the dual approach that is taken, an approach that is maintained throughout Marchette Chute's portrayal of the life of Herrick.

George Herbert and Robert Herrick were born less than two years apart and they had several things in common. Both of them graduated from the University of Cambridge, both

29 Ibid., pp. 110-111.

MARCHETTE CHUTE'S PRACTICE OF BIOGRAPHY

67

of them became country clergymen in the same year of 1630, and both of them produced a single book of poems.³⁰

The dual approach stresses not only the parallel between the two but the contrast as well, and the same first paragraph goes on to say:

But the Church of England needed a wide roof to accommodate two men as unlike as the saintly rector of Bemerton and the somewhat pagan vicar of Dean Prior.³¹

With regard to sources of information about her man Marchette Chute is not as fortunate in Herrick's poetry as she was in Herbert's. Robert Herrick's Hesperides is, on the whole, not autobiographical. When it is autobiographical she takes due advantage.

A remote parish like Dean Prior was probably even less civilized than the one at Bemerton and some of Herrick's most scurrilous epigrams seem to be pointed at his own parishioners. Or perhaps it is only a coincidence that some of the names he used, Scobble and Mudge, Dundridge and Coone appear also in the Dean Prior register.³²

As usual there is the problem of scarcity of reliable material. Miss Chute remarks, for instance:

It is not known what Robert Herrick was doing during the Commonwealth except for a later report that at the end of the period he was living in St. Anne's parish in Westminster.³³

To solve the dilemma, however, she resorts to her usual method of safe surmises.

It is not improbable that Herrick was living in St. Anne's Lane. It was near the Almshouse, where Herrick is known to have been living on an earlier occasion, and would be a natural place of residence for a man with so many Westminster connections.³⁴

30 Ibid., p. 155.

31 Idem.

32 Ibid., pp. 206-207.

33 Ibid., p. 265.

34 Idem.

It seems evident enough that Marchette Chute's treatment of her five subjects is essentially the same. Her type of biography is best described in her own term - biography in silhouette. There are accidental differences among the biographies but they are differences that spring from the relative availability of information about her subjects. The task of appraisal of Marchette Chute's biography: of seeing it in the light of her own theory and in the light of what is recognized as pure biography shall be the task of the final chapter

CHAPTER FIVE

EVALUATION

Now that some study has been made of Marchette Chute's biographies and of her ideas about what biography should be it seems appropriate to see the extent to which her practice is consonant with her theory. The exposition of Miss Chute's theory of biography has shown that her views are consistent with those of Harold Nicolson. With Nicolson, she believes that a biography must be completely authentic, that it must portray the individuality and personality of the subject, and that it must be artistic.

To say that Marchette Chute is an authentic writer at this point seems anti-climactic. In the chapters of this study that concern her theory and practice of biography this quality has been illustrated again and again. The propensity of Miss Chute for authenticity is nothing less than remarkable. One of the most striking examples of this passion for authenticity is in connection with Shakespeare of London, where she refused to accept any source which did not appear within nineteen years of her subject's death. This move borders on the exaggerated. John A. Garraty makes allusion to this:

Some authors believe that these biographies (i.e., earlier biographies of the subject) should not even be read by the later writer - that their interpretations may influence his and, in any case, that he should verify all evidence by reference to primary sources. Marchette Chute, for instance, claims that in her life of Shakespeare she used only sources which appeared within nineteen years of her hero's death. While it is certainly wise to trace all facts to their ultimate origins there is no reason why a fair minded author cannot read secondary accounts and take advantage of the

information and insights that they may offer. Earlier works frequently contain valuable evidence not obtainable elsewhere, even though they may be poor biographies. The author, for example, may have known the subject himself, in which case his book will probably be full of firsthand accounts of great potential importance. Such material may be suspect and should be checked but it ought not to be ignored.¹

Garraty's objection may hold generally, but in view of Miss Chute's discoveries about the unsound premises of Shakespeare's Restoration biographers it has little value when applied to Marchette Chute's self-imposed restriction in writing Shakespeare of London.

In view of Marchette Chute's caution there, however, one wonders about the situation with regard to her biography of George Herbert, in Two Gentle Men. Two Gentle Men is appendaged by six pages entitled "Walton's Biography of Herbert". Here is the opening paragraph:

Izaak Walton published his life of George Herbert in 1670, when he was in his late seventies and living as a guest in the palace of the Bishop of Winchester. Unlike his earlier Lives, which were written on request, this one was "a free-will offering... writ chiefly to please myself." His other motive in writing the little book on Herbert was to show the Restoration clergy what the life of a minister in the Church of England ought to be. Walton was troubled when he considered "how few of the clergy lived like him then, and how many live so unlike him now," and he wrote the biography to supply "a pattern of virtue to all posterity, and especially to his brethren of the clergy."²

In other words, for Marchette Chute, the authenticity of Walton's life of Herbert is questionable: Walton had a thesis and the danger was that the truth would suffer. One therefore is somewhat surprised to find

1 John A. Garraty, The Nature of Biography, New York, Knopf, 1957, p. 212.

2 Marchette Chute, Two Gentle Men, New York, Dutton, 1959, p. 277.

that in her life of Herbert Miss Chute uses Walton as a source. Concerning the burial of Herbert's mother she writes the following:

She was buried on the eighth of June in the parish church of St. Luke's, which stood east of Danvers House on the other side of the lane, but her funeral sermon was delayed until the first of July so that John Donne could deliver it. He had known and loved her for a quarter of a century, and Izaak Walton, who was in the church that day, saw him openly weeping. Walton saw George Herbert also, tall, "very straight" and very thin.³

And there are other references from Walton.

There is surely a lack of consistency here. Walton wrote his life some forty years after Herbert's death. Marchette Chute is accepting facts furnished by a man she knows to be prejudiced taken from a work that is far removed in time from its subject's life. In justice to Miss Chute, however, it must be stressed that material having its source in Walton is prefixed by the fact that it is - and is therefore presented with a certain reservation.

There are numerous times in Marchette Chute's biographies when facts are presented with reservations, and it is this that gives rise to one fault of her work. The Chute biographies are too tentative. The "probably's", "possibly's", "perhaps's"; the frequent necessity of prefixing statements with "it seems safe to assume", "it may have been that", "it is almost certain that": these factors infringe upon the story to the extent that something is lost. Certainly this is not the fault of the biographer; it is the fault of circumstances that have their particular causes in the scarcity of proven information about the

³ Ibid., p. 104.

subjects chosen. But be that as it may, something of the conviction of the biography is destroyed. It is fortunate that more information is available about the times than about the men. Miss Chute does not have to be tentative about her background material and this is what gives her men their silhouette appearance.

There is another objection about Marchette Chute's biographies that can be raised at this time. It was said above that "material having its source in Walton is prefixed by the fact that it is?" This statement calls for an obvious question: How do we know it is? The question is necessary because time after time in each of the biographies Miss Chute gives facts without mentioning their source. How then can one safely say that material having its source in Walton is prefixed by the fact that is? Simply because one who has read the biographies and the articles of Marchette Chute cannot but be convinced of her honesty, and one can safely presume that where a statement is of doubtful value she will present it as such.

The objection that Marchette Chute does not always give her source is a legitimate one. G.D. Harrison, for one, takes exception to this habit and explains why:

Shakespeare of London can be recommended as a good book for the public for which it was written. Students will not find it so useful. It is not mere pedantry in scholars which demands that the author of a book about the past shall acknowledge the sources of her facts. From time to time Miss Chute makes interesting statements which the curious and interested reader will wish to pursue; but without the source he is left wondering where the author found the fact or whether she invented it.

There is also a matter of literary ethics involved. In 1931, for instance, Dr. Leslie Hotson published his discovery of a new and interesting fact about Shakespeare which he had unearthed from the Public Record Office in London. A modern author who

uses that fact should at least acknowledge the debt to Dr. Hotson; it is not enough merely to include his book Shakespeare vs Shalloe amongst the other works listed in the ten pages of select bibliography. There is, admittedly, such a prejudice against footnotes in popular books that the author has always to face the problem of whether to take the cash of popular sale or to let the credits go. I believe that Miss Chute has made the wrong choice, for with proper documentation this would have been a most useful book for all students of Shakespeare.⁴

There is value, of course, in this criticism. Scholarship demands that all sources be acknowledged. To imply, however, that Marchette Chute's choice of her course of action was prompted by monetary considerations is grossly unjust. Consider, for example, these statements of Miss Chute.

A single paragraph has sometimes been built up from a dozen different sources of information, and to list these sources would in some cases take more room than the writing itself now occupies. The bibliography lists only a fraction of the books that were used in preparing the text, and I am sorry that lack of space has made it impossible to give individual credit to the thousands of publications, from the middle of the sixteenth century to the middle of the twentieth that have helped me in writing Shakespeare of London.⁵

This does not excuse Marchette Chute's neglect of the traditional technics of scholarship, but it explains her problem adequately and absolves her from Harrison's over-simplified accusation.

There can be no doubt about Marchette Chute's scholarship. Critics, though wary at first of assigning so sacred a title on one who has disregarded some of its technical aspects, later have acknowledged this. With reference to Ben Jonson of Westminster, C.J. Rolo says this:

4 G.B. Harrison, book review, in Commonweal, Vol. 52, No. 6, issue of May 19, 1950, p. 156.

5 Marchette Chute, Forward, in Shakespeare of London, New York, Dutton, 1949, p. xii.

"Miss Chute combines with a painstaking scholarship a gift for bringing facts to life."⁶ Richard D. Altick puts it this way:

In popular biography restraint is a virtue considerable as it is rare. It is difficult - how difficult nobody can know who has not tried it - to assimilate the contents of hundreds of specialized and complicated books and articles, and then to distill their essential facts into an easily comprehended narrative without doing violence to the truth. Miss Chute's sense of responsibility has won her the respect of professional scholars, who are notoriously chary of bestowing their blessing on avowed popularizers.⁷

The most meticulous efforts of scholars to get at the truth may sometimes meet with failure and if Marchette Chute is occasionally caught in error it may be ascribed to human frailty. Oscar James Campbell, writing about Shakespeare of London, alludes to this.

She is sometimes unwary of her interpretation of the evidence - as when she assumes that "Shakespeare broke with his wife, Anne, within two or three years of his marriage" and that in London he was always a lodger in some other man's house. The fact is that Shakespeare was himself a householder in the Parish of St. Helen in the year 1596. The high taxes assessed against his dwelling show that it was commodious enough to provide ample quarters for his family of five. There is no proof on earth that they did not live with him. It is only logical to assume that they did.⁸

However, Campbell goes on to say that in the long run this is not grave.

Occasionally Miss Chute misreads the evidence and even falls into a few errors of fact, but these are really minor blemishes on an otherwise excellent piece of imaginative scholarship.⁹

6 C.J. Rolo, book review, in Atlantic Monthly, Vol. 192, issue of November, 1953, p. 108.

7 Richard D. Altick, "How Lives Are Written", in The Nation, Vol. 184, issue of December 19, 1959, p. 470.

8 Oscar James Campbell, book review, in Saturday Review, Vol. 30, issue of April 1, 1950, p. 14.

9 Idem.

The principle of authenticity as applied to the writing of biography is, of course, intimately connected with scholarship. The second principle of pure biography, the portrayal of the subject's personality and individuality, is not so directly connected with scholarship, but there is an indirect connection: the material from which the subject's personality is built up must be factual. But the task of portraying personality is not itself one of scholarship, but rather of craftsmanship. One cannot help but think of Boswell's Life of Jonson as an example of personality portrayal at its best. Boswell succeeded in building up a living picture of Johnson for two reasons: first, he had the facts to work with; second, he had the gift for using the facts towards building up the personality of his man. Any discussion of Marchette Chute's portrayal of personality must be seen in the light of the fact that the information needed to portray, in any great depth, the personality of her subjects was unavailable to Miss Chute. The depth of personality portrayal of Marchette Chute's subjects varies in direct proportion to the availability of facts about them. Thus, very little of Chaucer's personality comes out; George Herbert is somewhat better developed especially in his career as an Anglican clergyman for which Miss Chute draws heavily from his autobiographical The Temple.

That has been said previously about the tentativeness of Marchette Chute's biography can be applied to her depiction of personality. She must be careful about drawing conclusions: the facts are simply not there; the anecdotes are not reliable. And so the personality aspect suffers and its depiction resolves itself into statements of this type:

All the contemporary evidence about Shakespeare unites to show that in his professional life he was a relaxed and happy man, almost incapable of taking offence. He did not participate in any of the literary feuds of the period, which recur in every century but were particularly numerous in the Elizabethan age, with its delightful talent for invective. As a contemporary of his, Sir John Davies, said admiringly of "our English Terence, Master William Shakespeare",

Thou hast no railing but a reigning wit.

Part of his dislike of "railing" can be laid to Shakespeare's natural good temper and instinctive courtesy, which earned him the title of "gentle" Shakespeare, but some of it must have been caused by the favorable conditions that surrounded his professional life. He worked for sixteen years without friction and without restraint in the art he had chosen, sure of himself, of his tools and of his results. Professionally he was a fortunate man, and equally fortunate were the men who had the privilege of working with him.¹⁰

This is personality portrayal but it is too general and too tentative to bring Shakespeare to life.

As has been mentioned, Marchette Chute achieves her greatest success with personality portrayal in her life of Herbert in Two Gentle Men. Such a passage as the following, for example, does more to define the individuality of Herbert than any number of possibilities and probabilities.

To feel nothing but disorder in a world of natural order, nothing but uselessness in a universe of use, made Herbert long for some kind of a simple, innocent solution that would bring his life into a clear pattern again. But he knew quite well that this sort of remedy was not available to him. He was a tense, complex, highly educated man who had dedicated his life to the service of a difficult God and who now knew the agony of being more distant than ever from his goal.¹¹

¹⁰ Marchette Chute, Shakespeare of London, p. 134.

¹¹ Marchette Chute, Two Gentle Men, p. 108.

Generally, though, Marchette Chute fails in the depiction of personality. The failure is not one attributable to her. The biographies she writes were never intended to be studies in depth of her subjects, as her frequent use of the term "silhouette" to describe her type of biography indicates. It must be said, however, that where circumstances allow, her depiction of personality is excellent. It is to her credit, not only as a scholar but as a biographer as well, that she does not stretch the truth to create an interesting character.

We may turn now to a discussion of the biographies of Marchette Chute in connection with the third requisite of pure biography, the artistic element. The extent to which a biography may be artistic has already been discussed. Allusion has been made as well to the relationship between this artistic element and the second requisite of pure biography, the portrayal of personality. Although authentic information about her subjects is too scarce to allow Miss Chute to present a continuous portrayal of them in depth, there is sufficient evidence to show that, given the material to work with, the personality would have been forthcoming.

This is not to say that there is nothing artistic about biography in silhouette. C.J. Rolo points to the particular artistic merit of Shakespeare of London. He speaks of the detailed background presented by Marchette Chute and then goes on, "Fitted against this painstakingly recreated background, Shakespeare's career takes shape in clearer perspective."¹²

¹² C.J. Rolo, book review, in Atlantic Monthly, Vol. 185, issue of April, 1950, p. 82.

There is another element that must be considered in a discussion of the artistic in biography, and that is the element of style. The facts may be there, personality may be depicted, but without a certain finesse of expression a biography would be most ineffective. There is nothing particularly outstanding about the writing style of Marchette Chute and it is in this that its merit lies. E.A. Robie calls it: "simple, direct, and entertaining."¹³ Richard D. Altick refers to "her resolutely undramatic prose",¹⁴ and to "the sober grace of her style."¹⁵ Miss Chute's style might best be described as adequate. Biography requires nothing more than this; such tentative biography as Miss Chute writes demands and, in fact, is the cause of a plain style.

There is a temptation to too quickly brand Marchette Chute's style as over-simplified. Altick mentions and counters this.

Actually considered, to be sure, Miss Chute's prose seems to be; it has the air, as Chesterton said of Matthew Arnold's essays, of a schoolmaster explaining things to a class of idiot children. But a careful reading of Two Gentle Men will show how deceptive this first impression is. I suspect that Miss Chute spends as much time over her sentence as Herrick did in carving his well-wrought poetic cherrystones. And the sober grace of her style does not limit it to a single key. Actually it is, in its modest way, a flexible instrument, which like the Church of England's roof, can accomodate the contrasting spirits of two lives like Herbert's and Herrick's (...)¹⁶

In summary, then, it can be said that, on the whole, the biographies of Marchette Chute are as close to what Harold Nicolson

¹³ E.A. Robie, book review, in Library Journal, Vol. 84, issue of September 15, 1959, p. 2635.

¹⁴ Richard D. Altick, Op. cit., p. 470.

¹⁵ Idem.

¹⁶ Idem.

envisions as pure biography as circumstances allow; that the depiction of personality leaves something to be desired but through no fault of the biographer; that the other requisites of pure biography are fulfilled. There is but one other possible reservation to be made before Marchette Chute's work may be designated as pure biography.

In the remarks made earlier, in Chapter III, about the different kinds of biography that have been produced, mention was made of the "pedestal" school of biography. One wonders if Marchette Chute, at least occasionally, does not bend too far in favor of her subjects. She has understandably developed a great love for her men. She is the first to admit the possibility that, unconsciously, some of this love could spill over into the biographies to the extent that the truth would suffer. Such a passage as the following seems somewhat exaggerated in favor of Shakespeare although it is left in the realm of surmises by the clause, "as far as all the available evidence goes."

His friend, William Shakespeare, was almost Jonson's complete opposite. As far as all the available evidence goes he was never in prison, never fought a duel with anyone, never bore a grudge, was very careful with his money, and lived and worked for twenty harmonious years with the same group of men.¹⁷

One is ready to accept everything except that Shakespeare "never bore a grudge." Fortunately, statements of this kind are rare.

One senses in the tone of the biographies, as well, a certain partiality towards the subjects. Marchette Chute's life of Robert Herrick in Two Gentle Men offers illustration of this point. Miss Chute

¹⁷ Marchette Chute, Shakespeare of London, p. 205.

pictures Herrick as a most unconscientious minister in the Church of England. From her life of Herbert we know the high regard she places on faithfulness to duty. Yet she constantly attempts to absolve Herrick of fault - and not too convincingly. Passages such as the following are frequent enough.

A country minister who did not take his religious duties seriously, had time on his hands, and the sin of sloth was usually considered to be his chief temptation. Herrick had no inclination to sloth, not as long as there was a blank sheet of paper in front of him and lines of poetry running through his head.¹⁸

Whether or not such occasional deviations from the ideal should anathematize work of general excellence must remain a matter of opinion. From the point of view of this writer there is too much of the real biographer in Marchette Chute and her merits far out-balance her short-comings.

John A. Garraty who accepts Harold Nicolson's theory of biography is not at all begrudging in his approval of Marchette Chute. He refers to her as, "one of the best of the modern biographers",¹⁹ and as one "who has managed to write biographies of men like Chaucer and Shakespeare (whose personal lives can only be reconstructed imaginatively) without violating the canons of her profession."²⁰ This is high praise from an exponent of pure biography.

18 Marchette Chute, Two Gentle Men, p. 218.

19 John A. Garraty, Op. cit., pp. 165-166.

20 Ibid., p. 21.

There remains now only to examine a few technical aspects of Marchette Chute's biographies. The test of any book, but especially of a popular book of biography, is readability. Miss Chute's writing style has been examined already and has been found acceptable as to readability. Two other much smaller, but important, aspects might be mentioned here.

The first of these has to do with the length of chapters. In Shakespeare of London the chapters are too long: they run from fifteen to thirty pages; most of them are over twenty pages long. The same is true, generally, of Geoffrey Chaucer of England. Chapters of such length become cumbersome and unattractive to the reader although it is difficult to know just why this is so. In Ben Jonson of Westminster and Two Gentle Men the chapters are more compact and therefore more appealing to the reader, running in length from six to twelve pages.

The other factor has to do with footnotes of an explanatory kind. Geoffrey Chaucer of England, especially, is loaded down with such footnotes. They are interesting enough but one wonders why they are introduced as foot-notes. It appears that in most cases, the information they contain might just as easily have been written into the text. As they are, they slow up the reader and destroy, albeit to a slight extent, the continuity of the narrative.

Neither of these factors effects radically the readability of Marchette Chute's biographies. They are observations of a technical nature directed more towards the books as books.

There are, finally, a few remarks that might be made about Marchette Chute's biographies as scholarly works. Miss Chute's habit of omitting foot-note references has already been discussed. There are, however, two useful items of a scholarly nature in each of her four biographies: a selected bibliography and an index.

The selected bibliographies comprise only a small number of the books and periodicals Marchette Chute has consulted. To have included all of them would have been a practical impossibility. The ones that are listed are those that proved of most value to her and would be of greatest benefit to the reader in following up information.

The indexes have been arranged with the accent on detail. The index in Shakespeare of London contains over one thousand major headings, many of which have sub-headings for purposes of cross reference. The indexes in the other three books are uniformly excellent and are a further testimony to Marchette Chute's painstaking care and workmanship.

CONCLUSION

In the concluding remarks on the work of Marchette Chute, it is relevant to comment upon three factors: the extent to which the biographical theory of Marchette Chute is in accord with that of Harold Nicolson; the extent to which Marchette Chute's biographical practice is in accord with the theory of Harold Nicolson; and the extent to which Marchette Chute's biographical practice is in accord with her own biographical theory.

With respect to the first factor, it is evident that there is agreement between the biographical theory of Miss Chute and that of Nicolson. The latter demands that there be three requirements before a man's life may be called a pure biography. A pure biography must be authentic; it must depict the personality of the subject; it must be a work of art. An examination of the periodical articles written by Marchette Chute, and of the Forwards and Appendixes in her biographies shows that she believes these same requirements to be necessary for good biography. There is great emphasis in Miss Chute's expository writings on the principle of authenticity; less on the other two principles.

Because there is a basic agreement in theory between Marchette Chute and Harold Nicolson, it follows that the second and third factors mentioned above can be discussed together. In her practice of biography Miss Chute adheres closely to the principle of authenticity: she has made maximum efforts to establish the truth of the statements about her subjects and about all the material that is included in her books. Similarly, she has gone to great efforts to ensure that the interpretation given to the facts is not biased, and if there are occasional

lapses here they may very well be unconscious ones.

In her implementation of the second principle of pure biography, the depiction of the personality and individuality of the subject, Marchette Chute is not as successful. The number of authenticated facts and anecdotes at her disposal is limited - too limited to furnish the selection needed for the accurate portrayal of personality. The result is that many tentative statements are made about her subjects' personalities, and this very tentativeness is incompatible with the definiteness that the depiction of personality requires. However, where adequate information is available, as in the case of part of George Herbert's life, Marchette Chute proves herself very capable of describing her subject in depth.

With respect to the implementation of the third principle of pure biography, the biographies of Marchette Chute are successful. The particular art of Miss Chute's biographies consists in making her subjects stand out, in silhouette, against an illuminated and detailed background. It is in this sense that her subjects may be said to live: they emerge clearly, in outline, and not in depth. The other aspect to be considered in a discussion of artistic merit is style. The writing style of Marchette Chute, plain and direct as it is, is the ideal vehicle for presenting the biography in silhouette that is Miss Chute's specialty.

As to the place of Marchette Chute's work in the panorama of biography, it is appreciably close to pure biography. There are but two reservations that prevent an absolute designation of her books as

CONCLUSION

85

pure biography. The first, this one beyond her control, is the failure to grasp the personality of the subjects in any depth; the second is the tendency, probably unconscious, to eulogize the subjects.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Altick, Richard D., "How Lives Are Written", in The Nation, Vol. 84, issue of December 19, 1959, pp. 470-471.

Concerning Marchette Chute's Two Gentle Men: an analysis. Very useful for its opinions on the writing style of Miss Chute and its appropriateness to her subject matter.

Bond, Donald F., "Biography", in Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 3, 1961 ed., p. 596.

A brief survey of the form from its origins to the present. Draws attention to the healthy state of modern biography and is of value in this study.

Campbell, Oscar James, book review, in Saturday Review, Vol. 33, issue of April 1, 1950, p. 14.

Book review of Shakespeare of London. Points out Marchette Chute's occasional short-comings: errors of fact and misreading of the evidence.

Chute, Marchette, "America's Finest Library", in Holiday, Vol. 23, issue of March, 1958, pp. 39-40+.

A trip through the New York Public Library. Helpful here for an understanding of Marchette Chute's interest in books, reading and libraries.

-----, Ben Jonson of Westminster, New York, Dutton, 1953, 380 p.

The life of Jonson. A primary source.

-----, "Biographies Bring New Companions", in The Wonderful World of Books, ed. by Alfred Stefferud, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1953, pp. 50-52.

This article focuses on the uses of biography. Helpful in learning Marchette Chute's theory of biography.

-----, "Books Are the Opening of Windows", in Wilson Library Bulletin, Vol. 31, issue of February, 1957, pp. 446-447.

Highlights the necessity of proper reading habits and correct use of books. Useful in understanding the author's biographical theory.

-----, "From 'Bad Risk' to Best Seller", in Library Journal, Vol. 70, issue of October 1, 1951, pp. 1485 - 1489.

From an address to the American Library Association Book Workshop in Chicago. A discussion of qualities necessary for the good writer and is illustrated from Marchette Chute's personal experience in writing Shakespeare of London.

-----, Geoffrey Chaucer of England, New York, Dutton, 1946, 347 p.

The life of Chaucer. A primary source.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

87

-----, "Getting at the Truth", in The Saturday Review, Vol. 36, issue of September 19, 1953, pp. 11-12, 43-44.

A discussion, illustrated from Marchette Chute's own experience, about the danger of imposing "fact" on a situation. Exposes the author's emphasis on the principle of authenticity in biography.

-----, "How a Book Grows", in Library Journal, Vol. 84, issue of September 1, 1959, pp. 2431-2432.

An expository article on the author's experience in writing and researching Two Gentle Men. Illustrates Marchette Chute's meticulous research habits.

-----, letter to the author, June 27, 1961.

Explains Marchette Chute's silhouette approach.

-----, "Lifetime Reading Habits", in Wilson Library Bulletin, Vol. 30, issue of April, 1956, pp. 619-620.

From an address at a convention of High School English teachers in New York City. Its emphasis on the necessity of reading is helpful towards understanding Marchette Chute's interest in biography.

-----, Shakespeare of London, New York, Dutton, 1949, xii, 397 p.

The life of William Shakespeare. A primary source.

-----, "Shakespeare of London", in Hornbook Magazine, Vol. 31, issue of February, 1955, pp. 28-35.

An article written for young people. Very similar to "From 'Bad Risk' to Best Seller".

-----, Two Gentle Men, New York, Dutton, 1959, 319 p.

Contains two distinct lives: the first, of George Herbert; the second, of Robert Herrick. A primary source.

Garraty, John A., "Biographers Are Only Human", in The Saturday Review, Vol. 36, issue of March 20, 1954, pp. 11-12.

A discussion of the techniques used by various schools of biography in depicting personality. Similar on a smaller scale, to the author's book, The Nature of Biography.

-----, The Nature of Biography, New York, Knopf, 1957, xi, 289 p.

A handbook of biography. Valuable for its discussion of the types of biography as well as for its exposition of the techniques of the modern biographer. Helpful, also, in its appraisal of Marchette Chute.

Harrison, G.B., book review, in Commonweal, Vol. 52, issue of May 19, 1950, p. 156.

A review of Marchette Chute's Shakespeare of London. Useful because of its interest in the scholarship aspect of Miss Chute's work.

Maurois, André, Aspects of Biography, trans. by Sydney Castle Roberts, New York, Appleton, 1929, viii, 209 p.

A handbook of biography. Helpful in a study of biographical theory.

Nevins, Allan, "How Shall One Write of a Man's Life?", in New York Times Book Review, issue of July 15, 1951, pp. 1, 20.

An article about the techniques of biographers. Especially helpful for its insight into the short-comings of psychological biography.

Nicolson, Harold, The Development of English Biography, London, Hogarth, 1927, 158 p.

A short history of English biography with emphasis on the value of pure biography. Essential to this study because it exposes Nicolson's theory of pure biography and points out the short-comings of various kinds of impure biography.

Robie, B.A., book review, in Library Journal, Vol. 84, issue of September 15, 1959, p. 2635.

Book review of Two Gentle Men. Helpful in its appraisal of Marchette Chute's style.

Rolo, C.J., book review, in Atlantic Monthly, Vol. 185, issue of April, 1950, p. 82.

Book review of Shakespeare of London. Draws attention to Marchette Chute's skill as a silhouette biographer.

-----, book review, in Atlantic Monthly, Vol. 192, issue of November, 1953, p. 108.

Book review of Ben Jonson of Westminster. Points to the scholarship and portraiture ability of Marchette Chute.

Tinker, Chauncey B., Introduction, in Life of Johnson, by James Boswell, London, Oxford, 1933, pp. ix-xxiii.

A study of the biographical principles, techniques, and style of James Boswell. It is helpful here because it treats of Boswell's emphasis on authenticity.

Wolf, Virginia, "The Art of Biography", in The Death of the Moth and Other Essays, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1942, pp. 119-126.

An essay. Valuable in differentiating between the biographical art and the art of fiction. Also useful in its treatment of the uses of biography.

ABSTRACT

Marchette Chute is a contemporary American biographer. The purpose of this study is to examine Miss Chute's five biographies of British writers and to evaluate them in the light of her own theory of biography and the concept of biography of Harold Nicolson.

Chapter I is devoted to a study of the theory of biography. The concept of biography that was found most sensible was that of Harold Nicolson. In Nicolson's concept of pure biography there are three elements: authenticity, the depiction of personality, and art. These elements are discussed in detail and some attention is given to the purposes of biography.

In Chapter II, the biographical theory of Marchette Chute is examined. It is shown that Miss Chute's theory is consonant with Nicolson's theory. Most of Miss Chute's expository writing, however, has to do with the element of authenticity. Also discussed is Miss Chute's attitude towards books and libraries which is significant inasmuch as it throws light on the reasons why she chose to turn to the writing of biography.

Chapter III deals with the practice of biography: the various kinds of "biography" that have been produced since the form began. It is seen that there has been very little of pure biography written; that most lives of people are, rather, impure biography because one or more of the elements necessary for pure biography is lacking. Allusion is made to the happy state of contemporary biography where writers are more willing to abandon the attitudes of servility and cynicism that have so warped biographers' views of their subjects in the past.

ABSTRACT

Chapter IV contains a study of Marchette Chute's four books of biography of British writers: Geoffrey Chaucer of England, Shakespeare of London, Ben Jonson of Westminster, and Two Gentle Men. The biographies are examined as to the techniques employed. It is seen that Miss Chute's subjects stand out in silhouette against finely detailed and brightly lit backgrounds. It is also seen that the dearth of authenticated material about her subjects makes it necessary for Miss Chute to intrude herself on the biographies with the result that there is a tentative note to her depiction of her subjects' lives. Some attention is also given to the methods whereby the criticism of the subjects' writings is integrated with the biographies.

In Chapter V an evaluation of Marchette Chute's biography is made. The extent to which she adheres to each of the three principles of pure biography is examined. It is seen that, in general, Miss Chute succeeds in implementing the elements of authenticity and art in her work, but that for the most part she fails to portray the personality of her subjects, although through no fault of her own. Some space is given, also, to the objection that Miss Chute neglects to use the time-honoured technics of scholarship. The place of Marchette Chute at the forefront of contemporary biography is also mentioned.

In conclusion it is stated that the theory of Marchette Chute is in accord with that of Harold Nicolson, but that her practice of biography is not altogether in keeping with the theory she has set forth.