

COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY IN EIGHTEENTH- AND EARLY NINETEENTH-  
CENTURY ENGLAND—LIVES BRIEF AND NOT SO BRIEF

by

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**COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY IN EIGHTEENTH- AND EARLY  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND – LIVES BRIEF AND NOT SO BRIEF**

submitted by

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English collective biography, or biographical works about a selection of individuals. It examines some of the reasons for writing collective biography in England, with particular attention to forms, uses, and purposes adopted during the eighteenth century. This study will identify ways in which English collective biography could be much more than a collection of brief lives intended to provide bits of information and entertainment. Specific works, namely, John Aikin's *General Biography or Lives, Critical and Historical*, Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, Matthew Pilkington's *Gentleman's and Connoisseur's Dictionary of Painting*, and Allan Cunningham's *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* are examined to illustrate the use of collective biography to convey ideas about British society, politics, and history, and in some instances, to serve a historiographical purpose.

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## DEDICATION

To my husband and children, for their unfailing encouragement and confidence in me.

Thank you.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of English eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century collective biography, or collections of lives or biographical information about a selection of individuals.<sup>1</sup> While general surveys of English biography have noted and briefly discussed collective biography as a form of life writing, occasionally mentioning specific examples,<sup>2</sup> scholarly and critical attention to English life writing of this period has concentrated for the most part on individual biographies, the literary character of biography, and the perfection and definition of biography as a genre.<sup>3</sup> Studies on the formation and development of public opinion and the reception of ideas, particularly in the area of scientific discoveries and development, have tracked the treatment of famous individuals

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<sup>1</sup>René Welleck may have been the first to describe collections of biographies as “collective biography” in *The Rise of English Literary History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 19, in which collections of biographical information about writers from the middle ages to the late eighteenth century are included in Welleck’s historiographical study of English literary history.

<sup>2</sup>Waldo Dunn, *English Biography* (London: Dent & Sons, 1916); Mark Longaker, *English Biography in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971 (1931)); Donald Stauffer, *English Biography before 1700* (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1964 (1930)) and Donald Stauffer, *The Art of Biography in Eighteenth Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941); and Welleck, *idem*.

<sup>3</sup>for example: Richard D. Altick, *Lives and Letters A History of Literary Biography in England and America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965). Wm. H. Epstein, *Recognizing Biography* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).

in biographies and biographical collections over time.<sup>4</sup> With the initiation of the project to revitalize the *Dictionary of National Biography*, culminating in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* in 2004, some further attention has been paid to tracing the history of English collective biography.<sup>5</sup>

The editors of a recent collection of essays about life writing in early modern England note that what has come to be called “biography” does not include all life writing. They suggest that a broader understanding of life writing might emerge from asking why people write and read lives, “...or, to pose the question historically, what have been the purposes and uses of biographies and other forms of life writing?”<sup>6</sup> This very interesting and far-reaching question could frame a much more extensive study than I am undertaking at this time, but a closer look at a few examples of English collections of life writing from

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<sup>4</sup>See for example, Richard Yeo, “Alphabetical Lives: scientific biography in historical dictionaries and encyclopaediae” in *Telling Lives in science—Essays on scientific biography*, eds. Michael Shortland and Richard Yeo (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996); Patricia Fara, “Faces of genius: images of Isaac Newton in eighteenth-century England” in *Heroic Reputations and Exemplary Lives*, eds. Allen Warren, and Geoffrey Cubitt (Manchester: Manchester Univ., Pres, 2000); Paulina Kewes “Shakespeare’s Lives in Print 1662-1821”, in *Lives in Print: Biography and the Book Trade from the Middle Ages to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. Robin Myers, et al. (Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 2002), 55-82.

<sup>5</sup>for example: Isabel Rivers, “Biographical Dictionaries and their Uses from Bayle to Chalmers”, in *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England: New Essays*, ed. Isabel Rivers (London: Continuum, 2001), 135-170; Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography: The Oxford DNB in Historical Perspective* (Leslie Stephen Lecture), (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005); Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2010). In a first step towards redressing another area of neglect in the scholarship, see also Sybil Oldfield, *Collective Biographies of Women in Britain, 1500-1900 - a Selected Annotated Bibliography* (London: Masell, 1999).

<sup>6</sup>Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker, “Introduction”, *Writing Lives: Biography and Textuality, Identity and Representation in Early Modern England*, eds. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 1.

the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries may constitute a first step to a greater understanding of the historiographical significance of one kind of English biographical writing. In the process of examining specific collections, I will look at some of the reasons for writing collective biography and identify ideas about British society and history conveyed by biographical collections of this period.

Commentators on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biography have often noted James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, published in 1791, as a significant advance in the development of the 'art of biography'. As a result, many other works of English life writing, apart from those written by Johnson himself, have been sidelined as not pertinent to the trajectory through the Boswell-Johnson intersection. The author of the most extensive survey of eighteenth-century English biography, Donald Stauffer, claimed that Johnson has a pivotal significance for all English biography in his capacity as a biographer and critic, and as the object of Boswell's attention.<sup>7</sup> In 1911, Sidney Lee, assistant, then successor to Leslie Stephen as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, called Boswell's *Life of Johnson* "the best specimen of biography that has yet been written in any tongue," and historian and biographer Harold Nicolson, in a series of public lectures presented in 1928, called Boswell the "consummate biographer" of the eighteenth century. Nicolson cited the ideal "pure biography", as a complete and accurate portraiture of

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<sup>7</sup>Stauffer, *Biography in Eighteenth Century England*, 386; and *English Biography before 1700*, viii. See also Longaker, *English Biography in the Eighteenth Century*, 407, 408.

historical truth, well constructed to create a definite impression of an individual.<sup>8</sup>

This retrospective on Samuel Johnson and James Boswell has persisted throughout the past century, effectively applying present-day standards of critical assessment to life writing of the past. The presentist approach fails to consider some of the reasons for biographical writing during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and sometimes goes so far as to assume that authors of the broader range of life writing had gone astray from the goal of perfecting the ‘art of biography’. Universal awareness of the *Dictionary of National Biography* may also have militated against the consideration of prior examples of collective biographies, its reputation apparently resulting in the *Dictionary of National Biography* being regarded as an original and unique production in English literary history. Recent attention to its successor publication, as noted above, has begun to rectify this understanding.

The earliest English biographical works were composed for religious and commemorative purposes — for glory to God and to honour the memory of the illustrious dead.<sup>9</sup> A curiosity and quest for knowledge about the world that began with the Renaissance helped bring about an interest in the writing and reading of lives for reasons

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<sup>8</sup>Sidney Lee *Principles of Biography* (Leslie Stephen Lecture) (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1911), 43; Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography* (London: 1928) (Nicolson maintained that after Boswell’s *Johnson*, the next best biography was Lockhart’s *Scott*, after which the “pure biographic strain” was lost until J. A. Froude published his biography of Carlyle in 1882.)

<sup>9</sup>Stauffer, *English Biography before 1700*, 5-7; 233; see also Reed Whitmore, *Pure Lives: The early Biographers* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), 48.

beyond simple hagiography and commemoration of kings and commanders.<sup>10</sup> By the eighteenth century, life writing in England was encompassing the full range of humanity from saints and martyrs to pious individuals known only to their families, from kings and conquerors to country squires, as well as scholars, philosophers, poets, actors, physicians, artists and artisans, adventurers, explorers, lawmakers and criminals, from the exalted and the eminent to the lowly and obscure.<sup>11</sup> Many lives appeared in collections with circumstances or themes in common, and many collections had been made of lives of English and British residents, demonstrating the eminence and worthiness of Englishmen and conveying a sense of England or Britain as a nation.<sup>12</sup>

The collective format provides a framework into which a biographer may gather a few items, anecdotes, or even a single detail from the lives of many individuals, or collect brief or even quite extensive biographies. It provides a means of drawing attention to or honouring a defined group, such as a family, a profession, practitioners of an art, or a nation, or exploring specific themes, such as martyrdom or scientific discovery—of which

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<sup>10</sup>for a discussion of humanism in the English context, see, e.g., Joseph M. Levine, *Humanism and History: Origins of Modern English Historiography* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987).

<sup>11</sup>See surveys of English biography such as those of Stauffer, Longaker, Dunn, and Pritchard, as previously mentioned.

<sup>12</sup>e.g.: Bede's *History of the English Church and People*, completed in 731, Bale's *Celebrated Writers of Great Britain* (1557-9), John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments of the English Martyrs* (1563), Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotlande and Irelande* (1577-8), Thomas Fuller's *The History of the Worthies of England* (1662), and Anthony à Wood's *Atheniae Oxoniensis* (1691 - 92). Fuller, uncharacteristically for male biographers of the time, included women among his "Worthies." The few exclusively, or inclusively, about women were mostly in the nature of devotional or conduct literature, for example, Mary Pilkington, *A Mirror for the Female Sex - Historical Beauties for Young Ladies* (London: Vernor and Hood, 1798).

the criteria might vary for subsequent editions.<sup>13</sup> There were collective biographies arranged according to a biographer's perception of hierarchy, while some lacked any apparent system of arrangement. By the eighteenth century, most were ordered either alphabetically or chronologically, sometimes with variations or subdivisions such as by reign of monarch or divided into thematic subsets.

Of the substantial number and variety of biographical collections published during this period in England, I have chosen to look at a particular format, the alphabetically-ordered biographical dictionary, and a particular category of subject matter, the lives of artists. Alphabetical order was introduced for biographical collections at the end of the seventeenth century and came into widespread use in England during the eighteenth. At the same time, the lives of artists emerged as the subject matter of several large collections. By way of background to the examination of specific works of collective biography in this thesis, the first chapter identifies models for English life writing of the period and briefly describes the rise in the interest in the arts and artists, the shifting and unresolved relationship between history and biography, and antiquarianism.

Chapter 2 focuses on *General Biography of Lives, Critical and Historical*, a biographical dictionary published in ten volumes from 1799 to 1815, which was edited and substantially written by John Aikin, a religious dissenter and promoter of moderate social

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<sup>13</sup>Such as for the *Oxford DNB*: see Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, noted above. Note also the changing presentation of John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments of the English Martyrs*, first published in England in 1563: the complete *Actes and Monuments (Variorum edition)* is available on-line at <http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/johnfoxe/>, as the result of a long-term project begun by David Loades in 1992.

and political reform.<sup>14</sup> Aikin used his compilation of lives as a means to explore the ideas of writers, scientists, and inventors, and to critique English social and political structures. His *General Biography* illustrates a unique and interesting use of collective biography in England at a time of significant domestic and international upheaval.

Chapter 3 examines several examples of collective biographies of artists: Horace Walpole's four volumes of *Anecdotes of Painting in England, with some account of the principal Artists*, first published between 1762 and 1780, and Matthew Pilkington's *The Gentleman's and Connoisseur's Dictionary of Painters*, published as a single volume in 1770, and Allan Cunningham's six volume series, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, published 1829 to 1833.<sup>15</sup>

Walpole's *Anecdotes* and Pilkington's *Dictionary* were each concerned with the cultivation of taste and the appreciation of the arts in England, although there are also significant distinctions between them in perspective, purpose, form, and content. Walpole and Cunningham each presents his biographical collection as a history of art. While Cunningham recognizes an antecedent in Walpole, he exhibits a different approach to the lives of artists from that of either Walpole or Pilkington, as suggested by the titles of their respective works. Cunningham also edited an 1840 edition of "*Pilkington's Dictionary*",

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<sup>14</sup>*General Biography or Lives, Critical and Historical, of the most eminent persons of all ages, countries, conditions, and professions*, 10 Volumes, ed. John Aikin (London: G. G. & J. Robinson, 1799 - 1815).

<sup>15</sup>Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England; with some Account of the principal Artists* (Twickenham: Thomas Kirgate, 1762 - 1780); Matthew Pilkington, *The Gentleman's and Connoisseur's Dictionary of Painters* (London: 1770); and Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters and Sculptors, 6 Volumes* (London: 1829 - 1833).

to which he adds a historiographical element unintended by the original writer.

The attention that has been devoted for at least the past century to biography as a literary form usually narrowly considered as the detailed story of a single life, has left collective biography to be viewed as essentially a reference work to augment other study, or as a collection of entertaining curiosities. However, biographical collections of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries conveyed meaning and information to their readers beyond facts about specific individuals and mere entertainment. In addition to fulfilling these purposes, as well as sometimes continuing to fulfill long-established purposes of commemoration and honour of the illustrious dead or religious inspiration and moral edification, the examples chosen for closer examination in this dissertation show how English collective biography during this period served as a medium for the expression of ideas about society, politics, history, and the arts. Consideration of works such as these contribute to our understanding of the extent to which the English public was exposed to a range of critical ideas, even in the course of reading popular literature.

While all biography has a connection to history, collective biography has the capacity to present a more thoroughly historical view. Chronological ordering of entries emphasizes historical meaning in a collection, but even the use of alphabetical order does not discount the possibility of collective biography being significantly historiographical in character. English collective biography, including compilations not confined to English individuals, may convey views of English history and contemporary England through the choice of individuals as biographical subjects, the selection and interpretation of kinds of events and circumstances in their lives, the extent to which contextual information is

included, and the attention given to particular times and events in the country's history.

These matters will be addressed at several points in this thesis.

## CHAPTER 1

### A SURVEY OF THE LANDSCAPE: BACKGROUND TO ENGLISH COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY

The English collective biographies discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis were to some degree modeled on earlier biographical collections. Plutarch's *Lives*, the French historical dictionaries of Moréri and particularly Pierre Bayle, and Vasari's lives of artists each influenced the biographer's treatment of a type of subject matter, the structure of the collective biography, or the purpose for writing, some collections showing the influence of more than one model. How the relationship between the writing of history and the writing of lives was perceived affected the organization and content of biographical collections. Antiquarianism, which provided another approach to understanding the past, cuts across the distinctions between history and biography, format and subject matter.

#### MODELS FOR LIFE WRITING

Plutarch's *Lives*:

Plutarch's *Lives* of Greek and Roman statesmen and military commanders, written during the first century had been available in English since at least the sixteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

Plutarch looked for indications of a man's character in his actions, and for evidence of his

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<sup>16</sup>Translation by Thomas North in 1579 from the French of Jacques Amyot: see A. J. Gossage, "Plutarch", in *Latin Biography*, ed. T. A. Dorey (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1967), 67.

influence on historical events.<sup>17</sup> He paid particular attention to the development of character, and to virtue and honour, noting that in writing lives, a few well-chosen personal details might be very effective in illuminating character.<sup>18</sup> In his life of Pericles, Plutarch claims that learning about virtuous action leads to emulation and to the development of good character in the person who studies it.<sup>19</sup> He also suggests that it would not be improper to make biography enjoyable to read, as it might thereby attract attention to a valuable lesson.<sup>20</sup>

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Plutarchan biography stood as the dominant model for English biography of men in public life.<sup>21</sup> It was particularly appealing to the English gentry, with their regard for classical Greece and Rome, and their interest in educating young gentlemen to take an active part in governing England.<sup>22</sup> In 1683, John Dryden edited an English translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, to which was

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<sup>17</sup>Not all examples were to be emulated. See for example, his life of "Crassus" and his "Comparison of Nicias and Crassus", Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives, Vol. III*, Loeb edition translation Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1919).

<sup>18</sup>Plutarch, "Alexander", *Plutarch's Lives, Vol. VII*, 225.

<sup>19</sup>Plutarch, "Pericles", *Plutarch's Lives, Vol. III*, 3 - 7.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Gilbert Burnet, *The Life and Death of Sir Matthew Hale, Kt.* (London: printed for William Shrowsbery, 1681): "No part of History is more instructive and delighting, than the Lives of great and worthy Men....This makes Plutarch's *Lives* be more generally Read than any of all the Books which the ancient Greeks or Romans Writ.", "Preface," unnumbered first and second pages.

<sup>22</sup>for discussion of Plutarchan biography: Martha Walling Howard, *The Influence of Plutarch in the Major European Literatures of the Eighteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina, 1970) 7-9; 99-124; Whittemore, *Pure Lives*, 11 - 33; Gossage, "Plutarch", 45-78.

prefaced Dryden's "Life of Plutarch".<sup>23</sup> His edition was reprinted at least five times during the eighteenth century; Goldsmith also edited a collection of *Plutarch's Lives* for young people, and another translation, by J. and W. Langhorne, was published in 1770.<sup>24</sup>

While there were a few double biographies published in England, Plutarch's format of paired lives does not appear to have been adopted for any English collective biography.<sup>25</sup> In the introduction to *The British Plutarch*,<sup>26</sup> a collection invoking Plutarch's name and reputation but presenting neither his parallel arrangement of lives nor, seemingly, the moral rigour of his judgment, the editor adapts the introductory comments from Plutarch's life of Pericles to describe his British biographies as

designed to convey instruction by the channel of amusement, and by recording the actions of illustrious men, to enforce, by such examples, the practice of those virtues, which are most conducive to the prosperity of a state, as well as private societies; while the errors which will now and then discover themselves in the most shining characters, are pointed out, and made use of as a shade to display the brightness of more exalted qualities

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<sup>23</sup>John Dryden, ed., *Plutarch's Lives, Translated from the Greek by Several Hands* (London: 1683-6). see also Stauffer, *The Art of Biography*, 466.

<sup>24</sup>A. J. Gossage, "Plutarch", 68, 69; Oliver Goldsmith, *Plutarch's Lives with Notes and Reflections for the use of young Gentlemen and Ladies*, 7 Volumes (London: 1762).

<sup>25</sup>Stauffer, *Biography in Eighteenth Century England*, 467; and Howard, 111-114. In a passage in Samuel Johnson's "Life of Pope", Johnson compares Pope and Dryden in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Plutarch, but his several other comparisons between poets have more to do with literary criticism than Plutarchan comparison. Samuel Johnson, "Pope", *Lives of the English Poets Vol. III*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Vbh, 1968, reprint of 1905 edition). 220-223; and lives of John Phillips and of Cowley, *idem, Vol. I*, 13, 19-35, 318-319.

<sup>26</sup>*The British Plutarch, or Biographical Entertainer, 8 Vols.* (London: 1762) and *The British Plutarch, 6 Vols.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Thomas Mortimer (London: 1776).

to greater advantage.<sup>27</sup>

The French historical dictionary:

The first compilation of diverse information adhering strictly to alphabetical order was apparently the *Grand Dictionnaire Historique, ou mélange curieux de l'histoire sacré et profane*, by French Catholic cleric Louis Moréri. Published in 1674, it was followed by other alphabetically-ordered dictionaries of arts and sciences, and has been noted as a precursor of both encyclopediae and biographical dictionaries.<sup>28</sup> Moréri's *Great Historical Dictionary* was published in English translation in 1694, and a second English edition, edited by Jeremy Collier, was published in 1701.<sup>29</sup>

Pierre Bayle, a French Protestant scholar, philosopher, and journalist, published his *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* in two volumes in Rotterdam in 1697. The first

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<sup>27</sup>“Dedication” to King George III in *The British Plutarch*, 1762. Even Thomas Fuller’s reasons for writing about his *Worthies* in 1662, which included “some profit for myself”, seem much less self-congratulatory.

<sup>28</sup>see for example: Richard Yeo, “Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia* (1728) and the Tradition of Commonplaces” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57.1 (1996) 157-175; Richard Yeo “Alphabetical Lives”, 142; and Pierre Rétat, “Encyclopédies et dictionnaires historiques au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle” in *L’Encyclopédisme*, ed. Annie Becq (Paris: Editions des Amateurs des Livres, 1991). 505-511.

<sup>29</sup>Louis Moréri (Lewis Morery), *The Great Historical, Geographical and Poetical Dictionary being a Curious Miscellany of Sacred and Profane History...* (London: 1694); and *The Great Historical, Geographical Genealogical and Poetical Dictionary being a Curious Miscellany of Sacred and Profane History...*, Two Vols., ed. Jer. Collier, A. M. (London: 1701).

English translations issued in 1709 and 1710.<sup>30</sup> Bayle's *Dictionary* consists mostly of biographical entries, including articles about biblical characters, classical Greeks and Romans, Church fathers and Protestant clerics, philosophers of all ages, and contemporary participants in the disputes of the Republic of Letters.<sup>31</sup> He adapted the rational neutrality of alphabetical order to suit his method of criticism, a seemingly exhaustive questioning and examining of all opinion, much of it on philosophical and religious themes. Lengthy footnotes in double columns of tiny print, frequently accumulating to overpower the main text, are appended to the entries. Bayle quotes and critiques his subjects' ideas and writings and the ideas of other commentators and critics. Marginal notes indicate sources or identify conflicting information. A further English translation was published in five volumes in 1734 to 1738, prefaced with a biography of Bayle by Pierre des Maizeaux, and an Anglicized version, with many additional English 'lives' was published in ten volumes in 1734-1741, edited by antiquarian and cleric, Thomas Birch and others. Birch himself wrote six hundred new lives for the project, many from original sources, as Bayle had

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<sup>30</sup>Pierre Bayle, *Dictionary*, Michel de la Roche, ed., London: 1709; *An Historical and Critical Dictionary by Monsieur Bayle*, 4 vols., London: 1710 (license to Tonson, 1701); the 1709 edition is referred to in several works, but does not appear to be accessible - see Paul Burrell, "Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*" in *Notable Encyclopedias of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: Nine Predecessors of the Encyclopédie*, ed. Frank A. Kafker (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1981), 83-103, 102.

<sup>31</sup>for a discussion of the Republic of Letters, including Pierre Bayle's participation, see for example: Anne Goldgar *Impolite Learning - Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters 1680 - 1750* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1995). 131-149.

done for his subject matter.<sup>32</sup>

The French historical dictionaries served as the model for the alphabetically-ordered British collective biography. *Biographia Britannica*, an extensive and erudite collection of specifically British and Irish lives, was published in seven volumes from 1747 to 1766, compiled “...in the Manner of Mr. Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary*,” with writer and antiquarian William Oldys as its principal editor.<sup>33</sup> In the Preface, the editors describe it as owing its plan to Moréri and the scheme of its accuracy to Bayle.<sup>34</sup> The text is augmented with marginal notes and double columns of extensive footnotes, although the erudition of *Biographia Britannica* has a less critical and sceptical edge than that of Bayle’s *General Dictionary*, and gives substantially greater attention to the lives of its subjects.<sup>35</sup> The second edition with Andrew Kippis as editor, published 1778-95, appears to have ground to a halt under the weight of antiquarian erudition after five

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<sup>32</sup>Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle* (London: 1734 - 1738), and Pierre Bayle, *A General Dictionary, Historical and Critical...of Mr. Bayle* (London: 1734 - 1741). For relationship between Des Maizeaux and Bayle, see Anne Goldgar, 131-148. See also J. M. Osborn, “Thomas Birch and the General Dictionary (1734-41), *Modern Philology*, Vol. 36 (Aug. 1938), 31-32; and Isabel Rivers, “Biographical Dictionaries and Their Uses”, 135 - 170, 149 - 152.

<sup>33</sup>*Biographia Britannica: or the Lives of the Most eminent Persons who have flourished in Great Britain and Ireland, from the earliest Ages, down to the present Times*, Seven Volumes (London: 1747 - 1766); on the identity of the editors: Richard Yeo “Alphabetical Lives”, 147-149; and Donald Stauffer, *Biography in Eighteenth Century England*, 249-250.

<sup>34</sup>*Biog. Brit. Vol. 1*, xvi.

<sup>35</sup>See, for example, articles on Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton, which praise them as great men, in addition to explaining their writings in the context of scientific controversies, also assuring readers of their Christian faith. *Biographia Britannica*, Vol. I, 913-934; Vol. V, 3210-3244.

volumes at the letter “F”, when Kippis died.<sup>36</sup>

While the sponsors of another collective biography, *A New and General Biographical Dictionary*, were committed to the alphabetical format, they clearly opposed the method that Bayle and his admirers had applied to that form, despite their reference to a “historical and critical account of the lives and writings” of its biographical subjects.<sup>37</sup> The series issued in multiple volumes for editions of 1761-62, 1784, 1795, and 1798, with a greatly expanded version edited by Alexander Chalmers and published as *The General Biographical Dictionary*, in 1812-1817. Its octavo dimensions, one quarter the size of the folio of the Bayle and Bayle-influenced editions and much less expensive to produce, would never have accommodated Bayle-style footnotes and side-notes, even had the editors been interested in doing so. Any critical commentary that appears is mostly literary and polite. The anonymous editors of the first edition claim to distance themselves from Bayle’s prolixity and critical eccentricity, explaining that

Bayle’s Lives are indeed nothing more than a vehicle for his criticism, and his work seems to have been chiefly the transcript of a voluminous common-place book...rather a miscellany of critical and metaphysical speculations, than a system of Biography.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Kippis’s efforts proved useful to biographical writers including Samuel Johnson and a fellow dissenter, John Aikin, noted below. See, for example, Pat Rogers, “Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets* and Biographic Dictionaries”, *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 31, No. 122 (May 1980), 149-171.

<sup>37</sup>*A New and General Biographical Dictionary; containing An Historical and Critical Account of the Lives and Writings of the Most Eminent Persons in every Nation; Particularly the British and Irish.* (London: Printed for T. Osborne, J. Whiston and B. White, W. Strahan, *et al*, 1761-1762).

<sup>38</sup>*A New and General Biography, Vol. I*, “Preface”, unnumbered second page; see also Richard Yeo, “Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia* (1728) and the Tradition of Commonplaces”, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57.1 (1996) 157 - 175.

The first of ten volumes of John Aikin's *General Biography; or Lives, Critical and Historical*, another collective biography in alphabetical order, was published in 1799.<sup>39</sup> Aikin clearly admired Bayle's erudition and pursuit of free enquiry, praising "the acuteness and vivacity of Bayle", while ostensibly rejecting Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* as a model. He describes Bayle's *Dictionary* as

...a kind of commonplace for all the critical and philosophical knowledge, all the curious information as to fact, and all the subtlety of argumentation, he had spent his life in acquiring. To a slender thread of historical text belonging to each article, is therefore added a vast body of notes, containing discursive matter of every kind, often solid, learned, and ingenious, not seldom running out into uninteresting minutiae, and gossiping narrative....a bad model for imitation to inferior writers....<sup>40</sup>

There is, however, in Aikin's thoughtful and quite original work, a similarity to Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* in more than name, which will be explored further in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*:

Another model for English writers of collective biography was provided in Giorgio Vasari's *Le Vite de' più Eccelenti Architetti, Pittori, et Scultori Italiani, da Cimabue insino a' nostri Tempi*, a chronological collection of lives of artists published in 1550,

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<sup>39</sup>*General Biography or Lives, Critical and Historical, Vol. I.*

<sup>40</sup>Aikin, *General Biography, Vol. II*, 57-62.

followed by an expanded edition in 1568.<sup>41</sup> Vasari's *Lives* was written as a history of the arts, from ancient times to the revival of painting which he identified with Cimabue, progressing through the lives of successive painters to near perfection in the works of Michelangelo in Vasari's own time. He intended his biographies to encourage artists to emulate the masters, and he praised and encouraged patronage as a further stimulus to improvement. The second edition was divided into periods introduced by Vasari's critical commentary and essays on history.

A translation, apparently the first in English, of eleven biographies of painters from Vasari's *Lives* was appended to William Aglionby's observations on painting published in England in 1685/6.<sup>42</sup> Vasari's *Lives* became known as more works about art began to be published in England, some writers relying on it for material as well as for a model.<sup>43</sup> When Matthew Pilkington published *The Gentleman's and Connoisseur's Dictionary of Painters* in 1770, he referred to Vasari as one of his sources and in his entry on Vasari, identified him as "...best known as the writer of the lives of the painters...for which work

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<sup>41</sup>A modern edition: Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, Trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, edited with an introduction and notes, by Philip Jacks (New York: Modern Library, 2006).

<sup>42</sup>William Aglionby, *Painting Illustrated in Three Diallogues, containing some Choice Observations upon the Art. Together with The Lives of the most Eminent Painters, from Cimabue, to the time of Raphael and Michael Angelo* (London: 1685/6), "Preface", unnumbered pages; further edition published in 1719 as *Choice Observations upon the Art of Painting Together with Vasari's Lives of the Eminent Painters....* See also Carol Gibson-Wood "Jonathan Richardson, Lord Somers's Collection of Drawings, and Early Art-Historical Writing in England", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 52, 167-186, 184.

<sup>43</sup>e.g., Jonathan Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* (London: 1715), 232-239; and Henry Bell, *An Historical Essay on the Original of Painting* (London: 1728); reprinted as *The Perfect Painter: or a Compleat History of the Original, Progress and Improvement of Painting* (London: 1730).

the whole polite world is most deservedly indebted to him.”<sup>44</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3, Horace Walpole modeled his *Anecdotes of Painting* on Vasari’s *Lives*, and in 1879, an editor of Allan Cunningham’s *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, referred to Cunningham as “the Scottish Vasari”.<sup>45</sup>

## ART AND ARTISTS’ LIVES

A curiosity about the lives of artists arose in part from an increase in interest in the arts. After the Restoration in 1660, not only the gentry but also the expanding classes of people involved in commerce and trade began to pay attention to the arts, and to develop an admiration for painting. Previously, no one but those connected to the Court had collected paintings, few people considered or wrote about the arts, and the importation of painting was strictly limited under laws that protected the industry of artisans and craftsmen.<sup>46</sup> As Englishmen were more able to travel to the continent, they were exposed to European works of art and began to collect paintings and sculpture, particularly as the customs restrictions lapsed.

The interest in the arts gave rise to a search for guidelines as to how to judge

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<sup>44</sup>Pilkington, *Dictionary*, v, 642.

<sup>45</sup>“Editor”, *Cunningham’s British Painters annotate and continued to the Present Time by Mrs. Charles Heaton* (London: 1879), v.

<sup>46</sup>Iain Pears, *The Discovery of Painting, the Growth of Interest in the Arts in England, 1680-1768* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1988), 1-3. Pears calls this series of events “a new and complex cultural phenomenon”.

quality in art, evidenced in and influenced by a discourse on aesthetics and taste.<sup>47</sup> One of the features of this discourse was a search for a comprehensive theory of painting, an issue that also engaged continental writers. English translations of two standard French reference works, *The Art of Painting*, by C. A. du Fresnoy, translated and edited by John Dryden, and *The Art of Painting and the Lives of the Painters* by Roger de Piles, were each accompanied by a supplementary list of artists who had painted in England. These lists included biographical details of the painters, and were compiled by English writers.<sup>48</sup> Painter and author Jonathan Richardson put together a chronological list of painters with brief biographical details to accompany a 1715 essay, revealing the influence of Vasari. In 1719, Richardson published *Two Discourses* as a work of instruction written expressly for novice connoisseurs of the “middling ranks”, to enable them to discuss art in polite society.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>John Steegman, *The Rule of Taste from George I to George IV*, with an Introduction by James Laver (London: Macmillan, 1968 (1936)), xv-xviii; 4-5. See also Lawrence Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), vii, 3-18. For a further discussion of neo-classical or Augustan taste, see “Taste and Augustanism”, the first chapter in Joan Pittock, *The Ascendance of Taste: The achievement of Joseph and Thomas Wharton* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1973).

<sup>48</sup>*The Art of Painting by C. A. Du Fresnoy with Remarks...translated into English, with an Original Preface...by Mr. Dryden....*second edition (London: Bernard Lintott, 1716). [first English translation 1695, supplement by Richard Graham]; and Roger de Piles, *The art of painting and the Lives of the Painters*, “Done from the French of Monsieur De Piles”, London: Printed for J. Nutt, 1706. The supplement was later published separately: Bainbrigge Buckridge, *An Essay towards an English School of Painting*, London: 1754, with the addition of a Life of Sir Godfrey Kneller, and a note about the author.

<sup>49</sup>see Carol Gibson-Wood, *Jonathan Richardson Art Theorist of the English Enlightenment* (New Haven, London: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 1, 179-201. See in particular, the chapter entitled “The Rationalization of Connoisseurship”, in which she argues that Richardson’s approach revealed him as a man of the enlightenment.

In his *Discourse on the Science of a Connoisseur*, Richardson observes that England, for all its accomplishments, had not produced painters that the rest of the civilized world could admire, a theme common to many English writers on painting.<sup>50</sup> Richardson proposes that the cultivation of the critical faculties of collectors and connoisseurs would lead them to appreciate and recognize advances in English art, and to encourage improvement by English painters.<sup>51</sup> David Hume sees the issue as still unresolved in 1742, his essay “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences” expressing a need for knowledgeable patrons to encourage and guide improvement in the arts. He was also concerned that exposure to “perfected” Italian painting may have stifled the rise and progress of native painting, “instead of exciting our artists... the cause of their small progress in that noble art.”<sup>52</sup>

## LIVES AND HISTORY

Early in the seventeenth century, in an outline for the classification of all knowledge, Francis Bacon had proposed that history might be divided into multiple categories of empirical knowledge to create a record of human learning. He suggested that “lives” was a category of history, equally dependent on truth about the past, with its

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<sup>50</sup>A similar lack of assurance was reflected in commentary on English writing of history, e.g. in Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 115-116; Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Letters, Vol. II*, ed. Harold F. Harding (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1965), 284.

<sup>51</sup>Jonathan Richardson, *A Discourse on the...Science of a Connoisseur* (London: 1719). 4.

<sup>52</sup>David Hume, “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences”, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987). 111-137, 136.

own particular advantages. According to Bacon, in their capacity to show both great and small, public and private actions, lives are capable of being more genuine and therefore more instructive than other histories. He also proposed that the study of history should incorporate all aspects of man's endeavors, including the arts.<sup>53</sup>

In introducing his edition of *Plutarch's Lives*, Dryden appears to draw Plutarch's view of biography into a modified version of Bacon's view of history. Plutarch had pointed out that he was not writing histories, but lives, which present greater opportunities for assessment of virtuous behaviour and for providing moral instruction.<sup>54</sup> Dryden proposes, in a substantially truncated version of Bacon's classification, that history is divided into "these three species: Commentaries, or Annals; History, properly so called; and Biographia, or the Lives of particular men."<sup>55</sup> While "biographia" is inferior in dignity, it is equal or superior to the other two "in pleasure or instruction", able to illustrate virtue with "more vigour", of greater moral benefit, and more comprehensive in style, being able to incorporate the plain narrative of annals or chronicle, and the gravity of history proper, with "the minute circumstances and trivial passages of life."<sup>56</sup>

Some collections of lives reveal the influence of Bacon's thought later in the

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<sup>53</sup>Francis Bacon, "The Advancement of Learning" (1605), *Francis Bacon*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 120 - 299. 175 - 182; and Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 222-236. See also John Aikin, "Francis Bacon" in *General Biography*, Vol. 1, 508-517.

<sup>54</sup>Plutarch, "Alexander", 225.

<sup>55</sup>John Dryden, "The Life of Plutarch", in *The Critical and Miscellaneous Prose Works of John Dryden*, Vol. II, ed. Edmond Malone (London: Cadell and Davies, 1800), 399.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 402-406.

seventeenth century.<sup>57</sup> However, even as an interest in history expanded to readers beyond the traditional ruling class and to topics beyond political and military events, many historians and commentators in Britain continued to subscribe to classical precepts about the writing of history and the separation of history and lives.<sup>58</sup> The dominant view of history at the middle of the eighteenth century held that it should be written as a dignified narrative of politics and power, constructed according to rhetorical principles adopted during the Renaissance, from classical writers such as Livy and Cicero. This view continued to reflect the judgment of those who saw history as a study of important events, intended particularly for serious people or those in public life, the same people about whom and for whom Plutarchan biography continued to be written. Adam Smith is recorded as teaching in his classes on rhetoric and belles lettres that only the “designs, motives and views of the most remarkable men...so far as they are necessary to explain the great changes and revolutions of States...” should be included in historical writing, and that the delineation of character, for which rules were also specified, must not interfere

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<sup>57</sup>e.g., Thomas Stanley, *The History of Philosophy, third volume* (London: 1660), unnumbered page in preface, consisting of quote from “Francis Lord Verulam, Advancement of Learning, Book 3, Sect. 5.” Stanley’s systematic treatment of lives of ancient Greek philosophers, is also indicative of Bacon’s influence; and Thomas Fuller, D. D., *The History of the Worthies of England* (London: 1662). Fuller’s individual lives were divided according to county and social class, some included solely for reasons of curiosity, 1-15 in fourth section of edition consulted (pagination is variable). See also Pritchard, p. 115; and Stauffer’s chapter on “Ecclesiastical Biography” in *English Biography before 1700*, 64 - 90.

<sup>58</sup>for an extensive analysis of the changing scene in historical writing in Britain of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment - Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740 - 1820* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000).

with “the dignity of history.”<sup>59</sup> Conceding only that one might, in a very limited way, bring a description of a man’s character and disposition into a “scheme of history”, he cites accounts of individuals by Tacitus, Sallust, Cicero, and Theophrastus.<sup>60</sup>

An easing of classically-inspired strictures is revealed in Hugh Blair’s lectures on rhetoric, presented annually in Edinburgh over twenty-four years beginning in 1759.<sup>61</sup> Like Smith, Blair speaks of the requisite dignity of history, but he incorporates a place for lives, which he calls “an inferior kind of history”, “less formal and stately than History, but for the most part, perhaps as instructive....” He recognizes that the personal may be a facet of the historical, and that the circumstances of an individual’s life may be a valid interest of history. Blair proposes that: “...whatever displays the state and life of mankind in different periods, and illustrates the progress of the human mind, is more useful and interesting than the details of sieges and battles.”<sup>62</sup>

When Horace Walpole published the first volume of his *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* provided the model for which Bacon’s theory

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<sup>59</sup>Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. J. Bryce, ed. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985: Lecture 12, p. 63; Lecture 15, p. 82; see also Lectures 16 - 20, pp. 85-116.

<sup>60</sup>and criticizes Clarendon for having too much to say about the characters of individuals in his *History of the Rebellion*, and Rapin for provided too much information about the private lives of monarchs and great men. Smith, Lecture 20, pp. 115-116; and Lecture 15, pp. 78-83.

<sup>61</sup>Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, 2 Vols.* ed. Harold F. Harding (Carbondale: Univ. of Southern Illinois, 1965). Fwd. by David Potter, v. Blair’s lectures were published first in 1783, and evidently widely known, running through at least one hundred and thirty editions, to 1911.

<sup>62</sup>Blair, *Vol. II*, pp. 266, 285 - 288. As Mark Phillips points out, Blair’s lectures also contain evidence of other literary and rhetorical ideas in addition to the classical: see Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, 40 - 45.

provided the conceptual support, including the writing of histories of the arts, the use of lives as history, and the collection of empirical knowledge in order to write history. For the latter, Walpole relied on the antiquarian diligence of George Vertue.<sup>63</sup>

#### ANTIQUARIANISM: ANOTHER PATH TO HISTORY

The author of a mid-eighteenth-century antiquarian study of Cornwall, William Borlase, describes the practice of an antiquary: “The proper business of an Antiquary, is to collect what is dispersed, more fully to unfold what is already discovered, to examine controverted points, to settle what is doubtful, and by the authority of Monuments and Histories, to throw light upon the manners, Arts, Languages, Policy and Religion of past Ages.”<sup>64</sup> Antiquarianism was concerned with uncovering evidence in the form of artifacts as well as written records in order to convey a context and, in the views of antiquaries, greater truth, to history. Popular depictions of British antiquaries often mocked them as pedantic and obsessive about preserving relics of the past, unable to distinguish significant historical facts from ancient trivia. However, Rosemary Sweet notes that British antiquarianism of this period was not all about nostalgic conservatism, as it also “adopted the spirit of the Enlightenment and contributed to its mission” by aiming to “dissipate the

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<sup>63</sup>Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England...., Vol. I*, Ralph N. Wornum, ed., London: 1876. (reprint: New York: 1969).

<sup>64</sup>William Borlase, *Antiquities Historical and Monumental of the County of Cornwall*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: 1769), v., quoted in Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries - The discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), xiv.

gloom of religion and enlarge the mind”.<sup>65</sup> The antiquarian impulse to collect facts and evidence, however ancient, also resonated with enlightenment thinking.

While the rules of rhetoric subscribed to by those who wrote history required a narrative uninterrupted by notes and digressions, antiquarian practice required continual references to the sources and the evidence.<sup>66</sup> The author of many learned works on historiography and antiquarianism, Arnaldo Momigliano, describes in a multitude of articles and books the nature of antiquarian research and practices from the classical to the modern period. His extensive research and analysis led him to the view that modern historical practice developed out of the coming together in Britain during the eighteenth century, of classically conceived historical narrative with a broad range of other modes of describing the past that comprised antiquarianism.<sup>67</sup>

Antiquarianism continued to be widely practiced in England during the eighteenth century. It tended to be undertaken by persons who made their living as writers or engravers, country clergymen and teachers, or members of the landed gentry who had the interest and the time to devote to esoteric pursuits. They collected everything on specific subjects that interested them, often with the idea of augmenting the historical narrative, and frequently intending to contribute to a general survey of past institutions and customs.

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<sup>65</sup>Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries*, xiv, 4-5, 31.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 5 - 6; see, for example, the rules for writing history as expressed by Adam Smith, and Hugh Blair, *Lectures*, Vol. II, Lecture XXXVI, “Historical Writing”, as noted above.

<sup>67</sup>See, for example, Arnaldo Momigliano, “The Rise of Antiquarian Research”, in *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 54 - 79, see also Mark Phillips, “Reconsiderations on History and Antiquarianism: Arnaldo Momigliano and the Historiography of Eighteenth-Century Britain”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 57, N. 2 (April 1996), 297 - 316 for a broader view of British historiography.

Walpole claimed an affiliation with antiquaries and a sympathy with antiquarianism, initially identifying himself as “editor” of the copious collection of materials which engraver, writer, and antiquarian George Vertue had amassed concerning the history of painting in England.<sup>68</sup>

Aspects of antiquarianism had an obvious affinity for some kinds of biographical collections, although the attention to the details previously considered unworthy of notice was incompatible with Plutarchan biography. Thomas Fuller’s *History of the Worthies of England* was clearly an antiquarian undertaking, as were Anthony Wood’s *Athenae Oxonienses*, and the anecdotal collection of *Brief Lives*, made by Wood’s friend and research assistant, John Aubrey.<sup>69</sup> Pierre Bayle’s method of embellishing his mostly brief biographical articles in his *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*, adding notes upon notes, piling up arguments, references, and conclusions, in a continual juxtaposing of evidence with facts and observations, was characteristic of antiquarian practice.

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<sup>68</sup>Walpole, *Anecdotes, Vol. I*, p. 1; See Martin Myrone, “Graphic antiquarianism in eighteenth-century Britain: the career and reputation of George Vertue (1684 - 1756),” in *Producing the past: Aspects of Antiquarian Culture and Practice, 1700 - 1850*, eds. Martin Myrone and Lucy Peltz (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1999, 35 - 55), for a discussion of George Vertue and antiquarianism; Walpole also published another work from Vertue’s manuscripts, *A Catalogue of Engravers, Who have been born or resided in England; digested by Mr. Horace Walpole...*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Strawberry Hill: 1765).

<sup>69</sup>John Aubrey, *Brief Lives, 2 Vols.*, ed. Andrew Clark, Oxford: 1898, apart from the details used by Wood, was not edited and published in full until the end of the nineteenth century. See Allan Pritchard, *op. cit.*, pp. 170 - 198. For Aubrey’s extensive antiquarian undertakings, see Michael Hunter, *John Aubrey and the Realm of Learning*, London: 1975. Joseph Strutt combined the historical purpose and the convenience of alphabetical order, in Joseph Strutt, *A Biographical Dictionary containing an historical account of all the Engravers from the earliest period of the art of engraving to the present time*, London: Faulder, 1785. Chapter I consists of “An Essay on the Art of Engraving, with a Full Account of its Origin and Progress”, 1-28.

## CHAPTER 2

### BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARIES: JOHN AIKIN AND *GENERAL BIOGRAPHY*

#### INTRODUCTION

In 1799, just over a hundred years after Pierre Bayle compiled his *Dictionnaire, historique et critique*, the first of ten volumes of *General Biography or Lives, Critical and Historical* was published in London.<sup>70</sup> Although the editor and principal writer of *General Biography*, John Aikin, abstained from the antiquarian manner of Bayle's heavily footnoted text, Aikin's choice of title acknowledges Bayle as his precursor in the incorporation of criticism into a biographical dictionary. Aikin's own article on Bayle introduces him as "a very eminent critic and philosopher, and one of those who have the most contributed to the freedom of discussion in modern times."<sup>71</sup>

While a century earlier, Bayle had compiled his *Dictionary* to challenge received opinion in primarily religious and philosophical matters, John Aikin and his associates used collective biography to challenge thinking about social and political conventions and institutions in Britain and elsewhere. They examined the actions and characters of rulers and statesmen, analysed developments and discoveries in science and engineering, and critiqued a broad range of literature, including historical works, political theory, and

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<sup>70</sup>*General Biography, or Lives, Critical and Historical, of the most eminent persons of all ages, countries, conditions, and professions, Volume the First*, eds. John Aikin, M. D. and the late Rev. William Enfield, LL.D. (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, G. Kearsley, R. H. Evans, and J. Wright; Edinburgh: Bell and Bradfute, 1799).

<sup>71</sup>Aikin, *General Biography. Vol. 2* (1801), 57-62.

poetry, all in the course of composing biographies of the individuals involved. Their criticism challenged views and opinions that had become standard for much of English society.

*General Biography* was clearly intended for a much broader reading public than Bayle's erudite and sceptical critique of ideas. The collection is introduced with the proposition that if any kind of writing could claim "universal suffrage," it would be biography, for its instruction and amusement.<sup>72</sup> Presenting biography as the popular choice implies an egalitarian view of biography, that it is of interest to everyone and accessible to all, appreciated for its usefulness and entertainment.

In writing biographies for *General Biography* Aikin and his fellow writers frequently obtained details from the same sources as relied upon by other compilers of collective biographies. However, Aikin brings to the genre his perspective as a member of a community of outsiders that formed an important component of English social, economic, and political life. He adapted the standard format of collective biography to his usual practice of expressing criticism of social and cultural institutions and traditions, when overt political and religious dissent carried the risk of further ostracism or prosecution. Additionally, the publication of *General Biography* demonstrated for Aikin's readers that one might express and continue to publish opinions that differed from those promoted by the established powers of church and state. Accordingly, I have chosen as an example of the English biographical dictionary, John Aikin's *General Biography* for the light it casts on a minority view of English society and politics at the end of the

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<sup>72</sup>John Aikin, "Preface", *General Biography*, Vol. 1, 1.

eighteenth century and for its display of Aikin's engaged and thoughtful analysis and judgment.

This chapter provides a brief outline of John Aikin's background in a community of dissenters whose religious views prevented them from participating fully in the mainstream of English life, the exclusion influencing their political and social outlook. A discussion of *General Biography* follows, initially noting Aikin's objectives as stated in his Preface, which serves as something of a manifesto of his social and political outlook and his ideas about biography. Referring to a number of individual articles in *General Biography*, I demonstrate Aikin's use of collective biography to express ideas about English politics, history, and society. The chapter concludes with an assessment of how John Aikin's *General Biography* functions as historiography in its use of biographies to present a view of England that is a product of its own past, influenced by ideas both homegrown and originating in the wider world.

#### JOHN AIKIN AND DISSENT:

English religious dissenters were Protestant Christians who did not conform with the established church on various points of doctrine and liturgy. They were not adherents to a uniform set of beliefs, but were mostly committed to the right of private judgment in matters of faith, freedom of conscience, and scripture as the only foundation of faith.<sup>73</sup> As

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<sup>73</sup>Helen Braithwaite, *Romanticism, Publishing and Dissent - Joseph Johnson and the Cause of Liberty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3 and see Daniel E. White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), 8-11, for a summary of doctrinal distinctions and the inclusiveness of the dissenting denominations; and pp.37-40 for a discussion of the Aikins' religious affiliations and beliefs.

a consequence of being unable, on a point of conscience, to submit to the authority of the Church of England and to swear allegiance to the sovereign, dissenters were generally prevented from taking degrees from Oxford and Cambridge and from holding civil, military, or crown offices, including elected office, by virtue of the requirements of the *Corporation and Test Acts*.

Dissenters established schools to educate young men who were barred from the English universities and from the customary routes by which the gentry established themselves in society and in the professions. The dissenting academies encouraged rational enquiry and provided instruction in science in addition to the classics and theology, reflecting the generally enlightened outlook of middle class dissenters, who were often involved in commercial and entrepreneurial activities. Born in 1747, John Aikin was the son of a Presbyterian minister and teacher who became a tutor in classics at Warrington Academy in the commercial and industrial town of Warrington between Manchester and Liverpool.<sup>74</sup> Aikin became a surgeon and medical doctor through apprenticeship and classes at the University of Edinburgh and the London Hospital, practicing surgery and medicine for several years in towns including Warrington, where he also taught chemistry at the Academy. He obtained a medical degree from the University of Leyden in Holland, then practiced in Yarmouth and London.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>White, *Early Romanticism*, 24-26.

<sup>75</sup>Lucy Aikin, *Memoir of John Aikin, M.D. with a selection of his Miscellaneous Pieces, Biographical, Moral and Critical* (Philadelphia: Abraham Small, 1824), 9 - 18. The only extant full biography of John Aikin is his daughter's *Memoir*, and specific details of his life noted herein are taken from it; his correspondence with various persons appears in scattered archives: see Marilyn Brooks, "Aikin, John (1747-1822)", *Oxford DNB*. (2004).

John Aikin and his sister, Anna Letitia Aikin, later Barbauld,<sup>76</sup> were part of a loose circle of friends and acquaintances in what amounted to a community of religious dissenters and disaffected Anglicans interested in education and scientific and other intellectual enquiry. Many were affiliated with the learned and collegial environment of Warrington, and some published essays and pamphlets through its printing press.<sup>77</sup> Aikin's initial compositions for publication included *Thoughts on Hospitals* based on his early medical experience and showing a recognition of social issues. He also assisted his friend, John Howard, in preparing Howard's ultimately influential report, *State of the Prisons*, for publication in 1777.<sup>78</sup> Aikin wrote about botany, designed a chemistry course and an English geographical survey for students, and published a survey of the surroundings of Manchester, in which he made extensive observations on topographical and social changes resulting from human activity.<sup>79</sup>

Throughout their lives, Aikin and his sister maintained a very close literary relationship. They collaborated so seamlessly in writing and publishing *Evenings at*

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<sup>76</sup>Barbauld has been the subject of considerably greater attention by scholars than her brother, most recently: *Selected Poetry and Prose of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, eds. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), and William McCarthy, *Anna Letitia Barbauld, Voice of the Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008).

<sup>77</sup>The dissenting community, exemplified by the Aikin family is described as a subcategory of Habermas' bourgeois public sphere in White, *Early Romanticism*, 67-86; and see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass: M. I. T. University Press, 1989).

<sup>78</sup>White, 72.

<sup>79</sup>John Aikin, *A Description of the Country from thirty to forty Miles round Manchester* (London: John Stockdale, 1795).

*Home, or the Juvenile Budget, Opened*, a six-volume work published from 1792 to 1796, that they refrained from identifying the individual essays as having been written by one or the other. Their miscellaneous essays, written for a fictional family apparently based on the Warrington community, encourage children and parents together in critical thinking on political, social, and cultural matters. The essays very clearly illustrate the authors' liberal, anti-militarist, and reformist views, and their conviction that the least disruptive means to achieving political and social reform is through rational cultivation of open and enquiring minds.<sup>80</sup> A belief that the moral development of the individual is beneficial for society is apparent in *Evenings at Home*, as in John Aikin's two volumes of epistolary articles, *Letters from a Father to a Son*, written between 1792 and 1800.

A number of pamphlets and books written by Aikin and Barbauld were published by Joseph Johnson, including Aikin's single volume of *Biographical Memoirs of Medicine in Great Britain* in 1780, his biography of John Howard in 1792, as well as *Evenings at Home* and *Letters from a Father to a Son*.<sup>81</sup> Johnson, also a dissenter, was a publisher and bookseller whose shop served as a meeting place for persons interested in liberal ideas and reformist and radical politics, including writers and artists such as William Blake,

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<sup>80</sup>*Evenings at Home, or The Juvenile Budget, Opened, consisting of a variety of miscellaneous pieces, for the instruction and amusement of young persons* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1792-1796); Michelle Levy, "The Radical Education of *Evenings at Home*", *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 19, no. 1-2 (2006-7), 123-150., 127. See Michelle Levy for discussion of their joint authorship, 129-131.

<sup>81</sup>Aikin intended *Biographical Memoirs of Medicine...* to be a history of medical developments as well as an addition to British biography, but found that he was unable to access materials from many private libraries, and his only volume covered "the revival of literature to the time of Harvey". See Lucy Aikin, *Memoir*, 20-22.

Henry Fuseli, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Thomas Paine, and Joseph Priestley. Many of Johnson's friends wrote for his *Analytical Review*, a scientific and literary monthly that became identified with issues of religious dissent and political reform and was represented by those in power as a dangerously radical publication.<sup>82</sup> From 1800 to 1808, the second to the seventh volumes of John Aikin's *General Biography* were printed by Johnson, who died in 1809.

The continued legal limitations on their participation in British civil society had given dissenters an interest in the expansion of civil liberties. Their ongoing lack of progress led to the realization for many that political reform, particularly on points such as parliamentary representation and government corruption, would likely be required before repeal of the *Corporation* and *Test Acts* could be achieved.<sup>83</sup> Initially the French Revolution brought encouragement to the dissenters and reformers, followed by a fear of losing gains already made or seemingly within reach, as British authorities toughened their resistance to change.

In 1790, Barbauld and Aikin had each published pamphlets, anonymously, in response to a failed vote on repeal of the *Corporation* and *Test Acts*. Once he had become identified as the author of one of the pamphlets and of a pamphlet criticizing the

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<sup>82</sup>Helen Braithwaite, *Romanticism*, 88; 159. Johnson was also co-publisher of the reformist *Monthly Magazine*, for which Aikin was literary editor until 1806. Lucy Aikin, *idem*, 110. Lucy insists that her father had nothing to do with its politics.

<sup>83</sup>See, for example, Stuart Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism - Political Rhetoric, 1770-1814* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) for a discussion of the relationship between religious and political dissent, and Braithwaite.

legal treatment of the poor, the town of Yarmouth took away his medical practice.<sup>84</sup> He worked as a doctor for only a few years thereafter in London, but continued to write until several years before his death in 1822. In 1798, Joseph Johnson was convicted of seditious libel and wilful criminal publication for selling a pamphlet opposing war with France. He was imprisoned for nine months, and the author of the pamphlet, Aikin's friend Gilbert Wakefield, an Anglican clergyman, was incarcerated for two years. The *Analytical Review* folded under the financial and political pressure of Johnson's conviction and incarceration.<sup>85</sup>

#### INTRODUCING *GENERAL BIOGRAPHY*: JOHN AIKIN'S PREFACE:

The ten volumes of *General Biography* were published over a period of sixteen years, from 1799 to 1815. Each volume contains about seven hundred pages, quarto size, of double-column densely printed text about hundreds of individuals. Each entry is distinguished from the previous one by an indentation and the capital letters of the next surname. References to sources appear within the text of the articles or in italics at the end, with no footnotes or margin notes.<sup>86</sup> In the tenth and final volume, the established

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<sup>84</sup>Lucy Aikin, *Memoir*, 78-79.

<sup>85</sup>See Braithwaite, *Romanticism*, 155-167, for the difficulties faced by Johnson and others as proponents of religious and political reforms; and Aikin's life of Gilbert Wakefield in *General Biography*. Vol. 10, 4-7.

<sup>86</sup>The only indication as to who composed each biographical entry is an initial or initials at the end of each, and since most of the articles in the first volume are designated "A." or "E.", it seems reasonable to conclude that with "A" representing Aikin, "E" refers to Enfield. In later volumes, "Mr. Nicholson", "The Rev. Thomas Morgan", and "Mr. William Johnston", named as co-composers are also designated by initials, although it is not clear whether "W. N." and "N" are one and the same.

system of alphabetical entries concludes at page 287, followed by a “Chronological Index of Sovereigns,” from 1556 B.C. to 1776 A.D. listing more than nine hundred names of rulers, biographies of whom are included in the main text. There is a two-hundred-fifty-page *Supplement* and three further articles appear as *Addenda*.

In her *Memoir* of her father, John Aikin’s daughter confirms that although unsigned, the “Preface” to *General Biography* was written by Aikin, that it is “...analogous to his settled habits of judging and feeling...an ingenuous exposition of his own standard of human greatness.”<sup>87</sup> Having initially cited the universal appeal of biography, Aikin’s aversion to hereditary privilege is immediately revealed. He explains his choice of alphabetical order over an ordering of entries based on hierarchy as if hierarchical order were the only alternative.<sup>88</sup> Uniting writers and readers in a curiosity and search for knowledge that he says makes “us” want information about an individual, he cites “fame or celebrity” as the basis for the selection, a criterion that makes no reference to rank or social status.<sup>89</sup> He also explains that there will be no special emphasis on British individuals, that he and his associates are “free from a decisive stamp of *nationality*,” seeing themselves as “citizens of the world,” implying a participation in the

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<sup>87</sup>Lucy Aikin, *Memoir*, 111.

<sup>88</sup>There is little evidence of hierarchical order being used in this period; within the chronological order of rulers in the second edition of *The British Plutarch*, published in 1776, some ordering according to rank occurs, but the arrangement is not consistently hierarchical; see *Volume IV*, in which the first section includes only members of the aristocracy, and the “supplement” contains articles on writers.

<sup>89</sup>Aikin, “Preface”, *General Biography*, 1-2.

society of man.<sup>90</sup>

Aikin proposes that it is the biographer's duty to "detach the man from his station," to avoid repeating standard notions about those who are famous for their involvement in "great affairs of the world." Their fame may be a consequence of inherited position rather than ability, and their personal qualities may have had no special influence on events.<sup>91</sup> While reminiscent of Bacon's proposal that lives may be more genuine and therefore more useful than history, Aikin's words imply further that biography may be used to reveal those undeserving of their recognition by history. He also insists that even hereditary sovereigns ought to be assessed by the same criteria as all others in public life. They have a place in *General Biography* in recognition of the power that is "entrusted to them," by implication pointing out to his readers that sovereigns owe their power to the consent of the people. Equally irreverently, he notes their utility as reference points for learning the events in a country's history.<sup>92</sup>

Aikin's opposition to hereditary privilege is apparent also in some of his other publications. In one essay, Aikin points out that the nobleman who boasts that his ancestors had accompanied William the Conqueror has in effect identified himself as a descendant of "subaltern banditti" who stole the land from its lawful inhabitants. Elsewhere, he refers to the traditional upbringing of an heir to an entailed estate as almost

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid. 5-6.

<sup>91</sup>Aikin, *Vol. 1, 2*; He also addresses the issue of whether biography may lead to a greater understanding than history, without resolving it convincingly, in "History and Biography Estimated", *Letters from a Father to a Son, Vol. II* (London: J. Johnson, 1800), 217 and 234.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 3.

inevitably producing a “low-minded brutal, tyrannical debauchee,” having had to do nothing to secure his land and position.<sup>93</sup>

In addition to individuals in public life, Aikin identifies the other general category of subjects as those who are noteworthy for distinction in art, science, or literature, based on their individual efforts. He cites the principles of invention, improvement, and “uncommon excellence”. He also notes that a broad range of writers, those “whose works still form part of the stock of general literature...” will be included to allow the work to function as a reference for “men of letters,” implying that a certain intellectual standard is to be maintained.<sup>94</sup>

Revealing what his daughter calls his “predilection for inventors,”<sup>95</sup> Aikin proposes that the inventor is a subject most worthy of biographical notice, for having “...durably added to the stock of valuable products of human skill and ingenuity,” and demonstrating “...the superiority of one individual over the common mass.”<sup>96</sup> He names two examples of intellectual greatness: canal designer James Brindley, and Isaac Newton. Indicating a willingness to challenge even the most exalted reputation, Aikin contrasts Brindley favourably with Alexander the Great.

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<sup>93</sup>John Aikin, “Inquiry into the Nature of Family Pride”, in Lucy Aikin, *Memoir*, 336-344, 340. and “On the Analogy between Mental and Bodily Disease”, in Aikin, *Letters*, 179-180.

<sup>94</sup>Aikin, *General Biography*, Vol. 1, 5. also see Aikin, “On Attachment to the Ancients continued”, *Letters...*, Vol. 1, 34: “But though the inventor stands higher in the scale of genius than the improver, yet the workmanship of the latter will in many respects be more perfect than that of the former.”

<sup>95</sup>Lucy Aikin, *Memoir*, 118.

<sup>96</sup>Aikin, “Preface”, *General Biography*, Vol. 1, 3-4.

Near the end of the Preface, John Aikin defines what he considers the parameters for the articles in *General Biography*, the “compass” of the work, making no distinction between the two classes of individuals that have been selected for *General Biography*, the public men and those who are known for their personal efforts and accomplishments

...with so vast a subject before us as the lives of eminent men of all ages and nations...the aim must rather be, to give a set of characteristic sketches in miniature, than a series of finished and full-sized portraits....and we hope we have dismissed few of that class, without fully answering the leading biographical questions, What was he? What did he? His moral and intellectual qualities, the principal events of his life, his relative merit in the department he occupied, and especially, the manner in which he was first formed to his art or profession, with the gradations by which he rose to excellence, have engaged our attentive inquiries, and we have endeavoured to develop them with all the accuracy that conciseness would allow.<sup>97</sup>

He ends the Preface with the assertion that while biographical information has been obtained by the writers from other sources, the “sentiments and reflections” are their own.<sup>98</sup>

The initial impression which Aikin clearly intends to convey through the Preface to *General Biography* is one of universality and social equality among readers, writers, and biographical subjects. The challenge evident in some of his remarks effectively advertises *General Biography* as different from other collective biographies, such as the successive editions of *A New and General Biographical Dictionary* and *The British Plutarch*, in

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<sup>97</sup>Aikin, *General Biography*, Vol. 1, 6-7.

<sup>98</sup>Aikin, “Preface”, *General Biography*, Vol. 1, 7. The writers drew from Greek and Roman biographies, Moréri and Bayle, *Biographia Britannica*, collective biographies and historical writings in many languages, individual lives, and the works of many of their biographical subjects.

which the main principle evident from the prefatory remarks is respect for the eminent.<sup>99</sup>

#### PUBLIC LIFE, OR “GREAT AFFAIRS OF THE WORLD”

John Aikin wrote most of the lives of rulers, British and foreign, ancient and modern, in *General Biography*. His biographies of ancient kings and statesmen show his familiarity with classical sources. In his article on Alexander, Aikin depicts him as a man of excess and capriciousness, determined and unrelenting as a general, unpredictable and unreasoning in his pursuit of glory, a conqueror who was much more interested in subjecting vast territories than governing them.<sup>100</sup> While Plutarch is the source and the model for his biography of Alexander, Alexander evidently represents for Aikin the evils of both arbitrary rule and the widespread glorification of military exploits, as well as the worst personal traits of an inheritor of land and power. He concludes that the best aspects of Alexander’s character were “...fitted rather to inspire admiration than esteem; while the worst rendered him a pest of mankind, and resembled him to one of those baleful meteors which dazzle as they fly, but ruin where they fall.”<sup>101</sup>

Aikin’s biography of Julius Caesar, another widely revered historical figure, commences: “Among the personages whom history commemorates under the title of *great men*, none, perhaps, can claim a higher rank than the dictator Caesar, the subverter

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<sup>99</sup>“Preface”, *A New and General Biographical Dictionary* (1795), viii; and “Advertisement”, *A New and General Biographical Dictionary* (1798), vii.

<sup>100</sup>*General Biography, Vol. 1*, 151-159.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, 159.

of the republican, and the founder of the imperial, constitution of Rome.”<sup>102</sup> He notes that although Caesar’s tendency to clemency may be admirable in itself, it essentially amounted to abstention from an abuse of the power that he had already usurped, and was unlike the clemency exhibited towards rebellious subjects by a modern king who is the legitimate head of state. Plutarch had linked Alexander and Julius Caesar in his *Lives*, but seems never to have written a comparison of the two as he did in respect of other “parallel lives”. Aikin explicitly contrasts them at the end of his article on Caesar, returning to the theme of hereditary privilege in comparing Caesar to the father of Alexander, from whom Alexander inherited his rank and kingdom.

Aikin relied substantially on David Hume’s *History of England*, for his lives of British rulers and statesmen prior to 1688.<sup>103</sup> Like Hume, Aikin was interested in following the development of English government and the legal foundations of English liberty. In his article on Hume, he describes his *History* as

a standard book, read by all, at home and abroad, who wished to take a compendious and interesting view of English affairs....It is generally allowed... that he has too readily admitted the idea that the liberties of the country are of modern date, and were so many forced concessions from the sovereigns. In his account of the Tudors and Stuarts, there seems a manifest design of exaggerating the despotism of the former, in order to lighten by comparison the usurpations and high pretensions of the latter. But after allowance is made for this systematic bias, Hume will be found free from the partialities which so commonly influence national historians; enlarged and truly philosophical in his views of events and characters; acute and sagacious in his deductions of causes and effects; and judicious

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<sup>102</sup>*General Biography, Vol. 2* (1801), 404-414.

<sup>103</sup>e.g. Aikin, *General Biography, Vol. 1*, “Alfred the Great”, 182-185; *Vol. 2*, “Charles I”, 608-614; *Vol. 5*, “James I”, 391-395; David Hume, *History of England, Vol. II, Vol. V* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983).

in the selection of those topics which render the study of history useful as well as entertaining.<sup>104</sup>

Hume's *History* was a very politic choice for Aikin, as Hume's accounts of English rulers, while controversial in some quarters, were unlikely to arouse significant objection. Liberal critics, whose opinion Aikin alludes to in the passage quoted above, saw Hume as too sympathetic to the early Stuart kings, failing, like the Stuarts, to acknowledge the extent of their violation of parliamentary rights under the 'ancient' constitution.<sup>105</sup> Aikin acknowledged the criticism of Hume from the whig perspective, perhaps intending to indicate his own independence from "systematic bias" but for the most part, concurred with Hume.<sup>106</sup> Aikin was also willing to state his disagreement with Hume, as he does in his biography of Cardinal Wolsey in the final volume of *General Biography*. Combining his particular objections to rank with his moral assessment of Wolsey's character, Aikin calls Wolsey the sort of man who, for ability and circumstances, is promoted by a monarch to the height of power, is ostentatious in his pride and

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<sup>104</sup>Aikin, *General Biography*, Vol. 5, 317.

<sup>105</sup>for example: Francis Jeffrey, "Review of *An Historical View*", *Edinburgh Review* 3, October 1803, 154-181, in which Jeffrey, reviewing John Millar's *An Historical View of the English Government*, voices the usual charge against Hume: "Mr Hume certainly magnifies the tyranny and arbitrary conduct of Elizabeth, when he compares it to that of a Turkish sultan, in order to extenuate the unpopular measures of her successor", and later "...Mr. Hume has certainly aggravated the absurdities of the puritanical leaders of the age, and omitted no opportunity to hold up the fanaticism of the Parliament itself to derision...".

<sup>106</sup>Aikin's original co-editor, William Enfield, published reviews of an abridgement of Hume's *History*, and of a continuation of Hume's *History*, in which he praised Hume's original work: William Enfield, "Reviews", *The Monthly Review*, Vol. 19, Jan. 1796, 73-74; 74-76, reprinted in *Early Responses to Hume's History of England*, Vol. II, ed. James Fieser (Bristol: Thoemmes, 2002), 201-205. See also William B. Todd, "Foreword" to David Hume, *The History of England*, xi-xxiii, xix, for an account of editions printed during Hume's lifetime.

presumption, insatiable in his greed, and falls as conspicuously as he had risen.<sup>107</sup>

It is apparent that Aikin's view of biography of men in public life did not include writing intimate details about their private lives, any more than Plutarch had intended in recommending that a writer look for a few details about an illustrious person's actions that might more perfectly demonstrate his character. Aikin's summation of the character of each sovereign is accomplished with little deference, but also without close scrutiny of his subject's private behaviour. His articles on the lives of George I and George II principally concern the state of the nation under the first two Hanoverian monarchs. While he disapproves of their direct involvement in international affairs, particularly war with France, he also affirms the accession of George I to the throne of Britain by the will of the people, supported by the Whigs.<sup>108</sup> As to his personal life, George I could be any English gentleman, seen from a distance.<sup>109</sup> In his life of George II, Aikin concludes approvingly that with the defeat of the 1745 Stuart-led uprising, "it appeared that the greater part of the nation had indissolubly connected the interests of religion and liberty with the support of those principles which called the house of Hanover to the throne,"<sup>110</sup> a connection that was generally supported by the English dissenters. His brief comments on the character of George II are irreverent but impersonal, an effort at balance:

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<sup>107</sup>"Wolsey", *General Biography Vol. 10* (1815), 150.

<sup>108</sup>Aikin, "George-Lewis I", *Vol. 4* (1803), 374: "He threw himself, or rather was thrown, into the arms of the whig party, who indeed alone openly maintained those principles upon which the right of his crown was founded. Of these, the fundamental one was the superiority of the national will in appointing a chief governor, to any claim derived from hereditary right."

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.* 375.

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.* 375, 376. Also article on Queen Anne, *Vol. 1*, 283.

He was a prince of very moderate abilities, and destitute of every ornament from science or literature, which he neither understood nor patronised. He was hasty and somewhat obstinate in his temper, and carried frugality to the borders of meanness. Yet a natural goodness of heart, a love of justice, and an honest openness of disposition, conciliated the affection of his people, and have inspired respect and veneration for his memory.<sup>111</sup>

Incorporating the lives of royalty into an eclectic collection of brief biographies in which hierarchy does not dictate the order of entries is a very clear and deliberate demonstration of Aikin's assertion that sovereigns are to be treated no differently from others in public life. Of English kings included in the 1795 and the 1798 editions of the *New and General Biographical Dictionary* series, only those predating the Tudors, with the exception of Queen Elizabeth, were included.<sup>112</sup> In Alexander Chalmers' 1812-1817 edition of the *General Biographical Dictionary*, Chalmers cites the distinction between biography and history as reason for their exclusion, saying that adding sovereigns encumbers biographical dictionaries by including "passages of history...by no means biographical."<sup>113</sup> He cites custom or tradition as further justification.

As in his lives of sovereigns, Aikin's articles about statesmen and politicians address almost exclusively the public behaviour of public men, like Plutarch, concerned

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<sup>111</sup>Ibid. 377.

<sup>112</sup>*New and General Biographical Dictionary, Vol. 5*, 1795 edition, 38-40; *New and General Biographical Dictionary, Vol. 5*, 1798 edition, 311-317; the Chalmers account is more extensive, referring to Hume's *History* as a source among several, including Bolingbroke's *Idea of a Patriot King*: Alexander Chalmers, *The General Biographical Dictionary, Vol. 13* (London: J. Nichols and Son, 1812-1817), 117-131.

<sup>113</sup>Chalmers, *General Biographical Dictionary*, Vol. 1, x. Chalmers' preface introduces this edition as "a new Edition of the Biographical Dictionary, more voluminous than any of the former...", Vol. 1, v.

with honour and character as revealed in their public actions, barely alluding to private or family matters. His articles on the Duke of Marlborough and Robert Walpole, show both as extremely powerful men of dubious moral character.<sup>114</sup> Marlborough's life is written as a study of a type, a "man of the world", governed by self-interest and supremely skillful at protecting that interest. Walpole is represented as repudiating his liberal principles and using corruption in order to govern. Aikin ends his article on Walpole, which appeared in his final volume, with the observation that his reputation seems to have improved with time. This comment may reflect Aikin's own reassessment of Walpole after many years of war, as he commends Walpole for trying to maintain peace.<sup>115</sup>

In accordance with the convention of writing biographies only about the deceased, the reign of King George III is analyzed through the lives of statesmen who had recently died, such as William Pitt, father and son.<sup>116</sup> The senior William Pitt was, according to Aikin, the defender of the English constitution against the Hanoverian interests and particularly against George III's attempts to expand royal prerogative. Aikin praises Pitt's unyielding opposition to general warrants and to the legal doctrine of libelous sedition, barely mentioning his unattractive characteristics of personality. Aikin clearly objects to Pitt's abandonment of his status as "the great commoner", but concedes Pitt's worthiness

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<sup>114</sup>Aikin, "Churchill, John", *General Biography Vol. 2* (1801), 689-694; and "Walpole, Robert", *Vol. 10*, (1815), 6-22.

<sup>115</sup>Aikin, "Walpole," *General Biography, Vol 10*, 22.

<sup>116</sup>According to his daughter, Aikin compiled a work entitled *Annals of the Reign of King George III*, which she claims was first published in 1816, during the Regency of the Prince of Wales while the king was still living, completing a second edition on the death of George III in 1820. see Lucy Aikin, *Memoir*, 151-152.

of honour, eventually calling him “this great man”.<sup>117</sup> By comparison, the 1798 edition of the *New and General Biographical Dictionary* and the Chalmers edition of the *General Biographical Dictionary* introduce the senior William Pitt him as “one of the most illustrious statesmen whom this country has produced”, and proceed with a mostly flattering picture of Pitt.<sup>118</sup> While Aikin also praised Pitt, he avoids the obsequious note and eschews the expression of personal enthusiasm for British military victories apparent in the other dictionaries.

#### ENGLAND AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

In writing to his friend Dr. Haygarth in 1802, Aikin claimed to have lost interest in public affairs, that he was “...cured of all theoretical ideas of reform,” called England the “best country in the world,” and doubted whether things could be better.<sup>119</sup> The loss of interest was ephemeral. Aikin uses his biography of the younger William Pitt,<sup>120</sup> whom he mentioned in the dispirited letter to Haygarth, as an opportunity to explain his profound objection to English domestic policy directed by the younger Pitt and others who had initially seemed to support reform. According to Aikin, those in power had overreacted, first over the agitation for reform in France, and then to the revolution, to the detriment of English civil liberties. Aikin explains:

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<sup>117</sup>John Aikin, *General Biography, Vol. Eight*, 1813, 191-195.

<sup>118</sup>*New and General Biographical Dictionary*, Vol. XII, 1798, 254-261; Alexander Chalmers, *General Biographical Dictionary, Vol. XXV*, 1815, 1-23.

<sup>119</sup>Lucy Aikin, *Memoir*, 141.

<sup>120</sup>Aikin, *General Biography, Vol. Eight*, 195-200.

A constitution like the British would, however, seem to have less to fear than almost any other, from the keen researches into the nature and authority of social institutions which preceded and accompanied such a mighty change. Yet the pertinacious rejection of various proposed reforms, and the number of subsisting abuses and corruptions, had given birth to discontents which rankled in the minds of a considerable proportion of British subjects. To obviate the dangers which might arise from this source was probably the first point of the ministerial policy, for, with respect to France herself, no idea could at the early period of the revolution be entertained of her acquiring strength from civil discord. The war was therefore first declared against *French principles*, and in the contest, government was aided by all the great powers and authorities of the nation; by the magistracy, the law, the church, the army, the mass of property, hereditary and commercial. The democratical party, however, was numerous in the capital and in some other places; they were actuated by a zeal bordering on enthusiasm, and had adopted a regular organization. The views of the wiser and more moderate, extended only to such temperate reforms as had been already proposed, particularly that of the representation of the people in parliament; but there were others who went the full length of the French innovators. A vigilant eye and a steady hand were obviously necessary to steer the vessel of state amid those dangers; but the manner in which Mr. Pitt on this occasion exercised the almost unlimited power which he possessed, has been very differently judged of by the different parties. To sound alarm as loudly as possible through the nation, to encourage the dissemination of high principles of government, and involve in a common obloquy all measures of opposition and all projects of reform; to augment, according to the apparent urgency of circumstances, the restrictions upon political liberty, and make temporary sacrifices of the spirit of the constitution to the public safety; appears to have been the system of his domestic policy.<sup>121</sup>

Aikin reports that the younger William Pitt was praised as “the pilot who had weathered the storm” for his having prevented a revolution and saved the English constitution, a view that is expressed several years later by Chalmers in *The General*

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<sup>121</sup>Ibid., 198.

*Biographical Dictionary*.<sup>122</sup> With evident bitterness, Aikin remarks that the accolade came from those who considered “a long and disastrous war as a cheap price for security at home.”

The lives of French statesmen, politicians, writers and theorists of the French revolution were also addressed by Aikin and his associates in an evident attempt to explain the disaster, a great source of disappointment to English reformers. The writers of *General Biography* clearly blamed some of the excesses of the French revolution on a failure to base ideas for political reform on reason rather than imaginative enthusiasm.<sup>123</sup> Many failed to give due consideration to the logical conclusions of progressively more extreme ideas, particularly absent a structure that could support institutional change. Aikin flatly states that the writings of Condorcet and his friends contributed to bring on the Revolution.<sup>124</sup> He claims that the greatest fault of Rousseau’s writing was too much imagination, then immediately notes that during the Revolution, “...his words were referred to as of the highest authority in political matters, and his memory was almost deified.”<sup>125</sup> In his 1807 article about the aristocratic Malesherbes, Aikin concludes that it was not knowledge and liberty, but the former abuses of these principles that led to the

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<sup>122</sup>Alexander Chalmers, *The General Biographical Dictionary*, Vol. 25, 9-26. Chalmers pretends not to understand why some objected to Pitt’s actions, claiming that the results proved Pitt correct. Pitt’s initial interest in reform is dismissed as typical youthful folly, later repented, to the obvious relief of the writer.

<sup>123</sup>e.g., articles on Jean Bailly, by “N”, Brissot and Mirabeau, by Aikin, *General Biography*, Vol. 1 (1799), 528-530; Vol. 7 (1808), 116-119; and Vol. 2 (1801), 306 -309.

<sup>124</sup>*General Biography*. Vol. 3 (1802), 97-98. See also articles on Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire: Vol. 3 (1802), 371-373; Vol. 8 (1813), 632-637; Vol. 9 (1814), 634-639.

<sup>125</sup>*General Biography*. Vol. 8 (1813), 637.

disastrous consequences of the revolution, and he pointedly reminds his readers that the long, arbitrary, and repressive reign of Louis XV would have been entirely unacceptable to an English public, while Louis XVI, initially more liberal, was too weak to effect the reforms that were needed.<sup>126</sup>

#### “DISTINCTION IN ART, SCIENCE, OR LITERATURE”

The biographers’ articles on individuals who were known for their achievements in science, literature, and the arts were necessarily more detailed in respect of their personal and private lives than the articles on individuals in public life. As Aikin had stated in the preface, their distinction had arisen from personal qualifications and individual action. Biographical subjects of this category were as famous as Isaac Newton, or as obscure as the two Danish university professors of the seventeenth century, Christian Aagard and Nicholas Aagard, whose very brief biographies appear as the first and second entries in *Volume 1*.

While Andrew Kippis’s second edition of the *Biographia Britannica* provides much of the biographical detail about James Brindley, the biography of Brindley in *General Biography* opens with an essay on the industrialization of the English countryside.<sup>127</sup> The writer cites improvements in “arts and manufactures” leading to the division of labour and new uses of private capital, with civil engineering developing to

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<sup>126</sup>*General Biography*, Vol. 6 (1807), 498-501.

<sup>127</sup>Andrew Kippis, *Biographia Britannica*, second edition, Vol. 2 (London: W. & A. Strahan, 1780), 591-604; Aikin, *General Biography...Vol.2*, 1801, 303 - 306.

meet the need for further means of transportation. This is a theme that Aikin had addressed in his descriptive survey of the countryside around Manchester which he had published in 1795.<sup>128</sup> His contrast of Brindley with Alexander the Great in the Preface to *General Biography* had previously appeared in “Great Men”, an essay in the final volume of *Evenings at Home*, published in 1796 by Aikin and his sister.<sup>129</sup> Despite Aikin’s evidently keen interest in Brindley, the writer of the article in *General Biography* is identified as “W. N.”, likely William Nicholson.<sup>130</sup> The article explains that civil engineers, who are usually self-taught, rely on their own ingenuity to invent new and original means to overcome practical problems. Brindley’s family and early life are briefly noted, although the details of many of his accomplishments are described without input from Brindley, as he drew no plans and left no records. The biographer speculates on the nature of genius, and struggles to explain Brindley’s abilities. His wonderful feats of engineering are described, particularly the design and construction of canals for the Duke

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<sup>128</sup>See Aikin’s survey of the countryside, particularly the section on River and Canal Navigation in *A Description... round Manchester*. The introduction to the Brindley essay also reminiscent of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*.

<sup>129</sup>John Aikin and Anna Barbauld, “Great Men”, in *Evenings at Home*, Vol. 6, 13. Brindley is described as one of the “Great Men” of Britain, who “invent useful arts, or discover important truths, which may promote the comfort and happiness of unborn generations in the most distant parts of the world....”, whose accomplishments were of his own making, without benefit of wealth or rank.

<sup>130</sup>The title pages of *Volumes 2 and 3 of General Biography* show the name “Mr. Nicholson” as one of the authors. William Nicholson (1753-1815) was another religious dissenter who was an inventor and science writer, responsible for publishing the *Journal of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, and the Arts*, otherwise known as “Nicholson’s Journal” for several years from 1797. The entry on Nicholson in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* does not mention any involvement in Aikin’s *General Biography*. Jan Golinski, “Nicholson, William” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004-8).

of Bridgewater, also credited with foresight and ability in appreciating the genius of Brindley.

A biography of Richard Arkwright, which appears in the previous volume, also begins with an essay in social and economic history, the biographer designated as “N”. He describes the process by which an invention becomes adopted for a manufacturing process as “like the lottery, enriches a few while multitudes become the losers,” often resulting in someone who was not the inventor profiting from the invention. The biographer evidently considers Arkwright’s role ambiguous in the invention of the textile machinery that produced great wealth for his family, and he concedes the value of the invention to the nation, without resolving uncertainty about the acclaimed inventor.<sup>131</sup>

The interest that Aikin and his associates show in these inventors focuses not only on the individuals but on the situations in which they or their inventions succeeded, and on social and economic conditions that gave rise to the development of new ideas. By comparison, other contemporary biographical collections, which also drew information about Brindley from the *Biographia Britannica*, lack the social and economic commentary of the article in *General Biography*, and have little but praise for Arkwright, although Chalmers notes the absence of information about him.<sup>132</sup>

Biographical articles in *General Biography* on inventors and scientists of the seventeenth century, such as Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, Robert Hooke, Edmund

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<sup>131</sup>*General Biography, Vol. 1, 1799, 389 - 392.*

<sup>132</sup>on Brindley: *A New and General Biographical Dictionary, Vol. III, 1798, 76-79*; Alexander Chalmers, *The General Biographical Dictionary, Vol. 7, London: 1812, 3-15*; and on Arkwright: *The New and General..., Vol. I, 1798, 463*; and Chalmers, *Vol. 2, 476.*

Halley, whose work was more fundamentally experimental and philosophical (scientific) than the mechanical inventions of the eighteenth century, make a point of tracing the effects of empirical research on their methods and discoveries, and of noting the implications of their results for further discoveries. Most of those articles on earlier English philosophers/scientists are written by William Enfield, in the first volume, or subsequently by Thomas Morgan, another dissenting minister who was Enfield's replacement. Morgan also wrote the articles on "divines, metaphysicians, philosophers, natural and moral, and mathematicians", until the ninth and tenth editions, when John Aikin took over much of that subject matter, with William Johnson, who had been with the project since the third volume.<sup>133</sup>

The article on Isaac Newton in Aikin's *General Biography* is attributed to Thomas Morgan. It is distinguishable from Newton's biography in the first edition of *Biographia Britannica* by Morgan's lucid explanation of many of Newton's inventions and discoveries and their importance.<sup>134</sup> The writer evidently intended to instruct his readers, and had faith in their ability to comprehend. In relating events of Newton's career, the writer provides a view of the partly collegial but perhaps in greater part, highly competitive and jealous environment of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century scientific discovery.

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<sup>133</sup>Lucy Aikin, *Memoir*, 115. Morgan is the only one of the co-authors mentioned by Lucy Aikin in her *Memoir* of her father. William Johnston is the Translator from the German of John Beckmann, *A History of Inventions and Discoveries*, (London printed for J. Bell, 1792).

<sup>134</sup>*Gen. Biog. Vol. 7, 1808, 371-385.* and William Oldys, *Biographia Britannica, Vol. V., 1760, 3210-3244*;—copied without footnotes in Thomas Mortimer, *The British Plutarch, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., In six volumes, Vol. V, 1776, 306-336*; very similar articles in *The New and General Biographical Dictionary*, 1784, 1795, 1798 editions.

The biography as a whole, at over thirteen pages, is a more detailed, complete picture of a man than most of the lives in *General Biography*, likely due to the volume of available information and the evident esteem in which Newton is held by the biographer. The biographer enlists the illustrious Newton in the cause of religious freedom, pointing out Newton's commitment to the principle of toleration and his alleged "unitarian sentiment". The same writer's biography of Edmund Halley is equally lucid in its explanation of Halley's complex mathematical discoveries.<sup>135</sup>

Despite having referred in a letter to a friend, to "...the paltry intrigues and nonsensical opinions which occupy so much of medical biography," John Aikin wrote a number of lives of physicians for *General Biography*.<sup>136</sup> He adapted the biographies from his previous work on the *Biographical Memoirs of Medicine in Great Britain*, which he had intended as a history of British medicine, adding many medical researchers and practitioners. Extending from ancient Greeks, Arabs, early Europeans, to modern doctors, Aikin's lives of doctors not only situate each in the course of the development of medicine, but also examine the relationship of medical practitioners to their academic and social milieux. His rational, empirical approach to medicine is evident, as is his respect for the practitioners such as William Harvey, Richard Mead and William Cullen, who treated medicine as a science to be investigated and understood.<sup>137</sup> As unawed by reputation in this field as in others, Aikin identifies Herman Boerhaave's system of

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<sup>135</sup>*General Biography, Vol. 5, 1804, 25-30.*

<sup>136</sup>Lucy Aikin, *Memoir*, 131; 93; and 104.

<sup>137</sup>*General Biography, Vol. 5, 1804, 71-73; Vol. 7, 1808, 1-3; Vol. 3, 1802, 254-256.*

medicine as theoretical rather than based on experimental science, resulting in its being supplanted by “newer doctrines more correspondent to the improved state of science,” while his research in chemistry was conducted “with the method and clearness of a true science.”<sup>138</sup>

## POETS AND PAINTERS

The articles on poets, in particular, demonstrate Aikin’s commitment to freedom of expression not only in political and civil matters, but in critical commentary. At about the same time as *General Biography* was launched, Aikin was preparing to edit a collection of works of English poets, for which his daughter says he was to revise and add to the biographical and critical prefaces comprising Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*.<sup>139</sup> Lucy Aikin notes that her father had composed articles on Samuel Butler and Abraham Cowley before the prospective publishers’ cancellation of the project. Aikin’s biography of Johnson and his not entirely laudatory opinions of Johnson’s widely revered abilities as a critic appear in the fifth volume of *General Biography*.<sup>140</sup> In 1810, *Works of the English Poets* was published in twenty-one volumes, edited by the same Alexander Chalmers who edited the 1812-1817 edition of *The General Biographical Dictionary*, a

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<sup>138</sup>Vol. 2, 1801, 205 - 208. Samuel Johnson had also written a very admiring biography/obituary of Boerhaave: Samuel Johnson, *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D....in 2 Vols. Vol. II*, (London: 1825), 11 - 120.

<sup>139</sup>Lucy Aikin, *Memoir*, 133. Eleven of his critical essays on English poets, including Spencer, Milton, Thomson, and Pope, published in periodicals or other collections are reprinted in Lucy Aikin, *Memoir*, 161-311.

<sup>140</sup>*General Biography*, Vol. 5 (1804), 540-547.

writer with a particular interest in, and a greater respect for, Samuel Johnson.<sup>141</sup>

For the most part, Aikin's biographies of Butler and Cowley follow Johnson's biographical commentary, much abbreviated and written in Aikin's clear, unadorned style, absent the Johnsonian pronouncements.<sup>142</sup> In his article on Butler, he quotes Johnson's observation that Butler's knowledge of human nature is exhibited in his comic epic *Hudibras*, although Aikin is significantly more appreciative of the humour in Butler's poem than was Johnson. In commenting on Cowley's poetry Aikin commends the reader to Johnson's "excellent critique" on the metaphysical poets in the latter's life of Cowley. However, in his scrutiny of Cowley's life and writing Aikin is much less censorious than Johnson, who considered Cowley to be the best practitioner of a style he evidently neither liked nor respected. Aikin more generously points out that Cowley's style of poetry is no longer to the popular taste, and his summation of Cowley is characteristic of his more affable outlook, ending in what seems to be a jab at Johnson:

...Yet he has a very good title to keep a place among the British classics, since if not a *poet* of the first order, he is almost unrivaled as a *wit*. Few authors afford so many new thoughts, so many absolutely his own. His works are a flower-garden run to weeds, but the flowers are numerous and brilliant, and the search after them will repay the pains of a collector who is not too indolent or fastidious.<sup>143</sup>

Aikin's original article on the poet William Cowper, who died in 1800, and whose

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<sup>141</sup>Bonnie Ferrero, "Chalmers, Alexander (1759-1834)", in *Oxford DNB*, Jan. 2008.

<sup>142</sup>"Butler", *General Biography*, Vol. 2, 394-395; "Cowley", Vol. 3 (1802), 188-191; Samuel Johnson, "Cowley" and "Butler", *Lives of the English Poets by Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, Vol. I, 1-65; 201-218.

<sup>143</sup>*General Biography*. Vol. 3, 191.

well-known poetic work *The Task* had been published in 1785 by Joseph Johnson<sup>144</sup> is interspersed with quotations from the poet's works, relating the ideas expressed in Cowper's poetry to his life.<sup>145</sup> Aikin takes particular note of Cowper's education at Westminster school, which, rather than instilling in him the self-confidence that, as Aikin says, the "great schools" are supposed do, instilled a hatred of English public education that inspired his poem "Tirocinium, or a Review of Schools", which Aikin calls "a piece of great strength".

Although this brief biography extends for little over two pages, Aikin creates a vivid picture of an artist struggling to overcome inner turmoil and distress, producing admirable work while using his own efforts to combat his personal difficulties. Aikin's sympathy for a suffering human being is evident, but so is his rational interest in Cowper's mental affliction as a medical condition. In his article on another distressed poet, Thomas Chatterton, whose fame arose from his supposed serendipitous uncovering of a trove of ancient poetry, Aikin explores the effect on public opinion of Chatterton's deception and early death.<sup>146</sup> Thomas Chatterton subsequently became an icon for the tormented romantic artist, but while John Aikin's assessment of him is not without sympathy, it is

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<sup>144</sup>Braithwaite, *Romanticism*, p. 73.

<sup>145</sup>*General Biography Vol. 3*, 191-193.

<sup>146</sup>*General Biography Vol. 2*, 1801, 644-647.

completely rational.<sup>147</sup> Public sympathy for Chatterton was apparently such that Aikin finishes with a defence of his own rather censorious judgment of the poet, on the grounds of the biographer's duty to truth.

For their biographies of painters and other fine artists, Aikin and his associates relied on the critical opinions of other commentators, contrary not only to their stated intentions but also to their practice in regard to all other categories of subject matter in *General Biography*. The most frequently referenced source was "D'Argenville", with several others including "Pilkington" and "Walpole" also mentioned.<sup>148</sup> Aikin's article on William Hogarth is, as Aikin notes, taken from John Nichols' biography of Hogarth and Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting*, including the praise and objections by both.<sup>149</sup> The article on Hans Holbein is essentially a less-adorned version of Walpole's Holbein, with Aikin also referring to Walpole's catalogue of the painter's works.<sup>150</sup> His biographies of Raphael and of Rembrandt rely heavily on Henry Fuseli's 1810 edition of *Pilkington's*

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<sup>147</sup>William Wordsworth, *Resolution and Independence*: "I thought of Chatterton, the marvelous boy,/ The sleepless soul that perished in his pride" ll. 43-44. written 1802, published 1807; John Keats, *Endymion*, published in 1818, dedicated to Thomas Chatterton; Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Adonais*, a poem commemorating Keats, Chatterton described in the poem as one of "The inheritors of unfulfilled renown" ll.397-399;

<sup>148</sup>"D'Argenville" refers to Antoine-Joseph Dézallier d'Argenville, whose three volume *Abregé de la vie des plus fameux peintres* issued in 1745-1752, specifically noted under article on "Albani, Francis", in *General Biography*, Vol. 1, 118-119. Pilkington's *The Gentleman's and Connoisseur's Dictionary of Painters*, published in 1770, then published under further editors, including the edition of Henry Fuseli, of 1810, and Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting in England* are discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

<sup>149</sup>*General Biography*, Vol. 5 (1804), 224-226, 226.

<sup>150</sup>Aikin, *General Biography* Vol. 5 (1804), 226; Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, Vol. I, 66-101.

*Dictionary*, quoting Fuseli's opinions of each.<sup>151</sup>

The reliance of Aikin and his associates on the works of others concerning the visual arts is perhaps attributable to their all being dissenters. As outsiders, they lacked the social connections that would gain them access to the houses of English art owners, and were generally neither sufficiently wealthy nor socially predisposed to travel to see the great art repositories of Europe. Paintings and sculptures must be viewed in order to be judged, and while the biographers could access everything that had been written about or by historical figures, inventors, scientists, and writers of all kinds in order to formulate their opinions, they could not critically assess art that they had never seen. Aikin may also not have seen artists' lives as representing the same opportunities for commentary on social and political circumstances as individuals in other fields, and this may have been another reason that his biographies of artists in *General Biography* do not seem to show the same level of engagement as he and his associates show in considering other categories of individuals.

#### CONCLUSION: *GENERAL BIOGRAPHY* AS HISTORY

John Aikin's *General Biography* is a biographical dictionary with a historiographical purpose. Despite its encyclopedic format, Aikin used it to present a view of England as a product of the ideas and actions of not only its own "eminent persons" but of those of other countries whose ideas have spread to England and whose

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<sup>151</sup>Aikin, *General Biography Vol. 8* (1813), 463-465 and 502-503; Henry Fuseli, *Dictionary of Painters...by the Rev. M. Pilkington*, 419-421 and 478-481.

actions have influenced English ideas, English policies, and English life. The writers do not look only to the past, but are concerned that recent wars and the restricted outlook of their fellow Englishmen have led to a reduced appreciation for English liberty and a fear of the free expression of ideas. These concerns are evident in Aikin's biography of William III, in his final volume, in which he proposes that William "will be honoured as the *deliverer* of the British islands from tyranny, civil and religious, as long as a due sense of the benefits of that deliverance subsists among their inhabitants."<sup>152</sup> While they look for meaning in past events, the writers of *General Biography* are at least as concerned with defining English society and culture in the present and with the effects that the stresses from both inside and outside the country have had on contemporary England and will have on England of the future.

In his enquiry concerning the development of civil society, Jürgen Habermas noted that for Pierre Bayle, "critical" meant the application of reason in a discussion that was "strictly private," by and large remaining inward while "outwardly subordinate" to state political power. While destructive of received opinion or prejudice, Bayle's manner of private enquiry was for the most part, a safe means of promoting rational enquiry. Habermas pointed out the contrast between Bayle's expression of criticism, and contemporary and later criticism in Britain, where the pamphleteers and periodical press had taken up the debate of political issues, representing an early step in the transformation of the public sphere.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup>*General Biography Vol. 10*, 1815, 113-119, 119.

<sup>153</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, 92-93.

Aikin, too, adapted the biographical dictionary to the purpose of promoting free and rational enquiry. Like Bayle's erudite criticism on the subject of philosophical and religious questions, Aikin's criticism of social and political matters carried the risk of being seen as a challenge to those in power. When authorities in Britain attempted to impose retrograde restrictions, Aikin and his associates turned to the writing of collective biography, a common genre in a format that, unlike pamphlets or essays printed in the periodical press, had no overtly political association. As a "general" biography, it had no obvious focus, its subject matter universal or encyclopaedic. *General Biography* provided a means for John Aikin and others to persist in their criticism of social, cultural, and political issues at a time when it would have been unsafe for them to do so openly. With the death of Joseph Johnston, there was a hiatus of five years between the seventh and eighth volumes, until 1813, when according to Aikin's daughter, "new hands" took over and publication resumed.<sup>154</sup> There does not appear to have been any change in editorial policy for the final three volumes.

While Aikin and his associates occasionally reveal their own religious sympathies, unlike Bayle, they do not dissect religious doctrine or challenge belief. Rather than criticizing Bayle for inconstancy in briefly adopting then renouncing Catholicism as a young man, Aikin notes the adversity which Bayle experienced as a consequence of changes of mind that were "animated only by the pure love of truth...a mark of an ingenuous disposition."<sup>155</sup> *General Biography* contains biographies of many "learned",

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<sup>154</sup>Lucy Aikin, *Memoir*, 145-147.

<sup>155</sup>*General Biography*, Vol. 2, 57.

“pious”, and “celebrated” divines, scholars, and devoted followers of various religions, including some women, who wrote about, preached, or defended their faith.<sup>156</sup> The biographers’ conscientiously ecumenical approach reflects more than religious tolerance. It also conveys the idea that a history of England is a history of its emergence from religious intolerance, and a concern that contemporary England may be retreating from its progress towards greater civil and religious liberty.

The commitment to reason and scientific enquiry throughout *General Biography* is evident in the many articles about the lives of those who challenged ignorance and superstition, sought knowledge of the natural world, worked to improve medical learning and practice, and applied newly acquired information to great effect. Articles about such individuals in which the biographers tell how each individual added to the knowledge in his particular field provide glimpses of progress in scientific discovery and technical development. Despite the alphabetical order of the biographies, these intermittent images accumulate to present a view of the advancement of learning, and of related changes in the physical and social landscape. In writing about historians and political theorists, jurists and professors, the biographers show their own erudition in many fields, subjecting the ideas and conclusions of their subject individuals to critical examination in plain and lucid language. They attempt to give historical context to the ideas formulated by individual subjects or evoked by their actions, frequently relating them to contemporary events and life in Britain.

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<sup>156</sup>For example, “Buzanval...an exemplary French prelate” *General Biography*, Vol. 2, 1801, 396; and “Menasseh, en-Israel, a very celebrated rabbi”, Vol. 7, 1808, 32-34.

While *Biographia Britannica* and *The British Plutarch* obviously focused on lives of British individuals, even the various editions of the booksellers' anonymously edited *A New and General Biographical Dictionary* claimed to favour British and Irish lives on the grounds that they had been under-represented in biographical publication. In contrast, Aikin not only referred to the desire to "enlarge our knowledge of mankind", he also noted that he and his associates did not intend to favour British biographical subjects, instead wishing "to be citizens of the world". He was evidently of the view that England was part of the greater community of man, and that it should neither consider itself aloof nor try to be isolated from the rest of the world. His view of England as a product of its history is clearly not a view that discounts or excludes the significance of outside influences, which he sees as ongoing, contributing to the state of contemporary England and to future developments. Biographies of foreigners also gave Aikin opportunities for indirect or covert criticism of British institutions and circumstances.

In the final volume of *General Biography*, John Aikin notes at the head of the "Chronological Index of Sovereigns" that the union of historical with biographical information was "a considerable object of this Work".<sup>157</sup> This statement is remarkable for its complete lack of the tentativeness of his explanation sixteen years earlier in the Preface, of the biographers' aim to distinguish between biography and history. Then, he admitted to the impossibility of separating them completely, while acknowledging that it is "obvious that biography alone properly belongs to the person; and that history, referring more

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<sup>157</sup>"Chronological Index of Sovereigns", *General Biography*, Vol. 10, unnumbered pages [following p. 287]

particularly to transactions, blends the exertions of many individuals into one common agency, without being very solicitous to assign to each his exact share in the result.”<sup>158</sup>

Having completed his work, Aikin seems to be asserting that in *General Biography*, he has succeeded in uniting history and biography, the result being a work of collective biography that functions as history.

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<sup>158</sup>Aikin, *General Biography*, Vol. I, 3.

## CHAPTER 3

### PAINTERS IN COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHIES

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines a selection of works of collective biography pertaining to artists, a category of subject matter connected with social and cultural developments in England at the end of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, as described in Chapter 1.

In 1762, Horace Walpole published the first two volumes of *Anecdotes of Painting in England; with some account of the Principal Artists*, followed by a third volume in 1764, and a fourth in 1780.<sup>159</sup> Walpole was a connoisseur of arts and man of letters, the youngest son of Robert Walpole, Lord Orford. In 1770, Matthew Pilkington, a clergyman of the Church of Ireland, writer of poetry and satire and sometime literary protégé of Jonathan Swift, published *The Gentleman's and Connoisseur's Dictionary of Painters* in one volume of over seven hundred pages.<sup>160</sup> These were the first substantial collective biographies published in England exclusively about artists. Further editions of both Walpole's *Anecdotes* and Pilkington's *Dictionary* appeared well into the nineteenth

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<sup>159</sup>Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England; With some account of the principal Artists...* (Twickenham: Thomas Kirgate, 1762-1780). The fourth had been printed in 1771, but not issued to the public until 1780: See Walpole, "Advertisement" to *Fourth Vol.*; In Walpole's letter of December 20, 1770, to his friend Rev. William Cole, he says that not only is he concerned that relatives of the painters will not like what he says about them in his final volume, but that he has become bored with the subject. Horace Walpole, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence Vol. I*, ed. W. S. Lewis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 207.

<sup>160</sup>Matthew Pilkington, *The Gentleman's and Connoisseur's Dictionary of Painters* (London: T. Cadell, 1770). For very brief biography of Pilkington, see A. C. Elias Jr. "Pilkington, Matthew (1701-1774)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: 2004).

century, and several additional dictionaries of artists were also published early in the nineteenth century.<sup>161</sup>

The third compilation of biographies that will be discussed, and the one that offers the most opportunity for exploration of the range of uses of collective biography into the early nineteenth century, is Allan Cunningham's six volume collection, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*.<sup>162</sup> Cunningham was a Scot, born in rural Dumfriesshire, a stonemason whose formal education ended at local elementary school. His first published works were poetry and songs. On moving to London, Cunningham became a journalist and assistant to sculptor Sir Francis Chantrey.<sup>163</sup> His first two volumes of *Lives* covering only painters were published in 1829. Cunningham's third volume, published as his first two were re-issued in 1830, pertains only to sculptors. A fourth volume on architects followed in 1831, and a fifth and sixth on painters were published in 1832 and 1833.<sup>164</sup>

Walpole and Pilkington were both concerned with matters of taste and the

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<sup>161</sup>e. g. John Gould, *Biographical Dictionary of Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, and Architects* (London: 1810); and Michael Bryan, *A Biographical and Critical Dictionary of Painters and Engravers, in Two Volumes* (London: 1813 - 1816), the latter expanded extensively and re-issued throughout the century

<sup>162</sup>see Leslie Stephen, "Cunningham, Allan (1784-1842)", rev. Hamish Whyte, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).

<sup>163</sup>David Hogg, *Life of Allan Cunningham* (Dumfries, Edinburgh, London: Hodder and Stoughton 1875) 288. Hogg appears to have written the only full-length biography of Cunningham

<sup>164</sup>Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, 6 Vols. (London: John Murray, 1829-1833): Volume and page numbers cited hereafter are from the second edition of the first two volumes, and the first editions of the remaining volumes.

appreciation of art by connoisseurs and patrons, but there are substantial differences between their approaches to biographical writing. The distinction most readily apparent is in format: the artists appear in Pilkington's *Dictionary* in alphabetical order, while Walpole adopted chronological order in support of his use of collective biography to write a historical account of the arts in England. Cunningham, who similarly used biography in chronological order, was on the other hand hostile to the idea of dictating principles of taste. He examined the life of each artist as that of an individual with a genius for his art that set him apart from the common man, but with whom the common man could sympathize. This chapter aims at identifying each writer's purpose in compiling collections of lives of artists, and analysing the ways in which various approaches to collective biographies of artists portray the significance of art and artists in English society and in two of the examples, present historical views of art in England.

#### HORACE WALPOLE'S *ANECDOTES OF PAINTING*

Walpole's starting point for his *Anecdotes* was the collection of information about artists that had been amassed by George Vertue, an engraver and antiquarian who had died in 1756.<sup>165</sup> In the Preface, Walpole identifies himself as Vertue's editor and as a fellow antiquary continuing Vertue's work. He expresses hope that both the antiquary

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<sup>165</sup>See Martin Myrone, "Vertue, George (1684-1756)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, Sept. 2004; online edition, Jan. 2008). Vertue was the official engraver to the Society of Antiquaries from 1717 to 1756

and the “common reader,” will appreciate the result.<sup>166</sup> It is only at the beginning of the main text that he acknowledges the specific goal of writing a history of the arts in England, but his prefatory remarks about Vertue’s work clearly signal this intention.<sup>167</sup> Like previous English writers on the arts, Walpole laments the scarcity of good native-born painters. He commends the monarchy for leadership in patronage of the arts, and while encouraging others to follow, he notes a lack of causal relationship between patronage and genius. He expresses confidence that improvements in the arts and sciences come with the stability of good government.<sup>168</sup> Initially having presented himself as using Vertue’s material augmented with his own research to pursue Vertue’s goal, by the end of the third chapter Walpole has turned his focus from antiquarian research to a national critical commentary on art, augmented with antiquarian research.<sup>169</sup>

Before beginning work on the *Anecdotes*, Walpole had joked about his “Vasari-

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<sup>166</sup>Walpole, “Preface”, *Anecdotes, Vol. I*, ix-xiv. References herein to the *Anecdotes* will be to the 1969 Arno Press reprint of: Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England with some Account of the Principal Artists*, ed. Ralph N. Wornum (London: 1876. reprint New York: Arno Press, 1969) The Wornum edition contains the text last revised by Walpole, footnotes marked “D” and Remarks by James Dallaway, for Dallaway’s 1826 edition, and footnotes and endnotes marked “W” by Wornum. The division into volumes is Wornum’s and does not follow Walpole’s original division.

<sup>167</sup>Walpole, *Anecdotes Vol. I*, 1.

<sup>168</sup>His comments are both whiggish (a son of Robert Walpole and a member of Parliament himself) and reminiscent of Hume’s 1742 essay “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Science”, *idem*, noted previously, in Chapter 1.

<sup>169</sup>Walpole, *Anecdotes, Vol. I*, ix, x, 1, 2, 21-26; 57.

hood” and it is evident that he modeled his *Anecdotes of Painting* on Vasari’s *Lives*.<sup>170</sup> He begins with three chapters of narrative about early pictures and artists in England, expressing some reservation about Vertue’s conviction that painting had existed in England before Cimabue.<sup>171</sup> Similar to Vasari’s division of the *Lives* into sections prefaced with essays on social and political conditions and developments in art, Walpole divides his work into sections according to the reigns of English monarchs. Each section begins with an essay about historical events and conditions of taste and patronage during each reign, frequently mentioning painters as part of the narrative, followed by separate articles on individual painters and practitioners of other arts.<sup>172</sup> Walpole’s articles are considerably shorter than Vasari’s biographies, and for the most part, Walpole pays greater attention to the art than the artists, often cataloguing their paintings.

Walpole’s antiquarian, historical, and critical concerns as introduced in the Preface are exemplified in his first separate entry on an individual painter. A few details about the life and career of John Mabuse, who lived during the reign of Henry VII, are followed by defence of the painter against the views of another critic. Walpole digresses on his distaste for allegory in painting.<sup>173</sup> He then reveals his ownership of “a celebrated

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<sup>170</sup>Horace Walpole, *Correspondence*, Vol. 35, 207 in letter to Richard Bentley, dated February 23, 1755, on receiving a painting from him, “I must indulge my Vasari-hood and write a dissertation upon it....”.

<sup>171</sup>Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes*, Chapter I, beginning with “The earliest Accounts of Painting in England”, Chapters II, and III, Vol. I, 1-56. Walpole also refers to Vasari as a source: e. g. Vol. I, 1; 17-18; 26-27.

<sup>172</sup>see for example, *Anecdotes*, Vol. I, Chapter IV, Painters in the Reign of Henry VIII. 1509, Vol. I, 57-64; and the entire Chapter IX on Charles I, Vol. I, 261-299.

<sup>173</sup>*Anecdotes*, Vol. I, 50-56.

picture” by Mabuse depicting the marriage of Henry VII. He outlines its provenance, gives a description of the picture, and provides some historical context to its subject matter. Walpole ponders the significance of one of the figures, an elderly man in a green robe

...above all proportion with the rest, unless, intended, as I imagine, for an emblematic personage, and designed from its lofty stature to give an idea of something above human. It is an elderly man, dressed like a monk, except that his habit is green, his feet bare, and a spear in his hand. As the frock of no religious order ever was green, this cannot be meant for a friar. Probably it is St. Thomas, represented, as in the martyrologies, with the instrument of his death. The queen might have some devotion to that peculiar saint, or might be born or married on his festival. Be that as it may, the picture, though in a hard manner, has its merit, independent of the curiosity.<sup>174</sup>

Despite the six footnotes to his description of the picture, Walpole’s speculation about the identity and significance of the man in green is at odds with the antiquarian persona that he had initially assumed. Rather than delving further into circumstances or meaning, he becomes aloof, reverts to his own judgment and taste, and pronounces the picture to be of value.

With his chapter on painters in the reign of Henry VIII, Walpole begins to examine patronage of the arts. His article on Hans Holbein starts with the observation that “Few excellent artists have had more justice done to their merit than Holbein,” apparently alluding to the significance of patronage to Holbein’s career.<sup>175</sup> Walpole tells several anecdotes of Holbein’s life, referring to youthful dissipation and waste of talent before his

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<sup>174</sup> *Anecdotes, Vol. I*, 54-55.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.* 64-65.

coming to England with a recommendation from Erasmus. Holbein became successful as a painter in the household of Sir Thomas More, then for Henry VIII. Walpole's critique of a portrait by Holbein of More is precise and convincing, and his familiarity with the picture is evident:

Employed by More, Holbein was employed as he ought to be; this was the happy moment of his pencil; from painting the author, he rose to the philosopher, and then sunk to work for the king. I do not know a single countenance into which any master has poured greater energy of expression than in the drawing of Sir Thomas More at Kensington: it has a freedom, a boldness of thought and acuteness of penetration that attest the sincerity of the resemblance. It is Sir Thomas More in the rigour of his sense, not in the sweetness of his pleasantry. Here he is the unblemished magistrate, not that amiable philosopher, whose humility neither power nor piety could elate, and whose mirth even martyrdom could not spoil. Here he is rather that single, cruel judge, whom one knows not how to hate, and who, in the vigour of abilities, of knowledge, and good humour, persecuted others in defence of superstitions that he himself had exposed; and who, capable of disdaining life at the price of his sincerity, yet thought that God was to be served by promoting an imposture; who triumphed over Henry and death, and sunk to be an accomplice, at least the dupe, of the Holy Maid of Kent!<sup>176</sup>

His analysis displays his best characteristics as a writer and critic, conveying both the quality of the painting and its significance for Walpole as historical evidence, presenting a view of More and his time. He has abandoned, temporarily, the posture of the antiquary for the man of taste and perception, while maintaining interest in the historical.

Walpole continues with anecdotes of Holbein in the service of Henry VIII that show the King's esteem for the artist, and a lengthy and detailed catalogue of pictures by

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<sup>176</sup>Ibid., 70.

Holbein with comments on their quality. Resuming the antiquarian role, he enters into a digression on pictures of jesters and fools. Walpole's biography of Holbein is a particularly rounded narrative, ending as it began, with a note of disapproval of Holbein's character. He portrays the king as a corrupting influence on all around him, having said in introducing Henry's reign, that "...when a king is magnificent, whether he has taste or not, the influence is so extensive, and the example so catching, that even merit has a chance of getting bread."<sup>177</sup>

Taste and connoisseurship initially appear to be of principal concern to Walpole in his chapters on painters during the reign of Charles I, "the first era of real taste in England." He compiles a catalogue and detailed commentary on the art in the extensive royal collection, which he anticipates will be "of use to collectors and virtuosi, for whose service this work is composed."<sup>178</sup> The recovery of this scattered information is also characteristically antiquarian, and Walpole reverts more fully to antiquarian mode in a digression on Balthazar Gerbier, a painter and architect whose secret diplomacy and acquisition of works of art for the King was of greater interest to Walpole than his art.<sup>179</sup>

The second chapter on painters during the time of Charles I includes the biography of Antony Van Dyck, who rose to great prominence under the patronage of the king and the aristocracy. Walpole notes a common misunderstanding that the painter was born in England, which he attributes to public awareness of many portraits painted by Van

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<sup>177</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>178</sup>Ibid., 264-299.

<sup>179</sup>Ibid., 274-280.

Dyck.<sup>180</sup> For the most part he praises Van Dyck's painting, and provides an extensive catalogue of his pictures. Although reporting him as gentlemanly in manner, Walpole represents him as profligate, greedy, and immodest. Walpole's disapproval of Van Dyck's social ambition is apparent, evidently intending to show that even knighthood could not make a painter into an English gentleman. As if concluding a homily on vanity, he ends his account by reporting the loss to his heirs of Van Dyck's wealth, as a result of the civil wars.

Beginning his original fourth volume with painters in the reign of King George I, "the period in which the arts were sunk to the lowest ebb in Britain," Walpole is emphatic in his disparagement of the taste of the times.<sup>181</sup> He describes the fashions as awkward and unpleasant, and the painters as unable to make something beautiful of their subjects. Architecture was "perverted to mere house-building, where it retained not a little of Vanbrugh" or "corrupt and tawdry imitations of Sir Christopher Wren", while statuary did not deserve to be called art.<sup>182</sup> George I he calls "void of taste", unable to encourage the arts.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup>Ibid., 316-338.

<sup>181</sup>*Anecdotes, Vol. II, 259.*

<sup>182</sup>Ibid., 260; Walpole's biography of Sir John Vanbrugh, architect in the Reign of Queen Anne, begins: "Sir John Vanbrugh belongs only to this work in a light that is by no means advantageous to him....He wanted eyes, he wanted all ideas of proportion, convenience, propriety. He undertook vast designs, and composed heaps of littleness. The style of no age, no country, appears in his works; he broke through all rule, and compensated for it by no imagination. He seems to have hollowed quarries rather than to have built houses...." and Walpole continues. *Vol. II, 255*

<sup>183</sup>*Anecdotes, Vol. II, 261.*

Walpole identifies Charles Jervas as the worst of the painters during this reign, “defective in drawing, colouring, composition, and even in that most necessary, and perhaps most easy talent of a portrait-painter, likeness.”<sup>184</sup> He reports that “between the badness of the age’s taste, the dearth of good masters, and a fashionable reputation,” Jervas was not only acclaimed but inordinately proud of himself. Walpole’s criticism of Jervas becomes criticism of an entire generation of native-born painters including Jonathan Richardson, whose writing about art he nevertheless praised, and James Thornhill, whose connoisseurship, if not his painting, he respected.<sup>185</sup>

With his fourth and final volume of artists’ lives, Walpole effectively completes a narrative for the foundation of a British School of painting, set within the larger narrative of the history of the arts in Britain.<sup>186</sup> His disparagement of painting in the reign of George I is the low point after the long decline, rendering his telling of the emergence of William Hogarth all the more dramatic.<sup>187</sup> In his commentary on art under George I, he casually observes: “But the arts, when neglected, always degenerate. Encouragement

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<sup>184</sup>*Anecdotes, Vol. II, 282 - 287*

<sup>185</sup>*Ibid.*, 287-292.

<sup>186</sup>The reorganization of Walpole’s four volumes into three volumes by Ralph N. Wornum in 1876, as republished by Arno and used for purposes of reference in this thesis places the biography of Hogarth at the beginning of the third and final volume, followed only by painters on enamel, in miniature, statuaries, and architects. This rearrangement of Walpole’s original order somewhat undermines the effect of his original structure.

<sup>187</sup>He introduces the period of the reign of Charles II with “The restoration of royalty brought back the arts, not taste.” *Anecdotes, Vol. II, 76-77*. However, he includes sixty-seven painters, including three women, and numerous other artists, including many whose work he praised.

must keep them up, or a genius revivify them.”<sup>188</sup> Walpole’s biography of Hogarth, the “great and original genius,” who began his career during the reign of George II provides the climax for the entire work, a point at which Walpole sees his history of painting in England turning into a history of English painting. The few notices on painters that Walpole added to the 1782 edition were inserted ahead of the biography of Hogarth, such that William Hogarth remained the final painter covered by the work.<sup>189</sup> As Walpole indicates in the Preface, with the reign of George III, “a prince who is at once the example and patron of accomplishments”, a new era of patronage and support for the arts arises.<sup>190</sup> In his Advertisement to his final volume, Walpole claims that “painting has rekindled from its embers” as demonstrated by many living artists, naming in particular Reynolds and Gainsborough.<sup>191</sup>

#### Walpole on Hogarth:

Walpole’s biography of William Hogarth, whom he identifies as breaking out from “the herd of our painters in oil,” is a combination of critical commentary on art and taste, with a character study of Hogarth. Recognizing Hogarth as in a class by himself, Walpole

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<sup>188</sup>Walpole, *Anecdotes Vol. II*, 261.

<sup>189</sup>There followed two further chapters, as in other sections, on “Painters in Enamel and Miniature, Statuaries, and Medallists, in the Reign of George II,” and “Architects in the Reign of George II.”

<sup>190</sup>*Anecdotes, Vol. I*, xviii: In his “Advertisement” to his original fourth volume, Walpole notes great improvement in painters who were still living, and whose lives he could not discuss.

<sup>191</sup>Walpole, *Anecdotes, Vol. I*, xvii.

calls him “a writer of comedy with a pencil.”<sup>192</sup> In this pronouncement, it is evident that the connoisseur and man of taste was somewhat at a loss in considering Hogarth’s art. He acknowledges Hogarth as a moralist, clearly approving of his judgment and understanding of human nature, and of his inventiveness and originality in conveying meaning:

Hogarth had no model to follow and improve upon. He created his art, and used colours instead of language....amidst all his pleasantries, he observes the true end of comedy, reformation; there is always a moral to his pictures. Sometimes he rose to tragedy, not in the catastrophe of kings and heroes, but in marking how vice conducts insensibly and incidentally to misery and shame. He warns against encouraging cruelty and idleness in young minds, and discerns how the different vices of the great and the vulgar lead by various paths to the same unhappiness....How delicate and superior too is his satire, when he intimates in the College of Physicians and Surgeons that preside at a dissection, how the legal habitude of viewing shocking scenes hardens the human mind, and renders it unfeeling. The president maintains the dignity of insensibility over an executed corpse, and considers it but as the object of a lecture.... It is to Hogarth’s honour that in so many scenes of satire or ridicule, it is obvious that ill-nature did not guide his pencil. His end is always reformation, and his reproofs general.<sup>193</sup>

Walpole judged Hogarth to be unsuccessful as a painter of portraits from life, better at depicting people that he had imagined.<sup>194</sup> This assessment tells more about the critic than the painter. According to the conventions of formal portraiture, the original genius Hogarth is found lacking, although Walpole is full of praise for Hogarth’s humorous and satirical depictions of human foibles. He condemns Hogarth’s pictures of

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<sup>192</sup>*Anecdotes, Vol. III*, 1-26, 1; “pencil” is the common term for paint brush.

<sup>193</sup>*Anecdotes, Vol. III*, 2-3.

<sup>194</sup>Compare his complaint, noted above, about Jervas lacking the ability to create a likeness, “that most necessary, and perhaps most easy talent of a portrait-painter, likeness.”

classical subjects, mocks his writing of theory in *The Analysis of Beauty*, and treats as almost tragedy his temerity to attempt heroic subject matter in “Sigismonda”.<sup>195</sup> He judges the picture to be “no more like Sigismonda than I to Hercules”, disgusting and vulgar, rejected by the prospective patron.<sup>196</sup> The implication that Hogarth would have avoided failure had he restricted himself to what he knew how to do shows Walpole’s grounding in the rules of eighteenth century taste, with its requirement that even a genius must follow the rules. Ever the connoisseur, he includes an extensive catalogue of Hogarth’s prints, of which he reports that he owns a great many.

Walpole made no amendments to the body of his account of Hogarth in further editions of the *Anecdotes*, although in 1782 he inserted a footnote stating that since the first edition was published, “Mr. Nichols has published a much ampler account of Hogarth and his works...more accurate, [and]...more satisfactory than mine....”<sup>197</sup> He adds two footnotes to correct points in his original article.<sup>198</sup> While there is no reason to conclude that he could not have verified his account before publishing the first edition, his own critical opinion and narrative structure appear to have taken precedence over accuracy.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>195</sup>See Pears, *The Discovery of Painting*, 124-126 for a discussion of the context. The model for the painting may have been Mrs. Hogarth.

<sup>196</sup>*Anecdotes, Vol. III*, 11-12.

<sup>197</sup>John Nichols, *Biographical Anecdotes of William Hogarth* (London: John Nichols, 1781). Walpole somewhat desultorily added a few more painters to the fourth volume of his edition of *Anecdotes* that was published in 1882, Joseph Highmore, Thomas Hudson, Francis Hayman, Samuel Scott, George Knapton and several others were inserted, ahead of the biography of Hogarth, *Anecdotes, Vol. II*, 322-327.

<sup>198</sup>See footnotes, *Anecdotes, Vol III*, 3, 4.

<sup>199</sup>See above, his similar preference for rhetoric in his account of Mabuse, *Vol. I*, 56.

With the exception of a purported continuation by Edward Edwards in 1808,<sup>200</sup> subsequent editions of Walpole's *Anecdotes*, such as that of James Dallaway in 1826, incorporating supplementary material by way of erudite footnotes, were faithful to Walpole's original work.<sup>201</sup>

#### PILKINGTON'S *DICTIONARY OF PAINTERS*

Pilkington's *Dictionary* appears designed to be different in every way from Walpole's *Anecdotes*. Unlike the chronological order of the *Anecdotes*, Pilkington's approximately fourteen hundred entries are in alphabetical order. The entries usually indicate dates of birth and death, but his supplementary lists comparing painters do not include dates. Pilkington, from a much lower social level than Horace Walpole but apparently always looking for favour, at times strikes a note in both his preface and his commentary that seems either nervously respectful or ingratiating.<sup>202</sup> Where Walpole concentrates exclusively on art in Britain, Pilkington's painters are predominantly Italian, Dutch, or Flemish and his sources, as he describes in his preface, and includes in a

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<sup>200</sup>Edward Edwards, *Anecdotes of Painters in England...intended as a continuation to the Anecdotes of Painting by the late Horace Earl of Orford* (London: Leigh & Sothby, 1808). Edwards considered that he was also making up for omissions or slights by Walpole. see Edwards, "Preface," 3-4.

<sup>201</sup>See note above concerning the Arno reprint.

<sup>202</sup>A. C. Elias, Jr., "Pilkington, Matthew (1701-1774), *Oxford DNB*. Despite being a clergyman, Pilkington was frequently involved in scandal and was apparently constantly ingratiating himself to those of higher rank, including Edward Walpole, an elder brother of Horace.

separate list, are primarily European art historians, including Vasari.<sup>203</sup> Of the books Pilkington lists as having been consulted, he explains, as if to gain the trust of his readers, “I extracted from each, what appeared to me most likely to prove either instructive or entertaining,” describing his purpose as to “...improve the taste or judgment of a lover of the Art.”<sup>204</sup> While Pilkington’s assessments are derived from the opinions of critics, Walpole relies on his own taste and his own connoisseurship to guide those who may be interested.

Perhaps in a reference to Walpole’s antiquarianism, Pilkington reassures “gentlemen and connoisseurs”, or those who wished to be seen as such, that he has avoided the “tediousness” of writers who provide too much information.<sup>205</sup> The initial nod to Vasari in the title-page reference to Cimabue speaks to the recognition factor of Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Painters* among Pilkington’s prospective readership, and little else.

The first entry in Pilkington’s *Dictionary* is typical of many, with a heading identifying the artist, Andrea Abate, the date of his death, and his type of work, i.e. “Painted fruit and still life”, followed by a very brief note about his art, and the patronage that he received:

This master was a Neapolitan, who excelled in painting inanimate objects. His colouring was bold; he gave a noble relief to the vases and other

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<sup>203</sup>In his list of “The Names of the Principal Authors whose Works have been Consulted” Pilkington includes “Anecdotes of Painting, by Vertue”, avoiding mention of Horace Walpole.

<sup>204</sup>Pilkington, *Dictionary*, v.

<sup>205</sup>Pilkington, *Dictionary*, viii, v.

ornaments, with which he enriched his design; and grouped all his objects with peculiar judgement and care.

He was employed by the King of Spain, at the Escorial, along with Luca Giordano; and that eminent artist was very liberal in commending the works of Abate; he esteemed him highly; and always allowed him that just praise, which his compositions universally merited.<sup>206</sup>

There is a certain distance in Pilkington's treatment of his subjects, even in his articles of a page or more in length, such as in that on Van Dyck in which Pilkington approvingly notes the painter's gentlemanly manner. His article on Sir James Thornhill is respectful and dignified, implying that the prominence of his work was proof of its excellence, as if taking care not to disparage the taste of those who owned Thornhill's work.<sup>207</sup> In suggesting that it might be overstated to compare Holbein's colouring to that of Raphael or Titian, he implies that it is to the credit of the "admirable painter" that some have done so.<sup>208</sup> While Walpole took seriously his own erudition, his antiquarian research, and his historical writing, also aiming at making his account entertaining, Pilkington was helpfully attempting to educate Englishmen on correct taste and to make life for them more genteel and enjoyable, trying to avoid giving offence to gentlemen and connoisseurs, whether authentic or hopeful.

Although William Hogarth had died in 1764, Pilkington did not include an article on Hogarth. After Pilkington's death in 1774, the following edition of the *Dictionary* in

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<sup>206</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>207</sup>Pilkington, *Dictionary*, 506-508 and 609.

<sup>208</sup>Ibid., 290 - 292.

1798 was edited by John Wolcot, a painter and satirical writer who added a number of English painters by way of a Supplement.<sup>209</sup> Included is a biography of Hogarth, beginning with a brief commentary that relates several unflattering anecdotes from the Nichols biography, followed by an almost verbatim copy of Walpole's article on Hogarth.<sup>210</sup> There is no effort to reconcile the two parts. Clearly the publishers could not ignore Hogarth by 1798, yet the editor had nothing to add.

Henry Fuseli, painter and Professor of the Royal Academy and a scholarly and erudite writer and critic, edited the 1805 and 1810 editions of Pilkington's *Dictionary*, making few changes to the former, the latter being the one described here.<sup>211</sup> Fuseli was a friend of publisher Joseph Johnson, and John Aikin relied on Fuseli's 1810 edition as a source of material for his *General Biography*. Fuseli added his own opinions and complete articles to Pilkington's original entries on specific painters, providing critiques of the works of many of the masters, such as a more critically reasoned but laudatory article on Michelangelo and a scathing article about Dürer.<sup>212</sup> He had nothing to add to the account of Hogarth. The words "gentleman's and connoisseur's" were dropped from the

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<sup>209</sup>Matthew Pilkington, *The gentleman's and connoisseur's Dictionary... a new edition* (London: printed for J. Walker and G. G. and J. Robinson, 1798); Wolcot not identified as editor in the book, but see entry under "John Wolcot" in *A General Dictionary of Painters...by Matthew Pilkington, A. M., a new edition*, ed., Allan Cunningham (London: Thomas Tegg, 1840), 658.

<sup>210</sup>*Dictionary*, 1798 edition, 792-800.

<sup>211</sup>Matthew Pilkington, *Dictionary of Painters...by the Rev. M. Pilkington, A. M.*, ed. Henry Fuseli, R. A. (London: printed for Walker, Wilkie, and Robinson, 1810).

<sup>212</sup>*Dictionary*, 1810 ed., 54-56; 159-160. His article on Dürer ends: "That the exportation of his works to Italy should have effected a temporary change in the principles of some Tuscan artists...proves that minds at certain periods may be as subject to epidemic influence, as bodies."

title, but much of Pilkington's original writing was untouched. Further editions of what became *A General Dictionary of Painters* followed, with various additions and alterations, depending on each editor engaged by the publisher. The 1840 edition was edited by Allan Cunningham.

#### ALLAN CUNNINGHAM AND BRITISH ARTISTS

A self-educated poet, song-writer, and journalist, Allan Cunningham possessed a background and life experience that were clearly very different from the aristocratic, wealthy, university-educated Horace Walpole or the aspiring gentleman and connoisseur, Matthew Pilkington.

In 1829, in the introduction to his six volumes of *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, Cunningham refers to the scattered nature of information about the history of art and artists, particularly “the biographical materials collected by the indiscriminating diligence of Vertue, and brightened here and there by the wit or the sagacity of Walpole, [which] lie strangely heaped together.”<sup>213</sup> He evidently sees himself as Walpole's successor, relying heavily on details extracted from Walpole's first three volumes in a fifty-page account of early painters in England.<sup>214</sup> Occasionally he takes issue with Walpole's views of particular artists, but he generally follows Walpole's

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<sup>213</sup>Cunningham, *Lives*, Vol. 1, 2.

<sup>214</sup>Cunningham, *Lives*, Vol. 1, 2-3; 4-53.

narrative of the development of the arts.<sup>215</sup> His biographies are arranged chronologically for each of the arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture, with four to eleven lives per volume.

In introducing the *Lives* Cunningham proposes that works of art stand for the events and history of lives that otherwise may seem devoid of event. He says they are evidence of how people thought in earlier times, "...a record of the taste and feeling of the times in which they flourished."<sup>216</sup> The emphasis is on the artist, the process of his work, the conditions of his life, his thoughts and emotions. As John Aikin had done in his Preface to *General Biography*, Cunningham speaks directly to his readers about their mutual wish to find out about their fellow man: "We love to know under what circumstances a great work of art was conceived and completed: it is pleasing to follow the vicissitudes of their fortunes whose genius has charmed us—to sympathize in their anxieties, and to witness their triumph."<sup>217</sup> However, in anticipating his readers' curiosity about their fellow human beings, John Aikin understands such curiosity as a quest for knowledge about the circumstances and even about the character of persons who are famous, but not, as Cunningham implies, about their inner lives and emotions.

Unlike Walpole and Pilkington, Cunningham is not trying to educate his readers in matters of taste and connoisseurship. While he is interested in the development of the arts,

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<sup>215</sup>For example, Cunningham disagrees with Walpole's assessment of Van Dyck. Like Walpole, he deplores the destruction by the Puritans of works of art during the civil war, and quotes Walpole on the dangers of extreme political views. *Lives*, Vol. I, 36, 41.

<sup>216</sup>Cunningham, *Lives*, Vol. 1, 2-3.

<sup>217</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

Cunningham is much more interested in each artist's own development as an artist, in the artist's character and genius, and in the artist's relationship with society. In seeing artists' works as evidence of the views of the times, the history of the arts for Cunningham becomes not so much a history of the development of art, as a history of ways of thinking about art and artists, of the artists' views of art, and of the relationship of the artist to English society.<sup>218</sup>

While the influence of Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting* is evident in Cunningham's introductory chapter, also evident are hints of eighteenth-century British philosophical history. Cunningham traces the development of the arts in Britain from "barbarous" beginnings, which he compares to the state of the arts as found by modern European explorers in South America, the South Seas, and India.<sup>219</sup> He proposes an organic image, likening art to a slow-growing oak tree, with every artist relying on the accumulation of knowledge to which he adds "a little more information to the common stock, for the benefit of his successors."<sup>220</sup>

Once Cunningham turns to a consideration of the lives of artists, he abandons the philosophical view of history, for a narrative of each life. He conscientiously informs the reader about the ways in which the artists worked and the circumstances in which their art

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<sup>218</sup>Peter Burke, in *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca, N. Y: Cornell Univ. Press, 1997), 14, uses the word "mentalities" in reference to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century commentators expressing awareness and interest in different modes of thought or "mentalities", not to be confused with that word as employed by the *Annalistes*.

<sup>219</sup>Cunningham, *Lives*, Vol. 1, 2 - 3.

<sup>220</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

was created. He also explores the artists' ideas and expression of those ideas, through their art and through their interaction with others. Anecdotes are told to provide insight into an artist's character or characteristic behaviour, principally connected to his work as an artist. Cunningham describes artists' relationships with family members, friends, fellow artists and patrons. While he attempts to provide an impression of each artist as a human being, he also describes the artist's works in terms of his place in the development of British art, and in terms of "taste and feelings of the times".

Cunningham begins with the biography of William Hogarth, with whom Walpole had ended his account of painters. Like Walpole, Cunningham has a nationalistic purpose in writing about British artists, and with even greater certainty, Cunningham sees Hogarth as a turning point towards the development of a British School of painting that will bring international recognition to British art. Cunningham notes near the beginning of his introductory chapter that before Hogarth, Britain relied on foreign talent, while "With him, and after him, arose a succession of eminent painters, who have spread the fame of British art far and wide."<sup>221</sup>

Cunningham ends his introductory chapter with a statement of Hogarth's place in the history of British painting:

It is plain that up to this time no British artist had arisen capable of leading the way in painting—no one who possessed at once talent for original composition, and skill to render his conceptions permanent. The heart of the country had as yet been but little moved by this art;—and all the splendid colouring, the academic forms, the fixed and approved attitudes and long-established graces, went for nothing, when a man appeared who sought lasting fame—and found it—in moral sentiment, nervous satire,

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<sup>221</sup>Ibid., 2.

sarcastic humour, and actual English life.<sup>222</sup>

#### FOUR EMINENT NAMES IN BRITISH ART

Cunningham includes biographies of four painters in the first volume of *Lives*: following the life of William Hogarth are biographies of Richard Wilson, Joshua Reynolds, and Thomas Gainsborough. The four were contemporaries, and their biographies are linked by cross-references and by indications that Cunningham regarded them as each playing a part in the foundation of the British School of painting.

Cunningham clearly has a strong affinity for Hogarth, a man with little formal education, apprenticed as a child to an engraver, who worked his whole life to support his family. He claims to have consulted Hogarth's unpublished autobiographical writings, otherwise unidentified.<sup>223</sup> At one hundred, forty pages the biography of Hogarth is the longest in the entire work.

To Cunningham, Hogarth's skill as an artist lay in representing figures in action. His talents and interests were not in following the contemporary taste, depicting the elegant and vacant looks of a wealthy or noble personage against a background of draperies or country estate. Walpole had claimed that Hogarth was unsuccessful at painting portraits, but Cunningham defines success differently from Walpole, pointing out that Hogarth could paint very good likenesses of his subjects, showing character and

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<sup>222</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>223</sup>such as in quoting Hogarth's own account of his historical painting, which Cunningham says "cannot be commended for candour; and it exhibits the levity of a man who was so pleased with success of another sort, that he thought much too lightly of works which the ablest find some difficulty in performing." Cunningham, *Lives*, Vol. I, 95.

mind, rather than dignity and grace.<sup>224</sup>

Cunningham describes Hogarth as a man who believed that art had to reveal nature, and who was confident in his own ability to follow that principle, from his humourous sketches of drinkers to his single and group portraits. It was the foundation of his first disputes as a student of Thornhill, and of his objections to English painters learning to copy foreign works instead of depicting English people in English settings.<sup>225</sup> Hogarth's opposition to the foundation of an Academy of art is recognized as opposition to what he considered the stultifying effect of academic rules on artistic imagination, an opinion that Cunningham clearly shares.<sup>226</sup> He defends Hogarth's intelligence against those who saw his pretensions as unjustified, saying that

If Hogarth showed little bias towards learning, it was because his powerful mind was directed to studies where the knowledge of actual life in all its varieties was chiefly essential – where an eye for the sarcastic and the ludicrous, and a mind to penetrate motives and weigh character, were worth all the lights of either school or college. But there is no proof that he was a man gross and uninformed, or that he thought lightly of learning....it is unjust to set him down as despising in the abstract, what his own great natural genius enabled him to do without.<sup>227</sup>

Walpole had been offended by what he perceived as the poor taste shown by Hogarth's painting "Sigismonda", while Cunningham is clearly offended on Hogarth's behalf, by the "too delicate and dainty" Walpole. While not describing the painting as

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<sup>224</sup>*Lives, Vol. I, 76 - 84.*

<sup>225</sup>*Ibid., 65-75.*

<sup>226</sup>*Ibid., 192.*

<sup>227</sup>*Ibid., 65.*

successful, Cunningham sees the reaction to it as a product of the personalities and of the times. He sums up Hogarth's art as a function of his character:

That his works are unlike those of other men is his merit, not his fault. He belonged to no school of art; he was the product of no academy; no man living or dead had any share in forming his mind, or in rendering his hand skillful. He was the spontaneous offspring of the graphic spirit of his country, as native to the heart of England as independence is, and he may be fairly called, in his own walk, the firstborn of her spirit.

He painted life as he saw it. He gives no visions of by-gone things—no splendid images of ancient manners; he regards neither the historian's page nor the poet's song. He was contented with the occurrences of the passing day—with the folly or the sin of the hour; to garb and fashion of the moment, however, he adds story and sentiment for all time.<sup>228</sup>

As the second of Cunningham's four originators of British art, Richard Wilson's biography is the story of an underappreciated and misunderstood genius. Wilson, according to Cunningham, sacrificed financial security as a portrait painter to dedicate his talents to landscapes admired more by other painters than by patrons of art.<sup>229</sup> He frequently and bitterly disputed with members of the Royal Academy, whom Cunningham disdainfully calls the "committee on taste." Cunningham describes Wilson's poverty and pride and his frustration at the lack of support for his art, leading at times to uncivil and irrational behaviour, although Cunningham also shows Wilson as at least headstrong from the beginning. The biography ends with an assertion that Wilson was a man of "strong sense, intelligence, and refinement,"<sup>230</sup> a judgment that is evidently a kindness on the part

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<sup>228</sup>Ibid., 189-190.

<sup>229</sup>Ibid., 195 - 214.

<sup>230</sup>Ibid., 214.

of Cunningham, perhaps a description of the art rather than the man. He notes that Wilson's pictures have become substantially more popular since his death.

The third biography, that of Joshua Reynolds, begins with an observation on the academic approach to painting, when students were expected to learn by studying and copying from the Italian masters:

When any one departed from such tame and servile rules, he was pronounced a Gothic dreamer, and unworthy of being numbered among those happy persons patronized by Saint Luke....Amongst persons of this stamp, to admire Hogarth amounts to treason against the great masters. The painters of those days were worshippers of the "grand style"—a term which would seem to mean something alone and unapproachable....<sup>231</sup>

Cunningham recognizes Reynolds, first and long-serving President of the Royal Academy, as the most famous and successful British painter. He also regards Reynolds as a mystery. Despite all he spoke and wrote about art and about himself, Reynolds revealed almost nothing about his own practice. An even greater mystery was his advice to other painters to practice in a manner that Cunningham sees as having stifled and denied progress and development in art, and undermined the cultivation of imagination and native genius. Cunningham notes that in promoting the "grand style" to students, Reynolds could not have failed to know that "...he was sending them forth to seek bread and fame in a pursuit where neither was to be found; while he was shutting his lips, and keeping silence concerning the domestic style and the mystery of portraiture, in which he himself was unequalled."<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>231</sup>Ibid., 215 - 329.

<sup>232</sup>Ibid., 322.

The final biography in the first volume, that of Thomas Gainsborough, “the fourth eminent name in British art”, shows Gainsborough as mostly self-taught, encouraged then afflicted with an overbearing patron. He describes Gainsborough’s portrait painting as successful although not equal to Reynolds, although in his “favourite study of free and unsophisticated nature” he “surpassed all living men.” For Cunningham, Gainsborough, like Hogarth, is an original genius, unmistakably English:

A deep human sympathy unites us with his pencil, and this is not lessened because all his works are stamped with the image of old England. His paintings have a national look. He has not steeped his landscapes in the atmosphere of Italy like Wilson, nor borrowed the postures of his portraits from the old masters, like Reynolds. No academy schooled down into uniformity and imitation the truly English and intrepid spirit of Gainsborough.<sup>233</sup>

#### MORE PAINTERS:

Cunningham’s second volume of biographies continues with an examination of the relationship between English painters and the Royal Academy when Reynolds as President continued to dictate the rules of taste.<sup>234</sup> Cunningham notes that Henry Fuseli committed himself to painting at the time when

Reynolds excelled all men in portraiture and wrought unrivaled and alone. Wilson and Gainsborough sufficed for the moderate measure of public demand in landscape. Barry and West shared between them the wide empire of religious and historic compositions, and there was nothing left

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<sup>233</sup>Ibid., 330-358.

<sup>234</sup>Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses*, in *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Knight, in three volumes, to which is prefixed an account and writings of the author, by Edmund Malone, Esq.*, second edition (London: T.. Cadell, 1798).

for Fuseli save the poetical.<sup>235</sup>

He explains how “the poetical” was suitable for Fuseli, and that Fuseli was an imaginative and technical genius, while at the same time a learned and critical thinker.<sup>236</sup> Cunningham recognizes in Henry Fuseli sufficient intelligence, imagination, and skill to be able to meet the requirements of the Academy while fulfilling his own artistic impulses.

The circumstances of Benjamin West’s life are portrayed by Cunningham as a succession of unlikely but fortunate events, the most fortunate being his patronage by George III.<sup>237</sup> He reports West’s innovation in depicting the figures in “The Death of Wolfe” in contemporary dress as effecting a revolution in British “history painting,” at a time when there was otherwise so little market for it that other practitioners barely survived.<sup>238</sup>

Cunningham describes James Barry as a real victim of Reynolds’ teaching, dedicated to painting in the “grand style” so revered and promoted by Reynolds. Cunningham conveys a sympathy and understanding for the beleaguered artist, whose fierce and serious demeanor kept him constantly in a temper, at war with other artists and the Royal Academy.<sup>239</sup> Clearly admiring Barry’s commitment, Cunningham concludes that

Barry was the greatest enthusiast in art which this country ever produced—his passion for it almost amounted to madness; and but for his

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<sup>235</sup>Cunningham, *Lives, Vol. II*, 289.

<sup>236</sup>*Ibid.*, 269 - 349.

<sup>237</sup>*Ibid.*, 1 - 59.

<sup>238</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>239</sup>*Ibid.*, 60 - 142.

works, his words and actions might have been gravely cited in proof of mental alienation. He hungered and he thirsted, not figuratively, but truly, for its sake....he brought an imagination second only to that of Fuseli, a strong love of the poetry of nature, and intimate knowledge of the works of the great masters, a deep feeling for their excellencies, fine skill of hand, and unequalled fortitude and perseverance.<sup>240</sup>

Cunningham's biographies of William Blake, whom he describes as guided by a star that only he could see, whose genius is beyond the understanding of ordinary people,<sup>241</sup> and of George Morland, who died in poverty and drunkenness at the age of forty, are full of sympathy and appreciation for each man's artistic genius.<sup>242</sup> Neither painter could comply with the Academy's rules.<sup>243</sup> He says of Morland that

He is original and alone; his style and conceptions are his own; his thoughts are ever at home—are always natural—he extracts pleasing subjects out of the most coarse or trivial scenes, and finds enough to charm the eye in the commonest occurrence. ....His intimacy with low life only dictated his theme—the coarseness of the man and the folly of his company never touched the execution of his pieces.<sup>244</sup>

After a volume each on sculptors and architects, Cunningham returned to painters for his fifth and sixth volumes, beginning with George Jamesone, a Scottish painter who

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<sup>240</sup>Ibid., 139.

<sup>241</sup>Ibid., 143 - 188.

<sup>242</sup>Ibid., 222 - 250.

<sup>243</sup>The copy of Malone's edition of *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds* in the British Museum reproduced in the ECCO database is apparently William Blake's own copy, complete with his hand-written notes and a scathing criticism of "Sir Joshua and his Gang of Cunning Hired Knaves."

<sup>244</sup>Ibid., 248 - 249.

predates Hogarth by a century.<sup>245</sup> Cunningham, evidently intending to draw attention to Scottish painting, apparently reconsidered his own dismissal of Jamesone as an imitator of Van Dyck in the introduction to his *Lives*, and re-introduces him as an eminent Scottish painter. Although he describes Jamesone's early attraction to art as remarkable in a country devoid of examples and teachers, he also uses his biography to outline the history of the arts in Scotland before the union with England, and to defend Scotland's reputation.<sup>246</sup> Noting that in Scotland, Jamesone acquired fame and fortune after studying abroad as a student of Rubens with Van Dyck, Cunningham claims

The love of poetry, and painting, and architecture, spread from King James amongst his nobles north and south, and his two gifted sons formed collections, and patronised genius, with all the liberality which a turbulent and economical House of Commons would allow. Jamesone, when he returned from foreign study, found painting a not unhonoured profession among the northern presbyterians, and was employed to execute many portraits of distinguished covenanters as well as cavaliers.<sup>247</sup>

His biographies of other Scottish painters, Allan Ramsay, Alexander Runciman, Henry Raeburn, and David Allan are, like that of Jamesone, more concerned with representing the Scots as cultivators of the arts than with discussing their painting.<sup>248</sup> The sixth volume ends with a biography of James Burnet, also Scottish and a landscape

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<sup>245</sup>*Lives, Vol. V*, 1 - 33. Jamesone had been included in Walpole's *Anecdotes*, but not in Pilkington's *Dictionary* before the 1829 edition.

<sup>246</sup>In a letter dated October 20, 1828 to William Ritchie, publisher of *The Scotsman*, Cunningham asks if Ritchie can find any information on Jamesone, noting that he is "one of our earliest painters, island-born, and I wish to do him as much honour as he deserves, and no more." David Hogg, *Life of Allan Cunningham*, 288.

<sup>247</sup>*Lives, Vol. V*, 3

<sup>248</sup>*Ibid.*, 34-45, 145-161, 204-241; *Lives, Vol. IV*, 21 - 48.

painter, influenced by the paintings of David Wilkie, also a Scot whose two-volume biography Cunningham later published.<sup>249</sup>

In his biography of painter James Northcote in the sixth and final volume, it is Northcote's biography of his teacher, Joshua Reynolds, that interests Cunningham. He judges the work to be lacking in "original vigour or accuracy of its sentiments," but "valuable as a record of sayings which would otherwise have perished, and of anecdotes which might have missed a chronicler".<sup>250</sup> This is faint praise from Cunningham, who, unlike Walpole, had no wish to appear to be an antiquary, and while he values the preservation of information, he compares Northcote's skills as a biographer unfavourably to those of Samuel Johnson:

What we chiefly miss in this work is that brief and lucid summary of character in which Johnson excelled. We are left to gather, from the surface of six hundred pages, Sir Joshua's merits as an artist, and his manners as a man. One learns more, in fact, about the President, from Northcote's Conversations than from his Memoir.... "Sir Joshua," he remarked to Hazlitt, "was not spoiled by flattery, and yet he had as much of it as any body need have. He was looking out to see what the world thought of him, or thinking what figure he should make by the side of Correggio or Vandyke, not pluming himself on being a better painter than some one in the next street, or surprised that the people at his own table should speak in praise of his pictures."<sup>251</sup>

Cunningham's biographies of British painters depict them as following their own

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<sup>249</sup> *Lives, Vol. VI*, 313-325.

<sup>250</sup> *Anecdotes, Vol. 1*, "Preface", vi.

<sup>251</sup> *Lives, Vol. VI*, 97; In the same letter in which he asks his friend Ritchie about Jamesone, Cunningham informs him of his intention to write *Lives of the British Painters*, "on the plan of Johnson's 'Lives of the Poets.'" *Life of Allan Cunningham*, 289.

impulses into art, driven by their imagination, and generally pursuing their own artistic spirits. In most instances, he describes the artist's life as a struggle to obtain acceptance for his work and to maintain a career as a painter. Cunningham displays no interest in patrons and a hostile attitude towards the art of the academy and the "committee on taste" that so tormented Wilson. He values innate genius and imagination unfettered by the rules of taste that Pilkington respected and that Walpole, who valued imagination so long as it was tastefully expressed, liberally applied.

#### SCULPTURE AND ARCHITECTURE

Cunningham considered a true British School of painting to have commenced with William Hogarth, and like Walpole, effectively dismisses earlier native-born painters as working under foreign influence. Neither saw British sculpture and architecture as suffering from the same disability. Cunningham's third volume of *Lives*, on sculptors, identifies "the first British name of any eminence in sculpture" as Grinling Gibbons, principally a wood carver, whom Walpole had called "an original genius, a citizen of nature."<sup>252</sup> In Cunningham's assessment, "All the wood-carving in England fades away before that of Gibbons at Chatsworth."<sup>253</sup> The biographies of sculptors Joseph Nollekins and John Flaxman are written in the same manner as those of the painters, Cunningham providing detailed information about their lives to present their characters and personalities, a task that was assisted by the fact that both had lived within his lifetime.

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<sup>252</sup>Cunningham, *Lives*, Vol. III, 1 - 16; Walpole, *Anecdotes*, Vol. II, 167.

<sup>253</sup>Cunningham, *Lives*, Vol. III, 10.

Anne Seymour Damer is the only woman whose biography appears in Cunningham's work, and she seems to have been included simply to provide the opportunity for him to disagree with Walpole, who had been effusive in her praise.<sup>254</sup>

The first biography in Cunningham's volume on architecture is of William of Wickham, Roman Catholic bishop of the fourteenth century, builder of great Gothic cathedrals. Cunningham uses Wickham's biography as an opportunity to outline the history of architecture in Britain, particularly Gothic architecture, and to quote several commentators including Walpole. Cunningham, stone-mason and poet, has his own views:

A Gothic cathedral...is at once a place of worship, a sanctuary, and a sepulchre; the mind which conceived it, was in its nature solemn, nay gloomy—and shared largely in that melancholy spirit which inspires our finest poetry.<sup>255</sup>

He sees the genius in Wickham in his re-construction of Winchester Cathedral on the foundations of the twelfth-century Saxon church as a peculiarly English in spirit, and he incorporates what is known of Wickham's life with a story of Gothic construction and English religious history.

The biography of dramatist and architect Sir John Vanbrugh, a particular *bête noire* of Walpole, is used by Cunningham to continue his history of British architecture,

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<sup>254</sup>*Lives, Vol. III, 247 - 273.* Walpole had said that "Mrs. Damer's busts from the life are not inferior to the antique", and he appointed her heir to his house, Strawberry Hill. Cunningham describes her dedication to sculpture, her belief in herself, and her intrepid self-promotion, but claims that she relied substantially on others: "Those works which we *know* to have been actually carved in marble by her own hand, are all rude in execution."

<sup>255</sup>*Lives, Vol. IV, 1 - 69.*

particularly exploring issues of differences in taste at different periods of time.<sup>256</sup>

Cunningham praises the “poetic” character of Vanbrugh’s conceptions, while Walpole had complained that they lacked “...all ideas of proportion, convenience, propriety,” breaking all the rules, without imagination.<sup>257</sup> Cunningham calls Vanbrugh “an inventor...criticised by a race of classic copyists,” and praises his imagination and his creation of an original style all his own. He notes that “...in this, as in many other matters, Horace Walpole wrote according to the feelings of a generation that had passed away.”<sup>258</sup> The biography of William Kent, an architect, painter and garden designer who had been a favourite of Walpole ends on a similar note, with a touch of Walpole-style wit: “His name was so famous in many ways in his own time, that it could not be omitted in these sketches; but I doubt whether any man would take it as a compliment now to be told that he painted a picture, planned a monument, designed a house, or laid out a garden as well as William Kent.”<sup>259</sup> The volume ends with the biography, although with few details of the life, of William Chambers, favourite architect to King George III, whom Cunningham concludes is more worthy of acclaim for his *Treatise on Civil Architecture*, than for his design of buildings and gardens.<sup>260</sup>

Cunningham’s preference for the “poetic” in architecture appears to have

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<sup>256</sup>Ibid., 253 - 283.

<sup>257</sup>Walpole, *Anecdotes Vol. II*, 255.

<sup>258</sup>*Lives, Vol. IV*, 265; 280.

<sup>259</sup>Ibid., 300 - 316; 316.

<sup>260</sup>Ibid., 329 - 352.

overcome his national pride, and he omits mention of Scottish architect Robert Adam, who shared the position of Architect of the King's Works with William Chambers. Robert Adam and his brother James were responsible for designs of buildings in Edinburgh's New Town, and their work, which came to be called "Georgian" style was emulated throughout Britain and Britain's North American colonies.

#### CUNNINGHAM AND PILKINGTON'S *DICTIONARY*

In 1840, seven years after publication of his final volume of biographies of British artists,<sup>261</sup> Allan Cunningham edited Pilkington's *Dictionary*, which had become *A General Dictionary of Painters containing Memoirs of the Lives and Works of Professors of the Art of Painting...by Matthew Pilkington, A.M.*<sup>262</sup> The title page of the single-volume edition claims "Twenty-six new lives of artists of the British School". A seventy-nine-page introduction by Cunningham begins with a discussion of the development of the arts of poetry, painting and sculpture from the time of the ancient Greeks. Like Vasari and the early eighteenth century writers influenced by Vasari, Cunningham traces the loss of the arts at the fall of the Roman Empire through developments inspired by Christianity, to the rebirth of painting with Giovanni Cimabue. There is a history of modern painting divided

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<sup>261</sup>The *Lives* reissued several times during his lifetime and after, most recently in its entirety as volumes in *Bohn's Standard Library* edition of *Cunningham's British Painters annotated and continued to the Present Time by Mrs. Charles Heaton*, ed. Mary Heaton (London: George Bell and Sons, 1879).

<sup>262</sup>Matthew Pilkington, *A General Dictionary of Painters; containing Memoirs of the Lives and Works of the most eminent Professors of the art of Painting...in Two Volumes*, ed. Allan Cunningham (London: Thomas Tegg, 1840).

into different schools of art, starting with the Florentine and ending with “The British School”. As in the introductory chapter to his *Lives of Painters*, Cunningham here and there refers to Walpole’s chapters on early painting in Britain, although this introduction to the *Dictionary* is necessarily much broader in scope than either his own earlier work or that of Walpole.<sup>263</sup>

By adding his own substantial introduction to *A General Dictionary of Painters*, Cunningham signals a change from its original emphasis on connoisseurship and taste.<sup>264</sup> He clearly intends his summaries of the various national or regional schools of art to provide some historical context. The prominent reference on the title page to twenty-six new entries on artists of the British School places British art in the company of that of other nations.

Despite Cunningham’s evident intention to give Pilkington’s *Dictionary* a new slant, his changes to the text of the immediately previous edition<sup>265</sup> were minimal, apparently limited to the new entries of British painters as advertised but unnamed on the title page. He made no changes to existing articles, and while some of his new articles pertain to artists whose biographies he had written for his *Lives*, none included in the

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<sup>263</sup>For example, compare his commentary on the possibility of painters in Britain using oil earlier than in Italy, a theory about which he expresses doubt in *Lives, Vol. I, 6*, while ascribing to it in *A General Dictionary...*, 1840 edition, lxxxvii - lxxxviii.

<sup>264</sup>*A General Dictionary of Painters*, 1829 edition, vii - xv.

<sup>265</sup>Hogg’s *Life of Allan Cunningham* does not mention his involvement with the *General Dictionary*.

*Dictionary* are copied from his earlier ones.<sup>266</sup> Cunningham died two years later.

#### CONCLUSION: ARTISTS' LIVES AS HISTORY

Walpole identifies his *Anecdotes of Painting* as a history of art in England, comprised of information that had been collected through the antiquarian pursuits of George Vertue and Walpole's own research about artists, their arts, and their works. His historiographical purpose is reinforced by the chronological order of the artists' lives and by his identification of English monarchs with the details of taste, connoisseurship, and patronage of art in England during their successive reigns. Walpole's commentary and anecdotes about artists reveal aspects of the social milieux of their times, and the information about collections and patronage provides a historical view of changing tastes and fashions in art and a view of eighteenth century English upper class taste.

While Pilkington's *Dictionary of Painters* also conveys a view of eighteenth-century English taste in art, he shows none of Walpole's historiographical consciousness. His alphabetical order provides a convenient means of locating information on paintings, and his supplementary catalogues focus on the artistic achievements of an indeterminate past. Rather than looking to Vasari's *Lives* to provide a model for a historical account of painting, the lesson that Pilkington learns from Vasari is that the ideal to which contemporary painters should aspire is that reached by the masters of the Italian Renaissance.

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<sup>266</sup>Of the painters whose biographies appeared in Cunningham's *Lives*, only Blake, Bird, Copley, Owen, Bonington, Northcote, Beaumont, Lawrence, Jackson, and Liversidge do not appear in the 1829 *General Dictionary* and have been added to the 1840 edition by Cunningham.

Pilkington is an instructor, while Walpole is a critic. The opinions that Pilkington expresses are for the most part not his own, but opinions of well-known commentators on art: Vasari, Ridolfi, Sandrart, Fresnoy, de Piles, Richardson and others. His only notice of the significance of art and artists to England appears in his pious hope of better art being produced in England as the result of more knowledgeable connoisseurship. His biographical information about painters is thin, used for the purpose of identifying and discriminating pictures, and his alphabetical order is the only debt Pilkington owes to Bayle.

Walpole's commentary on individual works or an artist's body of work reflects his own critical opinions. His anecdotal style reveals intelligence and wit, and is frequently amusing. He displays an aristocratic self-assurance, clearly lacking in Pilkington. It extends beyond art to his judgment of individuals and society in other matters. Walpole scrutinizes artists' behaviour in a way that seems to relate rules of propriety to rules of taste, but he is also something of the moralist.<sup>267</sup> His articles on Holbein and Van Dyck allude to the effects on an artist's character inherent in the relationship between a powerful patron and an artist, and he recognizes and applauds the moral criticism intended in Hogarth's works, while treating Hogarth's supposed rough manners as a sign of his lower rank, a failing of more than tact.

Having noted in his Preface that Hogarth achieved acclaim despite the lack of a patron, and that even the patronage of Charles I failed to produce a native-born genius,

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<sup>267</sup>“A *Censor morum* is not a much greater blessing than an *Arbiter elegantiarum*.”  
Walpole, *Vol. I*, xii.

Walpole is nevertheless unable to discard the idea of patronage as a stimulus to improvement in the arts, looking to the monarch to provide the example. His critical commentary is historiographical, tracing the path of art through periods of patronage and development and periods of inattention and stagnation, linked to reigns of monarchs, the traditional subject matter of historical writing. Walpole's delay in publishing the final volume raises the question as to whether, in addition to being sensitive to the feelings of Mrs. Hogarth and others, which a nine-year delay can hardly have been sufficient to mollify, he may have had some uncertainty about the direction of British art after Hogarth. His introduction to the fourth volume seems to imply that after a few more years of observing Reynolds and Gainsborough and other still-living artists, he was more confident that a British School was developing and that the spark of Hogarth's genius marked its beginning. The time had come to complete the project by publishing the final volume, confirming a progression towards a new history of British painting.

Cunningham, like Walpole, considers himself to be writing history, introducing his *Lives* with a fifty-page distillation of much of Walpole's *Anecdotes*. Fifty years after Walpole had marked the end of his historical account of art in Britain with an uncharacteristic hesitancy over Hogarth, Cunningham confidently identifies Hogarth with the foundation of the British School of painting. For Cunningham, with Hogarth and after him, "arose a succession of eminent painters who have spread the fame of British art far and wide."<sup>268</sup>

Cunningham's biographies of artists reveal a distinctly different approach from that

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<sup>268</sup>Cunningham, *Lives*, Vol. I, 2.

of Walpole. Having proposed that one of the satisfactions of reading biographies of artists is being able “to sympathize in their anxieties, to witness their triumph” Cunningham displays sympathy and insight in examining the personal circumstances of painters such as the irascible Barry, the evidently unstable Wilson, the drunken Morland, and the jealous Cosway.<sup>269</sup> The information that Cunningham provides is not particulars unearthed by antiquarians, but details which emerge from an exploration of each artists’ individuality, nor is it depictions of practitioners who, although remarkably talented, needed to be led or directed by men of taste and judgment.

Although he had expressed admiration for Samuel Johnson’s ability to give “a brief and lucid summary of character,” this was also evidently not Cunningham’s primary aim in writing his *Lives*.<sup>270</sup> Cunningham’s biographies were even less like Johnson’s *Lives* in critical commentary. In the *Lives of the Poets* Johnson had spent a much greater proportion of each biography on his own critique of each poet’s works than Cunningham included in his *Lives* of British painters. Cunningham is most interested in what events and ideas influenced his chosen artists, how they became artists, what they thought about their art, who they were as human beings, how being artists affected their lives and their families. Rather than seeing character reflected in art, he is more likely to look for a spark

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<sup>269</sup>Cunningham, *Lives*, Vol. VI, 1-20. Painter Maria Cosway is noted in the biography of her husband, prevented from pursuing her considerable talent by the apparent jealousy of her husband.

<sup>270</sup>In a letter dated October 20, 1828 to William Ritchie, in Hogg, *Life of Cunningham*, 288-289, Cunningham said that he was contemplating writing a “Lives of the Artists” in the manner of Samuel Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets.” Note also in reference to Northcote’s biography of Reynolds, above, his comparison of Northcote to Johnson.

of inspiration or imagination, and what he calls a “poetic” quality. This is the object of his criticism, not a judgment as to whether or not the artist has displayed a proper taste, or has an admirable similarity to a certain master.

There is in Cunningham’s chronology an underlying narrative of the painters’ self-liberation from the overbearing influence of patronage and academy, of their acquiring the ability to live by their own skills and genius. The communal sense of earlier biographical collections continues in Cunningham’s *Lives*, as he examines the lives of individuals that he sees as collectively contributing to and reflecting the character and nature of the British people. For Cunningham, the works and the lives of artists convey insights about the human condition and the spirit of the nation.<sup>271</sup> The purpose of his collective biography of British artists is to create a history of British art that provides these insights.

For insight into Cunningham’s historical understanding of biography, one might consider commentary by his friend, Thomas Carlyle, a fellow Scot whose father had once worked as a stonemason.<sup>272</sup> In an essay “On History”, published at about the same time that Cunningham published the first volumes of his *Lives*, Carlyle suggests that historical understanding is impossible to achieve without first determining the reality of human experience through minutely examining all aspects of human life. As an indication of the complexity of the task, of the need for an intimate knowledge of human experience, and of the individual as the basic unit of historical investigation, he proposes that “History is the

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<sup>271</sup>Note his comment, above, on Gainsborough: “No academy schooled down into uniformity and imitation the truly English and intrepid spirit of Gainsborough.” *Vol. I*, 356.

<sup>272</sup>See reports of their friendship in David Alex Wilson, *Carlyle, 4 vols* (London: Keegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1923), *Vol. I*, 363; *Vol. II*, 215-217; 384, 413.

essence of innumerable Biographies".<sup>273</sup> He quotes himself in a later essay, "Biography", in which he celebrates biography as the type of history most worthy of study for its opportunity to uncover knowledge about individuals.<sup>274</sup> He notes in particular, the interest in art as an interest in the artist. Identifying the inspiration for the study of a man as both scientific and poetic, he says the first is a concern with the external circumstances of his life, and the second with human sympathy and feelings of the heart. The latter leads to a knowledge that is intimate and real and therefore the more important. That is clearly the object of Cunningham's enquiry, and the direction favoured by Thomas Carlyle in his future quest to locate and revitalize the British spirit.

Consistent with their respective social positions, Walpole expected readers to appreciate his sometimes esoteric information and instruction about art and taste, and to be amused, while Pilkington anticipated a desire to obtain information for the sake of showing that one had taste. Cunningham assumes that his readers are interested in his biographical subjects because each subject is an artist, and because each is an individual human being. As Hogarth addressed his art to a broad audience, Cunningham addresses his writing to an equally broad readership, making no effort to appeal to Pilkington's authentic and would-be gentlemen and connoisseurs or Walpole's antiquaries, collectors, and virtuosi. In 1851, George Gilfillan, journalist, critic, and champion of Scottish poets, wrote of Cunningham's *Lives*:

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<sup>273</sup>Thomas Carlyle, "On History", in *Complete Works of Thomas Carlyle, Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, Vol. Two* (New York:: P. F. Collier & Son., 1901), 60-71.

<sup>274</sup>Thomas Carlyle, "Biography", in *Works*, 384-400.

...Cunningham shows us, in a fine mellow light, Gainsborough seated silent on his stile; Morland among his pigs; Barry propounding his canons of austere criticism, and cooking the while his steak; West arranging the tail of the

Giant steed to be bestrode by Death,  
As told in the Apocalypse,

with as much coolness as he would his own cravat; Wilson with his hand trembling at his palette, half with enthusiasm, half with brandy; dear enthusiastic Blake painting Satan from the life—asking “Jane Boucher, do you love me, lass?” and there at once a beginning and an end of the courtship;

....

Thus are Allan’s figures not set still and stiff at their palettes, but live, move, breathe, battle, love, burn, and die.<sup>275</sup>

In the 1840 edition of Pilkington’s *Dictionary*, Allan Cunningham attempts by his lengthy introduction to give it a historical dimension that it had previously lacked, apparently recognizing the continuing usefulness of such a work of reference in parallel with his *Lives* of British artists. In doing so, he is responding to Pilkington seventy years later, by situating British art in the larger history of Europe and European art, and by pointing out the existence of a British school of painting, established not by direction of gentlemen and connoisseurs but by British painters themselves.

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<sup>275</sup>George Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits, Third ed.* (Edinburgh: James Hogg; London: Groombridge, 1851), 245 - 246.

## CONCLUSION

As indicated at the beginning of this thesis, there has been very little notice paid to English collective biography beyond reference to its existence as one of many forms of life writing. Absent from the scholarship is an appreciation for the uses to which collective biography has been put, particularly new uses that had begun to arise by the eighteenth century, when English collective biography began to incorporate ideas about society, politics, the arts, and history.

Various purposes of collective biography were supported by different arrangements of material and a growing variety of subject matter. The form of collective biography characterised by alphabetical order came into widespread use in England during the eighteenth century, adopted for biographical collections of either a particular category of individuals or a general or universal range, the latter also a recent development. While alphabetical order might have been adopted merely for convenience, as in Matthew Pilkington's *Dictionary of Painters*, it could also underscore rational and critical purposes as it had for Pierre Bayle and did for John Aikin's *General Biography*, and the expansion of knowledge about man and the world. The range of individuals about whom collective biography was being written was also expanding, to include individuals outside the realm of those whose lives had been commemorated to stimulate respect, emulation, or religious devotion—the traditional purposes of biographical writing.

John Aikin's *General Biography or Lives Critical and Historical* is characteristic of the multi-volume English alphabetically ordered collections of the late eighteenth

century in format and range of individual subjects, but it is also like Bayle's *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* in its critical spirit. Aikin adapted Bayle's example for his own purpose, to provide a vehicle for social and political criticism and historical analysis. The alphabetical order of *General Biography* masks its concern with historical interpretation and its overall historiographical character, while its identity as a collective biography renders the work less a target for official objection than a series of essays or polemical tracts would have been. Its universal or general subject matter conceals to some extent the writers' interest in politics and the exercise of power, in the mix of articles on individuals across a broad social, political, and national range.

As demonstrated in this thesis, collective biography enabled Aikin and his associates to maintain a discourse about English society and politics at a time when those in positions of power were attempting to promote and enforce what Aikin saw as the false security of social, political, and religious conformity. *General Biography* was a medium for voicing a minority-view commentary on England's history, contemporary conditions, and future developments, well before these issues could again be raised publicly in the debate leading up to the first reform bill, and well before Thomas Carlyle and other voices of social criticism openly raised the question of the "state of England" in the 1830s and '40s.<sup>276</sup>

An interest in art and in matters of taste characteristic of eighteenth-century English society and the expansion of life writing to new categories of individuals are

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<sup>276</sup>See for example, Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. Richard D. Altick (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1965).

reflected in the adoption by Horace Walpole and Matthew Pilkington of collective biography on the subject of artists. Walpole ordered his biographies chronologically, considering himself to be writing history. The product of an antiquarian's research into art and the lives of artists became in Walpole's hands, a history of the arts, of connoisseurship and collection, and of the taste exhibited by centuries of royal and aristocratic collectors in England. Like Pilkington's *Dictionary*, it is an exhibition of eighteenth-century English taste, while also conveying Walpole's own greatly refined taste. Even in introduction to his long-completed fourth volume, and despite his own recognition of evidence to the contrary and his recognition that genius could instigate a renewal in art, Walpole could not renounce the idea that quality in art is dependent on the quality of its connoisseurs and patrons.

Fifty years later, Allan Cunningham composed a collective biography of British artists in which he disdains what he sees as the regulated taste of the eighteenth century, and invokes his readers' curiosity about artists as human beings whose innate abilities and internal motivation govern their art. Writing when romantic sensibilities had largely supplanted the classical ideals and ordered structure of the literature and art that characterised Walpole's rules of taste and self-consciously refined criticism, Cunningham's biographies pay a greater attention to the interior and private person. He is interested in the individual, and in what it means to the individual to be an artist, and in what the artist means to the spirit of the nation.

The distinction is also apparent between Aikin and Cunningham in their consideration of the individual. Both Aikin and Cunningham refer to the natural curiosity

that human beings have about other human beings, but Cunningham's is a deeper curiosity, a desire to know the inner man. Aikin sees a study of individuals such as presented in collective biography to be a study of "mankind", a rational investigation of humanity and accordingly of society. His sympathetic treatment of many of his subjects reflects an open-minded concern and human understanding, but his interest is in moral character and human nature, and in what makes a society and polity function fairly, reasonably and peaceably, not in what makes each individual a unique human being.

By the end of his introductory narrative, taken largely from Walpole's *Anecdotes*, Cunningham discards Walpole's method of biographical writing, and turns away from the philosophical component that had played a part in historical narrative of the eighteenth century. He is undertaking an enquiry into how individuals in the past thought and felt, how their works became "a record of the tastes and feeling of the times in which they flourished". This is not a historical overview, but a history uncovered by a close investigation of how individuals lived and thought and how the circumstances of their lives and their thought affected their own actions and creations, and how their actions and creations affected the nation.

Donald Stauffer's conclusion that the eighteenth century completed the separation of biography from history is consistent with his own view and that of most twentieth-century commentators on biography that Boswell's *Life of Johnson* had a pivotal significance for the "art of biography."<sup>277</sup> While one might find Stauffer's view of the separation of biography and history applicable to specific individual works of biography,

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<sup>277</sup>Stauffer, *The Art of Biography in Eighteenth Century England*, 517.

the eighteenth century might more accurately be said to have brought history and biography together in collective biography, as demonstrated by this thesis.

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