

REFLECTIONS I: BIOGRAPHIES

GEOGRAPHY'S LIFE TOLD THROUGH GEOGRAPHERS' LIVES

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Biography is flourishing in its traditional guises of literary biography and its film and television counterparts, and of historical biography, and is reaching beyond the human to the world of things: the lives of objects illuminate the societies in which the objects were commissioned, made, circulated, and used. Sub genres such as national biography are resurgent, 'life-writing' opens new possibilities beyond the traditional formal grammar of the genre, and digital connectedness broadens scope for finding connections in lives. Biography has played an increasing role in telling the history of British geography, primarily through memoirs of its human exponents, but also of accounts of its institutions and sometimes of its objects: its maps and instruments for example. This paper explores how biography has shaped our understanding of geography's past: its priorities, the constraints on it, its contribution to academic discussion, its aims. Some vehicles, most obviously the *International Geographical Union's Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies*, are views of geographers by geographers. Other, such as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, impose an external grammar on geographical biography and oblige comparison between geographers' achievements and priorities and those of others. Yet other vehicles, such as memoirs of British Academy fellows published in that institution's *Proceedings*, are by and of geographical academicians, writing soon after the subject's death, compounding challenges of internalism but allowing expansive treatment. Meanwhile, geography's institutions – the Royal Geographical

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Society and increasing number of geography departments – commission or find themselves the subject of their own life stories, sometimes celebratory, sometimes rather counter cultural. I share some insights into biography and geography from my time as Research Director of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, editor of *Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies*, and author of a recent rather subversive collective biography of women in Oxford's School of Geography.

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