Fear of Theory

Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography

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Foreword

Scaffolding a House: Biography and the Role of Chance in a Life

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In the first contribution to this volume, Hans Renders uses an image I like, comparing theory in biography writing to scaffolding that is needed to build a house. I think we can take the comparison further. What building material was used, for instance? How are the foundations? Who wanted the house built? Who built it? What purpose is it meant to serve?

I come to these questions – I look at the construction – from two separate angles. First, I am a historian. As such, I worked in academia and tried my hand in the field of biographical writing. Second, I now serve as president of Iceland and, judging by the precedent of my predecessors, might one day be the subject of a biography. Moreover, I would not exclude writing a memoir about my official duties in this honourable position.

For a historian with an experience in the world of biography, moving from being a writer of subjects to the subject matter itself was and is an intriguing experience. Simon and Garfunkel's opening words in one of their most famous songs come to mind, 'I'd rather be a hammer than a nail.'

Future historians and biographers will probably conclude that my effect on general Icelandic history has been and will be modest. Maybe they will also argue that any such influence will not revolve mostly around how I conducted myself in office but rather how others might have acted, had they been elected.

Maybe, however, I will be able to influence how Icelanders evaluate and see their past. As a historian, I considered myself a storyteller with a purpose in society at large, not just within my profession. I wanted to construct thought-provoking and readable narratives that would reach a wide audience and influence the way people perceived both the past and the present. Frankly, I was not that interested in the theoretical aspects of such efforts. I just wanted the job done.

I well remember a debate on this facet of historical writing in 2005. This was shortly after I completed my doctoral thesis on fishing disputes in the North Atlantic in the mid-twentieth century, a traditional archive-based work of political and diplomatic history. I was head of the Association of Icelandic Historians and was beginning to try to make my voice heard among my colleagues. A few of us took part in an engaging exchange of ideas and opinions on our online discussion venue, including my good friend Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon,

 | DOI:10.1163/9789004498891_002

aptly named 'the eminent connoisseur of microhistory' in Renders' words. Perhaps a bit too eager to incite responses, I stated that we should not complicate matters unnecessarily – that at the end of the day history is basically a very simple profession which entails recounting what happened in the past. Ranke could not have put it better. In a sense, I got what I deserved. This is unbelievably 'naïve', another friend immediately commented and more chimed in with similar comments, including the distinguished Anna Agnarsdóttir, an influential voice of reason (and, yes, we did manage to voice such criticisms and yet maintain our camaraderie).

Yet another friend in the field, Ólafur Rastrick, certainly gained the upper hand in our discussions with a wonderful, if somewhat ironic and partial, summary of my arguments:

> I would like to support the wise words of the head of our Association on this venue yesterday. How strange it is to allow people to make these primitive attempts to engage in scholarly debates about the premises of historical work. And to top it all, this is done at the historians' discussion venue! Yes, they just confuse us, these unfortunate captives of their own oscillation who never produce any real history. Of course, our role is to go and dig up the facts of the past and then disseminate them to the public. Why should we discuss the premises of what we are doing? Why should we discuss possible epistemic biases built into our profession? Why should we discuss the powers and influences which may affect what we search for, what we find, what we think we have found and how we disseminate our findings and so on and so forth?[1]

'Up with the shovels!' Rastrick concluded, referring to my call to 'dig up' sources about the past. Undeterred, I continued to defend my case, trying to explain that I was talking about the basic rationale – the need and desire to describe bygone events and developments, to produce history for interested readers. However, in online debates, as in politics, explanation usually comes too late.[2] I think I was still on the losing side when I continued writing that of course we should ponder all kinds of premises and biases – consider our theoretical framework (or scaffolding, in line with the comparison used above).

1 I kept the exchanges and provided a fair summary, I believe. See Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, 'Umræða um ekkert? Einföld og flókin skoðanaskipti sagnfræðinga um aðferð og afurð, sögur og sagnfræði, skor, skóga og tré', *Kistan* 5 April 2005, https://web.archive.org/web/20070103041920/http://www.kistan.is/efni.asp?n=3574&f=15&u=94.

2 For this perspective on the political arena, see Michael Ignatieff, *Fire and Ashes. Success and Failure in Politics* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2015), p. 35–37.

But I also stuck to my guns: 'It is not enough to wonder what kind of grip we should have on the shovel; we also need to wield it. For if not, why are we holding on to it?'

So it went on, with exchanges back and forth. Once more I tried to summarize my view on visible output versus the underlying theory and came up with a phrase that I was quite proud of, although nobody else seems to have found it worth remembering: 'Method is nothing without product.'[3]

Then it was time to put words into action – wield the shovel, build the house. Later in 2005, I published my first book on history and in the following year two others followed in quick succession. The first of the three was about one of Iceland's presidents, based mostly on his diaries. The second one was a slim volume on the Cod Wars, the Anglo-Icelandic fishing conflicts in the latter half of the twentieth century. The third one revealed threat perceptions, phone-tapping and other kinds of secret surveillance by the Icelandic state during the Cold War.

All of them were written for the general public, yet with adherence to general academic standards. I agree with those colleagues who complain that 'popular history', admittedly a vague and imprecise term, can be lacking in precision, care and accuracy, and sometimes overly nationalistic, one-dimensional and simplistic.[4] As for myself, I felt that my theoretical or epistemic framework was simple: To write in an engaging manner, to be critical but balanced and not to bow to any outside pressure. And all these works were heavily based on new sources. In other words, I used the shovel and dug up documents in the archives.

On that front, I am also convinced of the vital importance of sources as the basis of historical research. I would not go as far as the once well-known conservative historian G.R. Elton who, in Alun Munslow's words, was 'suspicious that theory was probably just an excuse for idleness in the archive'.[5] But I would like to point to the warning voice of Ruth Paley of the British Records Association, in a notification on H-Net in early 2020 about a forum on 'Archives and records in a post-truth world': 'In the present climate of cynicism and disbelief about information and indeed in institutions, lies a serious danger failure that records are no longer recognized as a vital part of the process of evidence needed to challenge and understand our society.'[6]

3 Jóhannesson, 'Umræða um ekkert?'

4 For such criticism in Iceland, see e.g. Ólafur Rastrick and Valdimar Tr. Hafstein (eds.), *Menningararfur á Íslandi. Greining og gagnrýni* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2015), p. 167.

5 Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History* (Basingstoke [etc.]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 3.

6 Ruth Paley, 'Archives and records in a post-truth world', https://networks.h-net.org/node/16749/discussions/5600011/archives-and-records-post-truth-world, 2 January, 2020.

My books on history were not biographies, admittedly, but surely these considerations apply to life-writing as well. Before I embarked on my doctoral studies, I had written a semi-biographical work, the history of deCode Genetics and its larger-than-life founder and CEO, Kári Stefánsson. It was written in haste, it was unauthorised, and it was an unforgettable experience. Indirectly, it also prepared me for an assignment that came to fruition in 2010. In that year, I finished a massive biography (at least in weight and length) of Gunnar Thoroddsen (1910–1983). He was a politician whose manifold career in public life lasted over half-a-century, including a stint as mayor of Reykjavík, decades in parliament, ministerial posts, a failed run for president, and ultimately the premiership, a post he had long sought.

The work was commissioned. Thoroddsen's family wanted to fulfil his wish that a book be written about his legacy and the publisher betted on a book that should sell well, provided it was not written in a dry, 'academic' style. Any discussion on the theoretical aspects of biography must entail these factors. In this particular case, the protagonist's relatives assured me that I would have full freedom to write as I saw fit, not the least about his long-running problem with alcohol, a battle he ultimately won. I fully subscribe to the view that, in biographies, honesty is key. In this particular case, I firmly believe that readers grew more sympathetic towards the subject because of his human faults, not in spite of them.[7] As one writer put it, having written about Manning Clark, one of Australia's most prolific and controversial historians, 'Biography's purpose is to lay things out … and to do so in a way which is always fair and sympathetic to the person as can be possible.'[8] And if it is not, truth still needs to be told, especially in writings about people of power and influence. In *Working*, Robert Caro's primer on his approach towards biography, this master of Lyndon B. Johnson's life explains that in his multi-volume work he wrote little on 'the many women with whom Lyndon Johnson had had sex … because none of them seemed to have any significance to him personally or to have any connection with his political or governmental activities.' I, however, support the criticism that Caro, who writes unhesitatingly about Johnson's other character faults should not have overlooked 'his virulent misogyny'. Joshua Kendall, the author of those words, argued further that this 'points to a long-standing blind spot not just in presidential biography but in the culture at large'.[9]

7 For a similar conclusion, see Stefán Pálsson, 'Tár, bros og töfraskór', in: *TMM* 3(2011), p. 136–140.

8 Doug Munro, review of Mark McKenna's *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark*, https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1253.

9 Joshua Kendall, 'Robert Caro's Blind Spot', *Slate* 22 April, 2019, https://slate.com/culture/2019/04/lyndon-johnson-robert-caro-affairs-misogyny.html.

That assertion might be debated. Many biographies of presidents and other public persons are quite explicit about private affairs, sexual misdemeanours and other aspects that might generate an interest in society. I will not discuss here whether that fact is deplorable or not, but we need to keep in mind that, in general, publishers want a 'sellable' product. They need profits. They do not operate in the academic world where other rules apply. During his years in the world of publishing, William Rees-Mogg learned 'that books on Marilyn Monroe always made a profit'.[10]

However, we historians and biographers are not only at the publishers' mercy. They usually sense that the public may like provocative or challenging biographies. In my case, the publisher certainly agreed that we should stray away from the earlier tradition in political biographies or autobiographies in Iceland where criticism was muted and praise was the norm, 'hagiographic tales' as one of my colleagues rightly put it.[11]

The escape from hagiography must not lead to sensationalism, however. The heading of the first media 'teaser' for my work on Thoroddsen is a case in point: 'Confided his faults to his diary'.[12] My publisher, with whom I enjoyed working, knew what would draw wide attention and it was not first and foremost my long chapters on a politician's beliefs or manoeuvres behind the scenes, even though they were quite exciting at times (in my opinion, at least). Still, in this particular biography, it was obvious that the bulk of the work should focus on the protagonist's public life, his success and failures in the political arena.

Thoroddsen's personal diary and notes provided the mainstay of the book, with detailed descriptions of his hopes, setbacks, and feelings. Here, I therefore return to the importance of sources. No matter how much we emphasize the need for a sound theoretical framework – the scaffolding if you like – there can be no construction without material. Thoroddsen's drinking at some stages in his life was common knowledge but it would have been impossible to analyse its effect on his whole life without the documents I found in the basement of his widow's apartment.

Finally, my experience from this fascinating diversion to life-writing convinced me yet further of the importance of agency and individuals in wider historical developments. My hero's life was certainly full of chances that led

10 William Rees-Mogg, *Memoirs* (London: HarperPress, 2011), p. 282.

11 Guðmundur Hálfdanarson, 'Biskupasögur hinar nýju: um ævisögur fjögurra stjórnmálamanna', in: *Saga* (1993)31, p. 167–190.

12 'Trúði dagbókinni fyrir brestum sínum', in: *Fréttablaðið* 15 Sept. 2010.

him from one phase to another and those haphazard changes influenced political developments in the country.

I venture to suggest that all historians, in particular those in the fields of social and economic history, should try their hand at biographical writings. Conversely, biographers would benefit from trying their hand at composing grand narratives, overviews of wide developments in space and time – the type of history which Sigurður Gylfi, that apt expert of microhistory, certainly dislikes! Too much emphasis on individuals, at the expense of society and deep currents, impinges our view. If I return again to Renders' comparison, it is akin to seeing the bricks behind the scaffolding but not the building itself. A better known expression would be the one about not seeing the wood for the trees.

When I was elected President of Iceland in 2016, I had a number of works in the pipelines, including a biography, a book on the country's presidents that was near completion, and my magnum opus, the fruits of my doctoral research and years in the archives, a multivolume work on the Cod Wars. Obviously, this transition altered all these plans. To be sure, I managed to publish the overview on Icelandic presidents. Still, I changed the tone somewhat and omitted the chapter on my immediate predecessor, more 'political' and more controversial than the last two persons who were in office before him.

In these pandemic days, I have sometimes been able to seek solace by continuing to work on my books on long gone fishing disputes. 'In many ways I cannot stand the present,' a mediaevalist colleague once remarked and I am fond of this remark by Winston Churchill that I discovered in Antonia Fraser's memoirs: 'It has been a comfort to me in these anxious days to put a thousand years between my thoughts and the twentieth century.'[13]

Where you stand depends on where you sit, it has been said. Historians and other academics hold a duty to society and the ethics of their profession, not to the interests of the state and statespersons in power. They need to be critical, not compliant. Conversely, it is almost written in a president's job description to promote unity and optimism.

For a historian turned president, this can be problematic. An academic who entered the political arena in another country was once told that 'if he wanted to be right rather than be prime minister, he should have stayed in university'.[14]

13 Antonia Fraser, *My History. A Memoir of Growing Up* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2015), p. 254. Ragnhildur Hólmgeirsdóttir, 'Hvað eru sögulegir tímar?' in: *Saga* 58(2020)2 p. 24.

14 Michael Bliss, *Right Honourable Men. The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1994). The comment refers to Pierre Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, 1968–1979 and 1980–1984.

During my presidential campaign, some opponents condemned my revisionist tendencies, in particular a critical, or what I would like to call nuanced, approach to the fishing disputes with Britain. Those conflicts are central in the nation's collective memory of recent history, even comparable in that sense to Britain's 'Finest hour' during the Second World War. According to these critics, I had degraded the heroics of those who fought gallantly for Iceland's interests and how could someone with that track record become head of state, a unifying figure? Again, I can point to similar instances abroad, where academics or persons of letters were accused of disloyalty to the nation. Not that I would compare my writings to his, but after Mario Vargas Llosa lost the run for the presidency in Peru, he complained how the 'hate office' searched in his bibliography in order to find statements and quotations he had cited in articles and interviews attacking nationalism as one of the 'human aberrations that has caused the most bloodshed in history'.[15] In Canada, Michael Ignatieff, the successful academic turned failed politician, described in retrospect how unscrupulous opponents twisted his earlier remarks and opinions: 'This aspect of politics – tendentious political misreading of something you said years before – was new to me.'[16]

Taking part in the debate about history and alleged treachery in my writings, I provided a possible solution, a vision of patriotism without chauvinism. Fortunately, this outlook seemed to appeal to many of those who were interested in this aspect of my candidacy:

> If elected, I don't want to undergo a complete transformation. … and hope that nobody googles me. But I would want the nation to understand that we can present the past in all its variety without being accused of disparaging the achievements of those who were in the forefront.[17]

In office, I have therefore aimed to highlight the dangerous but tempting desire of people in positions of power to use the past for their own present purposes. Likewise, I have continued to emphasize the distinction that needs to be made between healthy patriotism on the one hand, an inclusive and positive respect for our society, heritage, and history, and on the other hand the evils of a big-

15 Mario Vargas Llosa, *A Fish in the Water. A Memoir*. Transl. by Helen Lane (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 422.

16 Ignatieff, *Fire and Ashes*, p. 36.

17 Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, 'Þjóðin og fræðin. Nokkur orð um tilvistarvanda sagnfræðings sem varð forseti', https://www.forseti.is/media/1838/2017_03_10_hugvisindathing.pdf.

oted adulation of the nation and the instillation of automatic fear or suspicion towards the outside world.[18]

My personal change in profession has reinforced these beliefs. Overall, historians agree on the need to warn against the abuses of history by statespersons or aggressive extremists. They can easily point to the dangers of excessive nationalism and the temptation by national leaders to portray foreigners as evil enemies of the people. I wonder, however, if historians and other academics have at the same time downplayed, ignored or even belittled people's need for a common purpose, a common understanding of where we came from.

It could perhaps be beneficial for historians, especially those in the privileged position of tenure and academic security, to try to look at the world from other places than that safe confine. Still, it goes without saying that we do not want a return to the historical tradition of old, and I refer here to one of my favourite works on historiography, G.P. Gooch's encyclopaedic volume on history and historians in the nineteenth century.[19]

The sea change in my life in 2016 also enhanced my view on the importance of chance in individuals' existence. A totally unpredictable and unforeseen sequence of events led to my candidacy. During my tenure, I have also seen first-hand how coincidences can impact political developments. This experience will certainly influence my research and writing in the field of biography, if I ever return to that pleasurable pursuit. Similarly, my appreciation of written sources has been reinforced. Time and again, I have seen how information has been preserved in reports, emails and my own diary that would otherwise have vanished. During these days of Covid-19, I also make note of my colleague's new and excellent work on the 1918 influenza pandemic in Iceland. 'What if the nurses … had kept a diary and recorded there their thoughts', Gunnar Þór Bjarnason wrote: 'Or if they had sat down once the catastrophe was over and described their experience. If only those heroes had known how much they would have pleased one historian a century later!'[20]

Contrarywise, I also realize better than before how documents will always need to be evaluated, seen in a context and not taken automatically at face value. I am not saying that this applies to records emanating from my office

18 E.g. Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, 'Icelanders or Norwegians? Leifur, Snorri, and national identity then and now', https://www.forseti.is/media/2006/2017_03_23-nationalism_eng.pdf, and 'Defending Asgard, independence and human rights. The use of history in current affairs', https://www.forseti.is/media/5893/2020_03_04_polland_un_warsaw.pdf.

19 G.P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (London/New York, Longmans, Green, and co., 1913).

20 Gunnar Þór Bjarnason, *Spænska veikin* (Reykjavík: Forlagið, 2000), p. 156.

but I refer to Jonathan Lynn's and Anthony Jay's wonderful (and fictional) reminder in the sitcom *Yes, Minister* that the minister's notes might reflect:

a) What happened.
b) What he believed happened.
c) What he would like to have happened.
d) What he wanted others to believe happened.
e) What he wanted others to believe that he believed happened.[21]

Furthermore, my awareness of the limitations of written sources has been reinforced. I have looked up dates and wondered why nothing was written by me or others about a vital part of a sequence of events. I have also sensed how the documents do not capture the feel of the day, the emotions or the confusion. Furthermore, so much (unofficial) communication now takes place over the phone, by phone messages or through social media. Thus, my awareness of the limitations of sources in historical and biographical writing has been strengthened.

Finally, I have come to realize that it is one thing to espouse frankness in writings and access to sources when you're the author, quite another if you're the subject. The future will reveal whether I write my own memoirs and how I will react to possible interest from others to write about my tenure as president or my whole life. It is easy to recount how documents about heads of state and political leaders have been off limits to biographers or other researchers. In his monumental work on Emperor Hirohito, Herbert Bix described how diaries and family correspondence will likely remain inaccessible in perpetuity. The son of Richard Nixon's personal physician once vowed to never reveal certain aspects of the president's health and as one biographer complained: 'My argument that the public interest or the public's right to know whether the president was incapacitated and should have had his authority suspended under the Twenty-fifth Amendment did not convince him.'[22]

It is also easy to name cases of controlled access in order to shape history and legacies. In Canada, the executors of Premier William Mackenzie King's papers only offered sympathetic observers access to his sensitive diaries.[23] In a similar vein, we can find examples where access to documents has embar-

21 Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay, *The Complete Yes Minister* (BBC Books: London 1989), p. 9.
22 Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 6. Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger* (London: Penguin, 2008, p. 546).
23 Christopher Dummitt, *Unbuttoned. A History of Mackenzie King's Secret Life* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), p. 196–197.

rassed state leaders. Recently, declassified conversations between Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan demonstrated how they freely used racist language out of earshot, assuming of course that their crudeness would not become public knowledge. Similarly, in the introduction to my work on President Kristján Eldjárn, I recounted how Henry Kissinger had to apologize when it was revealed how he had, in the presumed safety of the Oval Office, called Indira Gandhi a 'bitch' and all Indians 'bastards'. This I did in order to explain that the reputation of Eldjárn remained unharmed although I revealed the content of his diaries and the reflections he had taped himself. He never called anyone a bastard, let alone a bitch, and when I was elected president I recalled this point I had made about my predecessor, although I hasten to add that I had not been in the habit of using such derogatory descriptions.[24] If you have no skeletons in the closet, you should find it easy to be welcoming and open-minded. However, if you are reserved by nature, you may not want to answer questions about everything that might leap to the mind of a biographer, or give unlimited access to your diary and other written sources.

The argument has been made that when leaders are in office, they must not fret too much about the 'verdict of history'. In conversation with historian Benny Morris, Shimon Peres argued that a 'leader who worries about how he will go down in history will not be a great leader'.[25] It is necessary to look in the press how our reputation is valued, but it is quite something else to become too obsessed with shaping our own history. In the US, where presidential biography is a particular genre, statesmen have been conscious of how they will be portrayed after their death. Some presidents already wanted to defend their legacy as soon they took power and then throughout their whole tenure. 'Man's desire to be remembered is colossal,' Franklin D. Roosevelt is to have remarked when he saw pyramids in Egypt in 1943.[26]

All these considerations make up for a theoretical basis of biography. Every case is unique, however. Every life contains its own peculiarities, twists and

24 Tim Naftali, 'Ronald Reagan's Long-Hidden Racist Conversation With Richard Nixon', *The Atlantic* 30 July 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/ronald-reagans-racist-conversation-richard-nixon/595102. 'Kissinger regrets 1971 remarks on India', in: *The New York Times*, 2 July 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/02/world/asia/kissinger-regrets-1971-remarks-on-india.html. Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, *Völundarhús valdsins. Stjórnarmyndanir, stjórnarslit og staða forseta Íslands í embættistíð Kristjáns Eldjárns, 1968–80* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2005), p. 205.

25 Benny Morris, 'Making History', *Tablet Magazine* [online], July 26, 2010.

26 See Sara Polak, 'Franklin D. Roosevelt as an Architect of Public History', in: Jelte Olthof and Maarten Zwiers (eds.), *Profiles in Power. Personality, Persona, and the U.S. President* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), p. 83.

turns. As for myself, I can certainly say that moving from writing national history towards becoming part of it has changed my outlook on the practice of writing about the past. Most significantly, it has increased my belief in the importance of agency, contingency and chance in human affairs. Also, I believe that I am even more aware of the limitations of our available sources. Finally, writing this article has reminded me how much I enjoy historical research. That feeling should perhaps be the main prerequisite for anyone wanting to enter the world of history and biography.