Eminent Victorians Study Guide

Eminent Victorians by Lytton Strachey

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Introduction

In *Eminent Victorians* (1918), Lytton Strachey examined the lives of four famous English individuals from the Victorian Era and found that they were not quite what previous biographies and popular legend had made them out to be. The four in question were Cardinal Manning, the leader of England's Roman Catholic community; Florence Nightingale, the nurse; Thomas Arnold, the educational reformer; and General Charles George Gordon, a soldier and adventurer.

Strachey sought a new approach to biography. The typical, sprawling two-volume Victorian biography presented its subject in the best possible light, ignoring any aspects of the life that might tarnish the person's achievements. Strachey determined that these large and tedious volumes, full of what he called "ill-digested masses of material," did a disservice to the art of biography. In contrast, he wrote short, pithy, artful biographies that told the truth about the subjects as Strachey understood it. The result, in *Eminent Victorians*, is a series of radical reinterpretations. Cardinal Manning is presented as a scheming, ambitious man rather than a pious representative of God. Florence Nightingale, although Strachey does not devalue her astonishing achievements, is presented as a woman maniacally obsessed with work, whose personality was acerbic rather than saintly. Strachey's Arnold, the headmaster of Rugby School, is little more than a pompous, pedantic fool. The portrait of Gordon is the most complex of the four, showing a man who was driven to his demise by the contradictions in his own personality and the vacillation of the British government.

Eminent Victorians is a landmark book not only because it punctured many of the pretensions and conceit of the Victorian Era, but because it signaled a new trend in the writing of biography, the influence of which is still discernible today.

Author Biography

Lytton Strachey was born on March 1, 1880, in Clapham, London, the eleventh of thirteen children born to an upper-middle class family. Strachey was educated in private schools and by tutors until he attended Trinity College, Cambridge in 1899. At Cambridge, he became a member of a group called The Apostles which included the novelist E. M. Forster and literary critic Leonard Woolf. The Apostles rejected conventional morality and cultivated the pleasures of the senses and the aesthetic appreciation of art. In this group, Strachey was able to give expression to his homosexuality.

Strachey obtained a degree in History from Trinity College in 1903, although the following year he failed to win the fellowship he desired when his dissertation on the British statesman Warren Hastings was rejected. Strachey then returned to London where he became part of the Bloomsbury Group, a group of unconventional intellectuals that included Virginia Woolf and her husband Leonard.

Strachey began writing literary criticism and essays for a variety of journals, and in 1907 became a reviewer for the *Spectator*. In 1912, he published his first book, *Landmarks in French Literature*, and first conceived the idea for *Eminent Victorians*, which at the time he called *Victorian Silhouettes*.

In 1916, during World War I, Strachey requested exemption from military service and declared himself to be a conscientious objector. His application was rejected, but he was excused from military service after failing a medical examination.

In 1918, *Eminent Victorians*, the work for which Strachey is chiefly known, was published. He followed this success with further biographies: *Queen Victoria* (1921), which won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Biography, University of Edinburgh, 1921; and *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History* (1928). All his biographies were marked by his witty, satirical style, his interest in psychological motivation (*Elizabeth and Essex* was indebted to the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, whom Strachey heard at a conference in 1922), and his determination to avoid the hagiographic approach that had marred the art of biography in the Victorian Era.

Strachey's other works included a play, *Son of Heaven*, which was produced at the Scala Theatre, London, in 1925, and a selection of essays and reviews, *Books and Characters: French & English* (1922). A collection of Strachey's writings, *Characters and Commentaries*, was published posthumously in 1933.

Strachey became ill in October, 1931, at a London dinner party. He died of stomach cancer on January 21, 1932, in Hungerford. The day he died, he said he had always wished to marry his friend, Dora Carrington, who had been devoted to him for years. Carrington attempted suicide the night of Strachey's death, and unable to cope with the grief of losing Strachey, she killed herself seven weeks later.

Plot Summary

Cardinal Manning

Eminent Victorians begins with an account of the life of Cardinal Manning (1807-1892), a convert from the Church of England who became Archbishop of Westminster and the leader of England's Catholic community. When Manning went to Oxford University, he seemed set for a political career, but his hopes were dashed when his father was declared bankrupt. Manning was soon elected to a Fellowship at Merton College, Oxford, conditional on his taking orders in the Church of England.

Manning became attracted to the Oxford Movement, a reform movement in the Church of England associated with the names of John Keble and John Henry Newman. But as the Oxford Movement seemed to slip closer to Roman Catholicism, Manning, who was now Archdeacon of Chichester, cut himself off from it.

Manning was a rising force in the Church of England, a man of great energy and administrative skill. However, he was tormented by what he believed to be the temptations of the devil to worldly ambition. Unable to find peace, he analyzed his motivations in detail, trying to decide whether, if advancement came along, he should accept or reject it. He also felt drawn towards the Roman Catholic Church. When it became clear from a legal case that Church of England doctrine could be decided by an Act of Parliament, Manning converted to Catholicism. The pope appointed him provost of the Chapter of Westminster. Within seven years, Manning had become Archbishop of Westminster. The appointment followed an internal struggle involving Manning, Cardinal Wiseman, the Archbishop of Westminster, and another cleric, Dr. Errington, the representative of England's Old Catholic community. Manning won because he befriended Monsignor Talbot, the private secretary of the pope.

Strachey casts the next stage of Manning's life in contrast to and opposition with that of Newman, who had also converted to Catholicism. Unlike Manning, Newman had almost been ignored. But then he wrote *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, which became a classic of Catholic thought. With his newfound recognition, Newman wanted to establish a Hall at Oxford for Catholic undergraduates, but Manning used his connections to the pope to block Newman's proposal.

Following this, Manning played a key role in defusing political criticism in England over the dogma of Papal Infallibility in 1870. Five years later, Manning became a cardinal. He ruled his diocese with efficient zeal, lecturing, organizing charities, delivering sermons, and writing many devotional books. He continued his strenuous work until old age. At his funeral in January, 1892, there was grief in the streets; he had managed to touch the hearts of working people.

Florence Nightingale

Strachey promises to show a different Florence Nightingale than the saintly "Lady with the Lamp" of popular legend.

Nightingale was born into an upper middle class family but showed no interest in the usual pastimes of a young lady of her station. She wanted to be a nurse, an occupation that was not held in high repute. Her family was appalled, but she pursued her goal with dedication, sublimating all other desires, and refusing marriage.

In her early thirties, Nightingale became superintendent of a charitable nursing home in London. In 1854, with the help of her friend Sidney Herbert at the War Office, she went to the Crimea during the Crimean War to alleviate the terrible conditions at Scutari, the British military hospital at Constantinople. In the hospital, "want, neglect, confusion, misery" reigned, for which Strachey blames the incompetence of the English authorities. With hard work, discipline, attention to detail, and a strong will, Nightingale addressed all the problems successfully, becoming in effect the administrative head of the hospital. Nightingale left the Crimea in July 1856, her reputation enormous.

After her return to England, despite ill-health, she worked feverishly, laying out plans for the reform of the entire Army Medical Department and fighting the bureaucratic opposition her proposals aroused. She was supported by loyal friends such as Sidney Herbert, her Aunt Mai, Arthur Clough, the poet, and her private secretary, Dr. Sutherland. Beginning in 1859, the system of reform she had fought for was put in place. In 1860, with the opening of the Nightingale Training School for Nurses at St. Thomas's Hospital, she became the founder of modern nursing.

Nightingale was driven on by a compulsive desire to work. She expected her friends to work as hard as she did, and if they did not, she questioned their commitment. Pushed on by Nightingale, Herbert died of overwork, and Aunt Mai left her to return to her own family.

Nightingale remained a potent force at the War Office for ten years, also working on a host of other reform projects. In her old age, her character softened and she became less acerbic.

Dr. Arnold

The sketch of Dr. Thomas Arnold is the shortest of the four. It concentrates on Arnold's role as headmaster of Rugby School, a position to which he was appointed in 1828. Arnold was a man of strong religious conviction, and he was also a reformer who set out to make morals and conduct the centerpiece of the school. Religious and moral principle, and gentlemanly conduct, were valued more highly than intellectual ability.

Arnold also changed the way the school was governed. He appointed prefects from the Sixth Form (the equivalent of eleventh and twelfth grade in the United States) who were

given responsibilities over every part of school life. They had power to discipline the younger boys, and they in turn were answerable to the headmaster. Arnold himself remained remote, although the boys were awed by his presence. Strachey compares him to the Old Testament God, the Lawgiver, ruling through power and wrath.

In the sphere of teaching, Arnold made few reforms. He introduced modern history, modern languages and mathematics into the curriculum, but did not allocate enough time for their instruction. The main objects of study remained ancient Greece and Rome. According to Strachey, therefore, who is scornful of Arnold's achievements, he simply reinforced an old system of education. By introducing morals and religion into education he altered the atmosphere of public school life, but not for the better.

General Gordon

General Charles George Gordon was born in 1833. He served in the Royal Engineers during the Crimean War and was sent in 1860 to China, where he remained for four years as part of a British occupying force. He was put in command of a Chinese army from Shanghai that won back huge amounts of land from a rebel force. Gordon's ingenuity and military skill played a large part in the victory, and he returned to England with an enviable reputation. He then sunk into obscurity for six years as the supervisor of a project to erect a system of forts at the mouth of the River Thames.

Gordon had a mystical temperament and spent many hours with his Bible in a search of Truth. His faith was unconventional, focusing on an idea of the just man who served the will of God by turning away from earthly desires. But Gordon was also a man of action who was ambitious for fame and influence. In 1874, he was put in charge of the Equatorial Provinces of Sudan, where he labored for six years, trying to bring the benefits of civilization to a huge, forbidding, unexplored land. He put down revolts and tried to end the slave trade.

Gordon returned to England in 1880. After several other expeditions, he set off on what was to be his last, back to the Sudan, where an army led by the Mahdi was threatening Khartoum. Gordon's instructions were to supervise a withdrawal from the city, but Gordon wanted to take vigorous military action. He was determined not to let Khartoum fall, but when he reached the city, the situation rapidly worsened. Soon the Mahdi's forces laid siege to the city. Gordon repeatedly refused to take the opportunities he had to escape. London was eventually forced to send an expeditionary force to relieve the city, but it arrived too late. Khartoum had been taken and Gordon killed. When the news reached England, there was an outpouring of grief and indignation.

Characters

Mohammed Ahmed

Mohammed Ahmed was a preacher and warrior from the Sudan. His mission was to lead the Islamic faithful back to the true ways of the Prophet. He declared himself to be the long-awaited Mahdi, a kind of savior, the last in the succession of twelve holy Imams. He declared a holy war and had military success against the ruling Egyptians. The Mahdi and his forces laid siege to Khartoum, eventually taking the city and killing General Gordon.

Thomas Arnold

Thomas Arnold was educated at Winchester School and Oxford University, where he gained a reputation for being industrious and pious. He married young and for ten years was a private tutor to boys about to enter the University. At the age of thirty-three, he became headmaster of Rugby School. England's public schools were badly in need of reform, being riddled with what Strachey calls anarchy tempered by despotism. Arnold agreed with the need for reform but he emphasized education in Christian morals rather than the cultivation of intellectual excellence.

Strachey presents Arnold as a pompous prig with a limited intellect. No aspect of Arnold's life and activities escapes Strachey's censure. Arnold called himself a liberal, but according to Strachey, he was in fact closer to being a conservative since he supported liberal causes only within very strict limits. Arnold also had a patronizing attitude to the poor, and the wealth of religious learning and belief that he brought to bear on society's problems had no effect whatsoever on those problems. Arnold's love of nature, his lack of an ear for music, his sense of moral evil, his disparaging remarks about the French on his European travels, all come in for Strachey's relentless satire. For Strachey, Arnold was an "earnest enthusiast," and little else.

Sir Evelyn Baring

Sir Evelyn Baring was the British representative in Egypt in the 1880s, at the time of Gordon's second expedition to Khartoum. He and Gordon disliked each other, and they were opposite in character. Baring was cautious, diplomatic, unromantic, and patient. At first, he resisted the suggestions of the British government that Gordon should be sent to Khartoum. He finally agreed on the understanding that Gordon would take instructions from him and supervise a withdrawal from the Sudan, even though he suspected Gordon was not the right man for the job. Baring became exasperated with Gordon's adventurous actions but tried to mediate between Gordon and the British government.

Li Hung Chang

Li Hung Chang was the Chinese governor of Shanghai when Gordon was given command of the army based in Shanghai. At first Li Hung Chang admired Gordon but the two men later quarreled.

Arthur Clough

Arthur Clough was a poet who lost his religious faith at the time of the Oxford Movement. He became a civil servant in London and one of Nightingale's helpers. He was given only modest tasks, and Strachey treats him satirically, picturing him wrapping up parcels in brown paper and carrying them to the post office.

Dr. Errington

Dr. Errington was the influential leader of the Old Catholics in England, families who had remained Catholic since the times of Elizabeth I. Errington was appointed Archbishop of Trebizond by Cardinal Wiseman. Errington became involved in a dispute with Manning over who should control St. Edmund's College. The dispute went to the pope. As a result of Manning's scheming, Errington was defeated and was removed from his position as archbishop.

Hurrell Froude

Hurrell Froude was a pupil of Keble and was a young man of great religious zeal. He was influenced by Keble, and the two men became friends. Froude then came into contact with Newman and played a part in the beginning of the Oxford Movement.

James Anthony Froude

James Anthony Froude was the younger brother of Hurrell Froude and a disciple of Newman. He later lost his religious faith.

William Ewart Gladstone

William Ewart Gladstone was one of England's most distinguished prime ministers of the nineteenth century. He and Manning became friends when they were both students at Oxford. But Gladstone was devastated by Manning's conversion to Catholicism, and after his conversion, the two men did not meet for twelve years. They later met occasionally and renewed their correspondence but clashed again over a pamphlet Gladstone wrote warning that if the dogma of Papal Infallibility were declared, the civil allegiance of England's Catholics could no longer be guaranteed. Gladstone also played

a role in Gordon's story. As prime minister, he at first opposed sending Gordon to Khartoum, and then long delayed sending an expeditionary force to relieve him.

General Charles George Gordon

General Charles George Gordon was destined for a military career from childhood. His father, an army officer, sent him to Woolwich Academy, after which he was expected to join the Royal Artillery. His commission was delayed, however, after his high-spirited temperament twice got him into trouble. He eventually joined the Royal Engineers instead, and behaved with great gallantry at the battle of Balaclava, during the Crimean War. After this he spent two years on the Russian-Turkish border, helping to ensure that the terms of the treaty of Paris were upheld. Gordon then made a name for himself in China, where the British were in occupation.

Gordon was placed in control of an army that won back large amounts of land that had been captured by rebels. After this, Gordon spent some years in obscurity, before taking on another overseas mission, this time in the Sudan, where he worked for six years trying to bring order to a vast and uncharted territory. His final mission was again in Sudan, where he was sent officially to supervise a withdrawal from Khartoum, but Strachey makes it clear that Gordon was not suited to the role the British government expected him to fulfill. He was a bold adventurer who chafed at bureaucratic or political restrictions, and he was not skilled in the kind of complex situation in which he was placed, which called for cool judgment and an ability to clearly assess the facts of a situation.

In Strachey's view, Gordon was an impulsive, eccentric romantic, with a bent for mysticism and a fervent belief that he should always follow the will of God. When he was at Khartoum, he decided that since the British government refused to follow his advice, he would act according to what he decided the circumstances required. But the situation soon got out of control, and Gordon was killed by rebel forces after a long siege.

Dr. John Hall

Dr. John Hall was the principal medical officer in the British army during the Crimean War. Nightingale was contemptuous of him, and when he was knighted, she referred to the initials K.C.B. (Knight Commander of the Bath) as "Knight of the Crimean Burial-grounds." On two occasions when Sir John tried to undermine her authority, Nightingale outmaneuvered him.

Lord Hartington

Lord Hartington was a member of the British Cabinet and the leader of the imperialist faction which did not support the official policy of withdrawal from the Sudan. Strachey suggests that they supported the appointment of Gordon because they thought this

would lead to the conquest of Sudan by British forces and the continued occupation of Egypt. Lord Hartington, although he acted slowly, had a reputation for impartiality and common sense. When the cabinet refused to send a relief expedition to Khartoum, he threatened to resign, and this threat forced Gladstone to send the mission.

Benjamin Hawes

Benjamin Hawes was the most senior civil servant in the War Office, and he made every effort he could to block Nightingale's reforms.

Sidney Herbert

Sidney Herbert was a close friend of Nightingale, and he is treated sympathetically by Strachey. He describes Herbert without irony as a perfect English gentleman, who was "so charming, so lively, so gentle a disposition that no one who had once come near him could ever be his enemy." Herbert was religious, unselfish, and conscientious. He and Nightingale formed a close friendship as they worked together for the same cause. Nightingale dominated him. Herbert was chairman of the Royal Commission that reported on the health of the Army, and he later became Secretary of State for War. His period in office was marked by farreaching reforms. However, pushed on by Nightingale, Herbert worked too hard, his health suffered, and he died prematurely.

Mr. Jowett

Mr. Jowett was the Master of Balliol College in Oxford. In Nightingale's later years he became her spiritual adviser, discussing with her in long letters matters of religion and philosophy.

John Keble

John Keble was one of the founders of the Oxford Movement. He went to Oxford at the age of fifteen and became a fellow of Oriel College. He was keenly aware of the defects in the Church of England, and how it had departed from its own roots and principles. When he met Hurrell Froude and later Newman, the Oxford Movement took shape. Keble also appears briefly in Strachey's biography of Arnold, where he advises Arnold about his religious doubts.

The Mahdi

See Mohammed Ahmed

Aunt Mai

Aunt Mai was Nightingale's father's sister. She accompanied Nightingale to the Crimea and thereafter acted almost as a mother to her, watching carefully over her health. However, when she was old she left Nightingale's service, feeling that she was more needed by her family. Nightingale could hardly bring herself to forgive her.

Cardinal Manning

Cardinal Manning began his career in the Anglican Church but later converted to Roman Catholicism and became Archbishop of Westminster, the leader of Britain's Catholic community. Although Strachey does not dispute Manning's formidable energy and administrative skills, he presents him in a negative light. Manning was a man of extremely strong will, with a desire for power and position commensurate with his assessment of his own abilities. He was ruthless when he had to be, and skilled in the art of ecclesiastical intrigue. But he was also a conflicted man who all his life wrestled with contradictory inner impulses. On the one hand was his desire for power and the will to use it, but on the other hand was his desire simply to submit to the will of God and not seek worldly advancement. Strachey finds many of Manning's psychological characteristics, including this inner conflict, in the stern face that stares out from the photographs of Manning in old age. The Archbishop's austere appearance reminded Strachey more of a medieval man than a modern one: "The spare and stately form, the head, massive, emaciated, terrible, with the great nose, the glittering eyes, and the mouth drawn back and compressed into the grim rigidities of age, self-mortification and authority."

On a few occasions Strachey shows some respect for Manning, as when Manning makes a moving and eloquent speech to the dockworkers during their strike. Strachey points out that when Manning died, there was an outpouring of public grief. Strachey also had grudging admiration for the way in which, in old age, Manning fought against death with his "bold and tenacious spirit."

John Henry Newman

John Henry Newman (known mainly now as John Henry Cardinal Newman) was one of the leaders of the Oxford Movement. According to Strachey he was an emotional man, a dreamer, and an artist, who also possessed great intellectual abilities. When Newman met Hurrell Froude, Froude interested him in the ideas of Keble, and the Oxford Movement was born. Newman began publishing the influential *Tracts for the Times*, to which Keble and others contributed. Newman eventually became a convert to Roman Catholicism, which resulted in the end of the Oxford Movement. After his conversion, Newman's life, according to Strachey, was a long series of disappointments. His talents were not valued by the ecclesiastical authorities in Rome, and he settled down in Birmingham. Many of his planned activities did not come to fruition, such as becoming rector of the newly formed Catholic University in Ireland, and his brief tenure as editor of

a Catholic periodical was not successful. But then Newman wrote his masterpiece, the *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, which became a classic of the Englishspeaking world. His fortunes reviving, Newman made plans to move to Oxford and build an Oratory, but his plans were blocked by Manning. Newman was eventually made a cardinal by the pope.

Florence Nightingale

Florence Nightingale was the famous humanitarian who became known as the "Lady with the Lamp" for her work in caring for British soldiers at Scutari, a military hospital in Constantinople during the Crimean War. Unlike his attitude to other biographical subjects, Strachey does not diminish Nightingale's achievements. He admires the resolute way she challenged the sluggish, reactionary bureaucracy of the British War Office and forced through revolutionary changes. She was disciplined and tenacious, with a clear idea of what she wanted to accomplish, and the strength of will to achieve it.

Strachey also emphasizes, however, the darker side of Nightingale's personality. Despite ill-health, she was driven on by an almost maniacal frenzy for work, and insisted on driving others to their limits and beyond (in the case of Sidney Herbert). She had a sardonic sense of humor, and Strachey sees the less attractive side of her personality in photographs of her: "[T]he serenity of high deliberation in the scope of the capacious brow, the sign of power in the dominating curve of the thin nose, and the traces of a harsh and dangerous temper—something peevish, something mocking, and yet something precise—in the small and delicate mouth." Strachey also seems to take pleasure in the fact that in old age, which Nightingale spent largely in seclusion, she lost her acerbic, sarcastic personality, and became fat and gentle.

Lord Panmure

Lord Panmure, nicknamed "The Bison" by his friends, was the Secretary of State for War during the Crimean War. After the war, he tried to block the reforms that Nightingale advocated. He resigned after the fall of the government.

Pope Pius, IX

Pope Pius IX received Manning when Manning was still a Church of England clergyman. After Manning's conversion, Pius IX gave him an immediate appointment, and later appointed him Archbishop of Westminster. It was in the reign of Pius IX that the dogma of Papal Infallibility was announced.

Dr. Sutherland

Dr. Sutherland was a sanitary expert who for over thirty years was Nightingale's confidential private secretary.

Monsignor Talbot

Monsignor Talbot was the private secretary of the pope and a master of the politics of the Vatican. Manning befriended Talbot, using him to gain access to the pope. Talbot ended his days in a lunatic asylum.

W. G. Ward

W. G. Ward was a young follower of Newman. He published a book in which he argued that the Church of England's separation from Rome was to be deplored. He was deprived of his degree by Oxford University and a few weeks later became a Roman Catholic.

Cardinal Wiseman

Cardinal Wiseman was the head of the English Catholic community who in 1850 became Archbishop of Westminster. Strachey refers to him satirically as a "comfortable, easy-going, innocent old man" who was unfortunate enough to get caught in the middle of a struggle for power between Errington and Manning. As a result, Wiseman lost the friendship of Errington, whom he had known all his life, and also his peace of mind. Wiseman eventually petitioned the pope for the removal of Errington from his position as archbishop. When Wiseman died, Manning succeeded him.

Lord Wolseley

Lord Wolseley was the Adjutant General of the Forces, and an old friend of Gordon. He was a member of the imperialist wing of the British government who acted as a go-between in the government's negotiations with Gordon prior to Gordon's being sent to Khartoum. Wolseley was the commander of the expeditionary force sent to relieve Gordon, which arrived two days late.

Themes

Ambition

Strachey's portrait of Cardinal Manning moves relentlessly along a single track. Unlike the pious and good man perceived by the masses, Manning was ruthlessly ambitious. He pursued his own selfinterest in a calculated path of career advancement. This character trait was apparent, according to Strachey, from Manning's early years, and the pattern continued throughout his life. The earliest hint is a subtle one. When Manning was a schoolboy, he was caught out of bounds by a master. By a clever trick Manning temporarily evaded the pursuing master, thus giving "proof of a certain dexterity of conduct which deserved to be remembered." The dexterity of conduct was the way in which Manning always sensed the best way to advance his own cause.

Thwarted in his political ambitions by his father's bankruptcy, Manning transferred his hopes to the sphere of religion. Thereafter he always had an ear for when opportunity might come knocking. When he was a country curate, for example, he married the rector's daughter. Strachey implies this was because that gave him a better chance of advancement within the Church of England hierarchy, even though he was really in love with another girl.

With a promising career in the Anglican Church, Manning distanced himself from the Oxford Movement not over any theological issues but simply because his association with the Movement might damage his chances of advancing beyond his position as Archdeacon of Chichester. After all, "Nobody could wish to live and die a mere Archdeacon."

Strachey has to face a challenge to his thesis when discussing Manning's departure from the Church of England, at a time when his star was on the rise, to become a lowly new convert to Catholicism. This might appear to contradict the picture of a man who coveted worldly ambition and achievement. Recognizing this, Strachey states, with some artful qualification, that "it is difficult to feel quite sure that Manning's plunge was as hazardous as it appeared." He then uses innuendo to suggest that Manning had already reached an understanding with the pope that ensured he would be looked after in his new religious home.

The theme of worldly ambition reaches its climax when Manning is appointed Archbishop of Westminster, the head of England's Catholics. As Strachey puts it:

Power had come to him at last; and he seized it with all the avidity of a born autocrat . . . . He was the ruler of Roman Catholic England, and he would rule.

But even that position of absolute power was not enough to satisfy Strachey's Manning. There was "something that irked him still." That something was Newman, the only man

who could challenge Manning's preeminence. And so, from his position of power, Manning crushed Newman's hopes of returning to Oxford and building an oratory there.

In spite of this lust for power, however, there was another, contradictory strain in Manning's personality, that of self-abnegation. The man who acted so astutely in his own self-interest was also a man who felt the call to submit passively to a higher, divine authority; to distrust worldly ambition, and simply to accept what came along in life. Much of this, Strachey implies, was motivated not so much by Manning's love of God but by his fear of hell. Manning struggled all his life with this self-renouncing aspect of his personality, but it was always the climbing ambition, often disguised as a call to service, that won out.

Sexuality and Femininity

In his essay on Florence Nightingale, Strachey makes it clear that Nightingale's success came at the expense of her femininity, including the fulfillment of erotic desire. He relates an incident in which the young Nightingale met a man who might have made a suitable marriage partner:

The most powerful and the profoundest of all the instincts of humanity laid claim upon her. But it rose before her . . . in the inevitable habiliments of a Victorian marriage; and she had the strength to stamp it underfoot.

Those energies thereby suppressed were directed into the furtherance of her humanitarian mission. Moreover, Strachey suggests that the driving force of her personality, which he compares to being possessed by demon, was masculine rather than feminine in nature. In order to make a mark in her chosen vocation in a man's world, she had in effect to become a man. Thus the real Florence Nightingale was the opposite of the gentle, saintly "Lady with the Lamp" that generations of schoolchildren have learned about.

Nightingale's masculine nature is illustrated in her dominance of the men around her, especially Sidney Herbert. In that relationship, the usual roles of the sexes, especially in Victorian England, were reversed. Nightingale was the active force, supplying the energy and the vision; Herbert was the willing subordinate, dedicating himself to helping her fulfill her goals, and eventually working himself to death to please her.

The fierce, dominant element in Nightingale's personality is also apparent in Strachey's descriptions of her at the hospital in Scutari. She succeeded there not by "womanly self-abnegation" but by discipline, hard work, and "the fixed determination of an indomitable will. Beneath her cool and calm demeanour lurked fierce and passionate fires."

Common sense suggests, with Strachey, that the gentle lady of legend could never have accomplished all she did in the nightmarish bureaucratic maze that was England's War Office without a layer of steel to her personality. But Strachey, alert to the hidden springs of motivation and the abnormal elements in a person's behavior, makes it clear

that in Florence Nightingale, her obsessions led her further, into neurotic, compulsive, bullying behavior.

Education

The theme of education is prominent in the essay on Thomas Arnold. Strachey's own school days were unhappy, and this may have predisposed him to look askance at the man he blamed for establishing the prevailing temper of the English public school. (A public school in England is the equivalent of a private school in America.) Strachey's main objection to Arnold, apart from his pompous and self-righteous personality, is Arnold's failure to implement reforms when the times demanded it. Arnold's obsession with moral and religious issues blinded him to the need to develop a curriculum that would meet the needs of the emerging Victorian Era. Instead, Arnold chose to continue a curriculum based in the classics.

Religion

Religion is a recurring theme and a constant target of Strachey's satire. He aims his literary barbs at the whole panoply of religious belief, whether the issue is doctrinal disputes within the Church of England, the reformist zeal of the Oxford Movement, the dogma of Papal Infallibility, or the writings of Nightingale and Arnold on religious matters, especially Arnold's musings about the relationship between church and state and his commentary on the New Testament. On all these matters, Strachey writes with great amusement and little sympathy. It is as if he is examining the incomprehensible and ridiculous beliefs of a remote tribe that no modern person could take seriously.

When it comes to General Gordon's religious beliefs, Strachey is partly satirical, partly baffled. Gordon is presented as an eccentric with an unusual brand of religious faith. On the very first page, Strachey pictures him wandering around the Holy Land with a Bible under his arm, trying to locate the Garden of Eden, and believing he knows the exact spot where the Ark of Noah first touched ground. Strachey later notes that Gordon was given to spending time alone, in which he "ruminated upon the mysteries of the universe"; his religious tendencies "became a fixed and dominating factor in his life." As Gordon read and reread the Bible (which was the only thing he did read), he developed a mystical and fatalistic attitude, in which he appears to have believed that anything that happened to him, or any mood or instinct that took hold of him, was simply the manifestation of God's will. This religious fatalism, Strachey argues, was a contributing factor in the complex web of events that led to the final disaster at Khartoum.

Style

Satire

Satire is the use of wit and humor to ridicule or show scorn of a subject. Strachey's satire in *Eminent Victorians* is pervasive. He uses it to diminish not only his biographical subjects and a host of minor figures, but also many of their principle beliefs, especially those in the area of religion. Strachey's tone throughout tends to be mocking and half-amused, as he chronicles the curious antics of his subjects. He is ready to poke fun wherever he can.

Strachey uses satire to present his view of Manning as a man of worldly ambition. For example, according to Strachey, Manning was attracted to the Oxford Movement not because of the truth of its religious ideas but because it elevated the clergyman to a higher status:

The cleric was not as his lay brethren; he was a creature apart, chosen by Divine will and sanctified by Divine mysteries. It was a relief to find, when one had supposed that one was nothing but a clergyman, that one might, after all, be something else—one might be a priest.

Almost everything about Manning is satirized: his active early life as a country clergyman ("he was an excellent judge of horseflesh") his diary entries recording his struggles with the terrible temptations of ambition; his earnest reading of the Church Fathers to assuage his religious doubts; and the obsessive care with which, in old age, he pored over his papers that recorded the "vanished incidents of a remote past": "He would snip with scissors the pages of ancient journals, and with delicate ecclesiastical fingers drop unknown mysteries into the flames."

Satire also characterizes Strachey's treatment of Florence Nightingale's pretensions to serious religious thought. Late in her life she decided to correct the errors of contemporary Christianity, but Strachey makes it clear that Nightingale's estimate of her own intelligence is seriously at odds with his own assessment of her. He describes her thoughts:

She would rectify these errors. She would correct the mistakes of the Churches; she would point out just where Christianity was wrong; and she would explain to the artisans what the facts of the case really were.

The author presents Nightingale's belief in herself only to mock it; the satire reveals her arrogance and inflated sense of self-importance.

Strachey is most relentlessly satirical in his account of Arnold, who obviously arouses his scorn. For example, after a long paragraph in which Strachey describes in quite flattering terms Arnold's attractive appearance that suggested a man of "ardour and

determination," he reaches a conclusion at the end of the paragraph that ridicules Arnold and undermines everything said earlier:

And yet—why was it? —was it in the lines of the mouth or the frown on the forehead? —it was hard to say, but it was unmistakeable—there was a slightly puzzled look upon the face of Dr. Arnold.

The implication is that this puzzled look gives the lie to Arnold's bold self-confidence about all matters.

Strachey also presents Arnold's views on education, as well as his positions on political, social, and religious issues, in satirical manner. On the matter of religious toleration, for example, "He believed in toleration . . . within limits; that is to say, in the toleration of those with whom he agreed."

Amongst the many minor figures to be subjected to Strachey's satirical pen was the reactionary Lord Panmure, the Secretary of State for War who tried to thwart Nightingale's reform plans:

It was most irksome; and Lord Panmure almost began to wish that he was engaged upon some more congenial occupation—discussing perhaps, the constitution of the Free Church of Scotland—a question in which he was profoundly interested.

Again, there is the half-amused tone, quite gentle this time, and the reader is left with the impression of a man who takes a great interest in an extremely dull issue, implying a smallness of mental range unsuitable for one in a high position in the government—which is exactly the impression Strachey wishes to create.

Irony

Irony generally means that the expressed words of the author are the opposite of his intended meaning. The title of the book, *Eminent Victorians*, is itself ironic, and much of Strachey's satire employs irony.

Two notable examples of irony occur in the biography of George Gordon. Gordon arrived in China in time to "witness the destruction of the Summer Palace at Peking—the act by which Lord Elgin, in the name of European civilisation, took vengeance upon the barbarism of the East." It is clear that in this context, "civilisation" and "barbarism" are reversed in their meanings.

Strachey takes a similar dig at the cultural intolerance and cruelty of the West when he concludes his biography with a reference to the battle of Omdurman in the Sudan, thirteen years after the fall of Khartoum and the death of Gordon: "At any rate it had all ended very happily—in a glorious slaughter of twenty thousand Arabs, a vast addition to the British Empire, and a step in the Peerage for Sir Evelyn Baring." It hardly needs to be pointed out that for Strachey there was clearly nothing happy or glorious about this event.

Innuendo

Innuendo is an indirect suggestion, often used to imply something harmful or unpleasant. Strachey uses innuendo when he discusses Manning's conversion to Roman Catholicism. After his conver sion, Manning was at the bottom of the ecclesiastical ladder, which might imply that he was motivated to convert by genuine religious beliefs, not worldly ambition. But Strachey undermines this by suggesting that something may have been discussed at a meeting between Manning and the pope three years earlier. Manning said very little about this meeting, which encouraged Strachey to call it a "mysterious interview." The implication is that the pope may have promised Manning some advancement if he would convert, but no evidence is offered to substantiate the suggestion.

Strachey also uses subtle innuendo in his hints that Gordon may have been a drunkard and a homosexual.

Figurative Language

There is a notable metaphor that illustrates the structural principle that operates in the biography of Manning. Throughout his account, Strachey contrasts the practical, scheming Manning with the more romantic, idealistic figure of Newman. This reaches a climax late in the book when Manning, who is trying to block Newman's plans, is represented as an eagle and Newman a dove. The result is a foregone conclusion: "there was a hovering, a swoop, and then the quick beak and the relentless talons did their work."

In "Florence Nightingale," Strachey uses animal imagery. Nightingale is at one point described, like Manning, as an eagle, but the more important comparison is with a tigress in the jungle. The tigress's victim is Sidney Herbert, and he is presented in the metaphor as a stag, "a comely, gallant creature springing through the forest." The outcome, as with the eagle and the dove, is inevitable: "One has the image of those wide eyes fascinated, suddenly by something feline, something strong; there is a pause, and then the tigress has her claws in the quivering haunches; and then—!"

Historical Context

Britain in the Late Victorian Era

In 1885, Britain was entering the final quarter of the Victorian Era (1837-1901). In that year, General Gordon was killed at Khartoum, seventyeight- year-old Cardinal Manning was at the height of his prestige, sixty-five-year-old Florence Nightingale was still working on the humanitarian causes in which she believed—and five-year-old Strachey was about to attend the Hyde Park Kindergarten and School in London.

For Britain, this was a time of both progress and unrest at home, and imperial expansion abroad. From 1884 to 1885, the structure of Britain's modern parliamentary democracy took shape. The Reform Act of 1884 extended the franchise to all working men (women, however, did not receive the vote until 1918), and the Redistribution Act of 1885 created parliamentary constituencies of roughly equal size. These reforms were passed during the second administration of prime minister William Ewart Gladstone, one of the greatest statesmen of the age, whose elusive character Strachey tracks in *Eminent Victorians*.

Despite political progress, however, the decade from 1885 to 1895 was a period of social unrest and economic uncertainty. There was a depression in agriculture, trade was fluctuating, unemployment was high, and there were many industrial disputes. In 1889, for example, 75,000 dock laborers went on strike in London, and won an improvement in their working conditions. Strachey mentions how influential Cardinal Manning was in speaking directly to large crowds of dock workers, when it was clear that they had won the dispute, urging them not to prolong the suffering of their wives and children. Over the following six years, there were strikes involving gas workers, railway porters, brick-makers, boot and shoe makers, colliers and iron workers, and others.

Coinciding with the labor troubles, Britain was rapidly losing ground to its industrial competitors, primarily Germany and the United States. By 1900, the British iron and steel, and coal industries had fallen behind those of Germany and the United States. Britain remained the foremost power in shipbuilding, but Germany led in chemicals, and the United States in the electrical industry.

In the face of this industrial competition, Britain looked to extending its political sovereignty to less developed areas of the world where it could extract raw materials cheaply. The last decade of the nineteenth century has been called an era of imperialism. Britain focused on acquiring territory in Africa, in which it competed with the other imperial European powers, primarily Germany and France. Britain had already occupied Egypt in 1882, and now extended its control to the Niger territories, Kenya and Uganda, and Northern and Southern Rhodesia. The Sudan was occupied, and as Strachey mentions in his biography of General Gordon, Lord Kitchener's army inflicted

great slaughter on the Sudanese army in 1898. The Boer War (1899-1902) established British control in South Africa.

World War I and Its Aftermath

This rising tide of imperialism formed the political atmosphere in Britain during the period that Strachey grew to manhood. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Britain was increasingly concerned about the rapid rise of German power, particularly the German Navy, which threatened Britain's long-held maritime supremacy. As a result, Britain drew closer to France, its old enemy, and the battle lines of World War I began to take shape. A crisis in the Balkans in the summer of 1914 precipitated the sudden and rapid descent into a general European war.

The loss of life in World War I was immense. In the Battle of the Somme in 1916, the British army lost 60,000 on the first day. Over three months later, total British casualties stood at 460,000, and the British had managed to advance just seven miles along a thirty-mile front. In 1917, British losses at Passchendaele reached 300,000 in a three-month battle. When the war finally ended in November, 1918, the British casualties numbered 750,000 dead and nearly 1,750,000 wounded.

Appearing in May, 1918, Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* was received by a people tired of war, shocked at the appalling carnage, and, at least in the intellectual classes, cynical about the policies that had dragged Britain into a ruinous, four-year continental war. Strachey, who was a pacifist, was well aware that the politicians who had allowed Britain to slide into war in 1914 were all products of the late-Victorian age. One of Strachey's friends, David Garnett, commented that "Lytton's essays were designed to undermine the foundations on which the age that brought war had been built" (quoted by Richard D. Altick in "Eminent Victorianism: What Lytton Strachey Hath Wrought").

With his satirical portraits of four revered figures of the Victorian age, Strachey set about puncturing the hypocrisy that underlay the surface of Victorianism and delivering a blow to its prestige. As Altick points out, he was not the first to do so. Authors such as George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and G. K. Chesterton had already been critical of Victorian thought. In the wake of *Eminent Victorians*, the anti-Victorian mood increased, and the book also changed the way biographies were written. In Britain and America, Strachey imitators wrote many "debunking" biographies, in which more eminent subjects were toppled from their lofty pedestals.

Critical Overview

When first published in May, 1918, *Eminent Victorians* received laudatory reviews in the press, and sales exceeded Strachey's expectations. The book was reprinted in Britain six times within a year of publication, and was also popular in America. Translations were made into French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Swedish. It seemed that the reading public, especially the younger segment, were receptive to a biography that toppled some icons of the Victorian age from their lofty pedestals.

There were only a few dissenting voices in the early reviews. One of them was Edmund Gosse, a biographer himself, who was not generally sympathetic to the Victorians. But in a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, reprinted by Strachey's biographer, Michael Holroyd in *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, Gosse complained that Strachey's portrait of Lord Cromer in his biography of Gordon was an ill-natured caricature which made Cromer unrecognizable to his friends. Strachey replied that "Unfortunately, in this world, it is not always a man's friends who know him best."

Professional historians were less impressed with *Eminent Victorians* than the general public. There were complaints that Strachey had slanted the evidence, and that his irreverent tone was inappropriate for the seriousness of his subject. In 1944, British historian F. A. Simpson wrote "Methods of Biography," an influential short article in which he accused Strachey of misrepresenting the incident in which Manning meets the pope, in order to promote his own bias. However, Holroyd argued that Strachey had accurately interpreted his source material, which was the official biography of Manning by E. S. Purcell.

In an article published in 1957, another British historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper, criticized Strachey's picture of Gordon sitting in his tent with his Bible on one side and a bottle of brandy on the other. Trevor- Roper claimed that in reality, the second object was not a brandy bottle but a prayer book, and Strachey had invented the brandy simply because it was funnier. However, Holroyd refuted Trevor-Roper, pointing out that in another source consulted by Strachey, and later confirmed by other sources that Strachey could not have known, Gordon was indeed presented as a secret drinker.

According to Holroyd, the criticisms of professional historians damaged the reputation of *Eminent Victorians*. The general reader was encouraged to think of the book as a "debunking" biography that had had a regrettable influence on modern biography.

Although that view is not universally shared, and *Eminent Victorians* still wins admiration for its style and its insight, a recent judgment by noted literary critic Richard D. Altick sided with the negative judgments of the historians. In "Eminent Victorianism: What Lytton Strachey Hath Wrought," Altick comments that Strachey used his sources "with great license, selecting and tampering with the data to conform to his fixed idea of his subject and going so far as to suppress contrary evidence and falsify quotations."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey surveys the history of biography writing and shows how Strachey changed the nature of the genre.

In his preface to *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey states that biography is "the most delicate and humane of all the branches of the art of writing." As to the rules and conventions of this delicate art, however, views have changed considerably over time. The purpose of the earliest biographies in English was to commemorate and glorify the deeds of great warriors. When early Christian monks took to writing biography, they added to the commemorative aspect the purpose of encouraging morality. Thus was hagiography, the lives of the saints, born. (Much later, hagiography was to be hilariously satirized in *Eminent Victorians* at the expense of John Henry Newman, who, Strachey reminds us, published a series of books entitled *Lives of the Saints*.)

Biography somewhat closer to the modern defi- nition did not fully emerge until the sixteenth century, with the publication of William Roper's *Life of Thomas More* and George Cavendish's *Life of Wolsey*, in which the authors made efforts to write the truth about their subjects' lives, even if that involved adverse comment. In the eighteenth century, James Boswell wrote *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), which is still regarded by many as the finest biography in the language. It presents a vivid portrait, without didactic intent, of a complex human being as he really was.

Unfortunately for the art of biography, the Boswell tradition lasted only for about fifty years. The Victorian age slipped back into the concept of biography as hagiography. Many biographies were written by relatives of the subject, who presented their "great man" as a paragon of virtue, untouched by scandal, moral failings, or anything else that might cast a dark shadow on his memory. Charles Kingsley's biography, for example, written by his wife in 1877, was dedicated to "the beloved memory of a righteous man."

According to Harold Nicholson, in *The Development of English Biography*, the "catastrophic failure" of Victorian biography was due to "religious earnestness," which Nicholson associated with the Thomas Arnold generation. (It was Arnold, of course, whose religious piety and earnestness was so mercilessly satirized in *Eminent Victorians*.) This earnestness, Nicholson states, did not permit "truthful representation," and a "Victorian fog" descended on the art of biography. One of the examples Nicholson cites is Dean Stanley's *Life of Arnold*, published in 1844, the very book which Strachey used to undermine the "official" view of the former headmaster of Rugby School.

There were a few exceptions to the rule, including James Anthony Froude's *Reminiscences* (1882-1884), a biography of Thomas Carlyle in which the author did not minimize the disagreeable temperament of his subject. This is the same Froude who crops up in *Eminent Victorians* as a disciple of Newman who writes a biography of St. Neot for his mentor's series—giving Strachey an opportunity for some mischievous fun. (Even Froude later condemned this piece as "nonsense.")

But for the most part, the Victorian biography was a lamentable affair, "written not to reveal but to conceal human nature" (as Robert Gittings puts it in *The Nature of Biography*). It is such works that Strachey describes in his preface to *Eminent Victorians*:

Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design? They are as familiar as the cortège of the undertaker, and wear the same air of slow, funereal barbarism.

No one could have expressed it better. But faced with the dead weight of this tradition, what was Strachey to do? How was he to approach his task? In his much-discussed preface, he lays out his method and purpose.

Strachey begins by stating that the history of the Victorian age can never be written because too much is known about it. The amount of material left by the Victorians (who were prodigious writers of letters, memoirs, and other information about their life and times) is simply too huge for any single person to wade through. For the biographer, then, a "direct method of a scrupulous narration" is ruled out. Instead, the biographer must approach his task in a more artful way. Using an analogy, Strachey states that the biographer must row out over the ocean of material and let down a little bucket and then examine the contents with "a careful curiosity." He must look into previously unexamined corners of the subject's life, or approach the life from an unusual angle, to gain the necessary insight.

Strachey's biographer Michael Holroyd, has commented on this in *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*. He describes two opposing approaches to writing biography. The first is the scientific approach, which is factual and documentary. The second is the literary approach, which produces a truth that is "personal and imaginative." Holroyd places Strachey firmly in the latter camp. He quotes a book review Strachey wrote in 1909, in which he laid out his principles nine years before the publication of *Eminent Victorians*. In the review, Strachey wrote, "the first duty of a great historian is to be an artist. . . . Uninterpreted truth is as useless as buried gold; and art is the great interpreter."

As he continues his preface, Strachey claims to have no desire to "construct a system or to prove a theory"; he has merely sought to "examine and elucidate certain fragments of the truth which took my fancy and lay to my hand." He then lays down two requirements for the biographer. The first is brevity, but the brevity must be such that "excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant." That is to say, the biographer should distill from the mass of historical record only the facts that are relevant, and then use his skill to interpret those facts so that light is shed on the subject of the biography. The second requirement is that the biographer must "maintain his own freedom of spirit. It is not his business to be complimentary; it is his business to lay bare the facts of the case, as he understands them." In other words, the biographer should

be objective, detached, and impartial. He should not act as a kind of posthumous cheerleader for the dead man, but neither should he be deliberately destructive.

Whether Strachey entirely obeyed his own principles has long been a matter for debate—was he truly impartial? Did he really have no desire to prove a theory? The influence of his work can hardly be underestimated. Some scholars argue that *Eminent Victorians* marked the beginning of modern biography. Certainly, in the years immediately following its publication, there were plenty of biographers seeking to emulate the Strachey method (and his commercial success). Reviewers called this trend "the new biography." Richard Altick, in "Eminent Victorianism: What Lytton Strachey Hath Wrought," describes the books that made up this trend as "fizzing with colorful personal details, imagined scenes, purported psychological insights derived from letters or thin air, and illusive intimacy."

There were also, of course, more serious biographies. These were the product of patient research and reflection and have enriched our understanding of a whole range of historical figures, more eminent Victorians among them. In the post-Strachey era, freed from an excessive concern for the subject's privacy and without the moral scruples that had in the Victorian Era drawn a veil over scandal, the biographer was able to tell the truth as he or she saw it. It was only in 1949, for example, as Altick notes, that readers discovered that the father of Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, was a brooding drunkard. This revelation of a family secret was disclosed not by an outsider but by the poet's grandson, Sir Charles Tennyson. Another revelation, that Victorian writer Wilkie Collins kept two mistresses living within a few blocks of each other, produced barely a ripple of surprise. Things had certainly changed since John Forster, in *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-1874) felt the need to disguise the fact that his friend, the novelist Dickens, had been estranged from his wife and kept a mistress.

The change in biography writing that dates from Strachey is nowhere better illustrated than in Michael Holroyd's biography of Strachey himself. Ironically, given Strachey's dislike of the Victorian biographer's "two fat volumes," Holroyd's *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography* (1967-1968) was also published in, well, two fat volumes. (In 1994, it was revised and reissued in one volume with the title, *Lytton Strachey: The New Biography*.) This biography spared little in its revelations of the shifting permutations of lovers amongst the Bloomsbury Group, and perhaps said more about Strachey's inner life than the average reader might care to know (Strachey's "erotic attention was partly directed towards the ears," for example.)

In recent years, biography has become one of the most popular of literary genres, and scholars routinely refer to the twentieth century as a golden age in biography. The trend toward complete revelation of every aspect of the subject's life has accelerated. One unhappy aspect of this trend, perhaps attributable to the demands of a popular culture soaked in sex, scandal, and confessional television talk shows, is the emergence of what novelist Joyce Carol Oates has called "pathography." In pathography, biographers mine their subjects for evidence of mental, emotional, and sexual dysfunction, almost as if they are case studies in neuroticism. Sexual deviations, addictions of any kind, incest, violence—all receive undue emphasis for the purpose (one suspects) of evoking

horrified fascination on the part of readers that will lead to good sales figures for publisher and author. As Justin Kaplan, biographer of Mark Twain and Walt Whitman, has commented (in his essay, "A Culture of Biography"), such biographies "make you wonder how their subjects managed to get out of bed in the morning, much less write novels or poems, paint pictures, compose music . . . or do any other part of the world's work." And when compared to the excesses of pathography, Strachey's "revelations" that Cardinal Manning was a worldly schemer, Florence Nightingale a masculine workaholic, Thomas Arnold a self-righteous prig, and General Gordon a mystical eccentric who possibly drank a little too much, seem mild fare indeed.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *Eminent Victorians*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Altick explores the profound effect Eminent Victorians had on both public understanding of the Victorian era and biography in general.

One of the most engaging of all the anecdotes relating to the early reception of famous books is the scene in the Brixton prison, south London, in the spring of 1918, when a controversial public figure, serving time for a political offense, exploded in laughter over a newly published book he was reading. His laughter was so loud, he recalled some years later in a radio broadcast, that "the officer came to my cell, saying I must remember that prison is a place of punishment." The guffawing convict was Bertrand Russell; the book was *Eminent Victorians*, by his friend Lytton Strachey. The sensation it caused marked the only time on record that a single 350-page book turned an entire past society into a laughingstock in the estimation of a new one.

Scion of an upper-middle-class family, member in his youth of a coterie of brilliant Cambridge undergraduates, presenting a distinctly odd appearance (emaciated frame, reddish beard, congenital shortsightedness, plus high-pitched voice), Strachey possessed a keen mind, a gifted style, and an ambition that was undiminished by his chronic invalidism. At thirty-eight he was well known for his numerous literary essays in intellectually fashionable periodicals and for *Landmarks in French Literature* (1912), a small, sparkling gem in a popular home-study series. He was also known as a central figure in the tiny modernist oligarchy called the Bloomsbury Group. With the publication of *Eminent Victorians*, he achieved instant notoriety—and enthusiastic acceptance on the part of many—as a joyous iconoclast whose shattering of customary assumptions was to require a serious effort in damage control. The book provocatively raised two seemingly unrelated issues, one literary, the other historical: How should biography be written? and What sort of people were the Victorians? In its wake, neither the demanding and now topical art of biography nor the public idea of the Victorians and their age would ever be the same.

Eminent Victorians was a boldly innovative book, owing little to any model except the eighteenth- century French *mémoire* and the slender English tradition of Jonsonian "humors" and the ensuing genre of Theophrastan "characters," profiles of human types that dwelt on a single moral or psychological trait. It was composed of four miniature biographies, of Henry Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold of Rugby, and General Charles ("Chinese") Gordon—a Roman Catholic prelate, a sentimentally idolized female humanitarian, an educational reformer with a pronounced moralistic bent, and a military adventurer—representatives of four widely separated spheres of Victorian endeavor. All had earlier been the subjects of admiring biographies, but Strachey treated them instead in the form of caricatural case histories: Manning as an obsessive ecclesiastical opportunist, the redoubtable Nightingale as a workaholic driven by ruthless devotion to duty, Arnold as a zealous, pompous public-school headmaster who tended to confuse himself with God, and Gordon as a religious fanatic and dipsomaniac, alternating between Bible and brandy bottle.

Strachey's aim was explicitly literary—to redeem the art (or, as his friend Virginia Woolf preferred, the craft) of biography from the incubus of late Victorian hagiography. He expressed his derision in words that were soon famous: "Those two fat volumes with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design? They are as familiar as the *cortège* of the undertaker, and wear the same air of slow, funereal barbarism" Strachey was not the first to complain that writers (often, more accurately, scissors-andpaste compilers) of tributes to deceased Victorians, grieving widows and piety-stricken sons in particular, were mausoleum builders rather than skilled portraitists and narrators. One of the most frequently cited examples of the type at the turn of the century had been Hallam Tennyson's bulky biographical eulogy of his late father, the poet laureate. Tennyson performed his task, as did other biographers, in vivid remembrance of the furor over James Anthony Froude's four-volume life of Thomas Carlyle a decade earlier (1882-84). Froude, a friend and disciple of the conscience and scourge of English society, had dared to portray Carlyle as he really was—an extremely difficult man to get along with, selfish, grim, irritable, subject to fierce outbursts of wrath against his much-enduring, spirited wife. This was not the idea the public held of the old man, whose eightieth birthday had been a national occasion. For his calamitous indiscretion Froude was unmercifully pilloried in the press and reviled by Carlyle's family. No biographer following him was likely to risk a similar expiation.

With Hallam Tennyson's biography and other such works in mind, the critic Edmund Gosse had several times protested the tyranny of biographical adulation and its necessary companion, reticence. In a review that was destined to take its place in anthologies of "notorious literary attacks," William Ernest Henley said of Graham Balfour's family- sponsored life of Robert Louis Stevenson—a confectionery image could serve as well as a mortuary one in such a context—that in Balfour's decorous pages his old friend was depicted as "an angel clean from heaven, and I for my part flatly refuse to recognise it. . . . This Seraph in Chocolate, this barley-sugar effigy of a real man . . . is not my old, riotous, intrepid, scornful Stevenson at all."

Eminent Victorians was meant to reverse the polarity of life-writing. Strachey demonstrated how easy it was, in the developing climate of cynicism at the end of the war, to replace uncritical censerswinging with indiscriminate ridicule. His manner might well have been called Bloomsbury chic: his assumption of superiority, his self-conscious cleverness, his eagerness to discover the absurdity that lurked behind pretension. Strachey's book also re- flects the deepening awareness, in those years when Freudianism had begun to pervade advanced thought, that appearances are deceptive, that to pierce to the truth of character the biographer was obliged to strip away the moral mask his subject wore before the world. Without adopting specifically psychoanalytic concepts, but assuming an Olympian pose of omniscience such as no earlier biographer had ventured to do—neither Samuel Johnson nor James Boswell nor any subsequent biographer—Strachey professed to isolate a single driving motive in persons whose makeup in reality had at least a normal share of human complexity.

Strachey's limitations were initially obscured by the success with which he manipulated his readers, beginning with the ironic "Eminent" of his title. He constantly resorted to fictional devices such as staged scenes, imagined interior monologues and conversations, and dislocations of time. He cultivated a trick of seizing incongruous details from his sources (he admitted to having invented only one, Dr. Arnold's short legs, which he used to devastating effect) and ripping phrases from their contexts, in the interest of both comic ambiguity and innuendo. Even his confessions of ignorance on a certain point were merely tactical, again to serve the purpose of sly innuendo: "What if —?" Above all there was his beguiling prose style, extravagantly admired by some: so carefully wrought, with its plethora of loaded rhetorical questions. It was, someone was later to remark, an exceptionally bad style for telling the truth.

But truth-telling was Strachey's only avowed aim. With breathtaking disingenuousness, he asserted that he aspired "to lay bare the facts of some cases, as I understand them, dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions." He did not mention that such an ideal of calm objectivity had governed English history-writing since the mid- Victorian era, when the principles of the so-called scientific historiography, based on the assumption that truth could be told only if its teller stuck to the documented facts and eschewed artifice, had been imported from Germany. Gosse's and Strachey's diatribes against the late Victorian and Edwardian monuments that passed for biographies simply meant that the "official" biographers had not learned from the historians, or that the pressures of conformity were more compelling than the attractions of truth-telling.

Readers seduced by Strachey's cleverness seem to have been indifferent to the intellectual dishonesty involved, if indeed they were even aware of it. Effects reinforcing the chosen simplistic theme were everything; scholarly responsibility counted for nothing. Yet Strachey knew what it was to be a painstaking scholar; he had written a weighty Cambridge dissertation on Warren Hastings, and he fancied himself an academic manqué, never forgetting the blow his pride had suffered when he failed to win a fellowship at his beloved university. In composing *Eminent Victorians* over a period of five years, he initially made great claims for the amount of research he was doing. "I sit here buried in books on Cardinals and Theologians," he wrote a friend while working on the "Manning." But in practice he relied heavily on the "standard" lives of his subjects, and these, like Graham Balfour writing his *Stevenson* from the sources, he used with great license, selecting and tampering with the data to conform to his fixed idea of his subject and going so far as to suppress contrary evidence and falsify quotations. Strachey made no strenuous efforts to search out primary documents. As the American historian Carl Becker once said of him, he worked "without fear and without research."

The most immediate result of the splash *Eminent Victorians* made was the advent of what reviewers called "the new biography" or, less flatteringly, "the jazz age biography," fizzing with colorful personal details, imagined scenes, purported psychological insights derived from letters or thin air, and illusive intimacy, as when one biographer of Matthew Arnold called that exponent of high seriousness "Matt" from cradle to grave. To describe these hastily concocted and well-seasoned snacks for the mind, a word was borrowed from H. L. Mencken's *America*, where the vogue was even more rampant: "debunk" (v.),

defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* thus: "To remove the 'nonsense' or 'false' sentiment from; to expose (false claims or pretensions); hence, to remove (a person) from his 'pedestal' or 'pinnacle.'" Bernard De Voto, dispensing with the cautious qualifiers, called debunking "the high-spirited game of yanking out shirt-tails and setting fire to them."

Not all the biographers belonging to the post- Stracheyan school—in England, "Hugh Kingsmill" (H. K. Lunn), Philip Guedalla, and Hesketh Pearson; in France, André Maurois, whose romantic biography of Shelley achieved the improbable feat of omitting to mention that he was a poet; and in Germany, Emil Ludwig—were debunkers. Authors of "popularized biography," another new term, might treat their subjects with unaccustomed vivacity and still respect them. Their Stracheyanism was most apparent in their indulgence of the imagination, either to supply gaps in the record or to make a better story than the record allowed.

One side effect of the liberation of biography from the constraints of privacy was that it struck fear into the hearts of living older authors who would themselves, in the natural course of events, be the subjects of full-dress biographies, and, beholding what the most emancipated of Strachey's disciples had wrought, sought to control their own posthumous image. More than one critic recalled that long ago, early in the eighteenth century, it had been said of "the unspeakable Curll," an unprincipled London printer-bookseller who kept a stable of hacks busy writing catchpenny and largely fictitious lives of all manner of men and women, that he had caused biography to add a new terror to death. Seeking to forestall future Stracheys, the last surviving eminent Victorian, Thomas Hardy, ghosted his own biography, presenting himself as he wished to be remembered. It was published shortly after his death under his widow's name; the deception was not known until a Yale scholar, the late Richard L. Purdy, discovered it a number of years ago.

Strachey's camp followers found it easy enough to imitate his mannerisms and rhetorical tricks, but none of them came even close to acquiring his suave skill. *Eminent Victorians* was not a model for general use, and although the modern reader is repelled by the deliberate distortion of evidence, the factitious sophistication and studied irreverence that are the hallmarks of those hundreds of biographies written to cash in on the book's fame, they at least set an impressive example of what life-writing should not be. It was their practice, as well as *Eminent Victorians* itself, that touched off what might be called The Great Biographical Debate. The sporadic critical chatterings that in the past century had been evoked by the publication of important or at least news-making life histories now gave way to a critical discussion of the principles and methods of biography that has been sustained for seventy-five years, on grounds that have not so much been fundamentally altered as modernized. The latest stage of the debate was marked by Janet Malcolm's lengthy attempt in *The New Yorker* in 1993, over the unquiet grave of Sylvia Plath, to isolate the "philosophy" of the art (what kind of reality can biography describe?) from the conflicting personal interests of a writer's relatives, friends, and biographers.

The running symposium had a healthy ripple effect. It obliged working biographers to consider more seriously what they were doing: how much they owed to the memory of their subject and to his survivors, and, in the other direction, to their readers; how to maintain a balance between the recital of fact and artistic effect; how to handle personal details and how much background to paint in (and know when enough was enough); how to use documents without violating their integrity; how, in short, to exercise the selectivity, the detachment, the instinct for design that Strachey had found so lamentably absent from the commemorative biography. Today's best examples, whatever their subjects, owe much of their high quality to the professional standards developed across the years and to the selfcriticism and cautious experimentation that the critical discussion encouraged among practitioners.

It was under the auspices of biography that the redemption of the Victorian age began. The questions that were tossed back and forth during the debate were pertinent, of course, to any modern culture in which the recording of significant lives flourished. But the debate had originated in a book specifically about four disparate Victorian figures, whom the public quickly took to be typical of their age. Strachey had made no such extrapolation publicly, although privately he had exclaimed to his brother James in 1914, while working on his "Nightingale" profile, "What a crew they were!" Had he not been bent on destroying the mortuary biography of his own time, he might just as well have exercised his temperamental iconoclasm on earlier false gods. (Why not *Eminent Men of the Renaissance? Eminent Augustans? Eminent Romantics?*) But it was Victorians that Strachey ridiculed, and the unanticipated consequence was that in response to his gibes a major new field of historiography sprung up.

The hostile tone of *Eminent Victorians*, as well as the feverish response to it, can be variously explained. The Bloomsburian David Garnett once said that "Lytton's essays were designed to undermine the foundations on which the age that brought war had been built." *Eminent Victorians* reflected the disillusion that was widespread as the First World War dragged to an end in a wasteland of blasted hopes and meager promise. The cynicism harbored by the intelligentsia to which Strachey belonged found a scapegoat close to hand in the generation of politicians and statesmen and the establishment they represented—late Victorians (born before 1901) to a man—whose blundering had drawn the nation into a calamity of unspeakable cost to their children and grandchildren. The Victorians' legacy to the brave new world had, to borrow an image Carlyle and others had favored in their time, the bitterness of Dead Sea apples.

In all this, there was a discernible whiff of Oedipean resentment and denial. Two memoirs, Samuel Butler's thinly fictionalized *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) and Gosse's own *Father and Son* (1907), had caused a stir by their candid rendering of parent-child relationships that were painfully at odds with the Victorian domestic ideal. (Later, in *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf would describe her liberation from the spiritual dominance of her father, the patriarch not only of his family but symbolically, as the first editor of the sixty-three-volume *Dictionary of National Biography*, of the biographical profession as well.) Strachey had the same rebellious inclination. *Eminent Victorians* could be read, on one level, as a covert attack on his own family, presided over by a line of senior administrators, which had failed to respond to the changing mood and so

typified many of the haute bourgeoisie from which he and the other Bloomsberries sought to detach themselves. The violent revulsion from ancestor worship, it seemed, ended in denigration.

But personal resentment, whether focused or diffused, was not the only cause of the anti-Victorian reaction. Long before Strachey was born, dissidents had participated, often uncomfortably and sometimes influentially, in Victorian public life. Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Ruskin, William Morris, even Dickens in his reformist mood had constituted the Victorian permanent opposition. The aesthetic movement that began in the 1870s had challenged the Victorian premise that beauty was inseparable from morality, and the very name applied to the counterculture of the 1890s, "the decadence," suggested a pronounced deviation from orthodoxy. A great deal of what was thought and said in the closing years of Victoria's reign and the ensuing Edwardian years was evidence of the declining prestige of Victorianism. In their various ways, three of the most prominent pre-war writers, George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and G. K. Chesterton, were critical of many aspects of Victorian thought. As early as 1904, in *The Poet's Corner*, Max Beerbohm, who was to become one of Strachey's admirers, guyed Victorian eminences in caricatures: a complacent Browning taking tea with his odd fan club, the Browning Society; Tennyson, in a vast room in the palace, declaiming *In Memoriam* to his queen in her widow's weeds, a portrait of her late sainted consort looking down; Matthew Arnold, leaning against a mantelpiece and grinning a horrible, toothy grin as his little niece, the future Mrs. Humphry Ward, asked, "Why, Uncle Matthew, Oh why, will not you be wholly serious?"

Strachey's biographer, Michael Holroyd, perhaps exaggerated when he declared that "the only reproach that can be brought against Lytton Strachey . . . is that he desiccated the corpses after the tempest had blown them from their gibbets." *Eminent Victorians* unquestionably ushered in the most virulent phase of anti-Victorianism. It provided a burning glass to concentrate the previously scattered rays of the rebellion, thereby initiating a process that led in time to the systematic study of the age, no longer yesterday but the (sixty-four-year-long) day before yesterday, as a distinct period in history, to be examined with the same inquiring spirit and with the same instruments as were applied to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the eighteenth century.

Until this happened, most of what was written about the Victorians in the 1920s and 1930s was either superficial or misinformed or both. The Victoriana offered to the public consisted mainly of chatty, often inane, reminiscences and memoirs of unimportant Victorian survivors and books on the social history of the era. The latter was a topic that was gaining antiquarian interest as the present beheld the past slipping further and further away from personal memory into the impersonal store of historical documents and artifacts. The centenary in 1937 of Victoria's accession to the throne witnessed a great outpouring of fluff, shot through with nostalgia and notably lacking in thoughtfulness. There was little sign as yet that the Victorians were about to be taken seriously—that behind the comedy act was to be discovered a society characterized by powerful thought and infinite complexity.

The tide turned first in literary studies, although none of Strachey's infamous four was a literary figure. The late Victorian popular veneration of Browning and Tennyson had persisted down to Strachey's time, even though critical opinion had turned against the latter. The new literary temper was evident in T. S. Eliot's reluctance to admit how much his poems owed to Browning's dramatic monologues and even more in W. H. Auden's remark that Tennyson "had the finest ear, perhaps, of any English poet; he was also undoubtedly the stupidest; there was little about melancholia that he didn't know; there was little else that he did"— literary Stracheyanism in a nutshell.

Now, one by one, the Victorian writers were examined afresh and the received canonical hierarchy revised. The foundation for critical reappraisals was laid by scholars applying the methods of scientific historiography to the materials of biography. Beginning in the forties, innumerable caches of personal documents, in both private and institutional hands, became available. One memorable instance out of many was the success Gordon N. Ray, later to be president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, had in gaining access to the Thackeray family papers, which enabled him to compile a four-volume edition of the novelist's letters and then to write a two-volume biography. Literary biography thus was rewritten, or in some cases written at length for the first time, on the solid and greatly widened basis of documents.

A formidable stream of meticulously edited collections of letters, indispensable to the writing of definitive biographies, flowed from the scholarly presses: those of Tennyson, Macaulay, George Eliot, FitzGerald, Newman, Meredith, William Morris, Rossetti, Walter Pater, Lewis Carroll, and more besides. Some, issued serially, are today far from completion. The most recent volume, the seventh, of the Pilgrim edition of Dickens's letters, with its encyclopedic array of explanatory notes, reaches only to 1855, with fifteen years to go. The two other big projects of the kind, each of which will run to thirty or forty volumes, are the Edinburgh-Duke edition of the letters of Thomas and Jane Carlyle and the edition of the Brownings' correspondence, financed on a shoestring and issuing from an ob scure publishing house in Kansas. The forty-fourth and last volume of the latter is tentatively scheduled to appear in the year 2009.

Editors and biographers benefited from the steady liberalization of the "public right-to-know" doctrine that has in recent years been denounced in some quarters as catering to voyeurism. One effect of Stracheyan biography and the increasing climate of tolerance was to free the art of biography from the informal censorship of parties intent on suppressing any information about a writer that did not harmonize with the controlled image or went counter to prevailing morality. In 1917, the year before *Eminent Victorians* was published, Gosse prepared, and deposited in the British Museum library against the day when it could no longer shock, a memorandum of all he had learned of the poet Swinburne's sexual proclivities but was not free to include in his biography. The day came in 1960, possibly sooner than Gosse expected, when Cecil Lang was able to print the memo in his edition of Swinburne's letters.

In 1949, Sir Charles Tennyson, the poet's grandson, broke the longstanding embargo on a family secret, the gloom of the remote country rectory where the future poet laureate and his neurotic siblings had grown up under the domination of an alcoholic, almost

deranged father. Revelation of the circumstances of Ruskin's non-consummation of his marriage and of Dickens's having possessed a mistress stirred controversy in their time, but the world viewed with equanimity the more recently divulged details of the unmarried novelist Wilkie Collins's having maintained two mistresses, one living in his home and the other, with his children, a few blocks away.

Strachey was not interested in the social and cultural environment that had helped shape his subjects' characters, and in any event the miniature dimensions of his portraits prevented him from addressing the question. But now the scope of scholarship on Victorian authors was enlarged to include the conditions in which they pursued their profession—the history of publishing, the emergence of a mass reading public and the resulting expansion of the market for books, the proliferation of periodicals serving every conceivable interest group, and the sub-literature that had never before claimed serious attention. For the sake of a wellrounded picture, the popular culture of print began to be studied side by side with literature in the old belletristic sense.

The academic industry devoted to Victorian literary biography was part of a much larger undertaking that eventually was to illuminate all areas of Victorian life and cleanse the word *Victorian* of the jokey connotations acquired in the years when *Eminent Victorians* defined the image of the age. Once the cadaverous ghost of Strachey had been exorcised, probably in the 1950s, specialists began to weave a seamless web of historical knowledge that embraced everything the Victorians did and stood for. The method of operation followed the pattern being set in other disciplines, the sciences as well as the humanities: individual effort was supplemented by cooperation in the form of several learned journals, innumerable special-interest newsletters, professional societies and support groups that met at annual conferences and interim symposia. Under the same impetus, centers were established for Victorian research in general—one at Indiana University, another at Leicester University in England— and others for work on particular figures—such as the Tennyson Research Centre at Lincoln, the Disraeli Project (its official name) at Queen's University in Ontario and its Gladstonian counterpart at Oxford.

The interdisciplinary tendency of Victorian scholarship was typified by two of the most seminal works in the field. Walter E. Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (1957) described some of the most influential elements in the intellectual atmosphere that affected literary expression. Houghton argued that the most comprehensive appreciation of Victorian ideas and attitudes could be obtained from the periodicals that were the prime receptacles of the age's thought, especially in the "higher journalism" to which several of them were devoted. He therefore conceived and supervised, often under discouraging circumstances, the editing of the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* (five weighty volumes, covering forty-three reviews and magazines, 1966-89). Houghton and his fellow editors accomplished what may have been the most impressive modern feat of collaborative scholarly detective work, identifying the authors of some 86 percent of the 89,000 articles, 90 percent unsigned, in the periodicals indexed. In addition to being one of the most underfunded scholarly projects of our time, the *Wellesley Index* has the distinction of being the last to be completed without electronic assistance.

The scope of the *Index* gave some indication of the sheer quantity of material available to scholars. The historian Kitson Clark once declared, without exaggeration, that the raw data comprised "a larger mass than exists for any country in any previous century," including visual documentation: the Victorians were the first to leave behind a photographic record of themselves. The long shelves of periodicals, now disintegrating thanks in part to Victorian papermakers' confidence in the permanence of cheap ingredients, had their counterparts in the millions of pages of manuscripts owned by university and research libraries in Britain and the United States— the British Library, the Oxbridge libraries, the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, the Pierpont Morgan Library, Yale, Harvard, and many more besides.

The production of books and articles mounted at such a rate that scholars could no longer pretend to master the annual flow. In the decade 1965-74 alone, some 18,000 titles were listed in the annual bibliography that recorded current activity in the field, and the number increased in every subsequent year. The centennial of *The Origin of Species* in 1959 was marked by literally hundreds of publications on Darwin and his works. Other aspects of Victorian science, little noticed in the Stracheyan years, were intensively studied, as well as the development of technology, the history of business enterprises in such significantly Victorian areas as engineering and manufacturing, transport history, economic history, and—of particular relevance toward the close of the twentieth century—the emergence of the city as a political, economic, and social phenomenon and a looming symbol of the human condition in the industrial age. To the existing body of imperial histories, as the Raj faded and the Commonwealth replaced the empire, were added numerous volumes exploring the hitherto relatively unexamined annals of the Victorian presence in Australia and Africa.

One class of eminent Victorians had engaged the interest of historians even before the term was on everyone's lips: the great politicians from Melbourne to Gladstone. The ponderous six-volume biography of Disraeli by William Monypenny and George Buckle (1910-20) was a notorious example of how stodgy the life of so colorful and problematic a politician and prime minister could be made to seem in industrious but inept hands. From the 1920s onward, as the surviving participants dropped from the scene, the tangled political history of Victoria's long reign was reexamined with a detachment and an authority that were now possible for the first time. Following the queen's death in 1901 there had been a spate of sedulously discreet memoirs of various members of the court. It may or may not have been in response to Strachey's comparatively respectful biography of Victoria (1921), which disappointed readers looking forward to the Stracheyan irreverence toward four commoners repackaged as lèse-majesté, that the locks were gradually, selectively, removed from the royal archives and collections were published of the queen's letters, the political ones in the 1920s, the personal ones somewhat later. Perhaps the thinking in the palace was that the wisest way to fend off the sharks of post- Stracheyan biography was to throw some food to the document-hungry historians who, in their circumspect way, preferred fact to fancy.

Of all the manifestations of the Victorian spirit that were studied from the 1940s onward, the most visible were the age's architecture and art. The Victorians had built imposing monuments to themselves, not only civic statuary but public buildings that were

exuberant, ornate, and eclectic (only one style was missing, and that was an indigenous one). These were the stone, brick, and mortar counterparts of the biographies Strachey despised. When large numbers of them, including quintessentially Victorian warehouses and office blocks, perished by enemy action in London and the provincial cities, the war-stressed nation had more urgent matters to occupy it than regret over their disappearance. But it was a measure of how far tastes had changed that only a few years later—when a protest was mounted against the planned destruction of two London landmarks, the Coal Exchange and the Doric arch in front of Euston station—the developers, although eventually successful, got a good contest for their money. The subsequent formation of a society to protect "listed" Victorian buildings, inspired by the scholarship of Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Nikolaus Pevsner and Sir John Betjeman's affectionate partiality, at least gave the preservationists some muscle in their perennial struggle with the destroyers.

In the four decades after the appearance of *Eminent Victorians*, the reputations of the most popular Victorian painters, whose work had commanded high prices from wealthy patrons in their time, plunged to their nadir. (The one exception was Turner, whose art was discussed throughout these years with considerable respect if not the admiration it now commands.) Victorian canvases were so little regarded that secondhand dealers could not even give them away, except to impecunious artists who could paint them over. From the mid-1960s onward there was a remarkable revival of interest in Victorian art, beginning with several eye-opening exhibi tions of Pre-Raphaelite work, which were accompanied by scholarly catalogues. Within only ten years or so, art historians, and critics in their turn, rediscovered numerous artists, some famous in their time, such as Etty, Dyce, Maclise, Mulready, Frith, and, of course, Landseer, and rescued others from the obscurity in which they had always dwelt. Initially their paintings' importance was primarily historical, as visual documentation of the Victorian scene and Victorian taste; in due course, their intrinsic aesthetic worth was detected, their market value soared, and they were given pride of place in the Tate and several provincial galleries. Collectors were attracted: Allen Funt, the entrepreneur of the television show *Candid Camera*, once amassed a collection of paintings by the late Victorian Alma Tadema, and it is said that Andrew Lloyd Webber now owns the most valuable collection of Victorian art in private hands. In the 1950s there was no such person as an art historian or a dealer specializing in the Victorians; today there are scores.

Unlike the sciences, where pure research often can be proved to have had practical spin-offs in everyday technology, the influence of scholarship in the humanities upon the society that has nurtured it can seldom be measured. Yet it must be more than coincidental that nowadays the Victorians figure so prominently in our thought and experience. Mark Girouard's writings on the Victorian country house and other buildings, illustrating the close connection between architecture and social history, have reached a wide public. Adaptations of Victorian novels, the latest of which has been the BBC's much praised *Middlemarch*, have repeatedly been successful on television and film.

And who can say how much of the rejection of Margaret Thatcher's homilies on "Victorian values" as the panacea for Britain's malaise a decade ago could be traced to the filter-down influence of historical scholarship? Some of the public, at least, had

enough acquaintance with the realities of Victorianism to realize that, whatever the intrinsic virtue of those "values" might be, they were mislabeled. Shibboleths they were; it was harder to prove that they were Victorian shibboleths unless severely qualified. But the very fact that Mrs. Thatcher invoked them as such was an indication of how radically the image of the Victorians has been altered since Strachey demeaned it to general applause. Then, the Victorians—stupid (like Auden's Tennyson), parochial, philistine, complacent, prudish—seemed to be beneath contempt. Now, they are apotheosized in a fashion, not only for political purposes.

Today, it is *Eminent Victorians*, not the Victorian mode of civilization, that is discredited. As a literary work it is almost unreadable, except as a curiosity. One is struck not by Strachey's once admired urbanity and elegance but by his pose as a middle-aged enfant terrible, his obsession with meretricious effects, and his astonishing predilection for clichés (not, I think, to be explained away as part of his ironic strategy). What once were the sophisticate's delight, Strachey's quick thrusts of a lethal rapier, now are seen to be nothing more than cheap shots aimed at straw figures. Yet, distortions and all, the stereotype his book generated has proved to possess inordinate staying power. Even one whose first acquaintance with the Victorians was derived from the book—many years after it was first published—has to admit that the image developed during a long career immersed in the records they left behind retains troubling nuances of Stracheyism.

The productivity of the scholarly industry that Strachey unwittingly brought into being supplies the crowning irony. "The history of the Victorian Age," the preface to *Eminent Victorians* began, "will never be written: we know too much about it." This was a clever paradox, characteristic of Strachey in both its attention-grabbing audacity and its false premise. It was less successful as prophecy.

Source: Richard D. Altick, "Eminent Victorianism: What Lytton Strachey Hath Wrought," in *American Scholar*, Winter 1995, pp. 81-90.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Hutch argues that Strachey greatly influenced "interest in possible connections between psychology and biography" in the twentieth century.

The response of biographers to modern psychological science and discourse has been a topic of considerable interest to scholars since World War II. Halting efforts to use psychological ideas in lifewriting were made early in the century, but they proliferated in the postwar era. Well known is the work of John Garraty on the interrelations between biography and psychology, and that of Leon Edel on the use of psychoanalytic ideas, especially the idea of "transference," in the art of biography. The language of scientific psychology, however, must be recognized as erected unwittingly upon older, longer-standing traditions of life-writing. Psychological reductionism is easy to slip into and, thus, it is a great danger faced by the biographer. But an awareness of the literary genre of biography, especially of some of the major historical and structural trends of nineteenth and twentieth-century life-writing, can serve to check inappropriate "psychologizing."

The argument of this paper is that best use can be made of psychological insights into biographical subjects, or the individuals studied by biographers, if those insights are offered in the spirit in which they first entered into the history of biographical writing in western culture. I argue that such a moment in the history of biography is represented by the life and work of Lytton Strachey; and that his use of what can be called "strategic irony" in writing about figures of Victorian England virtually opened the door to post-World War II interest in possible connections between psychology and biography. Strachey's almost melancholic preoccupation with himself, as it was gradually displaced onto the stage of literary production, was transformed into a new, distinct biographical style, that is, the strategic deployment of hostility toward professional authority as a literary device for analyzing individual lives. What is irony, and how is it strategic in Strachey's approach? Irony is a sophisticated form of hostility, defined as a feigned ignorance designed to confound or provoke. Such hostility can range from light humor to sarcasm or satire. It probes human weaknesses, not strengths, and seeks out the subterranean opposites that constitute the "depth" of a life, surface appearances notwithstanding. The strategy of using irony in his biographical narratives maintained (sometimes created) a distinction between Strachey the working biographer and the subjects toward whom his hostility was directed, and upon whom his unique literary craft worked. Yet, such a distinction, as will be shown, was not given but achieved, and the achievement was never clear and as permanent for Strachey as one might have hoped.

Lytton Strachey unwittingly introduced irony into life-writing. Irony, or the search for that which renders a life ironic in whole or in part, has become a powerful strategic device by which biographical analysis becomes an interminable activity of interpretation and participation in a life. Strategic irony combines the way a biography is written with a principle of interpreting a life. Strachey's contribution to the history of biography amounts to a hermeneutic, or guidelines according to which the writer and reader of biographies can claim personal meaning from the text by identifying with the

circumstances that contributed to its creation. And by "text" is meant not only the biography one reads, but also the person studied by the biographer and reader alike. The individual who is the subject of the biography, thus, is said to "live" or "come alive." As a strategy of expressed hostility, irony is perfect for portraying ambivalence in greatness. Irony is marked by a revealed play of unseen or sensed opposites. It denies any univocal meaning, theme, appearance, or characterization a biographer or a reader may possibly invoke in order to construct a description of a life. Strachey's legacy to biography— what Edel calls the New Biography—is that by means of seeking out the ironic in what is popularly believed about an individual, by implying something markedly different from first impressions, occasionally even the opposite of what is the public's general view, Strachey "made space" in how individuals may now be encountered in texts about them. Such space is evident in Strachey's biographical narratives, and the space becomes a threshold to a new kind of discourse about biography. The use of psychology in biography is one current attempt to give shape and force to this emergent discourse.

Critical Essay #4

Most biographers fall short of Strachey's hermeneutical mark, perhaps because the time was not, or currently is not, as historically potent for them as it had been for him. According to Eileen Overend, Strachey's literary reputation rests traditionally on *Queen Victoria* (1921), and his general popularity is due to *Eminent Victorians* (1918). Strachey became secure in his person and art so that, says Overend, "the distancing irony" of his early Victorian portraits mellowed into "sheer warmth" by 1928, when *Elizabeth and Essex* appeared. Other biographers, however, failed then as they may fail now to find such a secure place within themselves and within their art. The problem is that biographers are prone to stereotyping. Henry Murray describes a parallel situation in psychology. What he calls "trait psychology" is to psychology as stereotyping is to biography: says Murray,

According to my prejudice, trait psychology is overconcerned with recurrences, with consistency, with what is clearly manifested (the surface of personality), with what is conscious, ordered, rational. It minimizes the importance of physiological occurrences, irrational impulses and beliefs, infantile experiences, unconscious and inhibited drives as well as environmental (sociological) factors. Hence, it does not seem fitted to cope with such phenomena as: dreams and fantasies, the behavior and thought of children and savages, neurotic symptoms (morbid anxiety, phobias, compulsions, delusions), insanity and creative activity (artistic and religious). It stops short precisely at the point where a psychology is needed, the point at which it begins to be difficult to understand what is going on.

To seize upon traits, or recurrent, continuous patterns evident in a life, precludes genuine understanding of the rich and variegated nature of individuals. While claims are made that the depthdimension of a figure is presented, what remains is merely a stereotypical description of the "surface of personality."

It is useful to distinguish two approaches by which biographers construe their subjects and face up to the problem of "surfaces and depths" in biography. On the one hand, there is what can be called *unidimensional biography*. This approach emphasizes traits, and engages in biographical stereotyping for the purpose of locating a subject's single most motivational value(s), or predominant personal style in all things. Many recent biographers write about their subjects in terms of an "identity crisis," an "approach-avoidance conflict," "depressive episodes," and the like. To use Edel's phrase from psychoanalysis, the "transference relationship" between a biographer and the subject breaks down, with the biographer virtually "constructing" his or her subject by using an intuitive psychological method, almost like a novelist creating a protagonist or a psychoanalyst submitting to "counter-transference." Such a method lends itself to the charge of projectionism, where there is a tendency toward uncritical construction, or construing a life so it fits into and illustrates some prior conception or didactic point the biographer wishes to press, often the facts of that life notwithstanding. "Projective tests" in psychological diagnosis are based on similar assumptions about what counts in a life.

The approach of unidimensional construction is not new. Culture-bound models or paradigms of the ideal (or less than ideal) self are notable in ancient sacred biographies and hagiographies. Lifewriters, including autobiographers in antiquity, have long been in the habit of stylizing lives according to the current cultural and historical ideals of selfhood, or popular images of what constitutes a good or bad person. This approach has as its major nineteenthcentury spokesman not only the famous Thomas Carlyle who espoused biographical "hero-worship," but also the less well known theorist of biography, James Stanfield. For Stanfield, people's characters are conditioned by the ideals with which they are associated (e.g., Abraham Lincoln, associated with honesty, is portrayed as "Honest Abe"). The particular association described by the biographer is of his own making, done usually for didactic ends. As Standfield puts it, the biographer's job is "not only to describe, but connect; not only to narrate, but philosophize." In this way biography is used to sharpen the cutting edge of the particular worldview, and its inherent values, of the biographer. Moreover, when faced with modern psychology the unidimensional approach risks charges of being reductionistic insofar as psychological concepts contribute grist to the mill of construction, by which a life is rendered in ways perhaps not wholly in accord with the actual life lived.

On the other hand, the second approach can be called *multidimensional biography*, where biases more like those of Henry Murray prevail. Here anything like biographical hero-worship is eschewed in favor of sustaining that "point," as Murray puts it, "at which it begins to be difficult to understand what is going on." Lytton Strachey laid the foundations for this approach to biography. As we shall see, his strategy of irony, when directed at his subjects as a guideline for critically scanning their lives, themselves all stylized in the public's mind's eye according to proper Victorian canons of selfhood, served not only to "debunk" those subjects, but also to establish the viability of an alternative to biographical hero-worship. Exactly what constituted such an alternative remained unclear. This was because, as Strachey so well demonstrated, it is not easy to manage effectively, or in any standard manner, the tricky business of the transference relationship. Doing so is quite personal; there are no models, no paradigms, and no real guidelines to follow. Nevertheless, Strachey achieved what Edmund Wilson described as "a rare attitude of humility, of astonishment and admiration, before the unpredictable of life." Biographical reductionism of any kind was far from his interests.

Whereas the unidimensional approach suggests the viability of biographical construction, the multidimensional approach is more iconoclastic and concerned with deconstruction. This means that biographical portraits which have resulted from prior modeling (i.e., the constructionist tactic) are now taken apart or, at least, seen for what they are; and, so, become available to a biographer to live over afresh. Such a process was well put by James Boswell who described his own approach to writing the life of Samuel Johnson. One must see Johnson "live," and "'live o'er each scene' with him, as he actually advanced through the several stages of his life" and, thus, "to see him as he really was." Boswell said that his purpose was not to write Johnson's "panegyric, which must be all praise" but, instead, "his life; which, great and good as it was, must not be supposed to be entirely perfect." Among other possible formulae of selfhood, a panegyric here represents the kind of unidimensional construction, or stereotyping, that any good multidimensional deconstructionist would avoid, or declare wooden, even trite.

Discussions about construction and deconstruction are prevalent in contemporary literary criticism. The two terms are not intended to be technical ones when related to biography. They indicate attitudes toward what to expect from the life studied. Construction means a limited expectation, one that seeks to discover within or read into a life some univocal meaning. The assumption is that a life can be "boiled down" to a fairly circumscribed, single point about the life and times of the individual. Deconstruction means an expanded expectation, one that simultaneously challenges all univocal meanings attributed to a life (and the possibility of such), and holds out for something less than (or more than) consistency about a person's lifestyle, patterns of thought, relationships, and the like. Here there is no assumption that life can be boiled down to anything that can be conveyed conceptually. Rather, deconstruction means that the biographer and the reader of biographies must be open to encounter the text of the person's life itself. And this requires a critical suspension of disbelief, along with an appreciation of everyday situational ambiguities. Put differently, construction establishes a relationship between the biographer (and the reader of biographies) and the person studied that renders that person an "it," or a fabrication, at least in part, by the student of the life. The biographer (and the reader) assumes control and constructs that life, often using discourse and concepts from psychological science or any other idiom of human inquiry.

A criticism of construction is that the person, as a living text, gets lost, or substituted for by an alternative text built by the biographer and similarly built by the reader of the biography. Deconstruction, on the other hand, establishes a relationship between the biographer (and reader of biographies) and the person studied which converts that person, hitherto an "it," now into a "thou," which is not a fabrication by the student of the life but an evocation of the possibility of human encounter. The text of the person's life, not the biographer (or the reader), takes charge so as to preclude a search for univocal meaning or some other such stereotypical reduction. No alternative text is fabricated; the human text of the person studied becomes readily available. At least, we read the biography and can see how it was put together by the biographer; and, perhaps, the circumstances that went into the formation of the life and times of the person researched by the biographer. Generally, the debate between constructionists and deconstructionists pertains to attitudes toward objects of study in the humanities, the former being somewhat more chauvinistic than the latter.

We can now say that each of the two major approaches to the art of biography should be kept in mind if Lytton Strachey's unique achievement is to be recognized as the "high water mark" of connections between biography and psychology up to World War II. Clearly, Strachey's strategic use of irony, so well recognized by commentators and critics, stands at the crossroads of unidimensional construction and multidimensional deconstruction. How did Strachey achieve this in his person and art?

Critical Essay #5

The formation of sound moral character is one thing, but irony is another. Leon Edel has called Lytton Strachey a "master of biographical irony," a less poignant expression of ancient Greek "tragedy." The strategic use of irony means that any theoretical reduction of the facts of a life, say, to a statement about a person's "character" or personality "type," are forestalled. Herein lies the incipient deconstructionist posture in Strachey's biographies. The posture guarantees that the human quality of a subject is rendered available to a reader by means of the irony of juxtaposed facts, a sophisticated form of hostility Strachey directs towards professional authority, especially those literary giants of the generation before his own, like Carlyle and others. Strachey's approach to biography is no better seen than in his short essay of 1930 on the historian and biographer, James Anthony Froude (1818-1894). Martin Kallich astutely observes that Strachey's sketch of Froude "reads like a study of Queen Victoria in miniature." Kallich makes this observation because of the similarity he believes Strachey implied between the queen's "unconscious search for a father substitute, someone to satisfy her craving for authority," and Strachey's peculiar interpretation of Froude's life. If as Eileen Overend implies, Strachey's *Queen Victoria* stands as his first clearly multidimensional biography, perhaps with psychoanalytic overtones, then his essay on Froude represents the culmination of the multidimensional approach in which construction is abandoned and strategic irony, posing as incipient deconstruction, is adopted. If Kallich is correct, then we can ask, why did Strachey find this a necessary line of continuity to draw upon, that is, a personal encounter with his own search for authority as a person and as a writer, whether deliberately conceived as such or not? Could it be that Strachey is pressing the queen into the service of his own personal needs or, at least, finds such a connection useful for grappling with his sense of identity? Were Froude and Queen Victoria, somehow, to serve as the forge on which, through such grapplings, Strachey would craft his method of strategic irony? Behind the work of Strachey the biographer is the person attempting to find out the truth about himself. The magnitude for biography of his final achievement must not be underestimated.

Strachey's life itself is a paragon of irony recognized by a number of scholars. Great emotional distance separated Strachey from his father, Sir Richard, a general who had been active in the economic development of India and was sixty-three years old when Lytton was born. His mother was twenty-four years younger than his father, and she dominated Strachey's life, in spite of his being the eleventh of thirteen children. Physically frail and with precarious health, Strachey became preoccupied with homoerotic thoughts and feelings during school, and engaged throughout his life in homosexual relations, usually falling deeply in love with robust, athletic men. According to Michael Holroyd, the irony was that "Strachey's tendency was to fall in love with the sort of person he would like to have been." This served to heighten the irony of his most intense personal relationships time and time again. The virtual impossibility of exercising effectively any capacity for growth beyond his most deeply felt and intimate personal relationships underscores the pathos of Strachey's personal irony. However, it

was precisely this that he creatively converted into a unique method for writing biographies.

It was no coincidence, for example, that sometime around 1910 he was overcome by a period of stagnation and general literary obscurity. He had moved away from Duncan Grant, an articulate cousin and lover, with whom he spent holidays, and soon filled the emptiness in his life by associating with the bewitching writer, Henry Lamb. Lamb launched Strachey into the world of bohemian thought and behavior, so much so that in 1913 Strachey dedicated his *Ermyntrude and Esmeralda* to Lamb as "pornographic entertainment." Thus, Strachey's life was driven by a quest for some kind of suitable authority but, when the issue was put to the test, anything other than ironic failure seemed impossible. Strachey's quest for lovers, and the authority they seemed to bear for him, was really a search for heroes, or, as Holroyd has put it, for persons he himself would like to have been, or at least to have resembled. However (and ironically), the impossibility of success in such a personal endeavour would eventually serve to release him not only from the debilitating prison of his "hateful physique," but also from the narrow confines of a hateful and constrained Victorian milieu. Herein lay the origins of strategic irony and its use as a literary device in writing biographies.

All this is to say that the appearance of Strachey's essay on Froude so late in his life is more than a simple coincidence. The essay is significant because it points to Strachey's own personal confusion about the degree to which Froude was Carlylean or, put another way, because it reveals Strachey's wrestlings with his own quest for authoritative heroes of one sort or another. Within this confusion were posed the two approaches to biography described above: whether to side with Carlyle and unidimensional construction, or to keep the issue open and to allow for the genesis of multidimensional deconstruction, spurred along by the psychoanalytically- tinged temper of the times? For Carlyle, far above all others within English literary circles of the nineteenth century, was both a hero and a maker of heroes, at least insofar as Strachey himself was a biographer and was able to identify with Carlyle on this score. Strachey's person and profession were coming together, with the identity of each at stake.

Carlyle represented strength, and no writer up to Strachey's day commanded as much attention and respect for his person and his work from the general public. We can suppose that Strachey felt compelled to address himself to Carlyle's work, and to encounter the man in that work, if only vicariously. My suggestion is that Strachey accomplished this encounter by attending to an essay on Froude, who was Carlyle's student and biographer. Froude, like Strachey, was himself troubled by nineteenthcentury literary constraints. The point is that scholarly opinion of Froude is much more positive and laudatory in terms of all that Strachey himself later came to stand for in biography than is the opinion conveyed about Froude in Strachey's essay. How is this to be explained? Might this odd incongruity point to an ambivalence that lies at the heart of Strachey's own greatness? In order to account for this seeming discrepancy, my suggestion is that personal factors entered into Strachey's writing which eventuated in such peculiarities, and which served to clarify just who Strachey understood himself to be as a man and as a biographer. The essay on Froude was

Strachey's way of working out his own identity; and this would turn on the discovery and use of irony as a strategic literary device.

In 1882-1884 Froude came out with a fourvolume life of Carlyle, following the instructions of his master that his life was to be portrayed not in the manner of "mealymouthed biography" but "truly as he was." This biography followed *Reminiscences* of Carlyle in 1881; and in 1883 appeared the *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welch Carlyle*. Froude was at first denounced as a traitor to his master's memory. The exact nature of the breach is described by Richard Altick:

In his pages the man who was the veritable conscience and scourge of Britain, whose eightieth birthday in 1875 had been a national occasion, turned out to have been an extremely difficult man to get along with, selfish, grim, irritable, even violent. From first to last his domestic life had been marked by tensions and fierce outbursts. The spirited Jane Welch Carlyle, as was revealed by her letters which Froude published, had been a martyr to the bearded prophet—but far from an uncomplaining one. And Froude, had he chosen to do so, could have presented an even darker picture of unrest in Cheyne Row, for in a passage in her diary which he suppressed she recorded that her arms bore blue marks from her husband's abuse.

Surely Froude's work served the history of biography as a prefiguration of Strachey's popular writing later in the twentieth century. While it was not as subtle as the strategic irony that came to be buoyed up by psychoanalytic notions for Strachey, Froude's approach to biography rested on a fresh, almost cheeky style of "debunking," which became popular in his own day, and that stood as a precursor to Strachey's approach. One wonders, therefore, why Strachey found it necessary to be less than enthusiastic about Froude's life and work than we ourselves may be at least when confronted by Strachey's short essay about this writer.

Strachey knew about Froude's accomplishments and it is easy for one to suppose that, being the kind of twentieth-century biographer he was, Strachey's desire to be like Carlyle's biographer was intense. Was Strachey unwittingly jealous of Froude? If so, would this not be ironic in that Strachey and Froude were separated by a generation, and Froude long dead and buried? Once Froude was placed in the position of resembling a hero, if only because Strachey selected him as a subject, the narrative about Froude reveals nothing short of ambivalence toward Froude's accomplishments as a historian and biographer. In this way Strachey the biographer engages his own transference relationship, or en counter, with his subject. And, too, the gradual methodological shift from unidimensional to multidimensional biography, with an incipient emphasis on deconstruction, begins to be seen. The essay starts on a note of tribute but moves quickly to a sketch of Froude's failings; or, to put it another way, to the irony of Froude's highly acclaimed life and work. Strachey, thus, strategically distances himself from Froude, but unwittingly also reveals to the reader a deep engagement in sorting out the truth of who he is and who Froude is. How to deconstruct popular memories of Froude, and tell the truth of his life, without at the same time surrendering oneself to any univocal meaning attributed to Froude's life? —that was the question.

According to Strachey, Froude was a man "in whose presence it was impossible not to feel a hint of mystery, or strange melancholy, and an uncomfortable suggestion of enigmatic power." He asks, "what was the explanation of it all?" Just what was the "inner cause" of Froude's "'brio'" and his "sadness," this "passionate earnestness and this sardonic wit?" Strachey believes that it is easier to ascertain this inner cause, incidentally, than it had been for Froude's contemporaries. As Strachey put it, the reason was because "we know more of the facts and we have our modern psychology to give us confidence." The multidimensional approach to biography is signalled by the phrase, "modern psychology." However, that he gained only "confi- dence" from this psychology, and did not employ any of its theoretical constructions as he might have if he had been a member of the psychoanalytic fold, suggests Strachey's incipient deconstructionist stance. Prompted by his fascination with Froude, Strachey's hostility first appears in the form of irony. This also betrays the nature of his ambivalence toward Carlyle and, thus, toward Froude, both very successful biographers in Strachey's eyes, as well as authority figures unable to be embraced in fact or in fantasy. Such feigned intimacy with his literary giants was the price Strachey paid in order to achieve a creative advance beyond unidimensional, constructionist biographical writing.

"Perhaps the real explanation was old Mr. Froude," writes Strachey, "who was a hunting parson of a severely conventional type, with a marked talent for watercolours." We are told that Froude was brought up in a frightful terror by his widower father and brothers, who were "much older than himself;" sent off to college at Westminster, where he suffered "indescribable torment;" kept at home for two years as an "outcast" and "flogged" for "imaginary delinquencies;" and, finally when he began enjoying himself at Oxford later on, his father broke off Froude's engagement to a young woman and "denounced him" to the girl's father as "little better than a common swindler." However, writes Strachey, Froude was kept from suicide by an unrelenting "intense admiration" for his father, as Mr. Froude had drawn a "magic circle" around his son, from which escape was "impossible." Froude's life had almost been ruined by his father's "moral cruelty" and, though appearing to have "thrown off the yoke," Froude, says Strachey, remained in "secret servitude."

After his father's death, Froude "submitted himself to Carlyle," expressing in "explicit dogma" the "unconscious teaching" of his father by adopting Carlyle's philosophy of history, stress on heroes, and his provincial moral tone. Strachey then focussed on the central question, how are we to account for Froude's "adoration" of Carlyle? This adoration, Strachey believes, prevented Froude from allowing himself "untrammelled" to play upon his subject with his native art and his "native wit! . . . But alas! these are vain speculations; old Mr. Froude would never have permitted anything of the sort." One wonders if the same could not be said about Strachey's unspoken opinion of old Sir Richard, his own father, who permitted him so much of his mother's time and attentions. Multidimensional biography, and a manoeuvre of deconstruction, are incipient here. By declaring ironic his predecessor's relationship to Carlyle, Strachey managed to tarnish the lustre of Froude's most significant contribution to the genre of biography up to that time. However, the point is that this tarnishing was in the eyes of Strachey alone. By pointing to the negative aspects of Froude's life, Strachey unwittingly accentuated the positive aspects of his own budding art. By putting down a hero (Froude), Strachey, as

an innovative biographer (who builds on Froude's technique!), himself becomes a hero too. His personal triumph consummated a hard won creative leap ahead for biography and its methodological possibilities.

The genesis of Strachey's creative contribution to the history of the relationship between biography and psychology, though only implicit, is most clearly observed in process in this short essay on Froude. What begins as a personal struggle, perhaps with a transference relationship with Froude (and Carlyle), ends up as a professional resolution of that subterranean tension at the level of methodological creativity. Thus, unidimensional construction is avoided; and this persists as a literary style in Strachey's biographical writing. Leverage supplied by locating irony in a subject's life can pry open (and keep open) the possibility of real encounter, beyond projection and beyond stereotyping. The biographies that Strachey wrote drew attention away from the blinding illusions of nineteenth-century moralistic images of the self, or what it meant then to be a person. By doing so, Strachey's work as a lifewriter stands for the open-ended reality of individuality, or for the possibility of overcoming the distortion of the encounter between a biographer and a biographical subject. It overcomes a distortion of the biographer's capacity to participate in a life, albeit at some remove in time and space. Strategic irony is, thus, a powerful hermeneutical tool by which others might seek restoration of the self, if only through the vicarious means of reading and writing biographies, and rehearsing the drama of the play of invisible or felt subterranean opposites moving lives like tides that shift sand on beaches. Such opposites constitute us as much as they do the subjects of biographies. Lytton Strachey's contribution to biography is that, though it may possibly be informed by psychological science and discourse, whatever else it may admit, biography is hardly reducible to categorical statement alone. The legacy left by Lytton Strachey is the autonomy of the art of biography.

Source: Richard A. Hutch, "Strategic Irony and Lytton Strachey's Contribution to Biography," in *Biography*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Winter 1988, pp. 1-15.

Topics for Further Study

Mark Twain wrote, "Biography is the clothes and buttons of the man, but the real biography of a man is lived in his head twenty-four hours a day, and *that* you can never know." Was Twain right? Can a biographer ever really capture the essence of another person's life? If someone were to write a biography of you, how would they know what you are really like?

Should a biographer feel some empathy or affection for his subject to create a realistic portrait? If the biographer dislikes the subject, should he or she still write the biography? What difficulties might arise for the biographer if the subject of the biography were still living?

If someone in America today were to write a book similar in intent to *Eminent Victorians*, what figures either from the present or the recent past might he or she pick to satirize, and why?

Which biography in *Eminent Victorians* did you find most interesting, and why? Do you think Strachey was fair to his subjects, or did he deliberately try to show them in a less than flattering light?

Write a short satirical sketch of someone you know or someone who is well known, such as a politician, movie star, or rock star. Remember that satire uses wit and humor; it does not consist of insults or abuse.

Compare and Contrast

1800s: Britain's Industrial Revolution leads the world, and the British Empire continues to expand. More than a quarter of the world's landmass is under British rule, including India, Canada, Australia, South Africa, portions of east and west Africa, Ceylon, Malaya, Hong Kong, Singapore, and (at the end of the Victorian age) Egypt and the Sudan.

1920s: The First World War ends in 1918. Communism reigns in Russia. The British Empire is in decline and a movement for self-determination in the colonies gathers force. In Britain, working class organizations are strengthened, and socialism grows more popular. Fascism and Nazism will soon rise in Italy and Germany, respectively.

Today: Although Britain flourishes economically, it no longer has an empire. Instead, it is a member of the European Union, and its nineteenth century role as the world's superpower has passed to the United States.

1800s: In England, churchgoing amongst the middle and upper classes is high, and functions as a sign of status. Working class families, for the most part, do not go to church.

1920s and 1930s: Churchgoing declines overall, with the exception of Roman Catholics. The decline is partly due to the increasing availability of social diversions, such as the cinema, opportunities for participating in and watching sports, and the increase in the number of popular newspapers, magazines, and books. Another reason for the decrease in churchgoing is that the churches adopt unpopular positions on social issues such as divorce and the desirability of allowing public entertainment on Sundays.

Today: Churchgoing continues to decline, and Britain has become largely a secular society. A poll conducted in 2000 shows that under a million people (less than two percent of the population) attend regular Sunday services. This figure is half what it was in the 1970s.

1800s: Public and private behavior is governed by a strict moral code. Manners are formal, and in social relations, outward appearances are considered vitally important. Attitudes on sex and the human body are prudish. Dress is formal and elaborate; the body is completely covered. Underneath the public face of Victorianism, however, there is a great deal of hypocrisy. In London, prostitution flourishes. Women's rights are severely limited.

1920s: The years after World War I produce a reaction against Victorian prudery. Dress becomes less formal. Women, like men, can go hiking in shorts, for example, and bathing suits for both sexes are briefer. In 1920, women in Britain gain the right to vote.

Today: British society is more informal than in previous generations; relations between the sexes are less governed by formal rules. Gender roles are more flexible, and women pursue careers in professions formerly the exclusive preserve of men. Unlike

the large families favored by their Victorian ancestors, the British family is typically small, and power is often divided more equally between husband and wife. In contrast to Victorian prudery, sex is openly discussed, and in a consumer society sex is used in advertising messages to sell everything from cars to cigarettes.

What Do I Read Next?

Strachey's *Queen Victoria* (1921) is not as satirical as *Eminent Victorians*, although there is much humor and comedy in the story of an ordinary woman called to great responsibilities.

Anthony Nutting's biography, *Gordon of Khartoum, Martyr and Misfit* (1966), sees Gordon as motivated by a death-wish arising from his knowledge of his own homosexuality.

In *Florence Nightingale: Avenging Angel* (1999), Hugh Small draws on new material and argues that Nightingale's invalidism after the Crimean War was due to guilt—she realized that thousands of British soldiers died because medical staff failed to practice sanitary procedures that she should have enforced. In contrast to other biographers (including Strachey), Small argues for Nightingale's belief in the germ theory of infection.

Like its famous predecessor, A. N. Wilson's *Eminent Victorians* (1990), reexamines the lives of six representative Victorian figures, including two (Gladstone and Newman) who appear in Strachey's book. The other figures discussed are Prince Albert, Charlotte Brontë, Josephine Butler (feminist and reformer) and Julia Margaret Cameron (photographer).

Further Study

Ferns, John, *Lytton Strachey*, Twayne, 1988.

This is a survey of Strachey's development as a writer in relation to his life. Ferns shows how *Eminent Victorians* grew out of Strachey's opposition to World War I, for which he held the late-Victorian generation responsible.

Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa, *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Study*, Kennikat Press, 1967, pp. 52-61.

Iyengar surveys Strachey's work, praises his clarity of discernment and artistic sense, and regards him as an example for modern biographers to follow.

Kallich, Martin, *The Psychological Milieu of Lytton Strachey*, Bookman Associates, 1961.

This is an examination of Strachey's work in the light of Freudian psychoanalytical theories.

Whittemore, Reed, "Biography and Literature," in the *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 100, No. 3, Summer 1992, pp. 382-96.

Whittemore compares biographical or other works by Virginia Woolf, Sigmund Freud, Strachey, Patricia O'Toole, and Joanna L. Stratton, and shows the structural trends in the genre of biography.

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Introduction

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The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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