

History and Biography
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Thank you Mr Vice-Chancellor. I am honoured to be elected to a chair in the University of London. I stand before you in the robes of the University of Cambridge, where I was educated long ago. But I shall begin with a story from Oxford, where I taught for 29 years. If you go to the Turl, one of Oxford's quainter streets, you will find there three colleges, Exeter, Jesus and Lincoln. They present three very similar facades to the untutored eye, and it's hard to distinguish between them. Apparently an American visitor was heard to say 'I can't tell the difference between Lincoln and Jesus'. His tour guide replied, 'No American can'.

Which leads me to a date, the 4 April 1864, at a time when the American Civil War was once again going badly for the Union of the Northern States, when Abraham Lincoln added a famous sentence to a letter to one Albert Hodges, a newspaper editor, whom he'd recently invited to the White House. Their discussion there concerned Lincoln's evolving policy towards slavery in the United States, and slavery, of course, was the cause of the Civil War. In Lincoln's subsequent letter to Hodges he wrote:

'I claim not to have controlled events but confess plainly that events have controlled me'

The counter-position that Lincoln made here between the individual and the wider sweep of history gives us our text for this evening. My aim tonight is to draw on some aspects of my research and teaching in British and American history to explore the relationship between writing History and writing Biography. I emphasise 'writing' because this will not be a philosophical discussion of individual agency in history: to vindicate or vanquish historical determinism is not my purpose this evening. My aims are more modest: merely to explore with some examples, how Biography and History interact, sometimes reinforcing each other and sometimes throwing up contradictions.

Abraham Lincoln, of course, was a notorious dissembler, the frequent purveyor of the half-truth or the noble lie in a great cause. Lincoln was known for his tall tales, his blue jokes and stories of the frontier with which he disarmed and softened-up his audiences. He obfuscated and obscured, threw down decoys and laid false political trails, hiding his real policy, while applying pressure behind the scenes, as he tried to achieve what often seemed to be incompatible aims: to

defeat the rebellion of the Southern states, to hold the North united in the aim of restoring the full American Union, and to abolish slavery. When he told the American people in the summer of 1862 that his mission was only to save the Union and not to abolish slavery he had drafted already a version of his Emancipation Proclamation which was sitting in the drawer of his desk in the Oval Office in the White House.

Lincoln may well have been dissembling in this letter to Hodges, as well. Despite his protestations of impotence, he took many fateful decisions in the final decade of his life which owed everything to his desire to control events in the interests of Union and Freedom.

A successful mid-western lawyer who had a minor political career in the Illinois in the 1830s and 1840s, there was, first of all, his fateful decision to throw himself back into politics in 1854 to prevent the further spread of slavery in the Union. In 1858 he put himself forward for election to the United States' Senate in one of the most famous political campaigns in American History.

In 1860 he became the Republican Party's candidate for the Presidency. And as President, almost his first decision, against the advice of many in his cabinet, was to precipitate armed conflict with the seceded Southern states by attempting to resupply Fort Sumter in Charleston's harbour in April 1861.

Later he drafted and promulgated the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, and then, after his re-election in 1864, pushed hard for the 13th amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery for all time in the United States. These were not the actions of a man dangling in the crosswinds of uncontrollable events. Indeed, Steven Spielberg's compelling film biography of Lincoln, focused on the President's efforts to cajole majorities in Congress for the 13th amendment, by fair means and by foul, shows us with some accuracy the efforts of the man to bend History to his will.

Yet no historian would present the history of emancipation merely in terms of the lifelong determination of one man to limit and finally abolish slavery. Lincoln was one of millions in the North whose outlook was shaped by the anti-slavery movement as it developed from the 1830s. And when emancipation came it was as much the result of hundreds of thousands of slaves leaving the plantations and seeking refuge behind Union army lines, thus undermining the economy and social order of the Confederacy, as the determination of one man, even the President.

In seeking refuge with the army, the slaves became a problem to the commanding officers of the line, who had to keep and feed them, and who did

not know the legal status of these runaways. Were they still slaves or had they become free by crossing into Union army camps? The fleeing slaves thus became a problem to the War Office in Washington, and hence onwards, were a problem for Lincoln himself. In the interplay between thousands of individual acts of auto-emancipation in distant places in Tennessee, South Carolina, and Alabama, and the presidential decree freeing the slaves on grounds of military necessity, we can see the tension – if that it is – between biographical and structural historical approaches that forms the theme of this lecture.

Indeed, we can sense the tension on another occasion in Lincoln's life when he entertained Harriet Beecher Stowe in the White House on Thanksgiving Day 1862. Mrs Stowe was the authoress of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the great anti-slavery novel, published in 1852 and perhaps the most famous and influential of all American books. Lincoln is said to have greeted her thus: 'So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war.' On this occasion Lincoln seems to have accepted that one person - indeed, one woman- might genuinely have controlled events.

We shall return to Lincoln and the slaves later. Let me turn now to some local and domestic reflections on the founder of the Institute of Historical Research in 1921, and its first Director, A. F. Pollard, whose career is also instructive for our theme this evening. Pollard may be only a name now, but paraphrasing John Maynard Keynes, though we may not realise it, 'we are all the slaves of some defunct historian'. For Pollard taught Sir James Neale – Jimmy Neale, the great Tudor expert of the mid-20th century. And Jimmy Neale held seminars here at the IHR for many years, in which a certain Geoffrey Ehrenburg, a refugee scholar from Prague, better known later as Geoffrey Elton, learnt his craft and honed his ideas – ideas which have shaped the study of History in Britain since the 1950s.

Lest you be in any doubt, it was Elton's interpretation of the 1530s, derived from his arguments with Neale and Pollard, and focused on his hero Thomas Cromwell, the man who supposedly led a Tudor Revolution in Government, which you will have seen set out in Peter Kosminsky's adaptation of Hilary Mantel's novel, *Wolf Hall*, in recent weeks. Indeed, Elton gave Hilary Mantel her Thomas More as well as her Cromwell, for Elton, who lectured to me in Cambridge and who never missed an opportunity to share his strong opinions, seems to have loathed More, representing him as sanctimonious and hypocritical, as did Mantel in her novels.

In its first 50 years, the Institute of Historical Research was home to seminars, research projects and historians, including also A. G. Dickens, another former

Director, who vigorously debated and reshaped the national view of the Reformation and Tudor government. It is one of the most notable of the many contributions of the IHR to English Historiography. Thus far, my part in these achievements has been small, however. I can relate that Peter Kosminsky, who was in my year at school, contacted me to ask if I knew whether Anne Boleyn spoke English with a French accent after her eight years in the Low Countries and France as a teenager and young adult. I had to admit that I didn't know the answer, but as I told him, 'I know a man who does'. (Let me also add that Geoffrey Elton is not the only refugee from Prague in the 1930s who has had an influence on my career. I'm delighted that my close colleague from St. Peter's, Oxford, Henry Mayr-Harting, also from that city, is with us this evening).

In one view, Pollard was the antithesis of anecdotal and personalised history. Influenced by German models of historical research, he set up the IHR as a series of seminars, each focused on a country or region, and each with its own space and its dedicated library, inside the huts that ran along Malet Street which were the IHR's home until it moved into Senate House.

His inaugural lecture as Professor of Constitutional History at University College London in 1904 was a manifesto for high-level scholarly research, and was almost certainly designed as a contribution to the civil war then going on in the Oxford History Faculty between the university professors and the college tutors over the relative importance of historical research on the one side and teaching on the other, a battle that continues to this day. (I know, I bear the scars).

Though educated in Oxford, Pollard showed every sign of frustration with the outlook and methods of that university. He envisaged instead an Institute for History, associated with the administrative and political institutions of the capital - close to the sources, political and historical, in all senses – which would provide professional and academic leadership for the subject from London.

But if Pollard wrote major works of synoptic history, such as his fine textbook of 1910, the *History of England from the Accession of Edward VI to the Death of Elizabeth*, he also wrote important biographies of Protector Somerset in 1900 at the start of his career, of Henry VIII in 1919, and of Cardinal Wolsey in 1929 towards the end. And, for me at least given my biography, it is important to remember that Pollard's scholarly apprenticeship after studying at Oxford was spent as an author and an editor for the first Dictionary of National Biography, for which he wrote more than 500 articles in eight years, 1893-1901. That number dwarfs my own contributions to the second Dictionary of National

Biography, but in one aspect Pollard and I are equals: neither of us made much money from the DNB! Pollard's salary was a meagre £200 a year there, and it required marriage to the daughter of William Lucy, the owner of the famous Lucy ironworks to the west of Oxford's city centre, to stabilise his finances.

The DNB, compiled under its first two editors, Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, between 1885 and 1901, trained many of the initial generation of professional, university historians like Pollard himself, Charles Firth who was later Regius Professor of History in Oxford, and Thomas Tout, Professor of History at Manchester. In these lives there was no contradiction between writing biography, researching answers to great historical questions – Pollard on the Reformation, Firth on the Civil War, Tout on English medieval administration – and founding and sustaining institutions like the IHR in Pollard's case, or in Tout's case, the University of Manchester. Firth, meanwhile, was from the steel-making family who had founded Firth College, which later became the University of Sheffield.

There was no contradiction between these different academic projects because the first DNB was no exercise in nationalistic self-congratulation – no record of the worthies of British history designed to celebrate or glorify, but a serious-minded work of reference, designed to inform and to provide a basis for further research. Its editor, Leslie Stephen, the Cambridge don turned London man of letters, and perhaps better known today as the father of Virginia Woolf, was the least nationalistic of intellectuals, a descendant of radical and evangelical forbears who, in the early 19th century, had led the campaigns to abolish the slave trade and then slavery itself in the British empire.

As the more perceptive then recognised, the DNB was the culmination of half a century of the gathering, organising and classifying of public and private historical documents which saw the birth of the Public Record Office, now the National Archives, and the efforts of many aristocratic families to bring together and catalogue their own collections. The organisation of national archives, the composition of the Dictionary of National Biography, and the professionalization of History, were interlinked and mutually reinforcing developments at the end of the nineteenth century.

Pollard, I feel sure, would have welcomed the supersession of the first DNB by the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography on its publication in 2004 according to the plan laid down by its first editor, the historian and biographer of Mr. Gladstone, Colin Matthew. In a certain way it vindicated Pollard's faith in historical research: a century after the first DNB was compiled we knew so much more about the national past, and had opened up so many new lines of

enquiry to add to the political and constitutional history which dominated Pollard's generation – women's history, social history, intellectual history, the history of ideas, cultural history, the history of leisure and entertainment – that a new biographical dictionary was required to reflect our generation's version of national history.

Pollard would also have taken satisfaction in the better integration of the biographical and the contextual in the new Dictionary. The original DNB was still in use up to the point at which the Oxford DNB was published, and I'm sure I'm not alone in using its articles on a regular basis today with great profit. But in the new Dictionary it was always an aim to place the subjects covered in the history of their own time, and indeed, in the historiographical debates following their deaths.

An Oxford DNB article, we hoped, would not only tell a reader the key details of a life, but place that life in the most important historical trends. Many of the most significant lives covered also have illuminating essays at their close on the interpretation of the biography by subsequent scholars and writers. It helps as well that this online biographical dictionary can be searched thematically in so many different ways such that, through the miracle of modern technology, it transcends its origins in 55,000 separate essays and becomes a key initial source for anyone studying British History.

If you want to know the history of the Puritans, the Chartists, or the Suffragettes, start here with a simple word search. Nor is the Oxford DNB limited to biographies of individuals: we have biographies of families, for example: the Pastons, the Sassoons, and, indeed, the Stephens's. Over the last ten years we have published more than 300 'group biographies' – Prosopographies – of historical actors in concert, be they the Gunpowder plotters, the regicides of 1649, the Wilkites in the 1760s, the Langham Place Circle in the 1850s, the Pre-Raphaelites and the Bloomsbury Group. All of this shows the malleability and adaptability of biographical forms of writing under the influence of wider historical scholarship: 'no man is an island' in the Oxford DNB, but, in John Donne's terms, all 'are connected to the Main'.

The publication of the Oxford DNB marked an epoch, quite literally, in the history of publishing: as several reviewers remarked in 2004, it may well have been one of the first great works of the internet age, in the sense that it was specifically designed for – rather than merely transferred to – the web. It may also have marked a turn in academic fashions and intellectual history.

For three decades and more from the 1960s, academic life in Britain, as elsewhere, was dominated by the pursuit of structural explanations in history as in literature; whether Marxist, structuralist, post-structuralist, post-modernist and so forth, the emphasis was on the application of overarching approaches, concepts and methodologies to the study of the past with the aim of making ever-wider generalisations and uncovering the deeper patterns controlling events. The rewriting through the 1990s and early years of this century of the national pantheon of notable lives, on the other hand, may ultimately be seen if not as a form of academic counter-revolution then as an honest attempt to put back human agency into the study of History.

It was Marx, after all, in his essay on the 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, published in 1852, who wrote that ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past’. As long as we can emphasise that men, and also women, really do have a role in making their own history, it is an axiom with which the editors and contributors of the Oxford DNB are in the phrase of the age, ‘intensely relaxed’.

The publication of the Oxford DNB also brought together academic approaches to historical writing and academic authors of our articles with a wide reading public. British academics have flocked to write for the Dictionary, pleased to think that their work for it will reach a wider audience and last longer than anything they submit for compulsory and increasing irrelevant exercises in the state’s assessment of their research.

That said, it should not be forgotten that approximately one third of the contributors to the Dictionary are not associated with a university or college. It is also a matter for satisfaction that more than 20 per cent of hits on the Oxford DNB website emanate from public libraries in the United Kingdom, and that every day the Dictionary is used for homework, by family historians, by journalists (who in the nature of things, never acknowledge what they borrow) and has even featured in several recent thrillers.

Though essays in the Oxford DNB follow a standard narrative format from birth to death, they are not mere lists of facts and achievements, but set the distinctive characteristics of each subject in the flow of history. For example, Mary Warnock’s highly respectful essay on the social purity campaigner of our youth, Mary Whitehouse, is more an historical study of the tastes and social trends of the period from the 1950s to the 1980s in Britain than a straightforward biography, and is all the more interesting for that.

At the other end of the spectrum, Roy Hattersley's memoir of Prime Minister Jim Callaghan, with whom he sat in cabinet, is all the more compelling for the personal details and insights it contains which make the national history in the article come alive.

History and biography are intertwined in quite another way in the very recent entry for Jimmy Savile, added to the Dictionary in January this year. The decision to add biographies to the *OxfordDNB* some 3–4 years after death has sometimes been questioned and we have replied that our articles are not instantaneous obituaries but considered monographs, composed when all the information about a life is available and a mature judgement can be reached. Never was this more necessary than in the case of Savile. At his death he was still a celebrity, an entertainer, a character; by the time I sat down to write the entry with all the testimony of his victims and the official reports into his conduct around me, he was something very different. It was as if history had caught up with biography, mandating that we take a different view not only of the man now that his crimes were evident, but of conduct and behaviour in general that was ignored or tacitly tolerated in the 1960s and 1970s but which is unacceptable today. As moral standards and historical views have changed, so changes biography.

Savile was an exception, of course: the vast majority of entries in the ODNB concern figures notable and successful in their respective fields. We look for achievement, be that in a lifetime of honourable work for the public weal, or thirty seconds of heroism in war. Occasionally, we have relaxed our rules to include what may be described as representative lives. So among those who died in 2009 we included the last three surviving servicemen from the First World War – Henry Allingham, Harry Patch and Bill Stone – who died within weeks of each other and were celebrated in their final years because they were the last link to the formative events of the twentieth century.

Biography may be exemplary, in other words: the tracing of an individual life may be as good a way as any of presenting the history. Certainly that was my aim some years ago in writing a biography of R. H. Tawney, the political thinker, historian and educationist, whose life from Oxford and the trenches on the Somme, to the inner counsels of the Labour Party and the pages of the *Economic History Review*, seemed to illustrate some of the key themes in British History – political, social and academic - in the first half of the 20th century.

But as is often the case, it is only halfway through a book that the author belatedly comes to understand what he or she should really have been writing

about all along – and in my case it should have been a study not of one man, but of three friends who together helped create what we call the Welfare State. One was Tawney himself; another was his friend at Rugby and Balliol, the future archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, often described as the greatest churchman of the twentieth century; and the third, after whom this very lecture hall is named, was their Balliol contemporary and later Tawney's brother-in-law, William Beveridge, author in December 1942 of *The Beveridge Report*, or to give it its full title *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, often termed the blueprint of the welfare state.

Tawney and Beveridge went up to Oxford in 1899; Temple followed a year later. They knew each other intimately at the university. Temple remained in Oxford to teach philosophy and then took holy orders, while Beveridge and Tawney took up residence in the university's settlement house in the East End of London, Toynbee Hall, where Tawney taught adult education classes and Beveridge began the research that culminated in his first great book in 1909, *Unemployment. A Problem of Industry*, the work that inter-alia, set out the idea of the labour exchange for the advertisement of jobs and the recruitment of workers.

They remained in close contact all their lives and those lives bring us close to the great historical themes of their age. Tawney's legacy, no doubt shared with others, was the 1944 Education Act, for which he had agitated since the early 1920s. Beveridge laid out the early structures of post-war welfare. Temple's life and work reminds us of the Christian inspiration behind so much public policy before the 1960s in Britain.

There were differences between them as well, of course: Beveridge's empiricism as a reformer is in marked contrast with Tawney's emphasis on character and fellowship. Tawney and Temple were great Christians, whereas Beveridge lacked religious motivation. Tawney was in his element among the worker-students he encountered in the Northern mill towns where he pioneered adult education for the Workers' Educational Association during the Edwardian period; Beveridge was the more aloof, treating unemployment and poverty as intellectual problems to be solved from some distance, rather than experiences to be observed and shared. Temple was a moderate supporter of a Labour position and Beveridge was a lifelong Liberal. Tawney, meanwhile, was a socialist – perhaps the pre-eminent socialist of the twentieth century in Britain, but his relationship with the Labour Party was not as smooth as may be imagined, especially when Labour was led by Ramsay MacDonald, a man

Tawney already distrusted before MacDonald's betrayal of the party in 1931 when he formed the National Government.

A story is told of Tawney being canvassed in Mecklenburgh Square at the 1959 general election where his local MP was his personal friend, Lena Jeger, later the chairman of the Labour Party. The keen young party worker who interviewed Tawney on the doorstep returned to the local ward room somewhat confused:

Crumby old boy at number 21. I asked him, very politely, if he was Labour. He said he was Socialist. I kept asking if he was Labour and he kept saying he was Socialist. Then I put it to him straight and I said, 'What I really want to know is are you voting for Mrs Jeger?' And he said, 'Yes, of course'. So I said, 'Then you are Labour?' and he said 'I'm a Socialist.' So I put him down as doubtful. You can't be too careful'

The political, personal and temperamental differences between the three friends are an advantage to a biographer rather than a problem. In many senses these three were archetypes, representative of different approaches to social reform and different interests within it, each in itself crucial to the development of a modern politics of welfare. To write their collective biography would have been to explore the range of emotional and intellectual impulses behind the reforms that constructed our world.

It would also have allowed for a more evident and satisfying link with the sophisticated historical explanation of the intellectual origins of twentieth century welfare as advanced by my former colleague in Oxford, Jose Harris. For these three biographies of university men – all of them dons of one description or another – take us back to the intellectual destruction of laissez-faire social philosophies that distinguished the intellectual life of the universities in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods.

Under the aegis of T. H. Green's rethinking of Victorian liberalism in the 1870s and early 1880s; in Balliol, and other colleges also; in a dozen or more university societies, this trio and others around them sought to supersede the economic and social orthodoxies of the past that blamed the poor for their poverty.

In the record of great lives is a list of more than great deeds: properly researched and understood, there are many ways of linking biography to history, and in this case to a specifically *intellectual* history that shaped a generation of reformers whose legacy is still just about recognisable today. Their names are not forgotten, in Bloomsbury at least. This is the Beveridge Hall, and five

minutes away, at no. 21 Mecklenburgh Square, where the altercation in 1959 took place, is the blue plaque remembering R. H. Tawney.

But, you will say, this is too easy. In cases like these, where we are dealing with prominent public figures, leaders in civil society, influential and elite thinkers, it is no challenge to link biography and history together and to read history through the details of each of these great lives, which were great just because of their involvement in the central issues of their generation. And you would be correct. So let me end with a more complex example where history and biography are NOT interdependent: an example from the social depths of nineteenth century America rather than the intellectual heights of twentieth century Britain.

I have spent much of my career teaching the history of slavery in the United States, admiring and following the attempts of American historians to understand slavery as an economic system and social institution, and introducing undergraduates to a subject that always grips them.

Perhaps no area of American History has attracted as much attention and controversy as the attempt to write a general history of slavery in the decades before the Civil War. What was the psychological as distinct from the physical impact of slavery on the slaves? What was its impact on white society in the antebellum South? And on the economy of the South as a whole? Was slavery, as a labour system, profitable? Was it efficient, which is not quite the same thing as profitable? Was it exploitative, or, as recent historians have generally accepted, though with many caveats, paternalistic? Did the slaves have any sort of cultural autonomy or were they also bound to and confined by the social mores and religion of the masters?

These are the questions that have been researched and argued over as a population of 4 million African-American chattel slaves in 1860 has been subjected to closer analysis than almost any other social or racial group in history. Yet attempts at generalisations about the slave experience have broken down at the level of the plantation, the family, and the individual.

We think of slavery on great plantations; in fact the median slaveholding in the American South in 1860 was only 9 slaves, and many were held in even smaller numbers. When a white family owned a single black family, as sometimes happened, the personal relations that developed were quite different from those on a large plantation where many of the slaves were unknown to the whites.

The sheer adaptability of slavery to grow and manufacture most things, at most scales, whether on a plantation of 600 slaves on a bend in the Mississippi River,

or on a family farm in the foothills of the Appalachians, with just a few slaves, has made generalisation difficult. Indeed, the most prominent historian of American slavery, the late Eugene Genovese, in the attempt to explain the institution, used almost every conceivable historical term over the course of his career, associating slavery in turn with **capitalism**, **feudalism**, **seigneurialism**, **paternalism**, and finally exploring the **conservatism** of the Southern whites who resisted **abolitionism**. It was a mark of his intellectual odyssey that in his last works, that very resistance to liberal, industrial and commercial society on the part of the white South, had won Genovese's qualified admiration. Meanwhile, all those 'isms' are also worthy of remark: they are the evidence that American historians have sought to transcend and theorise the experience of individual slaves, and to present slavery systematically, as an aspect of wider history, as something more than the sum of 4 million parts.

If the attempt to write American slavery into History has thus proved difficult, the biography of slaves has offered little by way of a solution. As it was an offence to teach a slave to read and write under all the slave codes that governed slavery in the Southern states, it is estimated that less than 5 per cent of the slave population was literate. And those accounts of slavery that were left behind by slaves are fraught with difficulty as sources.

Over a hundred slave narratives of their bondage, written mainly by slaves who escaped from the South, have survived, but some were written many years after reaching the North, and others were written as campaign literature for the anti-slavery movement. Interesting as they are, all historians agree that they need to be handled carefully.

The most prominent and influential free-black of the Civil War era, Frederick Douglass, the first African-American to be invited to the White House by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, wrote the most famous of all these narratives, but he did so as a by-product of his role as a speaker on anti-slavery platforms to prove he really had been a slave who had escaped slavery in 1838. When this eloquent and proud man stood up to speak alongside white abolitionists, many disbelieved that he'd ever been in bondage. It was claimed by detractors that Douglass had been born a free black in New England. The 'Narrative of his Life', published in 1845, was written to prove a point.

Much later in the 1930s, the Federal Writer's Project of the Depression era sent young college graduates into the South to interview dozens of elderly folk in former slave-holding states who had been slaves before emancipation in the 1860s. And their remarkable testimony fills 40 volumes in the archives of the Library of Congress, some of which has been published. But the majority of

historians have observed a self-denying ordinance over this material, choosing not to use it because they consider it unreliable.

Old men and women forget, or embellish, or they naturally remember their childhood with affection. And since most slave children were not put to work formally on the plantations before the age of 10, many of those interviewed experienced slavery before being forced to labour for their Masters when they still had the run of the plantation. The Yankees in blue uniforms set the slaves free, but the economic and racial turbulence of freedom during the years of so-called Reconstruction after the Civil War were often recalled with regret.

The racial segregation of the South in the subsequent decades, and the informal though strict and sometimes murderous codes of racial conduct that enjoined courtesy and humility from African-Americans in all their interactions with whites, almost certainly affected the way that elderly blacks responded to the questions posed by young, white researchers in the 1930s. The assumption made by historians is that most of their testimony suffered from a sort of self-censorship, in which blacks did not ‘tell it like it was’ because they feared white reactions. This may explain why some of that testimony was curiously sanguine and often nostalgic about ‘the slavery times’.

But beyond matters of source reliability and accuracy, the accounts given by individual slaves of their experiences in bondage do not fit easily into the structures and governing principles that historians of slavery have developed to explain those experiences. This life-writing – for that is a better description than biography or autobiography of the snippets that have been passed down to us – is often too episodic, idiosyncratic, too individualised in short, to be easily integrated into the structural accounts of slavery that historians have developed.

Historians generalise about levels of resistance or acceptance in slavery; about the efficiency and profitability of slave agriculture; about the degree and extent of cultural autonomy or incorporation of the slaves vis-à-vis whites. But these themes are difficult to apply to the biography of Frederick Douglass whose intelligence and character, so evident in the image before you, gave him a remarkable, even mesmeric hold over those who owned him.

As a child, Douglass grew up on a plantation in Maryland containing hundreds of slaves where he was the special playmate of the Master’s son and heir, thus allowed the run of the plantation house and thus in constant contact with whites. That this plantation specialised in the production of wheat rather than tobacco or cotton, the quintessential products of slavery – though cotton cannot, in fact, be

grown as far north as Maryland – is further evidence that the history of slavery does not fit any pre-determined or stereotypical pattern.

Later, while held in Virginia, Douglass fought and wrestled for many hours with another of his owners, as described in a remarkable passage in his autobiography. The bout ended in mutual respect: Mr Covey never tried to discipline Douglass again. Douglass was later taught to read and write by a white woman in Baltimore who thereby defied the law. He was then not a field hand, but a skilled shipwright, working in the Baltimore shipyards, who was paid a weekly wage like any other free worker, but who, on Saturday evenings at the end of the week, gave most of his pay to a relation of his owner in that city. His then owner, in fact, lived hundreds of miles to the south.

We know that perhaps as many as 15 per cent of American slaves at this time, the 1830s, were industrial slaves living and working in towns and cities. But life stories like Douglass's are difficult to integrate in any general historical account of slavery: they do not fit the generalisations we have tried to make about the slave experience.

We are thus caught between remarkable personal accounts of slavery that, almost by definition, were written by unrepresentative slaves, and historians' generalisations about 'the slave system' as a whole which cannot do justice to the variety and complexity of an economic, social and political system stretching across so large and diverse a region as the American South, from Delaware to Texas.

I have encouraged many of my students to go into American archives and uncover what they could from the primary sources on slavery, leaving historians' debates to one side. Always they have surprised themselves on discovering letters, journals, diaries and account books that bring slavery to life, sometimes with brutality and sometimes with sympathy, but in ways that make each plantation under its discipline, sui generis, of its own kind.

And from slavery we turn back to Abraham Lincoln. After his death in 1865, Lincoln's law partner from his days in Springfield, Illinois, Billie Herndon, set out to collect as many stories, observations and accounts of Lincoln as he could find and preserve them for posterity. Latterly, in the 1990s, this material was collected together and published, though that was after my very first doctoral student in Oxford, Matthew Pinsker, who now teaches at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, had used it in his account of Lincoln in Illinois in the 1850s.

One of Lincoln's closest friends there, Joseph Gillespie, recalled in the year after his death that Lincoln studied little history and thought that 'as generally

written [it] was altogether unreliable'. John Todd Stuart, another of Lincoln's law partners, recalled that though Lincoln read 'hard works' of philosophy, logic and mathematics, he 'didn't know anything about history' and 'had no faith in it, nor biography'. When Billie Herndon wrote his own biography of Lincoln, which was published much later in the 1880s, he recalled a day in 1856 when Lincoln had loped into their office in Springfield and picked up the book that Herndon was then reading, a life of the eighteenth-century politician and political thinker, Edmund Burke. After flicking through its pages Lincoln apparently threw it down in disgust. 'It's like all the others', he said:

Biographies as generally written are not only misleading, but false...in most instances they commemorate a lie, and cheat posterity out of the truth. History is not history unless it is the truth.

Lincoln was referring to the 19th-century genre of heroic and exemplary biography and the historical profession has gone beyond that as we have seen. But even if we know the truth, whatever that term denotes, there is still a difficulty, which Lincoln does not seem to have appreciated, in taking together biographical and historical treatments.

Individual experience may be easily linked to wider currents in the case of an Archbishop of Canterbury or a leading civil servant, who, in the nature of things, were intrinsically part of national history. It is less easy to place in history the life of an illiterate slave, bearing only a variant of her mistresses' name, whose African origins by the 1830s were already obscured, and who may have been born on one plantation and sold on through several owners to a place hundreds of miles from her birth. Yet the attempt to do so – to place a slave's life in its historical context - has depended on hard graft in the archives and also remarkable historical ingenuity, and is thoroughly deserving of our respect.

So the point of this lecture is not to vindicate one or other of these methods of preserving the past, whether history or biography. Nor is it to dogmatise about the best sort of biography or the best theory of history. It is rather to encourage further attempts at the integration of structural and biographical approaches, though always with care, with an eye to the sources, and with an awareness of the limitations of both of these ways of writing about the past when taken on their own. Thank you.