



In Defense of Literary Biography

Gary Scharnhorst



Friends of the Alexander M. Bracken Library
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Introduction

At the 2000 annual meeting of the Friends of the Alexander M. Bracken Library, then Provost and President of the Friends' Board of Governors C. Warren Vander Hill announced that future presentations to the Friends at the annual dinner would be known as the Kirkham Lecture to recognize Dr. E. Bruce Kirkham's 25 years of service as the founding executive secretary of the Friends.

The 2005 Kirkham Lecture, held April 6, had a special twist—the speaker, Dr. Gary Scharnhorst, is a former student of Kirkham's. Scharnhorst completed a master of arts in English at Ball State in 1973 and studied under Kirkham.

Prior to coming to Ball State for his master's, Scharnhorst completed his undergraduate degree at Anderson College (before it became Anderson University). He later earned a PhD from Purdue University. He was awarded four Fulbright teaching fellowships to Germany, three of them to Heidelberg University.

He is the author, editor, or co-editor of 35 books, including biographies of Bret Hart and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. He has served as head of the American Realism and Naturalism section of the Modern Language Association and is editor of the journal *American Literary Realism* as well as, in alternating years, the research annual *American Literary Scholarship*.

The Department of English and the Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry co-sponsored Scharnhorst's return to his alma mater. Bruce Hozeski, chair of the Department of English; Joseph Trimmer, director of the Virginia Ball Center; and Robert Habich, professor in the English department, were instrumental to this co-sponsorship.

Scharnhorst's lecture at the Friends' dinner was an abridged version of his essay "The Resurrection of the Author: Why Biography Still Matters," which appeared in *Lives Out of Letters: Essays on American Literary Biography and Documentation in Honor of Robert N. Hudspeth*, ed. Robert D. Habich (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, © 2004), p. 236-252. For more information about *Lives Out of Letters*, consult the Fairleigh Dickinson University Press Web page at inside.edu/fdupress/04060804.html. Friends interested in ordering a copy of the *Lives Out of Letters* may do so at any book store or by contacting Associated University Presses at 2010 Eastpark Boulevard, Cranbury, New Jersey 08512, or www.aupresses.com.

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Executive Secretary
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In Defense of Literary Biography

by Gary Scharnhorst

Even in the current climate of textual scholarship, and despite the oft-proclaimed “death of the author,” biography remains a viable if unfashionable approach to the study of literature. To be sure, many writers over the years have regarded literary biography as a contemptible form of voyeurism. George Eliot described it as a “disease of English literature. . . . It is something like uncovering the dead Byron’s club foot.”¹ In a review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *French and Italian Notebooks* in 1872, Henry James complained that “whatever the proper limits” of biographical investigation may be, “the actual limits will be fixed only by a total exhaustion of matter.” Writers “will be likely to take the alarm, empty their table-drawers, and level the approaches to their privacy. The critics, psychologists, and gossip-mongers may then glean amid the stubble.”² James’s prediction has been realized in the lives of many writers. I think here of such obstacles as the prohibition on publishing Willa Cather’s letters. Matthew Arnold, George Orwell, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden each forbade his heirs from cooperating with biographers. J. D. Salinger, the Howard Hughes of modern American letters, left his hidey-hole in New Hampshire in 1993 long enough to hire a New York lawyer to block the publication of Ian Hamilton’s *J. D. Salinger: A Life*. The field of literary biography is strewn with the ashes of burned letters. Charles Dickens, James, even the egomaniacal Walt Whitman, did “the great thing,” in the words of Miss Tina in “The Aspern Papers,” by burning private papers. Dickens even invited his children to roast onions and potatoes in the fire.

In a vacuum of reliable sources, the danger is, of course, that unscrupulous biographers may misrepresent their subjects as Carl Sandburg mythologized the life of Lincoln. (Edmund Wilson once described Sandburg’s six-volume moonshine “the cruelest thing that has happened to our sixteenth President since he was shot by Booth.”)³ Stephen Crane’s first biographer, Thomas Beer, invented people and letters Crane ostensibly wrote and received in order to reinforce Crane’s bohemian reputation.

Or to cite another example I know well: The juvenile novelist Horatio Alger, Jr., shunned publicity throughout his life. Fewer than two hundred letters from his hand are known to exist, and neither a single letter written *to* Alger nor any of his personal papers are extant, because upon his death in 1899 his sister destroyed all of them according to his wishes. Thirty years later, Alger's first biographer, Herbert R. Mayes, decided that, if he could not locate any sources, he would make them up like a freshman hard-pressed to finish a term paper. "The going was easy," Mayes remembered half a century later, when he finally admitted to his hoax, "especially when I decided to quote from Alger's diary. If Alger ever kept a diary, I knew nothing about it. In any case, it was more fun to invent one. I had no letters ever written by or to Alger, which was fortunate. Again, it was more fun to make them up."⁴ With absolutely no basis in fact, Mayes portrayed Alger as a philandering neurotic estranged from his puritanical father, obsessed with writing the Great American Novel, who aspires to become President of the United States, and who dies alone and broke.

In the vacuum of genuine information, Mayes's inventions assumed the force and luster of truth. His account of Alger's life fooled literary scholars for over forty years because it simply reinforced the popular impression of the author and his work. John Tebbel, former professor and chair of the Journalism Department at New York University, prefaced his biography of Alger in 1963 with a startling admission: "It is a tribute to the research [Mayes] did at [the age of] 28 to note that it can hardly be improved upon nearly four decades later. The primary sources of Alger material are meager, but Mr. Mayes appears to have examined all of them, and no new original material has turned up in the intervening decades. . . . Mayes's research was definitive and I have drawn upon it freely for the biographical section of this book."⁵ As a graduate student in the early '70s, I wrote Tebbel to ask where Alger's diaries were located—the diaries Mayes (and Tebbel, following Mayes's lead) cited so authoritatively. In the public library in Marlborough, Connecticut, he replied—as if he had *actually seen them* there. Not until 1972 did Mayes, by then the retired editor of *Good Housekeeping*, finally admit that his Alger biography had been fabricated from whole cloth: "A more miserable, maudlin piece of claptrap would be hard to imagine," he wrote.⁶

But more to the point: Sometimes a literary biographer, less a detective than a miner or prospector, hits pay dirt by sheer luck or serendipity. As I was

working on a biography of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, best known today as the author of “The Yellow-Wallpaper,” I came across a column she had contributed to the Boston *Woman’s Journal* in 1904 on the demeaning effects of housework. This column soon elicited a reply from one “L. N.” in Concord, Massachusetts. “Please, please do ask Mrs. Gilman not to run down housekeeping any more!” L. N. opens her letter. She insisted that “there must always be housekeeping, or the superintending of housekeeping.” She closed her brief in defense of domestic labor by citing the example of the poet Emily Dickinson. “I know that Emily Dickinson wrote most emphatic things in the pantry, so cool and quiet, while she skimmed the milk; because I sat on the footstool behind the door, in delight, as she read them to me. The blinds were closed, but through the green slats she saw all those fascinating ups and downs going on outside that she wrote about.”⁷ This allusion to Dickinson reciting her poetry is the only description of its kind, the only first-hand or documentary evidence ever discovered that she read her verse aloud. But who was L. N.? Was the testimony reliable? I turned up an answer within ten minutes in the library. Louise Norcross, Dickinson’s cousin and intimate friend, settled in Concord in 1881 and lived there until her death in 1919. Otherwise, little is known about Norcross because she asked that her letters from Dickinson be destroyed at her death. So shrouded in mystery are the details of her life that one of Dickinson’s biographers wonders whether Louise Norcross even knew her cousin was a poet.

Obviously, she did. This glimpse of Dickinson at work corroborates manuscript evidence that she improvised or wrote spontaneously, even as it challenges the widely accepted notion that she wrote alone at night in her room. More importantly, if Dickinson sometimes declaimed her poetry, the dashes she used to punctuate her lines may well have been elocutionary guides. At the very least, Norcross’s comment belies the critical assertions that “there is no record of Dickinson reciting her verses, even for her family,” and that she wrote poetry only for the eye and never for the voice. As one such reader asserted in 1981, “she could not have spoken these poems or anything like them. . . . Not in speech but only in writing could the Dickinson words wield power.”⁸ So much for neat and pretty literary criticism. Sometimes, yes, the bedrock of biographical fact can explode (deconstruct?) empty theoretical speculation.

My work on Gilman in turn sparked my interest in Kate Field (1839–1896), the real-life model for the character of Henrietta Stackpole in Henry James’s novel *The Portrait of a Lady*.⁹ As in Gilman’s case, too, Field’s erasure from history is due not to a dearth of sources but because she also resisted simple categorization, she refused to subscribe to literary convention and formula, and she was a woman. A poet, playwright, and actor, travel writer and journalist, memoirist and lecturer, dress reformer, polemicist, publicist, and editor, Field was “one of the best-known women in America” during her life, according to her obituary in the *New York Tribune*.¹⁰ A member of the expatriate community in Florence in the late 1850s, she was writing about her friendships with the Brownings, the Trollopes, and Walter Savage Landor as the Italian correspondent of the *Boston Courier* and *New Orleans Daily Picayune* while still in her early twenties. The author of an estimated three thousand articles during her career,¹¹ one of the first women to contribute to the *Atlantic Monthly*, she first won national renown by covering Charles Dickens’s final American tour in 1867–68 for the *New York Tribune*. She published two popular travel books, *Hap-Hazard* (1873) and *Ten Days in Spain* (1875) and lectured and performed on stage in both the United States and Europe over a period of twenty-five years. In the late 1870s she worked as a publicist for Alexander Graham Bell—she once sang Irish folk songs to Queen Victoria over the wire to demonstrate Bell’s invention—and she helped to found the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford. In the 1880s she campaigned against Mormon polygamy and for a national marriage law. As the *Chicago Times-Herald* observed at her death, “To Kate Field more than to any man or to any other woman is due extirpation of American polygamy.”¹² As editor of the weekly *Kate Field’s Washington* from 1890 to 1895, she mentored Gilman, who published thirty of her early poems, essays, and stories in the paper. Yet there has been no biography of Field published since 1900—a gap in the historical record I hope to repair within the next couple of years. Despite the explosion in new scholarship devoted to “marginalized” women and minority writers over the past generation or two, there are important literary figures still to be recovered, biographies of significant authors yet to be written.

Again, sometimes a biographer strikes pay dirt by sheer luck or serendipity. A few years ago I was compiling a bibliography of nineteenth-century comment about Nathaniel Hawthorne. While searching the *Boston*

Courier for June 1846 for a review of *Mosses from an Old Manse*, I stumbled across this article, signed H. T.:

In the conflict of laws, one law must be supreme. If our state laws conflict with our national, the state law yields. The higher law always renders the conflicting lower law null and void.

Is it not so in all cases? If the national law bids me do what my conscience forbids, must not my conscience be supreme? Shall the law of conscience or the law of Christ be repealed by a Congress of the United States? . . .

There is a vast difference between submitting to unrighteous laws, and doing unrighteously in submission to law. Having from the beginning declared the war with Mexico unrighteous and unjust, I declare now the same; and although I submit, in obedience to the laws, to the appropriation of money to the support of the war, and should even pay my portion of a direct tax, should one be laid, yet I cannot volunteer to fight, no even serve if drafted. I submit to loss, inconvenience, suffering, in obedience to law, even if I conceive the law unjust;—but I cannot do wrong, even in order to sustain a just law. Conscience is to me supreme law; whatever other law conflicts with it, is null and void. H.T.¹³

Henry Thoreau published the essay “Civil Disobedience” or, as he called it, “Resistance to Civil Government,” three years after this piece appeared. “Conflict of Laws” seems to be a type of rehearsal for that essay—published, significantly enough, a month before Thoreau went to jail overnight for refusing to pay his poll tax. In 1846, it seems, Thoreau protested the method of financing the War with Mexico as much as the war itself. His political opinions were still evolving. In “Resistance to Civil Government” he would echo his earlier argument that the higher law of conscience nullifies civil authority, but he would deplore the ill-logic of his earlier stand: “See what gross inconsistency is tolerated. I have heard some of my townsmen say, ‘I should like to have them order me out to help put down an insurrection of the slaves, or to march to Mexico;—see if I would go;’ and yet these very men have each, directly by their allegiance, and so indirectly, at least, by their money, furnished a substitute.”

There is a standard caveat in literary biography that no reader should infer anything about the life of an author from the writings. We may study the life to understand the work, the argument goes, but not vice-versa.

Similarly, we may study the life of Beethoven to understand his music, but woe unto the critic who attempts to infer from the music anything about the composer's life. Here's exactly how retrograde I am: I'm even willing to challenge this assumption. While working on a biography of the pioneering western American writer Bret Harte, I came across evidence that, in fact, he and his wife, Anna, had a child no previous biographer had mentioned. According to a biographical sketch of Harte that appeared in a San Francisco literary paper in 1894, "While the Hartes lived in California three sons were born to them; but two of them are now living."¹⁴ Not only had no previous biographer noted the birth of this third son, he was not mentioned in any of Harte's extant letters, so I inferred he had died in infancy. But when? I guessed, solely on the basis of Harte's story "The Luck of Roaring Camp," which ends with the death of the title character, an infant boy, that the Hartes' son had been born and died prior to the publication of the story in July 1868. I knew Anna Harte had wept when her husband read the story to her in manuscript.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the San Francisco birth records for that era were destroyed in the fire that consumed the city after the 1906 earthquake. But daily papers often listed births, deaths, and marriages. Might the birth of this son have been reported in a newspaper? I ordered microfilm of the several local papers on interlibrary loan, gradually extending my search back in time, poring over them with the proverbial fine-toothed comb, until I found what I had expected. On 28 October 1867, eight months before "The Luck of Roaring Camp" was published in the *Overland Monthly*, this item appeared in a list of deaths in the San Francisco *Daily Bulletin*: "In this city, Oct. 27, the infant son of Francis B. and Anna Harte, aged 11 days."¹⁶ Bret Harte had memorialized his own child in the story, and Anna Harte had wept a mother's tears at the death of little Tommy Luck.

Finally, let me argue for the continuing relevance of literary biography by examining how the discovery of a few new details about the life of Mark Twain affects how we read his work. Consider this poem I found some years ago in the *Portland Transcript*, a Maine literary weekly, for May 1854:

THE SWISS GIRL'S HOME.
A Swiss girl lay on her dying bed,
Far from her native land,
And wildly thought in troubled dreams

By childhood's home to stand.
 With fancy's eye, she saw the cot,
 And shadowy mountains round,
 And heard the Swiss boy's ringing horn
 Far through the valley sound.
 But all was changed, for they were gone,
 Who gave the scene its charm,
 The grey-haired father's stooping form,
 Her mother's brow so calm.
 With aching heart, she turned away,
 "This is no home for me"—
 She started up with heavenly joy,
 "Oh what is this I see?"
 "I see a city built of gold,
 With pearly gates so fair,
 No sun doth shine, or day doth dawn,
 Nor sorrow enter there."
 "Before God's throne, bright angels throng,
 My Father's face I see,
 A blessed home I've found at last,
 Dear ones I come to thee." S. L. C.

As an eighteen-year-old journeyman printer in Philadelphia at the time, according to his official biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, Samuel Langhorne Clemens wrote "poetry of an obituary kind," although "all he ever said" about the episode was that his "efforts were not received with approval."¹⁷ Little wonder. This ode, with its archaic diction, dangling modifiers, lock-step meter, and sappy sentimentality, does not augur great literary promise. Twenty-three years later, however, Clemens recreated exactly the same moment in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Near the end of the novel, Tom and Becky Thatcher become lost in McDougal's Cave. Starving after several days in the darkness, Becky grows faint and briefly naps. When she wakes, she tells Tom, "I've seen such a beautiful country in my dream. I reckon we are going there."¹⁸ In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, however, Clemens parodied in Emmeline Grangerford's "Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots, Dec'd" the very type of stricken verse he had written at the age of eighteen:

And did young Stephen sicken,
And did young Stephen die?
And did the sad hearts thicken,
And did the mourners cry? . . .
No whooping-cough did rack his frame,
Nor measles drear, with spots
Not these impaired the sacred name
Of Stephen Dowling Bots.¹⁹

My point, modest as it may be, is that Mark Twain's humor often took the form of parody. He ridiculed not only his own adolescent sentimentality but the entire genre of obituary verse, which seems akin to laughing out loud at a funeral—which, of course, also happens in the novel.

In reaffirming my commitment to literary biography here in honor of my friend and teacher Bruce Kirkham, I worry I have only been “preaching to the choir.” Those who believe in the importance of contextualizing literary works in the lives and times of their authors do not need to hear my rant. On the other hand, those who discount the worth of investigating literary lives probably have not been persuaded to change their minds on the basis of my anecdotes and illustrations. There is an old business school adage: no one wants to talk to an accountant when there is an economist in the room. I might paraphrase it for my purposes: no one wants to talk to a literary biographer when there is a theorist in the room. Never mind; I'll continue to read microfilm and pore over manuscripts in search of that elusive detail, that unknown fact. I readily confess to a footnote fetish. In teasing out the story of a life from the traces it has left, I firmly believe, the literary biographer plumbs the most basic, most elemental sources of scholarship and tries to make sense, in literature as in life, of the personal and possessed past.

NOTES

1. George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), VI, 23.
2. [Henry James,] "Hawthorne's French and Italian Journals," *Nation*, 14 March 1872, pp. 172–73.
3. Quoted in Justin Kaplan, "A Culture of Biography," in *The Literary Biography: Problems and Solutions*, ed. Dale Salwak (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), p. 7.
4. Herbert R. Mayes, "After Half a Century," introduction to *Alger: A Biography Without a Hero* (Des Plaines, IL: Westgard, 1978), p. vii.
5. John Tebbel, *From Rags to Riches* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. v.
6. Mayes, p. xxx.
7. Gary Scharnhorst, "A Glimpse of Dickinson at Work," *American Literature* 57 (October 1985), 483–85.
8. David Porter, *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981), p. 141.
9. Scharnhorst, "James and Kate Field," *Henry James Review* 22 (spring 2001), 200–206.
10. "Kate Field Dead," *New York Tribune*, 31 May 1896, p. 7.
11. *Kate Field: Selected Letters*, ed. Carolyn J. Moss (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), p. 247.
12. "Kate Field's Career," *Chicago Times-Herald*, 1 June 1896, p. 6.
13. Scharnhorst, "'Conflict of Laws': A Lost Essay by Henry Thoreau," *New England Quarterly*, 61 (December 1988), 569–71. Linck Johnson disputes my attribution of this piece to Thoreau in "Did Henry Thoreau Write 'Conflict of Laws'?" *New England Quarterly*, 64 (September 1991), 433–44.
14. Hugh J. Logan, Jr., "Bret Harte," *San Francisco Argonaut*, 5 February 1894, p. 5.
15. *Selected Letters of Bret Harte*, ed. Gary Scharnhorst (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), p. 236.
16. "Deaths," *San Francisco Daily Bulletin*, 28 October 1867, p. 3.
17. Scharnhorst, "A Stray Apprenticeship Piece by Samuel Clemens," *American Notes and Queries*, 22 (May–June 1984), 135–37.

18. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, ed. John C. Gerber et al. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 227.

19. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Walter Blair and Victor Fischer (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1985), p. 139.

