

A Sermon

Preached  
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

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on

Sunday, 7 November 2010

Abide with us for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.

*Luke 24, 29*

We do not know why Cleopas and his fellow disciple decided to set off, on what they did not know was the first Easter Day, for the village of Emmaus. It was a considerable distance so they must have had a good reason, friends to visit perhaps or some long-standing prior engagement. Scholars disagree about who exactly Cleopas was and of his companion nothing at all is known. Yet for a moment in Luke's Gospel these two men on their enigmatic journey assume an immediate reality. We can see them in the mind's eye as they trudge along, heads down, bewildered by the events of the last forty-eight hours and kicking up the dust as they go. They are so slow and so absorbed in their conversation that another traveller on foot can come up silently behind them and break in unexpectedly on the discussion.

As is often the case when a third party joins old friends they seem to resent the intrusion, especially when it turns out that this newcomer is unaware of the subject that so preoccupies them. He seems hopelessly out of touch with what's been going on. 'Art thou a stranger ... and hast not known the things that have come to pass?' Cleopas is positively sharp with him.

So in this passage those two disciples step out briefly from among what the antiquary Thomas Browne called 'the dark society', the vast company of the unknown dead. It is in part for them that we gather today in an act not of memory but of commemoration. We cannot remember them, for we have no personal knowledge of them, we can only consider what they have meant, what they still mean and how, recognised or not, they walk beside us.

Among the historian's professional apparatus perhaps the implement most like commemoration is biography. An historical biography is an attempt to capture at a given moment the nature of that shifting relationship between the present and one or more of the dead, and it is biography, as a bridge between individual lives and collective remembrance that I want to consider in this sermon. Thomas Carlyle overstated the case, as he often did, in suggesting that history was not and should not be anything more than the essence of myriad biographies, as if the past were a coral reef made up only of dead individuals. Yet he was surely right to say that biography is often the most compelling part of an historical narrative, whether at moments like that on the road to Emmaus when a fragment of personality catches the light and is reflected across time or in the gospels as a whole which are, not least, four biographies.

It is the very attractiveness of biography of course that renders it in some quarters dubious. The biographer occupies an outlying and to some minds shady corner in the field of academic history. Our patron saint is James Boswell who like many real saints sets a mixed example, a warning as much as a model. Energetic, devoted, brilliant he was also 'vain and heedless' as Carlyle called him, in his essay

on the life of Johnson, at his worst ‘a babbler’, he ‘lived no day of his life’ Carlyle says, ‘without doing and saying more than one pretentious ineptitude’. Yet no Boswell no Johnson, or at least not much.

The relationship of biographer to subject, whether they know one another personally or not, is mutual even where it cannot be reciprocal. It is also uneven. For while the subject starts off at an advantage, they after all have lived a life that is of interest to others, whereas the biographer, usually, has not, yet of course the biographer, however flawed, has the upper hand and in most cases the last word. We have also the right of search, we go through letters, diaries and accounts, we read all sides of the case and we do so deified by hindsight.

The biographer knows the answer to the questions that most trouble the subject: will my book be a success? How will my children turn out? Is this nagging headache anything I should be worrying about? And then we make the material into a narrative, we give it shape which means selection and sometimes addition. Between raw documentation and a full-blown historical fiction biographers pick or try to pick a *via media* in order to communicate what they believe to be the truth about the subject, cutting down on the mass of detail here fleshing it out a bit there, balancing wood against trees. I added a few details to the road to Emmaus: we don’t know that the disciples had their heads down, or that they kicked the dust. I feel that’s all right in this context for emphasis, but I wouldn’t go so far if you didn’t have such easy access to the original.

The biographer’s obligations are, it has been said, heavy and delicate and they have to be borne in the knowledge that we are always, to a greater or lesser extent, wrong. But we are better than nothing, that nothing which the preacher in *Ecclesiastes* so labours:

For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? As the fool.

Carlyle, the Victorian prophet of Cheyne Row, takes up the preacher’s cry in his essay on Bowell’s life of Johnson.

Rough Samuel and sleek wheedling James were and are not. Their life and whole personal environment has melted into air ... the Bottles they drank out of are all broken, the chairs they sat on all rotted and burnt ... All, all has vanished.

And yet, he goes on, thanks to the drunken, over-bearing, over-dressed and slightly ridiculous Boswell, ‘they shall not utterly, not so soon by several centuries’ be lost. Carlyle is not offering eternity, but several centuries are worth having. The function of biography is, he goes on, to be like a row of naphtha lamps set down in the darkness of the past.

There it shines, that little miraculously lamplit pathway, shedding its feebler and feebler twilight into the boundless dark ... on which ... pathway we can still travel.

The naphtha lamp itself has long gone the way of the bottles and chairs in the Mitre Tavern in Fleet Street, yet now it marks the point at which we pass Carlyle on our way back along Boswell's path into the dark.

Thus much biographers can and do do for their subjects and their readers, yet this is not as I said a one-way relationship. By that I do not mean to suggest anything whimsically post-modern. I think experimental lives in which the biographer appears and meets the long-dead subject, do little service to either and usually irritate the reader. What I mean is that the point in history at which their paths cross is both to a great extent arbitrary and yet for both decisive.

The meaning of a life changes with time, not only as it is lived, but long afterwards. Thus biographies are written and re-written. 'The Perennial,' as Carlyle has it, shows 'ever new phases as our position alters.' As we and the dead are carried along through time they too change, take on new meanings, lose old ones or vanish from sight. Jane Austen is by turns a prude, a feminist, an inexhaustible source of tea-time television drama and then, apparently, single-handedly responsible for the slave trade. General Gordon is a hero, then a villain, then he sinks into relative obscurity taking a large part of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* with him. Carlyle himself had an ironically fatal effect on the reputation of his own biographer J.A. Froude, whose posthumous life with its revelations about the Carlyles' marriage was an attempt at honesty that was received as prudence and although Froude's reputation has largely recovered, as the pair of them float on along Carlyle's River of Existence, they will remain forever entwined.

Usually the effect of the subject on the biographer is much less public. Most of us I like to think know our places. Perhaps the ideal biographer is like the first stage of a Saturn rocket, falling away discreetly once the subject is launched, allowing him or her to continue under their own momentum. And yet privately, of course, the biographer is always changed by the encounter in much the same way as one is changed by encounters with the living.

You are enlightened and with luck amused by the life you write, you meet new people, some living some not, are led into new areas of intellectual enquiry, taken sometimes on actual journeys, for to stand where your subject stood, even if there is as little left of what they saw as there is of the Mitre Tavern, will always tell you something. And then, to try and get the subject's point of view in the figurative sense, the biographer has to journey mentally into many states of mind and emotion, to be in love or blinded by ambition, to be much younger and then much older than one is, and quite possibly to change sex.

The subtlest permutations of such relationships between living and dead were of particular interest to Thomas Browne. As an antiquary, another of the dubious types who like biographers lurk on the fringes of respectable history, and as a doctor he allowed his curiosity free rein. Browne liked the sort of questions that publishers at this time of year favour for novelty gift books. Among those he pondered were: are badgers symmetrical? (Browne thought they were) and why don't fish cough? (he didn't know). He also coined the word 'oneirocriticism' for

the study of dreams and in his 'Letter to a friend, upon occasion of the death of his intimate friend', written in 1656, he brought many of these thoughts together until he came by a sequence of rhetorical knight's moves to consider the appearance of the dead in dreams, and wrote:

To dream of the dead, so they appear not in dark habits and take nothing away from us, in Hippocrates' sense was of good signification: for we live by the dead, and every thing is or must be so before it becomes our nourishment.

We live by the dead in several senses. As a scientist, Browne was thinking of what we ingest, dead animals and plants, and as a Christian he was thinking of Christ's death and resurrection. He wasn't particularly thinking of biographers, they were a rarer species in his day, but the same might be said and is said, sometimes in an accusatory way, of us, that we live by the dead. Yet in Browne's account death is completion. Each act must be accomplished, the life must be lived, the book written and printed before it can become part of the living world. The passing of time, the death of the wise man and the fool, the inheritance of later generations are, Browne says, what give life meaning and form our understanding of those who are no longer present, who were never our friends, yet whose lives continue to act on us giving us a part of our identity.

The story of the road to Emmaus is on reflection an oddly uncomfortable one for the most part. The distress of the disciples at the beginning is followed by their impatience with the stranger. Then after they have explained everything to him, he in turn is irritated with them, calling them fools and expounding the scriptures at great length to set them right. By the time they are close to Emmaus it's getting dark, everyone is tired and it would be quite plausible psychologically if they were all rather sick of each others' company and went their separate ways, indeed Christ makes as if to be off. But then something prevails on his companions – good manners? a bad conscience? – and they ask him to stay.

What happens after that is a miracle and it must defeat the imagination of the most hard-working biographer to enter into it. But it is possible perhaps to imagine that moment on the road, when at an arbitrary meeting point, late in the day, two otherwise obscure men pause, confront their half-seen companion and invite him to stay, as we now late in the year, say to Browne's dark society, 'abide with us'.

## References

*Ecclesiastes* 2, 14–19

*Luke* 24, 13–31

Thomas Browne, 'On Dreams' (c. 1650)

—, 'Letter to a friend, upon occasion of the death of his intimate friend' (1656)

Thomas Carlyle, 'Biography' (1832)

—, 'Boswell's Life of Johnson' (1832)