FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Biography: A Brief History
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Harvard University Press
978-0-674-02466-3
(March 20, 2007)

"I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful," Samuel Johnson wrote in 1750.

Dr. Johnson's eighteenth century vision for biography was not merely that it should depict a wider range of subjects than male poets and princes. He also argued that biography should rise above "panegyrick" and include "the mistakes and miscarriages" of a life. Nigel Hamilton's study reveals that two hundred years would pass before Dr. Johnson's dream was to be realized. It wasn't until well after "the triumph of millions of individual's wills" in World War II that a multitude of intimate, imaginative, warts-and-all depictions of a wide variety of lives, male and female, would be published—in books, TV, film, radio, theater, and the Internet. Indeed, Hamilton's central thesis is that the proliferation of biography and autobiography is a function of the Western idea of individualism.

A Cambridge graduate, Hamilton has written several critically acclaimed biographies. His first was *The Brothers Mann*, followed by *Monty*, a three-volume, Whitbread Award-winning "official" life of Field Marshal Montgomery, *JFK: Reckless Youth*, and *Bill Clinton: An American Journey*. He has also directed the British Institute of Biography and has taught university-level biography courses in Britain and the United States. The writer claims in this study that, despite the current glut of biographies, and despite their importance to our notions of self, truth, and imagination, the field of biography is largely "neglected and marginalized" in academia today.

Hamilton traces the practice of biography from its origins in cave renderings of matchstick men (2900 BCE) to the present heyday, paying close attention to the ever-present tension between chronicle and art, commemoration and critical portrait, and how each culture, in each era, tries to resolve this tension. He cites Plutarch's revolutionary resolve "not to write histories, but lives," in a golden age followed by the hagiography of the Dark and Middle Ages. The Renaissance sees Shakespeare borrowing from Plutarch's rediscovered *Lives* for his history plays as constraints are lifted somewhat, and an educated citizenry becomes more willing to

look into the “empty corners” of history, into the lives of real, rather than idealized, men. But biographers were, for the most part, “newspaper obituarists” when Dr. Johnson urged in the 1750s that the craft be practiced by “the most artful writer.” Hamilton looks closely at the twentieth century emergence of biography as a creative endeavor. Wrenched from the stifling Victorians, biography has arrived today “at the forefront of Western culture” thanks to Freud’s psychological profiles, the fall of sexual taboos in publishing, and the development of bold new media for the investigation and display of lives.