

Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse by David Amigoni. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. vii, 199 pp. ISBN 0745007716. \$45.00.

David Amigoni has written an intriguing, challenging, and at times frustrating book. *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* is intriguing because it is not what it seems. It is not, for one thing, about Victorian biography as a genre, but rather, as Amigoni is careful to explain, about the role played by biography in the emergence and shaping of the academic disciplines of English and history, the two "master narratives" of Victorian culture. Biography, he argues, was central to both. The history of English literature as presented in the nineteenth century was chronicled through the lives of its authors. Modern historical studies in the same period stressed the role of major figures in the development of the English state.

Amigoni offers a theoretical re-reading of the function and significance of nineteenth-century biography and questions the idea of a homogeneous ideology of English literature. Moreover, he contends that the emergence of the authoritative discipline of modern history was crucial in determining the subordinate space occupied by literature. The book's challenge comes in its intense theoretical argument which presses into service a tantalizing range of Victorian biographical writing from the little known Macmillan series *Twelve English Statesmen*, and J. R. Seeley's *Life and Times of Stein* (1879), to celebrated texts such as Carlyle's *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, Macaulay's biographical essays, and John Morley's *English Men of Letters* series.

To the nineteenth-century liberal Comtean intellectuals who were behind the establishment of modern history as an academic discipline, the project had several functions. One was to reach out to a hitherto disenfranchised constituency, those without a classical education, to the self-educated, and to women. Another was to anchor the subject firmly in the present, to relate past to present, to distil, through exemplary biographies, the essentials of good statesmanship and good citizenship. Despite a firm base outside the universities, it was nonetheless an elitist and authoritarian discipline. These same liberal intellectuals, Amigoni argues, were suspicious of the powers of rhetoric, of "literariness," of the energies released by the act of reading itself, a power which could "misread or challenge claims that might be made about politics and the direction in which the nation should move."

Not surprisingly, the historians who were regarded with the most skepticism were those who were most "literary," Carlyle and Macaulay in particular. The book's final chapter lucidly discusses the responses to Macaulay's biographical essays, the attempts to neutralize the populist message of *The Lays of Ancient Rome*, and the contrasting constructions of Macaulay, first by Trevelyan and then by James Cotter Morison in his *English Men of Letters* volume.

There is much in this book to delight the student of biography as a genre. Amigoni draws together some fascinating threads: a nineteenth-century perspective