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Penny Summerfield, *Histories of the Self. Personal Narratives and Historical Practice*

Karen Meschia

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REFERENCES

Penny Summerfield, *Histories of the Self. Personal Narratives and Historical Practice*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 193 p. ISBN 978-0-415-57619-2

- 1 Throughout her distinguished career as a feminist cultural historian of the Second World War, Professor Summerfield's work has been remarkable for its imaginative, rigorous use of the full range of autobiographical material—diaries, letters, oral history, memoirs and more—available to researchers whose interest is in how subjective experience shapes and is shaped by the wider societal and historical context. This “turn to the personal” (6), as exemplified in Summerfield's work, has been contested and is still widely debated; the author's own epistemological and methodological clear-sightedness as to the constructed nature both of individual *post hoc* narratives and the historian's use of them was already evident in the title of an important earlier work *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, whose subtitle, *Discourse and subjectivity in oral histories of the Second World War*, clearly announced the author's intention to face head-on issues hitherto seen as epistemologically problematic.
- 2 In her recent publication, *Histories of the Self. Personal Narratives and Historical Practice*, the fruit of experience shared with students and fellow researchers, and of her long-standing belief in the value of individual life-stories for bringing to light marginal topics ignored by mainstream history, Summerfield has chosen to foreground such matters as reliability or representativeness by taking a historiographical perspective. She proposes “an opportunity to reflect critically, in relation to larger historiographies, on historical questions and methodologies focused on the personal in history” (3). Her aim is to examine, and to celebrate, the resulting transformation in historical practice brought about by this change of focus and she does so with her customary gift for concision and clarity, enhanced by an eye for the telling detail.
- 3 To elucidate her own choice of terminology, Summerfield explains how the many other alternatives currently in usage arose historically and are differently connoted—from the “ego-document” to the “testimonio” (5)—across cultures and disciplines. We are reminded that a preoccupation with the personal touched other human sciences

concomitantly, a trend rooted in the 18th century emergence of a new, modern self-consciousness “[...] that looks inward to its self rather than outward to family, faith and community.” (6) The author sees this interest for personal narrative, self and subjectivity as further stimulated by more recent intellectual developments: post-structuralism, post-colonialism, feminism and psychoanalysis. A preliminary cautionary comment concerns using archives, an essential resource, but which have mostly been built with a “degree of randomness” (12) that alternately delights and frustrates researchers.

- 4 Of the five chapters composing the main body of this 193-page work, four deal each with a specific genre of personal testimony: letters, diaries, autobiography and oral history, the fifth directly addressing the underlying question of representativeness. Deploying a fine selection of case studies that span the centuries and the globe, the author subjects each genre to a similar critical scrutiny: an examination of contexts in which the practice may arise, of its differing forms and significance for practitioners, and of the widely divergent approaches to such materials by historians. Summerfield’s feminist perspective does full justice to the gendered specificities and problematics of each genre and her methodological discussion invariably throws new light on familiar questions, often entailing a reappraisal of the issues involved in self-narrative, even if the fundamental tension for the researcher almost always hinges on the extent to which such sources can, or indeed should, provide legitimate access to empirical data.
- 5 The epistolary form, still the most common medium for personal expression, often arises in circumstances, wartime notably, where only one side of the dialogic exercise survives, requiring researchers’ methodological inventiveness. As throughout, Summerfield shows an evolution in approach, with early advocates of a history “from below” still reading letters in search of facts (25), in a perspective that continued to view individuality as a source of possible “bias” (27). Thus, Erikson’s insightful 1972 work on correspondence from Scottish and English immigrants to the USA does not engage with subjectivity or emotion, nor indeed gender, now seen as vital to historical understanding, and accessible precisely through letters. Subsequent research, notably on war correspondence, has involved a shift in perspective, viewing letter-writing as a social and cultural practice, and letters as “sites in which ideology, discourse and popular culture are deployed in the fashioning of the self” (24).
- 6 “Diaries and journals” says Summerfield, “capture the rough texture of the everyday, unsmoothed by retrospective insights and reorganisation” (50); as with letters, a recurrent question is whether the researcher’s objective should properly be that of information mining or of gaining access to subjectivity, which to an extent hinges on the (avowed) intentions of the diarist and these can vary widely. Starting from wartime examples of the “diarist as observer” (53), Summerfield then shows how the “cultural turn”, influenced by Foucault, has recast diary-keeping as a technique for managing subjectivity, a “technology of the self” (56), an approach potentially rich for understanding constructions of ethnicity and gender. Challenges for historians relate to issues of contradiction or incoherence, while the notion of privacy and the private-public divide is revealed to be less clear-cut than might be imagined.
- 7 Autobiography and memoir differ from the preceding, essentially private, synchronic genres in being both “more emphatically retrospective” (79), shaped simultaneously by two moments in time, and generally addressing a readership, so more artfully constructed. Interestingly, Summerfield shows how a somewhat unquestioning

“reading for facts” (80) by historians has given way to increasing sophistication as to the documents’ status as text, influenced by literary figures such as Philippe Lejeune, and now aiming for “subjective truth” rather than fact. This has liberated some from an illusory quest for objectivity and from unease about inaccuracies or inconsistencies, when discovering the *meaning* of the past is at issue. A key insight from Summerfield’s discussion relates to the importance of the prevalent discursive environment for the way autobiographers may draw on contemporary cultural models, unavailable at the time of the events, in reinterpreting their experiences. For historians however, the contingent nature of narrative performances can never make real people into mere textual constructs.

- 8 For Summerfield, the practice of oral history, or “recovery history” from below (107), enthusiastically embraced since the 1970s for its capacity to give a voice to the traditionally unheard, presents a difference in kind that may have made it subject to more doubt: the historian creates a corpus *ex nihilo*, only the relatively recent past is, by definition, within its scope and technology has enabled the methodology to escape the confines of academia. Reliability is thus a central issue, with the interplay between public discourse and personal recall, between individual memory and the popular cultural constructs available to frame experience, being crucial to understanding. Personal narratives are never “windows that open straightforwardly onto the past” (126) and evasions, silences and inconsistencies require sensitive handling: rather than attempting to “straighten out the crooked path of personal testimony”, the ability to “read against the grain” (128) can help contextualise irregularities (147).
- 9 The question of representativeness, mentioned throughout, is then tackled in depth, referring back to the case studies used in order to identify different strategies adopted for addressing the issue; these range from attempts at would-be scientific rigour to the suggestion that it is simply a false problem. Early concerns about legitimacy led to a preoccupation with samples, selection methods, benchmarking and so on for some historians in the 70s and 80s and Summerfield remarks that “an underlying anxiety that general claims are untenable unless underpinned by a demonstration of ‘typicality’ informs much of this work” (150), before proceeding gently to deconstruct these demonstrations. More crucially, she points out how a quest for the norm has always tended to disqualify women and minority groups. At the other extreme, this elusive goal of typicality may be brushed aside unhesitatingly by researchers in favour of the “luminosity of the single case” (150) that can serve as a powerful subjective vehicle for illuminating history.
- 10 The author concludes by noting that the “implicit defensiveness” (167) still detectable among historians engaging with the personal in their work is doubtless due to continuing attacks by detractors over the attention given to the individual rather than to the global or systemic, which they see as inherently conservative. She energetically refutes this position, as, clearly, the research she has discussed “challenges gendered, classed, raced and colonial power relationships, through histories of the self” (167) and indeed offers a new understanding of global processes. As to the genuine concern with “authenticity”, which she discerns as a constant among historians of the self, seemingly a hallmark of legitimacy, Summerfield finally demonstrates how this somewhat intangible quality can be better understood in terms of accuracy, authorship and provenance.

- 11 The wealth of detail and example which is precisely one of the most engaging features of this work necessarily goes unmentioned here. It is no accident that Penny Summerfield chose to open her introduction *in medias res* with a case study: "Estelle Armitage was born into a [...]" (1), which serves most appositely to demonstrate the fascination of life histories, providing as they do the opportunity to "visit other worlds through the prism of another person's memories, feelings and perceptions" (2). Beyond the academic interest, abundantly demonstrated here, of listening to the stories that others have to tell us, this invitation to empathise has never seemed more urgent and the book is a fine example of accessible erudition that will be of immense value to apprentice and seasoned researchers alike.
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Keywords: autobiography, gender, historiography, representativeness, subjectivity

Mots-clés: autobiographie, genre, historiographie, représentativité, subjectivité

AUTHORS

KAREN MESCHIA

Université de Toulouse – Jean Jaurès

karen.meschia@gmail.com