Despite the prodigious growth of fine Africanist scholarship since the 1960s, the continent's history sometimes seems to be lingering on the fringes of popular consciousness. Picking up a best-selling history, casual readers might find themselves learning more about King Leopold than about Tippu Tip. One remedy may lie in African biography. If publishers put out vibrant life histories of figures from Africa's past, ones acknowledging their complexity, perhaps popular familiarity with the continent would flourish. Biographies, ones that are not only vital but also intimate, do have the power to stimulate the imagination, ideally leading to deeper understanding of context and maybe even greater empathy with individuals. Jonny Steinberg's recent biography of the Mandelas' marriage, Winnie and Nelson: Portrait of a Marriage (2023), comes to mind as a superb exemplar.

The time is ripe. Within the discipline of history writ large, biography currently occupies “the central place,” according to Australian historian Barbara Caine (p. 7). She notes that this centrality is still subject to debate, but the fact remains that the approach is hotter now than it has been since the mid-nineteenth century. Caine has written a brief survey of the relation between biography and historical writing since Plutarch. Referring mainly to figures in the American and European (especially British) past, her study mentions only two books on African individuals, one iconic (Nelson Mandela) and the other an abolitionist who fabricated his autobiography to serve his cause
(Olaudah Equiano). Given the brevity of her book and the massiveness of the terrain, she should not be faulted for the scarcity of these references. Rather, her survey may point the way to possible future directions for Africanist biographers, such as those contributing to the Ohio Short Histories of Africa series, nearly half of whose current titles tell the stories of individuals.[1]

Caine’s survey shows contemporary historians casting an increasingly broad net over past lives. They want to avoid, and often to critique, the hierarchies—gender, ethnic, imperial—that long determined whose story gets told and how. Great men are no longer the sole worthy subjects, nor do they need to be heroes. Women have joined them, but so also have families, siblings, intellectual networks. Their flaws are fair game. All are capable of illuminating how the broader society works. Private lives, once narrowly concerned with spirituality and domestic affairs, are broadly considered worthy of exposure and discussion. And yet most historians have moved beyond reductive forms of psychoanalysis and the idea that there is an “inner life” about which the truth can be known. We can still speculate about and try to reconstruct “inner lives” but with keen awareness that people “perform” their lives: we all show others how we want to appear while we negotiate the social structures around us. In short, the door has swung wide open for biographers who wish to explore wider societies by treating subversive or marginal subject matter or even just significant moments in the life of someone who is neither male nor “great.”[2]

Roy Doron and his former dissertation advisor, the prolific Nigerian historian Toyin Falola, have produced for the Ohio series a brief biography of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the late Nigerian activist and polymath. (He was a high-ranking administrator, successful businessman, and popular writer.) Saro-Wiwa’s name gained global renown in 1995 when the Nigerian government hanged him for publicly combating the environmental damage caused by oil companies in the Niger delta. Although Saro-Wiwa did indeed belong to the Ogoni, one of the small groups in the delta whose livelihood had been cruelly damaged by oil mining and spills, he was no “tribalist” but an ardent Nigerian nationalist. Arguing that Nigeria needed, above all, a fair distribution of power among each and every group, large and small, living within its extensive borders, he had not supported the Biafran secession of 1970. Nigeria’s problem, as he saw it, was the unfair dominance of the country’s economy and politics by the three major ethnicities (Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, Yoruba). His novels and television plays avoided ethnic stereotypes of all kinds and celebrated the forces binding the country together, including the languages of English and Nigerian pidgin. When he closed his business enterprises (publishing, retail, real estate) and ended his writing career to found MOSOP (Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People) and become a full-time activist in 1990, he was challenging the power and profits not only of the entrenched political elite but also of multinational corporations like Shell. On a global platform, he cast blame on the Nigerian government, Shell, and conciliatory Ogoni chiefs. The Nigerian government executed him after he daringly equated the destruction of the Niger delta with genocide.

Doron and Falola are keen to underscore Saro-Wiwa’s legacy as “an icon of human rights and international activism” (p. 9). They do so in a fairly dispassionate book. First, they avoid reducing the causes of Nigerian ethnic conflict simply to British indirect rule policies. The British “did not invent ethnic and political conflict in Nigeria,” nor did they alone create a patronage system, one that Saro-Wiwa called “indigenous imperialism” (p. 22). Nigerian politicians from the “big three” were significantly to blame. Secondly, the authors are candid about Saro-Wiwa’s personal or ethical shortcomings: he used his political offices for personal enrichment, he put himself at the head of most Ogoni organizations to the vexation of their
established elders, and he neglected his two families. The authors celebrate the heroic efforts of their subject, without making him a hero. They conclude honestly that Saro-Wiwa’s legacy was “dampened” by the strife that followed his death, when factionalism destroyed international support for his movement (p. 145).

The authors’ general support for Saro-Wiwa would have been strengthened by greater candor about factionalism in MOSOP and Ogoniland generally. It is easy to blame the activist’s fate on the machinations of Sani Abacha, the military ruler of Nigeria, but Abacha was not his only enemy. Doron and Falola could have presented Saro-Wiwa’s fate and his own qualities more clearly if they had laid out the differing agendas and conflicting interests within MOSOP. The authors imply that the split within the movement was not as simple as “Saro-Wiwa leading idealistic youth against elders in league with Shell and the government,” but what then caused the schism? We need to learn more about why some Ogoni people were dissatisfied with his leadership. Mere mention of “controversy” does not shed light on the wider society (p. 102).

Ohio University Press is marketing this series as contributing “lively” biographies to the history of Africa, as well as “succinct[ly]” introducing the African past to the “student, scholar, casual reader” (p. 10). Liveliness and brevity are both challenging tasks, particularly given the political complexity of Nigeria, where ethnic identities have long been multiple and in constant flux. One wonders if political event-history is the best way to tell Saro-Wiwa’s story to a nonspecialist audience. Are the machinations of a dizzying array of acronymic political parties and movements the best way to bring Saro-Wiwa and his crusade to life? The cultural dimension has gone missing. Is it possible for the “Ogoni way of life” to become palpable in a work of this necessary brevity, especially when Ogoni experience—cultural values and behavior—take up less space than political parties? One also longs for more palatable evidence of the environmental damage wreaked on Ogoniland, beyond that the ruin made “life untenable” (p. 82).

Both the Caine and Saro-Wiwa books are slim products put out by publishing houses—Macmillan International Higher Education and Ohio University Press, respectively—intent on selling low-cost introductory books to students.[3] This commercial purpose may be connected to the low production values apparent in both books: there are typographical errors; the prose tends to be pedestrian; and, in the case of the Caine book, the ratio of print to page is so high that the physical act of reading can be less than pleasant. One wonders if a more inviting general introduction to “biography and history” would have been achieved by assembling, with brief introductions, an anthology of high-quality biographical excerpts—Thomas Carlyle on Cromwell, Carlo Ginzburg on Menocchio the miller, and Steinberg on Mandela—that show how the biographical form of history writing has changed over time.[4] By the same token, the authors in the Ohio series serve their intended readers best when they actually deliver the “lively” stories that they advertise and that newcomers to the field of African history so badly need.

Notes

[1]. Ohio University Press has grouped some of these short books into three compendia, two on leaders and one on activists.

[2]. Caine makes the interesting observation that one inherited literary practice has retained its grip: the structure of biographies remains chronological rather than, unlike many recent novels, experimental.

[3]. Caine’s book comes from Macmillan’s History and Theory series, while the Saro-Wiwa volume is part of Ohio Short Histories of Africa series.

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