English autobiography, c. 1540 – c. 1640

Autobiographical writing took root in England between 1540 and 1640. However, there was no established autobiographical genre: the word 'autobiography' entered English only in 1809. By 'autobiography' I mean a retrospective narrative by an individual of his or her life up to the point of writing. Such an account differs both from a chronicle whose author is a self-effacing observer of events and from diaries and other personal records kept from day to day or week to week. Texts that I would describe as 'autobiographies' were normally written with an audience in view, even if only family members, or just a single friend. They usually involved some self-representation; less frequently self-examination or self-interrogation. Here I classify my texts according to the various genres or media their authors chose. Given the constraints of time, my survey is necessarily selective.

The Reformation and Counter-Reformation encouraged the production of both Protestant and Catholic life writing. John Bale, a powerful early propagandist of the English Reformation, published in 1553 an account of his troubles as a Protestant bishop in Ireland and his flight abroad after the accession of the Catholic Mary Tudor. He included in his 1557 catalogue of British authors a concise personal autobiography that emphasized his conversion to Protestantism and his ensuing troubles. Bale's friend John Foxe included in his massive survey of persecutions, *Actes and Monuments* (1563), much more testimony that certainly or probably originated in the first person narratives of persecuted Protestants.

The most fully autobiographical Catholic records of this period were generated by the Jesuit order. John Gerard (1564-1637) and William Weston (1550?-1615) both wrote at the behest of their superiors detailed Latin accounts of their missionary work in England, in 1609 and 1611 respectively. Gerard's is the more forceful of the two.

He was self-deprecating about his achievements, and represented himself as God's unworthy instrument, yet he emerges from his own account as quietly effective and decisive in his missionary work. His narrative is full of dramatic incident, skilful delineation of character, and vivid dialogue. The Jesuit authorities controlling the English College in Rome also interrogated candidates for admission. Nearly 600 sets of their *responsa* survive from between 1598 and 1685, illuminating family divisions, inner individual religious conflicts, and the process of conversion.

The great sixteenth-century flowering of English poetry accompanied and followed the Reformation, though many of its sources of inspiration were secular. Several English poets drew upon or described their own experiences, and their verse figures prominently in recent studies of early English life writing. Exceptionally, the musician Thomas Whythorne (c.1528-1596) explained the hidden meanings of his songs and sonnets in a long and much-discussed prose account of his life that he sent a 'good friend' in about 1576. Whythorne revealed with unique candour the frustrations he experienced as a household servant, especially when the expectations of female employers created internal tensions expertly analysed by Elizabeth Heale. Meredith Anne Skura highlights Whythorne's 'unrelenting self scrutiny', his frank descriptions of his anger and of his feelings towards women, and his efforts to curb his passions, often obliquely expressed in his verse. The servant's need repeatedly to defer to his social superiors convinced Whythorne that he must make himself known to a wider public by publishing his music. Five portraits of Whythorne, including a woodcut made to accompany his published *Songs* in 1571, also testify to his interest in self-monitoring and self-representation.

Thomas Tusser (c. 1524-1580) appended a verse autobiography to *Fiue Hundreth points of good Husbandry,* the greatly expanded 1573 edition of his famous

agricultural treatise (also in verse). *The Authors life,* in 38, soon 40 eight-line stanzas, includes details of his family life and education from his birth onwards and accounts of his working careers as a musician and farmer. It presents Tusser as a man who had worked hard and with small reward to gain the valuable wisdom he now shared with his readers. He had suffered many misfortunes, but intended to accept what God thought best. Tusser dedicated the various editions of his treatise to his former patron Lord Paget, and other members of the Paget family, but in his *Life* adopted a familiar, confiding tone in addressing a 'gentle friend' or 'frends', among his readers, on whom he probably counted to help him achieve a prosperous old age. Tusser, then, was a writer who wooed both patron *and* public with his artfully contrived persona.

Another verse autobiography survived in a lady's commonplace book unpublished until 1993. This is 'The Memorandum of Martha Moulsworth Widdowe' (1577-1646), composed in 1632. Mrs Moulsworth's poem, completed on her fifty-fifth birthday, consists of 55 rhyming couplets. Her father was a clergyman who, she claimed, had taught her Latin. She recorded in her poem the names of all three husbands and the duration of their marriages, but it was the third to whom she had been married longest and whom she still mourned as an exceptionally kind partner. Her children had died by the time of writing. She was now determined to remain a widow. Three much-discussed lines of the poem express her wish that there was a university for women and her conviction that such an institution would be outstandingly successful. Here then is a distinctively female voice, but one that speaks of a life bounded by male authority. This beautifully balanced poem expresses conformist piety and a possibly deceptive serenity. But who were its intended readers? Its title 'The Memorandum' points to Moulsworth's desire to be remembered, and in tone and style, it has something of the character of a first person epitaph.

Parental advice, by this time a well-established genre, was sometimes based on the writer's own experience. Lady Grace Mildmay (1552-1620) left her descendants reminiscences interspersed with consoling meditations and virtuous precepts. Grace's pious, respected and well-loved mother had given her an exemplary upbringing. But her arranged marriage with Walter Mildmay, which had produced only one child; the couple's enforced residence with Walter's parents; their inadequate allowance, and Walter's frequent absences, had all tested Grace severely. Her father's enhancement of her younger sister's share of his estate at Grace's expense had been especially distressing. Her troubles had taught her to put no confidence in man. By their corrupt nature all human beings, but especially members of families, were apt to offend one another. God had however enabled Grace to resist temptation and immerse herself in the activities appropriate to a pious and useful lady.

The Cumbrian landowner Sir John Lowther (1582-1637) started writing a treatise of advice, but finally decided that he would set down his own life, and thus speak by example, which taught better than precept. His account of his young adulthood is dominated by his difficult relationship with his father, depicted as a man of poor judgement who was himself at odds with Lowther's grandfather. Lowther emphasized the need to conserve one's property and avoid waste. He was proud that he had kept the family inheritance intact, largely thanks to his good relationship with his grandfather and his legal expertise, which had been the basis of a lucrative practice. His account also vividly depicts the difficulties faced by a gentleman in maintaining his independence in face of the rivalries of local noblemen. However, it passes comparatively quickly over his distinguished public career.

Some autobiographers were mainly or partly motivated by the desire to justify their own actions. Richard Vennar (1564-1615) was exceptional in publishing an

Apology (1614) in an attempt to defend his damaged reputation. His initially promising career had suffered a serious setback when he had been cheated of his father's bequest. Subsequent efforts to mend his fortunes (which included involvement in theatrical productions) repeatedly went wrong as the result of his misjudgements or bad luck. He evidently became the butt of ridicule and suspicion. He addressed his *Apology* to two different audiences: the first part to his detractors among the 'infected Multitude' and the second to 'all generous persons'. In the first he rebutted what he represented as malicious charges and rumours; in the second he represented himself as a zealous patriot and loyal subject who had worked tirelessly for a series of good causes. Alas, he died an imprisoned debtor the following year.

In 1608, Sir Thomas Bodley (1545-1613) wrote a *Life* that has been described as a 'skilfully structured apologia for his career', but it is altogether subtler and more assured than Vennar's. Bodley carefully presented himself as an unselfish promoter of the public good in a variety of spheres: at Oxford university, as a diplomat, and finally as the restorer of the University Library named after him. His *Life* sought quietly but firmly to defend his reputation as an effective diplomat, to show that he had been the victim, not a promoter, of the 1590s political intrigues that allegedly cost him appointment to the post of secretary of state, and to justify his decision to devote himself to the Library project rather than return to the service of the crown. Bodley may have intended the *Life* for publication, though it was not printed until 1647.

The astrologer and medical practitioner Simon Forman (1552-1611) differed from these apologists in that, as Lauren Kassell, his most recent biographer, remarks, he looked to 'the record itself to vindicate its author in the eyes of posterity against his enemies'. His eventual professional success despite his early handicaps and his repeated misfortunes and setbacks in the shape of suits at law, imprisonments, loss of

equipment, slander, and trouble with the College of Physicians, spoke for itself. Forman left both an autobiography, portentously entitled ‘the book of the life and generation of Simon’ (1552-1573), and a record consisting of brief summaries of each year’s events (1564-1602). The latter, less carefully composed text, contains information about Forman’s promiscuous sexual adventures and other intimate details. As Kassell says, these texts ‘document the credibility of Forman’s lineage; his divine prerogative to study, heal, and overcome adversity in order to do so; the influence of the heavens on his life, and his ability to read these influences.

Travel and war – activities often combined – gave rise to more first person narrative than any other aspect of early modern experience save religion. Richard Hakluyt’s *The principal navigations* (1589), a huge collection of reports, did for England’s explorers what John Foxe had earlier done for her Protestant martyrs. However, few early travel writers were autobiographers as well as reporters. One of them was the Virginian pioneer Captain John Smith (1580-1630). Smith’s *True Travels, Adventures, and Observations* (1630) presents a romantic self-image that combines the valiant knight with the modern professional soldier. After a brief experience of apprenticeship, about four years soldiering, and a visit to James VI’s Scottish court, Smith retired into a remote Lincolnshire wood, where in a ‘pavilion of boughs’ he studied Machiavelli’s *Art of War* and Marcus Aurelius, ‘his exercise a good horse, with his lance and Ring’. Determined to fight the Turks, he entered Habsburg service, killed three Turkish officers in single combat, was taken prisoner, sold into slavery, escaped to Muscovy, and after further adventures eventually returned to England, where he joined in the first attempt to colonise Virginia in 1607.

In striking contrast with Smith’s *Adventures,* the so-called ‘journal’ of Richard Norwood (1590-1675) is a rare example of a life-narrative that combines foreign

adventures with intense self-scrutiny. In 1613 Norwood sailed to Bermuda, which he later helped to survey. He settled there in 1638 after several years teaching and writing about mathematics and navigation in London. He compiled his autobiography in his new home during 1639. He recalled among other things the vanity and wantonness of his youth, his love of plays and romances, the intense pressures of sexual desire, his attraction to Roman Catholicism, and his horrific nightmares. During his first visit to Bermuda, his reading of St Augustine's classic autobiographical *Confessions* helped Norwood achieve an 'undoubted assurance of the remission of sins and sure reconciliation with God in Christ', although even after his return to London he underwent 'a kind of spiritual-psychological breakdown' with a terrifying sense of the close presence of Satan. His recovery was to be gradual.

Norwood's account of his inner struggles anticipates a major theme of first-person writing during the years after 1640. The growth of sects after 1640 stimulated religious autobiography among the middling groups of English society. The upheavals of the civil wars and their impact on individuals and families also helped to generate a great increase in first person life writing. Few of the texts described here achieved print publication during their authors' lifetimes, and there is nothing to show that the others circulated widely in manuscript. No dominant form of retrospective first-person life writing established itself before 1640. The texts reviewed here belonged to different genres: different aims, different unseen audiences, and different rhetorical requirements informed and shaped them. Yet their authors created through their self-representation vivid impressions of distinctive personalities. In his self-scrutiny and the revelation of his preoccupations, ambitions and frustrations Thomas Whythorne in particular casts doubt on any claim that true autobiography emerged only in the later eighteenth century.