Editorial: Writing Lives Together: Romantic and Victorian Auto/Biography

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A letter, written by two hands. A diary entry, begun by a wife and finished by a husband. A daughter’s memoir which reaches back to mother, grandmother, great-grandmother. A map of London, its streets bearing the names of forgotten lives. Biographies of siblings, and of spouses; a poem which gives life to long-dead voices from the archives. All these feature in this special issue as examples of ‘writing lives together’: British life writing which has been collaboratively authored and/or joins together the lives of multiple subjects. Our contributors discuss a wide range of published and unpublished material from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, including biography, auto/biographical memoirs, letters, diaries, sermons, maps and directories. We also present essays by contemporary, practising biographers, Daisy Hay and Laurel Brake, who explain their decisions to move away from the single subject in writing the lives of figures from the Romantic and Victorian periods. We conclude with the reflections and work of a contemporary poet, Kathleen Bell, writing on James Watt (1736-1819) and his family, in a ghostly collaboration with the archives. As a whole, the collection offers distinctive new readings of collaboration in theory and practice, reflecting on the many ways in which lives might be written together: across gender boundaries, across time, across genre.

Our theme, ‘writing lives together’, and our historical focus were chosen to invite new interventions in a relatively recent but rapidly developing critical field. The growing body of work on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life writing has become increasingly focused on collaborative practices and communal forms. Amongst academic biographers of the period we can also see a trend towards exploring the interactions of multiple subjects: friendship circles, families, siblings and spouses, the spaces and places of interaction. Whilst there has been, as Rebecca Styler puts it in this issue, a general ‘turn to relationality in life writing
studies,’ it is no coincidence that this should be particularly concentrated in work by scholars of the Romantic and early Victorian periods.3

In the first place, there is a wealth of primary material available: the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are rich in examples of writing lives together. Siblings and spouses wrote and edited alongside one another: Charles and Mary Lamb writing their children’s literature on one table; Dorothy Wordsworth watchfully transmuting poetic material for William; Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke as a husband-and-wife academic team; or, as Lucy Ella Rose explores in this issue, Mary and George Watts responding to one another, sometimes to inspire and encourage, sometimes to critique. Family memoirs were a distinctive feature of the period, allowing writers to collaborate across time: Claudia Capancioni analyses the ‘model of intergenerational mentorship and interaction’ which emerges through Janet Ross’ work on her female ancestors. Less harmoniously, Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* (1907) rewrote the family narratives authored by his parents, as Kathy Rees shows. Friends might also write together, or write over one another: we are familiar with the creative intertextuality of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley and Byron, but Julian North shows how their practices were borrowed and transformed within their wider friendship circle, as the memoirs of De Quincey and Trelawny took Romantic conversations to a larger Victorian readership.

Bringing such broader exchanges into view helps us understand life writing as a dynamic expression of relationship within social networks of writers and readers, rather than as the consecration of individual identity.

This, in turn, connects with a new critical willingness to investigate the cultural work performed by sociability through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, from Enlightenment conversations to Victorian periodicals.5 Recent studies of literary networks and coterie culture have suggested that ‘it might be possible to chart an evolutionary sequence from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scribal and print communities, via taverns,
coffee houses, and salons, to various forms of textual community and sociable authorship in the Romantic period’ (Hackett 215), and beyond, into the pages of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel or newspaper. Our work on collaborative life writing is rooted in this investigation of ‘textual community’, and in the continuing interrogation of ‘solitary or interiorized Romanticism’ (Russell and Tuite 4). Indeed, both the emergence of late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century life writing as a focus of academic interest and the emphasis on its collaborative and collective character find their contexts within a range of broader critical challenges, in Romantic and Victorian literary and cultural studies, to what Jon Mee calls ‘the twinned myths of the isolated author and the solitary reader’ (Mee 315).

Feminist approaches to autobiography have made a significant contribution in moving the critical spotlight away from the lone male creator, enshrined in a singular, autobiographical ‘I’ in canonical Romantic lyric poetry and in prose works such as Rousseau’s *Confessions*, to reveal the diversely collaborative forms of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century life writing – especially written and read by women.7 This has led to acts of biographical and bibliographical recovery which question traditional canonical boundaries. As Hay puts it, writing about her own decision to focus on the sisters, friends and forgotten female members of better-known circles, group biography can become ‘an act of resistance towards posthumous and anachronistic constructions of significance’. Others also find collective biography a way of making occluded lives at least partially visible. Brake reflects on how her decision to write a dual biography of Walter and Clara Pater allowed the lesser known sibling to move into view and also revealed new aspects of her brother’s life. Matthew Sangster reads London plate series and directories as forms of multibiography in which we can recover – if only in glimpses – the lives of individuals who would never have become the subjects of more substantial books or articles.
The essays in our collection show that the study of women’s collaborative life writing still has much to yield, but not necessarily within an exclusively female conversation. Almost as soon as gendered binaries were proposed in the theorisation of women’s autobiography, there were calls for them to be eroded and for critics to acknowledge the ways in which male-authored *Lives* might also express relational selves. Despite some excellent recent work on allusive dialogues and co-authoring between men, and between men and women, in Victorian and Romantic life writing, there is still much to be done in this area. A notable feature of our collection is the number of contributors who have chosen to look at collaborations which cross gender boundaries. Thus, in discussing the Gosse family, Rees looks not only at father and son, but mother too; other contributors consider the intertwined lives of fathers and daughters (Bell, Styler); brother and sister (Brake); married couples (Rose, Hay); and the men and women of a religious community (James). In addition we include essays which look at male friendships within mixed-gender creative circles (North); and the ‘writing together’ of the lives of an entire city, in the mapping of the metropolitan crowd (Sangster).

Collaborations between women and men prompt a variety of critical approaches in the investigation of gendered identities and experiences. Styler, for example, shows how Josephine Butler defined herself as a feminist reformer in the process of writing auto/biographically first through the life of a man (her father) and then a woman (a female saint). Rose’s essay on Mary and George Watts explores the ways in which their relationship and gendered identities as artists were shaped through Mary’s records of their conversations in her diaries and in the domestic spaces they created, specifically their reading ‘niche’. Brake argues that the ‘dual focus’ of her sibling biography of Walter and Clara Pater shows how ‘their life trajectories overlap and diverge dramatically, in ways that inscribe gender more explicitly and augment understanding of the shapes of lives in history’.
This investigation of ‘lives in history’ – asking how lives are shaped by their times, and by the passage of time – is also a theme of this collection. The activity of writing lives together often happens through time: auto/biographers may repeatedly revisit particular subjects or themes, writing together or against their younger selves, or writing may happen across generations, especially in the case of family memoirs. Years may separate collaborators: James explores how shared reading and collective memories might be invoked, and transformed, across the centuries, from a seventeenth-century collective biography to a Victorian novel by Elizabeth Gaskell. Meanwhile, Capancioni argues that Ross’s intergenerational memoir allowed her, in Virginia Woolf’s words, to ‘think back through’ the experiences of her female line across the long nineteenth century and to create in her memoir a ‘continuum’ between past, present and future generations of intellectual women. As James shows, writers might pick and choose their forebears to give shape to their present choices. Gaskell, for instance, positions herself as novelist in a very specific Dissenting lineage, looking back to preachers of the previous century, who in turn invoked the persecuted exiles of the 1660s, so that a self-elected community takes shape through allusion and repetition. This process of writing across time can also produce a consciousness of developmental self-making. Styler’s account of Josephine Butler’s indirect self-articulation through writing ‘sequential biographies’ invites us to pay more attention to ways in which auto/biographical self-construction can take place serially. The interplay between past and present is also there in North’s account of De Quincey’s and Trelawny’s retrospective, intertextual collaborations with the lost creative circles of their youth. In De Quincey’s allusive interpolation of himself into a poem by Wordsworth, he attempts to position himself as the poet’s past and present collaborator. These were all ghostly collaborations with dead or distant partners. Arguably this is a relationship implicit in all posthumous biography – as Bell
writes ‘Although my chief collaborators in this work (Watt, his family, colleagues and friends) are long dead, my project could not exist without those writers from the past’. 

Watt’s words, brought to life in Bell’s poetry after long years in the archive, also show us the generic possibilities opened up by ‘writing lives together’. Collaboration might happen across genres, disciplines, and forms: Mary Watts transforming her husband’s pictures into terracotta; the seventeenth-century rhythms of an exiled preacher’s diary entry finding their way into the Victorian realist novel; Edmund Gosse channelling his parents’ worthy religious memoirs into his unconventional autobiography-cum-novel, Father and Son. Intersubjectivities can be formed and expressed through the act of writing different genres together. North shows how De Quincey and Trelawny articulated communal, auto/biographical identities by threading quotations from the poetry of the Lake poets and the Pisan circle through their prose memoirs. Bell finds a collaborative voice in the process of making poems from her subjects’ letters, accounts and inventories. Her work reflects the recent flowering of creative experiments with life writing, such as Deborah Lutz’s fresh look at the Bronte sisters through belongings such as a dog collar, a bracelet, a lock of hair, or Ruth Scurr’s revoicing of John Aubrey, in a constructed diary which borrows from his own words and from his Brief Lives.10 Twenty-first century life writing recognizes, in Scurr’s words, that ‘it is possible to find a form – or invent one – to suit the life in question’ (12).

Collaboration entails a deliberate effort to move outside the boundaries of the individual and consider oneself in relation to others. For some authors in the Romantic-Victorian period, collaboration was specifically linked to progressive social projects. Taking the step outside oneself could lead to larger benevolence, as in Coleridge’s belief in the expansive power of affection – ‘the love of our Friends, parents, and neighbours leads us to the love of our country to the love of all Mankind’ (James 43). In practice, of
course, this progression could be abruptly checked, as in the failure of the Pantisocratic community of equality and shared property Coleridge, Southey and friends planned on the banks of the Susquehanna. But Romantic interest in the possibilities of literary community was not extinguished. In the early to mid-Victorian period De Quincey and Trelawny represented the Romantic circles they had lived amongst as failed Utopian communities, in which they and their reading public might, nevertheless, still participate in a retrospective fantasy of belonging. Other Victorian biographers were empowered by collective and communal biography to forge socially progressive public identities. James shows how, in North and South, Gaskell placed the opposition of Rational Dissenters to religious authority within a context of the novel’s broader social and political protest, and found the confidence to do so by drawing on a legacy of Dissenting life stories, linked intertextually to each other. As Styler demonstrates, Josephine Butler also found the strength to create an unconventional public identity for herself as a feminist reformer in the campaign against state-regulated prostitution, through her successive auto/biographical self-fashionings. The desire to reveal the history and further the cause of female education fuelled Janet Ross’s collective life of her mother and grandmothers (Capancioni), and still motivates Laurel Brake in her dual biography of Walter and Clara Pater. Whether or not they explore explicitly politicised senses of community, each of the articles in our collection seeks to convey a mesh of overlapping writing lives – ‘a web […] of mingled yarn’, in Hay’s Keatsian phrase – the better to represent the ‘entangled nature of our social existences’ (Sangster).

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informed by the ‘Lives in Relation’ event organized by Amy Culley and Rebecca Styler in Lincoln in 2009: may the conversations continue.

References


5 The foundational volume for Romantic sociability is Russell and Tuite (2002). For recent interest in sociability in Victorian studies see e.g. The annual conference of the North American Victorian Studies Association 2016 on ‘Social Victorians’.

