

Fall 2001

The Biographer's Tale By A. S. Byatt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001. 305 pp. \$24.00. ISBN 0-375- 41114-3.

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Publication Info

Published in *The American Archivist*, Volume 64, Issue 2, Fall 2001, pages 405-407.

<http://archivists.metapress.com/home/main.mpx>

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REVIEWS

 Elisabeth Kaplan, Editor
The Biographer's Tale

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A. S. Byatt, the British author and critic whose 1990 novel, *Possession*, won the Booker Prize and captured the imaginations of readers worldwide, has produced in *The Biographer's Tale* another literary mystery constructed around the attempted unraveling of primary source materials. As the work opens, narrator and protagonist Phineas G. Nanson, a student of postmodern literary theory, suddenly decides to abandon his studies. His resolution is sparked by "an urgent need for a life full of *things* . . . full of facts" (p. 7). Professor Oremond Goode responds to this explanation by musing on the nature of facts and their place in scholarship, speculating that "the art of biography is a despised art because it is an art of things, of facts, of arranged facts" (p. 7). He suggests that Nanson might find it interesting to read Scholes Destry-Scholes's excellent but little-known biography of Sir Elmer Bole, a Victorian polymath, as he embarks on his new life.

Despite an initial skepticism of the merits of biography as a literary and scholarly form, Nanson becomes engrossed in Destry-Scholes's biographical study of Bole. As he examines and reexamines this monumental three-volume work, Nanson finds himself increasingly intrigued by the biographer rather than his subject, marveling at Destry-Scholes's masterful storytelling and arrangement of facts. His admiration leads him to form the project of writing a biography of Destry-Scholes, reasoning that "only a biography seemed an appropriate form for the great biographer" (p. 26). With this decision begins Nanson's adventure into the world of facts and things, a quest which soon leaves both Nanson and the reader questioning the very nature of facts and their limits.

Nanson commences his research on Destry-Scholes enthusiastically enough, looking up the biographer's birth and death records, writing to his publishers, and advertising for pertinent information. His efforts to piece together the life of Destry-Scholes are soon stymied, however, by scant primary source material. The few documents he locates—notes for a lecture on the "Art of Biography," three cryptic manuscripts which appear to be uncompleted

biographical sketches, and two shoeboxes full of index cards and photographs—are ambiguous and fragmentary. Faced with this paucity of sources, Nanson laments that Destry-Scholes “was very good at finding out other personages, but left no tracks of who he was” (p. 118).

During the course of his research, Nanson develops relationships with two women. Fulla Biefield, a Swedish bee taxonomist, translates passages from primary source materials that Nanson uncovers. Vera Alphage, a radiographer and, coincidentally, the niece of Destry-Scholes, provides him with an odd assortment of her uncle’s possessions, including most significantly the aforementioned index cards and photographs. Nanson is also diverted by accepting employment at Puck’s Girdle, a quirky travel agency which specializes in designing unusual vacations. Ultimately, the results of Nanson’s research prove unsatisfactory, and what he had intended as a biography of Destry-Scholes becomes, to his purported chagrin, an autobiographical account of his ill-fated attempt (and its subsequent abandonment) to document the great biographer.

Of particular interest in *The Biographer’s Tale*—to archivists, researchers, and general readers alike—is the interweaving of the primary source materials, several of which (the lecture notes, the three manuscripts, and some of the index cards and photographs) Byatt includes in Nanson’s text. The manuscripts (which he concludes are three separate, but somehow interconnected, biographical sketches) play a pivotal role in the narrative. From beginning to end, however, there is an aura of mystery about these documents. Indeed, their subjects, whom Nanson identifies as historical figures—a taxonomist, a statistician, and a dramatist—are referred to only by initials. Moreover, there is something fantastical and surreal about the manuscripts, and Nanson’s research suggests that these accounts represent a complex web of truths, half-truths, and untruths. The index cards, which Nanson spends a considerable amount of time attempting to arrange into related clusters, seem to be the notes from which these accounts were constructed, but shed little light on either the biographical accounts or Destry-Scholes’s purpose in writing them. Nanson is left to speculate about Destry-Scholes’s motives, wondering, “Was this a wry comment on the hopeless nature of the project of biographical accuracy, or was it just a wild and whimsical kicking-over of the traces?” (p. 273).

In the end, the mystery of Destry-Scholes and his manuscripts remains unresolved and unsolved, and Nanson notes the conspicuous absence of his intended subject from the narrative, conceding that he “appeared to have failed to find Destry-Scholes himself” (p. 248). Like Nanson’s search for Destry-Scholes, *The Biographer’s Tale* itself has about it an air of incompleteness, refusing to resolve itself neatly in the manner of Byatt’s earlier literary mystery, *Possession*. While initially frustrating, this lack of resolution appears to result more from design than from accident. Had all the facts fallen into place neatly, had all the loose ends been tidied up and tucked away, had all the mysteries been solved, *The Biographer’s Tale* might have been more satisfying to readers’

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expectations, but it no doubt would have been a lesser work as a result. It is the uncertainty and ambiguity of the novel that requires readers to reevaluate the nature of facts and what they think they know about facts, to consider the limits of primary source materials and of scholarship, and to wonder to what extent it is ever possible to construct a definitive whole from fragmentary parts. Perhaps these are some thoughts that archivists and users of archives, with their faith in and respect for documents and primary source materials, might do well to take away from *The Biographer's Tale*.

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