

Tim Lanzendörfer and Oliver Scheiding (eds.)

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An Anthology of Transatlantic Life Writing  
from the Colonies to 1850



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 Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

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Edited by Tim Lanzendörfer and Oliver Scheiding

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## Editors' Preface

We thank the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG)) for sponsoring the project, "Life Writing im Spiegel der frühen amerikanischen Zeitschriftenliteratur 1790-1830" (SCHE1616-4-1), from which this anthology developed. The DFG's generous financial support enabled one of us to dedicate his time exclusively to research into a dissertation on American biography and greatly facilitated the speedy selection and editing of primary texts. It also enabled us to hire research assistants and interns to help with the tedious process of preparing the texts which we selected for publication, and ultimately financed the publication of a far bigger and more inclusive anthology than we initially envisaged.

Like any project of this magnitude, this anthology could not have been compiled, edited, and brought to publication without help. We are greatly indebted to Christian Malte Kölzer's work on the primary sources themselves, typing them up and preparing them for annotation and emendation, a process he managed to pursue through to its conclusion even as he was preparing for and then writing his own master's thesis on Joseph Delaplaine's *Repository of the Lives of Distinguished Americans*. He was also a substantial help in the process of selecting texts for Supplement 2, "The Trouble with *Delaplaine's Repository*." Our interns, Maximilian Morini and Frederik Hess, for both of whom their engagement with the editorial and research work on this anthology was their first experience in the academy and who found themselves thrown into a large and complicated project at short notice, deserve our thanks as well, as do research assistants Maximilian Meinhardt and Julia Schoppmann.

A class we co-taught in the winter of 2011/12 called "Theories of American Biography/American Biography" was immensely helpful to us in our effort to select primary and secondary texts for inclusion in this anthology, and we are very grateful as well for the interest and research efforts of the graduate students in this class. Not only did they supply a number of primary sources from their own research which we had missed, but they also helped us sharpen our arguments for the choices we made in this anthology. Russell Backman, Elisabeth Knell, Frank Newton, Damien Schlarb, and Clemens Spahr all read parts of the anthology and commented helpfully on our work. The staff at the American Antiquarian Society was immensely helpful in getting reproductions of images; and the publisher's support for this project and the editorial commentary provided were invaluable.

Any anthology is necessarily a compromise between the exhaustiveness of its content and a manageable size—both for students and teachers as well as for a publisher. We are sure that there are choices that could have been made differently. We hope that our choices provide ample material for a number of approaches to American biography from its early period up to 1850.



# Introduction

## General Introduction

Three contemporary trends in scholarship inform the choices and selections made in this anthology. The first is the growing interest in forms of life writing, of which biography is a crucial but so far fairly negligently treated part. Life writing, a broad term which covers, at least in some readings, both fictional and non-fictional texts, has foregrounded both the cultural importance of biographical productions of all kinds as well as the literariness of many of those writings. Life writing scholars' repeated insistence on the centrality of auto/biographical texts for contemporary literary discourse—as evidenced by the volume and prominence of biographies both in the literary marketplace as well as in public awareness—transfers easily to the time frame that we have chosen for this anthology.

The second is a similar rise in the interest in periodical studies, especially in Early American Studies. Periodical studies has shifted the emphasis away from a preoccupation with novels, short stories, and religious writings towards the ephemeral and difficult to access newspapers and magazines which, as many recent studies have argued, figured far more prominently than monographs or even multi-volume works in the daily lives of Americans, especially during the Early Republic. Many of the texts chosen for this anthology have been selected from the large number of American periodicals published in the time frame covered, especially after 1800. Significantly, a large part of the discourse about biography's uses and the ways it should be written took place within the pages of magazines, either in the form of reviews of popular monographs or in theoretical and practical essays written for the periodicals themselves. Biography both happened and was theorized in the magazines, and to address biography in America from 1600 to 1850 means to also address this set of writings.

Thirdly, electronic databases of various forms have made it easier to obtain a vast amount of texts hitherto virtually inaccessible. In doing so, they have not obviated the need for anthologies, however. Not only does not everybody have access to these databases, but the large mass of material they contain makes the selection of representative texts more necessary. This anthology seeks to do precisely that.

## The Conception of the Anthology

The research project from which this anthology developed was interested in the production of life writing texts in Early Republic periodicals. As we delved into the subject, we quickly found how vital it really was to look into the wealth of material that the periodicals offered and which had not, so far, been systematically evaluated. But at the same time, we realized that an anthology which would only extend to periodical texts

would be insufficient. If previous studies, concentrating largely on monographs, had not covered the richness of life writing in the United States, neither would an anthology devoted solely to periodical writings. We therefore chose to make this anthology more broadly useful by offering a representative selection of biographical practice and theory from the very beginnings of settlement in the future United States to the 1850s.

The anthology therefore seeks to showcase the broadest conception of American biography that still seems consonant with a usefully limited size. The earliest popular reference for biographers in the Early Republic was the Greek-Roman historian and biographer Plutarch, author of the *Lives of the Ancient Greeks and Romans*. Plutarch's approach to biography, contrasting the lives of Greek and Roman notables, was not copied in America, but fellow biographers and critics frequently praised his style and conception of biography. His successors, Nepos and Tacitus, were likewise prominent in America, and we hold that samples of their styles are important to understand the later references. The same goes for the large slate of British biographical theory from Thomas Wilson to James Boswell, all of which influenced American biography.

As we go into the post-revolutionary period and address biography in the early United States, such British influence becomes less marked (although we print articles from American magazines which were themselves reprints of British originals), and we concentrate on intrinsically American biographical theory and practice. In doing so, however, a number of choices needed to be made. In order to better trace developments in biographical practice, we have limited the number of biographees represented in these pages, and instead chosen to print lives of certain figures as they developed over the centuries, so that, for instance, John Winthrop appears a number of times, as do Columbus and Pocahontas. Readers interested in discovering the lives of other figures are advised to look at the website. Choosing periodical articles allows us to print a number of full arguments, rather than excerpts alone, although the length of some of the articles has precluded their full reprinting; readers interested in full monographs should also take a look at our website (more on which below).

For the most part, biography between about 1650 and 1850 was a formulaic genre. Individual texts, whether monographs or short essays, were predictably structured and written, making the selection of individual biographies in this anthology necessarily slanted towards those texts which stand out, which are exceptional among the dross of writings that was biography and, frequently, biographical theory. We have opted to include a small number of biographies which exhibit the general features of the genre here, notably perhaps those by Washington Irving of Oliver Hazard Perry (doc. 47) and John Frost's long life of Mathew Carey (doc. 108), so that readers may be acquainted with the style, but they should be cautious about seeing the biographies selected here as representative of biography as a whole. Finally, this anthology ends with a selection from Ralph Waldo Emerson's lecture series *Representative Men* (1850). This is admittedly a convenient rather than a natural end point for the anthology, but all the same Emerson's biographical writings and theories exemplify how Thomas

Carlyle's Romantic and transcendentalist notions influenced American biographical theory even as Emerson himself developed something that may have been, for the first time, more American than European in conception; perhaps this is sufficient justification for our choice here.

Besides the chronological and largely atypical run through the history of biography, two thematic supplements seek to go more in depth about issues connected with biographical writings. The first, focusing on the various versions of Mason Locke Weems's life of Washington, traces in excerpts and translations the development of one of the most infamous of biographical texts and thus offers readers a glimpse at one form of textual development in American biography. The second thematic section, on Joseph Delaplaine's *Repository of the Lives of Distinguished Americans*, a collection of biographical short texts and engravings, offers a tantalizing glimpse at the debates on biography prevalent in the United States about 1815-1820, as well as shining a spotlight on the processes of marketing biography, producing biography, and ultimately seeking to establish a place for particular biographies in an often hostile environment of critics.

Lastly, this is an anthology of biographical texts only: we have opted to exclude autobiography. This is not for a lack of material. In fact, the discussion on the relative merits of biography and autobiography, and the beginning of a trend toward the self-authored life falls firmly into the period of this anthology, and some of the texts we have selected in fact discuss the differences and varying opportunities of either genre. It was ultimately necessary, however, to make a choice here.

## Online Anthology

This anthology seeks to take full advantage of the opportunities of the digital age. Space considerations made it necessary to limit ourselves in what we print in here: no such considerations apply online. Therefore, a complementary website for this anthology at

<http://www.americanlives.uni-mainz.de/>

provides a large number of supplementary files: full versions of the anthologized documents whenever possible, often in a typed and edited version excised from this print version for reasons of length; full PDF files (linked from Google Books) of the monographs and anthologies discussed herein, including a large number of the primary works listed in the bibliography; and engravings, paintings, and other visual material, either directly available on the site or linked to from there. The online presence of the anthology will help situate many of the texts within broader contexts impossible to anthologize in print.

## **Editorial Policy**

We have silently corrected misprints and spelling errors, except where those were regular variants (such as “publick”). Printers’ idiosyncrasies especially prevalent in earlier texts have been regularized as well: words in capital letters have been replaced by small capitals, except at the beginning of paragraphs, where they were changed to lower case; we have retained italics and small capitals as emphases.

Elisions have been marked in square brackets. Where entire paragraphs are omitted, square brackets are between paragraphs; where parts of a paragraph are omitted directly before or after such a major elision, square brackets may be doubled, to indicate that both complete sections and the beginnings of paragraphs have been elided.

Attributions have been provided wherever possible, with footnotes explaining our reasoning in all cases where the articles themselves do not identify authors.

We have regularized the format of chapter headings or subheadings where reproduced, and have similarly regularized capitalization in titles.

Original footnotes have been retained where they were explanatory in nature; otherwise, they have been abridged or deleted.

Readers interested in seeing the original typesetting are advised to check the online versions provided.