The New York Sun

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Robert Frost and the Future of Biography

The expertly edited ‘Biography Across the Digitized Globe’ is a kind of battle for recognition of biographers and their subjects that AI may tend to usurp but that cannot be silenced so long as biographers continue to pursue the genre.



Robert Frost. Via Wikimedia Commons



CARL ROLLYSON Apr. 4, 2025 04:00 AM ET

'Biography Across the Digitized Globe: Essays in Honour of Hans Renders'

Edited by David Veltman and Daniel R. Meister

Brill, 328 Pages

'Love and Need: The Life of Robert Frost's Poetry'

By Adam Plunkett

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 512 Pages

There are not that many biographies of biographers. James Boswell is an exception, and biographers like Fawn Brodie and Kitty Kelley, who have gotten into trouble for writing about the likes of Joseph Smith, Thomas Jefferson, Frank Sinatra, and the Bushes, have had their lives examined. Forthcoming is a biography of Richard Ellmann, James Joyce's much-heralded biographer.

As Nigel Hamilton notes in "Biography Across the Digitized Globe," readers are interested in the subjects of biographies, not the biographers, which has always been a problem in so far as biography is, consequently, treated as content, information, with very little attention to how a biography is composed and by who. Mr. Hamilton is worried because AI has begun not merely to regurgitate data but actually to think like biographers.

Hans Renders, recently retired from his professorship at the University of Groningen, might provide some reassurance to biographers who fear they might be out of a job. While the volume under review is not a biography of Mr. Renders, in its own way it is biographical, paying tribute to him not merely as a scholar of biography but as a journalist, a biographer, a book reviewer on radio and in print, and an organizer of conferences on biography that have made the genre more centrally important as a form of knowledge in itself.

Richard Holmes, celebrated biographer of Shelley, Coleridge, and author of the incomparable "Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer,"

provides an engaging foreword to “Biography Across the Digitized Globe,” describing his friendship with Mr. Renders and his first impression of a man with a “pair of large expressive eyebrows above an impish smile.” That’s the man I have met on several occasions, too, a biographer who fulfills the Holmes definition of biography “as a handshake across time, across cultures, across beliefs, across genders, across disciplines, and across ways of life.”

Mr. Renders, one might say, is a personification of biography, establishing a Biography Institute at Groningen, showing up in various parts of the world and bringing biographers together, arguing with them, and demonstrating that biography itself is a dialogue that continues generation after generation, with each biography having an expiration date, thus requiring subsequent biographies that continue the conversations about individual lives.

The protean Mr. Renders is really the answer to Mr. Hamilton’s concerns. By example, Mr. Renders has shown biographers that they have to be out there, talking to the public in every venue available — not just the printed page. Will AI be able to create the conversations that Mr. Renders has initiated, the arguments that continue in “Biography Across the Digitized Globe”?

Mr. Renders, Mr. Holmes points out, has stressed the “importance of biographical reception, and the possible influence of biography on public opinion, and social debate. In this sense he has argued that unlike the novel, biography is a “‘coffee-house form,’ provoking general discussion and varied arguments and interpretations, and he himself has taken a vigorous part in such debates.”

A case in point is Adam Plunkett’s superb new biography of Robert Frost, written not only as a searching commentary on a poet’s life and work, and the influence of other poets on him, but as a deeply engaging dialogue with other Frost biographers, and how their personalities interacted with the

poet, alternately illuminating and distorting the understanding of the man and his work.

As tempted as some reviewers might be to call Mr. Plunkett's biography "definitive" because of his exquisitely balanced, Richard Ellmann-like narrative, his work too will have an expiration date, as I'm sure Mr. Renders would say, because biography by definition is in flux over time, constantly accumulating new evidence and interpretations that also have to be seen in the context of cultures, beliefs, genders, disciplines, and ways of life.

The expertly edited "Biography Across the Digitized Globe" is a kind of battle for recognition of biographers and their subjects that AI may tend to usurp but that cannot be silenced so long as biographers, like Mr. Renders, continue to pursue the genre on the frontlines of all media.

Mr. Rollyson is the author of "Biography: A User's Guide," "A Higher Form of Cannibalism? Adventures in the Art and Politics of Biography," and "Confessions of a Serial Biographer."



CARL ROLLYSON

Mr. Rollyson is the author of The Life of William Faulkner and The Last Days of Sylvia Plath. He has published fourteen biographies and has written about biography for The Wall Street Journal, The Washington, Post, The San Francisco Chronicle, The New Criterion, and other publications.

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