

BOOK REVIEW

Klaas van Walraven, ed. *The Individual in African History. The Importance of Biography in African Historical Studies*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020. xii + 304 pp. Maps. Figures. Photographs. Notes. References. Index. \$73.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-9004407817.

The Individual in African History: The Importance of Biography in African Historical Studies, edited by Klaas van Walraven, commences with a lengthy editorial introduction that provides an overview of the historical development of the biographical genre. It is possibly a measure of historians' continuing uncertainty of the acceptance of biography as a valid scholarly approach that such an introduction is deemed necessary; there seems to be a need to establish a legitimate pedigree for the genre, going back to Boswell and other (western) classic writers.

The ten case studies presented in the subsequent chapters cover a wide range of issues. The biographical subject as "villain" rather than "hero" is sensitively treated by Lindie Koorts. The extent to which individuals are "representative" of times and trends (although this is more a sociological than a historical question) is the concern of Elena Moore and Iva Peša's chapters on a family in Cape Town and migrant workers in central Africa, respectively. Morgan Robinson develops the concepts of religious conversion and social rebirth, surely of relevance to proselytizing activity generally, among freed slave children in Zanzibar. Paul Glen Grant's study of the life of Cornelius Badu, Klaas van Walraven's biography of David Boganda, and Jacqueline de Vries's chapter about Michael Timneng all deal with the dehumanizing potential of violence and persecution at the hands of opportunistic European adventurers, colonial armies, officials, and missionary interests.

All of these narratives avoid reducing their subjects to mere victimhood, stressing instead their agency in the face of severe challenges and provocations. Finally, the perpetual puzzle about whether history makes individuals or individuals make history is raised by many of the contributors. These themes are all important and demand our persistent engagement.

Although the geographical spread is considerable, covering west, east, central, and southern Africa, four of the case studies concern subjects based

in South Africa, although this emphasis is masked by a general concern with methodological, rather than geographical, priorities.

Even though the authors in the volume wish that their subjects were better known, four of these biographical subjects have in fact made a mark in historical studies: Laurent Kabila, Abdullah Abdurahman, D. F. Malan, and Jack Hodgson. In their chapters about these four, Erik Kennes, Eve Wong, Lindie Koorts, and Duncan Money, respectively, introduce intriguing new ways to understand these individuals. Other subjects in this volume are the “unsung” characters of history—the enslaved who were freed, the converts who chafed against missionaries’ expectations, the interlocutors who risked all to “open” Africa to foreign interests. Often it is only with a very deft use of fragmentary evidence that their stories have been reconstructed; a key theme that emerges from the case studies is the challenge of writing biography on the basis of scant archival “presence” and much “absence.”

In several senses, there is a mismatch between the introduction and the case study chapters that follow. This question of the nature of the archive is not addressed there, nor is another important theme emerging from several contributions: the role of childhood as state and experience in the life of a biographical subject. Curiously, given that this volume is about biography in Africa, this introduction is silent on the long history of biographical production on the continent itself, or by those of African heritage—and why so many early efforts concerned collective, rather than individual, biography.

Although the introduction makes the valid and significant point that “the biographer’s own context” (12) must be taken into account, it is silent—as are most of the contributions—on the relationship between the language of the biographers and their subjects, or between ethnic identity and gender. In a period when so much work needs to be done to decenter western-centric notions of the individual and society, these are questions that biographers need to raise. These questions should not, however, stop us from pursuing our craft of life writing; on the contrary, they should challenge us to investigate more creatively precisely these fundamental relationships.

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