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[See table of contents](#)

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Introductory Remarks: Special Issue on “The Biographical (Re)Turn”

ADELE PERRY AND BRIAN LEWIS

At the 2010 annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association in Montreal, we organized a number of panels focusing on “The Biographical (Re)turn.” This reflected not only our own turn towards contextualized biography—Adele Perry’s work on nineteenth-century colonial governor James Douglas and his wife Amelia Connolly and Brian Lewis’s on the soapmaker William Hesketh Lever and the early homosexual rights’ activist George Ives—but also in recognition of one of the more notable shifts in historical scholarship over the last several years. We were both schooled in the new social historical tradition, that grand project arising in the sixties and holding sway for a quarter of a century or more. In trying to write history from below, in moving beyond the top-down decision-making of Great Men, the new social historians sought to uncover the experiences and impact of ordinary people. In deploying statistical and economic data to capture the economic and social fortunes of people who had left few other traces, these historians emphasized collectivities over individuals, marching classes, ethnicities, and genders up and down the pages of their texts. Biographies seemed old fashioned—retaining their appeal among non-academic writers and to a popular audience, to be sure, but not something able to capture history from below, the *longue durée*, or the shifting fortunes of ordinary people in a changing world.

The cultural and linguistic turns of the eighties, the rise of poststructuralist and postmodernist analysis and the claiming of a place at the academic table by a new generation of feminist and racially, ethnically and sexually diverse scholars all helped to challenge the grand, teleological narratives. With a renewed interest in the individual and in agency, the contextualized biography as an entry-point to a study of a broader world (and psychoanalysis as a means of exploring the interior self) gained a new lease on life and a greater scholarly credibility.

The articles in this edition—reworked, extended and peer-reviewed versions of some of the papers given at the conference—take stock of the state of play in the writing of historical biographies in a wide range of fields. Roderick Barman provides a commentary on the advantages and disadvantages of biography, with particular reference to his own experiences in writing the history of nineteenth-century Brazil. Veronica Strong-Boag reflects from a feminist historian’s

perspective and with the benefit of standpoint theory on the lives of Canadian suffragists. Alan Lester brings to bear a historical geographer's engagement with networks, relational space and life geographies in the context of the British Empire. Stephen Brooke points to the need to pay attention to and work with the creative unevenness and ambiguities of individual lives in the context of twentieth-century British gender and cultural history. David Churchill engages with a queer life and the politics and practices of a destabilizing homosexuality in twentieth-century America. And, finally, Laila Parsons explores the relative paucity of biographical accounts and the challenges of writing biography in the twentieth-century Arab world.

These papers cover substantial geographical terrain, ranging over Brazil, the Middle East and North Africa, the United States, the British empire, and Canada. They also engage a number of historiographies, including political, feminist, gender, queer, and colonial/post-colonial studies. The temporal focus is largely modern, spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and mindful of the historians' location in the present. Together these essays provide personal, eloquent and deeply reflective insights into the renaissance of historical biography.

Brian Lewis and Adele Perry
Co-editors