

review essay

Shimmering Waters

SWIMMING, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL MEMORY

Dawn Fraser, *One Hell of a Life*, Hodder, Sydney, 2001, pp. 420, Illus.; **Harry Gallagher**, *Memories of a Fox*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, South Australia, 1998., pp. 258, Illus; **Shane Gould**, *Tumble Turns: An Autobiography*, HarperSports, Sydney, 2000 [1999], pp. 280, Illus.

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Autobiography and its cousin, biography, currently enjoy great popularity. Bookshop shelves burgeon with examples from celebrity to unknown author, weighty tomes to flimsy photo-essays, politician to athlete. The proliferation and popularity of 'life writing' has generated increasing analysis of the form, particularly as a literary genre. The National Library of Australia held a conference on the theme in 2001, for instance, and the literary journal *Meanjin* devoted a special issue to the topic in 2002.¹ The focus of critique has been the author's motivations and intentions and the impact of self-authorship on the text. Issues and concerns about subjectivity, selectivity, the unreliability and vagaries of memory, and narrative style have emerged from such analyses. These same dimensions have also been raised in reflections on autobiography as history, especially the unique historiographic problem arising from the fact that in autobiography the historian is also the subject of her/his own history.²

While issues surrounding the author and text are important in considering the historical value of autobiography, they are not the only matters that could be considered. Equally important is the role of autobiography as social memory. Social memory has been defined as 'relatively discrete instances in a network of performances: enunciations in historical writing, speaking, (re)enactment, (re)presentation and so on ... the renderings of memory practices'.³ This can include films and radio programs, statues and other physical commemorative media, poetry and song, postage stamps, and books. Autobiography is one of many types of such 'performances', holding

historical importance for its reflection of personal and public meanings of shared historical events.

Social memory defines and ascribes value to the myriad of ways that history is received, experienced and understood, including but also beyond official, academic channels. Books can be powerful modes of social memory even in a post-literate world, because of their traditionally elevated cultural value, their permanency relative to ephemera and one-off events, and their widespread distribution in society through bookshops and libraries. As an especially popular form of writing dealing with life history, autobiography holds added potency as a channel for engagement with the past. Approaching autobiography as social memory therefore holds great promise for reading, understanding and interpreting this genre and individual autobiographical works.

At least two key matters require attention in considering autobiography as social memory. Firstly, we must examine the relationship of autobiography with the reader. How does autobiography enable the reader to connect with the past? Secondly, the *whole book* must be viewed as a package containing not only text but also photographs, drawings, appendices, dedications and samples of personal memorabilia that work with the text to engage the reader in the historical process.

Seeing autobiography as social memory requires considering the reader as well as the writer. For the author, autobiography in theory at least represents a journey in self-discovery impelled by 'the quest for self-knowledge and psychic integration, for cultural and social demystification'.⁴ Typically, autobiographies delve deeply into the childhood experience, and place more weight on childhood memories than biographies generally do.⁵ The slipperiness of this particular turf may compound the genre's subjectivity, but the exercise of recalling and reconstructing a life is invaluable nonetheless for its attempt at understanding and for its expression of the author's subjective truth. The dipping into the pool of personal memories is a private act; the sharing of this in the form of a published autobiography is a public gesture. When an autobiographer is a figure of public or historical interest, their unique perspective on their life and events becomes a valuable document through which to connect with the past even if the book's reflection of history is somehow inaccurate or misleading.

Audiences can engage with the past through autobiography in several ways. Autobiographical writing sheds light on historical events, both private and public episodes, which may inform, enlighten or entertain a reader. The additional possibility exists for a more personal interaction. Ian Britain has explained the popularity of the genre as stemming from a public 'appetite for gossip and vicarious living'.⁶ Less cynically, David McCooey acknowledges the pleasure of remembering experienced by some readers and the opportunity

for readers to evaluate their own lives as factors in the popularity of autobiography.⁷

Whatever the appeal may be, the reading of autobiography constitutes an exercise when social memory is 'acted out, performed, or demonstrated; in-between moments when we cease to live in time and space in order to reflect on, or be trained in, or entertained by something of our historicity, our being-in-history'.⁸ This ability to engross is especially potent when the reader's life intersects in time or space with that of the author. The book may then spark direct memories and allow the reader to re-experience and reinterpret events already witnessed. Given that most people actively chose what they read, the very choice of book indicates some level of prior relationship, meaning and engagement of the reader with the author and events covered.

A social memory approach to autobiography also requires consideration of content, asking 'Through what means does the book occupy the reader?'. In order to answer this we must consider *what* constitutes the book. In its most commonly understood sense, autobiography is a personal life story told in textual, narrative form. Frequently, it is dismissed as history because of this narrative aspect. McCooney rightly challenges this criticism, acknowledging the narrative presence in all history: 'If narrative is inherently fictional, then history would be a doomed game'.⁹ Creative narrative form may in fact be a key aspect of the ability of autobiography to engage historically with the reader. Andrew C. Sparkes, commenting on the appeal of another form of life writing, auto-ethnography, observes that 'Dramatic recall, strong metaphors, vivid characters, unusual phrasings, and the holding back on interpretation invite the reader to emotionally relive the events with the author'.¹⁰ Such narrative devices used by autobiographers have the potential to similarly woo the reader.

Modern autobiography is also much more than text, telling tales via various non-prose forms and perhaps even subliminal ways. Many autobiographies, with accompanying photos, illustrations, poetry, life time-lines, lists of achievements, testimonial blurbs and even web site links represent not only single instances of social memory but also multi-faceted, deeply embedded acts and reflections of social memory. These extras can be viewed as marketing tools, however they can also be regarded as important complementary historical snippets facilitating historical engagement of the reader, some of the 'infinity of traces'¹¹ deposited by social memory. Reviewing autobiography as social memory requires examining these items as integral parts of the book package that enrich the textual base and thus the readers' experience.

Sport autobiographies frequently brim with such extras, which enhance their ability to respond to popular enthusiasm in sporting history as a facet of local, regional or national history. Aside from their public appeal,

autobiographies are also important historical sources for sport historians. As a researcher of early Australian swimming, I wish more autobiographies and biographies existed for prominent competitors of the day to complement the rich lode of anecdotes, legends and secondary source materials. Other than Annette Kellerman, Barney Kieran and Frank Beaurepaire, to my knowledge no other identities were the subject of comprehensive biographical books or autobiography.¹² Autobiographies by these individuals would be invaluable for a number of reasons. For one, they would provide access to memories and details that would never be available to a historian or biographer no matter how good a researcher. Furthermore, they would provide a direction for further research. Equally important, they would stand as instances of social memory for the individual and their period, one voice among many offering access to the past.

Given this dearth it is gratifying that autobiographies for contemporary swimmers and coaches are relatively commonplace. *Memories of a Fox*, *One Hell of a Life*, and *Tumble Turns* together span over fifty years of the history of Australian competitive swimming. The lives of authors Harry Gallagher, Dawn Fraser and Shane Gould overlap in various ways, their stories complementing one another. Gallagher was Fraser's coach; Fraser and Gould are two of the country's most accomplished and celebrated swimmers. The books promote themselves as inspirational memoirs of personal struggle and triumph rather than as history, but simultaneously promise access to a shared past. This is an intrinsic part of their appeal to the public. The titles *One Hell of a Life* and *Tumble Turns* convey the double message of a rollicking good ride and a tough, twisting journey. The 'fox' of Gallagher's title implies craftiness, slyness and perhaps vulnerability born of his life experience. Despite their intersections, however, the three books are significantly different in purpose, tack, and style, and thus highlight the heterogeneity of autobiography as a genre.

One Hell of a Life and *Tumble Turns* can be seen as responses to public fascination with the careers and personae of Fraser and Gould, in particularly Fraser's larrikin reputation and Gould's mysterious disappearance at the height of her swimming fame. Gould also writes in order to understand her life and to chart her search for identity since retirement from competitive swimming at age fifteen. As a coach and lesser-known identity, Gallagher has the luxury of omitting most of his public career and focusing instead on his childhood relationships and how they shaped him as a man and as a coach. All three books are intensely personal and expositional, integrating tales of sporting success with revelations of personal suffering. These books work best as social memory when the authors' private quests articulate with public interest, making possible for the reader the sense of being-in-history.

All three open with a memorable incident in their public lives, before

commencing a chronological narrative from childhood. Gallagher begins with his recognition on the pool deck at the 1956 Olympics by a figure from his youth who delivers a message from his long-lost first girlfriend. The incident appears as a reminder that he cannot escape his roots despite his success, and thus explains the detailed childhood account that dominates the book. Gould opens with her experiences at Munich in 1972; Fraser with the awards ceremony for World Female Swimmer of the Century in 1999. It is significant that all three books open on a stage of one sort or another, reflecting their public significance as figures of historic importance.

Gallagher adopts a highly literary style, using theatrical devices such as telling the story of his confused paternity by eavesdropping as a boy on gossipy neighbours. Such scenes are dramatic, colourful, and highly evocative, aimed at creatively absorbing the reader. His book is divided into two equal parts, the first recounting his childhood and the second his development as a coach up until 1956. The first section dominates, in particular the memories of his youthful relationship and adventures with a neighbourhood girl named Gloria that have sustained him throughout his life. Gallagher's chosen timeframe is narrow and selective, but enables him to creatively explore his formative years and experiences. Both Gould and Fraser take a more straightforward 'here's the facts' approach but weave in stories that evoke the pains and the highs of their lives. Gould traces her childhood in Australia and Fiji, contrasting its happiness and 'normalcy' with her adult life. Married young, she raised a family in a radical Christian community in rural Western Australia. The book's narrative strength lies in her descriptions of attempts to reconcile her private and public selves and how this search for a post-swimming identity led eventually to the end of her marriage and the start of a new life in the late 1990s. Fraser's writing is picaresque, ranging from her working-class roots and sporting orbit to her later forays as wife, lover and mother, parliamentarian, cheese shop owner, sporting ambassador and national icon. Like her public persona, her tales are feisty and revealing. The storytelling in each book is powerful and engrossing, illustrating the power of narrative to bring history to life.

The events, dynamics and characters that filled the sporting landscape of this era form an imposing backdrop for these personal tales and hold great historical value. They provide an insight into the evolution and development of scientific training methods, and feature prominent coaches such as Forbes and Ursula Carlisle, Professor Frank Cotton, Frank Guthrie, Percy Cerutti and dozens of swimmers, past and present. The books offer personal perspectives on relationships and tensions with the official sporting bodies, especially Gallagher's and Fraser's battles with the Amateur Swimming Union of Australia. The amateur/professional dichotomy in sport is wonderfully illustrated, including by Gallagher smuggling himself onto the Olympic pool

deck in 1956 to watch Jon Henricks and Dawn Fraser triumph, Fraser's amateur ban at age twelve for accepting two shillings for a race, and by the threat posed to Gould's amateur status if an azalea flower was named in her honour. Fraser devotes many pages to defending charges of improper behaviour levelled against her; as one-sided as these historic versions may be they are accounts nonetheless against which the empirical record can be weighed.

The ability of these books to engage with the reader is aided not only by such narratives but also by their packaging and design. The titles and covers provide keys to the text, but are also entrees to other artful contents of the book. Table 1 below indicates the diverse range of materials and devices enhancing these three autobiographies. Photographs are the most prominent complementary feature of autobiography, and Fraser includes forty-four pages of images, Gould thirty-two, and Gallagher sixteen. I would hazard that it is a rare reader who does not start with the photographs, or flick to them frequently while reading. Images bring back memories, flesh out the word portraits, add colour to the story. Other significant pictures describe examples of social memory, such as those of both Fraser and Gould standing proudly with eponymously named street signs at the Olympic Village at Homebush.

Table One. Components of Social Memory in Autobiography

	Gould	Gallagher	Fraser
Photographs	Y	Y	Y
Illustrations	Y		
Poetry	Y	Y	
Website links	Y		
Quotations	Y	Y	
Recipes	Y		
Bibliographies		Y	Y
Records & achievements	Y		Y
Documents	Y	Y	Y
Testimonies	Y	Y	
Index	Y		Y
Dedications or acknowledgements	Y	Y	Y
Forewords	Y	Y	Y

Less immediately obvious than photographs are illustrations and other visual documents. Gould opens each of her book's five parts with drawings, including one of her in 1972 on the medal dais holding aloft Dawn Fraser's

stuffed kangaroo mascot from an earlier games. She also includes a copy of the running-away-from-home note that she penned to her parents in 1973 (p. 43), which poignantly captures her personal tumult amidst public fanfare. Gallagher includes preliminary State time-trial results from 1954 which shows the age and ability range of his swimmers (p. 206). These documents are randomly inserted with no explanatory commentary, and serve as potent surprise triggers for the reader's imagination.

The books also include a diverse range of other components that further enrich their power as social memory. Gould begins with a poem called 'All Things Green and Gould' written in her honour independently of this book by Rupert McCall. Gallagher introduces each chapter with verse, quotations, and even graffiti that reflect on his experience. Gould even includes the link to her official website, itself a prime example of social memory, and shares several of her favourite recipes with the reader. The dedications and acknowledgments offer insight into the lives and significant relationships of each author, while the forewords and cover blurbs convey their historical sporting significance. The forewords to Gould, Gallagher and Fraser are written by swimmer Michael Wenden, swimming official Stuart Alldritt, and advertising mogul John Singleton, respectively. Gould and Gallagher offer promotional testimonies and tributes from several big names of Australian sport, including Murray Rose, Susie O'Neill, Ron Clarke, Ursula Carlisle and Raelene Boyle in the case of Gould and Gideon Haigh and Dawn Fraser for Gallagher. These endorsements are arguably more than mere marketing devices, suggesting the present high standing of these figures in the nation's social and sporting pantheon.

Both Gould and Fraser include lists of their sporting records and achievements; Fraser augments hers with a life time-line. These show not only the well-known trajectory of their athletic careers, but cover lesser-known athletic activities such as Fraser's involvement in the Masters Games and Gould's post-swimming success in equine and ploughing events. Gallagher and Fraser contain bibliographies which include self-authored or ghosted biographical and coaching works. Finally, all three autobiographies are peppered with references to awards, titles and honours bestowed upon them. The inclusion of such material, from photographs to recipes to lists of records, undoubtedly enriches these books and enhances their accessibility to the reader. They provide subtle layers of meaning to the written work itself and to its author/subject. They represent components of social memory, coming together to create a historically valuable, multi-dimensional lens onto the past. Like the Dawn Fraser Pool, TV documentary about Gallagher, and Shane Gould Avenue, these books represent important instances of social memory.

Two factors special to sport and other forms of celebrity autobiography require attention in considering its value as social memory — the profit motive behind commercial publication and the phenomenon of ghost writers. Might the imperative to maximise sales skew the writing, or the focus of the writing, and somehow devalue it? Commissioned autobiographies aimed at a mass market may grapple less with the self and more with its public presentation. Preserving a public myth, or upholding an archetypal life, may be a problem generally with autobiography,¹³ but this is more likely to be an issue if an autobiography is commissioned because of an individual's public mystique. Fraser's book, which reinforces her 'Aussie battler' myth, is an example of this. While such a book may be less appealing from a psychological perspective, it nevertheless holds value as a reflection of the author's understanding of his or her own public myth, allure or appeal and the events in which they have participated. The commercial publication of an autobiography in itself indicates its value as social memory; publishing implies a perception that the work holds public meaning and importance.

What impact is made by the suspected spectre of ghost-writers that hovers over many celebrity and sports autobiographies? While the reader can only guess how much of these books were self-written, Fraser openly acknowledges the writing assistance of her agent (p. 401) and Gould thanks her mother for help with prose. According to Shane, Mum Shirley would comment on her drafts, 'That's a great story darling, but you have a quirky way of writing it' (p. viii). How might even so minor a 'ghost' affect the outcome? Would working out the 'quirks' simply improve the readability, or change its very essence? Some critics dismiss all celebrity autobiography from analysis because of the impact of ghosting on the works' integrity.¹⁴ From a social memory perspective, however, this is less problematic. Social memory is not concerned with the objective truth, but with studying the past through expressions and acts of memory. An autobiography, ghosted or not, is one of many possible routes granting access to the past. The particulars of its impetus or creation are less important than its physical existence and format, public availability, and power to launch the reader on an imaginative journey to the past.

Endnotes

- 1 *Meanjin* (special edition on biography), vol. 61, no. 1, 2002. Other recent analyses of autobiography include David McCooey, *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996; Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (eds), *The Seductions of Biography*, Routledge, New York, 1996.
- 2 Lynd Forgonson, 'Autobiography as History', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 2, Winter 1979/80, p. 139.

- 3 Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997, p. 5.
- 4 Clark Blaise, 'Your Nearest Exit May Be Behind You: Autobiography and the Post-Modernist Moment', in M. Rhiel and D. Suchoff (eds), *The Seductions of Biography* Routledge, New York, 1996, p. 202.
- 5 John Ritchie, 'Getting a Life', *Meanjin*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2002, p. 95.
- 6 Ian Britain, 'Life Writing', *Meanjin*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2002, p. 2.
- 7 McCooey, *Artful Histories*, pp. 3-4.
- 8 Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism*, p. 5.
- 9 McCooey, *Artful Histories*, pp. 9-10.
- 10 Andrew C. Sparkes, *Telling Tales in Sport and Physical Activity: A Qualitative Journey*, Human Kinetics, Champaign, Illinois, 2002, p. 73.
- 11 Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism*, p. 5. Healy is quoting Antonio Gramsci.
- 12 Annette Kellermann [sic], *How to Swim*, George H. Doran, New York, 1918; Laurie Fromholtz, *The Sobraon Wonder: A Biography of Bernard Bede (Barney) Kieran*, self-published, Wagga Wagga, NSW, 1991; Graham Lomas, *The Will to Win: The Story of Sir Frank Beaurepaire*, William Heinemann Ltd., Melbourne, 1960.
- 13 Neal Blewett, 'No Secret Selves?' *Meanjin*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2002, pp. 13-14.
- 14 Blaise, 'Your Nearest Exit May Be Behind You', pp. 201, 203.