

**BIOGRAPHY, GENDER  
AND HISTORY: NORDIC  
PERSPECTIVES**

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## Doing biography

Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, Tiina Kinnunen,  
Maarit Leskelä-Kärki

Biografering är det svar vi ger den andre och oss själva på frågan vad en människa är.<sup>1</sup>

Since the turn of the twenty-first century historians, alongside with literary scholars and social scientists, have developed a renewed interest in researching the individual, a development which is commonly referred to as the biographical turn. Historical biography is an old practice with a strong but often debated relationship with history as an academic discipline. In the twentieth century, in particular after the Second World War, academic historians generally did not see biography as 'real' history or perceive it as an appropriate field of historical research. As a result, biography remained under-theorised, even marginalised until recent years.<sup>2</sup>

The recent turn has been influenced by several overlapping currents, scholarly and political, associated with the idea of the interdependence between the individual and historical change. Reflecting the growing

<sup>1</sup> [Doing biography is the way to explore the question of what it means to be human.] Larsson 2001, 428.

<sup>2</sup> Österberg 1996; Ambjörnsson et al. 1997; Margadant 2000; Hamilton 2009; Caine 2010; Possing 2012; Possing 2015.

interest in ordinary people's lives, biographical writing and research has become entangled with the multidisciplinary field of life-writing research and its methodological interest in using various autobiographical sources. As a result, historical biography is part of an interdisciplinary field that is characterised by individuals' own ways of documenting and memorialising their lives and giving meaning to their experiences. This interest in the individual has strongly been influenced by a number of political and social changes at the end of the twentieth century such as the end of the Cold War, which brought with it a revision of history in Europe as well as an upsurge of the autobiographical.<sup>3</sup> The biographical turn is best exemplified by the thriving publication of books and articles with biographical themes.<sup>4</sup>

The Nordic countries are no exception in this turn. As a result, a number of studies<sup>5</sup> and historical biographies have been published in recent years, many of them innovative in their use of theoretical and methodological perspectives, particularly concerning the lives of women.<sup>6</sup> As part of this on-going endeavour, this anthology reflects upon how biography has been discussed, debated and theorised in the Nordic contexts during the past two to three decades and aims at further developing this field, especially from the perspective of women's and gender history. We acknowledge that the biographical turn has influenced also other disciplines, but focus on historical biography and its relationship with historical scholarship. Furthermore, biography and biographical

<sup>3</sup> Knudsen and Gram-Skjoldager 2012.

<sup>4</sup> For discussion concerning academic history and biography, as well as the historiography of biography, see e.g. Lee 2009; Hamilton 2009; Caine 2010; Suominen-Kokkonen 2013; Burdiel and Foster 2015; Possing 2015; Rendsis et. al. 2016. See also various recent thematic issues in academic journals, e.g.: *The American Historical Review* 2009; *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2010; *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 2012.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Ambjörnson et al. 1997; Egeland 2000; Rosengren and Östling 2007; *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 2012; Hakosalo et. al. 2014.

<sup>6</sup> On biographies on women see e.g. Sulkunen 1989, 1995, 1999; Possing 1992, 2001, 2007; Haavet 1998; Ollila 1998; Ulvros 2001; Kristmundsdóttir 2001; Leskelä-Kärki 2006; Niskanen 2007; Florin, Niskanen 2010; Carlsson Wetterberg 2010; Pálsdóttir 2010; Vainio-Korhonen 2010 and 2012; Hirdman 2012.

research has been prominent at national and Nordic conferences since the late twentieth century. This anthology is a result of a lively exchange between scholars from the Nordic countries, developed at various conferences and in different networks.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding its Nordic perspective this anthology is essentially international. Nordic biography is strongly conversant with international scholarship on biography, as will become evident in the individual chapters. This volume is a contribution to the growing international interest in, and theorisation of, biography and biographical research as a method of doing history. Its first objective is to strengthen the relationship between history and biography by demonstrating the various ways of employing biography as a method of historical analysis, in particular from a gender perspective. Its second objective is to shed light on the Nordic contribution to this methodological development.

By paying attention to certain methodological challenges and discussions, this volume examines what the biographical turn means in the Nordic countries. Salient here is the concept of gender and the issues that gender history raises in biographical research, most notably the intersection of the public and private domains of lives. Furthermore, the chapters discuss the ways the source material we use influences the reconstruction of lives. Connected to this, the relation between the individual protagonist and his/her contemporary historical context is a focal issue. The chapters will show the advantages of biographical research, with its careful contextualization and focus on the particular and the local. The book also points out the ethical challenges inherent in biographical research, particularly concerning the relationship between the researcher and the protagonist.

This anthology consists of ten chapters by scholars from various Nordic countries with the focus on the above-mentioned challenges:

<sup>7</sup> Haavet 2009, 110–123; Manns and Sundevall 2014; Blazevic 2014. This volume has its origins in the networking that has happened e.g. in the *Nordic Women's and Gender History* conferences particularly in Turku (2005) Reykjavík (2008), Bergen (2012), and Stockholm (2015). Biographical research has also been a topic at the *Nordic History* conferences, for instance in Tampere in 1996.

gender, context, and relationality. The individual chapters each have their own particular case through which they analyse the methodologies of doing historical biography. The volume has a coherent Nordic perspective, since each of the chapters has been developed in cross-national dialogue with the other authors. As the editors of the volume, we do not claim that there is a specific *Nordic* way of writing biography; however, the Nordic countries do have interrelated history and cultural heritage, and have often been perceived as a distinct entity, both by the countries themselves and by the outside world.<sup>8</sup> All the cases discussed in the chapters emerge from Nordic history and thus share a somewhat similar context. We argue that a Nordic perspective helps us to approach the common western narratives from the point of view of more remote parts of Europe.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, we want to emphasise the significance of transnational influences and connection.

Biography can be seen as the meeting point for many of the questions posed by historians today, as Giovanni Levi and Nigel Hamilton have put it. Biographical research, as well as other forms of research using and interpreting autobiographical sources, raises important questions concerning such problematic concepts as experience, agency, context and identity formation.<sup>10</sup> The renewed interest in biography is strongly

related to and intersects with microhistory, gender history, history of everyday life and “history from below”, all of which question the grand narratives of history and emphasise the individual, in particular ordinary people and their experiences in society.<sup>11</sup>

As in traditional biography, personal documents still comprise the core of biographers’ source material, but the understanding and usage of these documents as sources has changed during the last decades. Letters, diaries, memoirs and other autobiographical sources are no longer considered unproblematic or as giving unmediated access to individual lives in the past. Under the influence of interdisciplinary perspectives and new theoretical fields like life-writing studies as well as postmodern historiography, the complexity of these sources is now acknowledged and taken into account, as shown for instance in Birgitte Possing’s biography on the nineteenth-century pioneer of women’s education in Denmark *Viljens Stryke. Natalie Zahle. En Biografi* (1992). In this book, which was one of the trailblazers of the biographical turn in Scandinavia, Possing explored new ways of using autobiographical sources in historical biography.<sup>12</sup>

After her book on Zahle, Possing further developed her ideas on the relation between biography and history. In her chapter in this volume, ‘How does one relate a complex life? Reflections on a polyphonic portrait of the minister and intellectual Bodil Koch (1903–1973)’, Possing reflects upon the analytical tools she used when she wrote her biography of Danish minister and intellectual Bodil Koch (1903–1972) and compares this enterprise with her previous book. Possing not only wanted to make Koch, a popular and well known politician in the mid twentieth century, visible but also wanted to challenge the traditional life and times biography by focusing on a particular (public) phase of

<sup>11</sup> On microhistory and its influence on history, see e.g. Magnússon and Szijártó 2013. See also recent Nordic works where individuals and their life stories play a central role in literacy studies (Kuismin and Driscoll 2013; Edlund, Edlund and Haugen 2014; Edlund, Ashplant and Kuismin 2016). On the “new history from below” and the individual see e.g. Lyons 2014, 14–29.

<sup>12</sup> Possing 1992; Klein 2009, 311. See e.g. Stanley 2004; Leskelä-Kärki, Lahtinen and Vainio-Korhonen 2011; Edlund, Edlund and Haugen 2014.

<sup>8</sup> The shared history of the countries originates from the Middle Ages, when Finland became part of the Swedish Kingdom, and Denmark and Norway shared a common history for centuries. In the early nineteenth century when Finland was separated from Sweden and became autonomous part of Russia, Norway and Sweden formed a personal union that lasted until 1905. Iceland, for its part, was under Norwegian and Danish rule from the thirteenth century until 1944. During the twentieth century, particularly in the post-Second World War period, the Nordic welfare model has characterised the societal development in this area. As far as academic historiography itself is concerned, the shared history goes back to the early twentieth century when historians from the Nordic countries launched the tradition of Nordic historical conferences in Lund 1905. See more in Gustafsson et al. 2007.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent discussion on the Western feminist history and its applicability to the stories and experiences of the more marginal or remote areas, see for example Koobak and Marling 2014, who criticise the use of Western feminist theories in the contexts of the former countries in the Eastern block. More generally, see Abrams 2008. See also Hemmings 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Levi 2010; Hamilton 2009.

Koch's life. Furthermore, there were paradoxical views and narratives concerning the political life of Koch which Possing set out to analyse and understand. In her chapter, Possing discusses the challenges she met and the ways she solved them. Eventually, she ended up creating a polyphonic biography, and in her chapter she emphasises that there is never one pure voice that the biographer can find and use to depict the 'true' story of an individual.

In contrast to Possing, and thus reflecting the versatility of biography's methodology, Christina Carlsson Wetterberg shows how also a more traditional chronological approach can help the biographer to produce an innovative life narrative. In her chapter 'Biography as a way of challenging gender stereotypes: Reflections on writing about the Swedish author and feminist Frida Stéenhoff (1865–1945)', she argues that writing about nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminist protagonists from a gender-sensitive and feminist perspective can result in a narrative of victimhood. To challenge male-female boundaries and to open up the intersections of their life spheres, and thus produce a versatile picture of both the temporal context and the protagonist, she suggests that one has to work as close to the sources as possible and without prejudice.

### The biographical turn in the Nordic historiographies

The biographical turn is by no means a simple or transparent concept. Finnish historian and biographer Irma Sulkunen, for instance, considers historical biography to be part of an ongoing process, implying that the concept of a turn is too dramatic.<sup>13</sup> In a recent, inspiring editorial for the *European Journal for Women's Studies*, Kathy Davis critically ponders upon the concept of a "turn" and its meaning especially for feminist studies. She argues that we need to be careful when promoting turns, as 'they are exercises in power, enabling some knowledge to be excluded'.

<sup>13</sup> Irma Sulkunen discussed critically the concept of biographical turn at *Historianuutimuksen päivät* in Helsinki 2012. Her point is referred in Hakosalo, Jalagin, Junila and Kurvinen 2012, 375.

Identifying something as a "turn" necessitates making a critical distinction between what is important and what is not. It creates borders and constraints between scholars as well. Thus it is relevant to consider what we mean by the biographical turn and how this idea relates to the previous assumptions within historical research about writing biographies and life-stories. We agree with Davis in that 'we need to be sensitive to all attempts, including our own, to authorise one discourse, one theoretical perspective, or one disciplinary approach, while excluding, silencing or dismissing others'.<sup>14</sup>

In her book *Ind i Biografien* (2015), which explores theoretical and methodological aspects of historical biography, Birgitte Possing also emphasises the long tradition of biography and argues that at different times biographers repeatedly ask the same basic questions in their biographies. However, she claims, what is new – and what makes the concept of a turn justified – is the multitude of questions and answers, different interpretations and methodologies that are presently being introduced. Thus, the turn has much to do with us, the historians and biographers, and the ways we perceive biography and think about our research. It is us, the historical biographers, who are rethinking the biographical field in the light of the cornucopia of new biographies, new knowledge, new narrative and experimental forms, and the entrance of hitherto unknown protagonists.<sup>15</sup>

It is exactly this recent and emerging trend in biography and new biographical research that is emphasised in this volume. The chapters revolve around issues that have been central to biographical research for centuries, but now they are increasingly explored from theoretical, methodological and ethical perspectives. Underlining the many-sided nature of biography, we argue that biography 'cannot be dealt with in the singular'.<sup>16</sup> Complexity, diversity and multivocality are the perspectives from which this volume contributes to the ongoing discussion on biography.

<sup>14</sup> Davis 2015, 125–128.

<sup>15</sup> Possing 2015, 29–34, 188–199.

<sup>16</sup> Possing 2015.

A prominent feature in the biographical turn has been the concept of “new biography” which, under postmodern influences, emphasises fragmented selves, identity formation and gendered performances.<sup>17</sup> However, when discussing the genre of biography, and the development of biographical writing, we have to be aware that both have, to a great degree, been developed on the margins of academic historiography and in the overlapping field of academic and non-academic writing. In Finland, Sweden and Denmark, we can trace long historical roots for men and women writing biographies outside academia, nonetheless the significantly influencing the field.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, many of the topics being discussed now were pointed out already by earlier biographers, for instance the concept of “new biography” was discussed by biographers and thinkers such as Virginia Woolf already in the 1920s.<sup>19</sup>

As the historiography of biography clearly demonstrates, biography as an academic enterprise, as history, has been characterised by continuities and ruptures, as well as by differences between countries. The historian Michael Jonas has analysed the present state of Nordic biography from a German perspective and argues that the historical biography was not highly esteemed in Denmark and Norway after the Second World War, and even less so in Sweden.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, historical academic biography never lost its prestige in Finland.

The status of historical biography in Denmark and Sweden changed radically in the 1990s. This is evident in the anthology *Att skriva människan* (1997), in which the editors demonstrate that it had been impossible to present a biography as a doctoral thesis in the discipline of history in Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s. The heavy debate in Denmark in the 1990s changed that. This turnabout took place around the time of Birgitte Possing’s aforementioned doctoral thesis on the gendered history of education in Denmark and its pioneer Natalie Zahle. It paved

<sup>17</sup> Margadant 2000; Possing 2015.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Kattainen, Kinnunen, Packalén and Tuomaala 2005; Kinnunen 2013; Leskelä-Kärki 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Woolf 1967. See also Caine 2010; Possing 2015, 31. Concerning the discussion on the renewal of biography in Finland in the 1920s and 1930s, see Jalava 2013, 297–298. See also Puntilla (1936) 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Jonas 2009.

the way to a new appreciation of the dynamic relationship between the individual personality’s work, life and time, that is, between the individual protagonist and the contemporary national and international historical context, as opposed to focusing on the primacy of structures in historical analysis.<sup>21</sup>

Due to language barriers, the cases of Iceland and Finland have been less well known within the Nordic region than those of Sweden, Norway and Denmark, and even less so in the wider western context. Historical biography has long been a popular genre in Iceland, but it has been surprisingly sparsely discussed as a historical method or enterprise until recent years. Historical biography was, for the most part, the life and work-biography of important or well-known men, often written by trained historians,<sup>22</sup> either within or outside the academia.<sup>23</sup>

During the 1970s, younger Icelandic historians (many influenced by the Marxist theory) rejected biography as an outdated form of doing history. Influenced by structuralist ideologies, they preferred to find and analyse ‘long processes, economic systems, administrative systems and all kinds of welfare systems.’<sup>24</sup> Indeed, biography was in a need of a renovation in Iceland as the historian Björn Þorsteinsson pointed out in 1974. As an opponent for a doctoral thesis on a historical biography, he criticised historical biography for being a stagnated form of narrative, an account of life and work, instead of analytical research.<sup>25</sup> Although historians continued to criticise biography for its tendency to be hagiographic in style, it was not until the 1990s that biography began

<sup>21</sup> The interesting debate around Possing’s work (which, due to language, is though mainly Swedish and Norwegian) is documented and analysed in her book, *Ind i Biografien* (translated in English in 2016 as *Understanding Biographies*). Possing 2015, 15–19. See also Ambjörnsson, Ringby and Åkerman 1997, 7–8.

<sup>22</sup> Until the 1960s, history within the University of Iceland was taught as a part of ‘Icelandic Studies’, which was a mixture of literary studies, Icelandic linguistics and history, with heavy emphasis on the medieval period.

<sup>23</sup> Several of these biographies were written as dissertations for a university degree.

<sup>24</sup> Karlsson 2011, 10–12; Halldórsdóttir 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Þorsteinsson 1974.

to change in Iceland.<sup>26</sup> The strong male bias, both in terms of biographers and protagonists, was however still persistent and, as Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir shows in her chapter, women as historical biographers and as worthy protagonists only entered the stage during the late 1990s. Historical biography and biographical studies are gradually becoming stronger as an academic field and method in Iceland.

As pointed out, Finland differs to some extent from the general Nordic pattern. Already in 1990, the historian Ari Uino underlined the importance of biographical research as part of historiography. In the 1980s, and without interruption into the 1990s, historical biographies were written by historians at different stages of their academic careers and the value of these studies was never seriously called into question because of the genre. In addition, doctoral theses employing a biographical approach were commonly presented, even if some doubts were expressed as to whether they could be accepted as problem-based research. Such criticism was countered, for instance, with the argument that in a biography the individual life was the problem to be examined.<sup>27</sup>

In retrospect, some serious biases in the Finnish biographical scholarship are visible, one such being associated with gender. Despite the emerging field of women's history in the 1980s, the biographical field was still strongly male biased, both in terms of authors and protagonists, with a heavy emphasis on political historical biographies. This changed in the subsequent decades. As a result, similar to the case in other national historiographies, in Finland integrating women and gender into biographical research has gradually reshaped the field both in terms of methodology and in terms of the visibility of a new group of historical actors. Biographical research, in turn, has influenced women's and gender history; it helps both in questioning the grand narratives of history and in deconstructing the canonised interpretations of women's history. This can be noticed particularly in the works of Finnish historians Irma Sulkunen and Anne Ollila, both of whom interwove

<sup>26</sup> Magnússon 2004; Halldórsdóttir 2013. See also short articles in the historical journal *Saga* XLIX:2 (2011), 9–52, where eleven scholars and biographers, from different disciplines answer the question 'What is biography?' ['Hvað er ævisaga?'].

<sup>27</sup> Saarikoski (1989) 2006.

microhistory, gender history and biographical analysis into narratives of individual women in times of social change.<sup>28</sup>

However, bridging the gap between history and biography has not been without tensions among women's and gender historians themselves. The Dutch historian Mineke Bosch, among others, points out many women's and gender historians' ambivalence concerning biography.<sup>29</sup> This ambivalence has also been evident among Nordic women's and gender historians, who have primarily worked in the field of social history and emphasised the role of women in the workforce and in social movements.<sup>30</sup>

### Gendering biographies

Gender plays a central role in this book and permeates all the chapters, as they reflect topical and innovative research into male and female lives, and aim at developing a gender-sensitive historical biography in which gender is analysed and discussed in different historical contexts. Like any other social and cultural phenomenon, gender is constructed in time, in historical processes. Historians can offer a perspective that is open and sensitive to the diversity of the past as well as for the ruptures and disconnections between the past and the present.

As the gender historian Jeanne Boydston has argued, the perspective of gender as a category of analysis has in a way led us to a situation where we tend to see the past and its situations as similar to the present. In our eagerness to defend gender as a historical process, we have embraced the similarities while overlooking the differences. We

<sup>28</sup> Sulkunen 1989, 1995, 1999; Ollila 1997.

<sup>29</sup> Bosch 2012. See also e.g. Caine 1994, 250; Schaser 2001, 143.

<sup>30</sup> See the special volume of *Scandia* 'Genushistoriens urmaningar' (2/2012) concerning the content and status of gender history in present Sweden. In her article, Ann-Carin Östman pays attention to how the status of biographical and life-historical approaches has been higher in Finland than in Sweden, particularly in the 1990s. Östman 2012, 95. See also Tuomaala 2005.



should be equally sensitive to differences other than gender as well as to the complexity, inconsistency and discrepancy of the past.<sup>31</sup> Here, in particular, biography can help us in developing more subtle interpretations, since biography is always local and particular. Individual lives can 'illustrate how differences of wealth and power, of class and gender and of ethnicity and religion have affected historical experiences and understanding', like Australian historian and biographer Barbara Caine has put it.<sup>32</sup> And in looking from the periphery of the North – a term, whose meaning differs historically and geographically – we are aware of, and underscore, the importance of remembering that history is always culturally and socially situated in time and space.

Despite the impact of women's and gender history on biographical research, in the beginning of the second millennium women are still in the minority as protagonists (and also among writers). In her aforementioned book, *Ind i biografien*, Birgitte Possing reveals interesting figures on the gender imbalance in historical biography, both concerning protagonists and biographers, which still characterises the field. She analysed biographies published and reviewed from 2000–2011 in six selected historical journals and shows that the biographical genre was not only male dominated – it was astonishingly male dominated. Although the number of female protagonists rose from 10 per cent to 15 per cent in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, and more women were therefore being given their due place in history, men still filled on average 85 per cent of the biographical picture. There were large differences between countries however: in the United States, Sweden and Denmark the proportion

<sup>31</sup> Boydston 2008, 558–583. See also Aalto, Kaartinen, Konola, Lahinen, Leskelä-Kärki and Tuohela, 2014. Boydston refers to Joan Scott's influential analysis on gender as an analytical category, see Scott, 1988. See also Antri Harmainen's chapter in this anthology. Further on gender history from national and international perspectives see e.g. Morgan 2006; Abrams 2006; Downs 2010. On Nordic discussion see e.g. Hagemann 2003; Possing 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Caine 2010, 10. See also e.g. Florin 2015.

of women protagonists reached 20 per cent, i.e. one-fifth of all biographies.<sup>33</sup>

This bias draws attention to and is the part of the western historiographical tradition in which women have until recently not been considered active agents in history and thus have not been given a place in national or international historiography. Although this tradition has been challenged for nearly fifty years, women's and gender history is still underrepresented in most canonised historical narratives. The demand, and need, for a change and for revised histories is best reflected in the flourishing publication of national and international (European) books addressing the theme of gendered history.<sup>34</sup>

Biographies seem to be a fruitful way of exploring and representing women's lives – and thus to gradually change the way women are perceived and written about as historical agents in historical narratives. However the issue of female protagonist is related not only to gender, but also to differences within the category of women. In her chapter 'A biography of her own: The historical narrative and Sigríður Pálsdóttir (1809–1871)', Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir argues that ordinary lives are still marginal as the protagonists of women's biographies, and indeed their lives, lack a frame of narration within the field. She maintains that even though feminist biographers and theorists stress the importance of exploring and writing the lives of ordinary and forgotten women rather than exceptions and trailblazers, these women seldom become biographical subjects on the strength of their own individual lives but rather serve as representatives of larger groups of women. Halldórsdóttir grounds her argument on her study on the life and letters of the Icelandic Sigríður Pálsdóttir (1809–1871) who wrote her brother 250 letters during her lifetime but otherwise did nothing that would make her a woman worthy of a biography.

<sup>33</sup> Possing 2015, 65.

<sup>34</sup> Blom and Sogner 2006; Smith 2000, 2010; Porciani and O'Dowd 2004; Abrams, Gordon, Simonton and Yeo 2006; Epple and Schaser 2006; Hagemann and Quataert 2007; Downs 2010.

Most of the chapters in this volume are concerned with women, which is indicative of the present situation in the field of “new biographies”.<sup>35</sup> These have mostly been devoted to exploring women’s lives, their circumstances and the meaning of gender for women. The increasing interest in biographical research among women’s and gender historians in the early 2000s has resulted in a growing number of biographies of women as entrepreneurs, scientists, scholars, politicians, social reformers, artists, feminists for instance. Many of these biographies have been influenced by postmodern views and are experimental in form and context. In the Nordic context, this is exemplified for instance by Kirsti Niskanen’s book on the Swedish economist Karin Kock, *Karriär i männens värld* (2007), and Birgitte Possing’s aforementioned book on the Danish minister and theologian Bodil Koch, *Uden Omsvøb* (2007).

Although the history of masculinities and manhood is a growing field within gender history, men continue to be the unproblematised main characters of most biographies.<sup>36</sup> In this anthology the male sex and gendered ideas about men and masculinity are analysed by Antti Harmainen in his chapter ‘Group biography as an approach to studying manhood and religion in late nineteenth-century Finland’. For his analysis, the use of private sources is of crucial importance because they open up a possibility to see how the rigid binary of femininity and masculinity was challenged within particular circles in Finnish society. Harmainen discusses the emergence of a specific form of modern masculinity that saw features like empathy, which were normally perceived of as feminine, as compatible with a morally sustainable modern manhood. This concept of manhood was constructed in relation to alternative forms of religious beliefs, in this case theosophy and spiritualism. Here, Harmainen’s analysis is in line with Christina Carlsson Wetterberg’s, who sees the potential of biography in challenging the idea of strictly gendered spaces and identities.

Harmainen’s analysis reflects how one of the characteristics of gendered biographies is the emphasis on the overlapping of the private and

<sup>35</sup> We follow the argument of Birgitte Possing (2015) on how we need to talk about biography in plural, biographies, due to the diversity of the genre.

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. Possing 2012; Hakosalo, Jalagin, Junila and Kurvinen 2014, 14.

public spheres in an individual’s life.<sup>37</sup> The contested binary of public and private spheres has been one of the most salient concepts of women’s and gender history since the early 1970s and continues to motivate research on how women have dealt with the ideology of separate spheres while simultaneously trying to shape their new-found public lives. Kristine Kjærsgaard also addresses the public and the private in her chapter ‘Love and emotions in the diplomatic world: The relationship between Bodil Begtrup’s public and private lives, 1937–1956’ which investigates the complex love relationship, and later marriage, between Bergtrup and her fellow diplomat, Laurits Bolt-Jørgensen, as well as the way Bergtrup’s public life and career as a diplomat was affected by her relationship with Bolt-Jørgensen despite her determination to keep public and private separated. Kjærsgaard demonstrates that it is impossible to separate the private from the public in biographical study as they are always intertwined, even if it is the public life which is being investigated.

### Contextualising the individual(s) in biographies

For a historian writing historical biography, the most challenging task is the representation relationship between the individual and his/her historical period. Virginia Woolf pointed out this difficulty when she was contemplating the process of writing her memoir in the late 1930s: ‘I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.’ Later, the British biographer Hermione Lee argued that the biographer’s task is to see both the fish and the stream, that is, the context or “spirit of the age” in which one lives.<sup>38</sup>

In her *Biography and History* (2010) Barbara Caine argues that the upsurge of interest in biography among historians derives from their growing insight into the compatibility of the individual and the social/

<sup>37</sup> Ware 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Lee 2009, 13–14. See also how Finnish cultural historian Jukka Sarjala discusses the limitations of contextualisation in outlining too tightly the possible worlds of an individual in the past, Sarjala 2014.

political: “The “turn” that they describe involves a new preoccupation with individual lives and stories as a way of understanding both contemporary societies and the whole process of a social and historical change.<sup>39</sup> Women’s and gender historians have contributed to the discussion about the dynamic relationship between the context and the individual(s) with their emphasis on gendered and gendering structures and historical processes, as evidenced by the pioneering work of scholars such as Birgitte Possing and Susanne Malchau in Denmark, Inger Elisabeth Haavet in Norway, Yvonne Hirdman in Sweden, and Irma Sulkunen and Anne Ollila in Finland.<sup>40</sup> The relationship between the individual and the context is an underlying theme that this anthology seeks to develop further.

As mentioned above, microhistory, like biography, has broadly influenced the paradigm changes in historical scholarship during the past few decades, especially with respect to the usage of personal documents such as letters or diaries, which are also vital sources for biographers. The link between biographical and microhistorical research can be seen as mutually enriching, but also as problematic. On the one hand, there is an overlap between these two, as for instance Barbara Caine points out.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, there are methodological and theoretical differences between these two fields of research.<sup>42</sup> Microhistorians have generally chosen their protagonist because of his/her often marginal or exceptional life – criminal activity being one of the popular themes. Such individuals have been used to mirror their society and its hegemonic beliefs; “normal exceptions” is the preferred concept because the “abnormal”, unsuitable or punishable behaviour of these protagonists discloses what is thought to be normal. These individuals are thus not necessarily chosen because of their own merits but are, rather, explored as representatives of bigger processes or groups.

Notwithstanding biography’s special interest in the individual life, a good historical biography always develops our understanding of histori-

<sup>39</sup> Caine 2010, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Possing 1992, 2007; Malchau 1998; Haavet 1998; Hirdman 2006, 2012; Sulkunen 1989, 1995, 1997; Ollila 1998.

<sup>41</sup> Caine 2010, 111–116.

<sup>42</sup> Lepore 2001; Caine 2010; Magnússon and Szijártó 2013.

cal structures and processes. This is evident for example in the Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman’s fascinating biography about her mother, *Den röda grevinnan. En europeisk historia* (2012). The starting point for this book are the turbulent interwar years in Europe which Hirdman wanted to illuminate. In the end, the book became first and foremost a biography of her mother, Charlotte Hirdman, who led independent and cosmopolitan life in Germany, Moscow and Copenhagen before settling in Sweden as a housewife and mother of three. The political changes in Europe are made visible through the life story of a woman who remained a mystery to her own daughter.<sup>43</sup>

The American historian Jill Lepore has illuminated the differences between microhistorical and biographical research regarding their relation to individuals. Whereas microhistory aims at saying something about the culture in which an individual is positioned, the focus of a biographer is always on the individual, despite the careful contextualization. In microhistory, the aim is to analyse some mystery or phenomena, whereas in biography a life story has value in its own right. The individual is thus more of a tool for the microhistorian, who, as a consequence, does not develop as strong an attachment or ‘fall in love’ with her protagonist as biographers usually do – regardless of whether this is a bad thing or not.<sup>44</sup>

Notwithstanding the differences between them, Irma Sulkunen’s research demonstrates the productive overlap between microhistorical and biographical approaches and how this overlap opens up new possibilities to analyse historical change. In her trilogy (1989, 1995, 1999) on three Finnish women, Sulkunen uses their individual lives to explore large societal and political processes, such as nation building, formation of civil society and the modern gender order. In doing so, she conceptualises biography not as a separate field of historical research but rather as a method. She actually employs the concept of “person-based history” (in Finnish *henkilöhistoria*) to underline her view of the mutual relationship between biography and history. In 2009, Sulkunen retrospectively describes one of her protagonists as follows: “Through the activities

<sup>43</sup> Hirdman 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Lepore 2001.

of Miina Sillanpää, Finland's perhaps most notable female politician, the book traces in particular the changes that took place in the social system of gender when paid employment became more common and class society more firmly established.<sup>45</sup> However, in her book on Mandi Granfelt (1995), a school teacher and nationalist activist, Sulkunen does point out the importance of uniqueness when she stresses that, although Mandi could be seen as an example of her times, she nevertheless remains 'undefinably unique' in character.<sup>46</sup>

In Tiina Kinnunen's chapter "Fighting Sisters": A comparative biography of Ellen Key (1849–1926) and Alexandra Gripenberg (1857–1913) in the contested field of European feminisms', Kinnunen employs comparative biographical approach in analysing the ideological controversy between two contemporaries, the Finnish Gripenberg and the Swedish Key. Combining a biographical with a microhistorical approach, Kinnunen's analysis, influenced by the work of Irma Sulkunen, sheds light on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminism as a contested field, nationally and transnationally. The controversy surrounding the two feminists fighting for their ideas – and each other – is analysed against the broader context of modernization of gender relations and the changing role of religion.

Women's political agency is also analysed in Irene Andersson's chapter "Telling stories of gendered place and space: The political agency of the Swedish Communist Valborg Svensson (1903–1983)". Andersson shows how the unique life of a unique person, Valborg Svensson, turns into multiple lives when analysed through sources that are disparate yet still interconnected. In the sources available to Andersson, Svensson was mostly depicted by others or the sources were produced for identity production in public arenas. From her fragmented sources, Andersson creates a context and a narrative of gendered and class-related space for political agency in pre- and post-Second World War Sweden.

<sup>45</sup> Sulkunen 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Sulkunen 1995, 9. [jäljittelemättömän ainuuskertainen]

## Biographical relationships

Writing a biography is always a relational process and, as such, biography seems to be a special genre. Biography hinges on the interaction between the narrator and the individuals<sup>47</sup> being narrated, though the latter might be long deceased. This makes biography a dialogical process in which the narrator constantly mirrors her/himself and her/his opinions in relation to the other, and changes her/his opinions not only about the person being narrated but also about her/himself. As biographers, we must always clarify on what our relationship is to the individual(s) we narrate, since this relationship and reflection define what kind of biography we write. Thus, writing a biography means always balancing between involvement and detachment, as Hermione Lee puts it.<sup>48</sup>

Biographers and historians dealing with individual lives have often found it difficult to find this balance. Some have found a way to address the issue by publishing what the literary scholar Rachel Morley calls 'pre-biographical' writings, that is, scholarly articles that ponder upon the dilemmas and challenges they are facing while studying their protagonist and writing her/his story.<sup>49</sup> Although there are several scholars at the present writing about the question of who can interpret and represent a life, and how, or who 'owns' the remembrance of an individual, we have to keep in mind that there have been writers pondering upon these questions also earlier. For example, the Finnish writer, translator and biographer Tyyni Tuulio used many of the practices, that historians have started to use later on, already in the 1950s and 1960s, when she wrote several biographies of women. Her biographies and various essays concerning biographical writing were exceptional, since she used many

<sup>47</sup> In this section the focus is on biographies with one protagonist. However, it has to be kept in mind that a growing number of biographies are written about several protagonists. See e.g. Heini Hakosalo's chapter in this volume.

<sup>48</sup> Lee 2009. About this relational process, see also e.g. Culley and Styler 2011; Morley 2012; Leskelä-Kärki 2012, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Morley 2012, 77–95. Indeed, there are several such articles to be found in historical and scholarly journals, also by the editors of this volume: see e.g. Leskelä-Kärki 2001, 2004; Halldórsdóttir 2010, 2015. Also, for instance, Kristmundsdóttir 2006; Holmes 2005; Lee 2008.

of the means historians promote today: self-reflection, highlighting the importance of private sources, dialogical relation with the past persons, positioning of herself, and playing with literary genres.<sup>50</sup>

The British sociologist Liz Stanley has addressed relationality widely in her works, and she emphasises acknowledging the importance of what happens in 'the spaces between lives lived and lives written' – a process, a relationality that eventually leads to a final outcome: a book, a biography, or an article. The process of producing should be, she argues, an acknowledged part of the final outcome.<sup>51</sup> Stanley has discussed the unclear borders between autobiographical and biographical writing in her classic book *The autobiographical I* (1992). In it, she rejects the rigid differentiation between biography and autobiography and argues for their reciprocity by introducing the concept *autobiography*. Stanley argues that '“doing biography” in any of its sub-forms is intimately connected with the biographer's own autobiography'.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, we ourselves, our origins, experience and views are reflected, consciously and unconsciously, in our works and we must admit this. The historian Kate Brown phrases it aptly when she writes that we (or historical and biographical writing) must acknowledge that 'nearly all good history writing relies on the experience of the historian, the historian's own biography, to grasp and represent the past'.<sup>53</sup> To acknowledge one's own voice as a biographer and the intimate dialogue one creates with the biographée is not common in the Nordic research. In the third biography of her trilogy, Irma Sulkunen, however, dares to take this step when she engages in a dialogue with an eighteenth-century woman who is said to have started a religious revivalist movement, but of whom there are no extant sources.<sup>54</sup>

In her chapter 'Remembering mother: Relations and memory in the biographical project on Minna Krohn (1841–1917)', Maarit Les-

<sup>50</sup> See more in Leskelä-Kärki 2013. See also Oirtinen 2005, 186.

<sup>51</sup> Stanley 2002.

<sup>52</sup> Stanley 1992, 162–163.

<sup>53</sup> Brown 2009, 599. See also e.g. Leskelä-Kärki 2006, 78–85, 631–639, where she discusses the emotional relation of a researcher towards her subjects and develops a methodology of empathetic and hermeneutic approach further.

<sup>54</sup> Sulkunen 1999.

kelä-Kärki discusses relationality as an important starting point when engaging with the life of another, but also as an ethical issue that rises between the biographer and her subject. In her biographical project on Finnish nineteenth-century school teacher Minna Krohn, Leskelä-Kärki questions the idea of a coherent life story and asks how we could approach past persons in a way that would allow many voices and contradictions. Analysing the different narrated memories of Minna Krohn, and implementing the ideas of relational identity theorised by Adriana Cavarero, she asks how we, as biographers, might make use of the varied and often also contradictory material produced on past persons and do ethically solid biographical studies.

The multiple interpretations of relationality are a topic we address in many of our chapters. It is a wide concept that impinges on only the relationship between the biographer and her/his biographée but also the awareness of the relationality of (our) identities. Several of the chapters deal with the protagonist's close relationships – with children, spouses and friends, as well as with larger circles of colleagues and networks. We argue that contextualising our protagonist not only entails exploring her/him in relation to relevant cultural, political or economic contexts but should also include analysis of the social surroundings and the relevant networks and relations.

The increasing popularity of group biography is an indication of the usefulness of this approach, as exemplified for instance by Susanne Malchau Dietz' book *Køn, Kald og Kompetencer. Diakonissestiftelsens kvindes fællesskab og omsorgsuddannelser 1853–1955* (2013)<sup>55</sup> and Christina Florin's study on Swedish feminists' campaign for the vote, *Kvinnor får röst: kön, känslor och politisk kultur i kvinnornas rösträttsrörelse* (2006). In this volume, Heini Hakosalo points out, that, since the 1980s, most group biographies have been written by women about women.<sup>56</sup> Most of these works focus on the ways gender and social, cultural and political structures limit or open up possibilities for their women protagonists.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> For group biography, see e.g. Malchau Dietz 2013 and Caine 2010, 47–61.

<sup>56</sup> See Hakosalo 2014. See also e.g. Elqvist-Saltzman 1997.

<sup>57</sup> Ware 2010.

In this anthology, Antti Harmainen uses group biographical approach to historicise certain aspects of masculinity and men's lives. In her chapter 'Coming together: Early Finnish medical women and the multiple levels of historical biography', Heini Hakosalo asks how a biographer can combine various aspects of biographical approach when studying several individuals. She distinguishes between a set, a group and an individual approach and argues that the research question directs which of the approaches to employ and how they should be implemented. She suggests that group biography is best suited for an analysis of relations and their historicity, and for examining influences between individuals. She categorises pair biography, such as that used by Kristine Kjærsgaard in this volume, as a subcategory of group biography.

Hakosalo also discusses the multiple interpretations of the concept of collective biography. Kaisa Vehkalahti's chapter 'Bad girl biographies: Child welfare documents as gendered biographies' takes the idea of collective biography further, as she examines the biographical information collected and registered by the social service (child welfare) in Finland pertaining to 'delinquent' girls. As Vehkalahti demonstrates, this data is sensitive but at the same time also fascinating biographical source material. However, Vehkalahti does not focus on individual cases but instead examines knowledge-production, that is, the ways in which the forms and questions are structured, and what kind of biographies are produced. Simultaneously, she shows how these carefully structured (collective) biographies were used to define, interpret and identify improper behaviour.

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The volume is concluded by an 'Afterword' that discusses four inter-related topics from the view point of the future of biography as a category of historical research. This chapter completes but also opens up new perspectives on the variety of viewpoints and approaches of the preceding individual chapters. These four topics are 'Biography as an interdisciplinary endeavor', 'Relationality and ethics: biographers, protagonists and readers', 'Biography and the transnational turn in history', and 'Biography as a tool to combine micro and macro'. The twelve chap-

ters of this volume are aimed at showing the capacity of biography to reflect the challenges, both academic and political, of the constantly changing world and create tools to capture the interest of future reader generations.

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