Dossier

Thick Stories – an Historian Taking Personal Stories Seriously

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Abstract

Accounts of events, whether reportage, history or myth, are inseparable from the stories of those giving the account. This paper will look at the relationship between personal stories, journalism and history, suggesting that only an approach that includes individual stories, prosopographical detail and objective data can provide the "thick" retelling of events necessary to give a satisfactory account of events described, remembered or imagined. The argument will be illustrated by reference to three historical figures: John Henry Newman, Charles De Gaulle and António Salazar.

Keywords

History • Myth • Story • Biography • Prosopography • Namierite • De Gaulle • Newman • Salazar

Resumo

Os relatos de acontecimentos – sejam reportagens, narrativas históricas ou mitos – são intrinsecamente inseparáveis das histórias de vida de quem os relata. Este artigo examina a complexa inter-relação entre histórias pessoais, jornalismo e história, argumentando que apenas uma abordagem que integre narrativas individuais, dados prosopográficos detalhados e informações objetivas pode oferecer uma reconstituição "densa" dos eventos, essencial para uma descrição plena e satisfatória dos acontecimentos narrados, lembrados ou imaginados. Este argumento será ilustrado através da análise de três figuras históricas emblemáticas: John Henry Newman, Charles de Gaulle e António Salazar.

Palavras-chave

História • Mito • Estória • Biografia • Prosopografia • Namierite • De Gaulle • Newman • Salazar

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1. Prologue

When he published The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III, in 1929, Lewis Namier can be said to have invented a new kind of history, a new historiographical approach (Namier, 1929). So significant was the novelty of his method of looking at British parliamentary dynamics in the 1760s that the method became known, eponymously, as Namierite History. What then distinguished the writing of history by this Polish emigré jew, who was then a don at Balliol College, Oxford, from what had gone before? Put simply, Namier took seriously the detail of the personal lives and relationships, insofar as they could be reconstructed from the historical sources, of the very many historical actors who were active in the parliament of 1760. He did so by looking in a structured manner at correspondence, diaries, wills, bank records etc. to build up a complete picture of the individuals and both how and why they spoke, acted and voted the way they did. This made it possible to see clearly the similarities and distinctions of the entire parliamentary class and thereby explain the dynamics of that parliament, which marked the final years of a period of de facto one-party rule in Great Britain by the Whigs, an aristocratic, progressive party who had supported the German Hanoverian dynasty who had replaced the Stuarts on the death of Queen Anne in 1713.

In writing his history in this manner, Lewis Namier revolutionised the received history of the 18th century in Britain and more-or-less invented prosopographical history. The word prosopography comes from the Greek word prosopon, meaning face, or mask, or person, and is differentiated from biography by the fact that it is more concerned with identifying commonalities and differences between a group of historical figures, by the detail of individual lives, than it is in telling the individual story of those lives. It is here where the writing of history comes into conversation with the subject of this publication: the interaction between story and different kinds of literacy.

2. Historiograpy: Stories, Myths and Histories

I write this paper as a Catholic theologian and a Church historian – with all the antecedent religious and intellectual commitments those positions entail – and as such the question of story is always in my mind. Where those stories are accounts of events recorded in the sources of Divine Revelation – that is, in Sacred Scripture (a treasure trove of stories) and in the Tradition of the Church – or in accounts of the history of the Church, and, given my own expertise, particularly in the history of the Church in the last 250 years or so. More specifically what concerns me as I work in both disciplines is how we tell the tales of the past: how we give an account of what happened, why it happened and both how and why the individual historical actors behaved as they did. Whilst I consider this essential to the writing of history, I do not think it is really possible to meet Von Ranke's standard of writing history as it really was. ["…wie es eigentlich gewesen ist" (Von Ranke, 1885, p. VII). For the difficulty of translating this expression, and particularly the ambivalent term "eigentlich" see Gilbert (1987, p. 393).] I also recognise that antecedent religious commitments can both help and distort work as an historian. They can help the historian to take seriously the religious commitments of figures from the past who themselves were motivated by religious beliefs – what Sarah Foot has called, "the religious turn". The argument was first laid out explicitly in her presidential speech at the Summer Conference of the Ecclesiastical History Society in 2011 (Foot, 2012) and repeated in the second part of her Inaugural Lecture as Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Oxford that same year (Foot, n.d.). It is an argument that at its root calls upon the historian to allow for the possibility that the espoused religious beliefs and practices of individuals and even of groups or nations can be held in more or less good faith and be the legitimate basis for their acts.

On the other hand, there is always the risk that an overly attentive stance towards the religion of historical figures by historians who themselves have religious attachments can lead to a kind of confessional history. In such cases evidence may be privileged or discounted for reasons that serve neither history nor, if it is at all concerned with encountering the truth and knowing it, the religious faith of the scholar. It is important, perhaps, then for the Church historian to write as "neither a believer nor a non-believer" (Bianchi, 1977, col. 31). It is only then, I would argue, that a history can be written which allows, in the words of Mircea Eliade, an explanation of any given religious phenomenon in history "understood in its own mode of being, that is to say, studied according to religious criteria," and particularly to provide an account of those we might properly call homo religiosus and his or her actions, without which the history is inevitably and unavoidably inadequate (Eliade, 1976, p. 81). I further argue that there are other such personal details, personal stories which are essential to the project of writing thick history.

The fundamental thesis of this short paper is, therefore, that without understanding the stories of historical actors, including their religious convictions, self-perceptions and the dynamics of familial connections and social networks, it is not only poor history that we end up writing but no kind of history at all. What we are left

with is, at best, convenient fable or, at worst, distorting fiction. In studying historical figures with strong religious beliefs, for example, the criticism of psychologising is often allied to a cynical methodological atheism which discounts the real beliefs of those figures as genuine, good faith motivations for their actions. Thus, for example, we might be invited to take the view that King Alfred the Great can not have been motivated to produce a translation of the Bible into Anglo-Saxon by the genuine piety of a Christian king but only because of his desire to exercise control over the education of the minds of his people. This is, of course, absurd. It is certainly true that individual historical actors may have had mixed motives for their actions: the English King John's promise to take the Cross, that is to go on Crusade, in 1215 certainly owed as much to his desire to persuade the Pope to take his side in civil war then engulfing England and to the lifting of the interdict Innocent III had imposed, as it did to a genuine desire to liberate the Holy Places. But in Alfred, a King who made three highly risky pilgrimages to Rome and who followed up his victory at the Battle of Ethandune by baptising the vanquished Danish King and his entire army, after eight days of sermons on Christian doctrine, must surely have been motivated in part by his own sincerely held religious beliefs. To deny that is to replace history and even story with a kind of cynicism which serves neither to understand the past nor to make it accessible in all its strangeness to modern readers.

And strangeness there certainly is. The opening line of L. P. Hartley's 1953 novel, The Go-Between claims that "[t]he past is a foreign country; they do things differently there" (Hartley, 1953, p. 1). Whilst the phrase is certainly arresting, it elides over a very significance between the past and, for example, North Korea. It is certainly not straightforward to go to North Korea (and they certainly do things differently there) but, with determination, ingenuity and a certain measure of luck, it is actually possible. It is not possible to visit the past: once the moment has gone, it has gone. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, laid out the case in his 2003 Sarum Lectures (Williams, 2005). Williams was careful to remind his audience that the undertaking in which those telling stories of the past, those writing history had to respect two points of reference or poles in order adequately to account for change and continuity. Williams identified the one pole as the radical similarity of human identity and experience, in the past and the present, and the opposite pole as the radical dissimilarity of those things. Human beings in the past were substantially the same as they are now and, at one and the same time, substantially different. Like many truths, Williams's point, once expressed, seems obvious and yet it places us under an often unfamiliar discipline whenever we engage in any kind of storytelling that moves us beyond the position of the fabulist.

To illustrate this, I want then very briefly to consider certain aspects of the lives of individual historical actors as an essential part of the necessary business of writing a "thick" history. That is the objective must be to offer accounts, whether they be reportage, history or, indeed, myth (at least in the theological sense), which attract and compel our attention in order to give us a richer understanding of historical reality, in contrast to two--dimensional, monochrome histories which allow us to be lazy about the past and therefore about the present. This notion is borrowed from the social sciences, and specifically from the work of the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, who developed the notion of "thick description" from the work of the philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, when dealing with ethnographic and other observational data, but here applied to the historical record, to historical sources and other data (Geertz, 1973, pp. 5-6, 9-10). In his 1968 *Thinking and Reflecting* (Ryle, 1968) and a year later in *The Thinking of Thoughts: What is "Le Penseur" Doing?* (Ryle, 1969), Ryle had proposed a two-fold structure for looking at observational accounts of behaviour. There were those accounts which were "thin", which included surface-level observations of behaviour; and there were those which were "thick", which added the necessary context to account for such behaviour. To explain such context required grasping individuals' motivations for their behaviours and how these behaviours were understood by other observers of the community as well.

It is important to be clear why this all matters. In doing so, I don't intend to be taken as moralistic or engaging in scaremongering. Nevertheless, the distorted accounts of, for example, national histories are at present fuelling a war in Gaza, another in Ukraine and extraordinarily dangerous geopolitical tensions in East Asia. All of these are made possible by thin histories which collapse important distinctions, ignore inconvenient facts and, perhaps most dangerously, allow the "othering" of individuals, groups, and even entire countries. If the events of the twentieth century teach us anything, whether in the frenzied lunacy of the Khmer Rouge, the cold, efficient murder machine of Nazi Germany or the ideological hatred of the Soviet purges, it is that our human fellow-feeling can easily give way to a callous and deadly indifference, the moment we start to define others as "other". It matters not whether the characteristics of "other" are found in the eyeglasses that betray our ability to read, or the racial and cultural characteristics that mark us out as Jewish, or the economic advantages derived from small holdings of land that reveal we are kulaks: once othered the killing-fields, the concentration camps and the gulag all become not just possibilities but ineluctable destinations for societies that have settled for de-personalised, de-humanised accounts: societies who have opted for history as slogan. One of the

jobs of the historian, the story-teller, the author, the artist, the musician, the film-maker – today to these I think we must add the game designer and the creators of digital virtual realities – one of their tasks in any society which wants to escape a nihilistic death wish, is to tell thick stories, which respect the historical, archival, archaeological and scientific data but also take seriously the stories of historical actors.

I want to make another point here. I mentioned storytellers, authors, artists, musicians, filmmakers, game designers and digital creators for a reason. It seems to me that they are the real culture-smiths of our day; it is they who fashion the imaginative world about the past, the present and the future. These media do more to create society's impression of the past than any number of dusty archive mice than any number of archaeologists or historians. The rise of historical fiction, much of it brilliantly written and very well researched, has arguably had a greater effect on perceptions of the past than any number of scholarly monographs.

Here we might consider the impact of Hilary Mantel's award-winning Wolf Hall trilogy (Mantel, 2009, 2020, 2012) and its adaption for stage and for BBC Television. Thomas Cromwell, "a blacksmith's son, and rose to be Earl of Essex, Henry VIII's right-hand man, and minister of everything" (Higgins, 2012) has, I argue, been reinvented in the popular consciousness. He is no longer the "detestably self-serving, bullying monster" described by Simon Schama, a man "who perfected state terror in England, cooked the evidence, and extracted confessions by torture," of the documentary historical record (Wolfe, 2015). Neither is he any longer the venal schemer of Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* (Bolt, 1961), itself an effective manipulation of the public imagination, especially after the multiple Oscar-winning 1966 film adaptation, and one Mantel explicitly sought to overturn. Cromwell is now "a champion of the common man, a pragmatic businessman who eschews religious fundamentalism and fear-mongering" (Wolfe, 2015).

It may argued that Mantel was a writer of fiction and not history. To do so, however, is to miss two important points. The first is that in her own description of her research and writing, Mantel set herself a standard that sounds suspiciously like Von Ranke's claim (Alter, 2009). The second is that whilst academic opinion might be persuaded by, for example, Diarmaid MacCulloch's immensely scholarly, subtle and not entirely unsympathetic historical account (MacCulloch, 2010), the Thomas Cromwell fixed in the public mind is far more likely to owe its overall judgement to Mantel. After all the BBC adaptation was watched by upwards of six million people in the UK alone, and it has subsequently aired in both the United States and Australia. The novels were published to critical acclaim and with the attendant high volumes of sales. Wolf Hall won the 2009 Booker Prize and has been translated into, amongst other languages, Portuguese (Mantel, 2010). *Bring up the Bodies* won the 2012 Man Booker Award and *The Mirror and the Light* was long-listed for the same prize. Their cultural influence has been immense and with it a likely blurring of the boundary between history and historical fiction. There is a certain amount of argument about whether this matters, whether the public can or cannot tell the difference. The Australian historian Mark McKenna makes out a convincing argument that it cannot and that this does matter insofar as history matters at all, which both he and I think it most definitely does (McKenna, 2006). The quotation that springs so readily to mind here is from George Orwell's 1949 dystopian prophecy, the book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present, controls the past…" (Orwell, 1949, p. 162).

Perhaps another quotation should be juxtaposed with this and one inspired not, as with Orwell, by the Nazis but by that fons et origo of the terror of ideology, the French Revolution. Surveying the newly wrought carnage of Paris in 1789, before things really got going in The Terror of four years later, the Anglo-Irish politician and writer, Edmund Burke, wrote, "People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors" (Burke, 1790, pp. 47-48). So in the remainder of this short paper, I want to look backward to three of our ancestors, who I hope will offer brief illustrations of just how the story of the individual enables us to develop a thick account of them and the influence they had and continue to have. I confess to having been more than a little mischievous, if not quite deliberately inflammatory, in selecting the three individuals. Not one of them is a figure free of controversy, each evoking strong responses, each continues to divide opinions, yet in the events imagined, events described and events remembered in the lives of John Henry Newman, Charles De Gaulle and António Salazar, it is possible to see the benefit of the "thick history" approach for which I argue in this paper.

3. Events Imagined

First is John Henry Newman. Newman was born in London in 1801, the eldest son of initially comfortably prosperous parents. In his long life (he lived until 1890) he was a university professor (or Fellow, in the vocabulary of the University of Oxford), a Church of England cleric, a theologian, a founder of educational establishments and a writer on educational thought, a poet, a novelist, a Catholic priest, a Cardinal. His theological views polarised the English religious atmosphere of his time, his conversion to Catholicism in 1845 caused scandal

and led to a complete estrangement from many of his friends and at least one of his siblings. His comments concerning his former ecclesial community led to a criminal conviction for seditious libel and his views on the direction of travel of the Church he had joined caused him to be thought theologically suspect, if not actually heretical. That he was raised to the sacred purple in his later years, and to the altars of the Catholic Church, as St John Henry Newman in 2019, whilst clearly considerably post mortem endorsement by that Church, does nothing to alter the record of a deeply controversial life.

Newman scholars are often accused of taking so seriously the intricacies of his life – and we have an unparalleled wealth of detail since his journals, kept more or less for seventy years, and his entire correspondence survive more or less intact and in print, in the 32 volumes published by Oxford University Press (Newman, 1961) – that they engage in "psychologising" about Newman, either sympathetically or otherwise. Of course, this is a fundamental methodological criticism that historians who take seriously the individual stories of individual historical actors always face and which the structured and systematic prosopography of Namier sought to answer. Nevertheless, the criticism remains. I would contend, however, that it is both possible and proper to take those details seriously and avoid the pitfall of always trying to find an explanation in this psychological factor or that.

Newman had a distinct concept of the human imagination. It is found in many of his works but in its most developed form in the 1870 philosophical work, An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent (Newman, 1870). In short, for Newman, the imagination was not a faculty of the human mind concerned with thinking up the unreal, the fantastical. It was not about the imaginary but about making real, present in our consciousness things remembered, things intuited. He deployed this theologically to propose an epistemology in which both the individual and the Christian collective consciousness – what we might (and Newman did) call the mind of the Church – is able to take the remembered fact of God becoming Man in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the cosmos, to which we might give what Newman calls "notional assent", that is a theoretical assent to an idea, to take that remembered fact and through the operation of the imagination to make it so real that it has the power to compel us to action with, as he says, a concrete reality present in the mind, "to realize things unseen and unknown" (Blehl SJ, 1991, p. 18), such that they make a claim upon our beliefs and actions, and, "representing as they do the concrete, have the power of the concrete upon the affections and passions" (Newman, 1870, p. 89). It would be fair to say that this idea has been hugely influential in Catholic theology in the 154 years since the work was published. It is, for example, behind the personalist philosophy of Karol Wojtyła, who reshaped much of the Catholic Church's understanding of her ethical approach and moral theology in the 28 years he was Pope John Paul II.

Why is this relevant to the subject matter of this paper, however?

It is impossible to offer a satisfactory explanation of Newman's development of this distinct idea of the imagination, without taking seriously his own account of his own story. Written in haste, some six years before the Grammar of Assent, Newman produced a published account of his life to date. His Apologia pro vita sua,(-Newman, 1864) was written to answer criticisms from Charles Kingsley, a prominent English academic and author, that Newman had been intellectually inconsistent and dishonest in his journey from Anglicanism to Catholicism. In the Apologia, Newman detailed the history of his religious opinions, how they had developed and how they motivated his actions. In a very particular way, an account of an event in his teenage years provides an important insight into his own story that cannot but have had a massive impact on this idea of the imagination.

Writing about his first serious religious experience, in 1816, aged fifteen, Newman recorded it as being one which freed himfrom "childish imaginations," in the process created a religious landscape for him as real as it was imagined: remembered but, above all, real. It was an event which was utterly transformational for him. As he put it, "… confirming me in my mistrust of the reality of material phenomena, and making me rest in the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator" (Newman, 1864, p. 4). Absent this autobiographical account of an event imagined, in the specifically Newmanian sense of recalled and made real, with the concrete power to compel action, it is simply not possible to explain Newman's life of religiously driven commitment, the 1845 conversion to Catholicism despite the personal and academic estarnagements it brought with it, let alone the intellectual process which the working out of that imagined event involved (Morgan, 2021). The price he paid for living out the consequences of his faith and the intensity which he brought to the life which that faith inspired can easily be a thin histry. If the events of 1816 are taken seriously, if the reality of his imagination of the two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings is taken seriously, a thick story starts to become possible.

4. Events Described

The second person I want to look at is Charles De Gaulle. Born in 1890 (three months after Newman died, in fact), he lived until two weeks short of his eightieth birthday

in November 1970. His claim to greatness lies, I argue, in the opening sentence of his Second World War memoirs. He writes, "Toute ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France" (De Gaulle, 1954, p. 1), "All my life I have had a certain idea of France", and then he goes on:

> Sentiment inspires me as much as reason. The emotional part of me naturally imagines France, like the princess in the fairy tales or the Madonna in the frescoes on the walls, as destined for an eminent and exceptional destiny. I instinctively have the impression that Providence has created it for success or for exemplary misfortune. If, however, it happens that mediocrity marks its deeds and actions, I get the feeling of an absurd anomaly, attributable to the faults of the French, not to the genius of the country. (De Gaulle, 1954, pp. 1-2)[1]

It is not merely the fact that De Gaulle had this idea of France that makes a credible case for his singular greatness but that the idea was entirely a fiction of his own creation and yet one which by circumstance and force of character he brought about. The French, although usually translated as "I have had a certain idea of France," idiomatically includes the literal sense "I made for myself a certain idea of France." De Gaulle wrote this in 1948 or 1949 when he may well already have made the certain idea of France certain for himself. He had not, however, made his certain idea of France certain for France. That was to come later and specifically when he returned to power in 1958, when both the constitution of the Fifth Republic, the outlines of which he closely shaped, and more importantly De Gaulle's way of being President of that Republic made his certain idea of France the idea of itself that France was to come to have and which, arguably, it still has. It is impossible to understand France in 2024 or at any point since the end of the Second World War without understanding De Gaulle and being able to give a thick account of his life. He is, therefore, a useful example of how we should seek to engage with personal stories when we remember events described in History.

To take but one example from De Gaulle's long and very, very busy life, his astonishing capacity to engage and then disengage cannot be overlooked: something that appears to critical biographers – especially but not exclusively in the Anglophone world – as little more than childish petulance, grounded in a grandiose self--conception, that caused him to leave the political stage whenever he thought he could not get his own way. Brian Crozier, for example, took the view that "the fame of De Gaulle outstrips his achievements, he chose to make repeated gestures of petulance and defiance that weakened the west without compensating advantages to France" (Crozier, 1973, p. 3). In his superb biography of De Gaulle,(Jackson, 2019) Julian Jackson however, and arguably rightly in my view, explains at least one of those gestures of petulance and defiance by reference to an aspect of the General's life about which so many appear ignorant or see as irrelevant.

On the surface, it seems difficult to account for De Gaulle's behaviour in the aftermath of the Second World War without agreeing with Crozier's assessment. De Gaulle had laboured tirelessly, and against significant opposition from the other Allied Powers, for France to have a seemingly important role in her own liberation. Although there were only 120 French troops landed on D-Day, 6th June 1944, it was the General who drove the narrative of self-liberation, even to the extent of walking down the Champs Elysée in Paris on 25th August 1944, whilst German snipers were still carrying on a rear-guard action in the city and German artillery was shelling the city. Seemingly unconcerned about his own safety, De Gaulle was determined to be the first Allied leader in Paris, in support of the idea that France had liberated herself. In his speech that day, he declared that Paris had been liberated by the Free French Army, barely mentioning that the other allies had lost over 50,000 men in the ten weeks since D-Day. Recognised immediately as the head of provisional government he set about the task of holding elections and chairing the committee to draft the constitution of the Fourth Republic. And yet 18 months later he resigned, withdrawing almost entirely from public life. Certainly frustrations over the eventual shape of the constitution played a part but how could an energetic man of only 55, held in almost universal acclaim in France, take himself off to the quiet obscurity of Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises and stay there more or less out of public view for the next ten years, apart from a brief return to the fray in the 1951 parliamentary elections?

Charles De Gaulle and his wife Yvonne had three children. The eldest, Philippe, who looked almost exactly like his father, was born in 1921 rose to the rank of Admiral in the French Navy and died only in 2024, at the age of 103. He was followed in 1924 by a daughter, Élisabeth and then, in 1928 by another daughter Anne. Anne was born with Down Syndrome and grew up capable of only a single word, "Papa". The General was devoted to her. He once observed that she was the only person in

1 "Tout ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France. Le sentiment me l'inspire aussi bien que la raison. Ce qu'il y a, en moi, d'affectif imagine naturellement la France, telle la princesse des contes ou la madone aux fresques des murs, comme vouée à une destinée éminente et exceptionnelle. J'ai, d'instinct, l'impression que la Providence l'a créée pour des succès achevés ou des malheurs exemplaires. S'il advient que la médiocrité marque, pourtant, ses faits et gestes, j'en éprouve la sensation d'une absurde anomalie, imputable aux fautes des Français, non au génie de la patrie."

the world to whom he could talk completely without a care. Those who knew him best observed that around Anne he was a completely different man: no sign of the self-conscious dignity, the hauteur that marked him even in his relations with his wife and other children. He was light-hearted in her presence, unafraid to laugh and cry, playing with her in an entirely unselfconscious manner and entertaining her with songs, dances, and pantomimes (Nixon, 1990, p. 229). By 1946, Anne was visibly weakening, frequent illness accentuated her frailty and De Gaulle spent more and more time in Colombey. In an age before antibiotics and with a weak constitution, she succumbed to pneumonia just after her 20th birthday, in February 1948.

In August 1962, by then President again and amid the strife over the French withdrawal from its colonial rule in Algeria, the General was the victim of an assassination attempt organised by the French Algerians who felt betrayed by his acceptance of the need for Algerian self-government. Most people put De Gaulle's survival down to the peculiar suspension of his Presidential limousine – and the manufacturers, Citroën certainly claimed as much – but De Gaulle himself had no doubt: the bullet that should have killed him was deflected by the photo frame with the picture of Anne in it that he carried everywhere. It seems to me that if we are to take personal stories seriously, if we are to offer a thick account of De Gaulle's sudden and complete withdrawal from public life, the part played, albeit unwittingly, by Anne De Gaulle cannot be left out of the story. Once again, without this intimately personal biographical detail, De Gaulle becomes a caricature, a two-dimensional figure and his actions the subject of distortingly reductive explanations.

5. Events Remembered

Finally, António de Oliveira Salazar (1889-1970): I have chosen him knowing only too well how even his name is something of a lightening-rod when talking with the Portuguese but I want to argue that his story, and in particular his own self-conception as necessary to the government of Portugal, is crucial to a proper appreciation of modern post-Salazar Portugal and especially so in this fiftieth anniversary year of the 1974 Revolucão dos Cravos.

By way of explanation, in 2020 the Scottish historian Tom Gallagher wrote a biography of Salazar. Biographies of the man are not frequent in English, although common enough in Portuguese, and I was anxious to read it, particularly since it was subtitled "the dictator who refused to die" (Gallagher, 2021). After finishing the book, I successively lent it to several Portuguese friends of mine, chosen because I wanted to gauge the reaction from people across the Portuguese political spectrum. One reader had spent some months in the Aljube prison in the 1960s, one a Portuguese socialist close the the last PS government, one a political scientist from the Centre-Right and one a member of the House of Braganza, now quite old, old enough that is to have lived through a considerable proportion of the Estado Novo. I asked each of them to tell me what they made of the book. I was profoundly surprised that they each began their comments with almost exactly the same expression: "This was a book no Portuguese could yet write." Upon enquiry, every single one of them explained that Salazar was still too current for any Portuguese to write about him dispassionately. And yet, it is the duty of historians to give an account – what I have called a "thick account" – of what happened in 1974 and to do that, giving a thick account of Salazar is an indispensable prolegomenon. Accordingly, it is necessary to consider the "Old Man from Vimieiro" to illustrate part of what I want to say about accounts of events remembered.

By the time he suffered a near-fatal stroke in August 1968 (leaving Francisco Franco alone as the sole survivor of the dictators who had ruled so much of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s), Salazar had been the de facto ruler of Portugal for 36 years. He was already 79 and the last ten years or so of his rule had increasingly manifested the appearance of a repressive hand on a Portugal that was falling far behind even its Francoist neighbour. He was, as Gallagher says, "the dictator who refused to die". The end of his regime – was it fascist or not? I think we make a mistake in giving it such a tidy label – followed only a few years later, after his incapacity brought Marcel Caetano to power. Caetano had little of the command of detail, energy or personal force of character of his predecessor and when, in the revolution of 25th April the Estado Novo regime was swept away, few mourned its passing. After a hesitant start, by November 1975, autocracy had gone and the Portuguese began to embrace multi-party democracy with an enthusiasm that kicked off what the Harvard political scientist, Samuel B Huntingdon called "democracy's third-wave" (Huntington, 1991).

In 2007, the Portuguese broadcaster ran a television series and poll to identify The Greatest Portuguese, Os Grandes Portuguese. The King who first unified Portugal, Afonso Henriques was there in the top ten, as was Luis de Camões, but top of the poll with (concerns about the methodology aside) 41% of the votes was, Salazar, who gained more than twice the number for the runner up and victim of Salazar's regime, Álvaro Cunhal. How come? How did a dictator whose regime was overthrown in a famously almost bloodless revolution only thirty years earlier top a poll for a nation's greatest? There are many reasons, of course, but somewhere in the personal story of this deeply pessimistic reactionary lies a significant

feature: Salazar's self-understanding and his capacity to communicate it as evidently true to the Portuguese.

The story Salazar told of himself and to himself was that of the farmer's son become Economics professor, who was more-or-less dragged reluctantly from his chair in Coimbra to help out a government that could not govern a nation that would not be governed. As the Portuguese historian, António Henriques de Oliveira Marques, wrote: "He considered himself the guide of the nation, believed that there were things which only he could do ('unfortunately there are a lot of things that seemingly only I can do' – he had written in an official note published in September 1935) and convinced more and more of his countrymen of that too" (Marques, 1972, p. 231). It seems a reasonable hypothesis that it was precisely this self-understanding, effectively and convincingly communicated to a nation only too relieved that the stability he had brought following the "continual anarchy, government corruption, rioting and pillage, assassinations, arbitrary imprisonment and religious persecution" (Kay, 1970, p. 26) of the First Portuguese Republic, that explains not only the begins of his rule but its chronic vigour. Furthermore, without this self-understanding, the sheer personal industriousness, attention to detail and the reputed sea-green incorruptibility of the man becomes inexplicable and, therefore, so does the longevity of his regime.

6. Conclusion

Accounts of events are inseparable from the stories of those giving the account. This paper is really no more than a brief look at the relationship between personal stories and the writing of history. It should be taken as an historian's reflections on his craft and one which suggests that there is here adduces some evidence that only an approach that includes individual stories, prosopographical detail and objective data can provide the thick retelling of events necessary to give a satisfactory account of events described, remembered or imagined. The three individuals I have looked at show – at least on the balance of probabilities – that without such a thick account, we risk a view of the past that speaks to an illiteracy, an inability to read the past in a manner that allows us to reflect upon it soundly. I am conscious that, in a project that has looked at stories and particularly in a manner that has been concerned with different, technologically more sophisticated literacies, these observations offered from the dust of the historical archive will, at least, have made some small contribution.

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Bio

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