

Kierkegaard: A Biography

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Those unfamiliar with the biography of Søren Kierkegaard would perhaps expect that the life of the author of such texts as *Either/Or*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, or *The Sickness Unto Death* would make for interesting reading. They will be disappointed. As Alastair Hannay himself acknowledges, “for a writer so concerned about life, Kierkegaard’s own life was a conspicuously uneventful one” (ix). Indeed, this is an understatement. Hardly the tortured, impoverished, and angst-ridden figure that has come down to us as the stereotypical existentialist, Kierkegaard’s inherited wealth made his life outwardly one of leisure and financial comfort. Hannay recounts, for instance, that during the events in Europe of 1848 “the most immediate impact [upon Kierkegaard] of the conflict so near home was that it deprived him of the services of his man-servant, Anders, who was drafted for military service” (371).

Kierkegaard’s life presents his biographers with a difficult question: What kind of biography is possible for a subject who lived essentially a writer’s life, that is to say, one that to all outward appearances lacked most of the usual, or unusual, episodes that constitute an interesting biography? Hannay’s answer: an intellectual biography. The philosophically interesting question then becomes, as for any intellectual biography, whether the biographical material, such as it is, sheds interesting light upon the texts. Hannay certainly attempts to draw connections where they exist between Kierkegaard’s life and his writings, but the attempt sheds little light for the reason that the life and the writings are essentially one and the same. While in the usual instance of intellectual biography, as Hannay remarks, “a reader who has reflected on the writer’s life may feel better placed to judge the claims people make for the writings” (439), Kierkegaard appears very much an exception. Outside of his writing Kierkegaard led a remarkably uneventful life, and the biographical material Hannay provides reveals little, if anything, that the careful reader of Kierkegaard’s texts will not have already gathered.

The major portion of Hannay’s book therefore consists of textual analysis—a very competent chronological analysis of all of Kierkegaard’s major writings, focusing where possible on their more personal dimension. Indeed, of the nearly 500 pages that make up *Kierkegaard: A Life*, a large majority is devoted to textual exposition. In the remainder Hannay discusses (very briefly) what little is known about Kierkegaard’s childhood, his family relations (primarily with his father and elder brother), and several important personages in the intellectual life of early nineteenth-century Copenhagen, where Kierkegaard spent his entire life.

The most significant biographical occurrence Hannay does recount is undoubtedly Kierkegaard’s celebrated engagement to Regine Olsen and the rather unkind manner in which he severed their relations, ostensibly out of religious

obligation. This is one of the few places in which Hannay's skill as a biographer is called forth, and he indeed recounts the course of their relationship and separation with insight. Other episodes from Kierkegaard's life that are worth relating are few and far between, consisting in the main of rather trifling occurrences apart from their subject's unique, and often unbalanced, interpretations. Indeed, it is here that what is genuinely interesting in Kierkegaard's biography is most apparent (one might say exclusively apparent)—not in the outward events of this writer's life, or even the course of his philosophical reflection (for which one may read his books or the non-biographical scholarship that already exists), but in deeper psychological waters into which Hannay does not venture. Although the raw material for such a project is plentiful (beginning with the omnipresence of death in Kierkegaard's early life, a decidedly melancholic temperament, and his frequent bouts of paranoia), Hannay plainly has no interest in making Kierkegaard the subject of a psychological analysis, wishing instead to remain on the *terra firma* of textual analysis and intellectual biography, yet the price he pays for having done so is to have given us a work that is scarcely more interesting than the life it recounts and less interesting than the texts Kierkegaard left us.

In the end one cannot fault the biographer for the less than fascinating life of his or her subject. Søren Kierkegaard was nothing less than one of the preeminent writers of his time. He also was nothing more. If *Kierkegaard: A Biography* is to be recommended at all, it is less for the biographical material Hannay provides than for his chronological treatment of Kierkegaard's texts, a treatment that typically provides illumination upon the work of eminent thinkers, this book being no exception.

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***Fenomenologia dell'essere umano. Lineamenti di una filosofia al femminile*
[Phenomenology of Human Being: Features of a Female Philosophy]**

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The increased presence of women in the recent history of philosophy has generated a question hardly imaginable in previous eras of Western thought: Has philosophy changed because of this increased presence, or has it remained the same, with its traditional load of interrogatives and methodologies? Quite evidently, gender issues flourished in the twentieth century, and in particular over the last thirty years, as a direct consequence of the growth of feminism in almost all academic areas. However, this is not what Angela Ales Bello chooses to deal with in her