

## **Chapter 2**

### ***Voice, style, structure and treatment***

#### Voice and style

My usual writing voice, no doubt influenced by early training as a journalist and radio scriptwriter is, I think, clear and relatively plain: rhetorical and descriptive flourishes do not come readily. This kind of clarity and transparency worked in my previous biography *A Certain Style: Beatrice Davis, A Literary Life*, serving as background and contrast to the occasionally florid writing of the authors with whom Davis worked. Such a style also enabled me to mirror Davis's own voice: wry, ironic as shown in her letters to authors, occasional speeches about publishing and conversations with friends.

However, Hephzibah Menuhin was a different kind of subject entirely, with a very different voice. As a child and young woman she had studied French, German and Russian before becoming familiar with English literature. Her first writing in English was often stilted, sometimes reading as if translated from another language. And, as most of her reading when young had consisted of nineteenth-century fiction and poetry, a certain amount of high-flown sentiment was apt to creep into her adolescent letters and diaries. When she announced her intention of marrying Lindsay Nicholas, for instance, she wrote of 'animating the monotonous plateaux of his property with winged vision'<sup>1</sup>.

After a great deal of trial and error, I concluded that attempting to adopt a more elaborate writing style might dilute the sometimes compelling nature of the biographical material I was

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Robert Magidoff, *Yehudi Menuhin*, Robert Hale, London, 1955, pages 194-5

working with, including Hephzibah's letters. Moreover, Hephzibah's natural intensity did not lend itself to ironic commentary or levity. I hope the biography is not without humour, but Hephzibah herself was so passionate and committed to her causes that the slight detachment of authorial voice implicit in humour, and particularly in ironic treatment, seemed inappropriate in her case.

There was also the question of the market. Hephzibah Menuhin's story had never been told before in book form, and stylistic flourish can be irritating to a reader who wishes to follow a story not previously known. I felt that clarity of expression was the engine that would drive the story itself: presenting and controlling the material as logically as possible seemed to me most effective in telling Hephzibah's story.

### Structure and treatment: biographical perspectives

Most biographies about interpreters of classical music tend on the whole to fall into three main groups. In ascending order of seriousness and gravity these are the gossipy, sometimes mean-spirited and often salacious (Joan Peyser on Leonard Bernstein, Hilary and Piers du Pré about their sister Jacqueline), the jaunty memoir (Nigel Kennedy, Yehudi Menuhin, Artur Schnabel) and the serious, elegaic and reverential (Elizabeth Wilson on Jacqueline du Pré, Humphrey Burton on Yehudi Menuhin, Winifred Ferrier on her sister Kathleen).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Joan Peyser, *Bernstein: A Biography*, Random House, London, 1988; Hilary and Piers du Pré, *A Genius in the Family*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1997; Elizabeth Wilson, *Jacqueline du Pré, Her Life, Her Music, Her Legend*, Arcade Books, New York, 1999; Humphrey Burton, *Menuhin*, Faber and Faber, London, 2000; Winifred Ferrier, *The Life of Kathleen Ferrier*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1955; Nigel Kennedy, *Always Playing*, Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1991; Yehudi Menuhin, *Unfinished Journey*, Pimlico, London, 2000; Artur Schnabel, *My Young Years*, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1973.

For biographies in the first category to be successful, the subject needs – as in the case of Jacqueline du Pré and Leonard Bernstein – to be familiar to a large section of the reading public. The ‘hook’ for the general reader is the promise that the biography will explain what the subject is ‘really like’, and implicitly that the subject’s great musical talent (the reason for the biography in the first place) may be offset, or perhaps explained, by a tortured private life, a thoroughly unpleasant personality, or possibly both. These books have less to do with biography than with popular journalism; if not almost solely the product of undiluted personal experience the research usually depends on secondary sources, and the insights are scant and obvious.

An overtly journalistic treatment of Hephzibah Menuhin’s story would, I felt, not only trivialise her life, but fail to find a wide readership. The Victorian biographer Mrs Elizabeth Gaskell, an early practitioner of journalism-as-biography (though scarcely a salacious one) noted as she began her life of Charlotte Brontë: ‘If you love your reader and want to be read, get anecdotes!’<sup>3</sup> However, such anecdotes need to concern a subject whose life story will probably be known to readers, at least in outline. This certainly applied when Mrs Gaskell wrote *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* in 1857: it does not apply to Hephzibah Menuhin now.

First-person memoir is not really under discussion here. There remain the comprehensive biographies of musicians. These generally seek to describe their subjects’ work at least as fully as their lives, with a view to explaining why these musicians are considered great. The biography of Jacqueline du Pré by Elizabeth Wilson is a good example. It is a thorough examination of du Pré’s

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<sup>3</sup> Jenny Uglow, *Mrs Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993, page 406

musicianship and an analysis of the qualities that made her one of the premier cellists of the twentieth century. Wilson, a cellist herself, has some valuable comments to make about du Pré's technique and repertoire. However, Wilson is uncritical both of du Pré's talent and of her life.

The biography of Yehudi Menuhin by Humphrey Burton is written by a BBC music and arts commentator – not a musician himself – who knew Menuhin for many years. The author has basically restricted himself to a description of what Menuhin did, who he met, what music he played, and when. It is an account of Menuhin's life, and useful for checking names, dates and repertoire, but it is almost entirely non-analytical – either about Menuhin's music or his life.

Though their emphases are different, the Burton and Wilson biographies are both, I believe, heirs of a nineteenth-century biographical tradition: that written lives should be edifying for readers, that the great deeds of great people should serve as exemplars for future generations.

The reaction to this tradition of biographical writing, which came at the end of World War I, was most notably Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918). Strachey's essays on Victorian worthies have heavily influenced the development of biography ever since; their detached and sometimes ironic examination of motive, iconoclastic at the time Strachey wrote, is now one of the tools of modern life writing. This approach forms a logical counterpoint to Freud's ideas about the human personality, which were gaining popular currency at about the same time. Strachey's willingness to examine other aspects of personality in a critical light, as well as Freud's insights have been well

summarised by Virginia Woolf's comment in her novel *Orlando* that a person is built up of many selves 'one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand'.<sup>4</sup>

The insight that human beings are by nature contradictory and difficult, never all of a piece -- and that biography can deal with only a few of these 'selves' -- has been useful for modern biography. So has the view, expressed by Hermione Lee, that: 'Alternatives, missed changes, roads not taken, accidents and hesitations, the whole "swarm of possibilities" that hums around our every experience'<sup>5</sup> are equally important. Accidents and bad decisions arising out of particular circumstances are fruitful fields for a biographer's investigation.

The roles of contradiction and unforeseen circumstance were, I believe, crucial in my own approach to Hephzibah Menuhin, a woman whose personality and actions were seldom characterised by consistency. Reading other biographers' handling of these issues proved very interesting. Also valuable was evaluating various approaches to the blank spaces that turn up in any biography: the things the biographer wants or needs to know but cannot find out. (In the garbled-though-intelligible phrase of former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, these are the 'known unknowns'.)

*The Dark Lady of DNA*, Brenda Maddox's biography of chemist Rosalind Franklin, seemed to offer some useful insights. Rosalind Franklin was instrumental in discovering the double helix structure of DNA, but all credit for the discovery was taken by

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Marion Shaw, 'Invisible Presences': Vera Brittain's *Testament of Friendship*, in Trev Lynn Broughton and Linda Anderson, eds., *Women's Lives, Women's Times*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1997

<sup>5</sup> Hermione Lee, *Body Parts: Writing About Lives*, Chatton & Windus, London, 2005, pages 2-3

James Watson and Francis Crick. Maddox's aim in writing about her had been similar to mine in telling Hephzibah's story: to reinstate and make more widely known the story of a strikingly individual woman who, well known in certain circles during her own life, had been more or less ignored since her death..

There are obvious similarities between the two women. Both came from a Jewish background; both believed passionately that 'the improvement of the lot of mankind, past present and future is worth attaining' (as Franklin wrote to her father when she was twenty)<sup>6</sup>, both died young. Both were, in the popular mind, overshadowed by the men around them and, though professing feminist views, had been taught to be deferential to men.

There are important differences. Franklin was cheated of recognition by more ambitious and assertive men; she turned her back on marriage and children and, though she had friendships with men, she was too uncompromising for romantic involvements. In this she differs markedly from Hephzibah, who had the chance of following a particular career but who deliberately walked away: she left her husband and family for another man. Rosalind Franklin's family were very strictly Jewish while Hephzibah's family was non-observant, almost secular: unlike Franklin, Hephzibah was not subjected to religious strictures. Hephzibah had three children, Franklin none. Their way of dealing with the world seemed quite different. Franklin, whose life experience had taught her to be wary, kept people at a distance; Hephzibah was trusting and sociable and sometimes naive.

In writing *The Dark Lady of DNA*, Brenda Maddox had one important challenge that did not apply to what I was doing: the

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<sup>6</sup> Brenda Maddox, Rosalind Franklin *The Dark Lady of DNA*, HarperCollins, London, 2002, page 45

necessity to describe scientific concepts and procedures to a general audience. Explaining what Rosalind Franklin did and its importance, as well as the reasons why she was overlooked, took precedence over any consistent analysis of Franklin herself. Maddox presents Franklin as a driven, underappreciated woman, without much self-awareness or humour, whose working life seemed to proceed in orderly steps.

It is a frustrating biography in some ways. Maddox does not analyse or speculate about Franklin's relationships with her family, either as child or adult. I happened to learn from Franklin's brother, whom I met in London in 2003, that there had been a schism in the Franklin family and that Brenda Maddox had never been told the whole family story. However, in the text Maddox does not allude to this, or explain to the reader the difficulties it presented to her as a biographer. I believe the book would have been more interesting and complex if she had done so.

Though *The Dark Lady of DNA* was ultimately of limited value, the matter-of-fact clarity of its writing and its chronological form worked well as a model for telling a little-known life story.

Hermione Lee, too, uses chronology as the spine of her work, especially in her biographies of Virginia Woolf and Edith Wharton. Like Maddox, she has a no-nonsense style of writing (the fact that these books are entitled *Virginia Woolf* and *Edith Wharton* signals this from the start).<sup>7</sup> Lee, who has thought and written extensively about biography during her thirty-year career, uses the formidable armoury of detailed research to great effect.

On certain issues (Wharton's or Woolf's early sexual experiences, for example) she may not have any more emotional

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<sup>7</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, Vintage, London, 1997; *Edith Wharton*, Chatton & Windus, London, 2007

information about her subject than does Maddox about some aspects of Franklin's private or family life. However, she does not gloss over these topics, nor does she speculate at length about them. Instead, what Lee does is to give a great deal of detailed information about her subjects' milieu and society. For example, the second chapter of *Virginia Woolf* contains a detailed description of two houses – Talland House and 22 Hyde Park Gate – that were keystones of Woolf's childhood. This approach gives the reader quite a different 'feel' for Woolf's background than a description of her family background (though Lee does that too). In the same way, Lee gives a great deal of detail about Edith Wharton's friends, clothes, houses, and other details of her social life. This seems appropriate for a prolific writer whose novels deal so comprehensively with the New York milieu in which she grew up.

Of course, Lee chose two subjects who not only wrote a great deal about themselves but whose lives have been extensively documented already. She gives a very full sense of these two women moving through their lives, and she has a novelist's eye for the telling anecdote, as well as sharp almost epigrammatic astuteness. For example, she questions Leonard Woolf's anxious management of his wife's health. 'There is a narrow line between this careful watchfulness and a desire for control,' observes Lee<sup>8</sup>. She includes a long, very interesting though finally inconclusive discussion about the possible causes of Woolf's bouts of 'madness'. However, she often lets such insights remain without further comment, perhaps because this might introduce the kind of speculation about motive and intention that

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<sup>8</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, page 337

she, as an historian, is unwilling to undertake. The result is that while the reader learns a great deal about Woolf and Wharton, the subject is sometimes overwhelmed by the lavishness of fact and detail provided.

It is of course possible to discuss the life of Hephzibah Menuhin by including an enormous amount of information about her background: the role of the piano, musicianship in the 1920s and 1930s, her choice of repertoire, the effects on American society of the Russian Jewish diaspora in the early years of the twentieth century. There are elements of all these things in the finished biography. However, I kept coming back to the fact that Hephzibah's life story is not well known, and telling it as clearly as possible, I felt, was a priority. More importantly, Hephzibah's life had at least two startling changes of direction, and I wanted to understand, and to write, more about them: this involved more emphasis on psychological factors than social ones. In doing this, speculation about motive must play a significant role.

One biographer who finds this approach comfortable and appropriate is Miranda Seymour, especially in *Ottoline: Life on a Grand Scale*<sup>9</sup>, her biography of patron of the arts and society hostess Lady Ottoline Morrell. Unlike Woolf or Wharton, Morrell, friend or lover of many writers including D.H. Lawrence, Bertrand Russell and Aldous Huxley, is difficult to find through her own work, as she was not a writer. Consequently there are places in her story where her motives can only be guessed at – and Seymour makes a virtue of doing exactly that. She peppers her biography with variations on, 'What could Ottoline have been thinking of?' It is an effective technique, not attempting to disguise

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<sup>9</sup> Miranda Seymour, *Ottoline: Life on a Grand Scale*, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1993

lack of knowledge and at the same time inviting speculation, drawing the reader into a kind of intimacy or complicity.

Like the other biographies discussed, Ottoline follows the traditional chronological form. This approach can be nothing short of dangerous if one does not even know enough about the subject or her milieu to speculate about motive. The dangers are well summarised in this review by Daniel Johnson of *The Lost Life of Eva Braun* by Angela Lambert<sup>10</sup>

Angela Lambert's lively and readable biography tries hard to make Eva's 'lost life' more than a footnote in history. But her relationship with Hitler was kept too private even for family, friends and servants to do more than guess what made them tick. As she admits, we know more about her days in the Berlin bunker than all the rest of her life, and that last phase is all too familiar.

To make Eva more three-dimensional, Lambert has resorted to various questionable devices. First, she writes a parallel narrative about her own German relations, especially her mother, whose background bore some resemblance to Braun's. This is harmless but distracting. Then she speculates about what X might have said to Y – what Hitler and Eva might have said as they committed suicide. This is positively irritating. Finally, she tries to place Eva's life in the context of the historical drama around her. This is fine but she is out of her depth. She admits that until she embarked on her research she knew little about the period, and I am afraid that it occasionally shows ...

Lambert identifies so far with her subject that she tries to show that Eva was not an anti-semite and knew nothing about

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<sup>10</sup> London *Sunday Times*, 26 March 2006

what was happening to the Jews. It is impossible to prove a negative, but no reputable historian is likely to be persuaded ... The fact that Eva was a nice Catholic girl who had never joined the Nazi party does not exonerate her. The only thing that gave her life meaning was Hitler, and she knew better than most what gave his life its meaning.

(Clare Tomalin's biography of Jane Austen<sup>11</sup> has a not dissimilar problem: the facts of Austen's life are meagre and have been well covered in previous biographies, so, saying she is giving a fuller picture of Regency social history Tomalin describes the lives of Austen's brothers. In the terms of the extract above, this is sometimes harmless, but often positively irritating.)

Of course there is no reason why a biography or autobiography should follow chronological order. Arthur Miller's *Timebends*<sup>12</sup> is an autobiography in which he tells his story by, in effect, mimicking the way the mind works, by association. One thought suggests another, which again brings him to a third, and he tells his story without strict regard for chronology, or even many dates. In the hands of a lesser writer this could be absolutely maddening but Miller is a good enough craftsman, and his material sufficiently interesting, for the reader to be left feeling that he or she has not only read the account of a fascinating life, but been privy to the workings of a remarkable mind.

This apparently meandering approach is very effectively extended by Richard Holmes, who uses it, most particularly in

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<sup>11</sup> Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life*, Penguin Books, London, 1998

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Miller, *Timebends*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1987

*Footsteps* and *Sidetracks*<sup>13</sup>. Holmes, who had written well received traditional biographies of Coleridge and Shelley, turned his attention to the nature of biography itself. 'For me biography has always been a personal adventure of exploration and pursuit, a tracking', he writes in the prologue to *Sidetracks*. 'It is tantalising in its final destination, when a completed biography invariably leaves so much else to be discovered ... It is often surprising in retrospect, where previously hidden perspectives and retrospectives emerge. I conclude that no biography is ever definitive, because that is not the nature of such journeys, nor of the human heart which is their territory.'<sup>14</sup>

Holmes made his own investigations the subject of the essays in these books, which are therefore part travelogues, part descriptions of research, part personal memoir. Involving the reader in the process of forming biography, with all its uncertainties, chances and missed opportunities, gives a new flexibility to the form. The voice he uses is of the intelligent wanderer, picking up what information he can, sifting it, perhaps discarding it or fitting it into a larger picture, even drawing emotional landscapes for his subjects (e.g. William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft). The whole enterprise depends very much on his control of tone: in lesser hands this kind of writing could be twee or banal. And Holmes is very clever. Not only does he draw the reader into the enterprise, but he needs to describe only those aspects of lives or careers that interest him.

Relating the life of a subject directly to one's own experience and thereby illuminating both is also what Janet Malcolm does. Her

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Holmes, *Footsteps*, Vintage, New York, 1996; *Sidetracks*, HarperCollins, London, 2000

<sup>14</sup> Holmes, *Sidetracks*, page ix.

method, which involves critical evaluation of sources, investigative journalism, biography, travel writing and memoir is effectively shown in *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey*<sup>15</sup>. Malcolm describes her travels through Russia, visiting places of significance to Chekhov: hers is a journey, literally and figuratively, through the landscape that forged Chekhov's life and work. This way of telling Chekhov's story gives Malcolm great scope for flexibility. Like Miller, she often works by analogy and association: a meal in an inn leads her to recall a meal served in Chekhov's story 'The Wife' which in turn brings her to assess the part that religion and redemption play in Chekhov's work, to speculate on the personal influences that might have been involved, to present some academic critique about redemption in literature. In the words of the reviewer of the *San Francisco Chronicle*: 'The discourse effortlessly ascends from chatter to contemplation to genuinely brilliant critique'<sup>16</sup>

Malcolm, like Hermione Lee, is up against the fact that there are already several well known biographies of Chekhov. But her approach is entirely different: she sees no need to reiterate the details of Chekhov's life in greater detail. She uses his life story in several ways, deftly melding different threads of her story together without losing focus on the aspects of Chekhov's life she has chosen to highlight. She casts a critical eye on biography generally, especially in her analysis of no fewer than nine different accounts of Chekhov's death. (This technique I borrowed to some extent in discussing the vexed episode of the Menuhin children's forced haircuts.) The reader is left none the wiser about when, and

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<sup>15</sup> Janet Malcolm, *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey*, Random House, New York, 2001

<sup>16</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 December 2001

in what order, Chekhov had a glass of water, coughed and died quickly of a pulmonary haemorrhage, and what his last words actually were. However, this is not the object of Malcolm's investigation. The point she is most effectively making is about the unreliable nature of biographical narration and the role of accepted wisdom: in short, how impossible it is for any biographer to record and to know 'the facts', however authoritatively they may write.

Reading Chekhov is more about Malcolm's reactions to Russia and to the life of Chekhov than it is about Chekhov himself, and the reader learns more about her than about him. In the review already quoted the *San Francisco Chronicle* commented equivocally that 'Malcolm emerges clarified from Chekhov's presence'. *Reading Chekhov* is not really a biography, but an enquiry into some of the features of the genre and its wit, erudition and expansive learning make it a fascinating addition to the literature.

But the recent tendency to focus on the biographical investigation can mean that the subject of the biography yields first place to the biographer. And while the work of Richard Holmes and Janet Malcolm yields new insights into the practice of life writing, I believe the purpose of biography is to illuminate the life of one individual and – insofar as this is possible – to portray that person's mental, physical and spiritual world. This, of course, is also what fiction does; besides, the creation of character often gives greater scope for examining the different 'selves'. The template for the 'crossover' between fiction and non fiction, or

biography, is *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote<sup>17</sup>. Capote always asserted that his account of a Kansas mass murder and its aftermath was the first 'non-fiction novel', combining elements of both in the interest of telling a real story.

His comment about it is as accurate for biography as for any other kind of non-fiction. 'Journalism,' he said, 'always moves along on a horizontal plane, telling a story, while fiction – good fiction – moves vertically, taking you deeper and deeper into characters and events. By treating a real event with fictional techniques ... it's possible to make this kind of synthesis.'<sup>18</sup>

It seems to me quite legitimate to use the techniques of fiction in biography; employing whatever means are available to illuminate character and the world one's subject lived in. But the dividing line between fiction and non-fiction is blurring further all the time. For example, to be effective and interesting to the reader, both depend upon compression of material, felicity of language, control of tone and sometimes even a sense of drama. Capote's summary of the difference is insightful, and useful to some extent, but as a reminder of an approach to take rather than a method.

Because I intended to write about a woman whose life had not been documented as a biography, I felt I needed to tell the story of that life as clearly as possible. And the clearest way to do this was to write her story in sequence; in other words, to use the traditional biographical form. There were enough threads, themes and rich personalities in that story, I believed, enough questions to tackle as it progressed, to make a chronological account not only legitimate but the best approach to take.

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<sup>17</sup> Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*, Vintage, New York, 1965

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in George Plimpton, 'The Story Behind a Non-Fiction Novel', *New York Times Book Review*, 16 January 1966

At first I toyed with the idea of making some of the story's themes – a fuller history of the Jewish flight from Russian pogroms in the early twentieth century, a discussion of famous pianists in the 1930s – as separate 'breakouts', sections of the text presented separately from the main story. Norman Davies does this in his *History of Europe* (2003) as a way of adding extra detail to his main narrative. I decided against this on the grounds that it would be much too distracting for the reader. Hephzibah herself needed to remain the focus of the story and there would be enough scope, I thought, within that story to give further information about themes as they arose, relating them directly to her. That is why *An Exacting Heart* (my final title for the biography, embodying the ideas of both discipline and retribution) is very traditional in outline, a chronological progression from Hephzibah's birth to her death.

The shadow of Yehudi loomed over the first chapters, of course: his story is still well known to many people, almost invariably those aged over forty: to younger readers the name of Yehudi Menuhin is hardly known, unless they are musicians. So my problem was to write a biography whose early chapters would not be overfamiliar to some readers and utterly unfamiliar to others. I opted to tell the Menuhin story as if it were new, and to make a point of stating the impact of Yehudi Menuhin's name and fame on twentieth century classical music performance and on the life and development of his sister.

Within that traditional framework, I have taken advantage of approaches of other biographers to suit my project. Hephzibah was – as we all are – an unreliable narrator; at several important points in her story she dissembled, gave a view of her actions that did not take into account the interests of other people, or simply

got things wrong. Throughout the biography I have pointed out where these episodes occurred, and where necessary I have speculated, admitted freely when I did not know something, given as much detail as possible without compromising the story or shifting focus from it. There remains the question of 'novelistic' elements: when one spends several years thinking about one person, her actions and their consequences, a mental picture of that person develops, not unlike the way in which a novelist engages with a character. There is, however, one enormous difference between novelist and biographer: the biographer, though free to speculate, does not have the freedom to invent.