

7 What is the use of writing lives of recent scientists?

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Introduction

Few historians of science realize that scientific biography is a very old metascientific genre—one that goes much further back than the tradition of historiography.¹ While histories of science only came forth in the mid- and late eighteenth century,² the first *vitae* of astronomers and natural philosophers appeared already in the seventeenth century immediately after the rise of modern science.³ Since then, about four to five thousand biographies of scientists have been published in the major European languages, not to mention obituaries, short biographical articles, and dictionary entries on individual scientists.⁴ Cumulatively, scientific biography has been, and may still be, the best-selling and most widely read of all genres of writing about science's past. And, as long as the book review institution has existed, scientific lives have repeatedly matched the highest possible standards for scholarly writing.

This impressive quantitative and qualitative presence notwithstanding, the genre has not received much theoretical and methodological comment.⁵ Whereas historiography (including the historiography of recent science) is a perpetual topic of reflection for historians of science, biography has gained limited attention. Biographies of recent scientists have received even less. In this chapter I will focus on some of the issues associated with writing lives of recent scientists (i.e. of scientists active within the life-span of the biographer). I will draw on my experiences of writing the biography of the Danish-British-Dutch immunologist Niels Jerne,⁶ and the discussion will therefore at times be autobiographical. But the questions raised hopefully have a broader significance: what can be learned from writing biographies of scientists of the recent past? What can the genre be used for?

I: The road to the life of Niels Jerne

Let me first introduce my personal background for providing the typology of biographical sub genres in the following section of this paper. Niels Jerne is probably best-known today for his theories of antibody formation and for his theories of the self-regulation of the immune system—at least, this is what the Nobel Assembly at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm cited him for back in 1984.⁷ He was born in London in 1911 as the fourth child of an emigrant Danish bacon factory manager,