

MOMBERT, SARAH, et MICHÈLE ROSELLINI, éd. *Usages des vies: le biographique hier et aujourd'hui (XVII^e–XXI^e siècle)*. Toulouse: PU du Mirail, 2012. ISBN 978-2-8107-0206-0. Pp. 383. 23 €.

In highlighting “le biographique,” the editors of this collection indicate their interest in looking beyond the parameters of biography as a discrete genre and appreciating more generally the wide range of “uses” to which writing of a biographical nature has been put. Rosellini’s substantial, well-documented introduction makes a convincing case for this broader perspective, in which such writing might be considered “en tant qu’objet historique, dans la diversité de ses conceptions et de ses usages” (29). The first, shortest part of the volume includes contributions by Catherine Volpillac-Auger, Antony McKenna, Alexandre Gefen, and Martine Boyer-Weinmann that illustrate how our sense of the genre has evolved over the last several centuries. In a second, more expansive part, the focus shifts to biographical writing by well-known authors. Francine Wild argues that Perrault’s *Les hommes illustres...*, for example, was instrumental in “la construction du mythe classique et du ‘siècle de Louis XIV’” (131). Véronique Boulhol shows the extent to which La Harpe, at the end of the following century, adopted a biographical approach in his famous *Cours de littérature*, while Hélène Spengler traces Stendhal’s attempts (characteristically incomplete) to write a *Vie de Napoléon* that would also reflect the economic, social, and cultural reality of the period. One of the highlights of the volume is Élodie Saliceto’s perceptive study of Chateaubriand’s *Vie de Rancé*, a work whose generic ambiguity puzzled readers at the time, but which today seems quite modern. Equally impressive is Mombert’s treatment of Chateaubriand’s contemporary, Lamartine, who assumed the role of “biographe de gare” (207), intent on educating “ceux que l’époque exclut de l’échange savant comme de la vie politique: le peuple, les femmes, les enfants” (208). The final part of the volume, illustrating “usages littéraires du biographique” (233), examines four instances of biographical writing that have helped forge the reputation (for better or for worse) of well-known literary figures. Melaine Folliard chronicles, for example, the persistent efforts of Théophile de Viau to shape the reception of his own work, and Laurent Thirouin documents the systematic campaign, by Pascal’s sister initially and subsequently by his nephew, to promote the reputation of the author of *Les pensées* as a “savant chrétien” (278). In quite a different vein, Edwige Keller-Rahbé studies “la construction d’une légende libertine autour de Mme de Villedieu” (297), resulting in a negative portrayal that persisted well into the twentieth century. Finally, Laetitia Perret illustrates how educational authorities under the Third Republic carefully tailored versions of Montesquieu’s biography in order to present to *lycéens* the desired image of an author “cultivant la sagesse à l’écart des passions” (353). The editors provide a bibliography for the volume as a whole as well as summaries, in French and—rather unexpectedly—in English, of each article. As is frequently the case with collections of this nature, this one will appeal above all to readers whose own interests match those of individual contributors, but certainly the volume as a whole is professionally done.