

## Contents

### Writing Your Own Life Story

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## Introduction

*“There is properly no history; only biography.”* Ralph Waldo Emerson

Summer 1919. A troop carrier pulls away from its temporary mooring in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. It is carrying soldiers under the command of General Ironside, destined for the White Sea port of Archangel. Here, they will fight in support of the White Russians, the Tsarist force that is attempting to wrest control of Russia from its new communist leaders.

Amongst the men on board, is Sergeant Frederick Corder of the Royal Engineers, an exiled Londoner. He is being paid a bounty for his trip, which he needs in order to have enough money to marry Ethel Pepper. Fred, a big, burly man, built like a rugby forward, is already a veteran of the Great War. He walks with a slight limp, his left leg bent at an angle that gives him the nickname K-leg Corder. Somewhere in Flanders, he was shot through the knee and fell onto the barbed wire, providing a convenient human bridge for the others in his platoon to cross German lines.

Fred’s father was a violent alcoholic, who despite an excellent job in the House of Commons, drank his family into poverty. Fred himself is prone to sudden and irrational mood swings. He enlisted in 1912, as soon as he was old enough to run away from his troubled home. He never speaks about his childhood, save to lecture his own children on the dangers of alcohol.

On the quayside, amongst the crowds of well-wishers gathered to cheer the ship on its way, is a slim local lad called Roland Wood. Roland is one of six children living in the then fashionable West End of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He is training to be an architect. He too has served in the Great War, but as a volunteer. He now wears a moustache to hide the scars left by shrapnel wounds, sustained whilst a young Second Lieutenant in

Belgium, where he had been left for dead during a futile advance by the Northumberland Fusiliers. He has spent the last two years in and out of sanatoriums, fighting to regain the use of an arm that his father begged surgeons not to amputate.

Roland and Frederick were my grandfathers. They didn't meet on that day in 1919, but had to wait until 1951 when their youngest children, my parents, were married. The coincidence of that Newcastle quayside amused them. Both of them died young. I never knew Frederick and have only the faintest childhood memory of Roland.

The two men were ordinary lads; not untypical of their day and age.

One was fortunate to live in relative affluence at a time when most city-dwellers lived in conditions that would horrify us today - their house was one of the first to have electricity in Newcastle. The other was unfortunate to have been reared by a desperate, alcoholic brute. They probably had no realisation that they were living in extraordinary times. Both were lucky to have survived the greatest slaughter of young men in history.

Like Fred and Roland, we all leave a few doodles of our own across the margins of history. In Fred and Roland's case, there are some stiff, formal photographs, usually in uniform, a few medals, a cigarette box. In my study, I have the clever, well-drawn copies of Mickey Mouse, Pluto and Goofy that Roland drew for my mother's bedroom wall in the 1930's, that have been passed around the family for generations of young children to enjoy and somehow, as is the way in families, have found their way back to me. There's not much else.

Generations that follow us will find our names in the Census, on the deeds of properties, on electoral rolls, on membership lists in the archives of Trades Unions or professional bodies. We might have a box of keepsakes - the blazer badge, the school report condemning us as mediocre and lazy, a love letter, a certificate of baptism, a commemorative coin...

Not enough of us leave behind anything that will tell future generations what our lives were really like.

It doesn't matter that we are ordinary people doing ordinary things. A generation ago, it would have seemed the most outlandish idea that I could type this into a computer, using a keyboard. The next generation may find my method hysterically cumbersome, as they dictate their books into a computer. The generation afterwards will simply attach electrodes and "think" their words into a gadget smaller than a cigarette packet. In a hundred years time, someone will find this book in an antique shop selling such quaint items as books ("people used to read them you know") and laugh outrageously at just how wrong my predictions are.

Ordinary people are endlessly fascinating. Our lives may seem dull and trivial to us. Roland and Fred may well have believed theirs were too, but if they had only put down on paper some of their thoughts, if they had only taken a little time from their lives to write something about their experiences, we would know so much more.

Your life is not boring. You may not have climbed the Matterhorn or been to the moon or had a number one hit record. Most of us haven't. The biographies of the great and the good, the noisy, the powerful and the famous will always be recorded. The rest of us, the ordinary folk going about our ordinary daily lives are just as interesting - probably more so.

What you do every day will fascinate the generations to come.

Writing about your own life can't be that hard, can it? After all, it's **your** life, so you've got all the stories and characters to hand. You don't need to start inventing characters or plots - they're all there in your memories, your diaries, that little box of blazer badges and school reports.

When it comes down to it, you may well find it trickier than it looks.

Sometimes, it's hard to recall all the various events that make up our lives. There are the familiar faces with no names to go with them; there are the postcards in the attic from people you don't even remember. Dates, times and places melt into fuzzy, unfocused pictures.

Even when we can recall things clearly, actually getting that experience down can be a tough business. Have you ever tried writing down the anecdote that has your friends falling about laughing to find that it dies somewhere between the pen and the page?

This book is designed to help you write your life story. In it, there are suggestions to help you remember your past and to get your own story down on paper. Later in the book, I discuss various ways in which you can bring the story of your life to a wider audience.

In Chapter 8, I have provided several examples of autobiographical writing, not by the famous or well-to-do, but from men and women from ordinary walks of life who have set out to recall some of their experiences.

The examples I have chosen are from people I know from my work as a writing tutor. They are not professional writers, although many of them are easily good enough. They are from all walks of life - there are secretaries and nurses, teachers and office workers, people who've spent most of their lives on the factory floor, folk who've long since retired. Some of them have university degrees; others left school at fourteen or fifteen. Many had hardly written a thing since schooldays.

Above all, they have enthusiasm and this shines through in their writing.

So, if you want to tell your story

- for your own amusement
- as part of a family history
- for publication
- for friends
- for the nostalgia magazine market

Writing Your Own Life Story

- as a legacy for future generations
- as a few hundred words or a few hundred thousand
- to record your experiences of the war, old industries  
or a way of life that no longer exists,
- or simply to enjoy the act of writing

I hope that this book will help you to do it.

Nicholas Corder