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Caine, Barbara. *Women and the Autobiographical Impulse: A History.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 290 pp.

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<1>Barbara Caine's *Women and the Autobiographical Impulse* traces the development of British women's autobiographical writing across three centuries, from the eighteenth to the turn of the twenty-first. In its broad, sweeping scope, Caine's book is reminiscent of second-wave quests to establish a clear tradition of women's writing. Caine, however, updates this tradition by making clear that she does not expect her survey to be all-encompassing or to encapsulate any sort of universal feminine experience. She pays due attention to differences in perspective and privilege and considers how race, class, family background, geographic location, and other factors all contribute to shaping authors' lives and works. Although, as Caine remarks, "no single gendered approach fits them all," she shows that there is much to be gained by studying these diverse autobiographies in relation to one another (8).

<2>Rather than advancing a specific argument, Caine seeks to describe "the changing ways in which lives were presented" by women writers, and the ways in which these works documented "the inner life and subjectivity of their authors" (16). Self-portrayals, in Caine's account, are never divorced from the surrounding context. Fluctuations in autobiographical form occur in conjunction with important social and political developments. Caine also nods to the productive relationship between literary fiction and nonfiction autobiography: eighteenth-century tales of seduction, for instance, draw on conventions used in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740); likewise, accounts of self-development written in the mid-nineteenth century can't escape the presence of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847).

<3>In the first two chapters, Caine tracks how the secular and so-called "scandalous autobiographies" of eighteenth-century writers including Charlotte Charke, Constantia Phillips, and Laetitia Pilkington gave way to the respectable middle-class nineteenth-century autobiographies of Harriet Martineau, Frances Power Cobbe, and

Annie Besant. It was in this era that women's autobiography, according to Caine, "came of age," with Martineau leading the charge (106). In contrast to eighteenth-century works, which often documented a writer's seduction and subsequent financial precarity, these later autobiographies emphasized intellectual development and professional success in fields such as journalism, reflecting the new opportunities available to women in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. At the same time, they had to "negotiate contemporary ideals of femininity," which meant either paying tribute to idealized feminine domesticity or facing public disapproval (95). The nineteenth century also saw an increase in narratives written by enslaved or formerly enslaved women. Writers such as Mary Prince found an audience during a surge of antislavery activity in Britain during the 1830s and compelled readers to acknowledge controversial subjects including rape and forced labor, topics not typically addressed in other forms of life writing.

<4>Chapter Three focuses on the interwar period, when many women autobiographers were motivated to document the ways in which their individual lives intersected with epoch-shifting historical events, particularly World War I and the fight for women's suffrage. The religious crises that characterized so many of the previous century's autobiographies started to wane in favor of an emphasis on the writer's role in a larger historical struggle, as either observer or maker of history (or both). Writers such as Annie Kenney and Vera Brittain documented their experiences during the militant suffrage movement and World War I, respectively, emphasizing the importance of individual stories to larger historical phenomena. While elements of Victorian autobiography persisted in the works of Beatrice Webb and others, some writers were also beginning to more openly address sexuality, poverty, and personal struggles that would have been off-limits in the late nineteenth century. Particularly important in this regard was the advent of working-class women's autobiography. Along with Kenney, who prioritized her role in the suffrage movement, writers such as Kathleen Woodward provided detailed accounts of growing up in poverty and making one's own livelihood. This thread is continued in Caine's discussion of autobiographies written by domestic service workers in Chapter Four.

<5>The latter half of the twentieth century is the setting for Chapters Four and Five. In Chapter Four, Caine explores the "boom period in women's autobiography" that coincided with second-wave feminism both inside and outside the academy (163). Autobiography experienced a turn inwards during this period, as writers became "more introspective and concerned to analyse themselves and their own feelings" (206). Caine traces the pervasive influence of psychoanalysis and academic feminist discourses on autobiographies produced during the 1970s and 80s by women such

as Carolyn Steedman, Ann Oakley, Doris Lessing, and Janet Frame. Documentation of ordinary women's experiences was seen as a political act in itself: authors embraced intensive self-reflection and formal experimentation, often focusing on a particular episode rather than an entire lifetime. Discussions of adolescence and sexuality played a greater role than ever before, as did analyses of the many ways in which gender shaped experience and opportunities. Queer identity also makes an appearance in this chapter via Elizabeth Wilson's *Mirror Writing* (1982), which Caine reads in the context of the Gay Liberation movement. This stands in contrast to Caine's earlier treatment of Frances Power Cobbe, whom she notes was "formally single" and discreet in her 1894 autobiography about her long-term relationship with Mary Lloyd (93). While Caine makes clear that Cobbe's reticence regarding her personal life was in large part a product of her time, it would have been productive to consider ways that authors addressed queer identity before it was acceptable to do so overtly.

<6>The final chapter expands the scope of this discussion to the empire, addressing women's autobiographical writing in the "Wider British World" (219). Caine prioritizes former (or soon-to-be-former) British administrations in Africa and Australia and highlights autobiographies by Wambui Waiyaki Otieno, Sally Morgan, Nawal El Saadawi, Sindiwe Magona, and others. These autobiographies, as Caine shows, were fundamentally shaped by structures of colonial oppression, as writers addressed not only political violence and discrimination but also their struggles to navigate between indigenous ways of life and Western ideals. Caine highlights how these works, which were part of a "massive global expansion in autobiography," made previously unknown histories visible and "offered new ways of thinking about the writing of lives and of linking the personal to the political," which forever changed the development of global women's autobiography (259). It would have been interesting to know how Caine would have situated other countries formerly under British control—especially India—within this "global expansion," especially as it is not always clear why she pairs Australia and Africa. Granted, this would have required Caine to widen her already wide scope even further.

<7>*Women and the Autobiographical Impulse* is designed to be reader-friendly, and each chapter follows the same format. After identifying salient features of women's autobiography during the given period, Caine devotes separate sections to writing and publication practices, patterns of self-portrayal, and the construction of "inner life and subjectivity" (or lack thereof) in the works in question. Accompanying every chapter is a bibliography of autobiographical works, making it easy to follow Caine's chronology and references. It is worth noting, however, that numerous small errors detract from Caine's otherwise meticulous organization: dates are frequently

off by a century or more, and while the correct dates are typically clear from context, this happens enough to be distracting.

<8>Caine's gift for synthesis is on full display in this book. Here, as in previous works like *English Feminism, 1780-1980* (1997), she traverses a large swath of history, packing in discussions of an impressive number of key figures while remaining concise. Her synthesizing skills, moreover, must perform double duty, as she not only surveys the historical development of women's autobiography, but also pulls together dominant threads of autobiographical scholarship from roughly 1950 to the present. Caine's overviews of scholarship are bibliographically valuable, guiding readers towards influential works in the field without expecting them to already be well-versed. Occasionally, however, Caine leans too heavily on arguments made by other scholars—for example, Linda Peterson on nineteenth-century autobiography—and her own views on the form's development get lost. This is inevitable to some degree in a historical survey with such a large chronological scope, but it makes it difficult to pinpoint Caine's distinctive contributions.

<9>Caine provides a welcome survey of a field that is well-trodden within individual time periods but rarely receives this kind of broad historical overview. Faced with an almost impossibly large range of writers to choose from, she does an admirable job of selecting and describing works that are exemplary of important autobiographical features while also representing the disparate approaches that authors could take, even within the same generation. *Women and the Autobiographical Impulse* will be accessible to scholars and students alike. It should be particularly useful to specialists who are looking to quickly get a sense of the field of women's autobiography outside their area of expertise.

Notes

(1)Original emphasis.(^)