A Search for the Man As He Really Was

by Carlos Baker, New York Times, July 26, 1964

ERNEST HEMINGWAY used to remark that he did not want his biography written while he was alive, and preferably for 100 years after his death. During his lifetime, he did what he could to discourage his admirers from such an enterprise and to scare off his detractors with threats of legal action or more direct forms of dissuasion. In 1958, as a further non-incentive, he prepared a special document which served notice on his heirs that none of his letters was ever to be published. His widow and literary executrix, Mary Hemingway, has been holding as closely as possible to this directive, though sometimes, as in a recent issue of the Mercure de France, some letters have got into print simply because Hemingway's wishes are not universally known or respected.

Since he was one of the giants of his time, his wishes in the matter of biography have not been universally respected either. Seven or eight are already in print, and others may be expected. Whatever we may think of the quality and accuracy of these publications (and they do vary considerably in these respects), they were all plainly inevitable. For, by the act of dying, Hemingway surrendered control over his life in a double sense. Now he belongs, if not to the ages, at least very much to the age which in special ways he helped to fashion. Many of us would sooner keep on reading new works by Hemingway for as long as they last, or returning to old ones to see how they stand up under the weathering of the years. It is still a useful project to try to discover, in some systematic fashion, what he did for his epoch and what his epoch did for him.

Like most other human beings, Hemingway was both representative and unique. In working with the materials of his biography, one is chiefly struck by the uniqueness. Even though he would scorn the comparison, or find some way of turning it into a sardonic joke, what Ariosto said in 'Orlando Furioso' applies here very well: 'Nature made him, and then broke the mold.' The mold that fashioned Hemingway lies broken today in a hundred thousand pieces. The challenging task for any biographer who wishes to do his job well is to reassemble these fragments in such a way that this man, known in his day to millions though very well known only to dozens, can be made to return among us as a living being. In any absolute sense the task is of course impossible. The revivification of Lazarus was miraculous by definition. All that can be legitimately expected from even the most wonder-working biographer is an approximation of what Hemingway actually was.

One huge obstacle to seeing him plain is the pile of inexact allegations which bulk on the biographical horizon. For years he refused to give out any information about his

personal life. Many commentators, lacking the data they thought they needed, felt obliged to invent whole episodes, people, relationships, adventures. Rumors rose like poltergeists, went the rounds, grew tired, lay down and calcified to monumental stone. Others, seeing them recumbent, took them for fact, and now they have become part of literary history. The biographer must, however, take the greatest pains to reject them. With every available device from tweezers to bulldozers he must clear away the detritus of falsehood. Only then is there a chance of seeing the man as he actually was.

The attempt to recapture the colors and shades of his unique ambiance sends the biographer first of all to those who knew him best. One of the rewards of working with the life of a contemporaneous writer is the people one meets in the course of investigation. Though Hemingway made a substantial group of enemies, both by accident and intent, he was generally lucky in his friendships, luckier still in the lasting loyalties he was able to command. The number of those who kept in touch with him for period of up to 40 years is far greater than is common among us. He grew away from many, of course, as many did from him, evidence of which is amply provided in the pages of his posthumous volume, 'A Moveable Feast.' To others he displayed an astonishing continuity of affection. Even those who felt, on occasion, the full weight of his anger usually prove on closer acquaintance to be magnanimous men and women, remembering with minimal rancor the years and adventures they shared in his company.

To name them here would be invidious. But it is from people like these — jai-alai players, maharajahs, soldiers, ex-wives, hunting-guides, metropolitan columnists, veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, movie stars, ski-meisters, toreros, circus bear-trainers, restaurateurs and a scattering of literary people — that one gradually assembles the motes of light and heat which made up the atmosphere in which Hemingway lived and moved. From them it is possible to learn ever more deeply about that curious blend of seriousness and light-heartedness, paternalism and boyishness, firmness and gentleness which counteracts in most of their memories, the wild-boar truculence, the gratuitous cornadas, the surly threats and contemptuous insults of which he was likewise capable.

The biographer, wearing his special monomania like a judge's cloak, regularly asks Hemingway's former associates to perform feats of memory worthy of a courtroom witness under oath. He often requires more of them than he could himself achieve. But he soon develops a rough system of overlapping chronologies, incontrovertible (and there fore trustworthy) places and dates, and other schema which can serve as crutches for limping rememberers. As soon as they are convinced of the biographer's need for truth, most witnesses will labor mightily to help him attain precision.

Yet even with the best witnesses, the biographer must harbor, along with his will to believe, a healthy determination to remain sceptical until a case is proved. He may not go as far as Hemingway himself, who remarked long ago that 'memory ... is never true.'

But he will not go very far in his work before he discovers that interviewing, per se, is never enough. This is why the basic groundwork for any trustworthy biography ought to be a wide and well-organized collection of letters to and from the subject.

Nothing, if fact, helps a biographer more than letters. Note even formal autobiography is quite so revealing as the relaxed, informal words a man sets down at a particular place and time for the eyes of a friend. If it were possible to gather under one roof the absolute total of any person's correspondence from kindergarten to coffin, his biographer's task would be considerably eased. Most of those who try to trace another's tracks through space and time must, however, settle for a record far less than perfect. For we are not always writing letters, nor do all our letters survive, nor do we reveal in what we write more than a fractional part of what we are even then thinking and feeling.

There are bound to be gaps and lapses, indecipherable runes and wordless tunes — those mysteries, as someone said, which lie (and lie and lie) near the heart of all our histories. Even though the biographers' scepticism must therefore operate on the testimony offered by letters, he cannot afford to abandon for a moment his perpetual search for communications by, to, or about the subject of his interest.

Hemingway was, luckily, an indefatigable letter-writer. Nearly to the end of his life he took pleasure in the exchange of news, gossip, plans, dreams and nightmares. His letters are full of boasts, self-recriminations, confessionals, complaints and high and low badinage. After a day's work — say 753 words set down in four hours — he often turned to letters as a means of braking down his slow-moving equipage while the wheels of his imagination still lumbered forward. It was, he found, a better means of unburdening himself than a psychiatrist's couch. It skimmed his boiling brain of non-essentials, settled (or sometimes complicated) his business affairs, helped to alleviate his black rages, answered his need for comradely interchange with friends he trusted, explained himself to himself, and helped to exhaust him so that he could sleep.

The loss or preservation of these crucial documents is often, and unfortunately, a matter of luck. Juanito Quintana, proprietor of the Pamplona hotel which Hemingway immortalized as the Montoya in 'The Sun Also Rises', lost both his establishment and all but five of his letters from Ernesto during the Spanish Civil War. Margaret Anderson, editor of The Little Review, lost hers when the Germans occupied Paris. Other batches have been burned, inadvertently dumped, eaten to shreds by tropical insects, made illegible by damp-rot while the owner was away fighting in the Aleutians, or they have simply vanished into the insatiable maws of trunks in forgotten attics. On the other hand, it is posterity's good fortune that Mary Welsh Hemingway chose to take her obligations as executrix so seriously that all her husband's papers from Cuba, Florida and Idaho have now been sorted, classified, placed in folders and preserved for future reference.

Sometimes the most tentative of queries can uncover a treasure trove. There is, for example, the case of a former secretary of Hemingway, who not only saved all her stenographic notebooks but also discovered, to her considerable astonishment, that she could still read her shorthand notes after the lapse of years. That she was willing to make a tape recording of these letters for the benefit of Hemingway's biography still seems to his biographer one of the happier eventualities of the century.

Less significant, though amusing enough, is the existence in a generous collector's hands of a set of three letters, two of them by Hemingway and the third by a young British novelist-journalist who once asked to interview the master in his Cuban home. Hemingway politely declined, suggesting that the young man could get what he needed from a close friend in New York, and enclosing a letter of introduction to that friend. The young Englishman, short of cash and completely unsentimental, promptly sold his little sheaf for what they would bring in the open market, pocketed the cash, and moved on to interview someone else.

So the biographer will do well to count on letters, at least up to a point. They are certainly indispensable to the establishment of biographical exactitude. Yet even the information they contain must be examined with scepticism and used with caution. For it is a curious human tendency to tell lies in letters, fitting the text to what one knows of the recipient, withholding what one doesn't want known, skating with aplomb over the acres of thin ice. People of the most exemplary rectitude fall easily into this habit, and often for the best of reasons.

It should therefore not surprise us to find in the letters of a practicing novelist, for whom the line between fact and fancy is a many-splendored nonentity, some visible discrepancies between the truth as it was and the truth as he saw it. We all live by private mythologies. One of Hemingway's, of which he apprised his friends for years, was that his second novel was published the day the stock market crashed. Frequent repetition seems to have convinced him that this was so, though the volume had been on sale for more than a month before the dawn of the Great Dark Day.

A third source of biographical data which must be treated with more than usual circumspection is Hemingway's fiction itself. One important plank in his esthetic platform that the writer's obligation to tell the truth. This meant, in fictional practice, that he seldom wanted to depart very far from events in which he had played some personal part. The blowing up of Frederick Henry in 'A Farewell to Arms' is based, for example, directly on Hemingway's own encounter with an Austrian *Minenwerfer* on the Piave front one July midnight in 1918. Beyond the central incident, however, the biographer must watch for booby-traps. The actual and the imagined are everywhere so tightly interwoven that disentanglement is virtually impossible.

Other entanglements are somewhat easier to straighten out. One instance occurs near the end of 'For Whom the Bell Tolls', where Robert Jordan is made to recall a family

wedding in which he participated as a child — a memory closely associated with the spectacle of a Negro hanged on a lamp-post. Was this something Hemingway remembered from his childhood? No, as it turns out. He had picked up the story from his sister Marcelline, who served as a flower-girl at the wedding of her aunt and uncle in an Ohio town close to the turn of the century. One of her graphic memories of the otherwise festive occasion was a glimpse of a murdered man. Almost 40 years later her brother appropriated the incident as part of Jordan's background.

Widely variant combinations of truth and fiction appear in the stories. The setting for the prize-winning 'My Old Man' is completely authentic, based on Hemingway's own race-track experiences in Milan and Paris. All the rest is invented. So is the famous story called 'Indian Camp,' where Dr. Adams performs a Caesarean section on an Indian squaw, using a jackknife as a scalpel and a gut-leader as a suture. On the other hand, 'The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife' is virtually a playback of an actual quarrel between Dr. Hemingway and a half-breed Indian sawyer on the shore of Walloon Lake in the summer of 1912, with the youthful Ernest Hemingway as an interested onlooker. This is proved by a letter from his father to Ernest, written some 13 years after the event.

A biographer's day can be made by such a discovery as this. A dossier from Kenya, a note that records an offer of help from Paris, the rediscovery of an obscure item in his own files which is now for the first time meaningful — any of these can mark a particular day with the red rubric of memorability. A bad day is one when, without prior warning, he find himself dropping into the gulf. Supine there on one of the lower ledges, he gazes gloomily about him, measuring with bilious eye the vast heights yet to be scaled, inch by inch and day after inscrutable day to what seems like the last ding-dong of Doomsday. 'This job is impossible,' grates the sepulchral voice within. 'It can never be done — or if it can, my boy, you are not the one to do it.'

Yet he presently learns from his friends that this complaint is endemic to the whole clan of biographers — those who seek to tell the truth with as much art as they can muster. It is in fact a familiar malady among all those who try to reassemble the scattered remnants of a retrievable past and to build them into something that will live and breathe once more in a semblance, if only a semblance, of what actually, once upon a time, did exist. Others have succeeded in similar enterprises. Perhaps, after all, the mould can be reconstructed, the lost figure at least recognizably re-created. So, enheartened, he returns to his palpably impossible yet perpetually absorbing task, ignoring the low chuckle from the corner of the room which sounds curiously like the voice of Lazarus.