

[Editor's note: The following is apparently a draft of Jack's introduction to his autobiography *That Jack The House Built*. But the hand-written date at the bottom of the page from which this was transcribed indicates 5/2/95. Which is totally incongruous, since the autobiography was printed and distributed in 1987. Take it for what it's worth.]

I was at once amused and touched when my daughter KT first suggested, and Sr. Kathleen endorsed the idea, that I write my autobiography. I couldn't imagine anyone profiting from the recitation of such a dull and ordinary tale. It is still probable that my work will be little read and even less enjoyed, but there is no longer any doubt in my mind as to why the construction of my life's story has been a very good thing. Perhaps English historian William Stubbs sums up my main discovery best: "If a man wishes to learn something of a subject, his best policy is to write a book upon it." While it has long been my practice to write analyses of troubling issues, the steady evolution of self-knowledge that came with the development of this autobiography was a continuing series of shocks and surprises. My experience only verifies Dr. Johnson's observation to the effect that every man's life is best written by himself (although he then went on to concede that his opportunities to know it were more than compensated for by his temptations to disguise it.) Perhaps the best reason why one should write his own life story is that advanced by historian Joseph Renana: "One should only write about what one loves." This, then, has at worst been a labor of love and enlightenment for the author. One can only hope that it can be as much to at least a few readers.

But the project has, indeed, been labor. Apart from the shock of reality confronting myself for the first time, my second biggest discovery has been that the writing of autobiography has to be the most difficult type of writing in the world. Whereas Carlyle has remarked that a well-written one is much rarer, and proceeds to convict Carlyle of being "as much an optimist in his criticism as he was a pessimist in his ethics." Indeed, the seeker of truth in autobiography will eventually become a devout convert to pessimism. There are many reasons for this. First of all, one is overcome by the astonishing number and length of blank periods in one's life. This frustration is particularly acute as regards one's first decade on earth. This unhappy situation has prompted at least one wag to suggest that all biographies should start with Chapter Two. Kipling has underscored the vital importance of this blank period with his challenge to "Give me the first six years of a child's life; and you can have the rest." Yet, as Andre Maurois has noted, he could recall only a few outstanding memories up to the age of seven or eight. He has remarked that they appeared as "tiny, isolated pictures surrounded on both sides by dark strands of forgetfulness," and he went on to state that, "This is not enough to explain the complex individuality which we all acquire by the age of six or seven." If Kipling is right, and my reflection strongly suggests that he is, then the most careful dredging of the subconscious for even the seeming trivia of these highly formative years appears to be fully warranted. (The font suddenly changes here, and the text – previously justified, switches to left aligned)

There are other very real constraints operating against truth in autobiography. In the first place, hardly anyone has any real enthusiasm for confessing personal stupidity, much less personal shame. On the other hand, few would have the temerity to assume any vested right to violate the reputation or peace of mind of any figure peripheral to the Story. English writer Philip Guedalla says that autobiography is an unrivaled vehicle for telling the truth about other people. Death Valley Scotty's credo seems most apt: "Don't say nothing that will hurt anybody." Yet, we are surely shaped in some considerable measure by both the positive and the negative influences of those who share environment. How can our hero realistically project the full story of his development without at some point incidentally incriminating some of the supporting players? An extremely fine sense of discretion is needed in such instances, for no one has the right to tell the whole truth (as they admittedly see it imperfectly) about others. Nevertheless, one must recognize that such discretion in fact operates as a distorting filter even under the best circumstances. Nor is this the end of the problems with autobiography - other more subtle constraints yet remain. Maurois has contended on the one hand that autobiography is obliged to omit the many common-places of daily life to concentrate on the salient events, actions, and traits, but he has also conceded that in so doing one creates the impression that our hero's life was one smooth tapestry of main events, whereas the great bulk of the unrecorded hours were much as dull as our own. On the other hand, Sir Walter Raleigh in effect goes even further suggesting that accidents which may seem little more than trifles

often develop qualities every bit as much as participation in great worldly events. As for these so-called great events, their recounting likewise entails peril, English philosopher Henry Spencer has observed that to omit incidents that mark the progress of our hero's development and success diminish the value of the narrative, but to the extent that such reflect any honor on him, their mere mention often translates into charges of vanity. Maurois extends the figure by noting that, "memory rationalizes; ascribing lofty motives for actions performed unwittingly or unconsciously." Clearly, pursuit of truth in autobiography is as vain and illusive as pursuit of a will-o-the-wisp. We must conclude with Maurois that the severest autobiography remains, "a piece of special pleading," and that when we attempt our own portrait for other people we should not be surprised if, "the portrait is not accepted as a likeness." As Spencer has said, "An autobiography is a medium which produces some irremediable distortion." Will Rogers has reinforced this with his wry observation to the effect that when you put down the good stuff that you should have done, and you leave out the bad stuff that you did do, well, that's memoirs. As several wags have noted, biography is now as common as adultery, and hardly less reprehensible."

All the foregoing, of course, is merely to forge the proper perspective with regard to all that follows, and incidentally to explain the newly compounded word in our subtitle. As for the perspective, we yield to Isadora Duncan: "How can we write the truth about ourselves? Do we even know it? If there is the vision our friends have of us; and the vision we have of ourselves; the vision our lover has of us. Also, the vision our enemies have of us - all of these visions are different. "As for titles, we found that all the good ones have already been used. We liked the casualness of Graham Greene's *A Sort of Life*; and we cherished Oscar Levant's *A Smattering of Ignorance* as even more apt. *Something of Myself For My Friends—Known and Unknown* seemed just perfect. Too bad Kipling disposed of that one. And, had we wished to be more profound, we might have opted for *By Any Name*; the same being excerpted from American humorist Donald Robert Perry Marquis' awesome declaration - "All religions, all life, all art expressions come down to this: to the effort of the human soul to break through its barrier of loneliness of intolerable loneliness and make contact with another seeking soul, or with what souls seek, which is (by any name) God!" We finally settled upon the one we selected because it seemed at once both so historically right, and (please be kind) so characteristically *Wright*. You'll find no apology here either for the quagmire of quotes. They are not, as one might reasonably suspect, an accidental betrayal of pseudo-intellectualism. Rather, they are willfully incorporated as insurance against the customary cliché - "Well, it was all very interesting, but I didn't learn anything new," With this single disavowal on record, then, and with due acknowledgment to Samuel Eliot Morison (for Volume Three of his *Oxford History of the American People*) and even more so to William Manchester (for his *The Glory and the Dream*), whose superb historical narratives contributed mightily to my ability to recreate and chronologically structure personal reflections and experiences in relation to the appropriately contemporary atmospherics and events, we are now ready to proceed. No one can plead that they haven't been forewarned.