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History and Material Culture

A student's guide to approaching alternative sources

Edited by Karen Harvey

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6 Object biographies

From production to consumption

Karin Dannehl

Imagine a kitchen in a household of middling rank in around 1700. In this hive of activity several hours would be spent every day to prepare and preserve the food that sustained its members.[1] At its centre was the fire, and above the fire hung the cooking pot.[2] Our sketch of domestic industry is filled with smells, noise, heat and utensils. The objects that sustained the activities invite further investigation, for their existence suggests that our kitchen cameo is only a small part of a much bigger picture. What were they? If they were objects required by those who laboured in the kitchen, how did they come to be at the workers' disposal? On what basis were decisions of acquisition made? How were the objects designed and made? How sold? How repaired? What happened when they came to the end of their useful life?

Such questions relate to biographical turning points or stages in the life cycle of the objects found in the kitchen. In asking them, we set ourselves the task of considering the complete trajectory of an object from production to consumption. This chapter offers an introduction to the concept of object biography and the life cycle model, two concepts that, it will be argued, can be useful tools when handling the methodological challenges of an object-focused historical enquiry. The aim is not to give a full exposition of what different authors have said and how different fields view the biography approach to objects of the past. Rather, the chapter is pitched to show how the two concepts differ, how they might be applied and what challenges you might encounter in applying them. The example of eighteenth-century cooking vessels serves to link the abstract discussion back to the study of an actual object type. Since the biography highlights exceptional features while the life cycle study puts the focus on generic features, the two methods complement each other. Combining them into a hybrid methodology for exploring an artefact promises the highest returns.

The chapter is subdivided into six sections that will start with a look at definitions, and then move on to the general theme of the life story approach and the question of context before discussing the example study and potential sources. The sixth section is a discussion of the key findings.

Biography and life cycle model

Let us take a closer look at the definitions of the terms biography and life cycle. Not only will their meaning becoming clearer, a better understanding of the

terminology will also make us appreciate their specific advantages and disadvantages. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* recognizes three types of biography, essentially moving from the literary genres of history to any written record of life histories, and shifting from a focus on human life to include those of animals or plants.[3] At the base lies the notion of a story that traces an evolutionary development, and as such it can be transferred from a living organism to an object. As a literary genre the biography takes the shape of a story in an organized and structured fashion, starting at the beginning and ending at the end. Traditionally, it traces a life story that is considered to be complete, in other words, a life that concluded with the death of its subject, in order to trace the history of the subject and to show its exceptional character within its own time.[4] When applied to objects the biography offers the same features: a tightly defined, finite time frame, the focus on the subject against a context, and the express purpose of highlighting exceptional or unusual features. This leaves us with a problem. Many of the objects that the historian may want to investigate may be of interest not for their highly unusual value and hence unique life story, but precisely for their generic qualities. Such objects tend to be, at least at their point of making, fairly ordinary, and were for example the products of batch or mass production for everyday use. If our aim is to investigate the generic and more segmented elements of their life story, then they require a different approach.

One possible answer comes in the form of the life cycle model. Although equally premised on a life story, the life cycle model focuses on what is generic in the cycle more than potential peculiarities. Its definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* first relates to the biological life cycle, a 'series of developments that an organism undergoes in the course of its progress from the egg to the adult state'. It also covers the account of such a development, and is applied to 'the course of human, cultural, ... existence from birth or beginning through development and productivity to decay and death or ending'. The expression is in fact frequently transferred to capture the total of developmental stages, for example in commerce, where it denotes a product life cycle from exploration to growth and maturity through to decline.[5] Used in a wide range of disciplines, life cycle models postulate a beginning and an end, with an intervening period of growth and decline,[6] where start and finish respectively mark a generational change.[7]

A sub-category of the life cycle model is the life cycle assessment study. Such a study sets out to examine the entire life cycle of the product, including extraction and processing of raw materials, manufacturing, transportation and distribution, use, re-use, maintenance, recycling and final disposal.[8] The insights derived from the approach are instructive. They show, for instance, that the greatest degree of uniformity in the life cycle of a product is naturally found at the point of production, where technical knowledge of making tends to be relatively standardized, while the greatest variation is found at the user end of the career path or life cycle, where users' individuality, their freedom of choice, and the specific parameters within which they use an object will determine a great range of uses, or performances. At the 'production pole' an object is least likely to follow an idiosyncratic career, deviating from that of other objects of the same kind and make, since the place of production itself is likely to be the most culturally standardized. In so far as recipes for fabrication tend to work thus, workshops and manufactories act as repositories storing such technical production knowledge.[9] Initially used to compare products, applications of life cycle assessment studies came to include government policy, strategic planning, marketing, consumer education, process improvement and product design.[10]

Users and detractors alike have noted that life cycle assessment studies can be taken too far by including more and more stages of the product's impact, making investigation and assessment unwieldy.[11] Since models are used for the express reason that they may represent reality in the form of a simplified abstraction, they must make compromises in order to be functional.[12] Both the life cycle study and the life cycle assessment are designed to deal with much shorter periods of time than a historical treatment would require, and both postulate a linear development in that they reduce the life cycle to a linear interdependence of its stages. In their treatment, few of these stages come close to the depth and breadth expected of contextual analysis in history. Moreover, for a life cycle assessment study, full access to comprehensive evidence is assumed, a situation that is rarely if ever found with objects from the past. It is no surprise to find that many of the stages suggested in industrial studies of this type cannot be reproduced for the eighteenth-century case study, so that neither the life cycle model nor its relation, the life cycle assessment, can simply be transferred from industry to history.

Object life stories: trajectories through different contexts

Let us now consider what some of the proponents of objects' life stories have said. One of them is Kopytoff, whose particular interest is the process of commodification. Kopytoff compares the object's trajectory with that of a human slave who moves into the 'commodity stage'. The slave loses the status of commodity when bought but usually remains a potential commodity for the rest of his or her existence. Much the same applies to an object.[13] In fact, the process of commoditization is a product of cultural shaping. Not only is an owner's decision to enter or withdraw an object from being or becoming a commodity made subsequently to the producer's decision to make a product for sale, it is frequently a societal decision rather than a personal one, and tied to the values that the members of the society in question share. Depending on the stages of an object's biography, and depending on the age of an object, this may mean different, culturally acceptable uses.[14]

Kopytoff's approach is essentially that of a biographer with a focus on individual objects, even though he limits his enquiry to the stage where the objects go through cycles of exchange. This leaves out the wide range of contexts that sociologists, anthropologists, archaeologists and historians have identified, and where objects can be possessions, exchange values, tools, acquisitions, signifiers of status, products and even cross boundaries between object categories – for example, between decorative object and work of art in the course of time.[15] For Dant, who also embeds object biographies into his analysis of material culture,[16] this shift in context is at least in part the result of human beings' changing relationship with an object over time.[17]

The huge potential for dramatic shifts in context for any given object is even more prominent in Cummings, another scholar who uses the term 'life' with regard to objects. Cummings emphasizes that objects have several contexts, functions and associations. Central to the historian's interest, objects not only exist in their manifestation as physical things, but also in the documentary appendage that accumulates with every stage of their life cycle.[18] In other words, humans accord objects a parallel existence in the 'discursive space', though the amount and survival of the materials documenting it may vary. There is room for these parallel lives to go in different directions and for objects to lead 'double' lives, one on paper and the other as an artefact. Consequently, the discursive material is not an unalloyed blessing. On the positive side, it enables the historian who, in contrast to archaeologists, may be in a better position to piece together the trajectory from production to consumption to go beyond the artefact, particularly where artefacts are not available. Historians' studies of object life stories, with documentary evidence at their disposal, are as a result not tethered to artefacts. On the other hand, it throws open the numerous contexts in which an object existed, potentially obliging the historian to address them all.

Contexts and challenges

Because different contexts equate with the different passages of an object's life story or biography, the challenges of context warrant further attention. Context affixes meaning to an expression or event, while something that is said or done 'out of context' is, as a result, also without a secure meaning. Where the surrounding words or circumstances are missing, the meaning becomes uncertain and deceptive. Historians seek to retrieve, describe and analyse context, and not surprisingly the extent to which this is feasible is subject to debate.[19] Some of the specific problems of context and contextualization are the focus of this section. Three areas in particular are relevant to the historian of objects: the difference between exceptional and utilitarian objects and the effect on contextual documentation, the dilemma of the humble object becoming exceptional, and the question of deciding on appropriate contexts.

In order to deal with objects, we need categories. Categories can be simple and relate to a single element – for example, size, material or age – or more complex categories that distinguish between social, cultural or economic roles of objects – for example, between luxury and everyday objects, decorative and functional objects. Categories seek to limit and define, and so it is no surprise to find that for every rule there are exceptions. In the present discussion, it is useful to distinguish between expensive, artistic or otherwise exceptional objects and utilitarian ones, which are likely to be less expensive, less likely to be valued for their aesthetic values because of how this social, cultural and economic baggage influences the biography and life cycle of the object. The exceptional object is invested with interest, and consequently with commentary, whereas the humble object tends not to receive much attention. A simple rule of thumb is that the more valuable an object, the more likely it is to accumulate a documentary record along the way.[20] An example will illustrate

the difference. The maker's stamp on a piece of silver ware helps to identify the item as having come from a specific workshop, dating to at least the time period during which the maker, who can be verified from further sources such as masters' rolls, was active. Up until the end of the eighteenth century, small, tool-type articles rarely received the name or mark of the maker to help identification.[21] Base metal objects, with the exception of pewter ware, rarely bear marks.[22] The mechanism works both ways. The more discursive space an object is given, the more important and unique it becomes. The more important it is deemed to be, the more likely it is that its life story will be told, and the more important the full trajectory from production to consumption will become. The account will quite possibly be extended into the present times, because a precious object is more likely to be preserved, more likely to change hands, and most likely to be valued for this pedigree of ownership. The trajectory will thereby be biased towards an extended 'consumption stage' and will not necessarily give equal treatment to different stages of the object's existence. The humble object, by contrast, will be more likely to get used and used up, or returned as scrap to produce new objects, of similarly functional value that does not make them candidates for collectors' envy or museum displays. The case seems clear but the reality is more complex.

Given the large numbers of humdrum objects that once underwent the life cycle from production, distribution and consumption, and that have disappeared, those that have survived are, by virtue of their survival, exceptions. A collectors' guide spells out the incentive for collectors of humbler objects: 'To acquire even one old kitchen utensil or implement is to possess a piece of local and social history, of craftsmanship and, often, of beauty.'[23] The criteria may not be the ones a historian would like to see applied, but they illustrate how the boundaries between high art and craft, exceptional and everyday, are blurred.

This raises a dilemma for the researcher. If an everyday object is defined by being inconspicuous, then what are we to do on those occasions when they do appear – for example, in a comment by a diarist or as an artefact in a museum display. By dint of appearing, the humble object has become conspicuous. It is thereby at once removed from its regular contexts. For one, it did not undergo the final, the 'death', stage. In the case of our example, the cooking vessels, few survive because base metal was worth recycling. The pots that persisted have done so by chance and accident, and for reasons that can be very idiosyncratic. For example, although one may assume that a pot found in a field, filled with coins, was really intended to function as a pot for boiling despite its reassigned role as a safe, the new context of a hoard is likely to have to be taken into consideration. The problems do not end if the mundane object – intended for routine tasks and ultimately obsolescence and destruction – enters a collection and in a similar category to that of unique, expensive and exceptional objects. We also need to remember that the routines of use that may have involved the objects now on display have been removed purposefully to protect the artefacts from further wear and damage, precisely so that the object but not its context of use will be available for the historian, who is called upon at least in part to fill in the absent elements.[24] Museums' exhibition cases are sometimes little more than well-structured storage rooms, and even the most meticulously

assembled period room – for all its verisimilitude – does not remove the need to reflect on this additional layer of context. This new context, in which the researcher finds the object, posits its own challenges. This means that many of the proposed models for studying material culture, at least in part because they tacitly assume but do not overtly stress context,[25] struggle to address the fundamental problem of classification. Similarly, the challenges of multiple contexts are rarely acknowledged, and there is no model aiding a systematic approach.[26] So context, yes – but which one?

The afterlife of an object will determine how much information about its prior existence there is, how changed the object is from use, wear and tear, as well as possibly deliberate alterations that may have occurred at any stage. Despite the blurred boundaries sketched above, biographical material – that is, material that relates to a specific specimen – is rarely available for everyday objects. They usually have not survived in great numbers and the various contexts through which they would have passed in their existence are not usually documented. These may be valid reasons not to make humble objects the protagonists of biographies, but thankfully there is an alternative approach: the life cycle study. The life cycle study gives recognition to the 'communication value between the observer and the original producing culture'[27] of small, utilitarian objects. By virtue of their large number they performed a large array of functions in the course of their useful life,[28] and concern has been replaced by enthusiasm about the kind of information they offer.[29] With the life cycle model it does not matter if their life stories may appear incomplete, either because there is no data to retrieve them, or because the trajectory itself was incomplete.

Armed with the earlier discussion of definitions, the initial evaluation of the two concepts and about the consideration of context, we can move on to the case study. In the following section, the example of the cooking pot will help to evaluate the options and the obstacles to such an investigation, why it is useful and what the historian may learn from approaching a class of objects with the help of the analytical aids of biography and life cycle.

Life stories from written sources: metal cooking pots

The student of hollow ware is fortunate in that, although eighteenth-century cooking pots were not natural protagonists in the recordings of diarists and writers, they do crop up in them, as well as in the documents produced by inventors, metal workers and foundry managers, newspaper copy writers and tradespeople, the authors of cookery books, and finally appraisers in charge of the chattels of the deceased. And, being made of metal, they occasionally even made it into pamphlets of those thundering the doom of the population poisoned by the pernicious effects of copper and brass. At all stages of the life cycle the biographer is likely to find some evidence.[30] The three overarching passages or stages of the generic metal cooking pot's life are production, distribution and consumption. First, a piece of domestic hollow ware would undergo the production stage, where design and the technology and skill of making featured. Second, it would move through the distribution stage and here

questions of advertising and physical transportation would come to the fore, followed by sale and acquisition. The final passage would be the consumption stage, during which cycles of use and of restoring through cleaning and mending would have eventually led to scrapping and recycling of the metal pot, effectively returning its component materials to the distribution stage. An alternative route, and the one most likely followed by the artefact available to the historian, would have halted the use and consumption stage, or interrupted the life cycle at some point between production and using up, and led to the pot's preservation. This return to the distribution stage would have involved acquisition into a collection and subsequent return to the use stage with cycles of interpretation and investigation as a museum object.

There is room to flesh out the production aspect. A letter book and the documentation of a legal wrangle that accompanied a patent for producing cast iron hollow ware provide essential information for important stages in the overall history of metal hollow ware in England.[31] In early 1700 at the Coalbrookdale iron foundry in Shropshire, Abraham Darby succeeded in casting iron pots in sand, a process that was faster and cheaper than earlier techniques. His patent from 1707 granted him the right to keep his technique secret and to benefit from a royal monopoly for the exploitation of the process for 14 years.[32] This achievement is rated as an important breakthrough in industrial history. By the 1720s the then manager of the works, Richard Ford, was writing to keep the new owner, Nehemiah Champion, informed about the state of affairs and in particular the sale and distribution of the cast ware produced at Coalbrookdale. Large quantities of cast iron hollow ware were sent by barge on the River Severn down to Bristol, with complaints about faulty wares and the pressure of competition from foundries in Wales and further north peppering the correspondence. We note that the letter book and the court case do not relate to individual items of hollow ware. Instead, they assist us with aspects of generic life cycle stages, as well as the broader context of production at a give time, in this case the early eighteenth century.

Despite the survival of document evidence, some aspects remain extremely elusive: for instance, the connection between users and producers. Were there, for example, elements of consultation that may have resulted in changes in design? The artefacts sometimes show repairs that could be interpreted as traces of customization for the user, but available correspondence for hollow ware that mentions requests from end-consumers relates to hollow ware for industrial purposes. There is only the complaint from an early eighteenth-century wholesaler, Graffin Prankard, who cites the poor quality of the castings as the cause of his problems selling them, which indicates that consumers and users were not reduced to buying what was available.[33] Visual evidence, which would help to track changes in form and design, is also relatively scarce. Cookery books, such as Eliza Smith's, have frontispieces,[34] but still lifes and domestic scenes are mostly of Dutch origin and tend to use the lustre of highly polished copper vessels to add depth and the sparkle of light. Trade cards, a visual form of promotional literature with its heyday in the last third of the century, feature engravings of the shop sign but not often pots.[35] Perhaps most difficult is to show change over time because most documents that

have been mentioned provide only brief glimpses, and the detail that is available – for example, about ownership at death from probate material for the early part of the century – is mostly not available for the latter. It means that the historian may have to make do with inserting his or her object case study into the broader but less specific historiography, for instance of changes in retailing, in advertising, in technology, and consumption, offering the supposition that cooking pots may have followed the trends observable for other aspects of eighteenth-century life. In the case of consumption, for instance, this meant an overall trend for more and more diverse objects owned by more and more people.

Beyond written records

To the historian the reconstruction of a story from documents is key. To the historian of objects, however, the physical experience of the three-dimensional thing that is packed with sensual information, has to be of at least as much importance. To pick up an artefact is to engage with the past on so direct and so immediate a level, it approaches something magical. The experiences of weight, surface texture, sound and smell are part of the physicality of objects. They are an essential part of what artefacts have to offer the historian, and can be experienced with many of our senses, including sight, touch, balance, hearing and smell. We do well to remember that most of the human body is surface, including inner surface areas such as nasal passages, the digestive tracts and the inside passages of ear and mouth. This vast tactile area determines human experience of the external, material world. Of this surface area tongue, fingers, nose and ears are only the most salient points. Effectively, the entire skeletal and muscular structures experience an impact with the material surrounds when it comes to lifting, moving, pulling and pushing, and they combine to restore equilibrium when the sense of balance is challenged through handling objects that can be picked up. Such is the power of touch that where an object is removed from access to the elementary senses, as is frequently the case with museum artefacts, the sense of seeing will be supplemented from memory with information of weight, shape and other experiences that handling the object would yield in an effort to complete the reduced experience.

Surviving examples of eighteenth-century cooking pots are not numerous. The metal constituted a valuable raw material, and when the heat of the embers and sanding had taken their toll, as is evident in surviving specimen, most of them would have been sold or exchanged for their scrap value. Such artefacts as have come to us show us the range of their shapes, capacity, their weight, the colour – rose-golden hues for copper, gold-like for brass and grey for cast iron – and the marks of use. They make tangible in what vessels the soups and stews would have been prepared, and what striking difference it made when the much lighter battery ware, in their graded sizes, took over towards the end of the eighteenth century. To experience this difference, it is necessary to touch and manipulate ideally both the artefact(s) and replicas thereof. The reason for this is that the artefact is irreplaceable but it also shows itself only in its present condition – possibly fragile, probably worn. A replica can aim to show the item as it may have looked and

functioned when new, and, because it is a copy, it is not unique, but may be used for experimentation.

Re-enactment is a particular way of investigating the past, and its popular appeal of actors attired in period costume or the garb of Vikings, knights and Neanderthals has not always convinced more conventional historians of the seriousness of the pursuit. However, as will become evident, it is also a privileged form of getting to know some of the physical aspects of an object. Just as the excitement over a manuscript score or novel by an early author is permissible, the thrill of feeling the weight (or rather weightlessness) of a feather quill, the generic tool that would likely have been used to record it, or the weight of a cast iron skillet when filled with contents, should be equally acceptable. Re-enactment is unfortunately also a rather more resource-intensive form of research and most historians are unlikely to be able to carry it out for their own (case) studies.

Food ways[36] are programmes run by museums, using replica utensils with traditional ingredients and technology to demonstrate the cooking process and the final results to visitors. They are a prominent feature of 'living history' museums, and involve actors or demonstrators, frequently dressed in period costume to enact the work routines of people of a given period. The programmes also serve a research purpose in that they help to recapture practices and skills related to the use of domestic hollow ware, which for the most part went unrecorded. For example, in down-hearth cooking, women would frequently not wear shoes but continue to wear their long and fairly wide skirts. The present-day observer spots the fire hazard of a billowing skirt and the potential danger of burns to naked feet on hot bricks surrounding the fireplace. What is not evident at first glance is the inbuilt sensory alarm. Naked feet sense when they get too close to the live fire, and their owner is therefore likely to keep her distance from the flames. Wide, layered skirts, on the other hand, protect the legs from the heat. Demonstrators found that they felt the heat radiating from the fire much more on occasions when they practised wearing a pair of trousers or jeans. Because food ways aim to present a 'lived experience' they also aim to demonstrate within the right material context. Kitchens are reconstructed, or, if an original location is used, the kitchen furniture is displayed in such a way as to suggest the appearance of a working kitchen. The objects themselves may be originals or replicas, or a combination of the two, and in many cases the stock of utensils is an interpretation based on the collation of a number of kitchen inventories deemed representative for the type and size of kitchen to be reconstructed. Realism may go as far as a demonstrator picking a replica item out of the available array of utensils and proceeding to use it. Under these circumstances, display becomes a combination of preservation and frozen existence (the original artefacts on display) and fiction (the replica objects in use) but the compromise goes some way to creating an instructive experience. The best of them allow academic research, guided tours and touch-it sessions to go hand in hand.[37] The manager of the Odessa Houses in Delaware found that nothing compares with the hands-on, physical experience of the objects and the cooking methods.[38] To practise 'costume interpretation' is to perform tasks and activities in costume not merely for the benefit of visitors, but to put oneself into an environment that resembles as closely as

possible that of an eighteenth-century man, woman or child. This way it is possible to experience the 'landscape of living', with all the caveats for which such an approach calls.[39]

Traditions and customs, experience and the economies of well-honed actions are all products of time spent in carrying out physical tasks and the development of physical skills.[40] Skill, on the other hand, can only be imperfectly described and, perhaps surprisingly, only with difficulty be retrieved through trial and error, because it is largely the result of a host of pressures operating upon the person acquiring them. Even where the historian has training in some of the specialists' fields – for example, metalworking – time–space–movement analyses and an assessment of the ergonomics for the eighteenth century can only be approximations. They elude precise investigation because we no longer have the precise conditions in which to carry out tasks.[41] Other stages – for example, distribution – are even more difficult to recover through re-enactment scenarios. The routines involved in supplying goods and in maintaining networks of middlemen and customers are too intangible and too reliant on a whole social fabric to be readily enacted. The same goes for the virtual supply of goods through advertising. It cannot be fully relived because the system of social references that made it work cannot be recreated. In other words, the value of re-enactment is limited to the more concrete, physical actions, as evident in the opening scene of the lively eighteenth-century kitchen with the cooking pot over the fire. And while using sensual knowledge may not be typical among historians, there are many gains to be had from doing so when dealing with material culture.

Towards a blended approach: mapping biographies and life cycle stages

One of the salient challenges for the historian is the balance of change versus continuity over time. Consider a busy kitchen, this time around 1800 – what has changed? The cooking pot is hanging above a range that burns coal as opposed to a down-hearth fireplace with logs of wood. What do the objects that can now be found in the kitchen tell us about the tasks performed here? What does it mean to enclose a fire, or to develop flat-bottomed saucepans that sit on hobs rather than skillets with three legs to position them in the hot embers? Once more the number of potential themes to be unpicked is large, and they invite the contemplation of themes as varied as production technology, domestic cooking technology, women's work, diversification of utensils and aspects of interior design.

These themes are as relevant for 1700 as they are for 1800, but historians are rarely interested in taking snapshots, and want to assess change and continuity over longer periods of time. How, for instance, can the gradual switch from copper and brass pots to cast iron, which occurred over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and which is linked to new production processes, be mapped on to the biography of a specific artefact? And, conversely, how may specific life stories and the generic stages based on specimens available, and the macrohistory of an entire object category be combined? Infuriatingly, much, if not all, of the

material that historians have at that their disposal provides mere glimpses, and this applies to documents as well as objects. By itself, an artefact is a time capsule that allows insight into only a relatively limited time period. Based on both documentary and artefactual evidence, snapshots may be turned into a sequence of stills, and some of the gaps filled in.

Adapting the biography approach and the life cycle model addresses this important issue of historical writing. The main aim is to present a chosen topic within its context based on evidence that will illuminate such context. In order to succeed, context and its evidence need to be handled in a particular way. Biography and life cycle support the identification of life cycle stages or areas to disentangle the various contextual elements. They encourage discussion of the stages or contexts that permit a more detailed treatment, while not denying the potential for further stages that have to remain untreated. Finally, because of their cyclical postulate, they assist in reassembling or reintegrating the stages.

When combined, the two approaches become a tool that can liaise between the material and the descriptive narrative on the one hand, and the interpretative and representational aspect of historical writing on the other.[42] They assist the historian in the task of focusing closely, in a first step, on the object or objects in question, to be able subsequently to integrate the detailed object history into a history that has a more broadly social, economic or other focus. In the example of cooking pots, the life cycle approach helps to bring out the triangle of influences between production, supply and consumption. A next step could lead towards explaining the changes that took place in the kitchens of eighteenth-century England. Ultimately, the combined biography and life cycle of the cooking pot can serve in discussions about rates of development in spheres as diverse as technological, industrial, retailing and consumer expansion during the eighteenth century.

Conclusion

The main challenge of the biography approach lies in the idiosyncratic nature of a biography, in other words its claim to uniqueness. At the core of the life cycle model, on the other hand, lies the idea of standardization. Its challenge resides in the fact that no object's existence is ever completely identical or entirely cyclical with a return to the origins. In their pure and rigid application neither concept is entirely suited to the historian's needs.

Both approaches are devices that stress the organic, and therefore unpredictable, element in all objects. They map the generic trajectory that purposefully produced objects were intended to undergo together with the idiosyncratic trajectory that is not part of the user's intention but part of the life story of particular objects. At times the biography (artefact specific), at other times the life cycle (generic object) and in a third instance a blended approach will yield the best results for making the complexities of the relationships between stages more transparent. And, as a framework, biography and life cycle models accommodate the gaps and offer the flexibility to integrate as few or as many stages or contexts as possible.

Indeed, the two approaches considered here concede and make a virtue out of the fact that objects can be elusive for the historian. Objects disappear or change their contexts and meanings, making access to earlier stages or biographical passages difficult. It may not be feasible, or indeed desirable, to investigate all stages of an object's life. Both the biography and the life cycle model highlight the gaps in the investigation as much as they assist with placing the pieces of the mosaic that are known. The likelihood that the empirical challenges are likely to increase with the age of the object means that some or most stages of the life cycle and greater or smaller sections of the biography of an object will remain obscure. In the absence of a continuous succession of material to support the research there is therefore no continuous story to be told. Wherever this is the case, the biography approach assists in mapping out the absent passages. Wherever an object is too humdrum and therefore elusive to yield a biography, there may be life cycle stages to be identified. While they may not be filled, except with generic placeholders, they position the object firmly within a more complete context of use and activity. Mapped onto each other, the life cycle model and the biography allow for the absences as well as the additions of contextual layers and materials, such as the artefact base upon which the historian of pots and pans may draw. Neither the life cycle model nor the biography is unproblematic but, coupled, they can assist the historian in dealing with the complexities and, above all, with the absences in a constructive manner. The view of the mosaic that biography and life cycle produce is partial and fractured, but from it the historian may gain insights into the interplay between the cultural meanings and values bestowed upon and through objects on the one hand, and the mechanical and physical boundaries of an object's life and the interplay between them.

Notes

1 An attempt at calculating the amount of time invested in different household tasks, such as cleaning, cooking and other domestic work, was undertaken by Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660–1760* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 142–5.

2 For example, since the 1970s, Molly Harrison, *The Kitchen in History* (Reading: Osprey Publishing Limited, 1972); Doreen Yarwood, *The British Kitchen: Housewifery Since Roman Times* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1981); Una A. Robertson, *The Illustrated History of the Housewife 1650–1950* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999); Gilly Lehmann, *The British Housewife: Cookery Books, Cooking and Society in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Totnes: Prospect Books, 2003).

3 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, available at http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl, under 'biography', accessed 17 January 2008.

4 *Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), under 'biography'.

5 See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, under 'life cycle', 2. Citations: '1971 *Daily Telegraph,* 21 June 17/6 The four-stage life–cycle of every [manufactured] product exploration, growth, maturity, decline.'

6 For example, a plant's life cycle – e.g. grass from seed to seed-producing plant; an animal's life cycle – e.g. frog from spawn to fully grown frog capable of reproduction; a human life cycle – e.g. biological from birth to procreating adult, or from birth to death, marked by cultural rites of passage such as baptism, communion/confirmation, marriage, parenthood and death. Life cycles also exist in medical research and chemistry.

7 In this form the life cycle study has a well-established tradition, and company and business history are two of the areas of historical writing where the approach is used. See, for example, Philippe Jobert and Michael Moss (eds), *The Birth and Death of Companies: An Historical Perspective*, papers delivered at a colloquium in Glasgow in September 1989 (Carnforth, Lancashire, and Park Ridge/New Jersey: Parthenon Publishing, 1990).

8 See SETAC (Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry) 'Definitions of Life Cycle Assessment', in SETAC, *Guidelines for Life-cycle Assessment: A 'Code of Practice'* (Brussels: SETAC Publications, 1993). Available at: http://www.cfd.rmit.edu.au/dfe/lca1.html, accessed 4 December 2000. However, this online publication, based on a report edited by F. Consoli, D. Allen, I. Boustead, N. de Oude, J. Fava, R. Franklin, A.A. Jensen, R. Parrish, R. Perriman, D. Postlethwaite, B. Quay, J. Séguin and B. Vigon (eds) of a workshop organized by SETAC in Portugal, is no longer available.

9 Appadurai gives examples of production loci where greater trends towards variation are found. See Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics Of Value' in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, New York, Oakleigh: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 42.

10 The author of 'Life Cycle of a Steel Cooking Pan', for example, identifies ten stages, from the mining and transportation of raw materials to the cooking pan's use in the kitchen until its eventual consignment to the dustbin and the waste collection system. However, even his model could be expanded to include transport from the retailer's to the user's premises. See John Wright, 'Sustainable Resource Management: The Life Cycle of a Steel Cooking Pan', in John Wright, *Tipping the Balance: Sustainable Management of World Resources* (place of publication n.a.: Beckett Karlson, 1998), p. 42.

11 One example was Rob Goldberg, 'The Big Picture: Life Cycle Analysis' (Philadelphia, PA: The Academy of Natural Sciences, 1992). Available at: http://www. acnatsci.org, accessed 16 May 2000. However, his online publication is no longer available for consultation.

12 Ideally, models render complex interactions and interconnections accessible by simplifying them while at the same time drawing attention to the complexity that underpins them. See Mark Rees and John H. Lawton 'What Can Models Tell Us?' in Leslie Fowden, Terry Mansfield and John Stoddart (eds), *Plant Adaptation to Environmental Stress* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1993), p. 65.

13 Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: commoditization as a process' in Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*. In order to highlight the process and concomitant phases of commodification Kopytoff compares the effect of ownership and commodity status on things with that of slavery. His objective is not to emotionalize and dramatize the ownership of things by using a form of ownership that has become unacceptable within the Western cultural sphere, but instead uses its more readily accessible 'stages' of status to sensitize his readership towards ownership within the realm of things. See in particular pp. 64–5.

14 Kopytoff's examples are a Suku hut and a car. Depending on geographical and cultural arena, the biography of a car in Africa will be different from that of the same kind of vehicle in Europe. The Suku, on the other hand, have strong feelings about appropriate use of a hut, depending on its age. Thus using 'too old' a hut to accommodate guests is deemed inappropriate. See Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things', pp. 66–8.

15 See, for example, Cornelius Holtorf 'Notes on the Life History of a Pot Sherd', *Journal of Material Culture*, 7, 1 (2002), pp. 49–71, who discusses life history approaches in archaeology, namely short life histories (the lives of things in the past until they are discarded) and long life histories study (the lives of things until the present) to demonstrate that the material essence of an object is far from eternal, but subject to interpretation. Far from being essential properties of objects, their material identities are the result of the relationship of people and objects, and consequently ascribed to them.

16 T. Dant, *Material Culture in the Social World: Values, Activities, Lifestyles* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), p. 142–4.
17 Ibid., p. 131.
18 Neil Cummings, 'Reading Things: The Alibi of Use' in Neil Cummings (ed.), *Reading Things* (London: Chance Books, 1993), p. 15.
19 Particular opposition to the idea of context comes from postmodernist historians. See, for example, contributions to Brian Fay, Philip Pomper and Richard T. Vann (eds), *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
20 For example, the tracing of the life story of the Koh-i-Noor diamond in Arndt. Mersmann, '"Diamonds are Forever" – Appropriations of the Koh-i-Noor: An Object Biography', *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, 8, 2 (2001), pp. 175–91.
21 The practice only became more widespread in the nineteenth century, and particularly in America where American iron founders would have their names, or the names of their businesses or firms, moulded into all, including the small articles. See Alex Ames, *Collecting Cast Iron* (Ashbourne: Moorland, 1980), p. 13.
22 For the dating of brass, various techniques have been developed. Specialists differentiate between invasive and non-invasive techniques, but the difference between the documented and the undocumented object relative to the analysis is all the same considerable. An undocumented, non-authenticated artefact has to be treated with great circumspection. Dating techniques for metal objects draw on a database containing profiles of metal impurities, and this database is based on documented objects. Objects made of iron remain largely un-datable because iron is the metal with the fewest impurities and therefore the most difficult to date.
23 Geoffrey Warren, *Kitchen Bygones: A Collector's Guide* (London: Souvenir Press, 1984), p. 9.
24 A biography written from the 'numerous interpretations, often of a conflicting nature, making [the objects'] biography at times wholly schizophrenic' is the express purpose of Clifford Charles Lamberg-Karlovsky, 'The Biography of an Object: The Intercultural Style Vessels of the Third Millennium BC', in Steven D. Lubar and W. David Kingery (eds), *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), p. 272.
25 See W. John McIntyre, 'Artifacts as Sources for Material History Research', *Material History Bulletin*, Special Issue, 8 (1979), pp. 71–5, here p. 71, for reference to Edward McClung Fleming's article 'Artifact Study: A Proposed Model', published in *Winterthur Portfolio* in 1974. This model was further developed to enhance its usability and reflects the level of importance accorded to each quality through order of listing: material, construction, function, provenance and value. See also Anon, 'Research Reports: Towards a Material History Methodology', *Material History Bulletin*, 22 (1985), pp. 31–40, here pp. 31, 35 and 36.
26 But see Anon, 'Research Reports', pp. 31–40, for an attempt at a practical model.
27 Ibid., pp. 32–3.
28 See, for example, Henry Petroski, *The Evolution of Useful Things* (London: Pavilion, 1993), and Henry Petroski, *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990). The focus is not new to archaeologists, whose primary material consists predominantly of material objects, and who traditionally have seen their task in describing and classifying material objects.
29 Petroski, for example, insists that to study simple examples of engineering is as helpful, if not more helpful, as studying complex ones, such as space craft, because the principles of their development apply in either case, but are more easily demonstrated for simpler objects. See Henry Petroski, *To Engineer is Human: The Role of Failure in Successful Design* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1985). See also Susie West, 'Introduction' to Sarah Tarlow and Susie West (eds), *The Familiar Past? Archaeologies of Later Historical Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

30 The example study is based on Karin Dannehl, 'A Life Cycle Study of Eighteenth-century Metal Cooking Vessels: A Reflexive Approach', unpublished thesis, University of Wolverhampton, 2005. More detailed references to primary source materials may be found there. The glimpse of how at least one contemporary viewed cooking pots with regard to health and safety is found in Anon, *Serious Reflections on the Manifold Dangers Attending the Use of Copper Vessels. And other utensils of copper and brass, in the preparation of all such solids and liquids as are designed for food to human bodies: in a letter to a friend M. Cooper* (London: publisher n.a., 1755). It permits us to reflect on the most salient change over time, which was the gradual, very uneven but all the same traceable switch from copper and brass to cast iron.
31 See Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust (Coalbrookdale), Ford Letter book LAB/ASSOC/10, as well as the Coalbrookdale Company Stock Book 1728–1738 (piece number CBD MS 1) CBD 59/82/5. For court case material see: National Archives/PRO: PRO Chancery Depositions C 7/89/4 n.d. (1709–10); PRO Chancery Deposition C11/1721/15 (1716); PRO Chancery Deposition C11/1726/16 (1716); PRO Chancery Depositions C 11/1726/18 (1709) and PRO PROB 4/1311.
32 Patent No. 380, signed 18 April 1707, 'A new way of casting iron bellied potts, and other iron bellied ware in sand only', granted 'Abraham Darby, of our city of Bristol, Smith' the 'sole vse and benefit' of his invention.
33 See Somerset Record Office (Taunton), Dickenson MSS Do/DN/423 Graffin Prankard's Letter Book, letters dated 10 7mo (September) 1715 and 15 8mo (October) 1715. To judge by his correspondence, Prankard was never slow to voice his discontent if the wares were damaged or in poor condition.
34 Eliza Smith, *The Compleat Housewife or Accomplish'd Gentlewoman's Companion: being a collection of upwards of six hundred of the most approved receipts in cookery, pastry, confectionary, preserving, pickles, cakes, creams, jellies, made wines, cordials ...*, facsimile edition (London: Studio Editions, 1994). It was first published in 1727, and its 16th edition, with additions, was printed for C. Hitch and L. Hawes, etc., in London, 1758.
35 An exception is the tradecard by Elwell and Taylor, *c.*1760s, in the British Museum, Heal and Banks Collection, 85.99.
36 The section is based on interviews with demonstrators at the Odessa Houses, Delaware, and the Colonial Williamsburg Living History Museum in 2000. Debbie Buckson, manager of the Odessa Houses in Delaware, has a background in art history but she became increasingly involved in running the Odessa House Museums. Together with Susan Schmitt, she practises 'hearth cooking' dressed in period costume, including shift, stays and skirt. Much of their knowledge of how eighteenth-century kitchens and cooking worked has been acquired through trial and error. Girls at the time would have learned the skills required for cooking for a family through being around, through observation, just as boys would learn their fathers' trade, and from being given increasingly greater responsibility. Debbie herself, with no prior knowledge to bring to the task, trained with Harriet Stout at Jamestown Festival, who practises and demonstrates open hearth cooking there, and Susan Lukas in Pennsylvania.
37 Interview with Debbie Buckson in March 2000. As with all locations open to the public, a number of constraints upon 'authenticity' arise from contemporary, that is current, standards of health and safety. Authenticity may never rank above the safety of staff and visitors.
38 Ibid. The times for demonstration are 10 o'clock in the morning to 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and Debbie Buckson and Susan Schmitt point out that this panders to visitors' viewing preferences rather than eighteenth-century cooking practices. In an experiment with Susan Schmitt, roasting a chicken on the spit and boiling squash in a cast iron pot suspended over the fire, dressed in a long cotton skirts and barefoot, Schmitt commented on the fact that visitors preferred to see the roasting in operation. For this reason the chicken would tend to be left over the fire for longer than would be necessary for its optimum cooking.

39 Ibid.

40 Historic smithies, like their domestic counterpart, the kitchens, reveal much the same challenge. Alongside the educational objective, their aim is to rediscover old techniques, since the minutiae of everyday work and practice were not recorded. The training of apprentices, though a serious business for the master, took place as a matter of course and received reflection only through the pieces the apprentice would produce. Not only were smiths less likely to describe and record what they knew from experience, the smith's work, like the cook's, relies on the right timing for each step, making it impossible to interrupt a process to record it, or for an observer to dissect it into its constituent parts. The insights into the challenging task of retrieving past work processes were gained in April 2000 from Peter Ross, for 25 years master metal smith and demonstrator in the 'James Anderson Blacksmith Shop' at Colonial Williamsburg Living History Museum, Virginia, until 2004. See also, for example, Linda M. Hurcombe, *Archaeological Artefacts as Material Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), who discusses the practices of experimental archaeology to retrieve missing information about material remains.

41 Peter Ross observed that since the apprentices, whom he trains in his workshop – a historic smithy at Colonial Williamsburg – are apprentices in the twenty-first-century sense, he cannot exercise absolute control, nor does necessity impose the same pressure on them to perform, and to perform well, the tasks he gives them. He cannot recreate the conditions under which skills immediately related to efficiency would have developed. For instance, even the routine action of beating metal into a shape is conditioned by the fact that the worker had to get it right to ensure his livelihood, while the actor, although under pressure to deliver a good performance, is not under the same pressure to shape the piece of metal. Personal communication from Peter Ross in April 2000 and December 2002.

42 See C. Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 167–9.

7 Regional identity and material culture

Helen Berry

The study of individual and group identity has become a popular theme in historical research, in particular over the last 20 years.[1] It has most usually entailed the historian combing the archives for written records. If the unit of study is the nation state, this will involve research on the official records relating to the operation of power, such as legal documents, parliamentary proceedings and diplomatic papers; if the subject is the identity of individual persons, the historian may look for letters or diaries that record their subject's personal experiences. Whatever the unit of analysis, whether an entire nation or a single, private person (and the many other categories in between, such as a particular ethnic identity, gender or family group), the historian's focus, unlike that of the archaeologist or anthropologist, has tended to be upon the written word, in printed or manuscript form, rather than other sorts of material culture such as the built environment, art or manufactured goods. Where historians do use evidence from material culture in relation to questions of identity, it is fair to say that many notable examples use material culture to substantiate a hypothesis formed from detailed text-based research, rather than vice-versa.[2]

One reason for this is that academic historians are trained in the empirical tradition of using archival or printed evidence, which embeds their professional focus upon text-based source criticism; they are experts at piecing together and interpreting historical documents. The historian places importance upon deploying a sceptical approach to claims of accuracy in written texts, based upon factors such as the bias of the author, and the patchy survival of evidence, although (in common with other disciplines) he or she must now also wrestle since the rise of postmodernism with questions of 'truth' in history.[3]

The increasing trend towards specialization within disciplines has, in many instances, actually made it harder to find a common language to explore questions of identity in history across disciplinary boundaries, which is unfortunate given the mutual and overlapping concerns of researchers engaging with cultures in the past. Yet there are signs of an evolving cross-pollination of ideas and approaches. Creative dialogue across disciplines is sometimes achieved in very particular circumstances, such as where a research project is conceived by a team of experts working collaboratively, or where an academic has received specialist training in two or more different disciplines.[4] Some of the most influential historians in the field of early modern history have been influenced by the methods of other