

EVALUATING MEMOIRS

Memoirs occupy – for quite sound reasons – a lowly place in the regard of the professional historian. They are suspect for fallibility of memory, for intent of polemic or self-exculpation and for that extra share of human vanity which must be presumed in people who trouble to write and publish the story of events in which they were personally involved. For any retrospective account the historian prefers, when he can get them, scraps of contemporary evidence, not intended for the public eye, and, above all, not intended for “posterity.” Only when he has wrung all that he can from such contemporary evidence does he fall back, reluctantly and skeptically, on the memoir material and even then what he is likely to take from it will be declarations against interest, if he can find any.

– From Conor Cruise O’Brien, *To Katanga and Back: A UN Case History*

Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying.

– George Orwell, “Benefit of Clergy: Some Notes on Salvador Dali”