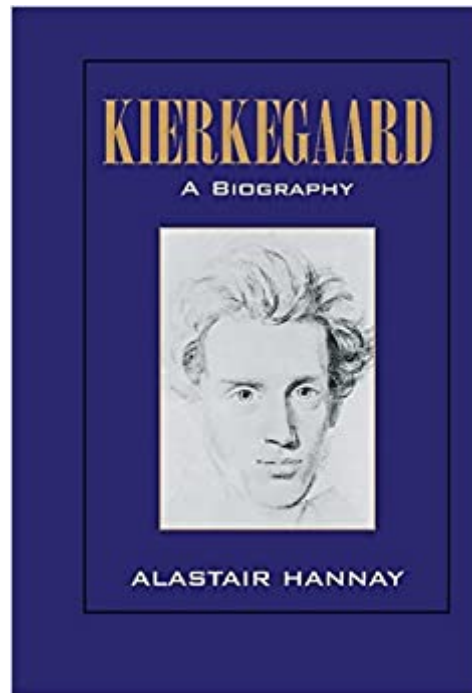


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Kierkegaard: A Biography



Synopsis

Written by one of the world's preeminent authorities on Kierkegaard, this biography is the first to reveal the delicate imbrication of Kierkegaard's life and thought. To grasp the importance and influence of Kierkegaard's thought far beyond his native Denmark, it is necessary to trace the many factors that led this gifted but (according to his headmaster) 'exceedingly childish youth' to grapple with traditional philosophical problems and religious themes in a way that later generations would recognize as amounting to a philosophical revolution. Although Kierkegaard's works are widely tapped and cited they are seldom placed in context. Nor is due attention placed to their chronology. However, perhaps more than the work of any other contributor to the Western philosophical tradition, these writings are so closely meshed with the background and details of the author's life that knowledge of this is indispensable to their content. Alastair Hannay solves these problems by following the chronological sequence of events and focusing on the formative stages of his career from the success of his first, pseudonymous work *Either/Or* through to *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*. This book offers a powerful narrative account which will be of particular interest to philosophers, literary theorists, intellectual historians, and scholars of religious studies as well as any non-specialist looking for an authoritative guide to the life and work of one of the most original and fascinating figures in Western philosophy. Alastair Hannay is Professor Emeritus in the department of philosophy at the University of Oslo. He is the co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion of Kierkegaard* (1998) and is also translator of several works by Kierkegaard in Penguin Classics.

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Customer Reviews

Kierkegaard: A Biography traces the evolution of a character who himself was made up of many characters of his own creation. Søren Kierkegaard's writings, published under various pseudonyms, were made in response to "collisions" with significant individuals (including his father, his brother, a fiancée whom he rejected, and a prominent Danish bishop). The development of these pseudonymous characters reflect Kierkegaard's growing sense of self, and his discovery of that self as being essentially religious. With considerable mastery of the political, philosophical, and theological conflicts of 19th century Europe, Alastair Hannay's biography also serves as an excellent introduction to Kierkegaard's philosophy and faith. From sentence to sentence, the book is full of small pleasures, particularly Hannay's judiciously employed, humanizing vernacular phrases. (As a young man, "Søren," like so many people, "blamed his father for messing up his life.") And like his subject, Hannay is a shrewd observer of the often-misleading relationship between appearance and reality. For instance, he suggests that "it does seem plausible to suppose that a main motivation behind the huge effort that writers put into their poetic products stems often from a sense of lacking in themselves the very substance that their works appear to convey." --Michael Joseph Gross

Kierkegaard wrote publicly, under a variety of inventive pseudonyms simultaneously revealing and concealing aspects of his self-scrutinizing personality, and privately, in his journals, under an increasingly paradoxical sense of self challenging any would-be biographer to faithfully render his life. And yet, like the writer of a mystery novel, he does drop clues to the puzzle of himself, for which veteran Kierkegaard scholar Hannay (professor emeritus of philosophy at the University of Oslo) has a keen detective's eye. Kierkegaard saw his life as a series of "collisions" with a few key individuals, and over the course of his life, he gradually realized a persona that was fundamentally religious. Hannay traces that dramatic unfolding through his sustained counterpoise of Kierkegaard's journal entries with his published oeuvre. In Hannay's hands, Kierkegaard's treatises, novels and journalistic essays are brilliant literary reflections of troubled personal encounters with an imperious father (Michael), a self-divided older brother (Peter), a rejected fiancée (Regine Olsen) and a complacent bishop (Jacob Mynster), who embodies, for Kierkegaard, the established church of Denmark. The infinitely interpretable Kierkegaardian themes of irony and despair, seduction, the exceptional individual, paradox and life alternatively inflected by aesthetics, ethics or religion

become newly accessible under this rigorous biographic gaze. For instance, Kierkegaard's efforts to justify the exceptional individual by excusing him from universal norms (in his own case, marriage) appear less as proto-existential heroism than as a sophisticated intellectual's attempt to protect a simple faith (such as Michael Kierkegaard's) from the pretensions of Hegelian philosophy to subsume it. Hannay's judiciously selected quotes from Kierkegaard will surely seduce those who are not already in thrall to this master stylist into reading at least some of his works firsthand. 8 pages of photos. (Sept.) Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Hannay's biography of Kierkegaard is an intellectual biography of Kierkegaard and his writings in the finest sense of the term. He sees Kierkegaard's writings as key to understanding the man responsible for those writings, so he devotes a great deal of his content to a thorough interpretation of the writings published during Kierkegaard's lifetime. Hannay's biography is completely different from Walter Lowrie's biography from 1938. Lowrie saw Kierkegaard's writings as clues to the mind of his subject, and therefore he quotes extensively from his writings. Hannay, too, sees Kierkegaard's writings as clues to the mind of his subject, but he goes about using these materials in a manner quite differently from Lowrie. Rather than the extensive quotations Lowrie used, Hannay provides extensive interpretations of Kierkegaard's writings. Hannay's interpretations are quite deep and philosophical, and are not for the faint of heart. Indeed, I would not recommend reading Hannay's interpretations prior to having read the texts being discussed. Hannay's text referring to Kierkegaardian texts I had read already were illuminating; those referring to texts I had not yet read were difficult and inscrutable. This volume would make an excellent companion to reading Kierkegaard's works. A useful approach might be to read the Kierkegaard work in question, and then refer to Hannay's chapter on that work. Hannay's language and composition was not the easiest to follow. He adopts a highly philosophical and obscure style appropriate for only the most advanced reader. It is an academic work intended for an academic audience. Those looking for a lighter, easier biography of Kierkegaard should refer to Stephen Backhouse's *Kierkegaard: A Single Life* instead. That said, Hannay's biography is an outstanding work successfully integrating the life of Kierkegaard and his notoriously difficult writings.

I highly recommend this book. Hannay's biography totally met my expectations/need for a scholarly introduction to Kierkegaard's life and work. The author does a brilliant job of writing about both with scholarly integrity and in a readable and refreshingly witty prose. I have found this to be highly unusual in philosophers' biographies. They are usually focused either on concepts or biographical

details. Hannay's book is a balanced account of both and encourages as well as enriches further study of Kierkegaard.

The first chapter is horrendous and it will be very difficult for the uninitiated to get a sense of what is going on. I understand starting with the crux of the life or what people call a definite "before and after" point, but the author totally botches it. I'm lucky I got to the second chapter because the author finds a voice that is very learned, amused, and restrained in its telling of a representative man. Would have given Five stars if the first chapter wasn't so terrible.--Cheers

The author of this book is indisputably qualified to be writing about his subject. However, he seems not to have spent long enough on this particular book, nor to have benefited from a good editor. The book is characterized throughout by a slightly flippant style, e.g. (as was pointed out in the official reviews above) saying that Kierkegaard thought his father had "messed up his life". This style is certainly no problem, and is in fact suitable to Kierkegaard himself. But the problem arises when subtle philosophical points are treated in such a laconic fashion that it becomes frustratingly difficult to understand what Hannay is saying - and this constitutes a definitive obstacle to understanding what Kierkegaard is saying - which ought, after all, to be the purpose of a biography. In contrast a biography like Rüdiger Safranski's book on Martin Heidegger reads like a thorough digest of Heidegger's ideas and can appeal to the beginner as a way into the world of that thinker. With Hannay, on the other hand, you would already have to know a lot about Kierkegaard to find value in his book. Many of the discussions are simply handwaving to what one would have to assume is an academic context of conferences and discussions where Hannay really finds his intended audience. What Hannay does bring to the table is a very thorough knowledge of the Danish context of Kierkegaard's writing. He knows the landscape of minor authors and religious and political figures against which Kierkegaard sketched out his brilliant revolution of the mind. But that doesn't make it a 4-star book. And as may be imagined, both of the last two points interfere with the book's value as a biography. In fact, it is not so much biography as intellectual history, and anyone hoping for a psychologically profound treatment of Kierkegaard's relation to his father, or to his fiancée Regine Olsen, will be disappointed. The book is much more about ideas than about people.

Well written, comprehensive and compelling reading. It's a little overly technical in places (although this may suit some readers). It also seems to focus a little too much on Kierkegaard's early works - the chapters on his later works e.g. Practice in Christianity, Sickness... and that part of his life feel

somewhat more compressed than earlier ones (perhaps it's actually a case of the earlier chapters being too long?) If you are new to Kierkegaard I would suggest reading Penguin's edition of Kierkegaard's Paper and Journals (edited by Alistair Hannay) first, and then this biography.

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