

## ***Abridged version of the biography as a launching pad for a wider audience***

Rec.: Hourly History, *Charlie Chaplin: A Life From Beginning to End*, North Charleston, 2017, ss. 42.

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### **Keywords**

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### **Abstract**

This book review discusses the main aspects of the concise biography of Chaplin, published by “Hourly History”. Chaplin’s life and work are presented in a sketch format, which may provide sufficient information for readers who have never heard the name of this cinematic giant. However, from a researcher’s perspective, it is of little value. Although the reader can find here the personal difficulties and political challenges Chaplin had to overcome throughout his exceptionally long and prolific career, as well as elements of his enduring legacy, it does not provide the recipient with an in-depth analysis of these issues.

*Charlie Chaplin: A Life From Beginning to End*<sup>1</sup> is part of the “Hourly History” series, a collection of short works presenting historical facts, which purpose is to provide readers with a concise overview of the most important figures and events of the past. Consisting of 42 pages, this biography of a famous comedian Charlie Chaplin aims to introduce the essential arc of his life: from poverty-stricken childhood in Victorian London, through creating

<sup>1</sup> Hourly History, *Charlie Chaplin: A Life From Beginning to End*, North Charleston, 2017

an evergreen “Tramp”, to the political controversies and exile that marked his later years. “Hourly History’s” provides historical information in more accessible and convenient form so their books can be read by wide variety of lecturers in about an hour and they are meant for accessibility rather than being scholarly profound.

This review critically examines the book through an academic point of view, analyzing its structure, accuracy, source base, interpretive strength, and contextual depth. While this publication provides a brief summary for readers lacking a scholarly approach, its limitations become apparent when compared to comprehensive biographies such as David Robinson’s *Chaplin: His Life and Art*<sup>2</sup> or Peter Ackroyd’s *Charlie Chaplin*<sup>3</sup>. The “Hourly History’s” short volume, considering both its strengths and weaknesses, offers a clear starting point at the same time omitting important nuances, historiographical approach, and analytical engagement.

Despite the fact that the “Hourly History” series combines popular history and nonfiction in an immediate access form, these volumes are not intended to replace academic biographies or comprehensive studies, but rather to serve as a launching pad for a wider audience. In this context, Chaplin’s biography serves a specific purpose to bring readers closer to key moments in his life and career in an accessible way.

However, this goal comes with a trade-off. The book lacks footnotes, citations, and a bibliography, raising concerns about the transparency of its sources. As a pedagogical tool for high school students or inexperienced readers, the book may prove useful. However, for those seeking documentary sources, critical historiography, or a complex thematic approach, particularly details about Chaplin’s personal life and the facts affiliated to his work, it does not come up with comprehensive information.

Despite these limitations, structure of the publication effectively captures Chaplin’s dual identity both as an artistic genius and a deeply controversial public figure. The biography provides narrative continuity, moving seamlessly between decades, encompassing not only Chaplin’s professional turning points but also his personal relationships and ideological conflicts.

The book is organized thematically and chronologically, beginning with Chaplin’s upbringing in poverty and ending with his now-famous return to the United States in 1972, where he received an honorary Oscar. First chapters highlight the hardships of growing up on the streets of London, his mother’s mental illness, and the influence of the tradition of British music halls. These experiences shaped Chaplin’s later comedic sensibilities, which can be traced

<sup>2</sup> D. Robinson, *Chaplin. Jego życie i sztuka*, Warszawa, 1995

<sup>3</sup> P. Ackroyd, *Charlie Chaplin*, Poznań, 2015

in detail in the biographies of renowned writers. Referring to recognized authorities on Chaplin's life will be essential if we want to establish the facts, as while reading the *Hourly History* we are coming across many inconsistencies. To begin with, we read that Charlie at "...the age of seven, [...] was sent to the Lambeth Workhouse to help pay off some of his family's debts"<sup>4</sup>, the next page informs that after some time the same year both Charlie and Sydney were moved to the Central London District School for Paupers<sup>5</sup>, and after following eighteen months they started education in the local Norwood School<sup>6</sup>. All those facts are not exactly true according to David Robinson, who states that on 1 July 1895, when Charlie was six, the workhouse hosted only Sydney, who after four days was moved to West Norwood Schools and stayed there until 17 September 1895. At this time Charlie was taken care of by his mother's distant cousin John George Hodges living on 164 York Street. The Central London District School for Paupers in Hanwell became their temporary place of stay in May 1896, which was supposed to be paid by Charles Chaplin senior in amount of 15 shillings per week<sup>7</sup>, so the children were not repaying anything for the state.

Next three chapters concentrate on the professional development of young Chaplin presenting him as a determined and bold actor taking London stages by storm and smoothly achieving huge success in America. We read about Chaplin's entry into the American film industry via the Keystone Film Company, where he developed the iconic "Little Tramp" character, and his next projects respectively with Mutual, First National, and eventually United Artists. Films such as *The Kid* (1921), *City Lights* (1931), and *Modern Times* (1936) were mentioned in the short description, but information regarding film criticism or references to film technique were omitted.

The middle three chapters touch only on Chaplin's personal relationships, his three failed marriages to much younger women, and his final, happy one to playwright Eugene O'Neill's daughter, Oona. They focus instead on the comedian's later life, including his return to the United States for an honorary Oscar in 1978, and the enduring message of his films. The biography concludes with a brief reflection on Chaplin's legacy, offering a respectful yet generalized summary of his cultural impact.

The political controversy surrounding Chaplin, particularly the persecution he faced during the McCarthy era due to his outspoken views on pacifism and socialism, is explored in Chapters Ten and Eleven. It recounts Chaplin's refusal to become an American citizen, the FBI investigation into his

<sup>4</sup> *Hourly History, Charlie...*, p. 2

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3

<sup>7</sup> D. Robinson, *Chaplin...*, pp. 28-29

personal life, and his eventual ban on returning to the United States, which resulted in the actor's entire family relocating to Switzerland. While this information is gripping and dramatically presented, the lack of references to sources or research on the cultural politics of the Cold War leaves the reader unanswered questions about the realities of the times and the reasons why Chaplin became the subject of a political witchhunt led by then-FBI director J. Edgar Hoover.

One of the book's most obvious shortcomings from a scientific and academic perspective is its lack of methodological clarity. The absence of citations, source footnotes and information about which texts or archives were consulted is significant unabling readers to confirm stated materials. A casual approach to the credibility of the information cited is evident, clearly demonstrated by the reliance on secondary sources and widely known reports, most likely synthesized from publicly available biographies or encyclopedia entries.

This above mentioned scarcity of citation makes it impossible to verify the factual accuracy of specific claims or evaluate the historiographic basis for certain assertions. For instance, the book relates to "Chaplin being effectively exiled from the United States"<sup>8</sup> and associates it to his Communist sympathies, a simplification that overlooks the complexities of immigration law, public opinion, and J. Edgar Hoover's personal vendetta.

In contrast, previously introduced Robinson and Ackroyd's biographies offer thoroughly researched, archival-based accounts, complete with citations supporting each major claim. These works draw on Chaplin's personal letters, FBI files, film scripts, and interviews with his contemporaries. By comparison, "Hourly History" offers only a definitive, anecdotal synthesis, which, while providing a broad picture of the actor and the times in which he lived and worked, makes it unsuitable for use in research or academic writing.

While the book generally recounts important events accurately, frequent oversimplifications and ambiguous facts make its message less than entirely credible. For example, the characterization of Chaplin's personal relationships with young actresses is presented in a rather delicate and general manner. The controversy surrounding his relationship with fifteen-year-old Lita Grey and the paternity suit for Joan Barry's daughter are mentioned, but without in-depth analysis, likely to ensure readability for a wider audience. This approach, however, came at the expense of contextual integrity.

Another important issue, besides proper references and fact-checking, is the lack of editorial precision. One recurring error is the misrepresentation of the 1940 film "The Great Dictator". In the book, it appears simply as "The

<sup>8</sup> Hourly History, *Charlie Chaplin...*, p. 31

Dictator”, which might seem minor, but it indicates an insufficiency of professionalism in the published work. Similarly, Chaplin’s ideological stance is loosely described as “communist”, while most scholars classify him more as a progressive humanist or left-wing pacifist. Such imprecision undermines the credibility of the text and underscores the importance of using scholarly sources to understand all the political or biographical aspects of the people or events portrayed.

Perhaps the greatest limitation of “Charlie Chaplin: A Life From Beginning to End” is its overly liberal approach to interpreting the events, quotes, and headlines presented in a de-psychological manner, failing to delve into either Chaplin’s creative motivations or the contradictions that plagued him. Readers are presented with individual events without any explanation of why they occurred or what impact they had on the broader socio-cultural context.

Chaplin’s Little Tramp, a complex socio-psychological construct developed by the artist on many levels throughout his career and arguably one of the most enduring artistic phenomenon of the 20th century, is described but not deconstructed. The book misses the opportunity to examine how this character combined slapstick with social critique, the impact he had on millions of viewers worldwide, and the emotional and often comforting message he conveyed to the poor who could identify with him, finding in the cinema a brief solace for their everyday worries and troubles. Despite numerous references to the anti-communist witch hunts of the McCarthy era, the book fails to mention how Chaplin’s silent films challenged capitalist systems and state violence through their brilliant use of nonverbal, physical narrative.

Moreover, Chaplin’s artistic evolution from a pitiful silent clown to a political provocateur conscious of his actions remains under-researched. His mature films, which reveal the darker side of humanity, such as *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), reflect postwar anxieties and disillusionment with a newly emerging reality in which the filmmaker no longer sees hope or the need to offer reassurance. “Hourly History” reduces this crucial creative process to a narrative of the declining popularity of the aging Chaplin’s films, rather than his artistic transformation. Compared to more detailed researches in academic film studies or cultural histories, the interpretive value of this book is, at best, inadequate.

The book’s undoubted advantage for a wider audience is its length and ease of reading. The book’s narrative style is clear and accessible even to the inexperienced reader, which is its definite asset. The tone is clear and direct, devoid of overdramatization. This makes it particularly useful for younger readers, those learning English as a second language (ESL), and adults seeking a quick and easy introduction to Chaplin’s life and work without delving

into the details of how his complex personality developed, both in real life and on screen. A brief overview of the milestones that directly influenced the personal life and career of this versatile artist allows him and his artistic achievements to be communicated to a general public than could be achieved with academic analyses.

However, this ease of reading is linked to a lack of depth. The narrative lacks critical vocabulary, theoretical framework, or even basic contextualization of historical events. An example is the previously mentioned “Red Scare,” which referred to the large-scale search for communist connections, among others, among representatives of the American art world in the 1950s. Unfortunately, no details of this highly controversial action by a US Senate committee are explained in the book. This means that readers unfamiliar with American politics of the period are unable to fully understand why Chaplin became the target of FBI surveillance, or what cultural and social factors influenced the dramatic shift in perception of the artist and his recognition as a dangerous and “alien” individual.

Due to its simplicity, *Charlie Chaplin: A Life From Beginning to End*, cannot be recommended for academic readers. However, it can serve as a starting point for non-specialists who wish to expand their knowledge of famous figures who had a significant impact on important aspects of people’s lives. This publication fulfills its purpose by encouraging readers to further explore the work and personal life of Charles Chaplin through analytical and critical literature based on reliable sources.

To conclude, it can be firmly stated that “Hourly History” fulfills its primary purpose, providing a concise, accessible summary of the life of one of cinema’s most iconic figures and creators. The book outlines Chaplin’s life, listing his most important films, offering brief summaries and outlining the circumstances surrounding their creation. It also describes the personal difficulties and political challenges he had to overcome throughout his exceptionally long and prolific career, as well as elements of Chaplin’s enduring legacy that still surround us. As an introduction, the book is a valuable study, especially for readers with limited time or those just beginning their adventure with biography.

However, as previously mentioned, its limitations are significant. The lack of sources, contextual analysis, and in-depth interpretation makes the book uncitable for academic use, and its content does not lend itself to critical analysis. Nor can it be considered a definitive or comprehensive biography. Readers drawn to the concise information presented in this book and seeking a fuller understanding of the life and cultural significance of Charles Chaplin, and his immortal alter ego, the Little Tramp, should consult the comprehen-

sive accounts of his life and work in the works of Robinson, Ackroyd, or other renowned writers.

After a thorough reading of *Charlie Chaplin: A Life from Beginning to End*, it must be concluded that it is a well-structured and clearly constructed textbook, serving as an introduction to further research, but it does not meet the requirements of a scholarly biography. This publication should be recommended to anyone beginning their studies of Chaplin, both the man and the icon. By outlining the most interesting aspects of his life, it is able to arouse the reader's curiosity and encourage them to deeply understand the little man hidden behind the most recognizable attributes in the history of cinema: his mustache, bowler hat, enormous boots, and bamboo cane.

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