The Right to be Forgotten... from History?

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Abstract
Some people seek to leave a legacy. They want to be remembered by others for doing something great, whether it be good or evil. But not everyone is alike in this respect. Others want nothing more than to go quietly about their business. They do not want friends or strangers prying into their lives. They do not want their inner, personal thoughts to be read and judged by those around them. [excerpt]

Comments
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Some people seek to leave a legacy. They want to be remembered by others for doing something great, whether it be good or evil. But not everyone is alike in this respect. Others want nothing more than to go quietly about their business. They do not want friends or strangers prying into their lives. They do not want their inner, personal thoughts to be read and judged by those around them.
But when they die, their personal belongings may pass to their children and perhaps eventually reach a local archive or historical society. There, their most private reflections become tools for professional and amateur historians seeking a greater understanding of these individuals and the past in general.

Imagine your own letters and diaries falling into the hands of an academic with no connection to you but for their passion for the past. Every complaint against your parents or griping about your boss might be on display for the world to read. How would you feel about a historian trying to deconstruct your spontaneous musings in pursuit of an objective understanding of your times? In this situation, your death would open the floodgates of your life to intense scrutiny.

Manuscript collections, with their diaries and letters, are among historians’ most sacred caches of resources. But the private and personal nature of these documents – the same elements that make them so valuable for researchers – also generate an ethical problem:

What responsibilities do historians have when dealing with the unpublished writings of private individuals?

The question struck me as I completed my most recent blog series on William Henry Lebkicher. Lebkicher was a quiet and modest fellow who spurned the spotlight, according to the Hershey Press. As I worked to redefine his legacy, I couldn’t help wondering: Would Lebkicher resent me for trying to understand how his early experiences as a Civil War soldier shaped his life? I certainly hope not, for I had the best intentions. But the question is so personal that it feels almost wrong to pore over his personal correspondence and try to force his writings into some coherent narrative, using his death as a justification for this invasion of privacy.

On the one hand, the public community has a right to a thorough body of historical knowledge; on the other, individuals might deserve the right to retain their privacy even beyond death. So how do we find a balance between these two interests? It is an especially difficult question when the dead have no one to speak for them.
If tomorrow the diaries and letters of non-public figures were declared off-limits, countless historians and archivists would be out of their jobs. The noble work of social history – telling the story of our world from bottom-up perspectives – would be all but defunct without access to unpublished sources from everyday individuals. Only the loudest voices – those of public figures – would remain present in our history texts, and humanity’s body of knowledge would be forever crippled by this imbalance of perspectives. Constraining the study of the Civil War to published accounts would present an elitist and dangerously narrow view of the subject matter. History is too important a subject to yield to qualms about the privacy of the dead.

But historians should never forget that they are responsible for the legacy of individuals and groups – some of whom lusted for a place in history and others who might rather have been forgotten. They must always keep in mind the limitations of their craft – and the dangers presented by assuming that we can comprehensively understand any individual or group of people based on a simple set of documents. Historians daily violate the privacy of our ancestors for the collective good; they must never forget the weighty responsibility that this entails.

Sources:


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