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Abstract

The historical method of microhistory is a small discipline that is often disputed on whether autobiography and biography are forms of microhistory; using the life of Father Richard T. McSorley as a reference, this paper seeks to address how both forms of narrative are microhistories and how they influence legacy.

Keywords

Microhistory, Biography, Method, Autobiography

Disciplines

Social History | United States History

Comments

Written for HIST 300: Historical Methods.

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Who Tells Your Story? Microhistory and Historical Biography

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HIST 300: Historical Methods

Professor Samji

April 4, 2023

Honor Code: I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

Introduction

Microhistory is a new concept in the ways of historical methods, with the first references of microhistory arising in the 1970s in opposition to the top-down style of history and as a result of social change which began to favor the “small man” who was often overlooked in history.¹ In terms of biography, Jill Lepore states that there is no significant difference between microhistory and biography; the key difference being that microhistory focuses on the key events of an individual’s life rather than the whole story that would be told in a biography.² The goal of this paper is to discuss the use of microhistory within biography and autobiographies to create a greater view of history. By looking at the historical method of microhistory, this paper will reshape the narrative of Fr. Richard Thomas McSorley whose impact on history is diminished not due to a lack of narrative around his life but rather a historical focus on a fault put on him posthumously.

Microhistory

The origins of microhistory are commonly traced by scholars back to Carlos Ginzburg, an Italian historian who published *The Cheese and the Worms* in 1976³, however, Ginzburg and other scholars stated the first use of the term microhistory was in 1954 by George R. Stewart. The influence of the Italian, French, and Anglo-Saxon views has changed and morphed the definition of microhistory and created a vast spread of ideas and conversation in order to encompass the principles of microhistory. Microhistory is a theory that relies on generalities, which are considered the most defining characteristics, as these generalities create the micro-macro link within history.⁴

¹ “The Microhistorian,” *Dissent Magazine*, n.d.

² Jill Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography,” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (June 2001): 129–144.

³ Sigurur G. Magnusson and Istvan M. Szijarto, *What Is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 1.

⁴ Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, “Microhistory: In General,” *Journal of Social History* 49, no. 1 (September 2015): 2.

Microhistory has many complexities, mainly for the fact that it has many different meanings and interpretations which allow different fields and studies to fall into one umbrella term. The benefits of microhistory lie within its ability to incorporate multiple approaches such as social and cultural history into a harmonious blend of analysis and narrative.⁵ The goal of microhistory is to tell about those who have impacted history in some way but would go unnoticed and undocumented if not for a historian asking questions about their existence.⁶ This raises the question of which all history stem from microhistory, even without the concept having been coined yet. It can not be said that microhistory is without flaws, as no historical method is free from error. As for microhistory, issues arise in the focus on small figures and events as the magnified focus on significance can blur the reality of the influence and unintentionally exaggerate a person's or events' overall impact.⁷

The definition of microhistory that is most suited to the discussions in this paper is from Jill Lepore's article "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography" in which she phrases microhistory as the intensive study of particular lives to reveal the fundamental experiences of ordinary people.⁸ Another useful definition for microhistory comes from historian Charles Joyner in which he states microhistory is the focus on small units in society, as a reaction to the generalizations made by the social sciences which do not necessarily hold up when tested against these smaller units.⁹ While this definition does explain the concept of microhistory, the definition by Lepore provides more context to the necessity of microhistory in determining the history of "average" people which relates more towards Father Richard T. McSorley. The differences in the definitions, however, show the ways that the

⁵ Simon, "Microhistory", 6.

⁶ Lepore, "Historians", 133.

⁷ Lepore, 140.

⁸ Lepore, 131.

⁹ Sigurdur Gylfi Magnusson, "The Singularization of History: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge," *Journal of Social History* 36, no. 3 (March 1, 2003): 36.

specificity of how microhistory is seen has changed and will most likely continue to change as society progresses.

Biography

Biography has not always been recognized as a genre of history, however, there are many similarities between biography and history when broken down into key practices.¹⁰ This being said, biography is seen as an inferior type of history by historians due to the focus only being on one person rather than an event and it is often not stemming from a scientific or sociological perspective that is the standard. Biographers defend their stance as a historical method with the reliance on the truth of historical facts, as the character is built from historical evidence in order to create something that borders history and literature.¹¹

Another take on biography as a form of history comes from Jill Lepore who states that there is no significant difference between microhistory and biography; the key difference being that microhistory focuses on the key events of an individual's life rather than the whole story that would be told in a biography.¹² Lepore also describes the different propositions that separate biography and microhistory, explaining that microhistory has a greater emotional distance from the subject which allows for more objectivity that may not be present within a biography as a result of entanglement with emotion that may come from a biographer.¹³ This idea is also discussed by Hankins, who speaks about the biographer taking creative freedoms that impact how factual the narrative becomes. Hankins also mentions that what is omitted in the biography is the decision of the biographer which makes it more personal.¹⁴

¹⁰ Lois W. Banner, "Biography as History," *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 580

¹¹ Thomas L. Hankins, "In Defence of Biography: The Use of Biography in the History of Science," *History of Science* 17, no. 1 (March 1979): 2.

¹² Lepore, "Historians", 132.

¹³ Lepore, "Historians", 142.

¹⁴ Hankins, "In Defence", 6.

Furthermore, biography can not be taken as the sole history of the event as this leads to information about the greater picture going unnoticed, causing the narrative to be skewed. Constructed microhistory requires reflective history as well as the in-depth, focused narrative of the individual in order to grasp the true reality of the event. Without the constructive nature of reflective history, there is also the chance for history to be altered to fit the views of the author of the biography rather than providing an unbiased account. This idea of a biased account would raise concerns about the legitimacy of biographies as a form of history as the facts stated to be historical evidence can be altered either in favor or against the subject. This idea of a biased narrative being constructed is crucial in the discussion of Father Richard McSorley, as the biographies that have been shared about his life and clearly personal in both respects, as they either come from those who have a deep respect for him or from those who do not like something about him.

Negative Legacy

The words written about people after they are dead have the chance to hold more weight as little can be done in defense. This is especially clear in biography-style accounts of history in which the truth of the situation can not be clarified and explained by the individual involved and as such relies on the truth of the reporter. This is evident in the writings about Father Richard T. McSorley after letters between him and Jackie Kennedy were displayed after his death.

Approaching the 40th anniversary of JFK's assassination and a year after Fr. McSorley's death, Georgetown University allowed viewing of McSorley's diary and letters of correspondence that described Jackie Kennedy's poor mental health after her husband's death. The Kennedy family was not pleased with this information being released especially in light of a substantial anniversary. In response, the University head Jesuit placed the blame on McSorley, as

he stated that he should have informed the library of the nature of the papers¹⁵, ignoring the obvious fact that he had died a year prior and would have been unable to inform the library of such before the release.

Additionally, author Thomas Maier had been writing a book on the Kennedys, using the information from the letters and McSorley's diary entries to provide explicit detail of the struggles Jackie Kennedy was going through at the time.¹⁶ Yet Maier did not receive as much backlash as Fr. McSorley even though he was the one to publicize the information to a greater extent. This shows that the ability to shape history for an individual is a difficult task as many specificities must be treated delicately. This example shows how history can be swayed based on who has the ability to defend themselves as Maier was living at the time and could place the blame onto Fr. McSorley.

After the publishing of the papers from Fr. McSorley's office at Georgetown and the publishing of Maier's book, the question of whether McSorley had betrayed Jackie Kennedy's trust by breaking the seal of confession between a priest and their parishioners.¹⁷ While it was determined that Fr. McSorley had not done anything against the procedures of the church, it was said that he acted in a gray area that looked poor on him. Even though the Kennedys were known to enjoy his presence before the death of JFK, it was made to seem as if these "confessions" were the typical meetings they had which was certainly not the case. Moreover, the phrasing of the news articles creates the narrative that Fr. McSorley intentionally wanted to share the private information¹⁸, with each news outlet disregarding the vow of poverty taken by Fr. McSorley

¹⁵ Caryle Murphy, "Georgetown's Top Jesuit Apologizes to Kennedys," *Washington Post*, November 27, 2003.

¹⁶ Thomas Maier, *The Kennedys: America's Emerald Kings* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 577.

¹⁷ Michael McGough, "Did Jackie O.'s Priest Betray Her?," *Slate*, November 19, 2003.

¹⁸ "Bleeding Inside," *Cape Cod Times*, last modified January 6, 2011.

which meant the papers did not technically belong to him regardless as he was to not have material possessions.

The narrative written about Father Richard McSorley did indeed have some factual information, although, at the same time, the narrative disregarded the key points that would have explained the actions of Fr. McSorley. This supports the ideas Lepore discusses in her writing about the differences between biographers and microhistorians. In the case of Thomas Maier, he showed to be a biographer rather than a microhistorian in his book about the Kennedys as he sought to find the dramatic details to explore the story.

Autobiography

Autobiographies are a new style despite the age-old instinct, with autobiography having a platform beginning in the 1800s. It is said by Donald Murray that everything we write is autobiographical, as we put our style and language into it.¹⁹ Autobiographies exist in a similar genre of history as biographies do, except for the ability to hear from the person experiencing life-changing events themselves.²⁰ Autobiographies allow for a closer and more intimate exploration of reflective history, as one does not know what is going to be important history while events are happening in their life.

Autobiographies raise a multitude of criticisms since their rise in popularity among authors. The use of theoretical work has been shaped to study autobiography to try to detail the methodological and theoretical problems which arise from the idea of design and truth that is being created.²¹ This is due to the complex nature of writing history based on personal experiences and not that of some other figure. Another issue that arises with autobiography is the

¹⁹ Donald M. Murray, "All Writing Is Autobiography," *College Composition and Communication* 42, no. 1 (February 1991): 67.

²⁰ Karl J. Weintraub, "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness," *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 4 (1975): 822.

²¹ Paul Jay, "What's The Use? Critical Theory and the Study of Autobiography," *Biography* 10, no. 1 (1987): 39.

inability to check one's facts as the author is reliant solely on their own records.²² Additionally, it is in one's nature to protect themselves which means that there is less likely to be any negative information highlighted in an autobiography that one might see in another narrative.

The benefit of biographies is that there is a more retrospective look at the past when creating the narrative as the author must frame the past to make sense of the present for the reader. Furthermore, as the author is reliving the events of their past they must re-experience the emotions as well which adds a greater level of passion into the narrative allowing the reader to feel what the author felt.²³

An autobiography comes to be by the interpreted past, meaning that diary entries clearly citing the events of each day does not qualify as an autobiography as the author did not have to look back upon the past to create their narrative. This is crucial to the concept of autobiography as it requires the author to not have a completely trustworthy sense of history as that is what makes it personal. This applies to the narrative of Father Richard McSorley as his autobiography thoroughly described his life, however, it did not include everything that happened as well as parts he stated he was unsure of, making it more realistic of a narrative.

Positive Legacy

Most people want to be remembered when they die, whether that is on a global scale by leaving their personal mark on history or on a smaller scale within their own families. With the latter, many do not plan on changing the world in some way but they do. These changes should be recognized and remembered as the way legacy is shaped defines how we are seen when we can no longer defend ourselves and our actions. The legacy of Father Richard T. McSorley represents this ideal as his life should be remembered for what he did throughout it for others.

²² Edward Seidensticker, "Autobiography," *Biography* 22, no. 1 (1999): 47.

²³ Weintraub, "Autobiography," 822.

The life of Fr. McSorley began on October 2, 1914, when he was born into a large, devout Catholic family in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; later, at the age of 18, he would enter a Jesuit seminary in Poughkeepsie, New York.²⁴ In 1939, Fr. McSorley was sent by the Jesuit order to the Philippines to teach. During his third year in the Philippines, McSorley had been living in Naga and was preparing to return to the United States.²⁵ Everything changed for him, however, as the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the Philippine island of Davao, leading the United States to declare war against Japan. Soon after, Fr. McSorley and the other American Jesuits teaching in Naga would be taken prisoner by the Japanese troops; Fr. McSorley would stay a prisoner in a Japanese concentration camp in the Philippines until 1945 when he was liberated by American soldiers. His time as a prisoner of war further shaped his view on the need for peace and nonviolence as he was deeply affected by the horrors of war he experienced from both sides.²⁶

After returning home from the Philippines, Fr. McSorley became a priest in southern Maryland where he took a stance against racial injustice by publicly stating his disapproval regarding all-white masses. Fr. McSorley also continued his support of the civil rights movement by meeting with leaders of the Black community and leaders of the white community who he knew were not racist.²⁷ Furthermore, Fr. McSorley began teaching at Georgetown University, where he developed close relationships with the Kennedy family and was able to pursue his teaching on peace and justice. This relationship with the Kennedy family was one that was very important to him as he admired John F. Kennedy's presidency and policy but more so because he grew to develop deep bonds with the family. This relationship began with Ethel Kennedy, Robert Kennedy's wife reaching out for tennis lessons which soon turned into Fr. McSorley spending

²⁴ Colman McCarthy, "Father Richard McSorley," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2002.

²⁵ Richard T. McSorley, *My Path to Peace and Justice: An Autobiography* (Marion, SD: Fortkamp Pub / Rose Hill Books, 1997), 3.

²⁶ McSorley, *My Path*, 28.

²⁷ Nina Ogden, "I Realized I Was Responsible Not Only for Myself, but for the People," *Fidelio* 6, no. 3 (1997): 91.

time tutoring their children and bonding with Ethel and Robert. He was later introduced to Jackie and John F. Kennedy at the White House.²⁸ After the assassination of JFK, Fr. McSorley became a person of comfort for Jackie Kennedy who would invite him over for tennis lessons at which they would discuss theological questions she had regarding God's role in her husband's death.²⁹

During his time at Georgetown, Fr. McSorley joined the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr., marching with him in Selma, Alabama, ignoring the backlash from his fellow faculty members.³⁰ After the civil rights movement, Fr. McSorley began to focus on spreading the message of love over hate while protesting the Vietnam War. Fr. McSorley also wanted to abolish ROTC on the Georgetown campus as he wanted to promote the anti-war movement over violence. In the 1970s, McSorley helped create Pax Christi USA, which is the national Catholic peace movement, as well as founding the St. Francis Catholic Worker House and the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker House which help support the underprivileged³¹.

Overall, the life of Father Richard McSorley was one that supported others despite significant adversity as evidenced by his passion for the Civil Rights movement and anti-war protests in regards to the Vietnam War. This description of events gives a greater depth of information about Fr. McSorley's life which was not present in the negative legacy that was created for him after his death following the release of his papers.

Conclusion

The overarching fact remains clear, Father Richard T. McSorley led a long life full of history-altering actions which should be acknowledged for their importance. The main focus of microhistory is to give attention to the "little man", an idea that is certainly present here. Many

²⁸ McSorley, *My Path*, 90.

²⁹ McSorley, *My Path*, 93.

³⁰ John Dear, "Remembering Richard McSorley, S.J.," June 17, 2009.

³¹ Dear, "Remembering Richard".

would be unaware of the life of Fr. Richard T. McSorley unless they specifically searched, despite the fact he was a prominent figure in the 1960-70s in many social movements. The stylistic ideals of microhistory are present with the differentiation between the information revealed in an autobiography, where the person who is the topic of history has control over the information being shared compared to that of a biography, where the person lacks that control and is therefore reliant on the goodwill and factuality of the author. Both genres of microhistory have their benefits and downfalls, but overall both types give a greater scope of an individual's impact on history that would not be possible from one type.

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