Microhistories: demography, society and culture in rural England, 1800–1930 uses a local study of the Blean area of Kent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to explore some of the more significant societal changes of the modern Western world. Drawing on a wide range of research techniques, including family reconstitution and oral history, Barry Reay aims to show that the implications of the microstudy can range way beyond its modest geographical and historical boundaries. Combining cultural, demographic, economic and social history in a way rarely encountered in historical literature, Dr Reay examines a fascinating range of topics. He extends the parameters of the fertility transition, sketches out a medical–social history of nineteenth-century rural England, charts the contours of family labour and the complexities of class, questions orthodoxies about kinship and the nuclear family, and explores the contexts of Victorian sexuality and the meanings of popular literacy.

This book demonstrates the challenging potentials of microhistory, and makes a central contribution to the 'new rural history'. It will be of interest to family and oral historians, as well as historical anthropologists, demographers, geographers and sociologists.
Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time 30

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Microhistories: demography, society and culture in rural England, 1800–1930

BARRY REAY

University of Auckland
To Athina Tsoulis, and Alexa
and Kristina Tsoulis-Reay
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Preface

The basis for much of what follows is family reconstitution, pioneered in France by Louis Henry, in England by E. A. Wrigley and the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, and used with great effect by John Knodel in his work on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany.¹ This technique – the linking together of life events recorded in the registers of baptisms, marriages, and burials – allows a depth of demographic analysis simply not possible at the macro level. Family reconstitution, in the words of Knodel, ‘has vastly expanded the horizons of historical demography’.² ‘No other technique’, write Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, ‘offers comparable range or richness of material.’³ Yet there is a dearth of such studies for nineteenth-century England. The Cambridge Group’s family reconstitutions – for totals varying from thirteen to twenty-six parishes –


² Knodel, Demographic behavior, p. 6.

mostly stop by 1800. The bulk of Richard Vann and David Eversley’s important study of the Quakers finishes at 1849. John Landers’ innovative work on London mortality covers the period up to 1830. This book is the first concentrated study to apply the technique of family reconstitution to a group of English communities over the whole of the nineteenth century.

Although the combined population of the three parishes was small, it generated a large number of life events and a substantial amount of historical data: more than 6,000 baptisms, the marriages of over 2,600 individuals, and at least 3,500 burials. The reconstituted family lies at the core of this study. As with all reconstitutions, the sizes of the sets of data vary. The completed family reconstitution forms, FRFs, provide the ages at marriage for over 1,600 people (more than 800 women). But the most useful set of FRFs is that of the 401 families for whom we have reconstituted life histories, from the marriage of family heads, through the births (and often the marriages and deaths) of their children, if they had any, to the dissolution of their partnerships, usually through death. They form the basis for the fertility and mortality calculations which follow. The numbers involved are a respectable size by Cambridge Group criteria. The fertility chapter draws on a total of more than 1,600 woman years in the age group 30–34. (Chris Wilson’s work on English natural fertility was based on parish totals which ranged from 614 to 3,841 woman years in age group 30–34, over the much longer period 1600–1799. The famous Colyton contributed 1,323 woman years.) A further sub-set of 289 marriages remained intact until the woman reached the end of her potentially fertile age span, defined here, as in other studies, as the age of 45; they are what are known as ‘completed families’ and were used

4 Ibid. (based on thirteen parishes); C. Wilson, ‘Marital fertility in pre-industrial England: new insights from the Cambridge Group family reconstitution project’ (paper prepared for the Conference on Demographic Change in Economic Development, Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo, December 1991) (based on twenty-six parishes).
5 Vann and Eversley, Friends in life and death.
6 Landers, Death and the metropolis.
7 I have followed the conventions of family reconstitution set out by E. A. Wrigley, ‘Family reconstitution’, in Wrigley (ed.), An introduction to English historical demography (New York, 1966), ch. 4; and Knodel, Demographic behavior. There were nonconformists in the area in the second half of the century – Wesleyans and Primitive Methodists – but many of them used the Church of England for their rites of passage and there are also surviving Methodist registers of births which I drew on. Vaccination registers provided dates of birth for part of the period. So it was possible to complete forms for some nonconformist families, those who would normally escape the net of family reconstitution. Coordination with the decadal census returns for individual parishes provided some added confirmation of births and deaths.
8 Wilson, ‘Natural fertility’, p. 227.
to calculate completed family size. Those completed families with children – 273 in all – provide the data for age at last birth and for birth or confinement intervals. Again this is a substantial number of cases by reconstitution standards. (The influential studies of Botterford, Colyton, Shepshed and Terling drew on respective data bases of 146, 162, 252 and 67 cases of age at last birth, stretching over two hundred years.)

One of the weaknesses of family reconstitution is that it misses the mobile sections of the population. By covering three adjoining parishes this study lessens the penalty of geographical mobility felt so keenly in single-parish reconstitutions. Most mobility was short-range, so a number of moving families were picked up in the registers of the two neighbouring parishes. The FRFs can be divided into marriage cohorts representing particular time periods, or grouped into parish and socio-occupational categories.

But this book goes further than family reconstitution. It develops the newer technique of ‘total reconstitution’ by linking the reconstituted families to other historical records. It is based not just on the thousands of linkages between baptisms, marriages and deaths, but on the coordination of the family reconstitution files with information held in a variety of other sources: court, school, tithe, newspaper, poor relief, probate and census. The result of the total reconstitution approach is to inject some class analysis and cultural context into the picture, thus overcoming a major criticism of earlier reconstitution studies.

I also draw upon oral history for the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sections of the book. The oral accounts provide a perspective of material and social life simply not available in any other source. It would have been very difficult to have written the chapter on the social economy without the rich oral evidence. If used carefully, the oral account can throw light on aspects of life in earlier times too, by using it as a foil for more fragmentary evidence: what the French historian Marc Bloch termed the ‘recessive method’.

It is important to stress what this book is and is not. It is not a comprehensive history of life in the Blean in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; as even a glance at the table of contents will indicate, there are whole areas of social life not dealt with or touched upon only lightly. The power of authorial intent should not be mini-

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Preface

The sources speak, and we listen and respond; but it is the historian who asks the questions and determines the agendas. My guiding unit of enquiry and analysis has been social class. Had I focused on gender, for example, I would have written a very different book.12

If it is not an Annales-aspiring account of every aspect of life in a community (or communities) over a century or more, neither is this book traditional local history of the English sort. Rather it is an extended exercise in microhistory, where the local becomes the site for the consideration of much wider issues.13 Microhistories focuses on life in the Blean area of Kent during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but uses the particular to explore some of the more significant societal changes of the modern western world, and, it should be stressed from the outset, to engage with important historiographical issues.

The focus continually shifts over the period, both in terms of subject matter and time. The emphasis is on the nineteenth century, but some chapters are wider ranging, including material up to the 1920s. I have attempted to breach some of the barriers between qualitative and quantitative history, to draw on the widest possible range of source material, and, in line with the aims of this series, to traverse the boundaries between cultural, demographic, economic and social history. The reader can judge how successful this has been. Some of the chapters cross less than others. Chapter 2 is resolutely demographic: chapter 4 will be easily recognizable to social historians. But most chapters defy easy classification, spilling out across perimeters, making use of a variety of local sources.

In sum, the aim of this book is to show that the implications of the microstudy can range way beyond modest geographical and historical boundaries. Whether in extending the parameters of the fertility transition (chapter 2), sketching out a medical–social history of nineteenth-century rural England (chapter 3), charting the contours of the social economy (chapter 4) and the complexities of class (chapter 5), questioning orthodoxies about kinship and the nuclear family (chapter 6) or exploring the contexts of Victorian sexuality (chapter 7) and the meanings of popular literacy (chapter 8), I hope that this book will demonstrate the exciting and challenging potentials of microhistory.


13 See chapter 9 for a discussion of microhistory.
Acknowledgements

This book grew out of research which I began for an earlier publication, _The last rising of the agricultural labourers_ (1990). One of my aims in that book was to place a rising – a moment of labouring protest – in its community context, and to do that I began detailed work in the local archives. In many respects, _Microhistories_ is a continuation of the introductory section of that earlier work: sentences became pages, single paragraphs ended up as whole chapters. As the reader will discover, the technique of family reconstitution has made this possible. I can still remember those tentative steps in a demographic direction. Maureen Molloy showed me a family reconstitution form; Kenneth Lockridge spent time discussing the conventions and techniques of reconstitution; Vivien Brodsky patiently checked my earliest efforts. This was in the early or mid 1980s (I am vague about the precise date), and these people have doubtless long forgotten their role; I am grateful nonetheless. I would also like to thank Eilidh Garrett, Roger Schofield and Chris Wilson of the Cambridge Group for their encouragement when – many years later – I arrived at 27 Trumpington Street with a bundle of tables and graphs, and John Knodel (of the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan) for reading an initial version of chapter 2 and saving me from some potential mistakes.

Many individuals have been supportive, reading and commenting on what have become various sections of the book. I am extremely grateful to Frazer Andrewes, Meg Arnot, Linda Bryder, Raelene Frances, Eilidh Garrett, Bridget Hill, Rab Houston, Alun Howkins, David Kertzer, John E. Knodel, Colin Lankshear, John Leckie, David Levine, Deborah Montgomerie, Charles Phythian-Adams, Jean Robin, Bruce Scates, Roger Schofield, Keith Snell, W. B. Stephens, Simon Szreter, Athina Tsoulis, David Vincent, Adrian Wilson, Michael Winstanley, Keith Wrightson and Philippa Wyatt. Jan Kelly, of the
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Needless to say, I owe most to my partner, Athina Tsoulis, and our children, Alexa and Kristina Tsoulis-Reay. They have always exhibited a healthy scepticism towards my various projects; with gratitude (and in quiet revenge) this one is dedicated to them.

Material in four chapters has appeared before. Chapter 2 was published in Continuity and Change. Chapter 6 was in a recent issue of Journal of Family History. Chapter 7 is a considerably revised version of an article in Rural History. Chapter 8, in an earlier form, was published in Past and Present. However, much of what follows is new.
Abbreviations

CCA  Canterbury Cathedral Archives, Canterbury
CKS  Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone
PRO  Public Record Office, Kew
PP   Parliamentary Papers
TL   Templeman Library, University of Kent, Oral History Project: Life in Kent before 1914