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Storied Identities: Identity Formation and the Life Story

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In her old age, my great-grandmother Margaret Crook wrote down a collection of personal memories from her childhood, which remain unpublished. This article uses the document as a case study for an analysis of the links between life history and identity. I examine the ways in which autobiographical writing can be used to trace the development of an individual's identity. I also reflect on the process of life storytelling itself, and consider the impact of this process on the construction of the subject.

Before Margaret set down her personal narrative in writing, she regularly shared her memories with family members. Despite Margaret's death in 1974, these stories have endured to become part of my family history and are still told today. Therefore, a portion of this study examines the importance of family stories to an individual's sense of identity: I consider the ways in which Margaret's life story has affected my own self-conception. Overall, this study seeks to demonstrate that, in various ways, the life story is integral to the process of identity formation.

Theories of Identity

Much has been written on the subject of identity, and this section is intended to give but a brief outline of the existing literature. Kearney has usefully identified four broad categories of thought, which make it possible to trace some general patterns chronologically.[1] The first can be described as the "rationalist" view, based on the Enlightenment notion of "bounded" identity: individuals are believed to have a fixed, individual identity with an unproblematic relationship to their culture and community.[2] Thinkers such as Marx and Freud unsettled such essentialist notions, and instead championed social models of identity, which recognised the powerful influence of others on our sense of self. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, fundamental understandings began to be questioned across the academic fields. This was the case for theories of identity. As a result,

1 Kearney, C., *The Monkey's Mask: Identity, Memory, Narrative and Voice* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 2003), pp. 35-56.

2 See Phinney, J. S. and Rotheram, M. J. (eds.), *Children's Ethnic Socialization, Pluralism and Development* (London: Thousand Oaks, 1987).

postmodern thinkers eschewed grand narratives, and instead embraced a constantly changing view of the self, in response to rapid social and technological changes.[3] The rise of identity politics indicated a new focus on identity, with an emphasis on previously marginalised groups.[4]

More recently, work in social psychology has led to the emergence of another pattern of thought concerning identity: that of "storied" identities. This recognises the central place of self-narrative in the process of identity formation, and is perhaps evidence of the general "biographical turn" in the social sciences.[5] It is suggested that individuals construct continuous, ever changing narratives to produce coherent narratives of self – for which Sarbin coined the term 'storied lives'.[6] Many social psychologists argue that our lives only achieve meaning as stories – life histories, personal narratives and autobiographies.[7] This has led to a focus on the nature of memory, and the way in which dominant narratives inform personal life stories.[8] Following Vygotsky, this approach also draws attention to the distinction between social identity and personal identity.[9] I have based my investigation into identity formation on the theories of the social psychologists, as I feel that this approach encompasses important aspects of the previous research, whilst also adding significantly to our understanding. It accounts for the social nature of identity, yet recognises that an individual has an active role in the construction of their own identity. It highlights the influence of cultural memory and dominant discourses. Moreover, it underscores the link between the life story and identity formation.

3 See Giddens, A., *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

4 See Hall, S., Hobson, D., Lowe, A. and Willis, P. (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (Birmingham: Hutchinson, 1991).

5 Chamberlayne, P., Bornat, J. & Wengraf, T., *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science* (London: Routledge, 2000).

6 Sarbin, T.R. (ed.), *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1986).

7 See Holstein, J. A. and Gubrium, J.F., *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Rosenwald, G.C. and Ochberg, R.L. (eds.), *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self Understanding* (Yale University Press, 1992); Freeman, M., *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1993); Linde, C., *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Carr, D., *Time, Narrative and History* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986).

8 Schank, R.C. and Abelson, R.P., *Scripts, Plans, Goals, Structures* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999).

9 Vygotsky, L., *Mind in Society* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978).

Life History Research

If we are to accept the notion that identities are "storied", a life history approach seems the most appropriate for an investigation into identity formation. The life history research method uses the life story, in its various forms, as a primary source for the study of history and culture. There are obvious advantages to this approach, neatly outlined by Hatch and Wisniewski:

> Life history and narrative offer exciting alternatives for connecting lives and stories of individuals to the understanding of larger human and social phenomena. A life history is composed of self-referential stories through which the author-narrator constructs the identity and point(s) of view of a unique individual historically situated in culture, time and place.[10]

With its focus on the individual and the effects of different social positioning, life history clearly accords with postmodern and post-structural sensibilities. It is also a critical approach, offering 'a serious opportunity to question the implicit racial, class or gender biases which existing modes of enquiry mystify whilst reproducing.'[11]

There has always been a strong feminist interest in life history, due to feminism's emphasis on women's experience as a vital resource for the creation of women's knowledge.[12] Indeed, the present study is distinctly feminist in the sense that it uses the female life story as a primary source for investigation.

The life story can take many forms, and this study engages with two different types. Firstly, autobiography: my great-grandmother Margaret Crook wrote an account of her childhood which is used as a source of analysis. I will demonstrate that autographical writing can be used to trace the development of an individual's identity, both personal and social. I will also consider the notion that, in writing her life story, Margaret was engaging with her own self-knowledge and constructing a sense of meaning. This study also takes family history as a form of life story. Family history has a strong oral tradition, and is often passed down through storytelling, though is rarely formally recorded. For members of marginalised groups, family stories provide a medium through which to construct their life story. Although it remains a rather under-researched

10 Hatch, J.A. and Wisniewski, R., *Life History and Narrative* (London: Falmer Press, 1995).

11 Goodson, I.F., 'The story so far: personal knowledge and the political' in Hatch and Wisniewski, *Life History*.

12 Cosslett, T., Lury, C. and Summerfield, P. (eds.), *Feminism and Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 2.

topic, it has been acknowledged that family storytelling has important implications for identity. For instance, it is particularly significant in fostering a sense of collective identity and group heritage.[13] As my great–grandmother's autobiography originated from a set of memories that she regularly shared with her family, a portion of this study considers the merits of this claim.

This study makes an original contribution by weaving together family stories with a theoretical approach to life history. It explores the notion that identities are "storied", and with this in mind draws clear links between self-narrative and identity formation.

Family Stories and Identity

Margaret begins her autobiography with the words 'I have been given this writing book with a request from a very dear person, who shall be nameless at present, to record recollections of my early life.'[14] The request had come from her daughter — my grandmother — who had been brought up listening to tales of Margaret's childhood, and felt her mother should record them for posterity. By doing so, Margaret was breaking with tradition. Autobiography as a genre has historically been dominated by men,[15] while women have generally been confined to constructing their life histories orally, in the form of stories told to family members.[16] Therefore, the importance of family storytelling should not be underestimated. Fiese argues that the activity 'reflects a developmental phenomenon of constructing meaning and identity in the family context'.[17] This can be doubly applied. Firstly, from the perspective of the storyteller, stories can firstly be a method of integrating experiences into a personal identity, in a similar way to autobiography.[18] Secondly, family stories shape the listener's sense of social identity, as, by promoting a shared sense of history, they can strengthen notions of group membership. Finnegan asserts that storytelling 'provides the background, the mythic

13 Martin, P., Hagestad, G.O. and Diedrick, P., 'Family Stories: Events (Temporarily) Remembered', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (May, 1988), pp. 533-541.
14 Crook, M., *Reminisciences of Margaret Crook*, (Unpublished), p. 1.
15 Marcus, L., *Auto/Biographical Discourses* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).
16 Fiese, B.H., Hooker, K.A., Kotary, L., Schwagler, J. and Rimmer, M., 'Family Stories in the Early Stages of Parenthood', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Aug, 1995), p. 767.
17 Ibid., p. 764.
18 Ibid., p. 783.

sense of continuance, that can have hidden, deep effects on one's own sense of identity'.[19]

Margaret died long before I was born so I never heard her reminisce in person, but I nevertheless eventually became a listener to her treasured tales, which were regularly told by both my Mother and Grandmother (who also have many tales of their own, of course). I was told her stories before I read her autobiography. It is clear that to some extent my own identity has been shaped by these tales, certainly by promoting a sense of belonging within the family group. One study suggests that family stories 'socialize children into the realm of family values',[20] and the moral message is certainly an important part of group heritage. Taking my family as a case in point, I would suggest that Margaret's stories have contributed to the transmission of a certain family ethos, and a consultation of the written autobiography seems to support this. In it, Margaret depicts her Mother as 'one of the humblest of women, never thinking she did anything at all out of the ordinary'.[21] She is portrayed as a woman from humble beginnings, who lived her life guided by staunch Methodist principles. In her autobiography, Margaret herself shows a tendency towards humbleness. She finds it difficult to talk about her personal qualities and achievements. For example, when intimating that the parson thought her the brightest in her class at school, she characteristically follows with: 'this was not much of a distinction.'[22] Humbleness, sometimes even a tendency to self-deprecation, is something that I have noticed in both my Grandmother and Mother, and I believe that the valuing of this trait has become embedded in the family ethos. Storytelling is certainly one method by which this has been communicated.

Family stories thus have important implications for the construction of social identity, as they strengthen the individual's perception of what defines the "us". According to Finnegan, 'the explicit crystallization of a family's shared memories… results from a family history or individual autobiography being written or recorded'.[23] By documenting her memories, Margaret has provided a discrete corpus of written material which can be used as a point of analysis of the connection between life writing and identity.

19 Finnegan, R. and Drake, M. (eds.), *From Family Tree to Family History — Studying Family and Community History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994), p. 118.
20 Fiese et al., 'Family Stories', p. 768.
21 Crook, *Reminisciences*, p. 33.
22 Ibid., p. 6.
23 Finnegan and Drake, *From Family Tree to Family History*.

Identity Formation and the Autobiography: an Analysis

'To begin then from the beginning…'[24] Margaret was born in 1889 in Portsmouth, the fifth in a family of six children. Her father was in the Royal Marines, but was retired and pensioned off by the time Margaret reached three years old. This occasioned the family's move to the village of Apperley in Gloucestershire, and her account is an evocative recreation of late Victorian and Edwardian village life. Margaret's personal narrative cannot strictly be described as an "autobiography" – defined as an account of the entirety of a person's life – as her story is curtailed when she reaches early adulthood. However, the "autobiography of childhood" has arguably developed into its own autonomous literary genre.[25] For Coe, a distinguishing feature of this genre is a structure that 'reflects step by step the development of the writer's self: beginning often, but not invariably, with the first light of consciousness, and concluding, quite specifically, with the attainment of a precise degree of maturity.'[26] This applies to Margaret's account, and in this section I will show very clearly the way in which her sense of self emerges.

Social psychologists have drawn attention to the distinction between "personal identity" and "social (or group) identity".[27] The difference can be neatly defined thus:

> Whereas personal identities refer to properties of the individual such as *intelligent* or *extravert*, group identities refer to the groups with which individuals align themselves, such as *American*, *Democrat*, or family member… both personal and group identities are integral aspects of the larger self-system.[28]

It is possible to track the development of both Margaret's personal and a social identity within her autobiography, in response to certain crucial influences. The 'interpersonal context'[29] of her account is of great importance, as groups such as the family circle and religious community emerge as key sites for the construction of her social identity. The narrative shows Margaret's identification with her position within these

24 Crook, *Reminisciences,* p. 1.

25 For reasons of convenience, I will be referring to Margaret's personal narrative simply as her "autobiography" throughout.

26 Coe, R.N., *When the Grass was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 8.

27 See above.

28 Morales, J.F., Huici, C., Heyle, C., Swann Jr., W.B. and Gomez, A., 'Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 96, No. 5, (2009), p. 995.

29 Personal Narratives Group (eds.), *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 20.

groups. The development of a more complex personal identity is also visible in Margaret's gradual discovery of her own unique attributes as she grows older.

A theme that dominates — and, in fact, defines — Margaret's autobiography is that of the family. It has been acknowledged that this social group is central to the process of identification that takes place during childhood.[30] Margaret's family can be described as emanating from the 'respectable' working class, which stood somewhat above the level of the very poor. In his study of autobiographies of childhood from the 1820s to the 1920s, Burnett observed that 'the virtues of education, hard work and self-improvement were respected' in this section of society, 'but not usually at the expense of a close, affectionate family life'.[31] This seems to accurately describe Margaret's family, as we shall see.

The modern understanding of the family is a product of the later nineteenth century.[32] With his concept of "affective individualism", Stone asserts that there was an elevation of the familial relationship and reassertion of emotionality during this period.[33] Margaret's autobiography certainly shows a family that is affectionate towards one another. On the occasion of one of her elder brothers leaving home to find work in another county, Margaret records that the family 'were all upset at the thoughts of Will going so far from home and were sad when he went. Mother shed many a tear, she was an emotional little soul and this was the first separation in the home circle.[34]

Burnett's study showed that relationships in large families tended to be happier than in smaller ones,[35] and this perhaps accounts in part for the closeness of the Crook family, which boasted six children. Large families could act as small communities, providing a nexus of differing familial relationships. For example, strong bonds could develop between siblings who had little need for anyone outside their sizeable immediate family.[36] Margaret and her younger sister were best friends: 'Annie and I had very happy times together.'[37] This could nurture powerful feelings of "belonging", strengthening notions of group membership and identification. In

30 Davidoff, L., Doolittle, M., Fink, J. and Holden, K., *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy, 1830–1960* (London: Longman, 1999), p. 91.
31 Burnett, J. (ed.), *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. xvii.
32 Stone, L., *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
33 Ibid.
34 Crook, *Reminisciences*, p. 25.
35 Burnett, *Destiny Obscure*, p. 245.
36 Ibid., p. 246.
37 Crook, *Reminisciences,* p. 17.

large families, young adult unmarried brothers and sisters could form an intermediate generation between parent and younger siblings and, according to Davidoff, often 'exercised quasi-parental affection and authority'.[38] In one of her earliest memories, Margaret tells of an occasion when her mother fell ill, and so her elder brother 'Willie looked after the home and us children. He washed us and saw us to bed and got our meals…I remember Willie carrying me on his shoulder when he went to Tewkesbury about five miles to fetch the medicine'.[39] Margaret remembers, of Will: 'I understand he took great pleasure in looking after me and taking me out'.[40]

Feminist commentators have identified 'an emergent set of formulae about women's autobiography, in which women's stories are constructed through their relationships with other people'.[41] The Personal Narratives Group has observed that, 'in some instances, the need to understand a relationship as the context for interpreting a woman's life and life story is readily apparent',[42] and this is true of Margaret's relationship with her brother Will, which almost eclipses any other in terms of significance. It has been shown that brothers, and particularly elder brothers, were often held in special regard by girls[43] and, indeed, Margaret states: 'Willie was my chief object of affection'.[44] This perhaps originated from his care of her in early childhood. The importance of this relationship to Margaret is evident in her fervent and unswerving praise of her brother and his accomplishments throughout the autobiography. Will is described as having 'an attractive personality, he was virile and strong and very good-looking.'[45] Margaret claims that he exerted 'a noble influence on all the men with whom he came into contact',[46] but it is his influence over herself that is most apparent. Will Crook was killed at the Somme in 1916. Psychologists have identified a tendency among some individuals to idealize a dead sibling, and this could be true of Margaret's attitude towards this one of her brothers.[47] However, Will was clearly (and remained) a

38 Davidoff et al., *The Family Story,* p. 245.
39 Crook, *Reminisciences*, p. 2.
40 Ibid., p. 1.
41 Steedman, C., *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography and History* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1992), p. 42.
42 Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting,* p. 20.
43 Burnett, *Destiny Obscure,* p. 246.
44 Crook, *Reminisciences*, p. 1.
45 Ibid., p. 12.
46 Ibid., p. 44.
47 DeVita-Raeburn, E., *The Empty Room: Surviving the Loss of a Brother or Sister at Any Age* (New York: Scribner, 2004).

guiding principle in her life, and central to the formation of her sense of self, a factor that will be further explored.

Religious belief is another major theme in Margaret's personal narrative, and was clearly a dominant aspect of her childhood. Although most country children had some connection with organised religion in this period,[48] religion was of particular importance to Margaret, and her self-categorization as a member of the religious community was central to the development of her social identity. After their move to the village of Apperley, the Crook family embraced Methodism and began to attend the local Wesleyan chapel, Margaret explaining that the key reason for this was that 'most of our relatives, Aunts and Cousins' did so.[49] Shiman argues that Methodist chapels 'frequently became the centres of religiously linked communities that provided all manner of support for their members',[50] and this is reflected in Margaret's autobiography. The community of believers appears almost as an extended circle of family and friends, and firmly promoted a sense of "belonging" among members.[51]

The family group is also of relevance here, as, by the late nineteenth century, it 'had become a central feature of religious life.[52] With a desire to produce "cradle Christians", religious instruction began early, and the task usually fell to the Mother.[53] This was the case in the Crook household. Margaret recalls that her mother

> liked us to learn a text and say it to her in the morning, and I remember saying the text "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much", and I recollect her saying that was just the word she needed that morning.[54]

Margaret's describes her mother, Annie Crook, as 'a deeply religious woman': she is a sincere, evangelical person and deeply solicitous of her family's spiritual welfare — a model of Victorian womanhood in this respect.[55] Margaret's religiosity is encouraged by her brother Will, who is described as exhibiting 'customary Christian courage and fortitude'.[56]

48 Horn, P., *The Victorian Country Child* (Kineton: Roundwood Press, 1974), p. 130.
49 Crook, *Reminisciences*, p. 4.
50 Shiman, L.L., *Crusade Against Drink in Victorian England* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 3.
51 Burnett, J., 'Autobiographies of Childhood: The experience of education', *History Today*, Vol. 32, No. 9 (September 1982), p. 11.
52 Davidoff et al., *The Family Story,* p. 108.
53 Ibid.
54 Crook, *Reminisciences,* p. 3.
55 For a discussion of Victorian womanhood and religion, see Hogan, A. and Bradstock, A. (eds.), *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1998).
56 Crook, *Reminisciences,* p. 42.

Margaret portrays him as a particularly pious individual, who 'took up active Christian work in our chapel and circuit',[57] qualifying as a Methodist local preacher while still in his twenties. Nonconformist Sunday Schools relied upon voluntary help, and Margaret's brother Will also volunteered as a Sunday School teacher, eventually become Superintendent and Leader. Margaret remembers that 'he took Bible lessons with the top class and they were most interesting'.[58]

Sunday schools, which enjoyed extensive popularity in the late nineteenth century, were very influential in the socialization of children.[59] They concentrated on both religious instruction and social activities, the latter of which is given great attention in Margaret's account. Recreational events such as outings or 'treats' were regularly organised and these could afford village children much pleasure, often being regarded as one of the major events of the year.[60] Margaret recollects: 'we would save up our pennies for these outings, as there was usually something to spend them on, and they were certainly red-letter days in our lives.'[61] The autobiography clearly shows the dominance of religion in Margaret's early life, perfectly illustrated in her observation that 'Sundays seemed to hold sway over our thoughts and actions.'[62] This is not a negative observation, however — some of Margaret's fondest recollections are of the Sabbath:

> I enjoyed Sunday morning; we put on our best clothes and went off to Sunday School, and later on to morning service… the sun always seemed to shine brighter and the birds sing more sweetly on a Sunday morning.[63]

The autobiography presents Margaret's experience of religion in her early life as overwhelmingly positive. As a result, she is firmly accepting of a Christian way of life, and this becomes deeply embedded in her self-identity.

A theme closely linked to religion is that of morality, a sense of which is developed during childhood. Davidoff *et al* show that 'as we grow up we test out the consequences of our behaviour and actions on others in relation to a system of values learned mainly within what are defined as household and familial groups.'[64] A number of Margaret's anecdotes describe minor incidences of wrongdoing, the accompanying moral

57 Ibid., p. 12.
58 Ibid.
59 Burnett, 'Autobiographies of Childhood', p. 11.
60 Horn, *The Victorian Country Child,* p. 145.
61 Ibid., p. 8.
62 Ibid., p. 32.
63 Ibid., p. 24.
64 Ibid., p. 56.

struggles, and eventual apprehension. In one notable instance — described as 'rather a shameful episode in my life' — Margaret came to possess 'half a sovereign gold piece'.[65] When its existence was discovered by her Mother, and the origin questioned, Margaret 'declared I didn't know anything about it… Mother went in to the other room and told my father what had happened'. Margaret is left with an 'unhappy frame of mind and with a very guilty conscience', and eventually owns up in the face of further questioning:

> Never shall I forget mother going in to the adjoining room and saying in a very solemn voice: "Emanuel, Margaret told us a lie" — note the use of Margaret on such a serious occasion. The greatest blow of all was when she said that Will would have to be told about it. He didn't say anything, he just looked me.[66]

Note that Will's good opinion was of the highest value to Margaret.

In Margaret's autobiography, childhood is to some extent depicted as a period of trial, involving a consciousness of sin and the guidance of certain key individuals. Her individual development is tracked in the text through the lessons learnt. Of the incident at hand, she concludes:

> I cannot say that I never told an untruth after this, but I certainly came to the conclusion that if I did tell a lie I should always be found out — which conclusion I believe is a very good one for any child to come to.[67]

It is clear from this that, for Margaret, the development of the self had a strong moral dimension.

Rose has argued for a direct connection between morality and collective identity, as what is moral is what 'we don't do'.[68] This originates within the family group, a fact evident from Margaret's autobiography. Nonconformist households characteristically insisted on rigid codes of behaviour and obedience and, indeed, Margaret's Mother sought to inculcate 'high moral principles'[69] and strict a code of conduct in her children. Margaret's assimilation of such principles is evident in her depiction of others outside the family group. For example, a 'family of Smiths' are described as 'a drinking, swearing family'. Margaret notes that, although the Smiths had large pictures of God and the Devil displayed in their living room, 'these pictures didn't seem to have much effect on the morals of the family'.[70] The Smiths are contrasted with their relatives,

65 Ibid., p. 16.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Cited in Davidoff et al., *The Family Story,* p. 92.
69 Crook, *Reminisciences*, p. 3.
70 Ibid., p. 10.

who conversely 'were very good Christian people and attended our chapel regularly'. In a manifestation of the conclusions of certain psychologists, Margaret was identifying herself as a member of a group, in this case united by a shared set of values. [71]

Education is the last major theme is to be explored. Margaret was clearly an intelligent child: the clergyman who taught Scripture believing her 'the brightest in the class'.[72] Her autobiography is full of descriptions of the village school, the school mistress and her lessons.[73] Academic work suited Margaret and she discovered a personal identity there. She was selected to go to a local school first as 'a monitress and then as a pupil teacher'.[74] Margaret excelled in her new roles and earned a reputation for academic excellence.[75] She went on to pass the examination for pupil teachers, ' which meant I went to Tewkesbury High School for Girls', and there she received full time education from specialists. The significance of this achievement is evident in the fact that she and another girl were 'the first two scholarship girls at this High School.'[76] Margaret was fortunate in having access to a scheme, described by Burnett as providing 'a route by which clever boys and girls from the working class…could acquire higher education, a nationally recognized qualification, and a social status approaching that of a professional person'.[77] By qualifying as a teacher, Margaret forged her own very distinctive identity with which she entered her adult life.

The Search for Meaning: Identity and Life Review

Margaret produced her autobiography in old age and, by writing her personal narrative, was engaging in a process of life review. In his study of ageing and reminiscence, Coleman suggests that individuals can find 'a sense of meaning and coherence' in this process. He also asserts that it is extremely unusual for a narrator to be 'unable to gain comfort from

71 Tajfel, H. and Turner, J. C., 'The social identity theory of inter-group behavior' in S. Worchel and L. W. Austin (eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall 1986).

72 Crook, *Reminisciences*, p. 6.

73 Burnett, *Destiny Obscure,* p. 155; Crook, *Reminisciences,* p. 6.

74 Crook, *Reminisciences,* p. 35. This was in accordance with the 'pupil-teacher' system, first adopted in 1846, under which 'promising older pupils were apprenticed to a schoolteacher for a period usually of five years, during which time they both taught and received further education'. (Burnett, 'Autobiographies of Childhood, p. 145).

75 Crook, *Reminisciences*, p. 35.

76 Ibid., p. 38.

77 Burnett, 'Autobiographies of Childhood', p. 145.

his/her memories'.[78] Graham Dawson's concept of 'composure' can also be applied here, in which a narrator puts together a story of themselves and finds relative psychic comfort in the process. They are composing a sense of self that they find acceptable. [79] The autobiography is one arena is one in which a person may achieve composure. Margaret clearly gained comfort from the act of writing her life story, as the memories she relates are overwhelmingly positive. However, 'composure' has a double meaning: it also denotes the process by which individuals construct their personal narratives in reference to the public stories available within popular culture.[80] A further analysis of Margaret's autobiography allows for the identification of some of these.

That there a mythical element to the life story is acknowledged. Peneff has notably argued that there exists 'pre-established frameworks within which individuals explain their personal history'.[81] Chanfrault-Duchet has extended this idea, asserting that individuals adopt certain 'narrative models' when constructing their life story.[82] She identifies three in particular, 'borrowed from the literary forms disseminated in social discourse'. These are "the epic", "the Romanesque" and "the picaresque" models, all of which, Chanfrault-Duchet claims, are 'manifestations of a particular quest for values'.[83] Applying this theory to Margaret's autobiography, it is possible to identify aspects of the both the epic and the Romanesque within the text. Firstly, the epic is said to reveal an identification with the values of the community[84] and, indeed, Margaret's autobiography suggests her social identity was formed in accordance with the set of values that she shared with her family and religious community. Secondly, Chanfrault-Duchet describes the Romanesque as 'the quest for authentic values in a degraded world'.[85] This model is visible in Margaret's description of the lifestyle and beliefs of certain others in the village that contrast with her own views on morality. This contrast assures her that

78 Coleman, P. G., 'Ageing and Life History: the meaning of reminiscence in late life' in Dex, S. (ed.) *Life and Work History Analyses: Qualitative and Quantative Developments* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 134–5.

79 Dawson, G., *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire, and the Imagining of Masculinities* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1994).

80 'Introduction' in Cosslett, T., Lury, C. and Summerfield, P. (eds.), *Feminism and Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 3.

81 Peneff, J., 'Myths in Life Stories' in Samuel, R. and Thompson, P. *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 36.

82 Chanfrault-Duchet, M.F., 'Narrative Structures, Social Models and Symbolic Representation in the Life Story' in Gluck, S.B. and Patai, D. (eds.), *Women's Words* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 80.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Lucien Goldmann quoted in Chanfrault-Duchet, 'Narrative Structures', p. 80.

her own values are indeed authentic. Chanfrault-Duchet argues that the framing of a narrative within a particular quest for values 'gives an axis of meaning and coherence to the life experience and to the self';[86] the adoption of such narrative models perhaps helped Margaret to achieve composure.

Chanfrault-Duchet has also identified several 'collective myths' present within popular culture that are often employed in the construction of the life story. One that is visible within Margaret's autobiography is that of the "Golden Age" or "Lost Paradise".[87] In the account, this myth is tied up with what Jones describes as the "country childhood idyll,"[88] which Margaret seems to evoke in the following passage:

> We used to walk back [from Sunday School] across the orchards… In the Spring the orchards would be a beautiful picture with all the pink and white apple blossom. We used to stroke one of the cows which we called Daisy.[89]

For Jones, reference to this idyll is 'driven by deeply embedded notions of childhood, nature, the country and the city shaped by romantic sensibilities.'[90] The image, made popular in the nineteenth century, of the thatched cottage with roses around the door continues to linger in the subconscious today, and could indeed have affected Margaret's description of her home: 'The farm house was large with a big garden, plenty of room for children to play about in, and I can recall pleasant sunny afternoons swinging and playing.'[91]

At the very least, the narrative describes the pleasures of a rural childhood from the standpoint of one who did not have to suffer the grinding poverty of a farm labourer's household. But, in describing these pleasures, Margaret's autobiography seems to evoke the collective myth of the "Lost Paradise", in a similar way to another autobiography of childhood — Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie*.[92] Coleman has observed a tendency amongst those reminiscing in old age to 'denigrate modern society and glorify the past'.[93] This tendency is particularly strong with regard to early memories, as our childhood provides a measure by which comparisons of past and present can be made. Indeed, Margaret displays this tendency to some

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., p. 81.
88 Jones, O., 'Rurality, power and the otherness of childhood in British Contexts' in Panelli, R., Punch, S. and Robson, E., *Global Perspectives on Rural Childhood and Youth: Young Rural Lives* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 193–4.
89 Crook, *Reminisciences,* p. 24.
90 Jones, 'Rurality', pp. 193–4.
91 Crook, *Reminisciences,* p. 2.
92 Lee, L., *Cider With Rosie* (London: Hogarth Press, 1959).
93 Coleman, 'Ageing and Life History', p. 120.

extent. In describing a favourite childhood Hymn of hers, with particularly vivid imagery, she states: 'these imaginatively fanciful pictures are far more beautiful, I think, than the pictures of violence and crime which are seen by the young folks on television.'[94] The Romanesque narrative model is in evidence again here: in writing her autobiography, Margaret was perhaps lamenting the loss of a "Golden Age" of authentic values and striving for an orientation of the self within a world that — in her view — contrasted unfavourably with that of her past. In this way, her memories could bring her comfort, and her notion of self remained tied up within them.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been provide an analysis of the link between the life story and identity formation, and explore the notion of "storied" identities. The study has examined different manifestations of the life story in the form of autobiography, family storytelling and life review. Prompted by my grandmother's personal narrative, I have engaged with just some of the cultural scripts that are inevitably adopted in the telling of the life story. In this way, I have shown that people do not simply remember what happened to them, but interpret it. Margaret's autobiography of her childhood memories provides a somewhat nostalgic but unsentimental portrayal of late Victorian and Edwardian country life, and tracks her development within it. Margaret's social identity is clearly shaped by her membership of various relational groups, such as the family and religious community, and reinforced by a sense of shared values.

The final few pages of her autobiography show Margaret gaining a degree of maturity, and the end of her childhood (and of the autobiography) is marked by her entrance to work. It was largely by pursuing her chosen career that Margaret established a personal identity. Describing her adolescence in these last pages, Margaret depicts a happy, exciting time in which she developed her own personality and pursued her own interests — very much aided by her acquirement of a bicycle.[95] However, the account shows the influences of her childhood to be enduring and her sense of social identity securely fixed, as she describes her joy at joining Will in his Sunday School teaching.[96] It is Margaret's relationship with

94 Crook, *Reminisciences,* p. 10.
95 Ibid., pp. 38, 42.
96 Ibid., p. 39.

her brother, that 'noble and gallant soul',[97] that emerges as the dominant note of her childhood. Indeed, she ends her autobiography with the news of his death in the First World War, the final sentence a quote from his remembrance service. It must have seemed particularly apt at the age in which she was writing: 'He did not grow old as we that are left grew old. Age did not weary him, or the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, We will remember him.'[98]

In writing her autobiography, Margaret ensured Will would be remembered, as would various other aspects of her childhood that until then were only recollected in the form of stories told to the family. However, I have, in this study, demonstrated that family stories such as these are significant in fostering a sense of group heritage and thus shaping an individual's social identity. As a historian, I can appreciate the claim that stories 'are the only sources out of which we construct our lives'.[99] Margaret found an enduring personal identity in academic pursuits, professing in her autobiography that 'books were always my chief delight and passion, as they still are.'[100] I have always myself been interested in academic study, and this may stem from an awareness of a tendency towards this in my background, informed in part by Margaret's stories. In this way, it is clear that the life story, in all its forms, has important ramifications for identity.

97 Ibid., p. 44.
98 Ibid.
99 Outlined in Marwick, A., *The New Nature of History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 171.
100 Crook, *Reminisciences,* p. 5.