Using family history to reveal the people behind 19th century public health statistics

Introduction

It is often difficult for students to understand the individual human impact of problems such as infant mortality or epidemic diseases, topics studied as part of the history of medicine and of public health. As a result, it's then harder to appreciate the significance of reforms aimed at tackling the problems. Textbooks routinely provide numbers, graphs and tables but how can we help students see the human reality behind those statistics?

One possibility is to use your own family history (or that of someone you know) as an introduction – what Rob Phillips called Initial Stimulus Material (ISM) – to generate curiosity and add that humanity. There are few things many students find more interesting than an insight into their teacher 'beyond the classroom', especially if you're also revealing your emotional reactions to the experiences of your family. Below are two such examples I came across recently when trying to fill gaps in my Dad's family history.

1. Infant mortality in the early 20th century

The 1911 census had one original and revealing feature – prompted by concern over infant mortality it asked people to identify the number of children born to a family, both children living and those who had died. The document below shows the entry for my grandparents, George and Charlotte Dawson, revealing that they had two children living but had also had two children who had died since their wedding in 1900.

NAME AND SURNAME	RELATIONSHIP to Head of Family.	AGE (last Birthday) and SEX.		PARTICULARS as to MARRIAGE.					PROFESSION or OCCUPATION of Persons aged ten years and upwards.				BIRTHPLACE of every person.	NATI
every Person, whether Member of Family, Visitor, Boarder, or Servant, who (1) passed the night of Sunday, April 2nd, 1911, in this dwelling and was alive at midnight, or (2) arrived in this dwelling on the morning of Monday, April 3rd, not having been enumerated elsewhere. o one else must be included. or order of entering names see Examples on back of Schedule.)	State whether "Head," or "Wife," "Son," "Daughter," or other Relative, "Visitor," "Boarder," or "Servant."	For Infants under one year state the age in months as "under one month," "one month," etc. Ages of Males.	Ages of Females.	Write "Single," "Married," "Widower," or "Widow," opposite the names of all persons aged 15 years and upwards.	State, for each Married Woman entered on this Schedule, the number of:— Completed years the present Marriage has lasted. If less than one year write "under one."	Children born alive to present Marriage. (If no children born alive write "None" in Column 7). Total Children Born Alive.	Children still Living.	Children who have Died.	Personal Occupation. The reply should show the precise branch of Profession, Trade, Manufacture, &c. If engaged in any Trade or Manufacture, the particular kind of work done, and the Article made or Material worked or dealt in should be clearly indicated. (See Instructions 1 to 8 and Examples on back of Schedule.)	Industry or Service with which worker is connected. This question should generally be answered by stating the business carried on by the employer. If this is clearly shown in Col. 10 the question need not be answered here. No entry needed for Legends Servants in private employment. If employed by a public body (Government, Municipal, etc.) state what body. (See Instruction 9 and Examples on back of Schedule.)	Whether Employer, Worker, or Working on Own Account. Write opposite the name of each person engaged in any Trade or Industry, (1) "Employer" (that is employing persons other than domestic servants), or (2) "Worker" (that is working for an employer), or (3) "Own Account" (that is neither employing others nor working for a trade employer).	Whether Working at Home. Write the words "At Home" opposite the name of each person carrying on Trade or Industry at home.	(1) If born in the United Kingdom, write the name of the County, and Town or Parish. (2) If born in any other part of the British Empire, write the name of the Dependency, Colony, etc., and of the Province or State. (3) If born in a Foreign Country, write the name of the Country. (4) If born at sea, write "At Sea." NOTE.—In the case of persons born elsewhere than in England or Wales, state whether "Resident" or "Visitor" in this Country.	State (1) "B ject (2) " Brit ject Fore Or (3) If na stat " (4) etc.
1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	
George Left Dawson	Head	34		Married	10	2	2	2	Shipping clerk 050	Shipping Co	Worker		Lancs Liverpool.	
Charlotte Ann Dawson	Wife	33	33	Married	10	4	2	2					Lancs Liverpool.	
Frank Dawson	Son	6											Lancs Liverpool.	
Hannah Huxley	Boarder		69	Widow					Private means 370		0		Lancs Liverpool.	

My first reaction was that I hadn't known that my Dad (born in 1913) had two older siblings who had died young – they'd never been mentioned by anyone in the family. My next thought was to

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wonder whether Dad had known about them or whether his parents had kept the loss of two children a secret from their other children – they eventually had five children who lived to adulthood. Then came the realisation that those two young children, known only from that number 2 on the census, would have been my aunts or uncles had they lived.

There was also a puzzle in the census entry – my grandparents had two children living but only one, Frank, is listed and the other person was a lodger. So where was the second living child, Bill, whom I knew had been born in 1909? I found him in a hospital's census entry, a hospital known at that time as a 'fever hospital', which led me to wonder just how my grandparents were feeling at that time. Two of their four children had already died – were they now dreading the death of a third?

So my grandparents, George and Charlotte, had lost two children out of four. Charlotte had a sister, Cecilia, who also lost two of her four children by 1911. The third sister, Sethina, was more fortunate as all her children were alive in 1911. (Sethina may seem an unusual name – she was named after their father, my great-grandfather, whose name was Seth.)

My reactions to all this information from over a century ago? Firstly, I was quite taken aback by how sad I felt for my grandparents, despite the fact that I never knew them. Secondly, I looked at those infant mortality graphs with an entirely new understanding – that's my family represented by those spikes in the graph and I can begin to understand the human reality behind the statistics. And finally, it seems very likely that my grandmother, my father and his younger brother and sister were amongst the early beneficiaries of the reforms made by the Liberal government of the early twentieth century.

2. Cholera in the mid-19th century

My great, great grandmother died of cholera in 1849.

Her name was Frances Cooper, wife of James, mother of 3-year-old John and Fanny, who was just a few months old. They were living in a court off McKee Street, Liverpool, sharing a toilet and water from a pipe in the street with everyone else in their court. That summer, cholera killed over 7000 people in Liverpool. One of them was Frances. She was 33 years old. As you can read on her death certificate overleaf, Frances died on 25th August, which also happens to be my birthday.

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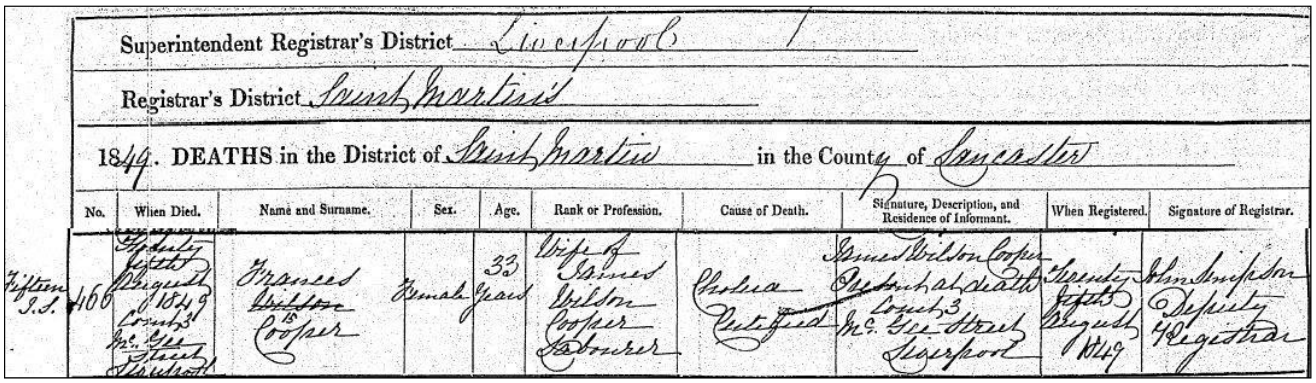

Superintendent Registrar's District Liverpool

Registrar's District Saint Martin's

1849. DEATHS in the District of Saint Martin in the County of Lancaster

	No.	When Died.	Name and Surname.	Sex.	Age.	Rank or Profession.	Cause of Death.	Signature, Description, and Residence of Informant.	When Registered.	Signature of Registrar.
Fifteen I.S.	466	Twenty fifth August 1849 Court 3 McGee Street Liverpool	Frances ~~Wilson~~ 15 Cooper	Female	33 years	Wife of James Wilson Cooper Labourer	Cholera Certified	James Wilson Cooper Present at death Court 3 McGee Street Liverpool	Twenty fifth August 1849	John Simpson Deputy Registrar

I've had this information for several months but typing the paragraph above still brought me to the verge of tears. In some ways it's all so long ago – 170 years, Victoria not long on the throne, cholera redolent of an utterly different age – and yet it's only four generations of my family. Frances was my grandfather's grandma, so near in generations that I feel very close to her (and not just because of that coincidence of 25th August). Seeing her death certificate, I felt deeply sad but also deeply angry – how could those self-regarding Victorians object to public health reform? They cost my great, great grandmother her life – or so it felt at first and, to be honest, maybe still does.

How many times have I included the cartoon 'The Court of King Cholera' in a book? How many objective, unexciting paragraphs have I written about the extent and spread of cholera, how many descriptions of people like Frances being saved from death by John Snow putting the Broad Street pump out of action? Now it all feels so much more personal, much more real, much more harrowing.

[The link between George Dawson on the 1911 census and Frances is young Fanny, who was only a few months old when her mother died. In 1870 Fanny married John Dawson, a master mariner, and among her three sons was George. Hence Fanny was my great-grandmother.]

Using these events in the classroom

The natural and by far the best use of such material is as the way into these topics, to stimulate interest and curiosity. One possibility is to give students the census return, death certificate or other example and ask them to explain what they can learn from it and what questions this raises – and also what they think might be the topic they're about to explore. Then reveal your own link to the document and explain how you feel about it – this would then lead into asking students what broader questions they have about either infant mortality of epidemic diseases. Pushing students to come up with questions is always important, both for motivation and to develop their ability to ask

effective historical questions. Then you can move onto the material you usually use, with the bonus that it's now providing context for those very individual human experiences in the documents.

Finding your own family evidence

Tracing your own family back across several generations is often straightforward if you have the names and locality of grandparents or great-grandparents. Short-term subscriptions (e.g. a month) to one of the family history websites (which provide census material and outline births, marriages and deaths details) enables quick exploration – some sites offer occasional free weekend access. Birth, marriage and death certificates are also available at commercial sites but for additional fees which are quite steep. It's about 75% cheaper to get these via the Government Register Office (website below) where a PDF of a Birth and Death certificate costs £6 and arrive in about a week.

If you can't find such documents for your own family then you could explore the 1911 census to identify the residents of houses near your school whose experiences would act in the same way.

Or you're very welcome to borrow my family and pretend they're your own!!

Useful websites

General Register Office

https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/Login.asp

Comparative survey of family tree websites

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/familyhistory/get_started/paying_for_research_01.shtml

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