
Diaries As A Historical Source

Diaries as a historical source can often seem familiar and easy to read as a source for the historian, as they are generally plain-spoken and riddled with detail. A diary comes directly from the author, creating an intimate perspective of who the person was, or at the very least who they are portraying themselves to be. Diaries can effectively reveal differences in language and expressive styles of the past, as well as pointing to the historical change and continuity of ideas of the self, social values and relations and ideas of work, which diaries can capture in a more intimate and focused manner. It can be tempting to consider personal documents to be more “sincere” than other primary source material, however “they too were the products of social and cultural ideas and practises, and they had their own set of rules, methods and conventions of production” (Sangha & Willis, 2016, p. 113). Therefore, they must be treated with some caution and one must analyse them with “reference to their origin, production, dissemination and survival” (Sangha & Willis, 2016, p. 113).

Although at first diaries can seem familiar and thus easy to read for the historian, they are not as simple as may seem. Although it may seem to be presenting an individual’s notions and ideas, on closer look many diaries can resemble diaries written in the same place and time. These diaries were created and shared by a literary class as a means to reflect. Therefore, they followed certain conventions of form and style that was considered appropriate of the time as a means of expressing reflection. Thus, although these diaries were ‘private’ in a sense, they followed many ‘public’ cultural conventions, therefore it is ideal to refer to these writings as being personal texts, rather than private ones. The history of diaries themselves furthers this point that these texts should be viewed as personal rather than private documents.

The diary is a somewhat recent method of culture in Western Europe and the beginning of the Americas, coming about mainly from a religious (Christian) need to chart one’s spiritual progress towards God. As time passed diaries would start to be used for recording personal feelings or in order to understand academic growth; “diaries thus were born of self-examination but expanded into a means of self-reflection and self-fashioning” (Stowe, 2018). By the nineteenth century, diarists often employed the literary devices of novels and other creative or imaginative means of writing, taking us further from the reality of what is being portrayed.

In conclusion, diaries must be handled with scrutiny and care, being treated not as a private and direct account but a “‘calculated performance’, shaped by many different influences both before, during and after its creation” (Sangha & Willis, 2016, p. 124). Diaries do not offer as straightforward a look into a period of someone’s life as we might hope, yet instead represent a “mixture of art and artifice” (Sangha & Willis, 2016, p. 124). This does not mean that there is nothing to gain from using diaries as a historical source, just that we should take the same care and scrutiny in researching and analysing these diaries as if they were any other primary source.