Microhistories can be powerful, bringing a small community to life while illuminating larger forces—race, gender, war, economics, technology, et cetera—affecting societies. But microhistories may also be of only parochial interest, researched and written such that only members of that community, or their descendants, will feel that the study speaks to them. Microhistories of this latter sort are also prone to the abandonment of evenhandedness, so that this family or that town, this company or that army unit is celebrated more than evaluated or analyzed, especially as the study moves closer to the present.

Jake Oresick’s *The Schenley Experiment* vacillates between the two types of microhistories—itself not an uncommon phenomenon. Oresick labels his study of Pittsburgh’s first public high school, which began as Central High School in 1855 and closed amid acrimonious debate in 2011, a “social history,” and he strives to use the school’s experience as a way to examine the city’s changing ethnic and racial demographics and a range of approaches to education itself. But Oresick, a 2001 Schenley graduate who penned a 2008 *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* column fervently opposing plans to close his alma mater, makes clear in his acknowledgements his purpose in writing this book, thanking his publisher “for giving us, the Schenley High School community, a clearer and more powerful voice, and a forum to memorialize our collective story” (p. ix). Indeed, the author devotes the last fifty pages of the slight 130 pages of narrative text to a full-throated celebration of the last twenty years of the school’s 156-year existence and a lamentation over what he considers to be the flawed decision-making which shuttered Schenley.

Oresick does tell an eloquent tale of a school which by the 1990s, haltingly and with some backsliding over the decades, had embraced the ethnic and racial diversity of Pittsburgh. He tells the tale more as a proud alumnus and as the lawyer and public policy analyst that he is, however, leaving aside the critical distance which historians usually like to claim. Readers who were part of the Schenley community will undoubtedly have their pride in the school’s achievements—and their disappointment in the school’s dissolution—reinforced. The rest of us—including this reviewer, who is not from Pittsburgh—will most likely finish the book merely shaking our heads at the bureaucratic and political errors which doomed the school.

Oresick, to his credit, is an exhaustive researcher of all things Schenley. He introduces a wide range of sources: articles in Pittsburgh newspapers; school yearbooks and its own newspaper; some municipal and board of education reports; and, especially, numerous interviews with Schenley faculty and students, including not only the author’s contemporaries but also many who knew the school firsthand decades earlier.

Oresick also refers to some secondary sources about Pittsburgh politics and demography, along with a handful of sources on race and education around the nation. But the author largely fails to engage the secondary literature on Pittsburgh’s economic and social changes over time, so his story of Schenley all but ignores the larger context of Pittsburgh’s own rise, fall, and rebirth, let alone the broader issues of urban education. Despite
his evident interest in the intersection of race and education, Oresick overlooks the burgeoning literature on the development of intercultural and multicultural education. Puzzlingly, he devotes at most three sentences to the teachers’ unions, which have in fact played a major role in Pittsburgh’s educational story from the 1960s until the present.

The “social history” aspect of The Schenley Experiment began with forward-looking city leaders who saw the need in the mid-nineteenth century for an academically rigorous high school. A combination of teachers whose credentials and achievements often rivaled those of university professors, administrators committed to “functional equality” across social strata (p. 132), and students and families eager to take advantage of educational opportunities offered had catapulted Schenley by the early twentieth century to the top ranks of schools, public or private, across the nation. Jews, other white ethnics, and eventually some African Americans joined the student body as the 1900s rolled on; despite tensions, that diversity both built community and demonstrated the potential of public education.

Further changes in the mid-twentieth century, both in the neighborhoods surrounding Schenley and in Pittsburgh’s approach to secondary education, led to an exodus of white students from the school, a precipitous drop in the percentages of graduates going on to four-year colleges, and a decline in overall school enrollment by almost half between 1965 and 1979. Oresick treads carefully here, giving free rein to criticisms by graduates from these years that the school allowed too many students to pass without any real academic standards, but also highlighting the citywide and regional athletic victories of school teams and the embrace of African American culture in the school curriculum and in school activities.

The renaissance in Schenley’s reputation, with modest enrollment recovery but a much more integrated student body, began in the mid-1980s through a set of magnet programs—an International Baccalaureate track; an English as a Second Language concentration; a tie-in with the Pittsburgh Ballet; a high-tech track working closely with the city’s universities—and a renewed focus on academics and social services for the mainstream students, still mostly African American, in the “Spartan Classics Academy” (p. 84). Oresick is at his lyrical best describing the virtual United Nations at the school around the time he attended, as teachers challenged students not only to embrace diversity in the abstract but also to confront the range of viewpoints that underlay diverse experiences.

However, whether Schenley either at its heights or its nadir was distinctive remains unclear, as Oresick makes little effort to place its experience in a broader context. There are charts which compare Schenley’s enrollment, racial makeup, and college attendance rates with those of other Pittsburgh high schools, but only intermittent attempts to analyze why the distinctions occurred or what they signified. At times the author adopts a “gee whiz” tone, beginning his chapter on Schenley’s decline in the early 1970s, for example, with a description of “stairwells and bathrooms ... filled with marijuana smoke” (p. 56), as if that were not commonplace in those years in countless suburban high schools as well.

The policy analyst takes over from the social historian for much of the second half of his text. First, Oresick sensitively analyzes the interplay in the 1970s and 1980s between the Pennsylvania Human Rights Commission’s integration directives, white backlash, city politics, and changing administrations at the district and school levels. Next, and in far greater detail, Oresick dissects the drawn-out decision to close Schenley, made ostensibly because of the crushing monetary burden that renovating the historic school building to eliminate asbestos would create. Oresick persuasively argues, by contrast, that both the science and the financial calculations behind the asbestos studies were flawed, that a new school superintendent from outside Pittsburgh and with little background in education failed to relate to the city’s neighborhoods, and that the school became in part collateral damage to the city’s tangled ethnic and racial politics. There are hints in Oresick’s study that Schenley’s closing was related to the larger, business-friendly forces involved in Pittsburgh’s postindustrial renewal efforts, but these remain only hints.

For those not part of the Schenley community, Oresick’s account will often appear as boosterism rather than analysis, as he oversells the school’s contributions. In his introduction Oresick highlights artist Andy Warhol and legal scholar Derrick Bell as graduates, but in his text he presents no evidence that either man remembered Schenley as having any influence on his life and work. He notes that Eleanor Roosevelt spoke at the school in 1956, but there is no indication that she interacted with students, as she appeared at a political rally which simply used the auditorium as a venue. That the African American opera singer Marian Anderson sang at an evening program arranged by a student club in the 1920s is more interesting, but, despite the build-up in the introduction,
her appearance garners only a third of a sentence in the text. (The account of Josh Gibson, the Negro Leagues baseball legend, storming into the cafeteria to get bullies to leave his son alone has more depth, and takes on wider interest given the recent screen portrayal by Denzel Washington of a character loosely based on Gibson in August Wilson’s *Fences* [2016].)

Oresick is too often uncritical in his use of sources. Two student recollections that teachers in the 1970s did not care whether students learned anything may or may not be significant; Oresick was far less diligent in ferreting out teachers’ perspectives. Oresick cites a self-published memoir to back up his statement that “blacks were also excluded from unions” in Pittsburgh in the 1930s and 1940s (p. 38), but this false generalization dismisses the policies of many Congress of Industrial Unions affiliates in the region beginning in the late 1930s. Oresick also pads his slim text with thirty-five pages of appendices, including a year-by-year record of most of the school’s sports teams and, inexplicably, the names, addresses, and major programs of every Pittsburgh high school, from the 1800s to the present.

There is value in having a eulogy of sorts for a school with a long and bumpy history in a major industrial, and now postindustrial, city. And Oresick succeeds in fulfilling one of the goals of the no longer new social history: to present the stories and perspectives of ordinary people as historical actors. But a book on such a crucial social institution in Pittsburgh as education which does not so much as mention the decline of steel and other manufacturing in the 1970s and 1980s as a determining factor in politics, finances, and even neighborhood change misses a chance to place its case study in a broader context. Similarly, a book on the dramatic reversals of fortune of one high school over the past three decades is incomplete if it makes only glancing reference to state funding, to the national mania for testing and accountability, and to the increased influence of educational “reformers” with backgrounds in business. Jake Oresick’s microhistory of Schenley High will engage Pittsburgh residents who remember the school and wonder why it closed, but it will stir only a ripple of interest among scholars and policymakers interested in successes, failures, and lessons learned in this “experiment” in urban education.

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