

Family History and the History of Families

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The State Library of Victoria, which opened its doors in Melbourne in 1856, was designed and built in a confident and expansive decade. Even as war clouds gathered in 1913 the Library's confidence remained strong and it added a magnificent domed reading room, designed with the British Museum Library very much in mind. This room, named the La Trobe Room after Charles Joseph La Trobe, the governor of the colony of Victoria at the time the library was planned, now contains the library's Australiana collection. I visit it reasonably frequently, and often, as I gather the books I want, I lament my loneliness, for most of the plentiful seats in this beautiful room are empty. The writing of Australian history is thriving at the moment, and some most interesting work draws on the State Library's rich collections of books, manuscripts, photographs, maps, paintings and much else that is available elsewhere in the library. But, to judge from the solitude and silence that usually surround me, this writing does not draw greatly from the collection held in the domed reading room.

The scene is different in the Library's genealogical collection, held in another interesting space which, like the reading room, has been recently and splendidly refurbished. Here experienced genealogists, some of them making a professional living from their work, move swiftly from source to source in their search for information; the multitude of records on microfiche and microfilm are usually in strong demand; the birth, death and marriage records, including many from England, Ireland and Scotland, are consistently consulted; so are the records of wills and probates, of immigration from the 1840s, of the ships that brought the immigrants, of Victorian hotels and crime, local histories, and much besides. Moreover, printed guides to the searching of family history and covering a range of countries where English is not the first language are available. I often hear people seeking assistance because they have not used a collection, or even a library, of this kind before. The genealogical venture, it is quite clear, has attracted people to the State Library's holdings who might not otherwise have visited them.

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Partly because of genealogical enquiries the extremely rich newspaper collection, held elsewhere in the library, is also heavily used. Many of the microfilms readers use to consult these newspapers squeak agedly as they spin around in the semi-dark room in which they have been placed. Little or no attempt has been made to provide adequate room, or light, to take notes from these microfilms; consequently these rich sources cannot be consulted in comfort. Laptops were not on the market when this room was designed, and, though those who run the library are presumably aware of their existence and may even use them, little or no attempt has been made to redesign the room to accommodate them. Despite these crowded, dark conditions family researchers are not deterred.

Outside the library the numerous genealogical societies are impressively busy and successful. The Genealogical Society of Victoria, for example, fills a whole floor in a large building in inner-city Melbourne; and is usually crowded with researchers. Books and journals devoted to the genealogical art proliferate; and courses, especially those that aim to assist the neophyte researcher, are plentiful. The multitudinous local historical societies scattered throughout the country are well aware of the needs of family historians and co-operate with them insofar as their resources allow. The productive activities of the Church of the Latter Day Saints are very well known internationally. And the web, of course, is alive with sites, chat groups and amateur and professional collections of information that, to varying degrees, are useful to family researchers. So plentiful is the material and so diverse its sources that one wonders how the family history enterprise functioned before the web began to weave its sometimes frustrating magic.

Of course, Sir Redmond Barry, the founder of the State Library of Victoria, did not have access to the web and would, one suspects, have found its democratic nature and its intellectual randomness distasteful. In any case he did not require a genealogist or a genealogical society to acquaint him with the history of the Barry family. And he may well have believed that ordinary people (his family's tenants in Ireland, for example) could not claim to have a family history. In his generation that was reserved for families of the ruling class — the lower orders had more urgent things, such as survival, on their minds. For Barry, like other members of the Irish Ascendancy, the oral and written history, the statues and paintings, the wills and collections of family documents encountered in the family home, as well as day-to-day living in that home, shaped the understanding of family history both at a personal level and in the larger context of Irish social and political life. Such a family's history was a familiar presence that did not have to be discovered and could be absorbed without the need for formally studying it. Viewed in this light family

history may well have been 'the ancestor and root of all other forms of historical enquiry'.¹

Most people lack the certainties of families like the Barrys and, if they wish to study the history of their own family, have to search for themselves or pay someone else to do the searching. As the construction of a family tree is often taken as a sensible way to begin that search, the genealogical societies and genealogical collections such as that at the State Library of Victoria have found themselves in great demand. Richard Aldrich, the person whom this issue of *Education Research and Perspective* honours, in one of his latest articles, 'Family history and the history of the family', published in what is his latest book, *Public or Private Education? Lessons from History* (2004), has grappled with some of the complexities of historical writing focussed on the family. I thought it fitting in this essay to reflect on some of the issues raised in his article.

The title of the article distinguishes between 'family history', which is concerned with the history of a particular family, and 'history of the family', which concentrates on the development of the family as an institution and is studied as one might pursue economic history or the history of cricket — one of Richard Aldrich's loves. Even if family history is not the ancestor of all forms of historical enquiry historians have long been interested in it. And so have large number of families. Aldrich draws attention to the events on 2 January 2002 when the Public Record Office placed on the internet the 1901 Census, which has a complete list of the 32.5 million inhabitants of England, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man who were at home on 31 March 1901. During the first five days of its availability 1.2 million users per hour attempted to access the website, which of course crashed. Would-be users of the service vented their frustration on the Public Record Office at the spectacular underestimate of demand and at the online costs that family (and other) historians considered prohibitive.² The market was angry indeed, but clearly it was very large.

Interest in this market was already obvious and not simply through the formation of societies to further its cause. The number of manuals and magazines offering to help family historians to find sources for the study of family history and, having found them, to find their way around the sources, official and private, is extraordinary. These books or computer programs or magazines offer assistance with family history as a general field, but also work at many specific levels — surnames, particular districts, specific occupations or fields of activity (people who have been connected with the military or police or banks or estate agencies, for example), individuals from particular countries or cities or districts, or particular religions, or belonging to specific associations or societies. What is driving

this demand, this clearly widespread and earnest (even driven) search for family beginnings? What is the peculiar attraction of family history? Does it provide some sort of ballast to balance the present and make the future more comfortable?

The historical origins of its appeal were clearly practical: thrones, inheritances, marriages and the power attached to them were and still are intimately related to family. So knowing family origins and understanding their consequences mattered. Sometimes family origins still matter in a terrifying and immediate way. They mattered immensely to Victor Klemperer, a decorated veteran of World War 1, on 15 May 1945. His extraordinarily brave and brutally honest diaries, whose discovery would have meant death for him and his wife (though she was not Jewish), tell of his anguished life as a Jewish civilian in Germany throughout the Second World War. At the end of the war, having removed the yellow star he was required to wear and been supplied with temporary papers, Klemperer and his wife fled from Dresden after the centre of the city had been reduced to rubble by the Anglo-American air raid. When the war ended they were in a village in Upper Bavaria. In an attempt to secure a travel permit that would enable them to return home Klemperer waited until the crowd surrounding a young woman official, who was answering enquiries on such matters, thinned out. He approached her and 'I told her in a low voice and in a few words, who I was, and pushed my Jewish identity card over to her. Immediately smiling courtesy, helpfulness, expressions of respect. One "Herr Professor" after the other'.³ His family origins, which for the last six years had been the cause of so much suffering, peril and humiliation (including dismissal from his professorship at Dresden University), were no longer a disadvantage.

No doubt most of those who were interested in family history and searched the PRO's new web site had less dramatic reasons for investigating the past. However, as Richard Aldrich has suggested, there is no reason to believe that the present interest in family history is more profound or more widespread than it was a century ago. But then, of course, especially outside the cities, life in England or Scotland or Wales was more stable. The late nineteenth-century Oxfordshire society brought so memorably to life in Flora Thompson's moving trilogy, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, is (among other things) family history as it can almost never be written.⁴ She describes with intense, clear-eyed affection, at once gentle but unsentimental, a society that is headed for dissolution by forces it cannot withstand. Within that society awareness of family was profound, complex and instinctive and Thomson recreates and illuminates the past with unmatched sensitivity. Had the PRO website then been available few people from *Lark Rise* would have needed to consult it. For those who

lived in that small part of England the past was part of, was instinctively lived in, the present, as in today's much more mobile society it can rarely be.

The passing of the society that Flora Thompson described has led to gains as well as losses. You can sit at home and use the internet to find original copies of Flora Thompson's book and even if the best copy at the most reasonable price seems to come from a bookseller in another country you can purchase it and have it delivered swiftly to your home. Nevertheless, the present interest in family history may reflect a desire to experience (perhaps to retrieve) some of the confident sense of identity that developed or seems to have developed in a past in which people knew where they came from. Quiet, knowledge of a tightly circumscribed family life such as Thompson describes may seem attractive to the deracinated. Similarly meticulously constructed family trees conveniently and vividly displayed on the computer, as they often are, can have a special mesmerism. They may give those who construct them and those who use them a sense of stability or a feeling of continuity with the past in a world that is often bewildering and alienating.

For families descended from English, Scottish or Irish migrants, as many families in the United States, Canada and Australia are, the search for roots, as it is often and revealingly described, can be particularly intense. If these migrants left their native land in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries the search can have particular meaning. To take my own country as an example: the first migrants to Australia (the Aboriginal people had come to the continent forty to sixty thousand years earlier and so can hardly be regarded as migrants) were, of course, the convicts and their gaolers. They came in relatively small numbers compared to those who flooded in during the gold rushes of the mid nineteenth century; the population of the city of Melbourne, for example, increased five times over in the decade of the 1840s. Though in the past convict-descent was regarded by many as a matter of shame, in more recent decades the discovery of a convict ancestor has often been prized, partly because it can be read as a defiance of authority or nurture the belief that those who sent the convicts out were more morally reprehensible than the convicts themselves. And partly also because convict descent establishes a clear ancestry and one which can sometimes be more easily traced (for example, through court records and newspaper reports) in the country from which the convicts were transported.

Moreover, because convicts were 'official' migrants and of considerable importance in public policy and political disputes until well into the nineteenth century, they can sometimes be found in Australian or home records more easily than can those of most migrants who flooded in during

the gold rushes. Almost all of that much larger number of migrants may be found in the shipping records, held on microfilms in state public record offices or in the well resourced collections of some genealogical societies. These records provide some details of the immigrants' background: port of departure, age, occupation, religion, marital status, and ability (or lack of it) to read and/or write, for example. Once disgorged into the port of Melbourne or other colonial ports these migrants dispersed in (mostly) unrecorded ways as they struggled to establish themselves in their new country. They can be found easily now only if they became notorious or famous.

Some of the convicts, having served their time, returned to their native country, but the overwhelming majority of the immigrants who came in the 1840s and 1850s remained in Australia. The journey of four months in a sailing ship was expensive and dangerous, though the shipboard mortality rate was much lower than that on the migrant ships used on the three-week trip between England and the United States — governmental authorities, concerned about the likely loss of life on the voyage to Australia demanded high standards of health and hygiene, whereas conditions on the ships travelling to the United States were simply left to market forces, with disastrous results.⁵ Some (usually very successful) migrants returned from Australia to England, Ireland or Scotland. Money was sometimes sent back to support families at home and/or to assist other family members to emigrate. But overwhelmingly (unlike Magwich) the overwhelming majority of nineteenth-century emigrants never returned from Australia. Nor did their children's generation return or even visit in significant numbers. For better or worse, most of the first two generations of migrants came and stayed, whether they wished to or not.

For those who could write, letters were one way of easing the separation, and valuable collections of such letters with perceptive commentaries have been made — David Fitzpatrick's, *Oceans of Consolation: personal accounts of Irish immigration to Australia* (1994), for example.⁶ Some similar collections document the lives of English and Scottish migrants. However, though these collections of letters are very valuable, the chances that a family historian, grappling to tell the story of a particular family, will come across letters to or from that family in such collections is remote. In any case, especially in the 1850s and 1860s, a minority (but nevertheless a considerable number) of immigrants could neither read nor write. Their isolation was deep indeed, though sometimes they might persuade others (including their children) to read or write for them. With the vast majority of nineteenth-century migrants to Australia, however, whether or not they were literate, the family historian can make no contact and can therefore do no more than guess whether or not the

letters that have been preserved describe experiences that their ancestors shared.

Of course, a small number became famous and may be found in dictionaries of biography or even have biographies devoted to them. For the rest the family historian searches in familiar places: newspapers, government records of various kinds, the proceedings of courts, the papers of innumerable societies, police and prison files, street directories, censuses, rate books, church records, land files, local histories, electoral rolls, school rolls and magazines, and the very many other records with which these historians have become familiar. Sometimes the rewards are rich but the most typical result of such searching is a family tree, often with photographs, and with additional commentary whose detail and density is variable. There are, of course, many other ways of making accessible the results of research into family history, one of the more intriguing and effective being the system used in J. Richard Houston's, *Numbering the Survivors: A History of the Standish Family of Ireland, Ontario and Alberta*.⁷

For many people such a result is satisfactory. It gives them some sense of their family's history, places their families in particular historical and geographical contexts which have meaning to them, makes it possible for them to visit overseas towns, cities or countrysides in search of the spirits of their predecessors, provides land or houses or graves which can be turned into family monuments, perhaps locates some heroes, villains or fools who can be celebrated, and through the discovery of photographs (and very occasionally paintings) bestows a physical appearance on predecessors who were previously names only and whose likenesses might be found among the living. In pursuit of the past the family historian may well consult and then organise and make accessible to the family a wide range of historical sources and perhaps bring to local historians, whose books and other writings are often of great value to the family historian, some new figures to inhabit the landscapes they have painted.

Family history can take other shapes in the hands of biographers of well-known families, especially those who choose to concern themselves with a subject's family as a whole. John Rickard's subtle and innovative study focuses on the family of Alfred Deakin, the Australian Prime Minister on three occasions in the early twentieth century, and includes an invented interview (in the form of a brief play) between two crucial characters, Deakin's sister and his wife. In quite different style Adrian Desmond's and James Moore's, *Darwin*, brings brilliantly to life not only his scientific endeavours but his complex and fascinating family. Understanding his family, these authors show, apparently effortlessly, is crucial to understanding Darwin the man and Darwin the scientist.⁸ Most family history, of

course, is concerned with less dramatic and less well-known characters but plentiful material (including letters and diaries) can sometimes be available for less famous people.

Whether such material is easily available or not, a family (and not necessarily a famous one) can often be brought to life or at least treated at greater depth if it is placed against a background of the history of the family, that is, of an analysis of the family as an 'historical phenomenon', as Richard Aldrich has called it.⁹ Historical background, often of conflicting kinds, is provided, for example, by the rich and plentiful writings of Phillipe Ariès, such as *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) that not long ago had an almost canonical status but looks much shakier now, Rosemary O'Day, *The Family and Family Relationships: England, France and the United States of America* (1994), Harry Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society, 1880–1990*, (1997), Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, (1987) and Davidoff with Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy 1830–1960* (1999). Davidoff and her colleagues are particularly challenging and also particularly valuable for they set out avowedly to challenge the nostalgia which can surround the golden age of childhood, at least as it sometimes exists in memories of childhood. 'The first purpose in our narration of the family story is ... to challenge myths and assumptions about this golden age and to shift the nuclear family from its central idealized position'.¹⁰ Such astringency, even if the central premises of this book are rejected, may drive the family historian to see that historians of the family can shed a sharp new light on the comfortable and the familiar.

Probably many of those experiencing frustration when they sought to access the 1901 Census on the internet in January 2002 shared the assumption of the census designers that 'household' was more or less equivalent to 'family'. If they did, as Davidoff and her colleagues point out, they were accepting assumptions about the family that can be seriously challenged. In a middle-class home there may well have been servants who were part of the household but not part of the family and who were even required to dress in ways that indicated that they were not: maids had to wear indoor caps until well into the twentieth century 'by which time they had become a resented badge of servility'. And in a remarkably revealing piece of thoughtless arrogance, which betrays how unexamined cultural assumptions posed as scientific objectivity, wives who worked at home were classified for census purposes from the 1881 census onwards as 'unoccupied' and removed from the occupational tables.¹¹

In a quite different way Richard Aldrich has tried to ask questions which call the accepted into question in his article in *Public or Private*

Education? He finishes this article with an examination of his own family history as seen through the eyes of his father who late in life became the family historian.¹² An historian son thus looked at the work of an amateur family historian, and at the same time influenced it by the discussions he had with his father. Though he looks with a kindly eye, Richard Aldrich nevertheless enables a reader to see his father, George Aldrich, in ways his father may not always have seen himself.

This type of relationship is obviously rare but a challenging and reasonably new historical trend which may provide family historians with another means of telling their private story and at the same time enriching it by the insights of historians of the family. Robert Darnton, Professor of History at Princeton, writing in *The New York Review of Books* and reviewing John Brewer's *A Sentimental Murder: Love and Madness in the Eighteenth Century* (2004), has noted (and in his article discusses) a new genre of historical studies. He has decided that this genre deserves a name and suggests 'incident analysis' because the large number of books he refers to in his article share one characteristic: 'they focus on an incident, relate it as a story, and follow its repercussions through the social order and even, in some cases, across successive periods of time'. They pose 'dizzying questions', he says: 'How can we know what actually happened? What delineates fact from fiction? Where is truth to be found among competing interpretations?' This historical genre, Darnton suggests, may lead its readers to conclude that 'the past, when seen up close, looks more inscrutable than ever.'¹³

Brewer's book centres around an event that occurred between 11.30 pm and midnight on 7 April 1779 when James Hackman, a Church of England clergyman, who had been ordained for only a week, shot and killed Martha Ray, the mistress of John Montagu, the fourth Earl of Sandwich, in London on the steps of the Covent Garden Theatre. He then attempted unsuccessfully to shoot himself. He was tried and found guilty by a bench chaired by the famous judge, Sir William Blackstone, whose *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69) was on its way to becoming the most influential exposition of English law. Hackman was hanged at Tyburn on 19 April, only twelve days after the event at Covent Garden.

Brewer's book is not a detective story, though it reads as easily as if it were. He is able to examine the events, what led up to them, and what followed from them, from many different viewpoints, including those of the three main figures, Hackman, Ray and Sandwich, an unpleasant libertine who, as well as lending his name to the sandwich (which, as is well known, he invented in order to enable his time at the gaming table to be unbroken by the need for eating) had nine children by Martha Ray. The main purpose of the book is not that of the detective story in which

the 'truth' underlying the events is sought and eventually discovered. Brewer is much more postmodern, though fortunately he writes subtle, jargon-free prose. He sets out in his own words 'to write a history of the accounts, narratives, stories — call them what you will — that were built around James Hackman's killing of Martha Ray'.

I am not suggesting that family historians, even very tactful ones, should attempt such an analysis, though no doubt it would be interesting if they did. However, they may well be aware of events in the family history, not necessarily traumatic ones, about which much is known and about which people have different views. A study of the kind that Brewer decided not to do may enrich an understanding of a particular family's history and take the historian, and the family concerned, into wider views of its history and the way it works. Richard Aldrich has not raised such a possibility and, being a gentle man, may feel uneasy about the tensions such an approach might bring to life. Whatever he feels, historians of the family and family historians have much to gain by reflecting on some of the issues he raises in the article I have been discussing. And by pondering the possibilities opened up by Darnton's category of 'incident history'. If that were done family historians in Melbourne may find themselves from time to time moving from the genealogical section of the State Library of Victoria and spending more time in its domed reading room.

NOTES

1. D. Steel and L Taylor, *Family History in School*, Phillimore, London, 1973, quoted in Richard Aldrich, 'Family history and history of the family' in Richard Aldrich (ed.), *Public or Private Education? Lessons from History*, Woburn Press, London, 2004, p.127.
2. Aldrich, 'Family history and history of the family', p.136.
3. *To the Bitter End: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer 1942-45* (translated by Martin Chalmers), Phoenix, London, 2000, p.586.
4. Flora Thomson, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1982.
5. Robin Haines, *Life and Death in the Age of Salt: The Passage to Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2003.
6. Cork University Press, Cork, 1994.
7. Generation Press, Agincourt, Ontario, 1979.
8. John Rickard, *A Family Romance: The Deakin Family at Home*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996, pp.127-30 and Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin*, Penguin Books, London, 1992.
9. Aldrich, 'Family history and history of the family', p.129.
10. Phillipe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood; A Social History of Family Life*, Knopf, New York, 1962; Rosemary O'Day, *The Family and Family Relationships: England, France and the United States of America*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1994; Harry Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society, 1880-1990*,

Cambridge [England] and New York, 1997; Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1987; Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Find and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy, 1830-1960*, Longman, London and New York, 1999, pp.3-4.

11. Davidoff, Doolittle, Fink and Holden, pp.36, 162, 28.
12. Aldrich, 'Family history and history of the family', pp.136-40.
13. Robert Darnton, 'It Happened One Night', *The New York Review of Books*, vol. LI, no. 11, 2004, pp.60-64. Brewer's book was published by Harper Collins, London, 2004.