

1 June 2013
Volume 1, Issue 2

History Detective

THANK YOU!

Writing is such an isolated occupation. Authors like myself sit in our studies tapping away at our computers, rarely speaking to anyone—indeed, engaging with others mainly through our words rather than our selves. I think it's one of the reasons why, when I had my career change last year, I decided to build up my speaking business rather than undertake paid research: engaging with the human race—wonderful! So when I sent out the first issue of the *History Detective* newsletter, I thought it would disappear into the ether as if it had never existed—except, perhaps, for a few unsubtle requests to take a person's name off my mailing list! Instead, I received so many emails saying how much the readers enjoyed the newsletter and will look forward to the next one that I decided to produce a newsletter every month. It will be published on the first of the month in a proper newsletter format.

BUT: When I produced a formal version of the first newsletter and emailed it out as an attachment, one-sixth of the emails bounced—perhaps because the person's inbox was full or too small or because of firewalls. So I will send out an advisory email on the last day of the month to say that it is coming, with partial contents in the email body and a "read more" link to the website version. That way, if the main email doesn't get through, you can still access it, and if you want to print it out, you can email me and I will try to manually send it.

BLOGS

Some of the emails I received included comments about information contained in the newsletter. I really appreciated the comments. In fact, I realised that it would be useful if others could read them as well. So I decided to begin some more blog posts—all now shown on the right. Feel free to add your own thoughts as your knowledge might also help others. If everyone shares, everyone benefits.

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BLOGS

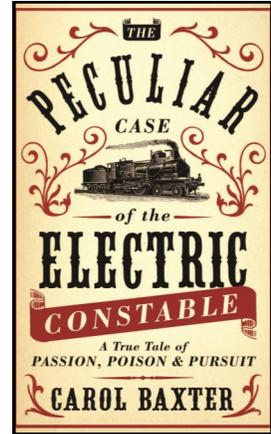
- Carol's Chronicles
- History Hints
- Words to the Wise
- Rave Reviews
- Publishing Pointers

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TAWELL TIDBITS

Books like *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable* go through a huge edit process, but the end is drawing nigh and the book will soon go off to the printers. I just received the following feedback from the freelance British proof-reader, Benjamin Marvin, who is well known for reading books of the same historical timeframe. Thank you Benjamin!

'I absolutely love this book! The amount of research that's gone into it is mind-boggling, and Carol has done an awesome job of skilfully combining all the elements to bring the people involved to life. John Tawell was a nasty piece of work, yet despite wanting him to be found guilty of his crimes I was genuinely horrified at the terrible way his life came to an end. Every chapter is consistently great, but the Quaker's final days are so packed with tension that I actually began to sympathise with him. Until the very end, of course. What a fascinating story. This has all the elements I look for in a book, and I was hooked from page 1. This is how it's done.'



PUBLISHING POINTERS: PRICE GUIDELINES

It may seem like I am starting backwards by discussing price as the first Publishing Pointer, but for those planning to self-publish a 'how to' book or family history, price is really important. It is impossible to 'break even', so you have to make a profit or a loss. To state the obvious, always plan to make a profit.

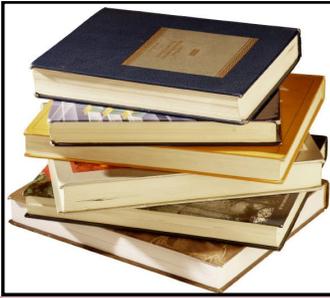
A rule of thumb is to price your book at five times the printing cost. And don't forget GST (in Australia). This might seem an extraordinarily high cost-to-sale ratio but you will often need to provide big discounts. For example, distributors buy books for around 25-33% of the Recommended Retail Price so if you want to use a distributor and if your book is not priced at five times the printing cost you would make no money.

Also, you can sit on stock for years, either because you print too many books or because your book sells slowly, so you

want to have your costs covered early on. Even now famous authors can have 'dud' books. Simon Winchester, the author of *Atlantic* (and *The Surgeon of Crowthorne* reviewed last month), was asked why he had written about the Atlantic Ocean and not the larger Pacific Ocean. He said that he did write about the Pacific Ocean, many years ago, but the book didn't sell well. About 28 copies!

If your book is expensive to print, this ratio is unrealistic as you would never sell any books. If that is the case, forget the idea of using a distributor. At the very least, price your book so that you have broken even when two-thirds of your print-run is sold.

I also heard recently that books should be priced in the "7" range: that is, \$17, \$27, \$37. I guess it gets away from the silly prices like \$29.99—that fool no one.



Monthly Musings

At a recent meeting of the National Speakers Association, the speaker talked about ... fruit trees. No, the talk wasn't about gardening. It was about the importance of building and maintaining business networks, so that we can help others and they can help us. He mentioned fruit trees because they, like relationships, take time to bear fruit.

It's takes time to find success whenever we venture onto a new pathway—including writing and researching—so what matters most is to enjoy the journey. That way, even if that rotten 'pot of gold' keeps receding into the distance, the emotional rewards along the way make up for it.

WORDS TO THE WISE: DANGLING MODIFIERS

'Oh no!' says a member of my family in sombre tones, as if the hounds from hell have just been unleashed. 'A daaaan-gling modifier!!'

I had just been grumbling that the edit process for *The Peculiar Case* had produced *two* dangling modifiers and that the bound proof pages had gone out to professional writers with these grammatical errors in it. Embarrassing! In fact, in my four mainstream books, I've had three different editors turn a perfectly good sentence into a dangling modifier. It's not uncommon, as it turns out. I once read that famous author Norman Mailer started a book—the first sentence!—with a dangling modifier. No one along the way—that is, the commissioning editor, the in-house editor, the freelance copy editor, or the proof-reader—noticed it.

Oh, sorry. I can see hands tentatively being raised and hear voices whispering, 'What on earth is a dangling modifier?' I think the best way to explain the problem is to provide an example. Here is a single sentence written two different ways:

Mary fell over on the way to the shops.

On the way to the shops, Mary fell over.

In the latter sentence, the subject of the sentence, "Mary", should immediately follow the initial clause or *modifier* "On the way to the shops" or else the modifier has been left *dangling*. This example will seem blindingly obvious and beg the question: how could anyone get such a sentence construction wrong? Other examples are not as simple, like the one from my book.

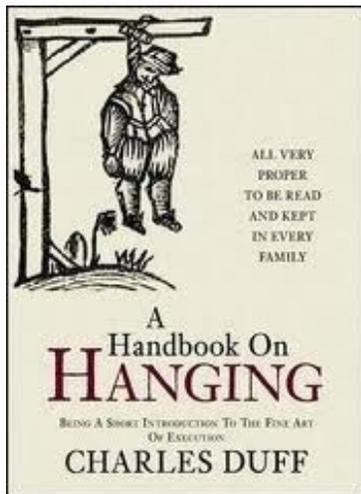
I wrote: "In desperate need of gold coin for the war effort, Parliament in 1797 had passed legislation ..."

The edit process changed it to: "In desperate need of gold coin for the war effort, in 1797 Parliament had passed legislation ..."

BUT: the year "1797" was not in need of gold coin for the war effort; rather, Parliament was. That being the case, the subject being modified (Parliament) had been separated from the modifier (In desperate need ...) by the intrusion of something else (in 1797), thereby creating a dangling modifier.

Keep an eye out for these sentence constructions in your own writing. If professional editors can make errors, we all can.

RAVE REVIEWS: CHARLES DUFF'S *A HISTORY OF HANGING*



Wales—so the politics, practicalities and philosophy of capital punishment are important themes. When I came across Charles Duff's book, I decided that it fell within my reviewing purview because Australia was founded as a penal settlement and many of the convict transportees initially received death sentences.

I found Duff's book in the library of my alma mater, Macquarie University, in the section on capital punishment. I picked it up and read the full title: *A Handbook on Hanging: being a short introduction to the fine Art of Execution, containing much useful Information on Neck-breaking, Throttling, Strangling, Asphyxiation, Decapitation, and Electrocutation ...* Cute title, I thought. I flipped through the pages; it seemed to be readable (in one of my Words to the Wise pieces I will talk about unreadable academic writing!) so I borrowed it. I began reading it while sitting in a train.

I started by thinking how beautifully it was written, in a cool satirical voice masquerading as one of naïve confusion. As usual, when I appreciate the quality of an author's prose, I check out who the author was, who the publisher was, and

To continue the 'dangling' theme: Currently, I am writing a book called *The Lucretia Borgia of Botany Bay*, which tells the story of the last woman executed in New South

when the book was published. I discovered that it was first written in 1928, with updated editions every ten years until 1961, that the late great Christopher Hitchens wrote an introduction to a 2001 edition, and that reprints and new print-runs keep on coming. On the back of the book was a review: 'A very deadly squib ... likely to upset the equanimity of upholders of capital punishment far more than any ponderous tome of "high explosive" argument or investment.'

So, as I said, I began reading the book on the train. Big mistake! Not far in, for example, the book talks about John Lee who 'refused to die' despite having one of the greatest of hangmen, Mr Berry, as his executioner. 'The cruel fact remains,' wrote Duff, 'three times he tried to hang John Lee; and three times he failed. Unhappily, no record was kept of what Mr Hangman Berry said or thought when he found that John Lee had bested him.' (spurt of laughter). 'It was a humiliating position for any English executioner. Let's hope the hangman was adequately paid for his extra work and the frustration in this case' (another spurt of laughter) ... 'No flaw or hitch could be discovered in the whole business. John Lee simply won the game, feet down.' (by now I was chortling) ... 'I have no doubt whatever in my own mind that John Lee could have been brought to a satisfactory end had the authorities permitted the hangman a few further attempts. I should put the limit at thirteen. After all, however artistic a hangman may be, he is human and bound to fail sometimes: *To err is human, to forgive divine* (B this time, in the infamous words of Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, I was nearly 'peeing my pants').

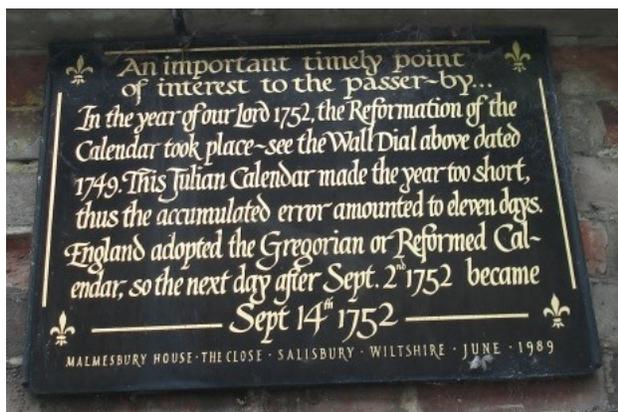
Before I was sixty pages through, I had bought a copy of my own. What a gem!

HISTORY HINTS: CALENDAR CONFUSION—LADY DAY

Has anyone who has lived in England wondered why their tax year begins on the odd date of 6 April? It was one of those passing thoughts I had when I worked there many years ago (so I could undertake family history research, of course!). The answer lies in the date chosen for Christmas Day.

The date 25 December, which falls three or four days after the northern hemisphere's winter solstice, has been important since ancient times. In Ancient Babylon it celebrated the birth of the Son of Isis, with lots of partying and gift-giving. In Rome, the winter solstice celebrations ended with the feast of Brumalia on 25 December. Many Romans followed the cult of the Sun God Mithra; they reportedly believed that Mithra was born of a virgin on 25 December and came to earth to save men from their sins, and that, as he 'grew', the days would become longer and warmer.

In the fourth century the Romans made the political decision to officially deify Jesus Christ (some Christian sects didn't believe in his divinity) and to impose Christianity on their predominantly pagan majority so as to ease social unrest. Pope Julius 1 decided that the pagans would convert to Christianity more readily if Christian celebrations were held on the same days as pagan celebrations. So, although theologians say that Christ was born in September or October, the Christians chose to celebrate the birth of their 'Son of God' on the same day many pagans celebrated the birth of their Sun God.



Nine months before that, 25 March, became the Feast of the Annunciation when the angel Gabriel supposedly announced the conception of Christ in the Virgin Mary. This date became known as Lady Day.

In England, Lady Day became the first day of both the calendar year and the financial year. That being the case, the date 24 March 1750 was followed by 25 March 1751. But in 1752, England not only dumped eleven days from its calendar (see Newsletter 1 and picture below), it also dumped Lady Day as the beginning of the calendar year, and changed to the calendar we use today. So 31 December 1751 was followed by 1 January 1752—which means that, in the English calendar at least, the dates 1 January to 24 March 1751 never existed! How bizarre is that. Which also explains why George Washington's birthday was officially changed from 11 February **1731** to 22 February **1732** as mentioned in the previous newsletter.

This explains why the *International Genealogical Index*, for example, can list two entries for the same person with the year of the event differing by one year, one generally being from the official church register transcription and the other from a contributor. To solve this problem, historians and genealogists should use a notation like '1731/32' for the pre-1752 dates between 1 January and 24 March. Or to be even more accurate (or pedantic): 11/22 February 1731/32!

But back to Lady Day. What were the Brits to do about their financial year? Rents were paid on 'quarter days', that is, Lady Day, Midsummer's Day (24 June), Michaelmas (29 September) and Christmas Day. Fiddling with the nation's finances would be a nightmare. So the days deleted from the calendar for September 1752 were added to 25 March with the result that the new financial year began, thereafter, on 6 April.

Thank you to Clare Shiels for the picture.



About the author

Carol Baxter is the author of three critically-acclaimed works of narrative non-fiction published by Allen & Unwin (*An Irresistible Temptation*, *Breaking the Bank*, and *Captain Thunderbolt and his Lady*), with another title (*The Lucretia Borgia of Botany Bay*) coming out in 2014. Her fourth book, *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable*, is being published internationally by Britain's Oneworld in 2013. She is also the author of a genealogical 'how to' book, *Writing Interesting Family Histories*, and has more 'how to' books in the pipeline. She is a Fellow of the Society of Australian Genealogists and an adjunct lecturer at the University of New England (NSW), and has edited many sets of early Australian records.

EMAIL MAILING LIST

Please forward this email newsletter to anyone you think might find it interesting or useful. They can then contact me if they wish to be added to the mailing list. Each time I publish a book, I will draw a name from the mailing list and that person will receive a free copy of my book. Those on my mailing list will also be eligible for pre-publication discount offers when I self-publish a 'how to' book. If you would prefer not to receive future issues, please let me know.

FAREWELL

So, until the next issue, the History Detective bids you good researching, writing, and reading.

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