



1 September 2013  
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# History Detective

## THE PECULIAR CASE OF THE ELECTRIC CONSTABLE:

**A true tale of passion, poison and pursuit**

OK, readers, a page of shameless self-promotion follows! On 5 September, *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable* will be published in the United Kingdom, and on 8 October in USA and Canada. Distribution hiccups have delayed the Australian release date until 30 October, but the good news is that I have **ADVANCE COPIES** so you can purchase a book before everyone else. Special deals are available on my website. You can make a note in the shipping details section if you want your book signed. To place an order, go to the Orders tab on the top-bar menu of my website: [www.carolbaxter.com](http://www.carolbaxter.com).

Attendees at the **NSW and ACT Genealogical Conference** (Canberra, September 2013) can pre-order copies and collect them from Keith Johnson at the conference, or buy one there (but stock will be limited).

**REVIEW:** A review has been published in the international trade magazine for booksellers, *Publishers Weekly*. It begins:

Fans of Erik Larson's true-crime thrillers will be pleased by this gripping account that presents a tipping point in the public acceptance of the telegraph: its use in 1845 to alert the authorities in London that a murder suspect had boarded a train headed there. With a novelist's flair for drama, using details that were painstakingly extracted from the historical record, Australian popular historian Baxter (*An Irresistible Temptation*) recreates the life of suspect John Tawell, a Quaker who had been transported for forgery, the events leading up to his apprehension on suspicion of having poisoned Sarah Hart, and his prosecution. Along the way, the story takes several unexpected twists, and Baxter does a stellar job of integrating details ... [see full review on my website or, even better, just read the book for yourself!].

**TAWELL WEBSITE:** Check out the book's website, but it is best to read the book first before reading Tawell's biography: [www.johntawell.com](http://www.johntawell.com)

**AUTHOR TALKS, RADIO INTERVIEWS:** If you go to the Calendar tab on my website, you will see my diary of talks and interviews. Come along if you live in the area or tune in to the radio interviews.

**FACEBOOK:** Search by its title for the book's Facebook page. I will include reviews, podcast links and diary bookings on that as well.

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### BLOGS

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## MONTHLY MUSINGS

With the publication of my new book imminent, I decided to google the title to see what came up. In addition to listing lots of bookshops that would stock the book (some with website extensions I had never seen before), and a couple of newspaper articles in areas relevant to the story, it brought up an article published in *Publishers Weekly* last March under the title 'The Big Books U.S. Agents Will be Selling at the London Book Fair'. It was a lengthy article so I flicked over it until I came to a section titled 'Curtis Brown/Gelfman Schneider', the former being my literary agency. The paragraph named books from four fiction writers: Margaret Atwood, John le Carre, Jeffrey Deaver, and a name I didn't recognise. Then it said: 'The big nonfiction title from the agencies is Carol Baxter's *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable ...*'

I nearly fell off my chair. Glad I didn't know about it at the time as the film rights were not sold. 'Maybe one day,' I sighed, after reading the article.

Then ..... ----->>>>

## RAVE REVIEWS: FIONA RULE'S 'THE WORST STREET IN LONDON'

The *Independent on Sunday* described *The Worst Street in London* as a 'fascinating micro-history of the life and grimes of a long forgotten place'. Great description!

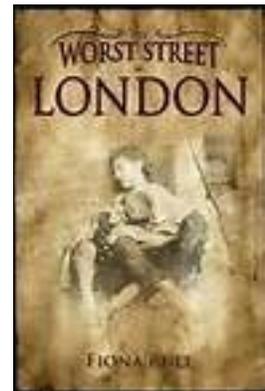
And it is indeed fascinating. The 400 foot-long Dorset Street in Spitalfields exists no longer; however, it was once the most notorious thoroughfare in London and the home of exactly the sort of people Britain wanted to get rid of when they sent their convicts to Australia. In fact, the convict forebears of many Australians probably came from Dorset street or the like, so this is a must-read for anyone with convict ancestors from Britain's cities. It will help you understand your ancestors world and feel the atmosphere of a place where desperation forced people to resort to whatever means they could to survive. (I do wish that 'middle-class' people would stop bleating about how tough we have it today!)

Fiona traces the history of Spitalfields from the 1190s when a priory and medical facility was built and named the Priory of St Mary Spital (or hospital). The field at its rear was called ... yes, you've guessed it: Spital Field. The name *Dorset Street* began as *Datchett Street*, from its owner, William Datchett. Considering the street's later reputation, he would probably have been glad that the name changed from *Datchett* to *Dorset*. No one knows why it changed, but I remember once reading in a book on surnames that common usage often changes a name to something more meaningful and memorable, and that if the surname *Havercroft* had been 'created' in the 1960s, it would probably have soon become *Hovercraft*. It's easy to imagine that that's what might have happened in the case of Dorset street.

Absorb the history about the street and its inhabitants—including three of Jack the Ripper's victims. What a gruesome way to go!

**FILM INTEREST for *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable* (written in small font as I have learnt that it is a waste of time and energy to get excited ...)**

Two days after the *Publishers Weekly* review came out (see page 1), I received an email from a Hollywood film company, one that has produced some well-known and critically acclaimed feature films. They said they were intrigued by the reviews and asked to read the manuscript. Naturally, I said 'forget it!' ..... Not! I said I would be 'delighted' to send the proofs to them. Since then, there has been some interest from closer to home as well. Stayed tuned (but don't hold your breath. The odds ...).



## WORDS TO THE WISE: NEGATIVITY

My family and I were eating breakfast on our recent cruise when an announcement came over the loudspeaker system. It was one of many such announcements on our eventful cruise, which included two medical evacuations (each requiring a change to the itinerary), and an 'emergency evacuation team' call-out due to reports of a burning smell (a short-circuit in the galley that was quickly fixed—as we were informed by an exceedingly loud loudspeaker message at 3.40am to make sure that rumours didn't spread—yeah, right, up to that point we had all been asleep!).

On this particular day, we had just anchored opposite an island and were to take a tender boat to the shore. The announcement said:

'The elders have put signs on the beach saying that swimming has not been prohibited because a great white shark has been spotted in the bay.' The officer evidently failed to

notice his double-negative as he didn't correct himself, but it wasn't hard to determine what he had been trying to say:

*swimming is not permitted; or  
swimming is prohibited'*

It started me thinking about something I had recently read in one of my writing books, something that hadn't resonated with me when I first read the book (which is why we should read such books over and over again). It said that writers should try to craft positive rather than negative sentences for purposes of clarity and sentence strength.

When you think about the above sentences, you can see that the second sentence is the positive sentence and that it is a tiny bit clearer and a lot stronger than the first. Moreover, the second sentence has fewer words, which is something that writers should aspire towards. Amateur writers tend to be wordier than professionals. 'Tighter' writing is better writing.

With this example running round in my head, I went back to my cabin and started writing this newsletter article (on a holiday? Yep. Mad!).

Later, as I was reading one of the crime/thrillers I enjoy, the following sentence jumped out at me:

*'I'm not a coroner who believes in restricting access to my enquiries.'*

The speaker was in fact a coroner, suggesting that this was a badly-phrased negative sentence. How could it be better phrased? I began by sliding the negative slightly to the right to produce the following:

*'I'm a coroner who does not believe in restricting access to my enquiries.'*

So 'the coroner' is now a coroner—accurate—but the 'belief' has become a non-belief—not good. Also, the sentence still takes longer to decipher than it should. So I slid the negative further to the right:

*'I'm a coroner who believes in not restricting access to my enquiries.'*

Aha! This is better. The negative is now butting up against the relevant part of the sentence. This makes it easier to comprehend.

Completely eliminating the 'not' produces the strongest and most positive sentence of them all, one that is particularly easy to understand:

*'I'm a coroner who believes in allowing access to my enquiries'*

Sometimes, though, writers need to weaken the power of a positive sentence or communicate a negative rather than a positive slant. In the book itself, the context made the 'not restricting' version appropriate.

Negative sentences are problematic, as I was taught at university in a first-year psychology class. The lecturer said that exam questions should always be phrased positively rather than negatively because research had shown that positive sentences are easier to comprehend and respond to. Perhaps the first-year lecturer failed to communicate this advice to our third-year lecturer who crafted a question in our exam paper that included not just one but two negatives in a single sentence. In the exam room tension, it was almost impossible to decipher let alone determine how to write a positive response. So much for practicing what they preached! But it's good to know, nonetheless.



## HISTORY HINTS: MARRIED WOMEN'S PROPERTY ACT

It rarely happens now but, in the past, when people noticed that I had a different surname to my husband, they often asked, 'Why do you use your maiden name rather than your married name?' Tactfully, I would begin my answer by rephrasing their question to 'You mean, why do I use *my own* surname rather than that of my husband?' That simple rephrasing provided one answer. From there I would head in different directions depending upon the type of person asking the question and the context of the situation. Sometimes I would say bluntly (and perhaps tactlessly), 'Well, I married him, I didn't become him.' Sometimes I would remind the questioner that the divorce rate has passed 50%, which has produced a sort of 'musical surnames' situation for women; when the music stops, which surname-chair do they end up sitting in? Their first husband's? Their second husband's? Or do they decide to go back to the surname of their youth? Generally, at some point in the conversation, I would explain why women 'lost' their surnames in the first place—and that's where the subject of the Married Women's Property Act comes in.

Under the English law of yesteryear, married women had no rights to property and progeny. For that reason, impecunious male members of the gentry would keep their eyes peeled for heiresses they could woo into marriage, while others, like the convict Sir Henry Browne Hayes (transported to NSW in the *Atlas* in 1802), kidnapped them and forced them into marriage. Marriage gave a man ownership of his wife's money, which he could use to save his estate or set up a mistress or gamble or do anything else he wanted.

Upon marriage, a woman's separate legal identity ceased to exist. Women became complicit in ensuring their own invisibility by abandoning their surnames upon marriage and adopting those of their husbands, even though



there was no legal requirement to do so then or now (it is merely tradition). To make matters worse, it became

customary for women to 'abandon' their given names as well. They became 'Mrs John Smith' that is, 'the *mistress* of John Smith', a possession like his cows and his chooks. It was almost impossible for a woman to escape the marital knot. Divorce required an Act of Parliament, which women had no money to finance. Moreover, when a woman endeavoured to leave a bad husband through divorce or otherwise, her rights to her children were at her husband's whim, and he often kept them just to spite her.

Liberal thinkers saw the dreadful situation many women found themselves in. If a woman was tied to a lazy drunk, she would be forced to work during the day without any right to the money she earned, to feed and care for her family in the evening with the little money he would give her, and to suffer his brutality and sexual advances at night. When the Anglican marriage service made a woman vow to 'submit' to her husband, it meant it in every sense of that demeaning word. Some 'feminists' were so horrified at what they saw of marriage that they chose to remain single.

Social reformers realised that if women were granted the legal right to their own income and property they would at least have some autonomy in a difficult marriage. The social conservatives were horrified at the idea. They believed that their homes would be riven by discord, and that women would fritter away their money or invest it foolishly. Worse, such rights would put women on an almost equal footing with their husbands, which was an appalling idea, a barbarous, semi-civilised notion. A happy home required a subservient wife. The man must be lord and master of his wife and children. Blah, blah. In Tennessee, the legislature said that married women lacked 'independent souls' so should not be allowed any property rights.

The social reformers won the day. Married Women's Property Acts were passed in England in 1870 (and improved in 1882) and Scotland in 1881, in the Australian States of Victoria in 1870 and New South Wales in 1879. The United States of America began earlier with legislation passing in some states as early as 1839. Google 'Married Women's Property Act' for your place of interest and you should be able to find specific legislation dates,

or at least start the search for more information.

For family historians, the significance of this social situation and the consequences of these acts can be seen in probate records. Lists of surviving English or Australian wills rarely include married women prior to the mid-1800s, whereas the names of widows and spinsters can often be found. With the passage of these acts, the legal situation changed. Married women not only retained the right to their own income and property, they could bequeath it to whomever they chose.

Interestingly, Scottish married women retained rights to property—and, historically, also retained their surnames. Married women are regularly named in lists of Scottish wills from the time these lists began, and most references note their maiden as well as married surname. For example, land dealings in the 1700s involving my female ancestor listed her as 'Christian Clark or Watson', *Clark* being her maiden surname and *Watson* her married surname. Scottish baptism records almost always list the mother under her maiden name, making her ancestry easier to determine than in England. English baptisms rarely do so. Accordingly, if an English marriage entry is not found, it is extremely difficult to determine an English wife's maiden name and to trace her ancestry back any further.

So, that's the long answer as to why I didn't change my surname upon marriage. Needless to say, I didn't inflict it on my questioners!

## PUBLISHING POINTERS: FONTS

'What font are you?' was the name of a session on ABC Radio 702 (NSW) one afternoon a couple of years ago. Listeners rang in and named their favourite font and explained what they liked about it or why they saw it as representing who they were. A font expert then discussed the named font. It was an intriguing programme and made me think about the fonts we choose in a whole new way.

Having edited many volumes of colonial records, I knew something about the publishing industry before becoming a writer, including that Times New Roman (written in the font itself) was a popular publishing font created for London's *The Times* newspaper in 1932. It was one of the *serif* family, which means it has little strokes added to the ends of letters. Serif styles are supposed to be easier to read in print than *sans-serif* types—which don't have the little strokes—although some scientific studies do not reach that conclusion. Sans serif fonts are supposed to be more legible

## Fun and Games: Naming Nemesis

Well, the general consensus is that nothing beats the delights of *Hogsflesh*. One reader, Jeffrey Bloomfield of New York, said there was a play named 'Mr H.' by Charles Lamb in which everyone was wondering what 'Mr H's' surname was. You guessed it!

One reader mentioned a relative with the surname *Suckling* who changed it to *Steven* so his kids wouldn't suffer schoolyard taunts. Kids are remarkably inventive, aren't they. My own *Baxter* became *Backside*, *Baxter-bum*, *Back-to-front* and, because I'm little, *Bonsai Baxter*.

Rex Toomey reported hearing of a Gulf Ward CNN newsreader with the name *Wolf Blitzer*. So appropriate. And Stephen Ehat reminded me of the sexting US mayoral candidate, Anthony *Weiner*, whose 'exposure' killed his ambitions. You can't make that sort of thing up!!

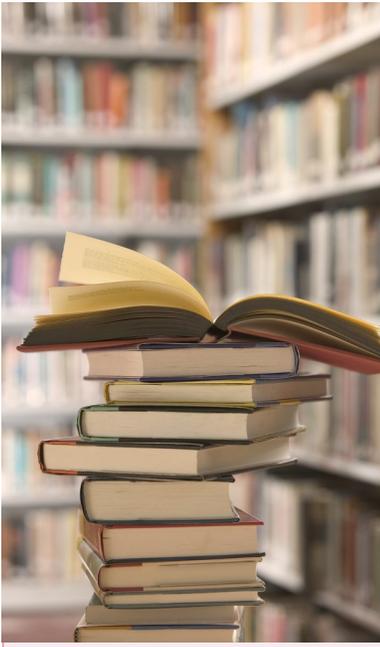
Carol Harrison mentioned the funny results of surname changes upon marriage: like *Esther Chester*. This reminded me of marriage pairings like First Fleeters Anthony Rope and Elizabeth Pulley. I wish I'd kept a note of everything I had stumbled across.

on the computer screen, which is an important point to remember for those building websites.

I mostly use *Verdana* in this newsletter. According to an online article *The Psychology of Fonts* by Emily Matthews, *Verdana* is a member of the humanist *sans-serif* family of fonts. They are inspired by human writing and are clean and modern but still warm and friendly.

It is important to think about your choices when picking a font for your publication. I once saw a family history that had the entire text printed in italics to make it appear like old-time handwriting. It was exhausting. Playful fonts like *Comic Sans* can soon become tiresome. Indeed, the same *Fonts* article says that *Comic Sans* is informal and somewhat juvenile and suggests that the author is looking for attention!

Have fun with your fonts but please, please keep your readers in mind when you pick one.



### About the author

Carol Baxter is the author of three works of narrative non-fiction published by Allen & Unwin (*An Irresistible Temptation*, *Breaking the Bank*, and *Captain Thunderbolt and his Lady*), and these, along with her just released international book, *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable* (Britain's Oneworld), have all been published to critical acclaim. Next year, Allen & Unwin will publish her fifth book, *The Lucretia Borgia of Botany Bay*. 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.



## GRAMMARLY

I recently received an email from a website called Grammarly offering a free \$25 Amazon gift card if I would run my next writing blog post through their Grammarly editing programme (my writing blog is my monthly 'Words to the Wise' article). Not liking to be 'bought', I ignored the email. When they approached me again, I thought I would test it for myself without letting them know. I ran a paragraph through their test engine and received the rating of 46/100. Can't say I was impressed (!) so, naturally, I had to see why my paragraph received such a low rating. They offered a free one-week trial so long as I gave them my credit card details; the payment would be activated if I didn't cancel the purchase within the week. When I looked through the list of identified problems, there were actually few 'errors': a comma that they said didn't need to be there (they were probably correct), and some suggestions re 'better' choices of words. Some suggested words were way off the mark, but others were an improvement on my original choice. I decided that it would indeed be helpful and didn't cancel my subscription.

Like all such programmes, it is only as good as the programmer and doesn't always 'get' some phraseology, but it is better than Word's spell check. It is probably too expensive for those writing only occasionally, but for others like me it could be quite helpful. It's one more barrier against those annoying little error gremlins that inevitably manage to get through to the printed page.

## WINNER OF FREE BOOK

As you know, each time I have a book published, I will pick a name from my mailing list for a free copy of the book. The winner of *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable* is:

Fiona Basile

## FAREWELL

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

**Carol Baxter**

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