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# History Detective

## THE PECULIAR CASE OF THE ... CHURNING STOMACH

For the past couple of weeks, I have been going to bed every night with two words echoing in my brain: 'totally irresistible'. When most of us are praised or criticised about our work, it is largely a private matter (unless you're the captain of the Costa Concordia!). A few work colleagues may hear about it and we might mention it to friends and family, but that's usually all. Authors, however, seem to go from one extreme to another. We live a largely reclusive existence, sitting alone in a study, needing quietness to craft our words (yeah, right; tell that to the cat!). Then suddenly, if we are lucky enough to be published and reviewed, it's as if a bullhorn is shouting the news from the rooftop. It's heard not only in our street or suburb or town; it's state-wide and often nationally. And now, for me, it's internationally.

Every time I hear that a review is about to be published, or notice a Google alert to say that something containing my book's title has just appeared on the Internet, my stomach churns. Am I about to receive a public flaying? In fact, my stomach starts churning months before the book comes out when I recollect what is to come: not the pleasure of holding the outcome of two years of work in my hot little hand but that ominous word 'reviews'. Of course, what would be worse is no bullhorn, no reviews at all—the silence of being ignored.

This time it has been even more agonising because I am little-known author Carol Baxter (who?) from Australia (where?) who is presenting her endeavours to the world (oh, really?). And what has been the response? In brief:

'totally irresistible'  
**Independent** (UK)

'as lively and readable as a crime novel'  
**The Times** (London)

'a fascinating history, mystery and portrait of a complex,  
contradictory man'  
**Daily Mail** (London)

The relief ... oh, the relief! But wait—the book comes out in the U.S. and Canada on 8 October. And then Australia on 30 October. The stomach starts churning again!

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### BLOGS

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- History Hints
- Words to the Wise
- Rave Reviews
- Publishing Pointers

[www.carolbaxter.com](http://www.carolbaxter.com)

## MONTHLY MUSINGS

When I do the background research for my books—or when I am reading newspapers or general books—I often come across subjects that fascinate me and would no doubt interest others. Now, when I come across such information, I realise that I can write something about it in my newsletter—like the article on ‘Time’ in the current issue. Many of these topics will be expanded upon in future ‘how to’ books.

That you also find such topics interesting is reflected in your emails saying how ‘interesting’ and ‘stimulating’ you are finding the newsletters. Music to my ears—and motivation to keep writing them. Thank you!



### Fun and Games: Naming Nemesis

Reader Kay Milton sent in a couple of delicious pairings: a Cloak marrying a Dagger, and a Fox marrying a Hunt. Classic! Imagine if these women had always planned to hyphenate their surnames with those of their future spouses. Rethink those plans!

## PUBLISHING POINTERS: EDITING 1



I have long been concerned about school and university education systems that judge students on their ability to craft a well-written, well-structured and well-argued essay in a tense exam environment at a moment’s notice. It favours students who can write a great first draft. Let’s be frank: in the real world, how many of us can write a great first draft? I certainly cannot and I’m a professional writer! I can sit at my computer struggling over a single

paragraph for six hours. No publisher would publish a writer’s first draft. No writer—unless the person was an idiot—would send a publisher a first draft. Before sending it, the writer ‘polishes’ it over and over again ... and keeps polishing it. When the book is finally published, the writer never reads it because of sheer frustration at being unable to keep on polishing (can you hear the angst of a just-published author who is STILL struggling to ‘let go’?).

I was reminded of the importance of the editing and polishing processes during a recent conversation with Australian historian/archivist Christine Yeats (now Vice-President of the Royal Australian Historical Society). Chris expressed concern about the number of works of history and family history that are being self-published, although her concern wasn’t so much about the quantity but the quality. Much of it leaves a lot to be desired.

I mentioned to her that I had recently given a talk to the National Speakers Association of Australia (NSW chapter) on the subject of ‘How to break into mainstream publishing’ and, while researching the topic, had learnt some interesting statistics. The number of ISBNs (international standard book numbers) issued for hard-copy books published in the U.S. has remained at around 350,000 a year for the past few years; however, the number issued for ebooks has jumped from a few hundred thousand to 11.5 million last year. This year: probably 15 million. Extraordinary! Most, of course, are for self-published books. And, from the single paragraph that summarises each book’s contents, it is clear that many are ‘first drafts’.

While part of the quality issue relates to the ‘scientific method’—that is, the adequacy of the writer’s research—part reflects the quality of the writing and editing processes. So this month I will discuss the editing/polishing process from the perspective of a professional writer. Next month I’ll discuss the steps taken by mainstream publishers to ‘improve’ a manuscript.

As I craft my prose, I tend to go over and over what I have written while I determine what I am going to write next. Before long, the manuscript includes some chapters that will barely need any further polishing and others that haven’t even been researched, let alone crafted. When the first draft of the entire manuscript is completed, I go over and over it, moving sections around and polishing it until I feel I can do no more without advice from my ‘readers’.

Most authors have friends/colleagues who will provide constructive criticism. For example, my friend Kate Wingrove is ‘my market’. If she says ‘Nuh, doesn’t work!’, I know she is right and I have to rethink what I have written. Courtesy of Kate’s comments, I rewrote

the last couple of chapters of *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable*. It's much better!

Some of my readers are historians (none of us knows everything!) and some act more as copy-editors or proof-readers. Stephen Ehat, who proofs the *History Detective* newsletter, does a brilliant job. Sometimes I cringe at the errors he picks up. Because—and this is extremely important to remember—we cannot proof our own work! Our sentences are a melody line running through our brain so, when we read the piece again, we hear the words we imagine we wrote rather than seeing what we actually wrote. It takes weeks for that melody line to dissipate, weeks before we can really 'see' the words we wrote.

## HISTORY HINTS: TIME

In my book *Writing Interesting Family Histories*, I ask the question: how did an illiterate person living in an illiterate society know what the date was? In this article, I ask essentially the same question but with respect to time. The answer seems simple: the sun ... then sundials ... then clocks on the town hall façade that boomed or chimed the hour. Or constables walking their beat and calling out 'It's midnight and all is well'. Or cocks crowing at the crack of dawn (with a warning to the cocks themselves that, if they are over-eager to greet the dawn, they might find themselves eaten for breakfast!). It was good enough for the local community—for centuries at least. But what happened when the local community became part of a broader community. What happened when technology arrived on its doorstep?

When railway tracks began criss-crossing the country, time suddenly mattered in a way it never had before. Trains travelled long distances and required precise timetables. People needed to know when exactly a train was arriving, but more importantly, when a train was departing. If they missed a train, they might be stuck for hours—or days. Railway safety also relied upon timetable precision. It became essential to establish a 'railway time', with the same clock used all along the line.

Many railways had their terminus in a capital city so they set their clocks by that city's time. 'City time' in a capital city like Sydney, Australia, was determined by an observatory that had

So, if you are going to self-publish a book, you must find others who can edit the manuscript for you. Your 'second-cousin twice-removed who enjoys reading' might be a really nice person, but that doesn't mean she will do a good job of editing/proofing your manuscript. Likely it will still contain spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors as well as problems with structure and flow. These will be noticed by your readers because most are used to the high quality publications that come from mainstream publishing houses.

Next month I will explain how mainstream publishers produce books that are of such a high quality, editing-wise. The process is more involved and costly than most readers realise.



been established to provide the exact time for shipping. As mentioned in my Rave Review about Dava Sobel's *Longitude* (Volume 1, Issue 3), ships' captains needed accurate clocks so they could set their chronometers and thereby calculate longitude—without which they were sailing blind, often with disastrous results.

Today, the four capital cities in the eastern states of Australia are set at the same time—in winter at least. Noon in Sydney (NSW) is also noon in Brisbane (Queensland), Melbourne (Victoria), and Hobart (Tasmania). But, prior to the adoption of the Australian standard times zones in 1895, noon in Sydney was 11.35am in Melbourne, 11.44am in Hobart and 12.07pm in Brisbane.

Confusingly, Bourke in Western NSW managed the extraordinary achievement of having three 'times' in operation at the same time. The railways kept Adelaide time (which was originally one hour behind Sydney); the post office kept Sydney time; and the mines kept local time. At what time should the pubs close? Who cared? Easier to leave them open!

So next time you see an historical reference to a 'time', think about what it meant. We tend to take 'time' for granted but it is a more complex subject than most of us have previously recognised.

## WORDS TO THE WISE: SEMANTICS

In 2012 something extraordinary happened. Australia's first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, had had enough. In a moment of glorious rage, she launched a broadside at the opposition leader, reminding him in open Parliament of some of his misogynistic statements and deeds. The YouTube video went viral, resonating with women all around the world. It was a watershed moment in Australian politics.

Gillard's 'misogyny speech'—as it came to be known—spawned a series of debates. One that particularly interested me was the debate about the 'meaning' of words. After reading many letters to editors, and hearing comments on talk-back radio, I realised that a lot of people don't fully understand our most fundamental communication system: language.

I first encountered this problem when I majored in linguistics at university. Whenever I mentioned my major, the response would be a blank look, then a light-bulb moment, then the question: 'What languages do you speak?' When I said, 'Only English, except for a smattering of excruciating school-girl French', they would look at me again with confusion and ask, 'Well, if you don't know any other languages, what do you study?' I would then answer: 'language, speech and hearing'. At which point, some wit would inevitably say, 'What?' (it was embarrassing how many times I fell for that one and began repeating the answer!).

The linguistics umbrella covers many sub-disciplines, among them 'semantics'. The *World English Dictionary* defines semantics as 'the branch of linguistics that deals with the study of meaning, changes in meaning, and the principles that govern the relationship between sentences or words and their meanings'. One day, during the semester devoted to the study of semantics, I walked into my lecture hall and learnt that the subject of the day was 'dictionaries'. My initial response was 'groan ... how dry!'. In fact, it was so fascinating that thirty years later I can still picture the lecture hall.

We learnt about the history of dictionary-making, principally of English dictionaries. We learnt how dictionaries had once been seen as 'prescriptive'—that is, they dictated how language should be used. Eventually, dictionary-makers had realised that dictionaries were by necessity 'descriptive'—that is, they could only describe the way language was used rather than dictate its usage because language, like everything else, constantly evolves.

So, courtesy of my linguistics background, I was fascinated to read the commentary about the misogyny speech, and to think about it from a linguistics perspective as well as from the usual political and social viewpoints. ABC radio 702 (NSW) phoned the editor of the *Macquarie Dictionary* to discuss the word 'misogyny'. The broadcaster said that, according to the *Macquarie Dictionary*, the word meant a 'pathological hatred of women' whereas Gillard had used the word more in the sense of a 'deeply entrenched prejudice against women'; could the editor please explain? The editor's response was that she hadn't looked at the word for a while and had obviously missed the change in meaning. Unfortunately, the editor forgot to add that dictionaries are descriptive rather than prescriptive—as her predecessors had taught me at Macquarie University itself—which should have been a crucial part of her answer.

Outraged community members continued thundering against anyone who used words in a way that deviated from their dictionary definition, declaring that a dictionary provides **the** meaning of the word and that those who deviate are ignorant/stupid/mendacious and so on. Underlying part of their complaint was the apparent belief that Gillard's use of the word 'misogynist'—which has a nastier aura than 'sexist' (now more of a bland throwaway line)—reflected an attempt to score additional and 'illegal' political points. Naturally, listeners' comments tended to reflect their political viewpoint, whether they were 'for' or 'against' Gillard's political party. What fascinated me,



though, was the correlation between the linguistic, political and social: that is, those who clearly espoused a deeply conservative political and social viewpoint were those most outraged at the idea of words undergoing changes in meaning. It asked the question: is social conservatism so resistant to change that it resists change even in the natural evolution of language? Intriguing idea.

Anyway, like everything else, language goes through fashions as it evolves. The very fashionableness of words—or otherwise—is obvious from the way we all cringe when middle-aged or elderly people use the slang words of their youth when trying to be ‘hip’ (to use a slang word of my youth!). In writing my books, I have to be careful about anachronisms, that is, words that either did not exist at the time I am writing about, or did not develop the meaning I

want to convey until much later. I constantly look up etymological dictionaries and learn some fascinating things. For example, the word ‘scientist’ was coined as recently as the year 1830, which shows how recently science became a profession. The word ‘suffragette’ was coined in the early 1900s, *after* women in Australia had already received the vote.

When Julia Gillard began her now historic speech, it perhaps occurred to her that her use of the word ‘misogynist’ might be considered contentious by the political opposition. By her own statement, it never occurred to her that her speech would go viral. As for dictionary-makers deciding, as a consequence, to update their definitions, that would have been beyond the wildest imagination of anyone —except, of course, for the dictionary-makers themselves, who saw a different history in the making.

## **RAVE REVIEWS: FRANK RYAN’S ‘TUBERCULOSIS: THE GREATEST STORY NEVER TOLD’**

No doubt every family history researcher has come across the death certificate of an ancestor or close family member who died from ‘consumption’ or ‘phthisis’—or, as it eventually became known, ‘tuberculosis’. Why? Because this nasty disease has been responsible for the most human deaths in Earth’s history. In the last 200 years alone, TB has killed one billion people, that is, one in every seven people—including my own grandfather. It is an extraordinary killing machine.

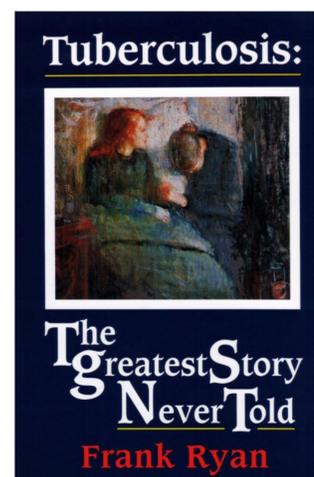
My friend Mike Elliott in England stumbled across Frank Ryan’s fascinating book about tuberculosis while we were both researching John Tawell, the subject of my latest book *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable*. Some of Tawell’s family members died from TB so I was curious to find out more about the disease (I have long learnt that the most interesting information comes from the most unexpected places). Little did I realise that I was picking up a gripping book. In fact, when I finished the book, I was disappointed that the journey had ended. And horrified too, when I realised how this deadly disease is now becoming antibiotic-resistant and is thereby fighting off its scientific foes.

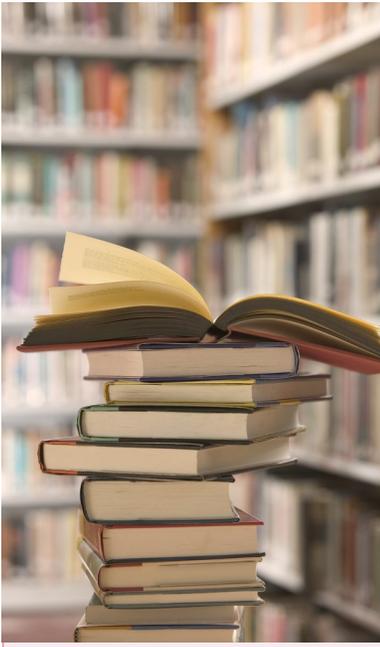
It’s not just the subject matter that is inter-

esting; it’s how the book is written. Ryan doesn’t merely tell us the facts about the disease and the discoveries of antibiotic cures. Like all good writers of narrative nonfiction, he tells the story from the perspective of those searching for a cure, covering their trials and tribulations along the way.

This book is a must-read for family history researchers for the simple reason that this disease must have impacted on the lives of our ancestors. For everyone else, it’s a great read.

Meanwhile, donning my writing teacher’s hat, let me say that our own writing—whether we are writing about a building, town, ship, military battle, murder or anything else—is going to be more interesting and readable if we focus on the people involved rather than the dry facts. And if we read enough books that do so, by the simple process of osmosis our own writing skills will improve.





### 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. In 2015, Allen & Unwin will publish her fifth book, *The Lucretia Borgia of Botany Bay*. Carol 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.



## WENTWORTH SEMINARS

In November, I am being flown down to Wentworth, near Mildura NSW, to give a series of researching and writing seminars/workshops at Wentworth library. These will begin on Monday evening 25 November and will continue all day Tuesday and Wednesday. The organisers have recognised that people will want to travel to Wentworth to participate, and will incur travelling and accommodation costs in doing so, so they have decided to charge the incredibly low fee of \$30 each day (the introductory session on Monday night is free). This fee will also include morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea.

Tuesday's sessions will mainly cover 'researching', while Wednesday's sessions will mainly cover 'writing'. The aim is to appeal to those interested in any type of research (local history, family history, memoir, investigative journalism), and any type of writing (including fiction). To that end, Tuesday's sessions will begin with three hour-long seminars on research principles and practices; for example, strategies for distinguishing truth from myth or belief. These topics have been chosen because all researchers require an understanding of these types of principles and practices if they are to become able and confident researchers whereas theme-based research ('convicts', 'Ancestry.com', and so on) only appeals and is useful to those undertaking that specific type of research. The day will end with a session on structuring a work of history or family history as many attendees will be historical researchers. Wednesday will begin with three hour-long writing workshops. These will also cover principles and practices but this time the 'practice' will be done by the attendees. We will discuss some of their endeavours as we go along. Wednesday will close with a seminar on publishing opportunities, including mainstream, self-publishing, websites and ebooks.

For further information, go to my webpage:

[www.carolbaxter.com/wentworth.html](http://www.carolbaxter.com/wentworth.html)

## FAREWELL

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

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