

History Detective



What a month August has been. I handed in the manuscript for *The Lucretia Borgia of Botany Bay* – at last. With a mainstream publisher like Allen & Unwin, a manuscript goes through an intense editing process, so it comes back to me three times before it goes to the printers. Being a compulsive ‘polisher’, I can’t help improving the prose every time it comes back to me (much to the in-house editor’s frustration!). I don’t read my books after they are published because I STILL want to keep polishing the prose.

With a three-week break until the manuscript comes back to me, I have returned to writing my ‘how to’ book: *Help! Historical and Genealogical Truth: How do I separate fact from fiction?* This book covers the fundamentals of evidence-analysis. It also provides a series of strategies that genealogists can use (in fact that we all *need* to use) to ensure that we accurately identify our ancestors and the information that relates to our ancestors. In my decades as a genealogist/historian/writer, I have encountered many research disasters because of failures to accurately interpret evidence leading to my conclusion that I should write a book on the topic. I am almost ready to send the book to the printer so I will include a link to a pre-publication discount offer in the next newsletter.

On the speaking front, I gave a four-seminar session at Port Macquarie, NSW, which went brilliantly. This included one session on evidence-analysis, one on structuring a family history, and two on writing. This is the first time I have given the single-day, four-seminar session and it showed that both the single day and the two-day sessions on ‘How to become a skilled history detective and writer’ are effective. Your own society may be interested in hosting such a session next year.

My next seminar is as follows:

Topic: **Writing Interesting Family Histories**

Date and time: Saturday, 27 September 2014, 1-3pm

Organiser: Goulburn Library

Location: Goulburn Mulwaree Library, 184-194 Bourke St, Goulburn

Phone: 02 4823 4431

Meanwhile, health issues caused by spending too many hours at the computer has meant that my time at the computer is currently limited, so this is again a shorter newsletter. The doctors say ‘rest’ but that horrid word is not in my vocabulary; instead, I’ve just bought voice recognition software to make writing easier!

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A writer is someone
for whom writing is
more difficult than it
is for other people.

Thomas Mann
(1875-1955)

History Hints: Re-evaluate your research

As mentioned on the first page, I have just handed in the manuscript for *The Lucretia Borgia of Botany Bay* after two years of work. It tells the story of Louisa Collins, the last woman hanged in New South Wales. She was convicted of killing her second husband and suspected of killing her first husband, both by means of arsenic poisoning. Since I have now written books about deaths by cyanide and arsenic poisoning – the deadliest poisons on earth – I sometimes joke that people shouldn't cross me!

My manuscript (100,000 words) was actually due at the publisher, Allen & Unwin, last January, but I needed an extension (fortunately, my publisher is more interested in 'the best book possible' than a contract deadline). It was a difficult book to write because the protagonist Louisa Collins faced the court many times. I don't write encyclopaedia entries so I couldn't just recount what happened; I had to make it interesting.

Similarly to *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable*, the book is written as a murder mystery so I needed to have the reader jumping from 'she did it!' to 'no, she couldn't have done it' to 'oh my goodness, I didn't see that coming'.

Part of the reason for the delay was also the fact that I didn't understand Louisa as a person. It was only in the last couple of months, as I read the manuscript over and over again polishing the prose and as I glanced back at some of my research material asking myself 'Who was she?' and 'Why?',

that I found the answer. The piece of information that triggered my understanding of Louisa as a person was surprisingly simple: the age on a marriage certificate.

For researchers, there are a few messages in this. One is that we should regularly re-assess our research material.

Research is a skills-building and knowledge-building exercise. The more research we undertake, the more skilled we become (well, most of us, anyway!). A piece of information that might mean nothing to us when we first research a family may resonate in the light of our broader range of knowledge when we later look back at the same information. I found this in my own research experience. I was unlucky enough to contract whooping cough in the Australian epidemic of 1997 (Beware! Our vaccination immunity decreases over time and this is a shocker of a condition!), which was followed by a rare form of pneumonia. The combination took out twelve months of my life. What did I do to keep sane? I decided to go back over all my research material to see if I had

missed anything.

As I explain in my writing seminars and in *Writing INTERESTING Family Histories*, I began writing up the results of my research as family histories soon after I became a genealogist – on an old manual type-writer in those pre-PC days. I never succeeded in moving over to genealogy programmes as I quickly became bored typing in names and dates (which is probably a good thing as the hours and hours I spent writing polished my skills as a writer). By 1997, having researched my husband's ancestors as well as my own, I had more than a hundred family histories on the go. So, while weak in body but able in mind, I pulled out my research files and my printed-out family histories and began going through them one by one. By that time, I had been a genealogist for two decades and had also spent years working in the industry, so my skills and knowledge had increased exponentially. In almost every surname line I looked at, I found something that I had missed or something that triggered an idea as to where I could research next.

I can't remember what they were now, but I do remember an epiphany I had many years earlier. Early in my hobbyist days, I came across marriage entries in New South Wales' church registers noting that the marriage was performed with the governor's permission. New South Wales was, essentially, still a penal settlement at that time so I didn't think anything of it. Only

later did I learn that 'the Governor's permission' meant that one of the parties to the marriage was a serving convict. For those pre-civil registration days, it was hard finding information about non-convicts so these three words opened a critical door – if a researcher knew their significance.

Another similar incident occurred in my research for *Breaking the Bank*, the story of Australia's largest bank robbery. Convicts tunnelled through a sewerage drain into the vault of the Bank of Australia in Sydney's George Street and stole the equivalent, in today's terms, of \$AUS20 million. Discovering that one of the robbers had drowned in Sydney Harbour, I went through the newspapers looking for a reference to his drowning. I found a surprisingly large number of drownings (I guess they didn't have compulsory swimming classes in those days) but none related to my robber. I immediately went through the newspapers again, just in case I had missed something. No such luck. My big mistake was in repeating the task immediately afterwards instead of waiting until



a later date. Why? Because I didn't realise at the time that the robber was married so I missed the entry noting that a named man and his unnamed son-in-law had drowned. Descendants alerted me to the reports after my book was published. (Grrr!! So frustrating!)

What might you have missed in your own research? Perhaps it was something (horror of horrors) that led you to hook the wrong ancestor onto your family tree.

I suggest that you hold off re-evaluating your research until my evidence-analysis book comes out as the book will increase your skills and knowledge as well as providing you with simple strategies to follow when you begin your re-evaluation process. Maybe you too will find something that transforms your research, something that might be as simple as the age on a marriage certificate.

Words to the Wise: Character and personality

Continuing the Louisa Collins discussion, you might be wondering how I could determine character from an age on a marriage certificate. You might be more confused when I reveal that the age wasn't Louisa's. Essentially, that age acted like a domino-effect trigger, spawning one thought that spawned another and so on. The end result was that I could suddenly make sense of actions that were incomprehensible until that moment – and had been to everyone else for 125 years. In making sense of those actions, I came to understand her character.

The phrase 'actions speak louder than words' is one we should all remember when we explore our ancestor's lives and write biographies about them. Many people enjoy reading biographies of famous people, but they wouldn't enjoy the biographies if they were merely recitations of the facts (as most family histories are). A biographer has to look at the words and deeds of the subject and use these to understand the subject's personality and character.

So what do these terms mean and how do they differ? An article 'Personality vs. Character' by Dr Alex Lickerman on the *Psychology Today* website provides an explanation: 'Personality is easy to read, and we're all experts at it. We judge people funny, extroverted, energetic, optimistic, confident—as well as overly serious, lazy, negative, and shy—if not upon first meeting them, then shortly thereafter ... Character, on the other hand, takes far longer to puzzle out. It includes traits that reveal themselves only in specific—and often uncommon—circumstances, traits like honesty, virtue, and kindness.' He adds that personality traits are mostly hereditary and unchangeable whereas character is based upon beliefs that can be changed, albeit with difficulty.

What can our ancestors' actions tell us about their character? For many of our ancestors, the only documentary evidence attesting to their existence is their appearance in church registers. Let's say that our English ancestor lived in a country town in the 1800s and was baptised in the established (Anglican) church. Does this mean that his or her parents were devoutly religious? Not at all. While western societies were generally more religious than now, much of that piety was founded on a type of Pascal's Wager logic –

that, considering the possible consequences, it was safer to believe in God, just in case. And it was also safer to 'protect' one's children by having them baptised, just in case.

While the devout claim that their faith is 'the truth', there are 5000 religions in the world with each claiming that the others are wrong to a greater or lesser degree. Simple logic would argue that they cannot all be right. Those who are curious to understand religious belief as a psychological and social phenomenon recognise that religious adherence is primarily a function of 'arbitrary coherence' – that is, we maintain to a greater or lesser degree the religious, political, philosophical and cultural views of the family/society we were arbitrarily born or adopted into.

In terms of religion, there is a spectrum of piety within each faith (and within each denomination of the larger faith). Those who professes allegiance to the Christian faith will position themselves somewhere along the piety spectrum, and might even vary their position over their lifetime, perhaps becoming more devout as they age (again, Pascal's Wager coming into play in many instances), or becoming less devout or even sliding off the scale into atheism as a result of education or lived experience. They might also jump from one denomination of their broader faith to another. However, they will rarely jump from one religious spectrum to another, that is, from the Christian spectrum to the Muslim or Hindu spectrum, for example.

Why are some people more pious than others? Psychologists recognise that the degree of piety is a function of its ability to meet the psychological needs of the believer, whether it is for the emotional and psychological comfort that religion brings, the sense of community, the social contacts and so on. So, how is this relevant for genealogists? Think about this. When an ancestor who was baptised in an Anglican church, and whose siblings remained with the established church, chose to join a non-conformist church (Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, etc), this serves as evidence that something about that non-conformist faith met our ancestor's psychological needs.

Obviously, our first challenge is to read the history of

About the author

Carol Baxter is the award-winning author of four works of narrative non-fiction (otherwise referred to as 'true-crime thrillers'), with three being published by Allen & Unwin: *An Irresistible Temptation* (2006), *Breaking the Bank* (2008), and *Captain Thunderbolt and his Lady* (2011). Allen & Unwin will also publish *The Lucretia Borgia of Botany Bay* in 2015. Her fourth book, *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable*, was published by Britain's Oneworld in 2013, receiving acclaim from the mainstream media in Britain, America, Canada and Australia.

Carol has also written a genealogical 'how to' book called *Writing INTERESTING Family Histories*, and has half-a-dozen more 'how to' books in the pipeline.

Carol is an adjunct lecturer at the University of New England (NSW), a Fellow of the Society of Australian Genealogists, and has edited many early Australian records.

Words to the Wise: Character (con'd)

this new church, both generally and in relation to the area in which our ancestor lived. It is also important to remember that piety is a double-edged sword with bigotry being its uglier face. The Quakers, for example, broke away from the established church in the mid-1600s and were persecuted by members of the established church. So, we should also try to find out how the broader community reacted to people who broke from one faith and joined another, asking whether they might have been ostracised for doing so. The more pious the family, the less willing they are to accept a family member who breaks with tradition.

Our ancestor's willingness to do so also opens a window into his or her character and personality. Think about the possibilities. Does it suggest open-mindedness to new ideas or perhaps gullibility? If an ancestor joined a non-conformist church and also joined the masses heading to the 'new world' (Australia, America, Canada), this could suggest a 'grass is greener' mentality as both 'push' and 'pull' factors, although it could also indicate that the person was being 'pushed' from home because of their new faith. Of course, the psychological yearning that led to a change of faith might have been more pragmatic – focused upon a member of the opposite sex who attended the place of worship.

Skilled genealogists tend to ask the 'why?' question in terms of social factors relating to our ancestors' lives; however, few seem to ponder the psychological factors. This is extraordinary because our actions are primarily driven by our psychological needs and desires. We weigh our options and decide what seems to be the optimal solution even if it might not seem so to others. In some of my books, the 'optimal solution' ended up being murder, although I'm sure that this option seemed less optimal after the murderer was caught! It must be noted though, that people can be shunted onto a particular pathway by events outside their control. For example, a considerably larger proportion of any gaol population than general population is made up of men with the XYY chromosomal abnormality which leads to a more aggressive personality. Also, children brought up in dysfunctional families are more likely to commit crimes than those from 'normal' families.

In the genealogical world, a person doesn't emigrate to another country simply because, for example, the enclosure laws meant that they were kicked off their land and were struggling to survive. They emigrated because, of all the options available to them – changing to a different occupation, theft, prostitution, begging, sleeping on a relative's couch, etc. – emigration seemed like the optimal solution. This decision also meant that, on the timidity/courage spectrum, courage won. How many people remained 'at home' and struggled to survive for the rest of their lives because they lacked the courage to make such a life-changing move?

So, how do we communicate this type of information in our family histories. I'll cover that in my companion volume to *Writing INTERESTING Family Histories*, which I think I'll call *Writing REALLY Interesting Family Histories*. Stay tuned.

FAREWELL

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

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