‘This book should be included in every genealogy subscription,’ was the reaction of genealogist Kate Wingrove after reading my latest ‘how to’ book: Help! Historical and Genealogical Truth: How do I separate fact from fiction?

Help! is a foundational guide for genealogists. The book is divided into two sections: Principles and Practices. The Principles section covers the general rules for information gathering and documentation while focusing on the evidence-analysis stage. It provides a series of steps you can use to determine the likely accuracy of all the information you gather. The Practices section offers a dozen strategies that will help you overcome the problems you encounter. Both sections provide case study examples of research successes and disasters. Most of the genealogists who are on the lecture circuit learnt these skills through years and years of practice. This book provides you with a short-cut to learning.

This month’s issue of the newsletter is a shameless plug for the book. It includes the blurb (page 5), an article explaining my decision to write the book (page 3), an excerpt from the first chapter (page 2), a case study example (page 4) and, most importantly, details of a:

PRE-PUBLICATION DISCOUNT OFFER

I have managed to keep the price down to $22.00 AUS (the same as Writing INTERESTING Family Histories) with a pre-publication discounted price of $16.00. This offer is available for the month of October ONLY. I have also shaved the Australian postage price to $3.50 (and $7 internationally). A link to the offer is provided in the covering email.

For international purchasers, the book will soon be available via Amazon’s print-on-demand system. I will provide a link when that version is available.

For those of you who haven’t got around to purchasing Writing Interesting Family Histories, I am including a discount offer for a two-book pack. For the month of October only, both Help! and Writing Interesting Family Histories are available for $35 plus $4.50 postage (Australia only). If these two books were purchased individually at the normal website price they would cost $48 including postage. The books will be posted to you in mid-December 2014.
As a historical detective who researches and writes true-crime stories, I have learnt something alarming. Many people have ‘gone to the gallows’ for a crime they didn’t commit – and others will do so in the future despite their innocence. This isn’t a polemic against the death penalty, though. Rather, it’s an attempt to bluntly demonstrate that a person’s abilities as a ‘truth-seeker’ can, in some disciplines, mean the difference between life and death.

Thankfully, that isn’t the case in the genealogical world. Most of our ancestors are already dead. We can’t knock ‘em off again – although some family historians seemed determined to do so via their dodgy research!

Accomplished genealogists use skills similar to those practised by the police. Let’s assess how they pursue their prey. In conducting a criminal investigation, detectives follow a simple three-step process:

1. Innocent people are ‘killed’ when a detective – historical or otherwise – fails to gather enough evidence or incorrectly analyses the evidence obtained. Naturally, we don’t want to join the ranks of these historical or judicial executioners, but how do we ensure that we don’t? By learning how to become skilled historical detectives.

Universities teach history students – indeed, all humanities students – how to make explicit what is implicit. That is, they teach analytical strategies that allow students to replace an inexact pre-scientific concept with an exact evidence-based concept. That’s essentially what we are trying to do here, so let’s expand our three-step process accordingly:

Now let’s apply this five-step process to genealogical research:

1. What is the implicit or unknown? Most of our ancestors are unknown before we begin tracing our family history, although they are implied by the simple reason that we exist. There are no ‘virgin births’ – not among humans at least – despite historical claims otherwise as well as those offered by horrified maidens who find themselves in a ‘difficult’ position. Our challenge as genealogists is to identify these unknown ancestors.

2. How do we collect the evidence? In order to identify these unknown ancestors, we have to begin at the beginning. This doesn’t mean starting with ‘Adam and Eve’, whether the beings of creation mythology or those labelled by scientists as ‘Mitochondrial Eve’ and ‘Y-chromosomal Adam’. Instead, the beginning – for genealogists, at least – lies with us. The end of the line, DNA-wise, is the beginning of the line, research-wise. We must begin with ourselves and gather information about our parents and our grandparents. Then we follow our ancestral trail backwards in time as far as our skills and the records allow.

3. How do we analyse the evidence? Our research results are of little use to us if we interpret them wrongly. So how do we sort fact from fiction, truth from myth? That, really, is the most important part of researching our ancestry. Mess it up and it might simply be a case of noting that our ancestor was born on 2 April instead of 3 April, which isn’t the sort of error that will cause our genealogical world to implode. However, as Albert Einstein said, ‘Anyone who doesn’t take truth seriously in small matters cannot be trusted in large ones either.’ It is essential that we make a concerted effort to gather and correctly interpret these core details because they form our ancestors’ metaphorical skeletons. Mess them up and we may end up clothing our ancestor in a sailor suit rather than a surgeon’s smock (or, given our aspirational natures, more likely the other way around). Mess them up big-time and the error will magnify exponentially. We will be hijacking not just one person but a whole branch
of our family tree, our genuine DNA-based ancestors, and tipping them off a cliff while we merrily cruise along researching generations of the wrong ancestral line – two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents ...

We’ll have spawned an error-monster that gobbles up an increasing amount of our time, effort and money. Needless to say, it’s best if we don’t spawn one in the first place, let alone continue to feed it.

4. How do we document our conclusions? There are various ways of doing so. As starters, we must have some sort of family record for each individual or each couple. Some genealogists use printed family group sheets; these days most use genealogy programmes. I always wrote up the results of my research in the form of family histories. Putting pen to paper – or fingers to keyboard – made me think about the information differently, which helped with problem-solving. Also, prose biographies are more accessible for non-researchers keen to read the results of your research, particularly if that axe-wielding genealogist who disliked your conclusions has succeeded in bumping you off.

5. What is the explicit or the known; that is, what have we succeeded in proving? Let’s backtrack a moment. Obviously, the implicit in the genealogy world is the blank slot on our ancestral tree. The explicit is the name we put in that blank slot. Not just any old name, of course. It has to be the name that should go into that slot, DNA-wise, the name of the person who – to put it frankly – shagged that other person whose name fills the preceding or following slot. Yes, I do realise that talking about our ancestors having sex is too blunt for the sensibilities of many genealogists, but the fact remains that we exist because an awful lot of it took place. Sex is the elephant in the genealogical bedroom. And, if we think for even a moment about our ancestors as being ‘bedroom’ partners (some argue that all historical research is actually historical voyeurism), we have a better chance of seeing them as real people. Surely, that’s what we as family historians are trying to achieve: not just adding names to charts with associated lists of dry facts or attaching pictures that look like cardboard cut-outs with cold, unforgiving faces, but finding the real people we descend from, those who were once young and vibrant, who loved and laughed and ...

On Writing this Help! book

Those of you who have attended my recent author talks will know that I am challenged by the idea of the ‘cross-roads’ moment; that is, the moment when my protagonists made the witting or unwitting decision that led to me writing a book about them. In a sense, it was a cross-road moment in my own life that led to me writing this Help! book.

In December 2012, when I was attending Allen & Unwin’s Christmas Party, my publisher introduced me – as the writer of historical true-crime – to an investigative journalist who writes about current, true-crime. With this mutual interest in crime, we began talking. As an investigative journalist, he gains much of his information from interviews so he was curious to know where I found my information. I explained that I did most of my research at State Records of New South Wales, at the State Library, and in online newspapers and so on.

He said, ‘But what if the information you need isn’t there or is wrong?’

I mentioned some of my analytical strategies then said, ‘Surely you use those strategies yourself.’

Looking at me in bemusement, he replied, ‘Yes, but I’ve never thought about it that way.’

I silently thought, ‘Wow! This is a trained investigative journalist, yet he seems to be flying by the seat of his pants in terms of his analytical skills.’

This was followed by the thought that most genealogists must be doing the same thing. And that’s what pushed me onto the pathway that resulted in this ‘how to’ book.

I had to relegate the idea to the back-burner for a year as I had contract deadlines to meet for The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable and The Lucretia Borgia of Botany Bay. Over Christmas 2013, I needed a break from Lucretia Borgia so, being a sucker for punishment, I started writing this book. A month later, it was largely nutted out.

Three people have helped in the production by reading the manuscript and offering their suggestions: Stephen Ehat, Kate Wingrove and Paul Milner.

Thank you!
Case study examples: Thunderbolt lives on ... or does he?

To effectively communicate the practices and principles of evidence-analysis in my Help! book, I needed case studies that showed the importance and benefits of applying these principles as well as the trainwrecks that can result when the rules of evidence-analysis are breached. I asked myself if I should use one-off examples from all over the world or case studies that could serve as a narrative arch. I decided that a series of multi-dimensional case studies would be more interesting and engaging for the reader.

As many of you will know, I incurred the wrath of a group of Thunderbolt fanatics when my book Captain Thunderbolt and his Lady was published because I refused to support their claims that bushranger Fred Ward didn’t die in 1870. They said that the police shot the wrong man and conspired to cover it up (a cover-up that, they claim, continues even in the present day and reaches as high as the office of the Governor of New South Wales), and that Fred escaped to California and died in Canada. They fired everything they had at me without success. For me, it was simple. The evidence made it clear that they were wrong.

The one advantage of my encounter with the ‘Thunderbolt conspiracists’ is that they provided me with wonderful examples of botched research. These researchers managed the extraordinary achievement of reaching the wrong conclusion about the births, marriages and deaths of Fred Ward and his lover, Mary Ann Bugg. They made numerous other errors as well. So two of the four ongoing case studies in the book relate to Fred and Mary Ann.

On the Thunderbolt website that serves as a back-up to my book, I debunked both the ‘Thunderbolt did not die in 1870’ claim and the ‘Thunderbolt escaped to America’ claim. For the latter, having little knowledge of American records, I resorted to checking census and death returns to counter the claims that Fred was listed in a purported 1871 California census and was buried in Ottawa, Canada.

When Stephen Ehat, a respected lecturer on the American genealogical circuit, read the evidence-analysis manuscript, he decided to apply his own extensive skills to determining once and for all whether Thunderbolt could have escaped to North America. The results of his research are communicated in a paper titled Frederick Wordsworth Ward also known as “Captain Thunderbolt” never came to North America. As Stephen writes in his synopsis:

With their comprehensive immigration laws, their property ownership protocols, and their comprehensive tallying both of citizen and non-citizen residents, the North American records generally ... are absolutely silent about the supposed presence of Frederick Wordsworth Ward aka “Captain Thunderbolt”, at any time and at any place either within the United States of America or within Canada. The stories that place Mr. Ward in San Francisco in 1870 and in a grave in Ottawa in 1903 are just that, stories. They are falsehoods that should be roundly rejected.

Stephen’s paper has been added to my Thunderbolt website, with a link to the paper provided in the History Detective covering email. Not only does it debunk the conspiracists’ absurd claims, it also lays out Stephen’s arguments clearly and concisely with comprehensive citations, so it serves as an example of the proof argument discussed in the Help! book. Additionally, it provides a useful guide to the comprehensive records available for the 1800s and early 1900s in those regions of North America. Thank you Stephen!

So what was the Thunderbolt conspiracists’ response when they received a copy of Stephen’s paper? A stubborn repetition of the erroneous claims then resounding silence. Since then, one of the conspirators has declared that a children’s book about Thunderbolt (Jane Smith’s Australian Bushrangers: Captain Thunderbolt, which was recently published by Big Sky Publishing and tells the evidence-based story rather than repeating the erroneous claims) is ‘totally false’ and a ‘disgrace’.

Why have the conspiracists reacted in such a way? Why doesn’t evidence-based research seem to penetrate the blinkers of belief in many people? That is a question that has intrigued me in recent years, particularly since my encounters with the Thunderbolt conspiracists. For those who have wondered the same, I have investigated the subject and provide some answers in my Help! book.
About the author

Carol Baxter is the award-winning author of four works of narrative non-fiction (otherwise referred to as ‘true-crime thrillers’), of which three were 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. Carol’s fourth book, The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable, was published by Britain’s Oneworld in 2013, receiving critical acclaim from the mainstream media in Britain, America, Canada and Australia.

Carol has also written a genealogical ‘how to’ writing book called Writing INTERESTING Family Histories, and an evidence-analysis book called Help! Historical and Genealogical Truth: How do I separate fact from fiction? She has another half-dozen ‘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 volumes of early Australian records.

The blurb

Help!

Historical and Genealogical Truth
How do I separate fact from fiction?

We sit at our computer searching for information about our ancestors and ... click ... we find something new and intriguing. But wait: it contradicts something else we’ve found. Clearly, both pieces of information can’t be true. So which is true and which isn’t? Or are both untrue? HELP!

Most family historians are more adept at gathering information than determining if it is accurate. An error can prove disastrous, gobbling up our precious time and money as we search in the wrong place – or worse, as we pursue the wrong ancestral line. So how do we ensure that our conclusions are accurate?

Help! Historical and Genealogical Truth: How do I separate fact from fiction? is a ‘must-read’ for family history detectives wishing to accurately trace their ancestry. Written in Carol Baxter’s easy-to-read style, it explains how to evaluate our ancestral information so as to determine which is reliable and which is like a virus that corrupts our efforts. After reading this book, you too will be able to separate fact from fiction, truth from mistruth. Your ancestors will thank you!

Size: A5; pages: 140; includes bibliography and index.

Recommended retail price: $22.00 AUS

FAREWELL

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

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