A feel for genealogy

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A feel for genealogy: family treeing in the north of England

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A feel for genealogy: ‘family treeing’ in the north of England

Abstract

Family history research is popular in England. As a social practice it straddles social class and is confined to neither the middle nor the working classes, but shows an enthusiastic and flourishing interest in the workings of social class and in micro-histories of the region. This article focuses on experts in family history research in a region of the north west of England where it is referred to colloquially as ‘family treeing’. Here family treeing is inflected by a post-industrial landscape and recent social and economic transformations with attendant threats to working-class life and dignity. Family treeing is about caring for deceased kin (Cannell 2011), but it is also, significantly, about caring for the living, and not only kin. It is an active practice of belonging both to people and places, and entails constant acts of reciprocity.

Keywords

Genealogy, ancestors, family history, kinship, social class, reciprocity

A local branch of the Family History and Heraldry Society (FHHS) meets on the first Wednesday of each month in the back room of the Methodist Chapel in one of three towns that, together with their satellite villages, comprise a northern English borough, which I call, for present purposes, the Valley. A monthly newsletter informs members of the topic of forthcoming meetings and usually includes a vignette, or two, from members about their own family history research, as well as queries about specific and named ancestors. The hope is that a reader will recognise the name from their own research and be able to shed further light on the social life of the deceased and their genealogical niche. Monthly meetings are usually organised around a talk from a guest speaker, followed by comments and questions from the audience, and then tea and biscuits. There are occasional meetings dedicated to ‘ten minute talks’ from members on their current research, to ‘research evenings’ that are open to the public, or to ‘heirlooms’ (to which I return). The ‘research evenings’ are an opportunity for ‘family seekers’ who are not members of the society to

solicit advice from people who are recognised locally as experts in family treeing. Members also deploy their expertise in 'outreach' activities: giving presentations to meetings of other local societies, such as the Women's Institute or the Natural History Society, or running 'drop-in' sessions at the library. Through such events and activities members are able to help people interested in 'doing' their family history to find their way not only through the paper archives and records that the local libraries hold, but also through the many and large digital databases and genealogical software now available.

The chairman tells me that the FHSS used to meet at the 'Mormon Temple',¹ but they were not allowed to drink tea there so they moved to the Methodist Chapel. Here, he says, they can drink tea but cannot run a raffle, which is a shame, he adds, as 'it used to be a nice little earner'. Tea lubricates conversation and at their monthly meetings members talk not only about their ancestors, but also, and perhaps more so, about the struggle entailed in finding them. They seem always to be ready and willing to advise each other. Some members recognise that the role of the family history society - self-fashioned to promote family history research, to develop expertise, and to help those who either do not know where to begin or are stuck - is becoming redundant. The society, they say, could be considered old-fashioned, anachronistic even, as people increasingly use the Internet alone at home and forge connections and exchange information independently with others around the world. Yet, the spin-off group from the FHHS that meets regularly in a local library gets more queries and attracts more visitors than it can easily deal with, and the monthly meetings of the FHHS always have an audience of between twenty and thirty people.

The talks at monthly meetings provide an opportunity for members, many of whom are as interested in excavating and elaborating detailed social histories as they are in genealogy, to display their expertise.² Their responses to, and engagement with, the presentations from guest speakers express both an individual and collective knowledge about the past and discussion often revolves around naming, locating and agreeing upon persons, places and things that are no longer present.³ Cathrine Degnen writes eloquently about the significance of 'absent presences' in Dodworth, 'over the border' as Valley people would say, in Yorkshire (Degnen 2013). She notes 'the salience of the absent and the enduring presence of that which is now erased, knocked down and built over' (Degnen 2013: 558) and of how 'knowing' such things, and displaying one's knowledge of them, connects persons, objects and places. 'Knowing' is a shorthand for 'collective experiences, at times evading words,

evading recounting, but relying on the having been there together’ (Degnen 2013: 563): a shorthand, that is, for belonging. Members of the FHSS also dwell on absent presences - people, places and things - and many of them know what they know through having ‘been there’ either personally or via their ancestors. As such, the talks at their monthly meetings serve, amongst other things, as fora for the public performance of community and belonging, and being able to display the credentials of belonging, partly through one’s fine-tuned knowledge of local social history, is a significant component of expertise in family treeing.

This article focuses on the contemporary relevance of expertise in family treeing. It argues that knowledge gained and displayed in the practices of family treeing is as much about pertinent social histories of the Valley as it is about one’s own genealogy. Many family tree-ers work earnestly and enthusiastically on behalf of unknown others, and are intent on locating, naming and connecting people and places. They understand their efforts in terms of reciprocity – as ‘giving something back’ to the people and places to which they belong and which, in turn, belong to them. A focus on reciprocity extends Marshall Sahlins’ (2013) recent re-definition of kinship as ‘mutuality of being’ by including its limits: how kinship is curtailed, for example, and kinship ties abandoned or broken. Fenella Cannell (2011), also drawing on ethnographic examples from England, has shown how local genealogical research is a means of caring for deceased relatives and how this points to the religious dimensions of kinship which have for the most part been ignored in recent anthropological analyses of Euro American kinship. Her arguments resonate with my experience of family tree-ers in the north of England, but their efforts are as much about caring for the living as the dead and such care extends beyond kin. Nonetheless, family tree-ers place a great deal of emphasis on the role of serendipity, fate and chance in their research, and I turn to this below. Such an emphasis points to mystical aspects of genealogical research which connect secular and spiritual ways of knowing the world and which begin to plug the ‘soul-shaped space’ that Cannell identifies as missing from contemporary Euro American kinship discourse (Cannell 2013: 234).

The genealogical method

I was initially drawn to the contemporary popularity of family history and genealogical research in the north of England through previous research on kinship and assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) in the same part of the world. ARTs revealed tacit

assumptions about kinship and acted as an ethnographic window through which cultural and otherwise implicit understandings of what constitutes English kinship could be discerned. I became interested in what the contemporary passion for family history research might also have to say not only about English kinship, but also about the anthropological study of kinship. After all, here we have a sizeable minority of the British population, in the first decades of the 21st century, mobilising a version of the Genealogical Method (GM) that was a central plank in British social anthropology at the beginning of the 20th century.

It is a cliché to say that British social anthropology came of age with the genealogical method. But, nevertheless, at the turn of the last century, social anthropology as an emerging discipline was attempting, on the one hand, to carve out a distinctive disciplinary identity and, on the other, to defend its scientific rigour: kinship was the solution to the former and the genealogical method to the latter. Kinship was the dominant paradigm of early 20th century British social anthropology, which saw as its prime and distinctive focus ‘face to face’ and ‘small scale’ societies and the ‘genealogical method of anthropological enquiry’, on which W.H.R. Rivers pinned his conversion from psychology to anthropology, was first published in 1900 (Rivers 1900; Rivers and Perry 1924). It was like an early rapid rural appraisal technique: the idea being that the anthropologist, pressed for time and without (necessarily) a sophisticated grasp of the host language, could quickly get a sense of the social structure of a village or small community by collecting ‘the pedigrees’ of knowledgeable inhabitants. Rivers advised that you should start by asking informants the name of their father and their mother, then their father’s father and their father’s mother and so on. You should also make it clear, he said, that you want the name of the person’s *real* parents - he was confident that the real father and mother, as opposed to any other person who might be referred to as such, could be elicited simply and straightforwardly. He writes, in the language of the time:

In collecting the genealogies I therefore limited myself to as few terms as possible, and found that I could do all that was necessary with the five terms, father, mother, child, husband, and wife. Care had of course to be taken to limit these terms to their English sense. The term which was open to the most serious liability to error was that of father, but I was able to make the natives understand very thoroughly that I wanted the “proper father” (Rivers 1900).

In subsequent publications Rivers went on to complicate this over-determined grid of ‘real’ kinship, asserting four modes:

1. Social kinship: where fatherhood and motherhood do not necessarily depend on parturition and procreation as with adoption (Rivers and Perry 1924).

2. Genealogical kinship: which, he said, might be determined by blood relationships but can also be determined by other social procedures.

3. Relational kinship: that is, defined through the terms of the relationship (although ultimately he found this unsatisfactory as ‘he considered pedigree and genealogy to determine the terms of relationship and not the reverse’ (Read 2001: 78).

4. Functional kinship: where ‘[p]ersons are regarded as kin of one another if their duties and privileges in relation to one another are those otherwise determined by consanguinity’ (Rivers 1924 [1968]: 53).

The GM has been read as an insistence on consanguinity (Read 2001). David Schneider (in)famously accused anthropologists of imposing this European folk model of kinship onto other societies and, in the words of David Parkin and Linda Stone (2004), alleged that ‘without exception his predecessors and contemporaries were mired in a basically genealogical way of thinking that rested, if only tacitly, on a view of kinship as ultimately biological’ (Parkin and Stone 2004:19; Schneider 1968; Schneider 1972). Are, then, family tree-ers, in their passion for genealogical research, also ‘mired’ in a genealogical way of thinking that ‘rests on a view of kinship as ultimately biological’? Might an investigation of the preoccupation of a good number of English people at the beginning of the 21st century with genealogical kinship illuminate the so-called ‘folk model’ that anthropologists were accused of exporting around the world? For Valley genealogists, genealogical and biological kinship are not necessarily synonymous and the genealogical research they carry out is not confined to a search for, or identification of, biological kin (although of course it includes them). For them biological kinship, frequently rendered as genetic, is but one way of imagining kin connections, and a great-grandmother, for example, is such by virtue of being one’s mother’s mother’s mother with or without a genetic connection.

Tim Ingold roundly criticises the genealogical charts produced by anthropologists and inspired by the GM (and see Bouquet 2000; Ingold 2007). For him, the female circles and

male triangles of the anthropologist's genealogical diagram fix persons in time and place and do not allow them to 'go for a walk'. While I argue that the genealogical method is neither as fixed nor as inflexible as Ingold makes out, I find his description of lines that 'go for walk' evocative in thinking about the digressions and meanderings of family treeing and about the efforts family tree-ers make to put 'flesh on the bare bones' of family connection. Using the genealogical method, Valley family tree-ers take their forbears walking, not only through their family but also through the Valley and its hills, as well as through its absent presences of, for example, houses, pubs, chapels, clubs and factories. Many put a great deal of effort into finding out more about the social life of their ancestors and are enthused by details of the social environments and economic conditions in which they lived. Family tree-ers have talked to me about the occupation, for example, inscribed on a census form, now obsolete, that they have painstakingly reconstructed from the perspective of the worker; or the cramped and overcrowded dwellings, with outside and communal privies and beds occupied both day and night by shift workers; or the factory-work that children from the age of twelve undertook with 'small and nimble fingers' and which made them, in the words of one family tree-er, indispensable to 'the industrial revolution'.

Paul Basu argues that we need to understand the search by Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders for their 'ancestral lands' in Scotland in the light of a 'fractured modernity' (Basu 2007). He writes of genealogists who travel to Scotland, physically or virtually, in search of their roots in a country they deem more 'authentic' than the one in which they live. The narratives of many of his informants are inflected by injury and injustice and through their family history research they make a claim to what rightfully belongs to them or perhaps, more precisely, a claim to where they think they rightfully belong. In the face of a compromised relationship as colonisers of indigenous peoples, the Scottish diaspora re-root themselves in their own ancestral homelands, far away, they imagine, from the unsettled settler societies in which they live.

The Valley family tree-ers are making sense of large social and economic transformations that have taken place in this region of northern England specifically, and in England and Britain more broadly. Their research, which focuses on an industrial past, is a move towards mending the rents in a post-industrial social fabric. They are trying for themselves, and for others, to fathom their post-industrial marginalisation⁴: to settle themselves in unsettled places during unsettling times.

Describing the search by white North Americans for European (particularly Irish) roots, the geographer Catherine Nash argues that, contrary to popular opinion, genealogy does not fix people in places (either geographic or genealogical). For her, the genealogical imagination questions both the naturalness of the nation and ideologies of cultural purity by revealing ‘diversity, uncovering interconnection [and] charting complexity’ (Nash 2002: 48). It can, she continues, ‘map flows and contamination rather than confirm pure identities and fixed locations’ (Nash 2002: 48). The point to make is that it has the potential to do both. This is also apparent in the shifting interests of white Australian genealogists in their ‘convict ancestry’, aptly described by Roland Lambert (2002). He draws on interviews with forty-six members of two Australian ‘convict descendent societies’ that have a combined membership of 1000, and although we do not get much of a sense of the social life of the family history societies themselves, his reflections on shifting kinship sensibilities are pertinent here. The majority of his respondents were unaware, prior to commencing their family history research, that one (or more) of their ancestors was transported as ‘a convict’ to Australia from Britain (Lambert 2002). For Lambert, this is indicative of how, in the past, ‘convict ancestry’ was stigmatised: convict relatives were screened out of family stories, effaced from family mythologies and thus forgotten. Today, by contrast, convict ancestors are not only sought after but also celebrated, a point to which I return below.⁵

The Valley genealogists thicken the lives of their ancestors with the kind of biographical and historical detail that underlines the injustices they suffered in the context of an industrial and industrious past. Their social histories of labour and industry are elaborated in the midst of post-industrial decline and they point to a time of self-sufficiency and flourishing community despite great hardship. Rather than a glib romanticisation of the past, or nostalgia for a time ‘gone by’, this emphasis is a hard-edged awareness of both past and current politics of class and inequality. The biographical detail of ancestors and the micro-histories of place that Valley family tree-ers relate ensure that the harsh realities of the past are kept alive, but it also enlivens a contemporary politics of class in a post-industrial landscape. Valley family tree-ers are working out and working through the turns that their families and family fortunes have taken, as well as the large social and economic transformations have taken place in this region of England.

In retrospect, the GM in British social anthropology was neither so fixed nor mired in biology as its critics would have it.⁶ Recall Rivers’ own observation that while genealogical

kinship may be based on blood ties it can also be based on other social conventions.⁷ I am reminded of Rebecca Cassidy's observations on race horse and horse owner genealogies in Newmarket, England (Cassidy 2002). The genealogical diagrams that individual members of prominent racing families made for Cassidy missed out anyone who was not associated with racing as long as they did not provide a link to another racing family. Cassidy tried to persuade her informants not to do this, but they argued the point. Eventually a compromise was reached. According to Cassidy, 'we put a diagonal line through non-racing folk ... this has the bizarre effect of recording reproduction that apparently takes place from beyond the grave' (Cassidy 2012: 43). This amusing and pertinent account raises questions about what genealogical kinship should look like. Cassidy's example is of a living genealogy, relevant to the concerns of the genealogist and produced as social commentary: in process and unfinished. I am interested also in the processual and never-finished nature of family treeing in the Valley and the kind of social commentary that is run through what is ostensibly a search for ancestors. In the processes of family history research, family tree-ers also talk about 'dead-ends' and lines that go nowhere. This article will also focus on the limits to family history, its curtailments as well as its affordances and asks: what breaks potentially never-ending connections?

The 'all-in-on-tree of John Joseph Frost'

The Valley family tree-ers who are the ethnographic focus of this article all describe the obsessive nature of their research and how it is like detective work with clues leading to other clues (see also Bottero 2015): the more that is revealed, they say, the more there is to discover. They frequently mobilise the idiom of putting flesh or meat on bones, and the pedigree is the skeleton on which the detail - the flesh - is layered. It is never-ending: a new affine, or in one case a daughter's new boyfriend, provide a whole new and different set of connections to work on. They talk of the excitement of discovery, as well as the thrill of the chase.⁸

For most family tree-ers with whom I worked it was very odd that I was not tracing my own family history. As experts in family history research, members of the FHSS were used to being consulted by, and giving advice to, family seekers and it was not obvious to them why I would be interested in their work, attend meetings and pay my subscription if I was not doing my own family history research. However, they generously tolerated me, and over

time shared their own genealogical connections and their general enthusiasm for family history research with me. Many family tree-ers I met insisted that I would never fully understand family history research - especially the excitement, frustration and obsession the search for ancestors generates - if I did not do it myself. One independent family tree-er in Alltown who was not a member of the FHHS decided, unbeknownst to me, to take matters into her own hands and to 'look-up' my ancestors on my behalf. The result, presented to me in the form of a computer generated 'all in one tree of John Joseph Frost' (my mother's father), was a surprise, not least because it began from my mother's father who is not a particularly celebrated or admired figure in my own family. The chart went back to 1871 and forward as far as my siblings (naming all, including a sister who died soon after birth), but oddly my father and his siblings were missing, and my father's father (with the same name as my father) and his siblings occupied my father's genealogical niche. My family tree, with its gaps and surprising starting point, generously generated for me, indicates how much information is available from the Internet and how little initial detail is needed in order to spin a relatively complex web (my genealogist had garnered little more about me prior to her research: not much more, I think, than I had five siblings, was born in Liverpool and that my mother's maiden name was Frost). It also reveals the limits to what can be achieved with 'information' only. Further kinship knowledge was required if the lines connecting my ancestors were to go for a walk. My genealogist had, through the Internet, connected up my kin for me, but without my complicity could neither verify nor elaborate.⁹ And without 'knowing' the city of Liverpool and its neighbourhoods, its histories of migration and labour, and its absent presences, the chart is skeletal and fixes named persons in awkward niches.

A kinship sensibility

The Internet, and the ready availability of civil registration records, church registers and census records for 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911, as well as the massive amount of information uploaded by individuals and groups across the country, is a prime mover in the burgeoning contemporary interest in genealogical research in England.¹⁰ Many Valley family tree-ers ask questions, answer queries, share information and upload both their records and the narratives they craft from their findings on the Internet.¹¹ In addition to producing their own web pages, which might include images or transcriptions from

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4 gravestones, memorials and family bibles, local genealogists create and disseminate
5 newsletters and pamphlets and upload autobiographies, photographs and maps (indicating,
6 for example, former parish boundaries).¹² There are some family tree-ers who do not use the
7 Internet and consult, instead, printed archives or the records available on microfiche. Some
8 members of the FHHS have painstakingly transcribed, by hand, parish records, census
9 forms, gravestone and memorial inscriptions, war records and more. The sheer volume of
10 unpaid labour that goes into transcribing, recording and making available diverse materials,
11 and the altruism embedded in the effort made on behalf of unknown others is striking.¹³ It is
12 significant to Valley family tree-ers that their labour is unpaid. They express antipathy
13 towards the professional genealogist who charges for his or her service but who may draw
14 on information that is freely available or that has been collected and collated through the
15 voluntary labour of others. For these genealogists, the genealogy, as a kinship object, should
16 be kept outside the realm of the market.¹⁴ This resonates with the way in which the
17 commodification of other kinship entities in the context of ART provokes disquiet. There is
18 a commonly expressed aversion to commercial surrogacy arrangements, for example, or to
19 buying and selling gametes, and many people I have spoken to about these things in this
20 region of England are acutely aware of the inequality implied in the privatisation of fertility
21 treatments (e.g. Edwards 2002, 2004).¹⁵ I am interested in the way in which the Valley
22 genealogists refuse the commercialisation of their role and resist the commodification of the
23 genealogy. As a kinship entity, and created from the unpaid labour of unknown others, it
24 ought not to be sold.

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41 While the majority of members of the FHSS are competent family tree-ers who have
42 gained their skills through practice over time and are seen by non-members, interested in
43 family history, as experts, there are some that members acknowledge to be real experts. They
44 are known to be more adept than others not merely at following clues but at recognising a
45 clue when they see one. Three women in particular are said to have ‘a feel for genealogy’:
46 not only are they able to manoeuvre comfortably and agilely around the archives, but they
47 also successfully and productively act on hunches and ‘feelings’. They are able to read
48 between the lines and act on the clues that emanate from texts, for example, or the objects
49 ‘passed down’ in families. These real experts also display a keen ethical responsibility
50 towards the family-seekers they guide. They talked to me of a need to double check and
51 verify information (especially that found on the internet and especially when doing
52 somebody else’s family tree), and of the need to convey the information they discover about
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other people’s ancestors carefully and sensitively. They take seriously the responsibility entailed in revealing to somebody something about their ancestors that they did not know: ‘you can’t know how people will react’, one woman told me, ‘when they find out they are not who they thought they were’. The real experts seem to be acutely aware of the implications of genealogical detail for a person's self-knowledge and that, in matters of kinship, what is known cannot be unknown. I understand this ethical imperative as a kinship sensibility: as having a keen sense of the implications of knowing one’s kin and how it might impinge on one’s sense of self. For them, judicious decisions have to be made about what to reveal to those tracing their family history, and how to reveal it, as not all news about ancestors is necessarily good or welcome for living descendants. Their practice is imbued with an ethical imperative to care properly for living descendants.

While not all family tree-ers have a feel for genealogy, all have feelings about genealogy: they are affected - moved - by what they discover. The stories they tell are emotionally charged and feature joy and triumph, as well as sadness, frustration and anger.¹⁶ Family tree-ers talk of how they like some ancestors more than others, and of how they can empathise with many but not all: ancestors can evoke antipathy and disgust, as well as admiration and pride.¹⁷ In a vivid account of the success and impact of the popular British television programme *Who do you think you are?*, Cannell describes how the celebrity participants display an emotional connection with their deceased kin (Cannell 2011). Although both ‘staged’ and ‘arranged’ according to the production conventions of television, their reactions, Cannell points out, are not ‘feigned’. Analysing interviews with ‘hobby genealogists’ (her term) in East Anglia, alongside examples of media produced celebrity genealogies, Cannell shows how one aspect of the contemporary enthusiasm for genealogical research in England is the opportunity it provides to ‘reconnect the living to their dead as kin’ (Cannell 2011: 465). Deceased kin become ‘actual rather than potential family’ and, through their efforts, local genealogists transform deceased relatives into ‘real persons’ (Cannell 2011: 469). Cannell provides a compelling critique of recent analyses of the burgeoning interest in family history research that have understood it as part and parcel of a contemporary preoccupation with the self and identity: as a narcissistic pursuit, as some social commentators would have it. She shows that it is not merely about finding out ‘who you think you are’ but a means by which deceased relatives can be dealt with fairly. Identifying the past injustices suffered by their ancestors is a means, then, by which local genealogists not only bring their dead kin into the present but also care for them.

This resonates with the way in which Valley family tree-ers animate the deceased and enliven them through the elaboration of biographical detail. They also narrate the injustices of the past and bring to mind the suffering of their ancestors and in so doing extend to them the care they deserve but did not get when alive. But, for them, just as not all living kin are suitable family material, not all ancestors are worthy of care. The narratives through which ancestors are brought into being often pivot on the contribution they make to the present, and present-day family tree-ers often tell of their ancestors in ways that make explicit how their own current good fortune is built on, and from, their suffering. There are ancestors who cannot perform this task: who cannot reciprocate by contributing the kind of biographical detail that helps their descendant make sense of the present. They may feature on the family tree - be diagrammatically represented by name - but are unelaborated, and can be dropped. Following Cannell, I see how, in imbuing their ancestors with a social life and a personal biography, Valley family tree-ers bring their deceased kin into the present and transform them into 'real persons'. But they were never not kin. The Valley genealogists, through their research efforts, activate and enliven a kinship that was already there - waiting to be discovered, brought to mind and hence to life. This means that it is also possible, and sometimes necessary, in the words of one family tree-er, to 'let sleeping dogs lie'. In other words, there are some ancestors who are neither easily nor readily appropriated as 'actual' family. This ability to both attach and detach ancestors - to include or exclude them - is a feature of the particular kind of kinship thinking that is frequently glossed, in this article also, albeit with numerous caveats, as Euro American (see for example Bamford and Leach 2009; Carsten 2000; Edwards 2006; Edwards and Salazar 2009; Strathern 1992, 2005).

Returning to Lambert's (2002) example from Australia, the present-day genealogists with whom he worked legitimate and accommodate their convict ancestors either by treating them 'quasi-professionally' as objects of historical interest (thus sanitising their attachment to them as a matter of scientific curiosity), or minimising their crimes (by, for example, excavating mitigating personal circumstances and empathising with the harsh realities and injustices of the time). In this sense convict ancestors are brought into the present and cared for, but the point to make is that they need not be. It also perfectly possible, as it was prior to the 1960s, to ignore or bypass them. Without the spiritual imperative of the Mormons, for example, who are charged with identifying and 'redeeming' their ancestors (Cannell 2005), kin can be dropped. Convict ancestors, child abusers, slave owners, bigamists, and so forth need not become 'actual' family: they need not be cared for or about.

The ancestor in the machine

Martin flips open his Psion, Series 5, hand held organiser. It is about 6 inches wide and 4 inches high and with its pen-like stylus he taps on the keyboard and looks intently at the tiny screen - a few more taps - a studied silence - and then to the astonishment of the woman who has asked him if he has any information about her great uncle Fred Perry, proceeds to tell her where he is buried (Newchurch cemetery), when he died (1880), the names of those buried with him, when they died, when he was born, when he married and, finally, the plot number of his grave, which, Martin says, he can show her on the schematic map of the same cemetery over on the other side of the room and, furthermore, if she wants, he can take her to the grave tomorrow because it is difficult to find as many of the older gravestones have fallen down and the plots are overgrown. The woman's jaw drops, before the penny does. She is taken aback. She was clearly not expecting this, and certainly not so much information in such a short space of time. She's been stuck, she had already told us, for a while: unable to go further with this particular branch of her family. Her initial bewilderment changes to delight which she expresses in a sharp shriek that quickly fades to an awed silence. 'How did you do that?' she asks, eventually. Meanwhile, Martin is insouciant. He has got the timing down perfect and is familiar with the effect. He has found the woman's ancestor, and more besides, in his machine. I have seen this happen before. I have also witnessed Martin drawing a blank - the person he's looking for is not on his database - but he can still impress with a snippet of information, not required but nevertheless interesting, about somebody else: perhaps somebody with the same name but, unfortunately, with the wrong date.

There are, of course, many people who were born or who lived in The Valley who are not buried there and Martin started his database by matching burial records with gravestone inscriptions. I got the opportunity to ask him about it a few weeks later. In a talk entitled 'An email too many and a google too far' presented by the secretary of the FHHS a couple of weeks before my meeting with Martin, she read out a news clipping that she had accidentally come across when 'googling' something else. The newspaper piece mentioned that Martin was in his early fifties and a grandfather. He looks younger and is dapper. Other members of the society, both male and female, some of whom are younger than him and others not much older, tend to treat him with the kind of affection older people reserve for

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younger people. Sitting in his living room, facing the television screen which lists queries from around the country, surrounded by framed family photographs, and with a small digital recorder on the coffee table between us, I ask Martin how he got interested in family history.

Do you remember in 1991 there was an enquiry in the ... Free Press of somebody who wanted to know somebody that lived in Hawthorn? ... I went to see if I could find it and match it against the marriage records, which were on microfilm at [the] library, with what was on the gravestones ... to try and build up a better picture. And ... because it was an Australian ... in Melbourne, and because my brother lived in Melbourne, I had this obligation to help. But it were before the Internet.

I did not remember the enquiry in the Free Press in 1991, but that is beside the point. The obligation to help, that Martin feels keenly, threads through the rest of our conversation. He remembers that I had originally asked if I could talk to him about the database on his palmtop and he is taken by the idea that what he has is a database, at the same time suggesting that it is much more than that. In his words again:

And so all this, what people think is data, is like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. You try to build up a picture of people that once existed before you did and you try to think 'well how did they manage without all the mod cons that we've got?' and 'what kind of life did they lead?'. By helping people, I found that I needed to get more data. For instance, Hawthorn cemetery records were held at The Valley and I had to keep going down there and saying 'who's in that grave?' because by obtaining the grave records you knew whether [you could go back] two or three generations. And then each of those names could be matched against one of the censuses, either 1901, 1891, or 1881 ... so you're building up a bigger picture. But the names themselves don't mean anything. I remember somebody saying - 'Oh he collects dead people' ... [but] what I was doing was sitting there and copying out of the index books ... I would sit there for a couple of hours ... on my days off, in the afternoon. I would go for about two hours at a time, and I'd probably write down 100 maybe 150 names, but of course it was week after week, and month after month ... I transcribed the first three volumes from April 1902 to July 1969 and then I thought, 'that's enough that'. I had 8307 names. I was just doing it [then] with pen and paper ... But then Hawthorn cemetery with 8,307 names just didn't seem enough.

[Meanwhile] I had joined the Family History group, so [as] a kind of contribution to that branch, I decided to do [another cemetery's] burial records which had 20,000 names.

So Martin had 28,307 names in his palm and next to each name an age, a grave number and a last address. ‘To make the picture complete’ he then went looking for matching marriages in the local church records and was able to create other columns: ‘not only did I have a burial’, he says, ‘I then had a marriage and, most important, I had a parent’. He turned his attention to other burial sites in the region and his database continued to grow. Its creation fuelled, he tells me, by curiosity, a desire to help people and as a way of contributing to the FHHS. The disjuncture between the hard slog of copying records by hand and laboriously entering them into a mini computer, and the flourish with which they are retrieved in response to a specific request is striking. Like the medium connecting mundane and spiritual domains, Martin conjures up the ancestor with a performance that is appreciated by his audience. Towards the end of our conversation, Martin remarks, almost as an afterthought:

I can’t do my family history because of my mum’s circumstances. She was a prisoner of war and was taken prisoner from Western Ukraine, so I think for me it’s a substitute: not being able to do my family history, but being able to do family history for my local area.

Doing genealogical work and inscribing kinship on behalf of others roots Martin here in his hometown: where he was ‘born and bred’. His sense of contributing to his ‘local area’ resonates with other ethnography of Britain which draws attention to the way in which notions of ‘belonging’, whether to places or persons, entails practices of reciprocity (e.g. Cohen 1982; Edwards 2000, 2005; Frankenberg 1957; Lewis n.d.). Belonging is imagined in both claims upon, and contributions to, places, persons and pasts that, in turn, project a future. Martin could not ‘be there’ via his forbears, but through his research on behalf of unknown others – an enquirer from Australia, a visitor to the FHHS, a poster on teletext – or known others, such as his fellow society members or his neighbour, he can ‘give something back’. His acts of reciprocity embed him firmly in both the FHHS and the Valley even though he is unable to emplace his deceased kin.

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Martin knows it would be difficult, if not impossible, to trace his antecedents in Ukraine. His mother's parents died when she was a child and she was used by an uncle as 'slave labour' on his farm in Western Ukraine. She never went to school and 'never knew how to read or write'. She was taken prisoner during the war and transported to Germany and, in 1948, applied successfully to the British sector as a 'misplaced person'. By then she had married a Ukrainian man, Martin's father, who was much older than her and had been married before. They came to Britain and settled in the Valley. Martin never knew his father; he died when he was a child. He tells me that for him his 'family tree starts when she [his mother] got married in Germany, and when he [his father] came over here ... His records show that he was also a prisoner but he worked in a munitions factory'. Martin is reconciled to the fact that one side of his family tree starts at the point that his mother married his father in Germany, and the other side when his father moved to the UK. He knows it would be difficult to go back further than this on either side - given the early death of his mother's parents, the rupture of war and displacement of populations across Europe. But he is also reluctant to delve.

... instead of wondering where my roots come from, I am leaving it as starting from my mother and my father, and taking it from there. I don't know whether it is still this fear of finding skeletons in the cupboard - right - because people do find skeletons in the cupboard.

Rather than delve into what might be unwelcome information, even if it were accessible, Martin focuses his attention on doing 'family history for his local area'. In explaining his database to me he emphasises the fact that he 'can be of service' and he can use it to help people: 'no good having all this information and not doing anything with it'. Martin roots himself in the Valley through his genealogical work on behalf of others, which he sees as his contribution to the place to which he belongs.

Martin's observations and practices encourage us to look at the dynamic processes of genealogy - at its materialities and performances - that go beyond its potential to fix. Local genealogists reveal to people links that are otherwise hidden and they act as mediators between the past and the present and between the ancestors and the living. In this sense, they figure more as shaman than as archivist. But as we have seen with Martin, the work of genealogy is a systematic reading and recording of the archives, with careful and painstaking

attention to 'the facts' of birth, marriages and deaths. Martin is a technical wizard intent on making the information he has collected over time, with skill and dedication, available to family seekers: thus helping them negotiate the archives and giving them shortcuts to what they could find for themselves.

Martin's technical skills, control over the archives and systematic methodology do not prevent him from recognising the enormity of fate and the role of God. His mother, he tells me, 'was fated to come over here'. Constantly hiding from 'the Germans' during daylight hours, a thunderstorm took her home one day and 'they were there'.

... if God had not sent that thunderstorm ... then there would be no [reason] of me being here, or my brothers being here, or our children and so forth and so forth - and you look back and you think "yeah it is incredible, that coincidence, that fate, if it wasn't just for that accident".

For Martin, a thunderstorm, described to him by his mother, marks the beginning of a chain of events which have led to him sitting here, in his flat, in the Valley, talking to me about family history research. Almost all the family tree-ers with whom I have worked turn to the chance encounter and to fate in their accounts of what they have found in their research and how they have discovered it. I explore further the centrality of serendipity, fate and chance in the narratives of family tree-ers in the next section, and do so through the example of two members of the FHHS who discover, by accident, a connection between their deceased kin via objects that belonged to them.

Serendipity, fate and chance

One of Cannell's informants described serendipity as 'happiness by accident' (Cannell 2011: 473), and while accidental, Cannell recognises in such descriptions of serendipity and the accidental, the intentionality of the dead: the ancestor who reciprocates the care of their kin by guiding, in some form, their search. She describes it as the ability of the dead to 'lead people to new links with the living' (2011: 465). I have already noted how narratives about family treeing in the Valley almost always touch on fate. I want to extend Cannell's insight and look at how 'things' act as extensions to the deceased and, as they have greater facilities than people to travel across time and place, can act to deepen links that were already there.

Occasionally, as I mentioned above, instead of a guest speaker or a research evening, a monthly meeting of the FHHS is designated an 'heirloom evening'. Joanne Harvey is a long serving member of the society and she has been doing her own family history on and off for many years. Her research got a boost, she tells me, when her brother, while bird watching, accidentally came across a chapel with a graveyard that contained a 'bunch' of Harvey graves. Over several years she looked up burial records and came across and swapped notes with other Harvey's one of whom had traced his early ancestors to Gisburn Forest and to 1797. She became intrigued by her Great Uncle Ted Harvey who was killed in the First World War and she has painstakingly compiled and collated biographical details of each of the other thirty four other young men, listed alongside him on the war memorial in the Parish Church of a relatively small village in the north eastern corner of the borough (and see Edwards 2012). Joanne brought her Great Uncle Ted's war medals to the heirloom evening. Another member, Maddie, brought in a gold locket that had belonged to her Great Aunt Louise. Joanne describes how at 'heirloom evenings' participants group around small tables and take it in turn to talk about the object they have brought to the meeting and through that object track relevant genealogical links. On this occasion, Joanne talked about her connection to her Great Uncle Ted through his medals and Maddie to her Great Aunt Louise through the gold locket encasing two tiny photographs. At some point, in the conversation, with a crawling sensation on the back of her neck, Joanne realised that she and Maddie were talking about the same person. Aunt Louise's fiancé, killed in the war, whose photograph is lodged in the locket, she realises, is her Great Uncle Ted. It turns out that Louise and Ted had been engaged to be married. Joanne and Maddie were both 'gobsmacked'. Apparently, Louise had never figured in the stories that had circulated amongst Joanne's family, whilst in Maddie's family it was always known that Aunt Louise had tragically lost her fiancé in the war but nothing was known of him and no details circulated. Maddie and Joanne were able to augment each other's genealogy by adding missing pieces. It turned out that Maddie also had postcards that Ted had sent to Louise from the front during the war. Joanne tells me that to hold them and see his handwriting was, surprisingly, very emotional. The locket, and the connections it unlocked, cemented Maddie and Joanne's friendship. They became close friends, spending time together outside FHHS meetings, confiding in each other, sharing the progress of their research, going on holiday together – coach tours, for example, that take them to visit the war graves in France and Belgium. Not long after that evening and the unexpected discovery of the connection between their kin, Maddie gave the locket to Joanne

as a gift. Maddie told me that she had initially thought she would leave it to Joanne in her will, but she changed her mind: she wanted to be sure that the locket got to Joanne, no matter what.

The research of these two members of the FHSS brought them together and led to the discovery of an unexpected link between their kin: a link which deepened their friendship. Their genealogical research brought their deceased kin into the present and literally onto the table. In bringing their forbears and the relationship between them to mind, Maddie and Joanne could embellish their lives further and with care and attention. Significantly for both Maddie and Joanne their own friendship was not only cemented in the discovery of their shared history but will also, they believe, endure into the future: a belief augmented by the gift of the locket. In a final twist to the story, caring for Joanne, means that Maddie has to be careful about how and when she reveals to Joanne that she also has in her possession postcards that had been sent to Louise during the war from a man other than Ted.

Histories of place, past, persons (and things).

In this article, I have wanted to show how family treeing in the north of England is a social practice through which a number of broader aspects of contemporary English social life are revealed. It is taking place in the context of a post-industrial landscape where people are working out, and working through, large social and economic transformations that have impinged on families and their futures. I have found Ingold’s notion of lines that ‘go for a walk’ useful in thinking not only about the digressions that family tree-ers take, but also about the genealogical diagrams they produce: the lines they draw do more than merely connect up people already fixed on a grid. They are thickened through biographical and geographical detail collected and layered through research. They are lines which brings those named into the present-day and which reveal absent presences that bespeak belonging to persons, places and pasts. They are lines that develop into social and classed histories of the Valley, where people are struggling to make sense of contemporary social and economic upheavals and to project themselves, their families and their communities into futures that are uncertain.

In its preoccupation with serendipity, fate and chance, I see family treeing in the north of England as exercising some of the emotional capacities that would otherwise be exercised by religion, although they are not mutually exclusive. I appreciate Cannell's observation that

anthropologists of Euro American kinship have shared with their informants a thesis of secularisation which has assumed that kinship (and thus genealogy) is secular and has nothing to do with religion, and indeed perhaps this goes some way to explaining my surprise at the ethereal and mystical aspects of family history research. It begs the question, however, of what kind of religion this is. As Cannell observes, her informants 'tell it slant' - partly to protect themselves from ridicule (Cannell 2011). Yet I get the sense from the family tree-ers who have been teaching me about genealogical research that they have no problem telling it straight - ancestors are kin, they can be either highly influential or too distant to have an impact, and there is such a thing as fate, not to mention serendipity and chance. Some hold these ideas alongside their Baptist, Catholic or Church of England practices, many others profess to not being religious. Their kinship, I would argue, is neither secular nor religious but has the capacity to draw in aspects of both: to draw in and on different materials, concepts, imaginings, items of evidence and so forth that thicken and enliven the links between kin whether living or dead. Serendipity, I have noted, is also mediated by 'things': the chance encounter with a booklet, a necklace, a photograph, sets off a chain reaction and reveals hitherto unknown connections. Things elicit attention, as do the dead: they catch and carry stories of kinship.

Around about the same time as Marshall Sahlins was defining kinship as mutuality of being (Sahlins 2013), Degnen was arguing for processes of 'mutual possession' to describe the interrelationship of people and place in the English village of Dodworth (Degnen 2013). I have followed the same line of thought in this article, but through the lens of reciprocity rather than mutuality. Many anthropologists have noted that reciprocity is central to the kind of kinship thinking that has been glossed as Euro American and I have shown how reciprocity informs, and is displayed in, practices of family treeing in the north of England. I argue that a focus on reciprocity, rather than mutuality, helps account for the way in which kin ties with unknown ancestors are not only forged and maintained, but also broken and abandoned. It also helps us understand the efforts that local genealogists expend on behalf of unknown others. Many family tree-ers in the north of England consider their research as contributing - offering something - to the Valley: as paying something back to the place to which they belong and which, in turn, belongs to them. This means that it is always possible for those without ancestors in the Valley, like Martin, to grow their own roots.

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¹ The Church of Jesus Christ and Latter-day Saints

² Members of the FHHS are known (and know each other) for specific specialisms: one for local cemeteries and burial records, another for war graves, another for the history of a particular neighbourhood, another for monumental inscriptions and so on. Expertise is distributed and allocated and members frequently note that ‘if we don’t know something, we know somebody who will’.

³ I have written elsewhere about how the presentations given by guest speakers at the monthly meetings of the FHSS act as a catalyst for discussion about the social and classed history of this region of England (Edwards 2012).

⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous reader for probing this point.

⁵ Lambert points to a shift from ‘shame’ to ‘pride’ which he dates to the 1960s, while acknowledging that other writers (e.g. Dixon 1999) are not convinced that the shift is complete and instead note ‘a lingering, subterranean anxiety’ (Lambert 2002: 115).

⁶ In anthropological theorising about Euro American kinship, what gets to be included as biological still remains notably under-problematised (Edwards and Salazar 2009). Like other culturally competent actors, anthropologists seem to know what belongs to the domain of biology. However the biology available to us today is quite a different biology from that available to Rivers and colleagues: as Hannah Landecker suggests in a wonderfully insightful paper, ‘biotechnology changes what it is to be biological’ - her focus is on possibilities presented by cryopreservation where ‘cells can be made to live differently in time’ (Landecker 2009: 220). And Sarah Franklin, with characteristic pithiness, reminds us that ‘biology can make itself strange as quickly as any of its critics’ (Franklin 2001: 320).

⁷ And listen to this wonderful quote from Nathaniel Harris Morgan (third cousin of Lewis Henry) writing in 1869 and cited by Gillian Feeley-Harnick (2013). After agreeing that, at first glance, nothing can be less inspiring or interesting than a genealogical table, he goes on to point out that each name,

when it occurs in the midst of these dry records, throws out an electric light at every link in the chain of the generations. Each of these names, in the table, is the memorial, perhaps the only memorial, of a human heart that once lived and died ... Each of these names is the memorial of an individual human life, that had its joys and sorrows, its

cares and burdens, its affections and hopes, its conflicts and achievements, its opportunities, wasted or improved, and its hour of death. Each of these dates of “birth,” “marriage,” “death!” Oh! How significant! What a day was each of these to some human family, or some circle of loving human hearts (N.H. Morgan 1869: 11 cited by Feeley-Harnick 2013: 192-3).

⁸ Anne-Marie Kramer notes the same from her Mass Observation data: ‘people take as much pleasure in *making* themselves connected and rooted, as in *being* rooted and connected’ (Kramer 2011: 392).

⁹ This example also points to diminishing domains of privacy and anonymity, and to the increasing impossibility, in the light of ever-increasing availability of personal and biographic data on the internet, of remaining silent (unknown). It poses a challenge to anthropological conventions of maintaining the privacy of both informants and ethnographers and shows how the decisions that researchers make about what to reveal about themselves are not necessarily theirs to make. It could be argued that this merely underscores what is readily recognised as the intersubjective nature of ethnographic research. But it also exemplifies broader societal moves to ever-increasing transparency (Strathern 2000) or compulsion to expression (Deleuze 1997). ‘The problem is no longer getting people to express themselves, but providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say’ (Deleuze 1997:129).

¹⁰ The genealogical industry is large and there is a constant flow of new magazines and books devoted to the practice as well as new software and databases. Genealogical tourism is booming with travel agents and tour operators creating new niches in homeland genealogy and war cemetery tours (and see Schramm 2004).

¹¹ Basu (2007) describes how, for his informants, the Internet is both research tool (mobilised to find links and organise data) and a medium (the forum where interaction takes place). Since then, developments in Big Data, for example, are changing the field rapidly with ever faster and more extensive (re)search capacities.

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¹² The way in which family treeing is of a piece with a contemporary enchantment with social media and what Green, Harvey and Knox call ‘the imperative to connect’ (Green et al. 2005) bears further study.

¹³ I am reminded of Monica Konrad’s ethnography on egg donors in the UK. She shows how a spiritual kinship is conceived between women who donate their ova and the unknown recipients who remain anonymous (Konrad 2005).

¹⁴ Despite, or because of, the growing and lucrative industry of family history research with its magazines, commercial software, television programmes and so on, of which they are avid consumers.

¹⁵ In another ethnographic example, Stefan Beck alerts us to the way in which bone marrow grafts in Cyprus also have to be exempted from the commercial sphere: they cannot be possessed like things, he argues, and are ‘inalienable’ insofar as they carry the traces of the donor (Beck 2011).

¹⁶ To empathise with an ancestor might provoke anger at the injustice and inequality they suffered.

¹⁷ Adam Reed identifies something similar in his description of a literary society in London. He is interested in the act of solitary reading, and describes the obsessive and imaginative qualities members take to their reading of the novels, in this case, of Henry Williamson. Members of the society that Reed describes are passionate readers and in his words: They dwell on the quality of their engagement with literature, in particular those cherished moments of reverie or rapture. Indeed, the solitary reading experience is presented as an emotional investment, drawing out powerful and often unexpected depths of feeling that lead them to question who they are and how they perceive the world around them (Reed 2002).