

Family History: Some new directions and their implications for the archivist

Written history, defined by Carl Berger as “a self-conscious effort to establish the meaning of experience for the present”,¹ is not what it was. There was a time when we could safely place the past behind us as a closed register of great and small events occurring sequentially through time, which the historian might fashion into literature or into a treatise designed to validate an interpretation of the march of time and the progress of humanity. History, whether academic or popular, was essentially created to be read with or without the help of illustrations, as a pursuit of the mind and the intellect. History was something other people wrote for our enlightenment or entertainment, which we accepted more or less passively, and found to be of absorbing interest or a deadly bore according to our predilections and the skill of the author. In whatever guise, history had to be read or laid aside. At best it sharpened our judgement, aesthetic sense and critical ability; at worst we learnt it by rote to regurgitate answers in examinations without any sense of commitment or personal contribution.

More recently we have come to learn that as with war and the generals the past is too serious a matter to be left solely to the academic historians, authors of text books and writers of fiction. Dubious efforts to bring the past “to life” have often been ill-conceived and dishonest, for the past is quite dead and can only be perceived from the evidence which has survived. The sounds have dispersed, the light waves race, away through outer space, organic matter rotates through growth, decay and recreated energy. All that we have retrieved amounts to mere fragments and it could never have been otherwise. We can however bring the past into our lives and in some senses we are powerless to reject it. We bear within ourselves the consequences of our separate pasts, and to some extent, those of our parents and ancestors. To this we are committed as we cope with our tumultuous present and look to the future. This is our personal past which no one can take from us but which may lie buried in our subconscious and in the evidence of men, women and events that fill archives and museums. Some of us feel we must seek it out because, quite simply, it is a part of us and we are diminished by our ignorance. We talk about “family trees” and “roots”, metaphors for a union with the physical environment which we are coming increasingly to respect; such roots are no less real for being intangible. We are learning to call this interest “family history” and in its fullest sense it may become a positive social therapy of compelling, deeply satisfying power as we seek to resolve our place in the scheme of things. This is the history which we must perceive for ourselves and experience if it is to be authentic. We must exercise our informed imagination and be prepared for frustration and disappointment in the course of our pursuit.

Family history while implying an understanding of the life of our ancestors also demands careful genealogy, and requires a patient discipline towards the rejection of self delusion when the evidence is sifted. Most genealogists are meticulous and their collective contribution could become a valuable resource for the quantitative historian and

1 Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History* (Toronto, 1976), p. lx.

the sociologist concerned with family reconstruction, record linkage and the study of the family in the aggregate. There is surely a real opportunity here for the amateur genealogist and professional academic to meet on equal terms, and for the amateur to appreciate those studies by academics which seek to generalize about families and communities which have a bearing on his or her past?

To strengthen this relationship we need to preserve far more family history if we are to know ourselves and give our descendants a chance to appraise us and relate to us. Guides to archival repositories can be deceptive for although we have often vast collections of personal papers in our archives, they may have little to say about the family. Our habit of giving priority and preference to elites and prominent persons was quite justified as containing historical evidence of the larger scene but may not enable us to study the family as an institution. Again, less public families have consistently destroyed their records as being of no interest to themselves, too private for others and quite trivial in the larger context. Nothing could be further from the truth, and there are signs that this attitude is beginning to change.

The hitherto symbiotic bond between archivists and historians has resulted in a heavy emphasis on intensive acquisition and processing of records for political, economic, social and institutional history" from the top down", reflecting the main thrust of historical writing during the past century. Such history became almost the exclusive domain of the professional academic historian; amateurs were left to putter around their one backyards in the pursuit of local history, seen largely as a mix of topography, geology, biography of local worthies, institutional chronology, antiquarianism and anecdote. Sometimes this material derived from sources now lost and achieved a primary value but, with few exceptions, professional and amateur historians ceased to relate to each other; two more solitudes emerged. Genealogists tended to work in isolation, caught between national and local history which had little to say to them that was relevant to their interests and, in consequence, their pedigrees were little more than the organization charts of the family hierarchy. The chase was the thing and the hunt for the generation further back may not have been seen as particularly historical at all.

Meanwhile, there have been sea changes in the way we perceive ourselves during the last twenty years. Centralist history and centralized archives and museums have yielded to the heritage movement and an increasing awareness of the local environment and ecology; communications technology and photography have intensified the thrust; local history has become a field for serious academic research and the appreciation of our past in our present is now enjoyed by many who skill find a great deal of historical writing hard to take. History, in short, has broken loose from the printed word and may now be conveyed and appreciated, through all the other "media of record" which bring together professionals and amateurs alike at various levels of endeavour. Now, when we think of local history, we think of viable communities such as towns, cities, and river valleys² not just who was there and a chronicle of events but how they operated as totalities; likewise, as the basic units of any society or community, how in general principle did the families relate to each other?

Family history is not simply genealogy, although this would normally provide the structure. Family history should involve a knowledge and understanding of social history and material culture. The family tree will set our ancestors within their proper environments but according to their occupations so that the local museum or archives may well be able to allow generalization within reason on the kind of lives they led. At this point we have to draw on a wide range of sources, many of which may not be literary at

2 An excellent survey of this historical approach is to be found in David J. Russo, *Families and Communities. A New View of American History* (Nashville, 1974). For English history see Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London, 1965).

all, and none the worse for that, in providing an accurate mental picture of local society. A study of local implements and technologies may lead to an examination of local industry and patterns of trade which in turn may lead to parameters imposed by government and national politics. This surely is how the world was seen by our ancestors first through the family, then the village or neighbouring town; national events would rarely impinge save in time of war, general elections, economic depressions and such like. The origins of the "highland clearances" in Scotland lie behind many a family in Nova Scotia. National histories are important but they do not have to be approached first.

The pictorial record marvellously helps to recreate appearances, bearing in mind the conventions of the artist and the objectives of the photographer. If these records are used in conjunction with a personal visit to the scene it is remarkable how the original topography can be recreated in the mind's eye, especially in the small towns, coastline and countryside which may not have changed out of all recognition. At dawn and dusk shapes are reduced to silhouettes, sounds are dominated by the animal world and we can to some degree see and hear as our forefathers did. All respectable local historians, academic or otherwise, have now learnt to put their boots on and get a feel for the lie of the land which, in human terms, is usually a constant. Surely the rigorous pursuit of an accurate family tree for its own sake merits this kind of pause and pilgrimage, which may in turn offer physical clues or a chance encounter which the record alone could never provide?

This wider pursuit of family history is gaining favour. A workshop held recently in Pictou, Nova Scotia, with the title "Beyond the Family Tree... New approaches to Genealogy" raised many of the above issues and included family history through the spoken word, family research for academic history, and the Celtic Studies Project, which involves the study of families in an ethnic context. A more systematic identification, acquisition or microfilming of local archives and manuscripts in support of such local study was also outlined and initiated by a subsequent summer employment project.³ Most impressive was the rich interplay of personal experiences and insights which the multi-disciplinary approach helped to release between amateurs and professionals alike. A similar meeting at Machias, Washington County, Maine was just as successful and had the distinction of being the first international meeting of its kind, since it included Americans and Canadians along the Maine border (which was seen to be largely artificial from the standpoint of family history). The warm relationship between those taking part and a willingness to share information, particularly between genealogists, was again evident as was the active involvement of archivists, museum curators, academic historians and librarians. About 150 persons attended the two meetings.

Surely this is what the study of family history as an aspect of humanism should be like, encompassing all related media and disciplines and centred on valuable personal ties with friends and acquaintances. The success of these two conferences suggest that the time has come for small pilot projects to test the waters, and that not only cultural institutions but also the tourist industry and government departments of tourism would do well to encourage those who will be travelling in search of their ancestors. I suggest the following approaches:

1. The publication of a genealogical map perhaps superimposed over a faded back road map or as an alphabetical listing keyed to the grid on the road map. This could, not, of course, be inclusive or totally accurate but would give some ideas where the principal families at least had their settlements.

3 This intensive and systematic uncovering of surviving archival material within a relatively small area I have elsewhere described as "paper archaeology: as opposed to our usual emphasis on following random leads. *Ontario's Heritage: A Guide to Archival Resources*, Vol. 1 (Cheltenham, Ont., 1978) is a significant move in this direction.

2. The publication of a list of genealogical centres with the names of families for which a reasonable body of information is available. This might make a good summer employment project. A directory of this kind would be a great help in knowing who to contact when planning an itinerary.

3. Road maps for selected itineraries which describe features of interest *en route*. Several provinces have these.

4. More walking tours of town & villages. These could be quite modestly produced in the first instance and made available locally. They should not be oriented entirely to architecture.

5. Bus tours to be devised with great care under various themes such as "The Loyalist", "The Planters", "The Scots" and should be accompanied by guides knowledgeable of families and places. These tours might last for several days with evening sessions spent socializing with local societies and orienting the group for the next day's journey by means of films, slides, oral history, etc., Evening events could also be available for those travelling in their own cars.

6. The formation, if such does not already exist, of some form of federation to bring together museums, archives, historical and heritage societies under a general heritage umbrella at the provincial level. I recognize that this kind of co-operative activity by autonomous bodies can be achieved in a number of ways depending on their historical evolution but, naturally, supportive effort will be made much easier through a structure of this kind.

One of the implications for archives arising out of such an holistic approach to family history may be the justification for more "outreach" programs appealing to travellers of all kinds and of more genealogical finding aids since these could be of great value to academic historians and sociologists studying the family as an institution. Another would be the encouragement of the assembly of material by families on a systematic basis as they related to their lives, through the collection of scrapbooks, photo albums, tapes, correspondence and household accounts. It may be that some genealogists interested in this kind of history might agree to begin saving this kind of thing, documenting it and if necessary depositing in with restrictions in their local archives if they find it difficult to preserve it at home. I do not see how else we can obtain the records of "middling folk" which could be so important. With this in mind it might be worth holding workshops on family records, why and how to keep them, including suggestions as to what to keep.

There are those who would argue that this approach is too parochial for words and that this is not real history or the stuff of history, but surely one aspect of the history of this county as of any country is the aggregate of families and communities going about the business of life during which some individuals will come to direct affairs within the larger scene. In consequence, we should not blind ourselves to the impact of national and international events on local society. We can acknowledge and assent to the history of our country but we may only be able to grasp its reality if we can anchor ourselves and our families in space and time so that we may know where we are coming from. Without this strong sense of territoriality or provincialism in the first place, the rest of the country and the world instead of being a human extension of ourselves may seem no more than a slightly hostile geographical expression to which we can accord little enthusiasm or understanding. Perhaps only when we have achieved this sense, can we have the confidence to fully experience a feel for country or nation. This is the price of our new awareness of locality which can be so frustrating at the national level. It is, nonetheless, where we are at.

Hugh A. Taylor
Public Archives of Nova Scotia