

American Archivist with the rest coming from a variety of sources including *Midwest Archivist*, NARA's *Information Papers*, *Georgia Archive*, *Drexel Library Quarterly*, and *Picturescope*. Unfortunately, the long list of sources does not include any articles from *Archivaria*.

Appropriately, the *Reader* concludes with Gerald Ham's "The Archival Edge." In many ways, the profession now finds itself on the "edge" as archivists are being asked to collect a multitude of different records for an increasingly diverse audience. In addition, archivists are being called upon to anticipate and predict the requirements of future users. Although those in the profession might disagree as to how far the archivist should venture in determining what records should be retained for posterity, few can argue that the profession does not and will not continue to exist on the "archival edge." In this sense we must strive to develop archival literature which will help equip archivists to meet future challenges. This is why a publication like the *Reader* is important. Rather than attempt to provide a blueprint for future archival development, the book provides a collection of works which includes both classical theory and modern insights into these issues. In bringing this literature together in a single volume, the *Reader* helps to broaden and strengthen the foundations upon which the profession might build in the future. This book should be a standard reference work and a welcome addition to the growing body of archival literature.

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The Mountain of Names: A History of the Human Family. ALEX SHOUMATOFF.
New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985. 318 p. ISBN 0-671-49440-6 \$29.95.

In 1961, when Alex Shoumatoff was fourteen, his family moved to London and rented a flat in a house belonging to the Society of Genealogists. He left the bath running one day and the resulting overflow damaged some of the parish registers in the society's search rooms. This hardly augured well for any future interest in genealogy. Neither did his first youthful foray into genealogical research. He spent day after day in the PRO scanning ships' musters in an attempt to prove a family legend that an ancestor, as a visiting Russian midshipman, had been with Nelson at Trafalgar. While he eventually discovered that his ancestor had at least been within sight of the battle if not of Nelson (which makes this family story closer to the truth than most), he came to the conclusion that genealogical research is "tedious and often disillusioning."

Despite this unpromising start, Shoumatoff was later to write a book about his family history called *Russian Blood*. (Its working title was *Rootsky*.) His most recent book, *The Mountain of Names*, is concerned with genealogical research and family history in general. Shoumatoff is a *New Yorker* staff writer and much of this book first appeared in its pages. As one would expect, *The Mountain of Names* is chatty, discursive, and immensely readable. While it is not intended for a specialized audience, it is a book that archivists should enjoy reading. Genealogists are among the most frequent users of archives, not to mention perhaps the most diligent and determined, and as archivists we should know more about what brings them to our doors.

A wise friend of mine once remarked that it is all right to tell stories about yourself as long as you don't do it for the sake of the "I" in the story. Genealogists may be said to study the past for the sake of the "I" in history. Shoumatoff's great accomplishment is to place this self-centred pastime in a wider context. The first section of the book contains a survey of theories of kinship, of all the ways in which people have structured their relationships to family members, both the living and the dead. Inuit believe that dead relatives are reborn in their children; Mexicans take food to the cemeteries on All Souls' Day; Brazilians use spiritualism to keep in touch with their dead. These beliefs and practices, and many others like them, both stem from and result in a sense of closeness with departed ancestors. When people feel detached from the past and regard this detachment as an unsettling deprivation, they may resort to genealogy. The Society of Genealogists was founded in 1911 at a time when many people in Britain felt cut off from their past as the result of an era of upward social mobility. Americans may feel isolated from their past as the result of emigration and what many of them perceive as the enforced loss of ethnic identity in the "melting pot." In our attitudes towards the past Canadians resemble Americans more than we do other New World peoples, yet there are certain differences. It is a pity that Shoumatoff does not deal with Canada; on the other hand, the omission compels the Canadian reader to think for himself or herself about the subject. Of course, we are all detached from the past but not all of us find this a reason for dismay. It appears that when people do not feel a strong sense of connection with living family members or with their fellow citizens they may also feel shut off from the past. For example, it is almost inevitable that the English should be keen genealogists; they live on an island, they are not, most of them, native to that island, they have not lived in extended families for centuries, probably as a result of the waves of emigration which brought them to England in the first place ("not everybody could get into the boats"), and they place a high value on individuality. Add to these factors that strong feeling of horror at the transience of mortal life, which is so marked a characteristic of English literature, and it is no wonder that the English should turn to the comfort of genealogy.

Are there no practical reasons for genealogy? There are, and Shoumatoff deals with its legal and medical uses. Yet, as he also points out, very few of the genes of an ancestor seven generations back will be inherited, so that tracing such an ancestor is not likely to provide you with much in the way of hard scientific fact about yourself. Yet inheritance is not only genetic but also cultural and psychological — the way we are brought up and the way we are taught to think of ourselves. Shoumatoff does not expand on this idea as much as he might, and this is a pity as it seems to be closely related to what might be called the mythopoeic aspect of genealogy. Our self-image is a story about ourselves which we continually tell, and for many Canadians an important part of their own personal myth is provided by a sense of belonging to a national group. Genealogy offers reinforcement of this myth for those who feel that it is not enough to have a Scottish name, for example, but require actual proof of Scottish ancestry. It goes without saying that they are not proving as much as they imagine since they are not likely to have a purely Scottish ancestry nor is there any gene for "Scottishness." Yet, as Morag Gunn says in *The Diviners*, "The myths are my realities." Genealogical fact is used in the service of a personal truth.

For Shoumatoff the most heartening aspect of genealogy is that it demonstrates that the idea of the human family is actual fact and not just a cliché for Christmas cards. For we are all cousins, admittedly not very close cousins, but cousins nonetheless. Consider that we all have two parents, four grandparents, and so on. If we go back far enough, however,

doubling our progenitors with every generation, we will eventually reach the patently false conclusion that in one distant generation we each had so many ancestors that they would have exceeded the most generous estimates of the earth's population at the time. We are face to face with what the Mormon genealogist Robert C. Gunderson calls "pedigree collapse." Because cousins have so often married cousins, some individuals will fill more than one place in our family trees, and so we all share our ancestors. Shoumatoff has high hopes that if this perception of ourselves as all members of one family catches on it will have a beneficial effect on the way the human race lives together. In view of the fact that the truth of an idea is rarely connected with its emotional impact, it is hard to share his hopes. If truth conflicts with a cherished myth it is easier to deny the truth than build a new myth. A telling example, which Shoumatoff quotes in a different context, is found in South Africa. The christening records of the Dutch Reformed Church in that country go back to 1652. They are not open to the public because they would reveal the inconvenient fact that many Afrikaaners, especially those whose ancestors arrived in the country before 1750, have black blood. The family tree of the entire human race can never be drawn up. It has been estimated that between 85 and 92 per cent of all the people who have ever lived have left behind no trace of their individual existence. Either they were not recorded or the records have not survived. Shoumatoff scatters throughout the book accounts of how and why some of the records now used by genealogists were created and how they have survived. He also explains how some of them have been lost or, as in the case of oral genealogies, are in the process of being lost. The overall effect of this is to make one feel that one is assisting at a small miracle whenever a genealogist finds the name he is looking for.

Yet, as all archivists know, the names of a great many individuals have survived, and about 1.5 billion of them may well be the safest things on earth, kept on microfilm in the vaults of the Genealogical Society of Utah in the "Mountain of Names." If archivists read nothing else in this book, they should read the final chapter which deals with the Mormons and the Genealogical Society of Utah. It explains why the Mormons are trying to gather the name of every individual who has ever lived, so far as that is possible, and how they gather, process, store, and make names available. These are all topics about which most archivists are curious and probably misinformed. Yet the real value of the chapter lies in its emotional impact. Odd as Mormon beliefs must seem to even the most sympathetic outsider, such genealogical beliefs and practices sum up magnificently what the book is about. In their concern for the whole human family and the individuals which make up that family and in their unflagging determination to save the records of as many individuals as they can, they remind us that genealogists, whatever their motives, are working at a gigantic and glorious enterprise. We archivists so often tend to regard genealogists as a necessary evil. *The Mountain of Names* should help us to think of our work with genealogists not as a tiresome part of our daily duties but as a task very much worth doing, possibly even joyous.

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