On paper, on screen, on site

Family history in the 21st century

By Dr Imogen Wegman

Late last year, I found myself in Amsterdam for a few days. I was on holiday, and I had spent the previous few weeks exploring European castles and Christmas markets. As a historian, I am well suited to winter holidays. I spend them pottering around in museums and enjoying the emptiness of grand sites that are usually crowded in summer with no room to just stop and stare at the strange details only a historian could love. But on arriving in Amsterdam, my brain ticked back into action and insisted I address some of the family history mysteries of my Dutch heritage.

I only ever met one of my grandparents — my maternal grandmother. She was a feisty Belfast woman who sometimes hinted at wild stories (and had several unexplained engagement rings in a jewellery box). I now, of course, regret not asking more questions when I could have. Instead, I’m asking questions of the records to try to find some missing stories from all sides of my family.

People enter into family history research for any number of reasons. For some, it’s an exercise in self-discovery, while others have an interest in the history of a time or place and use their family as an entry point. Some, like me, enjoy the stories of individuals but have complicated feelings about how those stories affect who they are today. But really, motives for entering into a family history search are almost irrelevant, outweighed by the benefits of delving deep into the past.

There is a genre of history for every person, but sometimes it is not the one they have been exposed to at school or during early-adult attempts to appear cultured.
Technically, history covers everything that has happened until the moment you read this word. That is a daunting thought. Family history can be a gentle starting point to finding the historical period, place or theme that really interests you.

In my role as Associate Lecturer, I encourage students to think beyond their immediate ancestors. Family history is more than a list of names and dates. Those are only the starting point from which each family history researcher can spread their questioning wings.

Census data might suggest that upheaval has occurred between censuses — children have died, the family has moved. On further research, it becomes clear that an epidemic swept through the region. Before you know it, you are elbow-deep in medical histories, then drawn further into the gruesome world of medieval treatments.

As new family historians enter into the vast world of baptismal records, maps and family heirlooms, they must also learn new languages. They learn the languages of record keeping and of computers. Many of our students are retirees, finally enjoying the time to pursue questions they have wondered about for many years. Today, it is possible to conduct a huge amount of research from home, as archives and libraries generously make their records available online. Archives are increasingly using digitisation as a means of preservation by reducing access to the fragile originals.

Learning to access this information online, however, can be daunting for those who rarely use computers. We teach our whole diploma online, with students across Australia, and one of my favourite parts is seeing the incidental skills our students learn. They are thrown into this new digital world, flail for a moment, and then start to paddle with increasing confidence. We hear stories of grandparents and grandkids bonding over learning to use online resources, or isolated farmers connecting to a larger world in their moments of free time. They arrive wanting to learn about their ancestors’ worlds, but depart with the ability to better connect with the world around them, as well.

My time in Amsterdam was driven by some very simple questions — I wanted to learn more about how Dutch records work, what is available online, and what isn’t. But my father had also asked me to see the house he grew up in. On his birthday, I hopped on a train and a bus, walked around a corner and found myself in what is now a commuter town near Schiphol Airport. His house was easy to find, right on the main street. There was no sign of life, and I was not brave enough to knock on the door. I dithered, walking to and fro a number of times before retreating to a cafe. While writing my order, the server asked what brought me to this nondescript town. Her response was quick.

‘Oh, I know who lives there, I think. I’ll ring Mum and check.’

Five minutes later, I had a name and an invitation to drop by. Twenty minutes later, I was in the roof space of my father’s childhood home. Digital records are fantastic and open whole new worlds to us, but sometimes there is nothing like seeing the original.

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