

## **Genealogy, Migration and the Study of the Past**

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The historian and the genealogist were once the same person, until specialization and professionalization of the former took the two along separate paths. While the specialist wrote and lectured in universities mainly of politics, the genealogist's work was discounted as snobbery or antiquarianism. In recent years we have witnessed the collapse or at least the weakening of the rather artificial walls among the several disciplines. Most of the territory claimed for history is being worked on by those using the techniques of anthropology, geography, economics, demography and sociology. So much has this been so that people sometimes speak of economic, political or social history as though these were fundamentally distinct, rather than being differing aspects of the study of humanity through time. I believe that genealogy as a system of research offers a further useful perspective for the study of past generations and their worlds.

It is no secret that some family historians conduct their research in a disorganized fashion. An examination of several "finished" family histories will reveal that their compilers had no particular idea of how to relate family or individual to some economic, social or political context. People lived within a milieu or setting in which families, events, even the actions of individuals, were related through cause and effect.

Historians supply information and interpretations in their writings, and one would expect that family historians would gather a knowledge of context from such literature, but all too often they do not profit from the written histories. One of several reasons for this failure may be that much of the best historical writing is not directed to the so-called general reader. Much of this literature seems to have been written by authors who have despaired of involving the common person in the study of the past. In doing so those historians may have misread the contemporary situation. Winthrop Bell's study of the settlement of foreign Protestants in Nova Scotia is a heavy, almost an encyclopedic, work; yet scores of family historians are clamouring for copies, almost at any price.

The psychological and sociological considerations which have propelled millions of North Americans into a quest for ancestry have also created a potential readership for works of history. This new audience wants to see how the society and the family reacted one on the other. These readers expect that those who possess the advantages of education and opportunity for research will both reveal and interpret the events of the past.

Recently we have experienced the emergence in our region of the genealogical historian. Usually, though not necessarily, university-trained,

such people have been imbued with or have naturally had an interest in the community as a whole and in explanations that go beyond the obvious. Such genealogists want context and information beyond the skeletal family tree. They want to know how and why, as well as who and when. They practice macro-genealogy, a form of cooperative data extraction that arranges the information about all the people rather than merely one family. This person cares about methodology and has even developed a methodology that could be of service to social scientists. As a writer of research articles and guides I have found that one cannot simply produce a collection of lists, but one must present a methodology as an integral part of the work; otherwise one is writing an inventory and not a guide.

Since it is impractical for the academic historian to carry out detailed nominal record linkage for hundreds of families, it is the province of genealogical historians to educate family researchers in the techniques and methods of analysis and organization of information. By improving the critical standards of genealogical research and by drawing historical literature to the attention of family historians, the genealogical historian serves as a useful intermediary between some of the public and some of the valuable work being produced from within the university community. The academic world has much to offer to the family researcher, if only it is kept in mind that the audience may be unsophisticated in the arts of scholarship, but nonetheless seeks adequate information and logical explanations. In short, I am not urging anyone to write down to people, but simply to write for people whose lives are lived outside the academic milieu.

I began a few moments ago to speak of methodology and it is only right that I define genealogical methodology as a way of organizing information and of conducting research and trying out ideas. The emphasis is upon planning in the gathering of information, as well as observing an order and sequence in research. This method seeks for context and historical setting. People lived their lives within several communities (a farm, a fishing hamlet, a regiment, a factory, an extended family, a congregation, or any of the array of groupings within which one might have been found.) Each new setting wherein one finds an individual in the past will have left its traces or records. Explanations for many of the things that happened, for what people did, will emerge from an examination of many sources.

We can begin by considering genealogy as being, firstly, a motivation that will draw people into research of a more general nature, including the reading of sound historical literature. Secondly, it offers a methodology which can be utilized to generate new bodies of information designed to help in the investigation of specific questions about past generations. In compiling the record of even one family, the family historian performs a service. Marc Bloch observed that "one of the most difficult tasks of the historian is that of assembling those documents which he considers necessary." Has the family historian perhaps been doing this for us, all

unawares? Because so many family historians have a pack-rat approach, they will look at anything if there is a chance they will find the family name mentioned therein. The British scholar, Alan Macfarlane, recognized this when he spoke of classes of records that were "little used by historians until a few years ago. Genealogists, however, were fully aware of their value."

Have I perhaps hinted that historical genealogists and the researcher in the social sciences at universities have something in common? If university faculty and students bring fresh points of view to the archival evidence and offer new interpretations of the recorded past, they require that there be conservation and preservation of that documentation, that inventories, catalogues and indexes be prepared to expedite research. If genealogists seek evidence for their specific projects, they also have these needs.

The genealogists tend to go further, however, by the particular nature of their endeavours, and bring into the repositories much documentation that might otherwise not have arrived there and become available to all, academics and amateurs, alike. In Nova Scotia I can cite as examples of this truth the discovery of the 1851 census for Pictou County, about two dozen sets of church records, hundreds of Bibles, pictures and maps, and copies of documentation in private hands. Of course, one's notion of history must involve an attempt to gain a progressively more thorough understanding of the human past for one to see the exciting challenge posed by new evidence becoming available.

If one common interest shared by amateur and academic is the identification, collection and preservation of documentation; another might be projects of a more or less demographic character. When we know the pattern of fertility, marriage and mortality among a people and have tried to identify and classify the factors which explain the emergent patterns, we may be able to explain more about past society than so far we have been able to do. Naturally we are not concerned simply with data quantification but also with the relationships of one group or community to others. We want to know, for instance, whether the patterns of family life and vital activity in colonial Nova Scotia were merely a continuation of the model in the former home, or whether the change in environment overcame the traditional forms. I think it is rather an indictment of our priorities that we know more about the evolution of buildings in this region than we do about the history of the family here. Was the family essentially a biological or an economic unit, or did this change from place to place, time to time, and if so or if not so, why did the evolution follow the patterns it did? Genealogists, or some of us, ask those sorts of questions; so do many scholars in other fields of study.

The contribution that genealogy might offer to the solution of these problems could be significant if we distinguish between family reconstitution and genealogy. In the former the rules of linking one record to another are relatively few and at some points arbitrary. Consequently demogra-

phers must accept a small level of error, much as statisticians allow for in political polling. Genealogists cannot accept such a rate of error, because familiar linkage can only be made on the basis of complete identification. Unless a precise linkage can be established among individuals, no reputable genealogist would consider the connection as having been made. In family reconstitution fewer records are used than in family history, hence the resultant linkages cannot be considered as being so firmly established in the former as in the latter.

Sound genealogical studies may open up new perspectives for the social sciences. As gradually we supplement demographic data by using other documentation we have at our disposal four sets of data concerning the development of a family: (a) its demographic behaviour (especially its fertility); (b) its geographic mobility; (c) its matrimonial alliances; and (d) its social standing, related to the accumulation of wealth, inheritance and changes in occupation. If we had scores of well-documented representative genealogies, we might solve some of the problems which continue to concern scholars who are too often obliged to limit the scope of their studies either to narrow topics or to further development of existing studies.

The study of migration such as that of eight thousand people from New England to greater Nova Scotia in the generation before the outbreak of the American Revolution offers possibilities for cooperation and mutual assistance. The demographer or the scholar practicing family reconstitution is particularly handicapped here, due to a shortage of banks of data which contain complete information of the migrations of large numbers of families or individuals. If one studies a single city or township, its records rarely contain specific references to the origin or the destination of the people who come and go. The evidence needed to follow people beyond the specific jurisdiction will be found scattered in many records in many locations, and no simple reconstitution based on a few sources will gather sufficient data.

In these circumstances a complete and accurate picture can be obtained only through a tedious process of piecing together the several family histories one by one. This is the area where the genealogical investigator is most experienced because the migration of families and the proving of their identity as they move along is one of the problems that a genealogist most often faces. I suggest that when a scholar wants to study a problem in migration and finds the usual statistical methods or the technique of family reconstitution to be inadequate, he/she consider designing a new genealogical study to meet the needs of the particular migration problem being studied. The demographer could accomplish this by enlisting the help of one or several experienced genealogists.

Assume for a moment that seventy-five Planter families settle within a Nova Scotian township between 1759 and 1772, and that it is generally

known that the first eighteen families among them came from a specific New England town. How reliable is a generalization about the date and cause of migration if it is based purely on the circumstances affecting the first eighteen families? For anyone who has not yet tried the experiment, may I suggest they take a random list of two dozen New England names from among those reaching Nova Scotia in those years and then to attempt to find out *from which* place in New England each family came. After all, knowing the place from which they came may have a considerable bearing on the when and the why of the migration. Was each following neighbours and kindred to Nova Scotia, thereby serving as a link in a chain migration? Did the particular settler bring a skill or craft with him which may have been valued enough that his coming was solicited? Were those who came eldest sons, second sons, youngest sons, children of landowning families, whatever? Some of the work of finding answers to such questions might be alleviated by recourse to published genealogies or to the methods of enquiry commonly employed by sound genealogical historians.

The genealogist may produce studies of large numbers of families that would assist others in answering questions about the family cycle or life course and its wider relationship to social and historical movements, because the genealogist habitually covers a wider and more eclectic range of documentation than does the typical researcher who is carrying out family reconstitution.

I would like to set forth a synthesis of the concerns we have in doing genealogical research on a basis of migration. I think most will agree that the questions we ask and about which we attempt to collect data in a search for answers are not very different from those the academic scholars have been asking themselves. Bear in mind that such an investigation may involve reconstruction of the family story across several jurisdictions over several generations. A not unimaginable path might be that taken by a family from southwestern Scotland to northern Ireland about 1690, and from thence to New Hampshire about 1725, and from thence to Minas Basin after 1760.

First, we seek to identify the economic, social, political or religious reasons contributing to each major migration of some or all family members. Political factors might include war (flight from conscription, from enemy occupation, or being posted or discharged from a regiment abroad), revolution (e.g., Loyalists), government policy in the homeland. Economic and social reasons might have to do with exhausted carrying capacity of land; natural misfortunes such as crop failures, severe winters, forest fires; industrialization or urbanization; mineral discoveries; receipt of word from successful earlier emigrants; or serious changes in major markets for one's produce. Religious reasons include persecution or the desire of a sect to establish a new community stamped with their vision of a godly "new Jerusalem."

Secondly, was the migration of the family unique, or was it part of a larger movement of population? How many people were involved and over what length of time?

Thirdly, what documentation exists in which the details of the migrating families may have been recorded (e.g., passenger lists, naturalization, travel documents, newspaper notices, customs returns, governmental correspondence, land or church registers, and so forth.)?

Fourthly, what human resources are available to us? Are there official records, genealogical societies or descendants of the migrating families to be found in the place of origin?

The arts and sciences change and grow. Good genealogy offers techniques and information that will assist scholars in finding answers to some questions that are not easily answered through the methods of family reconstitution or statistical analysis. Together with other methodologies, genealogy might offer its contribution to our insights into what Peter Laslett termed "The World We Have Lost." If the immigration historian is not involved in the human dimensions of the past, he has begun to lose his *raison d'être*. Likewise, if genealogical historians do not show a regard for methodology and study their families within the wider contexts of community, country, ethnicity and culture, they will indeed be dismissed as "mere antiquarians."

It is time that genealogists and the academic humanists embarked upon a dialogue aimed at enhancing their mutual cooperation and awareness. Because of the remarkable character of genealogical progress in the Atlantic Provinces and Quebec, our area has one of its infrequent opportunities to show leadership. Let us embrace the opportunity to help Canada to catch up at least with Germany, France and the British Isles in this important respect.

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