

FAMILY STORIES – DISENTANGLING FACT FROM FICTION

It appears that the Americans like to refer to family research as 'genealogy', meaning something serious and well documented, whereas 'family history' is seen as fables and fabrications.

In the UK the opposite applies: family history is seen as research incorporating historical background and context whereas genealogy can become a sterile list of names and dates.

However, the general principle is the same: the aim is to assemble well-documented information set in its historical context and presented as a coherent and interesting narrative. The study of history is a discipline with its own methods and principles. These can be applied to personal family research, using critical assessment and understanding of the evidence collected.

The intention here is to offer a few guidelines on how historians assess evidence and points that should be taken into account. Particular reference is made to stories handed down within the family and family narratives but the principles apply to all evidence collected.

(a) *Mistakes or confusion in the narrative*

Family stories that have been handed down orally may have become distorted in various ways. To take a trivial example: my father, on separate occasions when recounting the family story of someone who had beaten up the local wifebeater, in the flow of narrative named the hero as his grandfather and two different great-grandfathers. A comparison of all the details of the narrative with known facts showed the story could apply to only one of these people. **You should be aware of possible slips of the tongue or confusion between generations in family stories.**

(b) *The names mentioned may be correct but the facts behind the story may not be quite as presented*

Family stories can sometimes provide very useful pointers, especially if they mention places of origin. My grandfather, my father and their cousins all relate that the Robertsons came from Greenock (or that area). However, more research has revealed a strange twist to the story.

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, it was not uncommon for men serving in the Royal Navy to adopt an assumed name. One of the Bounty mutineers is a well-known example. This was not necessarily because they were criminals fleeing justice. The evidence mostly suggests the opposite: joining the Navy was an adventure, which you might not enjoy. Young men might be tempted by seamen's tales, calls to perform their patriotic duty, even just to get away from work or home. When they joined up, others might advise them to take the precaution of giving another name so, if they really disliked the Navy, the Navy would find it more difficult to catch up with them if they tried to escape. Desertion was a serious offence.

It took a long time to find documents relating to the naval career of my great-great-great-grandfather John Alexander Robertson because it eventually turned out that the Royal Navy knew of no such person. He joined the Royal Navy in 1794, cautiously giving his name as Alexander McKellar. When he decided to continue his service at sea, he had to retain the name Alexander McKellar, to keep a continuous record of service, which might ultimately lead to a pension and financial support. He gave various accounts of his birthplace at the beginning of his naval career but he eventually settled for the alias of Alexander McKellar born in Greenock and he (and the Navy) stood by that version for the rest of his life.

So the family story appears to have its origins in the persona that my great-great-great-grandfather invented for himself. John Alexander Robertson was not born in Greenock but he claimed his alter ego Alexander McKellar was. There were McKellars in Greenock and the story was probably based on the knowledge that Greenock was the place of residence of McKellar relatives. The Robertsons were almost certainly in that

area of Scotland as well, but there are indications that their residence at that time may have been in Glasgow.

- (c) *Documents that survive from the past were put together either by someone who wished them to survive or by someone who had a purpose to serve in which historical interest played no part.*

Documents need to be assessed in their context. It is a basic principle of historical research that **documents that survive from the past were put together either by someone who wished them to survive or by someone who had a purpose to serve in which historical interest played no part.** The second category covers documents such as parish registers, civil registration records and other records relating to everyday events. The first category covers documents such as notes and memoirs intended for circulation.

- (d) *What were the author's intentions when writing a document used as a source for family history?*

Some families are fortunate enough to have a written account of their family's history. These also need to be considered with care. The author of such texts will have brought his own intellectual baggage and interests to it and will have had particular motives for writing it, though they may have been well-intentioned. **When considering historical documents, you need to assess the author's background and intentions.**

In 1969 John H. Davis, a cousin of Jacqueline Bouvier (later Kennedy and Onassis) wrote an account of his family's history entitled *The Bouviers: portrait of an American family*. Mr Davis's interest had been partly inspired by *Our forebears*, a family history written by his grandfather, which was extensively circulated within the Bouvier family and had a profound influence on it. Mr Davis's affectionate portrait did not prevent him from being severely critical of his grandfather's work. Major Bouvier had not set out deliberately to deceive. His family's rise to the upper class, his distance from his grandfather's humble origins, and above all his very strong devotion to his family led him to believe in his idealized history of his family. He was a lawyer by training, but his critical faculties failed him in this area.

Consequently he assembled a number of references to members of the French aristocracy who happened to have the same surnames as his French grandparents and compiled his history to give an impression of continuity between the aristocrats and his own known, humbler ancestors. The story was accepted unquestioningly by his family and it certainly helped them. A number of factors played a role in developing Mrs Kennedy's style and distinction but confidence in her aristocratic origins must have helped. Her position as First Lady later helped blow the cold winds of critical scrutiny over this particular historical fabrication.

- (e) *Get as close to the original source as possible*

Other families have their own ancestral stories and some of these have been recycled several times in family publications, perhaps not so creatively as Major Bouvier's work, acquiring a different veneer and variations with each retelling. The Internet has added to the perpetuation of uncritical family stories.

It is an accepted historical method, particularly when dealing with earlier histories and chronicles, to **try to identify the earliest version of a particular story, the one that is closest to the event.** It is still probable that the author had his or her own agenda, but there will have been less opportunity for later embroideries and confusion. You should assess whether the author was likely to have been in a position to be well-informed.

Later narratives may add valid points to a story but you should still consider whether the author was in a position to be well-informed.

- (f) *If there are differences in the facts in two accounts of the same event, one account will be wrong*

If there are differences in the facts in two accounts of the same event, they cannot be brought into line by conflating them. **One account will be wrong**: for instance if one account sets an event in May and the other in July, the correct date is not June.

- (g) *Try to understand the historical context of a family story*

In some cases the family story may deal with much earlier events, possibly in another country. You should **consider whether the later narrative has become confused because descendants** who passed on the story **were no longer familiar with the historical circumstances and background**.

- (h) *Is a family story plausible in terms of historical context, even though there is no evidence to support it?*

An example of a family story that cannot be proved or disproved is Robert Burns' belief that his grandfather had suffered in the Jacobite cause. Some biographers have questioned this, but the grandfather in question was apparently a tenant of the Earl Marischal who was forfeited after the 1715 uprising and the story would have passed through only two people. The story may have inspired Burns' interest in Jacobitism; he wrote several songs and poems on Jacobite themes.

In these cases historians have to make as informed a judgement as possible. Here the story seems plausible and suggests an explanation for later attitudes.