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Family history and academic history – the value of collaboration

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Date

Tuesday 6 February 2018

Laura King, University of Leeds

Part of the Living with Dying project has involved working with a lovely group of family historians. They've been researching their family histories and we've been supporting them with some training - and lots of chatting over tea and biscuits! In turn, they've been generously doing interviews with us and sharing their research (some [through blog posts](#)). We're asking the question, how can historians of families and family historians work together? And we're currently working out how such a collaboration might work best...

To this end, we've been finding out about various ways in which family historians and academics have come together. This raises an interesting question. Is the value in such collaboration about bringing together different research methods? Or is there value in bringing together different types of people, working in and out of different organisations, and for different reasons? Of course, academic and family historians aren't separate groups, as some of the examples below show. Some universities offer family history programmes, students and academics use genealogical methods in their academic research. But too often these types of knowledge remain separate, and the expertise of genealogists and family historians under-valued.

A discussion on Twitter quickly produced lots of examples of exciting projects drawing on both types of knowledge, methods or collaboration between different kinds of historians. There are some wonderful examples of the many varied ways in which genealogical methodologies are being used in academic contexts. Here academic historians have a lot to learn from family historians and genealogists. In fact, lots of examples of this are cases where family historians or professional genealogists have gone on to use their expertise in postgraduate study and academic research. Ali Flint, for example, was [inspired by doing her own family](#).

[history which led her on to a PhD topic on letter writing amongst nineteenth-century gentry women in Derbyshire](#). Claire Greer started by researching her family history, then wrote a novel on the First World War, started a [blog](#), and is now doing a PhD at the University of Western Australia ([watch out for inspiration on using innovative methodologies in this kind of research](#)). Indeed, the [Centre for Archive and Information Studies at the University of Dundee](#), a leading place for academic genealogy (still a rare subject in universities), supports lots of PhDs using genealogy and other historical research methods. Others have found genealogy the most effective approach for research: Peter O'Connor (@OttawaFamilyTree on Twitter) [used genealogical methods in his PhD to investigate utopian commune members, and to track their descendants where possible](#). Adrian Stones, meanwhile, has used genealogy to research Black British history, [tracing the fascinating past of his own family history](#). Author Ruth Symes has taken this idea even further, by writing books which [combine social history context with practical advice for other family historians](#). Meanwhile, house historians (such as [Deborah Sugg Ryan](#) and [Melanie Backe-Hansen](#)) use genealogical methodologies in combination with context about changes to housing and the way people lived to understand the history of a particular building. There's some beautiful writing in this genre too – I'm a big fan of both Alison Light's [Common People](#) and Richard Benson's [The Valley](#).

Collaboration offers rich potential here. Archives and libraries, are doing really exciting work in this area, working with family histories in crowd sourcing, coproduction and collaborative projects. In the US, [Recovering Voices](#) at the [Smithsonian](#) unites museum objects and researchers with the communities from which those objects came, with the aim of preserving endangered indigenous languages. The centenary of the First World War has also been a fascinating moment for this – the National Archives, for example, have sought to bring together a range of groups through its Voices of the Home Front project and [upcoming conference](#). And the [Legacies of War](#) project at the University of Leeds has also been doing lots of great work involving family historians in various projects around the First World War and its commemoration.

It's clear that collaboration could be useful in all sorts of different kinds of histories – of families and houses, but also subjects like sport, as shown by [the Sport and Leisure History Research team at Manchester Metropolitan, Cheshire](#). Combining family history/historians and genealogical methodologies with academic research into particular places or institutions has been particularly successful – such as [Jane McCabe's research into Anglo-Indian children of Graham's Homes who migrated to New Zealand](#) and [Tanya Evans' research into the Benevolent Society of New South Wales, Australia](#) (check out [this great write up on their collaboration](#)). Other projects are bringing together the expertise of family and academic historians to explore the history of [railway accidents](#) and [poverty in the eighteenth century](#) in Britain, as well as our own work on families' experiences of death and dying.

And what's clear when you start to look into research in this area is not just how family history and genealogy might have lots to tell academic historians, but how they can be useful tools in other settings too – not least in working with dementia sufferers, as [Nick Barrett](#) and [Joanne Mihelcic](#) have been exploring.

Academic historians are increasingly keen to work with family historians and genealogists, as real experts in their own fields. And genealogists seem to be keen to collaborate too – family historians such as Sue Adams [suggest that genealogists like her would like to see more interaction with academic historians](#). How can we make sure these groups are connecting up? Perhaps more spaces for a brew and a chat would be a good start – like [the series of family history workshops Julia Laite has started at the Raphael Samuel History Centre](#). And research centres which look outwards to encourage conversations between different kinds of historians can only be a good thing, like the [Centre for Applied History](#), led by Tanya Evans, at Macquarie University in Australia. Let us know in the comments if there are other examples of these kinds of spaces – or great projects which bring together family and academic historians. Let's see more of this kind of thing!

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