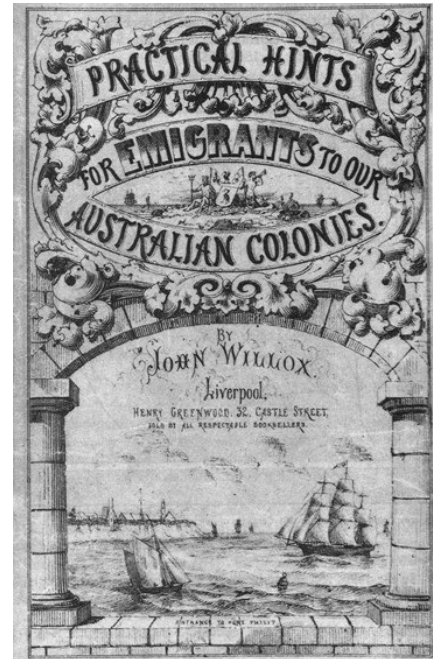


Introduction

Emigration

What interests me most about family history is the 'history' bit. Lists of ancestors' names and dates have only a minimal attraction, just a practical starting point. I've always loved discovering what life was like before our time, our social history, our foundations and understanding why and how we came to be here in Australia. Just making that decision to travel across the seas approximately 21,000 kilometres to the other side of the world taking several months, most likely never being able to return, never again to see family or friends left behind, was a huge risk requiring much optimism and 'guts'. That always amazes me and makes me appreciate the sacrifices emigrants and refugees make today. However, the families that arrived here, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, were probably typical of the British emigrant who believed that settling in the Australian colonies was their birthright. It would have been interesting to know their attitude regarding indigenous Australians, whose land we stole and occupied, or if our ancestors had any understanding of that at all.



Emigration pamphlet c 1858.

Source:

museums.victoria.com.au

Tough lives

Learning about our forebears in the light of economic fluctuations, wars, public health, political struggles and other challenges, really puts their lives into perspective and makes important comparisons to our lives today. I have particularly noticed the difficulties our female ancestors endured, many constantly in some part of the child-bearing cycle, often rearing large families, performing physically demanding domestic tasks, many frequently on the move due to economic highs and mostly lows, sometimes without a husband's regular support. Infant mortality was common and a short life expectancy the norm. The men, especially when coming to Australia, took their chances in gold mining (all without success) or running a small business in a trade or in commerce to improve their economic situation. Insolvency was never far away and there was little if no government welfare safety-net.



Frances Annie Box, her daughters and grandchildren 1928. Source: family collection

Family support or otherwise

Another thing that really stands out to me is the importance of family interconnectedness and support for individuals' survival in those precarious times. Grandparents, in-laws, siblings, uncles and aunts often played a vital role by providing nurturing support and financial assistance where possible. This was the case when my paternal grandmother faced the 1930s economic depression as a widow with 5 children to bring up. Fortunately, her parents-in-law were able to provide her with her own home, saving her and her children from possible destitution and enabling them to pursue their interests and build careers. In some circumstances the withdrawal of such supports would

have sad and tragic consequences. This occurred following my maternal grandparents' divorce, my grandmother was shunned by her siblings and exiled by the family, never to see her six children again, nor any grandchildren.

Being a detective

An addictive aspect of family history research for me is solving mysteries. I am often asked if I have discovered any 'skeletons in the closet' - oh yes! syphilis, desertion, children taken into 'care', insolvency, alcoholism, and plenty of 'shotgun weddings' as are found in most families once you start digging. Uncovering 'scandals' can help explain contemporary morality and why certain individuals behaved as they did.

I have also discovered some outstanding individuals, risk-takers and progressive thinkers, both male and female, who made notable achievements: the school inspector, the child musicians, the emigrant to Paraguay, the knighted surgeon, the workhouse doctor, the gaoled suffragette, the Corn Law 'repealer', and many others who were highly regarded in their professions and communities.



Discovering an ancestor with fellow researcher Jan Ellis at West Brompton Cemetery, London. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2014

Gathering information formal and informal

Like many of us who take an interest in family history later in life, we often wish we had asked certain questions of our grandparents and parents when they were alive. Luckily my great aunt, Aunty Lilse (Alice Lilian Smith) who lived to 96, was able to give me information about the Box family. I have also learned that anecdotal evidence has its biases and imperfect recollections (I had to laugh after spending time interviewing Aunty Lilse when she then said, 'but I could be making it all up!!'). Cross-checking Aunty Lilse's information with official records clarified her stories - she wasn't making it all up, it was just a bit hazy.

The vast amount of online resources available has made research so much faster and more comprehensive than when Dorothy Hurley was discovering Elizabeth the convict or when Julian Rogers was writing about the *Bargaly Paradise*. They really did the hard yards! But formal records (BDM certificates, the census, or electoral rolls for example) have their imperfections and can contain incorrect transcriptions of names or dates and many depend on who gave the information to the registrars.

Being a member of genealogy and local history groups provides opportunities for sharing information from which I have greatly benefitted. Original personal family documents don't always exist, but due to the help of other researchers, I have been fortunate to access memorabilia, letters and photographs of the Rogers and Cobden families at the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the West Sussex Record Office in Chichester. I got pretty excited holding letters written by my great-great-great grandmother in the 1820s!



Offline researching in Dumfries, Scotland.
Photo: Euan McGillivray 2014

The past is present

To me, the past is always present, tangible and visible. Whether through family possessions handed down, letters, diaries, places ancestors lived and worked, or through noticing a relative's mannerisms and characteristics reflecting a parent or grandparent, the past is part of us. It's also intangible - our values, beliefs, attitudes, priorities, ambitions etc. From undertaking my research, I have gained a much greater insight into what underpins my own values and perceptions. I hope my stories will inspire younger generations to consider that too.

Ann Hurley

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