THE EMOTIONS OF FAMILY HISTORY IN CANADA

TANYA EVANS

Associate Professor Tanya Evans is Director of the Centre for Applied History at Macquarie University in Australia, where she teaches public history and modern history in the Department of Modern History. Her books include the prize-winning *Fractured Families: Life On The Margins in Colonial New South Wales* (New South, 2015); *Swimming with the Spit, 100 Years of the Spit Amateur Swimming Club* (New South, 2016); with Pat Thane, *Sinners, Scroungers, Saints: Unmarried Motherhood in Modern England* (Oxford University Press, 2012) and *'Unfortunate Objects': Lone Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

> "I feel that generally the academy does not respect family historians... it is often judged as 'less'".
>
> – Survey respondent, 2016

> "I suspect that most historians would not see family history as more than a hobby".
>
> – Survey respondent, 2016

In late 2016, I had the pleasure of visiting Carleton University in Ottawa as a research fellow in public history to compare the meanings of family history in Canada with the practice in Australia and England. I moved to Australia from Britain in 2008, and since 2016 I have been researching the meanings and impact of family history in Australia, England and Canada and what this tells us about history and historical consciousness in different national contexts.

I have long challenged perceptions of family historians as amateurs, supposedly driven by nostalgia to hunt out Golden Ages in the past, and I've written about the radical potential of family history and the value of collaborative work with these researchers (Evans, 2011, 2015). I am continuing to analyze the meanings and impact of family history on "ordinary" people around the world with a range of interdisciplinary scholars and international public historians as part of the #HistoriansCollaborate network in the UK.[1] I have become increasingly

1 www.historyworkshop.org.uk/how-do-family-historians-work-with-memory

interested in the impact of this form of research and community engagement on individuals and society more broadly.

Family history has captured people's imaginations at different times, in different countries. It expanded alongside multiculturalism in settler migrant nations such as my own in Australia, but this was also the case in Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and elsewhere. Its meanings vary in these different national contexts. Scholars agree that genealogical work can provide us with unprecedented insight into how history is undertaken, imagined, and discussed by "ordinary people" (Conrad et al 2013). As the teaching and research of public history becomes increasingly internationalized, we need to pay careful attention to the practice and meanings of family history around the world for scholars and practitioners – diverse communities both consuming and producing historical knowledge, but not often in conversation with each other. I suggest in this short piece that we should be conversing more with these diverse researchers and – together with Tim Compeau based at the University of Western Ontario and other international public history colleagues in Berlin 2020 at the International Federation for Public History conference – we will continue to encourage academics to undertake collaborative research projects with diverse local and community historical organizations.[2]

Globally, family historians are "new social historians" focused on bringing the lives of the marginalized to the fore, challenging stories about the stability of nuclear family life, gender, class, race and sexuality – as well as their respective "national" stories – when unearthing the histories of their ancestors. Drawing on survey data and oral history interviews undertaken with family historians since 2016, I reveal some of the benefits of collaboratively produced historical knowledge and suggest why it should be valued by everyone.

Since this research began towards the end of 2016, I have received 77 responses from Australian family historians, 25 English and 29 Canadian family historians. I have followed up some of my surveys with oral history interviews. Women make up the majority of respondents to my survey and as subjects for my interviews, but men have also responded to my call outs, especially in Canada, if not in the same numbers. Among the 77 Australian respondents, 15 were male – 19%; among the British respondents, five were men and 20 were women; men made up a greater proportion of the Canadian respondents – eight (38%) were men, 21 were women. I aimed to examine the motivations for undertaking family history research and the emotional impact of discoveries on researchers.

Many of these family historians state that female relatives encouraged and fostered their practice of family history by sharing familial stories. Mary Jane Culbert, based in Ottawa, was inspired by her mother to become a family researcher. She said she was driven:

> "To continue the historical research my late mother accomplished until the late 1980s when she was too ill to continue. Her research sat in

2 https://ifph.hypotheses.org/6th-ifph-international-conference-2020

> boxes in a relative's basement for 25 years until I took it over. I've taken on this project to honor my mother and her wishes that the research continue. In her notes, my mother said that she had taken on the family history research in honor of HER late mother" (Survey response, Sept. 27, 2016).

Many of these researchers feel an obligation to continue this research to honor the efforts of the women in their family trees and to reveal their life stories that have remained mostly obscured. Lorri Busch became a family historian in 1989 when she took her elderly grandmother for long drives to Toronto to get her out of her nursing home for a few hours. She recognized the value of the stories being told and recorded her tales of growing up in the East End of London during the First World War. Up until that point, she had hated history and "that changed when grandmother started telling me stories" (Survey response, Sept. 5, 2016). Family history research often teaches individuals the value of history and reveals the important relationship between past and present for individuals and society more broadly.

Academic disdain for genealogists, who are often mature women, remains hard to document because it is usually articulated orally and rarely in writing – but it certainly exists. Academics, sometimes even feminist historians, have been quick to distance themselves from genealogists in the desire to set themselves apart from and better than, those "amateur" family historians; from those who supposedly "wallow in self-indulgent nostalgia" (Bashforth). I think that we all need to work harder at embracing the work of family historians and the historical knowledge they are producing. Survey responses reveal that family historians in Canada (as elsewhere) want their work valued and resent their efforts being derided, for good reason.

The family historians I surveyed and interviewed were passionate about their research and understood themselves and demonstrated their skills to me as sophisticated researchers. Lorri Busch states that "a good family historian works with primary sources, ensures that conclusions are well-researched." Peggy Homans Chapman regretted not studying history at university but now teaches new family historians how to research. She emphasizes "the importance of knowing the local history and impacts on people in order to be a more effective searcher." She thinks that "formal methods of genealogical research are not dissimilar from the historical research method" (Survey response, Aug. 30, 2016). Gillian Leitch works as a senior researcher at CDCI Research Inc. in Ottawa and confessed to having a BA, MA and PhD in history, but she thinks that through family history she has "developed a wider range of skills as a historian, an understanding of different sources, and their uses and limitations. Specifically I have come to understand that sources lie, and that has given me a good sense of doubt and caution when using sources" (Survey response, Sept. 6, 2016). She feels that "generally the academy does not respect family historians, and when I do family history or incorporate it in my academic interests, it is often judged as 'less' " (Survey response, Sept. 6, 2016). That said, several family historians suggested that attitudes were starting to change and there was a welcome belated academic recognition of their work at recent Canadian Historical Association conferences.

Family historians cherish primary as well as secondary sources. Alan Campbell has a lot of respect

for academic historians who provide "comprehensive citations in his/her publications. I like to use these citations to dig deeper into the history behind their ancestors. I take little at face value. If I am given a family tree, I check the facts and follow up on citations given. I am prepared to be as critical regarding a history book written by an academic." These family historians have a deep understanding of the possible future uses of their work and ensure that their research can be used for secondary analysis by generations to come. These researchers work collaboratively and are passionate about sharing their knowledge, skills and expertise locally and globally.

Many of these researchers are deeply embedded within their communities. They are often autodidacts, but are also taught by librarians, fellow researchers, related family historians around the world, community organization members, local historical societies, and by watching global versions of family history television programs, especially *Who Do You Think You Are?* While many family historians are proficient users of social media and website portals for research purposes, some remain deeply suspicious about the promises of the Internet. Survey respondents derided the "hobby genealogists" who did not put in the hard yards of research and did not "feel the need to source the stuff they post on various sites" without attribution or acknowledgment. They take enormous pride in their capacity to read sources critically and to constantly check, triangulate and question their data. There is no doubt that written, oral and material evidence has an emotional impact on family historians, but it is used critically, nonetheless.

Many credit family history as the root of their passion for history as a subject and discipline. Like survey respondent Carole Whelan, they are empowered by their research because it "cannot be gleaned from a book; it must be done from my own skills base and by following leads in many forms and by often thinking outside the box. No one can 'give' me the answers, I must dig for myself and this is a fulfilling feeling"; to get "caught up in my research is a real escape for me". (Survey response, Sept. 4, 2016).

The #Historians Collaborate initiative started in the UK in January 2019 amid hopes to encourage greater collaboration between different types of historical researchers and producers of history, including social historians, family, local and community historians, oral historians, archivists, genealogists and museum professionals. The network is trying to make it easier to cooperate as teams involved in historical research. Whether you think of yourself as a family historian, a local historian, a genealogist, an archivist, a museum professional, an academic or none of the above, the chances are you're doing research involving complementary skills, interests, subjects, methods and resources. Our aim is to bring us all together in conversation, to find a way of ensuring we all know what other people are doing – and how we might usefully collaborate. I look forward to collaborating with Canadian-based family historians for many years to come and I want to encourage other researchers to do the same.